

OUR MONEY'S GOOD

We took the town to get a decent night's sleep. Tomorrow we keep up the retreat to the Fatherland beyond the Rhine. What will it be like there? Will it be still be waiting for us? Will anyone still really be waiting for us there?

So, here we are for now, pulling out of poor, long-suffering France for good. And speaking as a soldier, that's the way I'd want it.

Nightfall. Like black insects we scuttle through the village, scattering to occupy houses to spend the night in. Somewhere. Anywhere. Just as long as we have a roof over our heads. A little water. A bite to eat... if there's any food left.

Our dear Sergeant picks me of all people to knock at the door of this quaint little cottage as it slowly sinks into the gloom of dusk. He wants me to get the owners to put us up for the night. Unpleasant business. Everyone else is already occupying their houses as the village folk glare at us with thinly veiled venom. Even with the war nearly lost we're still requisitioning things, occupying houses, staying one more night! Falls the night and the hatred melts into the darkness, hiding, waiting.

The village shakes itself awake in alarm. Muffled cries and obscene oaths, and it finally dawns on me: all these years of war, all these bullets and shells have made me stupid. Only now do I begin to admit it as fragments come flashing back through my memory, fed on cinders and smoking embers, alight with grief and fear that strike at will.

This village saw me for the first time one day in May 1940 on our way through to Lilles. We were marching the other way back then. I've been through four years of fighting since. I can hardly be blamed for forgetting it. I have to admit, I got it mixed up with another one at first, some other French village I must have been through. Or was it Italian or Yugoslavian? Or Greek? Some other village, long hidden under the smoking ash of my idiot memory, perhaps forever.

Too many explosions, too many deaths and burnt-out towns.

Yet, incredibly enough this malaise –the slow, living death of 1944– still brings me one forgotten pleasure, long-since banished –one pleasant memory in my agony. This peace-loving little backwater and old Mercier, the cobbler. I became firm friends with both the last time we passed through in the year of 'great victories'. I take no notice of the Sergeant, but slip away instead and make my way to Mercier's house. The old man will be smoking his pipe, listening to waltzes, mending shoes.

When I get there, three young soldiers join me and want follow me inside, encouraged by the fact that I speak a little French. They're so young, so desperate to sleep under a roof, get some proper rest, have a hot meal, talk quietly about the prospect of home, and wile away one last, idiotic night in France!

We knock on the door and old Mercier himself opens up for us –a serious, gloomy, vaguely searching expression on his face. I was desperate to see if he'd recognize me. But he just stares at us gravely, acceptingly, with barely repressed hatred, and stands aside without a fuss.

I step inside and say nothing, waiting.

I've obviously changed a great deal since 1940, and how many German soldiers must he have befriended after me...? How many has he put up with since...? How many has he stifled his hatred for...? And me in my shabby, faded uniform, holes in my boots, bearded, sunken-eyed with a stray dog look I just can't shake off these days –just like my young brothers-in-arms who, without asking permission, without a word, search and occupy the house, manhandle the man's possessions, and generally treat him like another piece of furniture. Like them, I'm tired, frightened, desperate for a home –desperate for mine still to be standing like this one. I so badly need to fill the stillness – my memories, a house, a woman– that I'm reluctant to introduce myself... I don't deserve him for as much to look at me!

Four years! I've aged decades. But what about him? How do I know what he's been through? How do I know his two sons died at the front? Or that he refused point-blank to mend shoes for the invaders? Or that his shop was requisitioned? Or that old Irma, his wife, died for lack of a doctor and medicine? He stands there stock still, staring at us now in silence with deep, brooding, unblinking scorn from a corner of the room. The aura of his absence is even more hurtful, though we pretend not to notice it. Waiting, just waiting.

Waiting longer. Four years longer. And here are we, looking to spend our last night in France with a roof over our heads...

So he just lets the mayhem happen, a deafening racket of doors opening and slamming, a bunch of kids in uniform calling him "mon vieux" and lying down to sleep in his bed.

How *can* I introduce myself? What right do I have? How do I go about it? How do I approach him? Tell him I'm the young soldier he used to talk to about wine and leather back in 1940, the one he invited to cognac, pleasantly surprised at coming across a "well-mannered German"?

Introduce myself? He wouldn't believe me. There's really no light left that can light his dark vigil and my smoking ashes. He'd probably only end up suffering more than he has done already. Too much defeat –human defeat– written on my face and in my body to even mention, never mind bring back the memory. I'm old now too and I don't want –neither of us would want that cognac we drank together back in 1940 when I was just a well-mannered German lad. There is no cognac left.

I'm a German and it's 1944. Which is why, like my comrades, I also ransack the larder in search of any food that might be stashed away. Which is why I dump my rucksack on the couch and ask him, "Eh, mon vieux? Got any wine...? Our money's good..."