

Milk Run (Synopsis)

Chapter 1

The opening chapter consist solely of an elaborate description of Mount Cagna and Punta di Monaco on Corsica. No characters appear in this chapter.

After a detailed description of the forbidding, rugged landscape of thorny scrub brush and jagged rock outcrops, the chapter ends thus:

“Falling into a landscape such as this, where space and time are so mysteriously mixed – devastated by a mishap, mischance or on purpose, one could disappear forever, or at least for a very long time.”

Chapter 2

We are introduced to Frances Coates. She is in Bizerta, Tunisia. She has been in North Africa as a correspondent for the Red Cross for nearly a year. The field hospital has been broken down, packed up and everything, including the patients, are being unloaded in Bizerta.

She is arriving from Bône, Algeria by ship. On shipboard she thinks back to her time in North Africa and all of the discomforts: threat of malaria, the flies, intestinal upset and the smell of DDT and antiseptic chemicals in the air. She is thankful for the clean sea air.

She thinks back to the last family dinner they had the evening before she shipped out and remembers how everyone kept up a cheerful demeanor, and assured one another that the war could not last much longer.

“She was not one of those people who would be depersonalized by wearing a uniform, because her personality, her charisma offset the uniformity of a uniform. Apart from the fact that she had to wear a uniform when on duty, she took it as normal that she should. Her appearance was a symbol of her duty and united her with all of the men and women around her, who, like her were in this country for a war started by dictators, a war that they would bring to a victorious conclusion.”

Chapter 3

The port is a scene of controlled chaos as the people and material are transferred from the ship to waiting vehicles.

Frances was hoping to meet up with a friend, Helen, a nurse that she had spent time working with in North Africa before Helen shipped out to Bizerta. Somehow, Helen manages to find Frances amid all of the confusion.

The two reminisce about their time together in North Africa with the 41st Hospital Unit, which was

receiving casualties from the Sicily invasion.

“In reporting about the course of the war and the work that the men and women of the American Red Cross were doing, had caused her to come in contact with a lot of people. Often it was all business, but sometimes there was a personal connection, before they lost sight of one another again. She had her baggage, or as she joking referred to it, her “household,” lugged from one place to another, unpacked, then packed up again.”

Helen takes Frances back to the hospital and airfield where she is stationed, and Frances has a pleasant dinner at the officer's club, and even recognizes some of the nurses she had worked with before.

“Later, after Frances was asleep, a courier plane, a B-25 with droning motor took off, rattling the windows of the barracks. It was a routine flight over the Mediterranean toward the North, a milk run as the pilots of these courier or supply ships called them. Who knows where they were headed, perhaps to Italy?”

Chapter 4

Helen has arranged for Frances to hitch a ride on a B-25 headed to Ajaccio, Corsica. Frances is sure that she will be able to hop a flight to the Italian mainland from Corsica. On this flight the B-25 will make a stop on the way in Sardinia.

Frances is amused to see the B-25 bomber being loaded with tomatoes and fresh eggs. She thinks to herself, “What does it say in the Good Book? Swords into plowshares? This ship must be named “Bomber into Vegetable Transport.”

She stops for a moment to admire the nose art and sees that the aircraft is named “Alabama Belle.” The co-pilot says to her:

“That's right, ma'am, and with the Alabama Belle you will fly in complete safety, just like in a dream, I'd say,” and he pats the thigh of the Southern Beauty painted on the side of the ship, “That is Dave's grandmother. She protects us from the evil Germans. Since she has been here we haven't had any problems with them. When the Jerrys see her, they turn and run and forget to shoot at us.” He turns to the pilot and says, “Ain't that right, Dave?”

“No, that's not right!” Dave answered laughing, “Both of my Grandmothers were true Kansas girls. And take your hand off that girl's thigh, you are making me jealous, and if you keep making stupid jokes you will be making a jump between Corsica and Italy – but without a parachute.”

Chapter 5

The aircraft lands at Sardinia. They are not sure how long they will be there because they are waiting for delivery of more vegetables from the local farms.

Frances sees a truck, painted with a Red Cross symbol on it, sitting on the other side of the runway, and heads for it in the hopes finding a good cup of coffee.

As she starts out she notices the wreck of a B-25 bomber on the side of the runway. It had apparently made a belly-flop landing without the landing gear extended. The wreck had sort of collapsed in on itself. She goes toward the wreck to get a better look, then thinks twice about it:

“You would be better off turning around now and getting your coffee. You've seen enough,” she says to herself, half aloud, but ignores her own advice and continues on toward the aircraft. So close that she can hear the creaking of the aluminum shards as they wind causes them to flap against one another.”

She looks into the wreck and sees the radio operator's seat. That was the same place she sat in the aircraft on the flight to Sardinia. She notes a well-worn photo stuck to the radio console of a smiling young woman in a bathing suit on the beach.

“The image of that young woman and the fleck of bloodstains on the pearly green of the plane's interior, was one of those images that would remain with her for a very long time, and return to her mind's eye again and again along with a feeling of disquiet.”

She finally tears herself way from the crashed aircraft and continues on to the Red Cross truck.

Chapter 6

Frances is greeted by another Red Cross lady, Vera. Vera welcomes Frances with a fresh-brewed cup of coffee and fresh-made donuts.

Vera tells how the Red Cross takes the truck out to the airfield when crews come back from a combat mission, and the ladies hand out coffee and donuts to the returning flight crews. After a tough mission the boys really appreciate coffee, donuts and a smile from a pretty girl.

As Frances enjoys her coffee she thumbs through some old copies of “Stars and Stripes.” Frances and Vera are joined by a soldier, Butch, who is part of the ground echelon and has brought more copies of “Stars and Stripes” to hand out to the returning combat crews when they get back.

The three of them chat about the course of the war. The Luftwaffe has been pretty much cleared from the skies, the bombing of Monte Cassino, Axis Sally's propaganda broadcasts, the eruption of Vesuvius, and the invasion of Anzio.

Their conversation is interrupted by the roar of aircraft engines in the sky. The B-26 Marauders are returning from their combat mission. Butch and Vera spring into action getting everything ready receive the crews when they land.

The Alabama Belle has been provisioned and Frances makes her way back to the aircraft with the pilots for the short hop from Sardinia to Corsica.

Chapter 7

Boarding the aircraft Frances finds that they have picked up another passenger, he is with the 321st Bombardment Group stationed on Corsica.

PFC Mike Layman has a small pet monkey on his shoulder. The pilots tease Mike about the mascot:

“He has a hard job with you guys. Mascots for the 321st BG! Is it true that he was promoted to sergeant and has gotten used to smoking and drinking beer in the enlisted man's club?”

Chapter 8

Captain Dave Hartmann pilots the ship on this milk run to Corsica. He flies low, about 2000 feet, to allow the mountains on his left to shield him from the crosswind, but also because he likes to see the farms below. Before entering the Army in 1941 he was on the City Council for Garden City, Kansas for three years. He grew up on the family farm, and after the war he plans on returning and working the farm.

A young girl on the ground leans her bicycle against a wall and waves at the low-flying aircraft.

The co-pilot, Will, says to the pilot:

“Good Lord, she looks good. She has brown eyes and freckles. I am sure she was waving at me! Stop here and let me out.”

They land at the Ajaccio airfield.

Chapter 9

A weather front has moved in and it is raining when the aircraft rolls to a stop. It is cold and windy on the runway and Frances is already thinking about the warm Italian sun.

She reports to the commanding officer, but the Colonel is not very helpful. He tells her that connecting flights are not easy to come by, especially in the current bad weather. There is the possibility of a courier flight to the 57th Bomb Wing HQ. She will have to make herself as comfortable as she can until he finds her a ride.

He suggests another possibility, driving over the rugged mountains to the airfields on the east coast of the island. The trip is long, hard and dangerous, and he quickly rules it out.

Finally, he tells her he will get her on one of the courier flights. He also says that she is not going to be comfortable hanging around in this drafty tent, and suggests that she go into town to stay at the Hotel L'Aiglou that the Army uses when needed. He directs a sergeant to take her there.

Chapter 10

This chapter is primarily descriptive of the drive from the Campo del Oro airfield to the town of Ajaccio. There are lavish descriptions of the landscape, the dramatic coastline and the quaint town of Ajaccio itself.

Chapter 11

Her driver introduces Frances to Monsieur Bartoli, the hotel manager, and tells her that the Colonel will let the hotel know when they find her a flight, and send someone for her.

M. Bartoli sees that Frances is tired from her day's journey and offers her a cafe au lait. He is delighted to find that she speaks perfect French, and sees to it that she gets some bread to go along with the coffee as a snack before dinner.

Frances hears voices in a neighboring room and peeks in to see a group of GI's putting up decorations for a dance later that night. She withdraws without being noticed.

M. Bartoli tells Frances that he has free rooms in the hotel, but he knows that the dance tonight will make a lot of noise that would even disturb her on the upper floor. So, he proposes that she stay with a friend of his who runs a small bed and breakfast with his wife. Bartoli arranges everything and soon a car arrives to pick her up.

Chapter 12

At the inn Frances lays down to rest and quickly dozes off. She awakes a couple of hours later, and recalls the dream she had. She dreamed about the small dog that she had when she was a little girl. The dog was named Toto after the dog in one of her favorite books as a child, The Wizard of Oz.

In the dream she is riding in a Jeep and Toto is running along behind them, then he gets left behind in the dust. She realizes that she called out to him in her sleep and that is what woke her up. Then she thinks back to the real Toto who was lost to her one day when she was walking with him in the woods. He ran off and was never seen again in spite of all of her family's efforts in searching for him.

She was awake and refreshed now and looking forward to dinner.

She thinks back to the ride to the B&B with M. Aitoni, and the warm greeting by his wife when she arrived.

A soft knock on the door calls her to dinner.

Chapter 13

With dinner not being totally ready yet, Frances is invited to sit by the fire. She observes the rooms of the inn which are decorated in an old-fashioned style. Dark woods, taxidermy, and a small statue of Napoleon Bonaparte who was born in Ajaccio. Her host offers her an aperitif before dinner.

Sitting with M. Aitoni by the fire, he tells her a little about his life. He limps a little. It is, as he puts it, a souvenir of the First World War. He tells her about buying the house then turning it into an inn, and how the business dropped to nothing once the Germans arrived to occupy the island.

“It was with a mixture of wonder and sympathy that the Aitoni's listened to Frances' description of her work as a war correspondent in North Africa and the hardships that went along with it. However, it was clear from their questions and the timid interjections of the elderly couple that they didn't think a young woman should lead such a restless and dangerous life.”

After dinner Frances retires to her room and gets her typewriter out to do a little work.

She hears the phone ring in the hall. The airfield has called to say that there is a courier flight planning to leave at 11PM that very night, in spite of the rain and bad weather.

The elderly couple suggest that she stay another night, but Frances is eager to get to Italy and agrees to take the late flight.

Chapter 14

Frances hastily repacks her things and sits with the Aitoni's for a few minutes waiting for the jeep to arrive to pick her up. M. Aitoni tells her how much the Corsicans feel grateful to the US for their role in freeing the island from German occupation. Mme. Aitoni makes Frances promise to write to them once she gets settled to let them know how things are with her.

When the jeep arrives from the airbase, Frances finds that the rain has stopped and the wind is noticeably warmer. Also in the jeep with Al was M. Bartoli. Al did not know the location of the B&B so Bartoli rode along to guide him.

The Corsicans call the warm wind that came up that night “The Libecciu.”

“The Libecciu comes direct from Africa, out of the desert over the sea and brings warm air, rain and sometimes dust from the desert. A strong wind! The snowpacks on the mountains sometimes turn red from the desert dust. Bartoli laughed mischievously, and nodded toward Al, “And they also say that the wind drives people mad, crazy, insane. In such a night anything is possible, people die, couples break up, fall in love, in the cliffs above the gorges boulders tumble into the crevasses.”

Bartoli suddenly realizes that he might be frightening the young American lady, so with another mischievous grin he says:

“Perhaps the wind has come because of you? Yes, of course! It has come to take you back with him, the wild Libecciu, back to Africa, back to the Sahara. He wants to do something good for you! He has fallen in love with the bella signora americana! The hot, ardent wind does not want to leave your side. You better watch out!”

Frances took the playful warning as a compliment.

Chapter 15

When Frances saw the waiting courier plane sitting on the runway, it was like a stone lifted from her heart. She was not going to be stuck on a corner of this remarkable island. The mad dash from the Aitoni's inn in the middle of the night had not been in vain.

She was looking forward to seeing Naples and Vesuvius after all she had heard about the battle for the city, then there was the liberation of Rome and soon the whole of Italy.

Frances finds out that there will be a short delay before they can take off. They are waiting for another courier aircraft to land at the airfield.

Frances gets a cup of coffee and waits in the orderly's tent with a couple of GI's. One of them has tuned in Axis Sally on the radio.

Francis and the GI's chat about Axis Sally's propaganda broadcasts and comment on the musical selections.

Then to everyone's surprise in the tent, Axis Sally directs an announcement to the Allied forces on Corsica. She welcomes them to the island, and promises a welcoming present to be delivered by the Luftwaffe. She won't tell them when or where, because she doesn't want to spoil the surprise.

They hear a small airplane come in for a landing.

“A Lightning,” Al says, standing next to Frances, “Now is the time, Ma'am, your connecting flight on Uncle Sam's Airways will be departing in a few minutes.”

Chapter 16

Al accompanies Frances out to the B-25 sitting on the runway. They look at the aircraft and note the peeling paint and the places where it had been patched. Al follows Frances' gaze:

“Yeah, the good old “Deathwind” was there at the beginning in North Africa and also later in Italy. You can't see it very well anymore but it is still painted on the upper surfaces in the 'Desert Pink' color scheme. Just after we moved to Corsica it was taken out of combat duty. Now it is just used for easy courier flights, milk runs, like today.”

Frances can see that the pilots are already on board and are going through the pre-flight checklist in the cockpit. Mike, and his little monkey, will be flying with her on the short hop to Solenzara.

Al and the Colonel stand by and watch the Deathwind make its way down the runway.

Chapter 17

“During the afternoon of May 10, 1944 the Libecciu with building force made its way from North Africa over the sea to Corsica.”

The author describes in lush detail how the warm wind laden with moisture collided with the cold snow-capped mountains to form thick clouds of fog.

Twenty-seven minutes after midnight, Pierre Lucchesi, turned off the lights and was about to follow his wife to bed when he heard his dogs barking and could make out the drone of an aircraft engine. He was used to seeing aircraft overhead, but usually the American planes flew along the coastline. This one appeared to be heading toward the mountains. Was this one planning to go over the mountain? Without knowing how fast the aircraft could climb, Pierre still thought it would be tough to clear the mountain peak. While Pierre was making these quick calculations in his head he noticed a thick bank of fog appear in just a few seconds between the peaks of Ovace and Monaco.

“On the eleventh of May, 1944 the B-25, “Deathwind,” disappeared into the fog bank and smashed into the southwest flank of Punta di Monaco. The force with which the nearly full gas tanks exploded ripped the aircraft into countless metal shards all over the field of boulders around the crash site. The flash of light from the fireball created by the ignition of hundreds of gallons of aircraft fuel lit up the clouds of smoke from within then dissipated. The sound of the explosion, and its echos, rang unheard through the mountains.”