

The Road

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The constant rumbling of military traffic overhead made the towpath tremble beneath his sleeping body. His restless turning rustled and tore the old newspapers under the travel-stained overcoat. He had removed this from his friend who had perished during the night. A corpse no longer had need for a quilted silk lining.

After leaving their shell-shattered homes and burying the fragmented remains of their families, the two fathers no more, had walked from the village with nothing but the few belongings they could carry. They hoped to find sanctuary from this pointless war but only found temporary refuge from the bitter cold in an underpass.

The man whimpered in his sleep, the sharp fracture in his left arm piercing tissue beneath the skin. His friend was beyond feeling anything, not even the large piece of shrapnel in his gangrenous thigh before life surrendered to death. For the rest of the day the survivor stared at his motionless friend before exhaustion dragged him into a deep sleep.

As the sun slowly set the temperature rapidly plunged and thick snow began to fall silently at the ends of the underpass. It had been his friend's last wish that he washed and buried him within the obligatory twenty-four hours and at sunset. However, the never-ending convoy of armoured vehicles and tanks

using the road above prevented him from leaving the refuge. Like a wild animal he waited silently for the danger to pass.

Suddenly, there was a muted clash of metal followed by angry voices shouting in a foreign tongue. The change from monotonously droning vehicles to what was clearly a road accident stirred the man and wincing with pain he sat up and leant against the frost-covered wall. His head turned to look from one moonlit semicircle of whiteness to the other, half expecting to see soldiers appearing at the openings, but the heated uproar remained above his head.

It was the unmistakable sound of metal clinking that abruptly drew his attention for it seemed very close and it had echoed in the tunnel. Turning his head he saw a solitary figure squatting on the riverbank and by the moonlight reflecting off the snow he could see that he was young man, uniformed and carrying a machine gun over his shoulder. He was also a mere fifty yards from where he was sitting.

Using the base of the water bottle the soldier struck the thin ice once more and gave a grunt of satisfaction when the frozen surface gave way. He plunged his hand into the opening and as the bottle filled the man hiding in the dark could hear the gurgle of the crystal clear water entering the flask and he ran a tongue over dry lips.

Without making a sound he pressed back against the wall to reduce his silhouette against the other moonlit opening of the underpass. With unblinking eyes fixed on the soldier the refugee began to edge downward and had almost reached a prone position against the wall when his hand slipped. The splintered bone jerked making it impossible to stifle his cry of agony and the soldier's head jerked up like a startled hare. The dropped water bottle skittered across the ice as the machine gun swung round and aimed into the dark.

The soldier shouted a command, something that the man trying to remain motionless with knuckles pressed against his mouth, was unable to understand. Advancing in a crouch the soldier entered the underpass with extreme caution until he stumbled over the body. He cursed and leapt back not knowing what or who it was. The refugee watched with bated breath as the private bent to study

his find and he heard what could only have been a curse when the young man identified it as a corpse. He prodded the body with the toe of his military boot and satisfied that the stranger was deceased he moved forward. Dead men don't shout and he was determined to discover the person who had.

He took ten more paces with eyes that had now become accustomed to the gloom before being aware of the injured man lying against the wall. The muzzle jerked up and he barked a question but the injured man, not knowing the language, was unable to answer him.

The soldier commanded him to show his hands but the man, again not comprehending the order, remained with one arm supporting the other and both hands tucked into the sleeves of the large overcoat. He watched as the soldier, who was now becoming dangerously impatient, indicated that he should stand up and gritting his teeth the man painfully levered himself upright with his good arm and then, with his back pressed against wall, he slid upward to stand unsteadily before the cocked weapon.

After barking another question and receiving no response the soldier mimed to show that the coat had to be removed. With moans suppressed behind tightly closed lips the coat was unbuttoned and shrugged off the shoulders to slide down and puddle around his feet.

The muzzle was lowered slowly for the soldier had noticed the oddly bent arm. He had seen many broken bones and looking at the man's unnaturally white face he could understand the agony he was suffering.

The gun swung back onto the soldier's back and the bag, hanging at his belt was unzipped. The refugee cringed as the man walked towards him but the soldier smiled reassuringly and removed a roll of bandage. He made a winding action round his own arm to demonstrate what he planned to do. The terrified man nodded and then pulled back again as a wicked looking bayonet was slid from its scabbard. The soldier held the long blade against his own forearm, miming a splint, and the injured man managed a feeble smile despite the waves of pain.

With totally unexpected tenderness the young man bound the fracture to prevent the ends of the bone moving too much. He wound the bandage as tight as he dared until the flat blade was completely hidden. Only the sweat-stained leather grip showed and from the remaining lengths of bandage a crude sling was fashioned, helping to alleviate the man's misery.

Pointing above his head, the soldier tried to explain that his was the last vehicle in the convoy but that it had hit a farmer's tractor. The men were frustrated at not being able to communicate and he tried a simpler mime of walking fingers, as though crossing a road, and a moment of understanding showed briefly in the injured man's eyes. You will be able to do that as soon as my armoured car has gone the young private continued, using his fingers again, but these actions were far too complicated to be understood.

The refugee shivered and the soldier picked up the coat and draped it across his shoulders. He closed the front over the injured arm and as the last button was being fastened a shout startled both men. With disciplined precision the young man jumped to attention for he had recognized his commanding officer's voice.

A tall man dressed in a black leather coat that had strange insignia on the collar and shoulders strode towards the two men. Snow flew from the toes of his black boots as he approached. He barked a question and the private gave a reply that clearly failed to satisfy the officer.

There followed a severe tongue-lashing that made the young soldier freeze with fear. An order was barked into his face, splattering spittle on his cheeks and the soldier, after a brief hesitation, startled the refugee by removing the warm coat and handing it to the officer. Holding it between thumb and forefinger his superior held it up for closer inspection before nonchalantly tossing it onto the frozen river. The officer shouted that the deliberate loss of military equipment was a court martial offence and his finger pointed at the bayonet hilt protruding from the bandaged arm. The private struggled to explain how he had tried to help the injured man.

An obvious grunt of displeasure preceded another barked order and with a brief look of sympathy at the confused refugee the private ran from the underpass. He climbed the steep bank as though the Hounds of Hell were at his heels, occasionally slipping on the ice beneath the deep layer of snow. He reached the road to find the farmer's tractor and the convoy had gone. A solitary personnel carrier sat waiting with white vapour issuing from its burbling exhaust and he climbed into the fusty, sweaty warmth to rejoin his comrades.

Many unspoken questions showed in the eyes that turned his way when he entered but the private took his place on the bench with his head bowed and stared silently at his boots, unable to voice his fears. There was a tight knot in his stomach and his hands clutched both thighs for he knew, from experience, what his commanding officer was capable of doing.

In the claustrophobic silence they all heard the sharp sound that faintly filtered through concrete, earth, tarmac and the thin layer of steel beneath their boots. After a few moments the officer climbed into the vehicle and thrust the bayonet back into the private's empty scabbard with an angry order not to lose it again.

The Captain took his seat, waved to the driver and the personnel carrier continued on to the next village leaving the main road clear and perfectly safe for anyone to cross.

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