

## The Sniper

[np] He sat quietly looking out the peephole he had punched in the wall of the people's house he had broken the locks to get into. Sometimes he would sit there for hours knowing that the enemy was only a few yards away and that they would be looking for people to shoot just like he was.

[np] He had been a normal little boy growing up in a country that was generally at peace. There was no question that as a member of a family that enjoyed majority status he had not had to worry about his place in society. His family had in fact had a privileged lifestyle under the current government and he had had no reason to want to change this.

[np]He had gone to a good elementary school and then graduated from high school, after which he attended college where he studied philosophy and economics. Neither subject had prepared him adequately for the life he was now leading, he reflected as he sat there waiting.

[np]When he first entered the house from which he now watched the enemy, he had carefully removed all the china from the cabinets on the wall which now provided a vantage point over the roofs of the houses and the shabby courtyard below. It simmered in the midday heat and a few miserable chickens pecked their way across it looking for something to eat. A mangy dog or two sometimes slunk by, its tail between its legs.

[np]When he had first broken the locks to get into the house, he had found the owner dead in the bedroom where a rocket had hit him as he lay sleeping in his bed. His body was black, full of large maggots and was decomposing, and had stunk so badly that the sniper had had to

cover his face; his eyes had watered with the effort he made to keep from retching. His comrades had come in and wrapped the corpse in a sheet and taken it away for burial.

[np]When he had first agreed to fight for the revolution it had been so pure and clear. So easy to understand. It had been to fight against a government made up of greedy, brutal sycophants. He thought he knew when he joined his comrades in revolution what they were all trying to achieve. But recently, as he watched the power struggles going on between the different factions, he wasn't sure at all about their motives, or his for that matter.

[np]Despite his academic background it had turned out that he was extremely good with a precision rifle. He was very accurate when he placed his bullets into his human targets. He enjoyed the distance that was created between him and his victims by the telescopic sites, these sites also gave him optimal levels of accuracy at long range. His weapon was an M24 .300 Winchester Magnum. It had an adjustable cheek piece that he had had specially made for him, and which he had adjusted to fit his shoulder, and helped him avoid making contact with the barrel of his weapon. In addition he had an adjustable sling that allowed him to stand, kneel, or sit when he operated his rifle.

[np]As he waited patiently for his victims to come into his sites, he had a long time to think about his brief life. As a young boy he had not sought out trouble. He was more of a bookworm and enjoyed reading adventure books. He particularly liked to read about Superman and GI Joe. When he got older and was in university his tastes changed to Schopenhauer, Marx, Engels and a wide variety of other philosophers. He was not religious, he believed in nothing except for what he now did. He had become harder and more hateful after

he shot his best friend, who had somehow become a part of the faceless enemy to him. His best friend who had grown up in privilege with him and who had refused to join the revolution.

[np]He kept going over that day in his mind, just to make sure that his memory of what had happened was right. It was a normal day for him. He got up off the mat he was sleeping on on the floor. He made tea, a weak variety and put a small slice of lemon in it. He went to the bathroom and pissed like a horse. It had been one of those times when he had drunk a good deal of beer the night before. He stepped carefully over his sleeping comrades and walked outside to meet with his Commander. He was a surly individual, not one to make jokes, a good fighter and a deeply religious man. His commander had assigned him to a position that was just outside the town and where he would have a good look at the enemy advancing.

“You are one of several others who will be looking at the enemy. Make sure that you pick them off as they cross the bridge. Don’t miss.” He told him.

“We are in position to stop them from getting access to the village” he added.

“Yes sir” the sniper replied “I’ll get the targets, sir.”

[np]Most of the villagers had now left. However there were a few of the very old who refused to leave their houses and had become victims of stray shots, or of the barrage of rockets that rained down on the village since it had been taken by them. He remembered seeing an old woman come out waving a white flag shuffling in her worn slippers to the well to get water. He had played with the idea of shooting her for practice, but then he let her go. She was not so lucky, one of his comrades on the other side of the square shot her in the head. One

shot placed right and it was all over. Her body had lain there for several days before they dragged it away. In this war there were no winners or losers, just collateral damage that didn't seem to matter to him anymore.

[np]As he took up his position on the other side of the bridge that day, and after stuffing his bag with some stale bread and a slice of cold meat for breakfast, he remembered wondering how many he would shoot. He had felt a small twinge of excitement since the action would break the hours of boredom that he often experienced sitting and waiting for a target.

[np]For some reason on that particular day, his mind dwelled on his best friend. They had shared everything growing up. He remembered them playing soccer together and how the ball would move up the field like a fast flying bird, passing joyfully between them.

“To me now, pass it to me” they would call to one another “I want to make the outside shot”

It was the one thing he loved outside of his books. He had tried to persuade his friend to join the revolution but he did not want to leave the comfort of his family and his home; he did not believe in the desire of the people for change. In the end however as the government became more desperate, they began to draft young men and women between the ages of nineteen and thirty to fight, and he had found out that his friend had ben conscripted a few months before.

[np]The sniper knew that his family did not understand why he had gone over to the other side. His father had tried to persuade him to come home,

“Son” he had said “I know this government, they are my friends I can persuade them to let you go. Let you leave the country, you just have to come home”, he had told him.

But, he knew that he did not want to return to his old life, it had ceased to have meaning for him. Most things had ceased to have meaning for him after he had shot his friend.

[np]On that day there were three snipers positioned at various points around the bridge. The enemy did not advance until a little after midday, at the hottest time when the sun was a huge, an unforgiving, yellow circle in the sky above them. They came in threes and fours and there were women in their midst. He hesitated as he got them in his sights because they made him think of his younger sister, and he felt regret at having to kill them. One was particularly beautiful he noticed, with blond hair piled high on top of her head.

After some had advanced and many of them were shot by him or the others, he noticed five men crawling on their hands and knees along the stone sides of the bridge. He sighted one and shot him, and at the same time two more were shot by his colleagues. The last two were trying to protect themselves hiding under one of the stone abutments, covering their eyes with their hands to see where the shots were coming from. Clearly their commander had no difficulty sending them onto the bridge where they would be sitting ducks. That was the price of old men’s wars he thought, many of the young die.

[np]As he idly trained his sites on one of the figures lying under the stone outcropping he felt his heart rise up like a butterfly into his mouth and flutter there. He recognized his friend and

he felt a sharp pain in his side that made him double over. When he stood up and returned to his sites, his sling in place, he saw that both men were still alive.

His radio crackled against his side and he heard his commander's voice saying

"Come on what are you waiting for, take them out?"

He continued to hesitate and in doing so he recognized a cowardice in himself that he did not like. With his finger steady on the trigger, he aimed towards his friend crouching against the abutment and slowly pulled; at the same time as his rifle fired, he heard another shot coming from a comrade a little further to the south of where he was lying in the dirt. He saw his friend slump forward with blood spurting out of his forehead and he found himself hoping that it was not his bullet that had performed the execution

[np]After the enemy had retreated behind the hill across from the village that night, he walked down to the bridge under cover of darkness and he lifted his friend's body across his shoulders.

His commander had said:

"What the hell do you think you are doing"

He had replied:

"Sir I knew this man well, he was my friend and I want to give him a burial; out of respect sir"

His commander looked him in the eye from under his cap, pulled low over his forehead and paused for a second. Then he curtly nodded his head, saying nothing, and turned around to head back to base camp.

[np]The sniper went down to the edge of the river and dug in the soft dirt with a spade he had brought with him, unearthing rocks and sand. He placed his friend's body in the shallow hole in front of him and he stood beside it with his head hung low. As he looked across the softly running water, the moon came up and he saw a reflection of it slice like a piece of melon across the dark liquid.

[np]He remembered all of this now clearly as he sat waiting in the building behind the wall with the hole punched into it, that at that moment, the moment when he buried his best friend, he had thought:

"I do not care anymore if I die" .

[np]He remembered too, that even as he stood by his best friend's grave, even then, he knew he would return to being a sniper, and that he would continue to kill his victims without remorse. Yes he would kill the enemy, he would not think about their wives, or their parents or their friends, he would kill them, and with any luck he would not survive to have to live with the images of their faces.

"Yes" he said softly to himself as he held his rifle firmly against his cheek preparing to shoot whomever he was told.

“A sniper sees every face of the ones he kills clearly, and he cannot allow himself to feel remorse”.