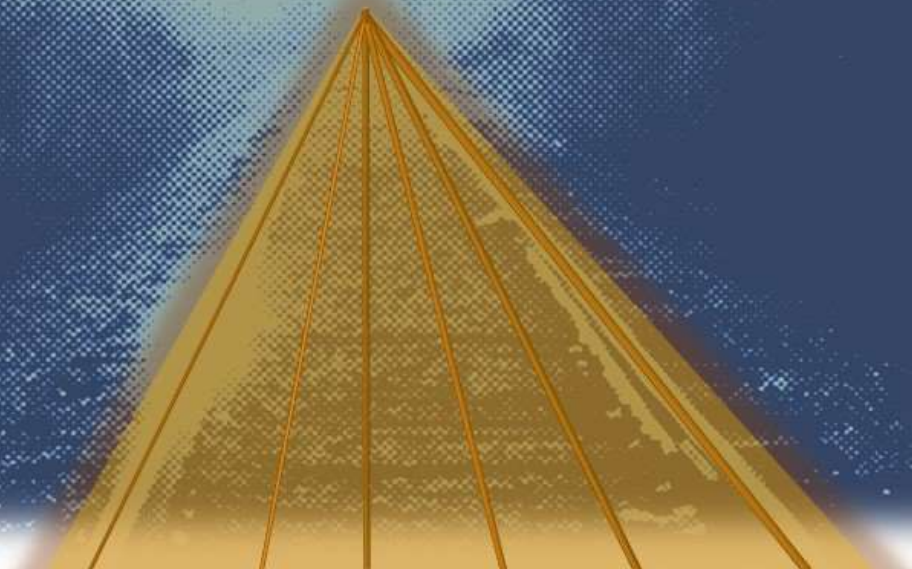


Sandbag

By Timothy Collins



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Sandbag

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December, 1941, was the advent of World War II. That Advent brought sorrow to my mother and me. But Christmas came and went. Sandbag made it all easier to bear, even happy.

Josiah “Sandbag” Bryant wasn’t what you’d call a little man. He was tall and portly with an imposing presence. Despite his love of gambling and the hard Depression years that cast him into the noble poverty of hobos, he carried himself with an elegance few could match. Most importantly, he was kind-hearted, bearing gifts wherever he went.

My mother and I first met him in mid-1935 when he visited our house for a sandwich and some coffee. I was 6 then. Of all the hoboes I’d met during those years, Sandbag stood out, not only because of his size, but because of his reddish hair and dark, sandy complexion. He played his mysterious guitar for us in thanks for the food. I didn’t realize it at the time, and my mother never mentioned it. He was a “colored” man.

My mother, my brother, who was 14, and I lived in Olmstead Falls, Ohio, a village of about 700 on the New York Central railroad tracks that came west out of Cleveland. There were plenty of hoboes then, and my mother always tried to share our hospitality with coffee and a sandwich and a place to sit in our tiny garage out of the wind during the winter. Our house, only a block from the railroad tracks, had the hobo mark of being a friendly place. The destitute men and boys always treated us with kindness and respect. Some even helped with chores.

My mother and father were, I guess, separated, but not quite. She still loved him, but he would not give up his Navy career, which began during what they called “the war to end all wars,” long before I was born. They had married in 1919, he, a rising officer, and she, a former Navy nurse who had left the service after the war. In some ways, their match must have been all right. She traveled with him for awhile until my brother, Francis, was born in 1921. That’s when she moved to northeastern Ohio to be closer to her mother, and my father continued to serve his country wherever the Navy sent him.

I was born in 1929 after my father had been on temporary duty in Cleveland learning about aircraft construction and operations. He visited us from time to

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time, and we went to see him a few times at different naval bases, even taking a trip to Hawaii in 1938.

Most hoboes visited our home once, maybe twice, but Sandbag was different. Maybe he liked us. Maybe he wanted to settle down. Strangely, he sometimes seemed like a father, encouraging me to study, write, and learn to play music. His own story was powerful, one of great wins, terrible losses, and, as it turned out, fear, sorrow, and loneliness. I liked him and wondered how and why he had ever fallen on hard times.

During one of his visits, Sandbag told us he was born in northern Mississippi sometime in 1896. He wasn't sure where and when, because his mother died in childbirth and his father drifted off after leaving him with his grandparents, who had been slaves. They had rudimentary skills, but were basically uneducated. Sandbag's memories of his grandfather were vague, except for guitar lessons. Sandbag recalled that his grandfather had horrible scars on his back where he had been whipped as a slave. His grandfather was lynched by the Ku Klux Klan on a terrifying night in the summer of 1903 when Sandbag was 6 or 7. The Klansmen forced him to watch and then raped his grandmother.

As he and his grandmother fled that night, Sandbag grabbed his grandfather's guitar. The two spent the night in a neighbor's barn and then headed north. He didn't remember how long it took, but they travelled on foot and caught rides with Negro farmers in their wagons. Eventually, they ended up in Memphis, Tennessee. Sandbag carried the old guitar all of the way.

His grandmother wasn't well when they got there, but she took a job working at a kitchen on Beale Street, where the wealthy black folk of Memphis sought entertainment in the clubs and theaters. Sandbag got his nickname there because of his read hair and big build. He hawked newspapers and played guitar solo and with street groups. He was learning and making a little bit of money at the same time. It made life easier, especially as his grandmother grew weaker. She died in the summer of 1905. Sandbag was about 9.

Street life was bad. But Sandbag's musical ability was a gift and his salvation. He only had to hear a tune once or twice before he could play it on the battered guitar, and he had an ear for the new sounds that were emerging in Memphis, especially along Beale Street. People stopped and listened. They dropped coins in his case. He attracted the attention of Robert R. Church Sr., who was active in developing the area as a cultural and commercial center.

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Church, who was noted for his philanthropy, did not take the young boy in. But he did help Sandbag meet other musicians, including W.C. Handy, a leader in the emerging blues scene, sometimes called the father of the blues. Handy introduced him to slide guitarist Furry Lewis, who helped Sandbag get work as a boy wonder in clubs along the street. As Sandbag put it, the blues helped him put his hard luck behind. He was lonely sometimes, but had a roof over his head, some schooling, regular meals, and people who were willing to teach him music.

By the 1920s, Sandbag held a place of respect among his peers. At one time or another, he worked with luminaries like Charley Patton, Louis Armstrong, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith. He played back up, wrote some music, and made about 20 recordings of his own. Even with all of his talent and contacts, he did not do well with his growing piece of fame. As he put it, the money came easily. And it went easily. He liked to play cards and got into debt with some of the mob leaders who frequented Beale Street.

Sandbag managed to pay his debts, but it left him broke and friendless. As he told this part of his story, he laughed when he said it was better than being killed and thrown into the Mississippi River by the gangsters. Then the Depression hit. He took it philosophically. It was hard to get gigs anyhow, and the proceeds from his record sales were gone. So, in 1932, he decided to ride the rails, figuring he could always play someplace for a meal.

When he showed up at our house on that early summer Saturday morning of 1935, he seemed different from all of the others. I looked up as I was playing in the back yard. I heard a gravelly voice from the alley. The man was dressed in an old suit and carrying a beat up guitar case.

“Is this the place where the good folks live?”

Many of our neighbors in the village feared the hoboes and resented my mother for treating them kindly. I was accustomed to their visits by now. Always curious, I liked many of them. They told great stories.

“Would you like some coffee? My mother is fixing breakfast.”

My mother came to the back door. “Mike, breakfast is ready.” Then she saw the hobo. We had an unwritten rule of never letting hoboes in the house. I was surprised when she said, “Won’t you please come in, Mr. ...”

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He was surprised, too. "Sandbag, Ma'am." He knew the rules. He was not supposed to come in. "I should eat out here."

"Please come in, Mr. Sandbag. Really. It is quite all right."

Sandbag hesitated. Then smiled. I remember his teeth glinting in the sunlight.

My brother, Frankie, was spending the night with a friend, so Mother quickly set his place for Sandbag. It was obvious he was hungry, but his table manners were perfect as he ate pancakes, eggs, and sausage and sipped coffee. I don't remember much talk, but once or twice I caught my mother studying the man across the table from her. He didn't seem to notice.

Another of our unwritten rules when helping hoboes was not to ask personal questions. So when Mother started talking to Sandbag, I was again surprised.

"I'm sure you don't remember me, Mr. Sandbag. But I think I remember you. Do you mind if I ask if you are the Sandbag Bryant who played that lovely blues guitar? I saw you in Memphis in 1920."

Sandbag was quiet, a distant look in his eyes. Then, a faint smile crossed his face. "Yes, ma'am."

All Mother said was, "I have some of your phonograph records."

Sandbag smiled again, perhaps a little more brightly. "Thank you for remembering. Those were good days."

With the unwritten rules already broken, Sandbag took his turn. He was self assured. "And, may I ask, what is your name, ma'am?"

She didn't hesitate. "Eleanor Wharton Blaine."

"My husband was stationed in New Orleans with the Navy for a short time after the Great War. We came to Memphis for a wonderful weekend and heard you play at one of the clubs."

Mother then broke yet another one of our rules. I couldn't believe it when she pulled out her coin purse to give Sandbag money. He interrupted her.

"I would be truly grateful for some money, ma'am, but I can't take it from you."

"Please take it, Mr. Bryant. I remember that evening in Memphis like it was yesterday."

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“No, I can’t take it unless you allow me work for it. I see that your grass needs to be cut. It sure grows quickly at this time of year.”

And so, Sandbag cut the grass and took the coins. My mother packed a sandwich for him. Before leaving, he played several tunes, singing with his distinctive voice. He patted me on the head as he left. Like the rest of our visitors, we didn’t know if we would see him again. But this time, my mother was sad. I still think I saw a tear in her eye.

"Please," he said as he turned to go. "If we see each other again, call me Sandbag. That's what they all call me now." He walked away, whistling in the warm sun.

"He was so good, then," Mother said after he was out of sight. "And even with these hard times, he is just as good now. No. He's better. It is so sad he has been forgotten and now lives out there."

Sandbag did come back many times, bringing news of his travels and helping me with my guitar and piano. I was growing up into what sometimes seemed a crazy world that included an absent father and a wandering man who was a steadying influence.

Between 1935 and 1939, the Depression slowly lifted as large parts of the world moved into another war. I remember this because my mother and Grandmother Wharton—who watched me when my mother was at work at the hospital over in Berea—made me listen to the news on the radio and read the newspapers. They both quizzed me, telling me that knowing what was going on made me a better citizen. I suppose they were right, but I only did it because if I passed I got to listen to my favorite radio shows like *Gangbusters*, *The Green Hornet*, and *Fibber McGee and Molly*.

On New Year’s Eve, 1939, I was listening to the radio and waiting for 1940 to begin. My brother was out with friends. He had enlisted in the Navy and would be headed off to training in a few days. My mother was unhappy, but not surprised. She knew the signs. The war, already started in Europe and Asia, frightened her.

I was at my grandmother’s for the evening. My mother was working at the hospital. It always seemed like there were bad accidents on New Year’s Eve. Tonight was no exception. When my mother came home at about one in the morning, she hugged me and told me the bad news.

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"Sandbag was hit by a car at the rail crossing near Shantytown."

I cried out.

"Don't worry. They brought him to the hospital earlier this evening. The driver of the car was drunk, they say. Sandbag is bruised up. His ankle is broken, and his guitar was smashed. They'll keep him in the hospital for a couple of days, but since he hasn't any money, they'll send him out to the county home to recuperate."

I protested. "They can't send him there. You read that newspaper story to me the other day. The place is awful."

"You're right, dear. And that's why your kind-hearted grandmother (she turned toward her with dramatic emphasis) is going to let Sandbag use her guest room until he's up and about again in a couple of months."

My grandmother spluttered for a moment, then relented. She was a good woman. My grandfather had died when I was a baby, and having us next door had helped her build a new life. Sometimes a shy person, she was grateful that her daughter had come back to be with her. Like almost everyone else in the village, my grandmother wondered why her daughter was so kind to hoboes, a group of poor men who had a shabby air of danger about them. But she had come to accept their visits. Sandbag had charmed her.

Unlike so many of his fellow travelers, Sandbag's experience in Memphis set him straight in some ways. He had decided to hit the road, but he always managed to stay sober and out of the way of the law as much as possible.

"I was on my way to fame in Memphis and couldn't stay in the groove," he said. "Traveling the rails has been a good groove for me."

On New Year's Day, my mother took me to the hospital to visit Sandbag. Kids weren't supposed to visit, but she got me in after a long discussion with a doctor, who kept staring at me and my guitar.

When we finally got into the ward where Sandbag was, he lit up when he saw us. I gave him the guitar. "This is for you. I heard yours got broken. I'm sorry you got hurt last night."

I saw a brief look of protest flash across my mother's face, followed by a smile. I had not told her what I planned to do. She decided not to say anything.

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Sandbag was firm though. "You know I am grateful, young man. But I cannot take this from you. Sandbag, hobo that he may be, does not accept charity from anyone, except for food and the railroads."

"This is not charity, Sandbag," I said. "It is a gift. A gift for someone who got hurt. A gift for someone who lost his prize guitar. A gift for a friend."

Sandbag swallowed. He was at a loss for words.

"A gift. For me. From a friend."

I picked up his rhythm. "A gift. For you. From a friend. A gift, Sandbag. A gift for a traveling man who keeps coming back to see us. For a traveling man who teaches me a lot."

Sandbag had recovered his tongue. "You, young man, are something else, not only a cool cat, but a kind cat, far wiser and kinder than your years. Far wiser. Far kinder."

He quietly strummed the guitar, and heads around the ward turned his way as he sang and played.

My mother was crying. Somehow, I felt like I had helped her repay a deep happiness shared in Memphis in 1920.

Sandbag's accident changed all of our lives. The severe fracture left him with a limp. He wouldn't be running to catch any more trains. Whether he wanted to or not, he was going to have to settle down.

He stayed with my grandmother for a couple of months. He played and sang for us and our friends and gave me music lessons after school. My mother and I found, with his help, a good used guitar for me.

He introduced us to a Sunday morning radio show called *Wings Over Jordan* on WGAR radio out of Cleveland. "Listen to those voices singing those spirituals, young man. Those are songs of men and women who have known great sorrow, but have great hope. You know, on a warm Sunday morning, you can walk down the streets of neighborhoods where my kind of people live, and you can hear those voices coming from the window of almost every home. We are coming to a better day, young man. We are coming to a better day."

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In the evenings, we still listened to the news. It was not good. The war in Europe was spreading. My mother and grandmother, with their memories of World War I, wondered when the United States would be dragged in.

Sandbag's leg slowly got better, and he began to share his cooking. It was always a surprise, always good. He had traveled for awhile with an unemployed chef, who, as he put it, "could make an oxtail taste almost as good as a filet mignon. I know. I've had both."

With the coming of spring, Sandbag found a job as a clerk at one of our local produce greenhouses. I had a hard time understanding when my mother patiently explained that Sandbag was lucky to get a good job like that. Some people would never hire Negroes for good jobs. "Times are changing," she told me. "And in this case, it's for the better."

Sandbag was happy. "I like it here," he said simply. When he got a Friday and Saturday night gig at a nearby roadhouse, he was cool about it.

"You know, young man," he told me, "life on the road was hard at times, but it could be all right. Oh, there were some crooks, but lots of good, kind folks out there, if you knew where to look. Life in Memphis was a long time ago. It was hard at first, but turned out just fine. Lots of good, kind folks, there, too. But this, young man, this is THE life. I don't know why, but I am blessed." He smiled. "Good folks here, too. Yessir. Good folks here."

As the war in Europe grew closer, Sandbag wrote new verses for an ongoing bad war news blues song. Sometimes, he ridiculed Hitler as a little, cruel man, a slave master.

One of my favorite verses was written in 1940 as the German war machine was smashing through France, which was powerless to stop Hitler's army of infantry, tanks and aircraft.

"Li'l Adolph thinks he's a big man, he puts the world in a trance.

"Li'l Adolph thinks he's a big man, he puts the world in a trance.

But you know this world don't like li'l Adolph, and he won't get no second chance."

Sandbag was back, a lot like his old self, becoming an important member of our community. People who had ignored the guitar-toting hobo now noticed him. He started playing at the African Methodist Episcopal Church and soon

began to get invitations to play at parties and events. He then got an opportunity to play for students and faculty at some of the nearby colleges, like Baldwin Wallace and Oberlin. Some people remembered him.

Word spread quickly as his talent was "rediscovered." When he got invitations to play farther away, he was gracious but firm. He wasn't interested. He had traveled too much.

"I like it here," he added, with an emphasis on "here."

He told my mother, grandmother, and me that he didn't need or want a life that would be more complicated. "I have a good job, good food to eat, a good roof over my head [he was renting to buy a tiny sandstone cottage near the railroad tracks], the sound of trains nearby, and most important, I have good friends who dig my music. I really do like it here."

Meanwhile, occasional letters from my father and brother reinforced what we were hearing on the news. Both of them were in Hawaii. While living in a tropical paradise, they were part of a navy that was getting ready for a war that no one seemed to want. When it came, it came with a vengeance.

By the end of 1941, we expected war, but the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese in mid-afternoon (our time) on Sunday, December 7, was a horrible shock. That evening, we stayed by the radio to listen to news reports. It was scary. I was 12, and the stories from movies, radio shows, and comic books about spies and "fifth column" saboteurs raced around in my active young mind. The widely reported trial of the Duquesne spy ring revealed the workings of Nazis right in our own country. That night, I dreamed about Edward G. Robinson pursuing George Sanders in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*.

The President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, declared war on the Japanese on December 8. We listened to his speech on the radio at school. We already knew there was a lot of damage at Pearl Harbor, and 1500 men were reported dead. Congress quickly voted for the declaration. I'm not sure a lot of the other kids understood everything that was happening. But, like the adults, they were scared and angry, and, I think, distracted.

For the first time ever, I was glad I had read the paper and listened to the radio news. I had a better understanding of current events. Some of my friends asked me to explain. I tried to be calm when I answered. Inside, my stomach was pitching and rolling. I was scared for the father I barely knew and my brother, who were so far away in the middle of the war zone.

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I heard later that some schools sent their students home after the President's speech. We stayed in school all day. My teacher did a good job at keeping our minds occupied. I was glad.

Sandbag had come to see us on the evening of the 7th. Like everyone else, the usually cool man was visibly angry. He was upset about rumors of sabotage and reports that the enemy was massing ships, planes, and troops off our coasts. All we could do was talk. We felt helpless, but determined.

The next evening, we again talked out our fears over a piece of news of the day. Elliott Ness, the famous gangbuster and now safety director in nearby Cleveland, had told the newspapers that the city had a plan to arrest and detain alien citizens if need be. Cleveland was a city of immigrants, maybe a hotbed of covert activity designed to bring the country down. My mind raced. I don't think I slept at all that night.

Wednesday was a blur of more anger and fear. The country formally moved into a war for which it was not fully prepared. The news from the Pacific was bad. My grandmother bought me a world map. As I listened to the radio, I followed the rapid Japanese advances with pins on the map. It was frightening, especially with the news that the air raid on Pearl Harbor had sunk two, maybe three battleships.

Now, we were waiting to see what would happen with Germany, which had invaded Poland and other eastern European countries, occupied France, bombed Great Britain, and invaded Russia. The map told me how bleak things were. The Axis powers that included Germany and Italy now occupied most of Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and a large swath of the Pacific.

On Thursday the 11th, Germany declared war on the U.S. By the time I got to my grandmother's after school, she was listening to the radio news. The President had just signed our declaration of war. It was also the same day that members of the Duquesne spy ring were found guilty of espionage for Nazi Germany. Even at 12, I never quite saw things in black and white. I was excited. I knew the surprise attack was wrong. I tried to understand why people wanted to fight each other. Maybe I wanted to go to war, but I was much too young anyhow. I felt frustrated and confused. What I remember most is that I was scared. Everyone was.

The day was cold and gray with a few snow flurries. After some milk and cookies, I went out to toss a football with some friends for awhile. We talked a

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little bit about the war. Billy and Archie wanted to talk about girls. I joined in, but was not about to let them know about my deeply secret crush on Margaret Schumacher. I don't know if she even knew. I dreamed about her sometimes, and it felt good.

It was getting dark. I saw my mother walking up the sidewalk from the streetcar stop. I waved at her. Then I saw someone riding a bicycle with a light on it coming up the street toward us. A man on the bike rode past her and us. He slowed to a stop in front of our house. I noticed he was in a uniform and was pulling an envelope from his small leather pouch.

I ran over. "May I help you, sir?"

"Maybe." He was kind, but impassive. "I have a telegram here for Mrs. Blaine."

"That's my mother." A telegram, I thought, wondering why. "There she is, coming up the street now."

She was no longer walking like someone who had worked a long, hard day. Her pace was brisk, almost a trot. As she came close, I could see she was afraid. I didn't understand.

"Mrs. Blaine? I have a telegram for you. It is from the Navy Department. Would you sign here, please?" He handed her a clipboard.

Her hand was shaking. I knew something must be wrong, but I still didn't understand, even as the man quietly murmured, "I'm sorry."

Mother took my hand. We hurried up the sidewalk to the front door. She tried to get the key into the lock. I had to hold her hand steady.

When we got inside, she opened the envelope and glanced at the telegram in the dim twilight. Silently, she handed it to me, turning on the light.

As I took the letter, I saw a single tear on her cheek, glinting brightly in the yellowish light until she dabbed it with her handkerchief. I read the note:

The Navy Department deeply regrets to inform you that your husband Francis William Blaine Sr. captain USN died in action in the performance of his duty and in the service of his country. The department extends to you its sincerest sympathy in your great loss. To prevent possible aid to our enemies please do not divulge the name of his ship or station. His remains will be interred temporarily in the locality where death occurred.

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I looked at her, wondering what it was like to die in an air raid. I saw another tear on her cheek. She was taking her wedding ring off.

"I loved him. He was a good man. But I never wanted him to stay in the Navy. It was his life. He was always so far away. And now it comes to this."

She took the yellow telegram back and put it with the ring on the shelf in the telephone nook.

"You must not tell anyone. He was stationed at the Naval Air Station at Kaneohe Bay, on the other side of Oahu from Pearl. Do you remember going there?"

I nodded, trying to remember. "I don't remember an air station," I said.

"You're right," she said. "It was a quiet, beautiful beach then. Your father was helping to supervise construction of a base there. He may have been one of the very first Americans to die in this war, even before the Japanese airplanes reached Pearl."

I pondered what she said, comparing it with what we had seen in the papers and heard on the radio. I nodded, anger mixed with excitement and sadness. I tried to remember his tanned face and smile, but I couldn't even remember what color his eyes were.

"Come," she said. "We need to tell Mother." I saw another tear in her hazel eyes.

As we turned to go out the door, the telephone rang. My mother picked up the phone. It was Sandbag. They talked for a few moments. Then she hung up. "He's coming over," she said simply, as we walked silently over to my grandmother's in the snow flurries.

My grandmother's reaction was stoic. She had lost a son in the Great War. She understood military duty and her daughter's grief. She hugged my mother, noted the absence of her wedding ring, and gently asked what she could do to help.

With a slight smile, she said, "People here in the village do find you a bit eccentric, Eleanor, but many are tolerant and will want to show you and Michael kindness when they find out about your husband's death, even if they did not know him."

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"Yes, Mother. You are right." We started to set the table. "Sandbag is coming over, so we need to set an extra place."

"Does he know?"

"He called as we were about to come over here. I told him."

"And he's coming to dinner?" I couldn't tell if there was an undercurrent in my grandmother's voice or not. By now, there was nothing unusual about Sandbag joining us for dinner.

My mother picked up on something. "He is our friend, Mother."

"Yes, Eleanor. He is."

When Sandbag arrived, he hung up his coat and asked my mother an unusual question. "I know many white folks would disapprove, and perhaps some colored folks, too. But I am full of grief for your loss. May I hug you?"

I did not quite understand the flicker of a frown on my grandmother's face. It disappeared when Mother, with tears and a smile, allowed herself to be enfolded in Sandbag's huge, but gentle embrace. She sobbed, then looked into his eyes.

"You have no idea how happy it makes me that you came to our village, became a friend, and yes, part of our family."

Whatever was bothering my grandmother had passed for now. Our dinner was more quiet than usual, tempered with sadness, but laden with smiles of kind assurance from Sandbag.

After dinner, we talked, listened to the radio news, and Sandbag played and sang for us. After he left, I listened to the radio while I did some homework. The discussion between my mother and grandmother was intense, but not angry. Long ago, they had learned to be frank without becoming overly upset at each other.

I quietly rolled on the floor toward the kitchen so I could hear better.

"...You know I like Sandbag, Eleanor. I have tried to overcome my feelings about colored people. Sandbag is a good person, but I must wonder if it was wise to let him hug you...."

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I heard my mother stand up. I quietly rolled back toward the radio. I think she saw me trying to settle back into place.

"Come along, Mike. School tomorrow." Give your grandmother a hug."

As we walked home, I asked what she and grandmother were talking about.

"She is upset that Sandbag hugged me. It is hard for her. So many people of her generation are prejudiced against Negroes. She is worried what other people in town would think if they saw him with me like that. In some places, it would be a crime, and he would be punished."

I remember being stunned. "But he asked for your permission. If he's a friend, I don't even think he should have to do that at a time like this."

"You're right, Mike. Sadly, there are people who think differently. I never worry about them."

Mother had plenty of other worries. A couple of times during the night, I awoke to hear her crying.

The next morning, Mother headed off to work and I headed to school. Margaret Schumacher, who lived next door, was waiting for me. "I saw the man from Western Union last night. Then I overheard my father. He's the dispatcher. He was telling my mother that your father died in the attack on Sunday."

She looked me straight in the eye and took my gloved hand. She squeezed it and quickly let go. "I am so sorry."

I tried to hold her gaze. It wasn't easy, but I stammered out a shy thank you.

I shivered. My face was already flush from the cold, so she couldn't see me blush. I was embarrassed, sad, and grateful all at once. We started toward school together. At least none of my chums saw her take my hand. That would have been hell, even under the circumstances.

I was subdued when I reached school. Somehow, my teacher, Mrs. Forrest, knew what had happened. I suppose my mother or grandmother had called her. She came to the cloakroom and expressed her condolences. "If you need anything, please let me know, Mike." She patted me on the shoulder.

I again stammered my thanks. We walked into the classroom together. I didn't know what I needed, except I didn't want attention right now. Were the other

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kids staring at me? No more than usual, I guess. I was sad, but I hardly knew my father. In his gruff way, he had been kind to me, my brother, and mother. But he was always so far away. I remembered how my mother would cheer up when he wrote.

At morning recess, I told Billy and Archie. I swore them to silence. "It'll be in the paper soon enough."

Of course, they went and told everyone else, and at lunch, some of the kids came up to me. Others stared. It was awkward, but Mrs. Forrest tried to help everyone understand what had happened.

For my part, I was glad it was Friday. After school, I hung back in the cloakroom for a few minutes after everyone else was gone. Mrs. Forrest was at her desk as I came out.

"Are you all right, Mike?"

"I guess so."

"You've had a hard day. I know your father was distant. Maybe that makes this harder for you in some ways. Just remember. He loved your mother. He loved you and your brother. He loved our country."

Somehow, I felt a little better. When I walked out into the damp, gray schoolyard. Margaret was waiting and walked with me to my grandmother's. We didn't say much, but I was glad she was there.

After my snack, I didn't feel like going out to play or doing homework. My grandmother indulged me and let me listen to some radio adventure shows.

When it was about time for Mother to get home, I looked out the window. In the shadows, I could see two figures on our front porch. One was my mother. The other, a man, was handing her a telegram.

"Oh no!" I shouted. I bolted out the front door without my coat. Mother's sobs carried toward me as the Western Union man walked away. I guessed what had happened, but a strange thought went through my head: What a terrible job the Western Union man had.

My grandmother was shouting something at me, but stopped as she realized what had happened. My mother clung to me, shaking. "No! Not my son, too! Not Frankie!"

Sandbag

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She handed me the telegram. In the dim light, I read it, similar to yesterday's message, but so much harder to take:

The Navy Department deeply regrets to inform you that your son Francis William Blaine Jr. sea. 1c USN was lost in action in the performance of his duty and in the service of his country. The department extends to you its sincerest sympathy in your great loss. To prevent possible aid to our enemies please do not divulge the name of his ship or station. If remains are recovered they will be interred temporarily in the locality where death occurred and you will be notified accordingly.

I handed the telegram to my grandmother. She let out a pitiful cry. "Oh, I hope they find him. He was on the Arizona, like that huge battleship you got to tour in San Francisco," she whispered hoarsely. "You cannot tell anyone."

I was thinking. My brother, always the outgoing one, always the popular one. Dead. His body missing. I would never see him again. Tears came to my eyes. But I couldn't cry. Not then. I was the man of the family. I didn't like it.

We went into the house. It was dark and cold, the way we all felt. I fumbled and found the light switch. The phone rang. No one moved. I answered.

"Hello, Sandbag. ... Please. Come over if you can. We got another telegram.... Yes. It was Frankie." My voice cracked.

When he came to the door, I finally cried. He hugged me.

"So sorry, young man. So sorry."

He moved to my mother with me in tow and surrounded us both with his huge arms.

"You are being asked to bear too great a burden. I cannot change it, but I will be here to help you bear it, if you want."

He drew my grandmother into the circle. She seemed grateful.

"I have my gig tonight at the Roadhouse," he said. "I don't know if you feel like coming out tonight, but you are welcome."

Then, he left.

Sandbag

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Almost every week, my mother and I, and sometimes my grandmother, went to the club where Sandbag played. Much to my surprise, my mother, through her tears, suggested we go tonight.

"You know that's not proper, Eleanor...." my grandmother started.

"Proper?" my mother interrupted. "Proper? I could be called unpatriotic. But is war proper? Are the deaths of my husband and son proper?"

"Yes, they gave their lives for the country. And I guess that is proper," my grandmother said.

"And you know these are proper tears of mourning, mother. But we cannot change what has happened. I choose to mourn by going out to listen to Sandbag, perhaps to remember a happy evening I shared with my husband so many years ago. His music is so alive, much like my husband and son were a week ago. I hope you will go with us, no matter what anyone else thinks."

And so we went out, and that night, Sandbag's music and zest for life began to fill in some of the deep holes in our lives. Even my grandmother admitted it was the right thing to do as we drove home.

The next morning, Pastor Reeder stopped by to pay his respects. He had quietly supported my mother's efforts to help the hoboes, practicing what he preached. He put an end to the meanest comments and convinced a few church members to contribute money to help out, especially during the darkest days of the Depression. He had often provided my mother with coffee, bread, cheese, and meat and helped men with medical problems get treatment when it was more than she could handle at home.

"I cannot tell you how my wife, other people at the church, and I are saddened by your great losses, Eleanor."

My mother, eyes still red and puffy, was grateful. "Thank you, Pastor Reeder. My whole world is scattered right now."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "We have known each other many years, Eleanor. I did not know your husband, but I will sorely miss Frankie. He brightened our lives."

Tears again flowed down my mother's face.

Sandbag

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Pastor Reeder took her hand. "I cannot even pretend to say that I understand the ways and whys of God in this, Eleanor. We are at war, a sinful state if ever there was one. But please know that the church will be here for you in any way humanly possible. It is the only way we can make our faith, such as it is, alive and strong in the face of great evils that afflict our world."

"Thank you, Pastor Reeder," she said. That afternoon, several women came by with a dinner basket, something that was repeated numerous times in the days to come.

Despite our sorrows, Christmas was coming. I was trying to overcome the emptiness of disbelief and anger that follows the sudden death of someone you love. At the same time, I was still young enough to be excited about the holidays. But the grief deeply tinged my joy. This year, we had two gold stars hanging in the front window of our house. They dimmed the brightness of the legendary star of Bethlehem, a cherished symbol in our family.

Yet, there was cheerful news. Sandbag was asked to play and be one of the emcees for a live radio show for servicemen and civilian workers that would be aired nationally on WGAR. It was scheduled for 7 on Christmas Eve in the terminal at Cleveland's Hopkins Airport, one of the busiest in the country, and noticeably busier since Pearl Harbor. Count Basie was the headliner. Sandbag was to play a set and introduce the big band whose leader was born in New Jersey but sprang to fame from Kansas City. Sandbag arranged for me to come to the rehearsal that afternoon. My mother was to join us there that evening.

With all of the air traffic overhead, I can't say I always looked up at the airplanes coming and going from the airport, but, as a boy growing up in a time where aviation was always in the news, my eyes were on the sky a lot of the time. December, 1941, was not a very good month for watching airplanes. It was fairly warm most days. We had a little snow, but it drizzled a lot. We could hear the airplanes coming and going, but often couldn't see them for the clouds.

Christmas Eve was too warm for the season, with low clouds, occasional drizzle, and some fog. As Sandbag and I walked to catch a streetcar that would take us to the airport, I heard the droning of an approaching airplane. I had learned to identify airplanes by the sound of their propellers in the air, but something didn't sound right.

Sandbag

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Just then, a DC-3 coming from the south broke through the clouds in a descending turn to line up with Runway 6, heading northeast toward the airport. I watched in horror as a B-17 coming from the west broke through the clouds at the same time and place. A propeller on its left wing bit into the DC-3's tail, ripping it off, chewing it to pieces that scattered across the sky.

The DC-3 was out of control. In what seemed like slow motion, it went into a flat spiral, headed for some farm fields and forest northeast of village. Meanwhile, the B-17's wing fuel tank had caught fire as spewing fuel hit the hot exhaust ports of an engine. It was off course, wings level, but falling toward Berea. I looked to the northeast and saw some smoke where the DC-3 had crashed.

I didn't know I could run so fast. Despite his bad leg, Sandbag was not far behind. When we got to the plane, its nose was wedged next to a tree. The co-pilot's head and shoulders were out the window. He was struggling to get out.

I scrambled up the tree, bracing myself against the fuselage, Somehow, I managed to pull the man out of the window and into the arms of Sandbag and some others who were waiting below.

Without thinking, I crawled through the window and unstrapped the pilot from his harness. He was unconscious. The plane was burning faster.

A man stuck his head through the co-pilot's window. "Hurry!" he shouted.

I have no idea how I did it. I hefted the pilot across the controls. His head and left arm were bleeding. The arm was broken. The man outside grabbed him under his arms and pulled him out the window. Others helped put the injured man down, gently, considering the situation.

The heat in the cockpit was searing as I jumped into the man's arms through the window. Sandbag was on the ground waiting to take me. The three of us barely got away from the nose before it was engulfed in flames. My coat and gloves were singed, but they kept me from getting anything more than superficial burns, like a sunburn, on parts of my face, especially my nose.

The man who helped me out of the cabin shook my hand.

"You are one cool cat in the face of danger, young man," Sandbag said, giving me a hug.

Sandbag

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I was breathless and couldn't answer. What I had done was just beginning to settle into my mind.

When I saw the planes collide, I didn't think. The run, climbing up the tree, pulling the co-pilot out, getting into the cockpit and pulling the pilot out, and escaping from the burning airplane all seemed to happen in slow motion. It was the stuff of schoolboy hero daydreams. I never had any sense of danger. Now, I started to cry.

"There, there, young man. It's all right. You are a brave one." Sandbag knelt down to be at my eye level. "We need to go see your mother."

"But you'll be late for the rehearsal."

"Let's not worry about that right now, Michael. There's still time. The main thing is making sure you are all right. And to let her know what happened."

A crowd had gathered, including the police, fire department, and an ambulance. Sandbag turned to a police officer. "Sir," he said, in an almost humble way, "this young man pulled the two crew members out of the plane. Someone should take him to the hospital where his mother works in Berea to make sure he is all right. You can see where his face got some burns."

"And you are?" the officer asked.

"Sandbag Bryant, sir."

"Oh, yes. You're that great blues guitar player?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you have some identification?"

"Yes, sir."

Sandbag pulled out his wallet and handed the officer some papers, including his Social Security card.

"OK, Mr. Bryant. That's fine. Let me see if I can arrange transport to the hospital for the two of you."

By the time the officer left, every kid in town had reached the crash site and was pressing to get closer. Margaret Schumacher was there. I guess my reddened face hid my embarrassment.

Sandbag

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I was trying to tell my friends what had happened when Ty Williams, a reporter for the paper, pushed his way into the group. When he tried to butt in, I said curtly. “If you listen now, I can tell you the story, but I’ll be leaving in a minute to go find my mother at the hospital.”

In those few moments, I was able to tell the story to my friends briefly, with Mr. Williams listening in. But there was no time for excruciating details of a 12-year-old. I’m not sure they believed me, but I was dirty and tattered and looked the part. Margaret was in awe. So were the others.

The police officer returned. “Barnes from the fire department will take you to the hospital to see your mother,” he said. “But it’s a mess over there. That other airplane crashed nearby. Now, Michael, isn’t it? From what I’ve heard, you are one brave kid. We’ll need to talk to you as soon as possible.”

I told him we would be at the hangar for the rehearsal. With that, we went back to pick up Sandbag’s guitar where he’d dropped it. But it wasn’t there. The firefighter called the police station on the radio to let them know about the theft, and we were off.

I had never been to the hospital during a big emergency like this. The place was in a state of organized chaos. Everyone was in a hurry, including my mother, who was running down the hall when she saw us.

“We have three survivors from the B-17 that crashed here, plus several patients who were on the ground nearby.” Then she looked at me. “What happened to you?”

“I rescued the two pilots from the DC-3....”

She cut me off. “Yes, they got here ten or fifteen minutes ago.... Oh my God! Michael! You could have been killed!”

I had never heard her swear before. “I’m fine, some burns on my face.”

She gave me another quick look with her skilled eyes. “Thank God.” She hugged me, welling up with tears.

Then she turned to Sandbag with a curious look of concern and a happy glint. “I must get back. Sandbag, would you mind picking up some ointment at the pharmacy for Michael’s face and helping him get whatever clothes he needs. I know how busy you are....” She glanced at her watch. “And you’re late for the

Sandbag

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rehearsal. Plus, looks to me like you were in on this business, too. Charge whatever you need to me.”

Sandbag flashed a smile. “Consider it done. I will repay you later.”

There was no time for discussion. My mother hugged him and then me. “I love you, you crazy boy,” she said to me, turning to run back to her station in the emergency room.

Reporters were all over the place at the hospital. Sandbag dodged them and found a pay phone so he could call the radio station let them know what had happened. We headed out to get some new clothes. Normally, I was a slow shopper, but not this time. Sandbag and I had new shoes, shirts, ready-made trousers, and overcoats in only a few minutes.

Meanwhile, we told the store owner why we were in such a hurry. Our story matched the condition of our clothes, so he believed us. In a stroke of luck, he had an order for shirts from someone at the show. His delivery boy took us to the pharmacy and then to a pawn shop to get a guitar for Sandbag. Then, he drove us to the airport.

As we rode, Sandbag gave the guitar a closer inspection. “Oh, this is a lovely instrument.” He almost purred. “Listen to this, young man.” He played and sang one of his favorites, “Revenue Blues,” by Charlie Patton.

When we got to the hangar where the show was going to be held, people overlooked me in their rush to see Sandbag. The voices seemed to be in unison. “We heard you saw the crash and helped rescue the pilots,” everyone was saying.

“Yeah. I was there. But this is the young man who did most the rescuing.” He pointed at me. “Meet one cool kid. This is my fine friend, Michael Blaine. He can tell you a good story.”

I again kept it short, mostly because I wanted to see the rehearsal. But the show’s producer had enough of a nose for news to know a good story.

“We need to get the rest of this rehearsal going, but I want to put you on the phone with our news department,” he said to me. “Would you like to do that?”

The radio station’s report asked me a lot of questions about the crash, what I saw, how I reacted, what it was like in the airplane.

Sandbag

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Then he asked me if I minded if he put me on the air for a live interview. He wanted to scoop the newspapers. It took a few minutes to get everything set up. I guess we were on the air for about five minutes. I gave credit to Sandbag and the man who pulled me from the cockpit before it caught fire. I never caught the man's name.

The time on the air went fast. Maybe I should have been nervous when I thought about all of the people listening, but it was like any telephone conversation.

When I hung up the phone, Officer Seitz from North Olmstead came up. He was friendly enough, I guess. He had a lot of questions. I answered as best I could. He finally cracked a smile when he was finished.

"I believe what you said, even if it's unbelievable, if you know what I mean," he said.

"Yes, sir. It seems unbelievable to me, too."

"You'll get used to it with time. But you have had some day. Everyone will be proud of you when word gets out about what you did."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, someone told me about your father and brother. I am so sorry."

"Thank you, sir. It's been a hard few weeks for my mother, grandmother, and me,"

"I know. And on the first day of the war, too. You can be proud of them, though."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, a lot of other folks are going to want to talk with you. I know the reporters are after you already. And the government investigators will want to talk with you soon, too. You'll do fine."

"Thank you, sir."

Officer Seitz was right. As we were talking, I noticed several reporters and photographers waiting for him to go. I wasn't afraid, but it was like watching a pack of animals about to pounce on their prey, and I was it. I tried to head to the rehearsal, but they came over, jabbering all at once.

Sandbag

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Maybe I felt a bit cocky. I held up both hands in a gesture that frankly told them to shut their mouths. To my surprise, they stopped shouting. A presumed leader of the group stepped out. “You’re Michael Blaine?”

“Yes.” Cameras clicked and flash bulbs popped. “If you all shout at once, we’ll never get this done. I’ll answer your questions as best I can, but only one at a time.”

Suddenly I felt very much the adult, in control of the situation.

The beasts weren’t cowering, but they actually took turns. From what I knew about newspapermen from the movies, it surprised me. So, I told the story again, answering their questions as best I could. One reporter took me aside after it was all over. “Would you talk to me about your father and brother? I bet you wish you could share this story with them.”

Tears welled up, but I didn’t cry much. The reporter was really nice. He gave me his handkerchief. So I told him how sad we all were, and how I really did wish I could tell my father and brother about it.

“I hadn’t seen my father for quite awhile because he was career Navy. But my brother would have been proud of me, I guess.”

The reporter didn’t push any harder, and I was grateful. The last part of the quote became the lead paragraph for a feature story in the *Cleveland Press* the next day.

I heard the word “proud” a lot for a few days, but it really wasn’t a word I’d ever used much. I think I was more like Mother. I was quiet, private, not wanting too much attention, even though I liked it, too.

Like any 12-year-old, I suppose, I’d dreamed of being a hero, maybe in a ball game or something like that, but certainly not pulling two men from a burning airplane.

I was already learning a couple of lifelong lessons: Fame meant lots of people were watching you, at least for awhile. And, you did something because it was the right thing to do, not because it would make people proud of you.

Sandbag understood that lesson well already, but he wasn’t about to let me slouch off into a corner somewhere. He thought I deserved recognition, and once the rehearsal was over, he drew me into the group of performers. Sandbag

Sandbag

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smiled as he introduced me again, and we told the story, but not “just the facts.”

People laughed when he described how he hobbled behind me, leaving his guitar behind, and that someone actually stole it in the confusion. He didn't mind much. He had seen far worse tragedies, and besides, he'd been eyeing that guitar in the pawn shop for a month or so and was glad to have it.

“Too bad, though, that it was the guitar this young man gave me when that drunk hit me and smashed my grandfather's guitar that I had with me on the road for all those years. Guess it's time I bought one for myself.”

Then, he held up the pair of pants I wore into the cockpit.

“I saved these as a souvenir, folks. This young man is going places.”

I laughed along with the others, but was embarrassed. I had no idea he'd retrieved them from the store.

With that, a hat started going around. The money collected more than covered what we'd paid for the guitar and clothes.

“I know a few men who are still down and out,” he told everyone. “If you don't mind, maybe this will help make their holidays a little brighter. Thank you!”

Sandbag was that type of man. He was good to others, but would not accept charity for himself.

All of this story telling wasn't quite an ordeal, but I was glad when it was over. Sandbag took me to get something to eat. After we'd eaten, he handed me his guitar.

“Guess what I'm playing tonight. Three songs.”

Without even thinking, I launched into “St. Louis Blues.” I was so deep into playing, I didn't see the others' heads turning our direction. When I heard people clapping, I was totally surprised. Sandbag had managed to make me a center of attention again.

Someone from a nearby table shouted, “How old did you say he is, Sandbag?”

“Twelve.”

“Man! What a set of digits!”

Sandbag

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“Nice pipes, too,” someone else said.

Sandbag smiled and turned to me again.

“OK. Good guess. What’s next?”

I thought for a second, not sure I wanted to play for an audience again. Then I started playing “God Bless the Child,” which had been a huge hit for Billy Holiday in 1941. I loved the song.

The room was quiet after the applause. Sandbag held up his finger to indicate one more. “OK. You’ve got two.”

I started into a version of “Go Tell It on the Mountain” that he had taught me. At the end of the first chorus, he stopped me. People actually groaned. So, I tried “Silent Night,” an instrumental version. I was right, and I still couldn’t believe people were actually clapping when I finished.

As the time for the show approached, the energy level in the hangar rose. The radio people were checking equipment. Basie’s band was warming up in a back room, getting ready to take their places. The announcer, producer, and director were making sure everything was in order. People were beginning to take their seats. Chairs up front were reserved for my mother and me. She was late, delayed at the hospital, I was sure. Sandbag took me backstage so I could watch. He left a note on her chair telling her where I was.

The hangar was full of time-ticking-down momentum toward the show, which now had a life of its own. Everyone was in place. As the seven o’clock news ended, the announcer did an introduction, Basie’s band took its cue and broke into a raucous version of “Jingle Bells.” The announcer, with his strong baritone voice pumped up not only the radio audience, but everyone in the hangar. The crowd cheered, soldiers whistling as the band galloped into its version of “And the Angels Sing.”

During a commercial, a local group, led by Bernie Cummins, took the stage. The band had a good reputation in Northeast Ohio and had played at places such as the Hotel Cleveland Bronze Room. I liked them. Later on, when the Wings Over Jordan Choir sang “Go Tell it on a Mountain,” I was mesmerized by their voices and harmonies.

It was amazing how fast the show went. Pretty soon, it was time for Sandbag, whose set was before Basie’s band, which was slated to close the broadcast.

Sandbag

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Sandbag patted me on the shoulder as he walked out on the stage and sat on a stool before a thousand or so souls. Even the thought of it petrified me, playing like that in front of people I didn't know.

It was obvious some people knew who he was, had seen him locally, or remembered him from days past. He thanked them graciously as he began to play "St. Louis Blues" in his inimitable way.

"You are so kind," he said in response to the applause. "And now, a new song, by Billie Holiday, a lady who is getting the recognition she deserves." He plucked an improvised introduction and let the power of "God Bless the Child" build in its own sadly beautiful time.

As he was singing the last chorus, someone nudged me and took me by the shoulders. It was one of the musicians I'd met at rehearsal. Sandbag's song ended to applause, partly heartfelt and partly prompted by the applause signs that were being held up.

"Thank you so much on this beautiful Christmas Eve. Now, this is not in my script. But I want to introduce someone to you." He turned toward me as the musician guided me onto the stage. After some impromptu applause: "This young man is Michael Blaine. I have seen him show dignity and courage this past month, and I admire him."

Someone thrust a guitar into my hands. "Silent Night," young man. Just like we rehearsed it this afternoon."

All of this took seconds. At Sandbag's urging, the quizzical look on my face disappeared. I played a simple introduction, not wanting to make a mistake. He joined in. We fed on each other, back and forth for two verses, when I heard a piano in the background.

The scripted discipline of radio was bent, not broken. The director, quick to react, had the microphones on the band up and ready when he saw Basie get ready to join in. Then drums and bass. A clarinet, the other woodwinds, the trumpets, all meek and mild, a chorus of angels for the fourth verse of quiet, spontaneous joy heard nationwide. Sandbag let me take it to the end.

The audience was in an uproar. When it quieted, Sandbag thanked Basie and introduced the band without dropping a beat. The national segment of the show would end on time. The music in the hangar would continue long after, a

Sandbag

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holiday dance for young people shocked by Pearl Harbor and the day's airplane accident, but not yet war-weary.

As Sandbag and I left the stage, we saw Mother with a huge smile on her face, the largest I had seen in weeks. She hugged me. "Merry Christmas, Mike. You were unbelievable!"

I let the words linger. "I love you, Mother. It is so good to see you smile like that."

She turned to Sandbag, tears with the smile. The hug she gave him was warm, lingering a moment longer than the others I had seen lately.

"The young man was unbelievable, wasn't he?" He pushed her back a bit still holding her gently by the elbows. He smiled at her, and then at me.

The show's producer and director couldn't decide whether they were happy or not, until they found out that the station's switchboard was jammed with calls from all over the country. A surprise could be a good thing, they decided.

I don't really know if I slept that night or not. The rush of Christmas Eve turned to Christmas Dawn, an Advent of glad tidings that continued to wash away our grief.

There was much mourning to do. The loss of husband and father, son and brother would always be with our family. Yet, here in the middle of it all, there was joy. My presents were fine and memorable in their own way. The church service was festive, and people who heard the radio program the night before told us how wonderful it was.

After church, Margaret Schumacher asked me to come over that afternoon and I did, right after we came back from the hospital, where Sandbag, my mother, and I visited the two recovering pilots of the DC-3.

When I went to Margaret's house, the visit was low key. Her family asked a little bit about my Christmas Eve adventures, but it was only part of the visit, which included playing games and drinking eggnog.

As I left, Margaret gave me my first kiss when we had a minute alone under the mistletoe in her hallway. It surprised me. I liked it. So did she. It was the first of many.

Sandbag

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Sandbag spent the day and evening with us. My grandmother had grown to like him even more. I sensed that my mother was growing to love him. They gave each other so much strength, sharing the love each needed so much. Their years together were happy, but ended all too soon.

Josiah ‘Sandbag’ Bryant, blues guitarist, 73

Cleveland, Ohio - December 7, 1969—Blues guitarist Josiah “Sandbag” Bryant died yesterday at his home in Olmstead Falls. He was 73.

He is survived by his beloved widow, Eleanor Wharton Bryant, whom he married in 1946, and his devoted step-son, Michael Blaine.

Bryant was born in Mississippi in 1896. He grew up in Memphis learning about the blues in their earliest days. His career flourished after World War I. Musicians nicknamed him Sandbag because of his sandy-colored hair and portly build. He played with some of the most famous blues and jazz artists of the time

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, he fell on hard times. Out of work, he became a hobo and rode the rails for much of the decade. He ended up in Olmstead Falls after being struck by a car on New Year’s Eve at the end of 1939. The accident left him with a bad leg, and he lived there for the rest of his life.

Within a couple of years, Bryant became a beloved musical talent in Northeastern Ohio with his unique voice and Mississippi Delta guitar style. While working at a greenhouse in Olmstead Falls, he entertained in schools and small clubs, demonstrating his love of music and people of all ages. In late 1942, he started his own club in Berea, Hobos’ Haven, which became a meeting place for new and experienced musicians.

His performance with then 12-year-old Michael on radio station WGAR on Christmas Eve in 1941 reintroduced him to a national audience and paved the way for him to open his club. Michael took over running the club in 1969, months before his stepfather died.

Bryant gained a new following during the 1960s’ folk revival, when he had a chance to play at clubs in New York, Cleveland, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. His humor, storytelling, and singing and playing enthralled audiences until he decided to stop travelling in 1965.

Only a few of his original recordings survive, but a new double album of some of those recordings and new material was released in 1963....