

A chill rakes his spine. It is a soft tingle, just enough to rouse him from the depths. Face down in a pool of drivel, the young Lothario is unsure of his place in the world. This reluctance is palpable as he drinks in the blackness like a homemade *amer*, slowly swishing the gloom this way and that across his tongue to best capture its flavor. The acrid tone confirms his suspicions—here is a realm detached from the sovereignty of his dreams. Not Eden, but Gethsemane, where dangers are many and miracles few. He attempts to roll over. Once, twice, the third time proves the charm. A tepid dampness covers the sheets beneath him, chilling his back and stirring up a rage in the pit of his stomach—*Piss!* He runs four fingers through his hair and, to his surprise, returns a sweaty hand. Relief meets him in the form of an audible sigh, but focus proves an impasse in the ebb and flow of obscurity. Tears of fatigue gently trace the curves of his dimples before slipping headlong into oblivion. The silence of the room is unnerving.

‘For worms,’ he says aloud, an eloquent nod to defeat.

But life is poetic and God, himself, a wag; for in this moment of surrender comes a revelation, questions calling out from the shadows: *What happened? How long have I been asleep?* He stumbles to the window, his outstretched hands grasping for the sill. His legs shake beneath the weight of his upright body and oxygen shocks his brain. He tries to remember but can gain no ground. Peeling back the curtains, he is floored to discover the night sky stretching wildly before him. A vision, this abyss of black and blue is alive in the shivering light of the stars. Miracles are rare in Gethsemane but staring into the infinities proves a sobering grace for the young man. He imagines, perhaps naïvely, that the constellations return his gaze. *They say the sun is ninety-three million miles away. How far away are these little specks, then?* A cackle escapes him at the thought, betraying the authenticity of the moment. It is an augury of innocence and the words of Blake trickle through his ears:

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*To see a World in a Grain of Sand*

*And a Heaven in a Wild Flower*

*Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand*

*And Eternity in an hour ...*

He lingers at the window, a fatalist living for the flaws. The seconds become minutes and though his sense of self has resurfaced, his memory remains awash somewhere in the cosmos. In the far-flung reaches of his mind he likens himself to one of Coleridge's blue-jackets. "*Water, water, everywhere,*" *the mariner had said. Lost in the drink, damned to the ice drifts until the albatross appeared. But I haven't an albatross to guide me.* Tearing himself from contemplation, he moves for the bed when a gleam draws his attention to the landing. A band, white gold and luminous in the moonlight, lay wedged between the floorboards beside the door. It belonged to his mother once, and to his father's mother before that. He takes hold of the heirloom as one takes a child's hand and places it amongst his books, remembering then how he broke it off over chalky tea:

The cafe was at capacity and a piano twinkled above the chatter of the diners. Earl Grey it was; the smell of bergamot oil had soothed him. He let the pot steep too long and then ruined his cup by overcompensating with the milk. He delayed for as long as he could and when it was done she followed him back to the flat, pleading at first before cursing his name through snot and tears. She mourned. Not for him, but for a dream in her head and for a humiliation that could not be overcome. Realizing there was no way back, she left him at the door with her pride in tatters and

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his mother's ring rolling about the deck. He found comfort in the bottle, drinking himself to stupor while the ruby hues of dusk sank steadily in the Western sky.

He is sick at the realization, throwing open the window as vomit rushes his throat, lurching and watching in awe as the contents of his stomach spiral to the ground with a splatter. A gas lamp flickers on a distant street corner and the silhouette of a seabird shows atop the device's iridescent beam. He smiles at the sight, scraping his mouth with the back of his hand as he steps away from the window for a second time. He strikes a kerosene wick, a look of determination etched across his face, and starts to gather his belongings lying strewn about the room—ruptured ballpoints and faded photos of his adolescence, a ragged pocketbook overflowing with unfinished literary endeavours. He resets the hands of his watch and for the first time hears the mechanisms of the lock at work as the door opens to reveal the waiting corridor. He steps forward but hesitates at the threshold having missed the soft clink of bijouterie in his pockets. He has forgotten: neither cash nor clothes, but the smallest and most important object of all.

A reading table lies dormant in the corner. This desk of polished birch is his hermitage and his workplace. Stacks of books both new and old span its surface in organized disarray, and the ring, resembling something of Tolkien's relic in waiting, sits atop the utmost of these pillars. He slips as he nears the table and watches in horror as his flailing limbs tumble these standards in succession. Saint-Ex. Remarque. Innes. Tolstoy. Ajar—these names gloss the tangled masses of covers and spines. *Soldiers and writers. The very best.* He plunges a hand into the ruins and retrieves a sack of cloth.

Outside there is a bench and a breeze. The breeze descends upon him a midnight intercession, simultaneously putting the wisteria vines of the nearby garden to sway. A touch of honeysuckle graces the fresh evening air. Sidestepping a puddle, he settles down in the middle of

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the bench and opens the sack. Inside are the ingredients for mindfulness, and he occupies himself with them and the rolling of a fag. An artist at work, he delicately folds the paper with one hand while measuring out his preferred cuts of Turkey's finest with the other. With a final stroke he adds the filter and licks the apparatus shut to create the cylinder and sign off on his masterpiece. The tobacco provides warmth and familiarity, whereas the stone beneath him is cold and obtuse. His blood congeals in the briskness of the night and his post mortem begins as all dissections do: unceremoniously atop a pewter slab. As the first incision is made he knows not what to feel nor how to feel it. There is melancholia, despair, a great longing for something he cannot recall. But concealed within the pain is something more—for the first time in his life he is the protagonist of his own story. And now, suddenly gifted with the ability to write the future, he is uncertain how to proceed. Lost in the fumes and faraway in his thoughts, he is unaware of the heavy footfalls upon the gravel.

'Got a light?' queries the stranger in the slightest of accents. He cuts an impressive figure in the twilight. Not waiting for an answer, he sits down beside the young man.

'Of course,' he replies, startled. 'Forgive me, I didn't see you coming.' He strikes a match and reaches across to set the newcomer's *clope* alight, catching a glimpse of his countenance in the dying brilliance of the flame. A bit older, there is something familiar, almost fatherly, about him. He is handsome, with slick hair pushed to one side and the bristly moustache of an officer covering his upper lip. His eyes reflect like pools against his pale complexion. 'I don't think we've met. I'm Dimitry Olenin, but everyone calls me Ollie.'

'I know who you are.' He extends a hand through the smog. 'Name's Lev. I come here for a smoke now and again and have seen you and your girlfriend a few times.' He points to an open window several stories up the adjacent brownstone. A soft glow radiates from within.

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‘Fiancée, actually.’

‘My apologies.’

‘That’s alright. It’s over now, anyway.’ Ollie pulls long and hard on his cigarette having said too much.

Silence permeates the air and Lev tiptoes the line between intimate and unknown. He takes a drag and asks, ‘Want to talk about it?’

‘Thanks,’ says Ollie, shaking his head in dissent, ‘but it’s fine. I’m fine. It’s what I wanted.’ He is reticent, not wishing to talk, but now that he has begun he cannot stop. ‘I didn’t love her. Not truly, at least. I didn’t want to drag her ...’ He pauses, searching for the right words and for justification within them. ‘I didn’t want to drag *it* out any longer. It wouldn’t have been fair.’ Another pause, this one twice as long as the last, as the smoke climbs and falls, climbs and falls, momentarily settling in the valleys between them before restarting for the heights.

‘You speak like a man looking for an exit,’ Lev goads him. Only his eyes are visible above the mask of rising vapours. ‘You going somewhere?’ There is a truth to his stare.

‘I’ve been thinking about heading East for a while now. I have a friend out there, Pau ...’ His voice trails off and he pulls on his cigarette once more, but it has gone out from a lack of attention. ‘The Front should provide the spark, the inspiration I’ve been looking for. You see, I’ve had this feeling lately.’

Lev’s eyes flash. ‘What kind of feeling?’

‘A feeling of dread, you might say. It’s difficult to explain, but I look at this fag and see myself in its slow and steady burn.’ He flicks it softly into the night, a jettison into outer space. ‘From something to nothing, decadence wrought with decay. And I don’t know. An idea has come over me, an obsession really, that I must leave tonight or ...’

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‘Or be snuffed out tomorrow,’ Lev completes the sentence for him.

‘Exactly! I feel like a kite caught out in the tempest, a sojourner meant for another world. I don’t belong here.’

‘I understand the sentiment. Quite well.’ Lev’s voice is measured and matter of fact. His acceptance of these statements and the lack of enthusiasm behind it spurs Ollie’s intrigue.

‘*Really?* How’s that?’

‘I was stationed at the Front once. Many years ago, in Sevastopol, there by my own accord. Like you I was trying to find myself.’

‘You’re a soldier, then?’

‘*Was* a soldier, yes. Tell me, do you know the story of Cardigan’s six hundred?’

‘Hold on,’ implores Ollie, ‘*You* fought with the Light Brigade?’

‘Something like that,’ says Lev through pursed lips. He allows the smoke to filter from his mouth before taking it back in through his nose. ‘The siege changed my life. I’m not proud of what happened.’

‘But you were heroes!’ Ollie's voice trembles with patriotism.

Lev shrugs. ‘I suppose it depends who you talk to. A lot of good men died. On both sides. And for what, Empire and a handful of guns?’

‘But Tennyson ...’

Lev rounds on him, his intonation unchanged. ‘Tennyson is a poet. It’s his job to embellish the facts. Take it from someone who was there. There was no honour in it.’ He moves closer to the young man now, turning to face him head on. The lit cigarette hangs from the corner of his mouth and his features are enhanced in the lustre of its blaze. ‘I’ll show you something. Call it a *sketch* from my time in the war.’

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Ollie had not noticed before, but it is there, no longer hidden by the shade of night: a marathon of a scar, ravaging the left side of his face. It runs from his forehead to his neck before disappearing beneath his collar. Fixing the *clope* between his fingers, Lev slowly traces the remnants of the wound, describing the injury in detail: ‘*Here*—the sabre nearly got my eye. And *here*—the blade missed my jugular by less than a centimetre. I lost consciousness on the field.’

Ollie gasps, his allure undone by the brutality of it. He can no longer bear the sight of this stranger. His revulsion does not go unnoticed and Lev stands to leave, dropping his cigarette into a glass bottle used to collect ash and butts by the regulars. Unfinished and fuming, it smoulders atop a mountain of burnt out filters. ‘If this scar has taught me anything,’ he proclaims, ‘it’s that you don’t have to runaway to go on an odyssey. There are battles to be lost and won at home.’ He adjusts his sleeves before fastening the top button of his dinner jacket. ‘Ultimately, we’re all wretches in need of redemption, simple pilgrims on the road to a simple end. I imagine it’s like Blake says: “God Appears & God is Light to those poor Souls who dwell in Night ...”’

‘You know Blake?’ Ollie inquires weakly, his eyes transfixed on the bottle.

‘William’s an old friend. His words have been with me for many years.’ The same tune of silence greets the pair on their departure. ‘I must be off. Thanks for the light. Perhaps we’ll cross paths again.’

‘I’d like that very much,’ Ollie lies.

Lev departs and the sound of his feet crunching loudly upon the gravel travels swiftly through the air. He is no more than an outline in the darkness when he turns to offer the young Lothario a final *conseil*: ‘Watch out for that puddle. I think it’s vomit. And Dimitry,’ his voice no longer judiciary but eerily sincere, ‘keep an eye out for wildflowers—you’ll find them in the strangest places.’

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Ollie mutters an incoherence in reply, his eyes still glued to the bottle, mesmerized by the withering fumes of the fag as they dance and sway and eventually die within the confines of the vessel; there one moment and gone the next. A brisk wind blows, and a chill rakes his spine. He comes to alone in the haze, his post mortem complete and the bench empty beside him. Unsure of himself and his place in the world, he reaches for the bottle. Full of ash the colour of snow, its glass is cold to the touch. The wail of an albatross descends upon him a midnight intercession as he starts up the path towards the brownstone. Unnerved, he slips, tumbling headlong into the muck. From the ground he can see yellow blooms lining the puddle's shores.

THE END

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