

No Man

He can see the sky and it is the most beautiful thing he has ever seen, a dome of infinite blue. He can see the sun. It has gradually, imperceptibly, crept across the heaven. In the beginning he had to strain his eyes to the left as far as they would go to see it and now he is beginning to have to strain them to the right. They ache from the constant light but that doesn't bother him. The sun is still warm on his face, even though it must be getting late. He cannot remember when it last shone but he imagines it was a very long time ago; maybe he never noticed it.

Some clouds formed earlier on in the direction of where his feet must be. Long, thin tenuous clouds that appeared out of the air to drift peacefully away beyond where he could see them. Sometimes a billow of smoke will pass over him and his world will briefly be cold with shadow. The smell of cordite will sting his nose and sometimes clods of mud will patter around him, thrown up by the explosion. But then the smoke passes and again the delicious sunlight caresses him.

He can hear every shell as it shrieks earthwards and each time he wonders again whether one of them will end its brief, violent flight on him. But none of them do. Some fall so far away that he can barely feel the mud around him shiver as they detonate. Others hit the ground only tens of feet away, tearing deep wounds into the soil and showering him with the fragments. Endlessly they fall from the blue sky, bearing their loads of destruction. But never on him, not yet. He's glad that they don't. He is in no pain. He can watch the sky and the sun in its timeless orbit; maybe he will even see it set.

He cannot move anything apart from his eyes. He cannot feel his legs. And his memory is gone. His mind is blank, wiped; he does not know his name or what has happened to him. He just knows that he is lying here in the mud, between bodies and craters, and long coils of barbed wire. Waiting.

Someone was close to him, very close. He could hear their breathing, long and slow, as if they were asleep. He would have been able to touch them if he could have moved his arm. The breathing was with him for a long time, very regular, somehow intimate. He listened to it and breathed with them. But then the breathing had stopped, without warning, from one breath to the next and he was alone. Further away someone had been saying a name. *Francesca*, over and over and over again. A normal voice. As if they were mentioning the name in conversation, again and again, no change in the tone or the speed, like a record needle stuck in its groove. But they too had stopped suddenly. A shell probably got them.

If he could speak would he be saying someone's name? He might have a wife, children even, but he can't remember. He doesn't mind, it wouldn't change anything now.

He feels like he is part of the mud already. Gradually it has been oozing into his tunic, cold and alien on his skin. But now he cannot feel it anymore, maybe his body temperature has warmed it, or maybe he is too numb to feel it. This mud will swallow him and possibly he will never be recovered. There are so many others out here, each once a person, with a face that had smiled and cursed and cried. Each had been loved. Each with a story to tell, but not anymore. He is almost like them; he has forgotten his story.

Strangely he does have one last memory though, one lone recollection amongst the emptiness in his mind. It is the memory of a room.

The room is small, rectangular, and contains only a sink, a bed, and a cupboard. The walls are made of smooth wood, painted light yellow, and there is a door opposite the bed. Another wall has the sink – made of white porcelain – attached to it. There is a lamp hanging from the ceiling, with an opaque white shade. It has a wick that glistens with oil and a long fluted chimney of glass. But better than this the room has a window. And through this window he can see a field of long grass, and beyond it a body of water that stretches almost to the horizon. On the horizon are dark rolling hills and above them, the sky, dark and blue and filled with towering stacks of white cloud. He does not know what is beyond the door. When he tries to open it there is only that emptiness that has swallowed the rest of his memories.

This room must have meant something to him, for its memory to survive whatever it was that left him here. Or maybe it was just chance that he has one meaningless last recollection whilst everything else was purged. What happened in this room? He will never know, but he can savour its memory.

Suddenly he can hear shouting. The gunfire seems to have gotten closer. He can hear the vicious hiss of bullets as they cut the air overhead, briefly intruding into his world. A machine gun is firing somewhere in quick bursts and its explosive chatter is making unremembered fears stir in his mind. There are screams and more shouting. And suddenly something flies through the air, thrown by an unseen hand, and lands beside him. Adrenaline erupts into his blood. Even though he saw it for only a fraction of a second, he knows it is a hand grenade.

He tries futilely to move, to crawl away, but of course his muscles are not responding. He doesn't want to die so soon. It is far too early. He should have been allowed more time. He stops trying to move, and closes his eyes. Tears are streaming out from under his eyelids.

He forces himself to breathe slowly, to try to order the thoughts in his mind before it is permanently extinguished. Time slows down so that its passing is barely perceptible. Maybe my mind knows it is about to be vaporised, he thinks, maybe it is slowing down my perception of time so that he can have a few more moments. *Any second now...any second.* His whole body is shaking. *This anticipation is killing me*, he thinks. He would have laughed insanely had he been able to do so.

The moments pass, and he is still alive. *It's a dud; it's a bloody dud.* For many minutes he lies with his eyes closed, maybe even for as long as half an hour. He cannot think but continues to cry silently.

Then there is a new sensation, warmth around his breast, for the first time an ache. *I'm bleeding; I must have opened a wound.* He knows that this time it really is the end. He feverishly tries to think of his past, someone he knew, anything, an anchor in this world before he slips into the next, but it is useless. There is nothing. Sounds are becoming more distant, the sky darker, but he realises that the darkness is only in his mind.

He re-enters the room, searching for a memory that he might have missed but there is nothing new. He looks through the window scanning the glorious vista, but he's seen it all before. He turns round and suddenly there is a cot in the middle of the room, a simple wooden cot, painted white. It is occupied. Ever so slowly he bends over and delicately moves a blanket so that he can see into the child's face. With an overwhelming certainty he suddenly remembers that he is a father, and that this is the child whom he never saw, who was born after he began his service at the front. He is transfixed by its beauty, its innocence, its peacefulness, but he dares not touch it in case he wakes it. Very slowly he leans forward until his face is almost touching the child's curls. He can smell its freshly washed skin. *Remember me*, he whispers softly into its ear. Then he straightens up, opens the door and without looking back steps into the all-consuming void that is beyond it.

His corpse is smiling.

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