

the other end [that it] is put in the hands of those folks who are going to go out and kill and murder people[. A]t that point you then have a criminal act.

Examples of this, recently reported in the *Financial Times*, are the huge sums of money being channeled from Islamic extremists in Great Britain to terrorists groups in the disputed region of Kashmir in India. The money is often collected after Friday prayers, under the auspices of human-rights charities, particularly in London, Manchester, and Cardiff. If this is already happening in Rome, Milan, and Turin, Italy may soon turn out to be the first Western country to fund an Islamic *jihād*, courtesy of its internal-revenue service.

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Letter From the Elsenborn Ridge

by Brian Kirkpatrick

The 99th's Last Mission



My father told me about his combat experience in World War II just once when I was a boy. I must have been under ten, and we were in a car at night. My clearest memory of what he told me is the story of the deer his unit killed with their carbines, and of their delight in the fresh meat.

Now that he's in his 70's, I hear many of his stories: the strange composition of his division, the 99th, and what the German general who couldn't cross the Elsenborn Ridge said about the 99th after the war; what my father did on the Danube that got him a Silver Star nomination, and how he lost it when he fell asleep on guard duty in a rear area. Sometimes, my father seems to be hiding other stories, such as what he traded his coveted cigarettes for while he was in Paris.

The stories started to flow in 1995, when he went on a trip with other mem-

bers of the division to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge, the 99th's first major engagement. The American veterans were astonished that, so many years later, the Belgians greeted them like heroes. When my mother describes the cider and chocolates, her face—now half-paralyzed—still lights up. After that trip, my father began to talk about his experiences, and he hasn't missed the division's annual reunion since.

My parents live in Texas, so when the 99th's reunion brings them close to Baltimore, I find myself among the division's aging alumni, their wives, and their grown children. The 99th is a skeleton operation now, providing support services, and is no longer a combat infantry unit. As a consequence, when the Division Association meets, nearly all of the members are well into their 70's. Unavoidably, the number who can attend is smaller every year. At the closing banquet, they bring out the bottle of champagne in a chest, with which the last man is supposed to toast his lost comrades. My father told me that he and a friend have agreed that, when only the two of them are left, they'll drink it together. "It wouldn't be as much fun to drink it alone," my father said.

For my father, there are already times when the meetings seem terribly lonely. I heard about the first absence that night long ago, when I was a small boy. According to the first version my father heard, Dean, his boyhood friend, was standing—*standing*—in his foxhole, reading a letter from his girlfriend, when the artillery shell landed, killing him instantly.

"The first thing I thought," my father said, "was 'How could he have been so stupid?' I was furious."

My father was just 20.

The other absence hurts more now, because it's more recent. Dick, my father's foxhole partner—the man with whom he slept in rain and snow, who kept him alive and was kept alive by him—is absent. Alzheimer's has taken Dick from my father, something the Germans tried and failed to do.

My father usually tries to get out of telling his stories, saying others should speak instead. Twice, he was in a rear area because of injury: once, because of a fall that injured his back, and once, because of a minor wound. As a consequence, he wasn't with his friends at the battle in the area of the Remagen bridge.

To him, the fact that he lay in the snow for a month in the woods of Belgium, during the Battle of the Bulge, and suffered permanent damage to his feet from frostbite, or that he was nominated for a Silver Star when the division crossed the Danube, can't make up for his absence when G Company of the 395th had their third great battle.

All of the men say similar things: that others should speak; that each of them did nothing special; that someone else was the hero. The 99th was badly outnumbered when the German veterans made their push for the Dutch coast during the Battle of the Bulge. Someone kept the Germans off the Elsenborn Ridge, but to hear these men tell it, none of them had much to do with it.

The men of the 99th laugh a lot at the reunions, but, when they tell the serious stories, there is always that subtext of guilt. G Company's former commander—still called "Captain" by all the men—told me about the time, in a quiet area, when he arranged for the company to have a rare hot meal. As the first group gathered in a walled garden, a hidden German observer called in an artillery barrage. Of course, the Captain couldn't have known there were any Germans around, but he still lacerates himself for those deaths.

Why do they all seem to feel guilty? They were part of the effort that closed the German concentration camps and liberated the grateful Belgians. Moreover, they had little choice but to fight. Still, I think that, by their lights, they have committed two terrible sins. First, they all killed other men, or tried to. And, unlike so many of their friends, they are still alive. Each year, the burden of that last crime increases.

The 99th is on a final, teaching mission, and my son is among their students. The lessons creep in, among the family gossip and war stories, and he learns them without realizing that I have put him in a classroom. He is coming to understand that young men, strong enough to walk from the Atlantic coast to southern Germany while carrying a heavy automatic weapon—that is, young men like him—all become old. That these old men have gone ahead of him and know about things he will encounter, even if he never has to lie in the snow with a rifle in a forest in Northern Europe. That there are good leaders, who are loved by their men for the rest of their lives, and bad ones, who, in their egotism, can order

impossible assaults for a photographer's sake, killing their own unnecessarily. That war is something not to be sought with glee but is such a terrible thing that even the victors suffer from it for the rest of their lives. That what he will remember of his wars is his love for his friends, and whether or not he failed them.

Brian Kirkpatrick writes from Baltimore, Maryland.

Letter From Venice

by Andrei Navrozov

A Good Idea



The most readily saleable kind of merchandise a writer keeps on offer is his natural gregariousness, with the widely advertised consequence that so many writers drink themselves to death. In this steady though unprofitable trade of ours, I am pleased to say, I have some distinct advantage over the competition, as I never went to school and spent my childhood in near-monastic isolation. That such a mode of upbringing, notwithstanding John Stuart Mill's inspiring example, is almost universally credited nowadays with the unleashing of homicidal sociopaths, called "loners," upon placid diners in fast-food restaurants may be flattering; nothing, however, is further from the truth, since it is perfectly obvious that a person deprived of a certain experience in his youth is all the more eager to have his fill of it as an adult. So it is for me with human company, with the result that no pipe-smoking stranger on the train, no matter how choleric, and no newspaper-reading misanthrope on the bus, however deaf, have ever evaded the tungsten grasp of my clinically certified volubility.

At the next table at Harry's Bar the other night were two middle-aged couples visiting Venice, one British and one Australian. The Englishman, whose wife would soon reveal herself as the weak link in the organization of the table's defenses against my relentlessly mounting intrusion, was in the insurance business. The other man, quiet and mild-mannered, though married to a highly strung

and oddly birdlike American, would later confide that he was a corporate executive in the Murdoch group of companies. A very short time after I had insinuated myself into the table's chitchat, while at the same time stratifying my position as the resident Venetian, with the aid of a Jesuitical commentary on the imperfect wisdom of ordering what my neighbors persisted in calling *those green noodles*, the Englishman turned to me and said, "You know, I really love this Harry's Bar over here. I want to start one just like it, in Mayfair. You think it'd do well? A good idea?"

"Well," I chewed judiciously on the celery in the Bloody Mary, wondering if it would sound snobbish to ask how familiar he was with the restaurant's South Audley Street namesake, or its sister establishment on Fifth Avenue, or the half-dozen unauthorized knock-offs here and there, including a particularly sad one on the Lungarno in Florence. But at that point, my collocutor volunteered that he was both a member of Mark Birley's dining club in London and a habitue of Cipriani's in Manhattan, thus opening the door to further insidious speculation. "What is it exactly," I asked, "that you like about this place so much? I mean, is it the food, is it these famous low chairs, is it the lighting?" "No, it's the mix," he said. "It's the atmosphere. You know, all these different people." As though to underscore the point he was making, two sailors in uniform had walked in and leaned on the bar.

It was time to let the penny drop. "You mean, me?" I said, eyelashes aflutter. "You mean that in a place like this people like you find yourselves seated next to people like me? You are quite right, of course, this sort of thing cannot be expected to happen in New York, nor in London these days. And I shall now tell you exactly why. Do you see that table in the center, the one with three people on it? That's Count V— with his houseguest, dining with Donatella A—. Now, when their bill arrives, you'll find that they'll be paying one-half of what I'm going to have to pay at the end of my dinner. And when *your* bill arrives, my friends, you'll be paying twice as much as I'm about to pay."

A shocked silence followed, as I had expected. "Isn't that a bit unfair?" thought the English wife. "That's just outrageous!" thought the American wife. "So, in effect, aren't we paying for this Venetian Russian's dinner? And he's on his fifth

Bloody Mary!" thought the husbands in unison, instinctive hands on plump wallets.

"Dear friends!" I said. "I know what you're thinking, and as a resident of Venice I thank you for opening your hearts, and your pockets, to our island paradise. But you've told me yourselves, *I love the mix*, haven't you? Well, let's say you start yet another outrageously expensive restaurant in Mayfair, with the aim of recapturing what you perceive as the unique atmosphere of the original Harry's Bar in Venice. Who is going to go there? Fatcats, fatcats, and only fatcats. Who but a fatcat is going to pay \$200 for a meal of Friskies Buffet, to say nothing of the three-dollar bottle of mainstream Italian red marked up to fifty bucks? So how is your new restaurant going to be any different from the fashionable Harry's Bar that already exists, and prospers at your expense, in South Audley Street?"

"Besides, you mustn't think that the round-robin of mooching I've let you in on is unique to this place. All Venice works on the same system of negative air miles, and could never work without it. The corner bar where I have my coffee every morning charges one dollar, whereas you would pay five dollars. Why? Because it's *my* corner bar, not yours. My water taxi to Piazzale Roma costs thirty dollars, yours will cost you double. Why? Because I have an account with them, while you are mere birds of passage. If I had made your hotel booking directly through the Venetian hotelier, you'd be paying a third less. Why? Frankly, because the owner would believe that you are of some relevance to the society in which he actually lives, and not one of the ten million credit-card numbers that make up the abstract *presenze a Venezia*.

"That's why we still have at least thirty restaurants, both in the city itself and out on the islands, that are better by far than any in New York or London, and at least half a dozen that are as good as any in Paris. Eliminate what you see as the unfairness of the system I'm describing, and straightaway the natives, and then the regulars, and then everybody else who is in any sense distinguished, unusual, or noteworthy, will stop coming. We will all withdraw into our homes, since, for the money that even the regulars end up paying here, one can easily hire at least a Croatian cook. It will be all tourists, rich tourists in famous places like this one, and poor tourists everywhere else. And then Venice will end up like Florence,