

## “The Tinder Box”

### I

In the woods, unaware, he entered a third part of his life. The war followed behind in boot prints; he occasionally looked back, watching them divide the ground and his days. He adjusted his gun on his shoulder, too used to the weight of it. He tried to remember how he got there, to those woods, but his memories were in the wrong order. Every day happened at once, in the war. The only thing he hoped to know for sure was that these woods were after the war.

Unless he saw woods between gunshots, but it may have been fields then, grey, or snow-covered. The snow was light one year, barely dusting the black-scarred landscape.

Black-scarred with trenches—

*He takes out a photograph of a girl, large eyes and a white lace collar. His thumbs are stained with mud, the gun rests on his shoulder. The noise above his head, past the tuft of colorless grass, never stops, so he does not hear it anymore. Next to him, a soldier looks to the side, the whites of his eyes glowing, or does this happen after that one morning different from the others, existing silently among them?*

He shook his head, rattling the thoughts. His eyes flicked to the side, searching, always vigilant. Quietness could not be trusted. A dog barked suddenly, not far away, reverberating. He stopped and looked to the sky, dropped to the ground, but there was no noise besides another bark from the dog. He was surprised to see dry leaves under him and not mud, gathering grey-white clouds rather than the drone and swarm of planes. The

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two visions existed at the same time for him, and his hands shook as he tried to separate them, unsure which place, this time, would be real.

The dog kept barking. The soldier followed it, tracking it as he would have tracked a sniper. He found the source in a small clearing with a well in the center. The black stones stood out sharply from long and fragile grass. This was not the grass of the war, but the dogs were: Alsations, three of them. They stood still and quiet when they saw him; before he walked into the clearing they had been circling an old woman hovering by the well, shushing her dogs every time they barked.

The dogs' eyes shone like wounds, a deep brown, almost black. They had a sagacity about them, a burden in their expressions.

*A dog sits next to them, panting, eyes rolling at the noise. We can't let this one go, says the soldier next to him. They kill those mercy dogs out there, I'm sure of it.*

These dogs had clear eyes. They must have been scouts, taught to be silent at the approach of intruders. They stared at him, and stared; he stared back until the old woman spoke.

“You just got back, then, did you?”

The soldier looked up at her. Her eyes were shadowed, wisps of hair trailing across her face. He did not like her, the way she half-smiled.

“Where did you get the dogs?”

“Found ‘em. You find ‘em everywhere now, left along the roads. You can't have these around children, not these. Would kill ‘em in an instant.”

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“Of course they would. Children would pull their tails, and it would remind them of the war.”

The woman laughed, a coarse sound. “You would believe that. I’ve been waiting for someone to come along, I have. I’ve dropped something down this well and I can’t send my dogs after it.”

“What have you dropped?” asked the soldier, hesitant. The dogs did not move; he could barely see them breathe.

“An old tinder box that belonged to my mother. It means a lot to me. I’ll pay you to get it for me.”

He advanced and looked down the well. He needed money. The well was utter black inside, as if the darkness had substance and could float up and over the sides, spill out onto the weak grass. The water shimmered, sickly like trench sludge, when the clouds above shifted.

*The foxhole is utter black, with the odor of decay. Others have died here, today, yesterday, last week. That does not matter. It is a place to hide.*

“A tinder box? The one in there won’t work anymore. You’ll have to buy a new one.”

*This woman is not right in the head. I should have known that.* “I can’t help you.”

“You must, I need it back. This one is priceless, an heirloom.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and turned to walk away, uncomfortable in her almost frantic presence. She grabbed his arm. Her knuckles were white. The dogs growled and

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retreated. The woods dissolved in front of him, the grass turned yellow and flattened, dark stains where bodies used to be.

*He stares into the eyes of a foreign soldier, but he does not know if he is an enemy. Above the trenches, he cannot afford to guess. His arm is caught in the soldier's grip. The noise is everywhere, it may never leave his head. The sky is entirely grey, like a photograph, no color reflected anywhere. It could be either clouds or smoke; he does not remember the difference. The mercilessly young soldier's eyes are wide with fright and determination. He knows this soldier means to kill him. The young soldier looks up at a low-flying plane and he sinks his bayonet into the young soldier's neck and watches him bleed, his heart emptying the blood out of the wound, the only color for miles—*

He looked to the ground and saw the woman dead in front of him, blood pooling out of a wound in her neck. Old and new blood mingled on the bayonet. The dogs sniffed at the body of the old woman then looked to him. One, almost entirely shiny black, tentatively nosed his hand. The soldier raised his hand and the dog sat, ears pricked.

“You didn't like her much, did you,” he said. He reached into his ragged backpack for an old biscuit and gave it to the dog. The other two approached and he fed them, too. “You know we've been to the same place.”

He walked on, the dogs following, the dark one in the lead. He did not look back at them or the woman. She lay among the soft grass: just another dead from the war.

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### II

His life moved in episodes, as in dreams, the scenes of a play. The sets changed in darkness, time condensed. He awoke on the edge of the forest with the dogs, felt as if he had always had them. A town was in front of him and the woods entirely behind.

He shuffled through the town with his eyes down, only looking up at the houses and storefronts to remind himself where he was. No one spoke to him and he did not look at anyone, though the streets were almost empty anyway. A weariness overcame him suddenly, and he tried to remember how long he had been walking. But he could not even remember how he got to the woods and was too tired to try.

He stopped at the last inn he saw, one that looked cheap, with a decrepit sign swinging from the door frame.

*I wonder how long it's been since I slept in a bed*, he wondered. He looked at the dogs and raised his hand to make them sit. He knew they would wait.

The inn was mostly dust and dark wood-paneled walls. An older, worn-looking man sat at a heavy desk, reading, small glasses balanced on the bridge of his nose.

“Are dogs allowed in here?” asked the soldier, taking off his hat and swinging his gun to the floor. The man glanced up and regarded him for a long moment.

“We don’t get a lot of guests here who have dogs,” he said slowly. “Just make sure they don’t soil the room...”

“They won’t. I’ll take your quietest room, thank you.”

The man handed him an oily key and the soldier brought his dogs up to the room. It did not remind him of anything. Small and dim, closed on all sides, it was not a field or a trench, but he found he could not sleep. He walked downstairs again with the dogs and

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wandered in the town until the unfamiliarity of the streetlights’ sharp contrast against the night overwhelmed him.

Back in the room, the soldier paced, making the dogs agitated. The dark one watched him while the other two whined. He shut the curtains and lay down on the bed, but still did not sleep; he knew what he would dream about. The soldier faded in and out of consciousness throughout the night, lost track of time, and fully slept only when the sun rose and his room filled with dusty light.

When he woke up again, the sun almost ready to set, he did not know what day it was and did not care. He brought the dogs outside and walked with them through the streets until he could see the stars before going back to the inn. He left the dogs tied outside and they watched the passersby.

The man at the desk directed the soldier to the cramped dining room. Inside, yellow lights shone on dark polished wood and claustrophobic booths. The soldier sat in a shadowy corner and watched guests filter in sporadically, tiredly. A waiter handed him a menu and the soldier, without reading it, ordered the first thing on the list. He tried to remember the last time he ate a whole meal, but he did not know if he was hungry; he had grown so used to the feeling that he did not recognize it anymore.

The waiter brought the food and then went to the doorway where he greeted a young woman, looking to be in her early twenties, who had just walked in. She glanced briefly at the soldier but he took no notice, listening to everything at once. Most of the guests were old men talking about books or politics. Some mentioned the war, what could have happened differently, what was inevitable. The soldier blinked slowly.

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*He stares into puddles of gasoline to distract himself. The rainbow colors shiver and reassemble, coat the dirt. He stares for hours on end in the trenches, and everything seems quieter. He cannot see himself or the sky in any reflection.*

“Are you going to eat that?” asked the waiter, tugging the soldier back into the somber dining room.

“Not anymore,” answered the soldier, poking at it with a fork. “It’s cold now.”

“That’s because you let it sit for so long,” said the waiter with a disapproving glare. He pointedly took away the soldier’s plate and the young woman raised an eyebrow. The soldier knew how to listen discreetly.

“Must you? I don’t know how you haven’t been fired yet,” she said to the waiter, almost smiling.

“Do your parents even know you’re here?” asked the waiter with a smirk.

“Why wouldn’t they?” she replied. “They have got spies everywhere, haven’t they?”

The waiter went into the kitchen and the young woman started walking toward the soldier’s booth. He tried to smile but he was not sure if he did. She sat down across from him.

“Sorry about him. He’s my cousin. Always acts that way, but his father owns the place so he can keep working here.”

“Doesn’t bother me, I’m the one who wasted food.”

“It’s not that great here anyway.”

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They sat in silence for a while. She assessed him and he didn't look at her, half-wondering why she wasn't leaving. He had long forgotten how to have conversations so it did not cross his mind to say anything further. She spoke again, startled him.

“Where are you from? I haven't seen you here before.”

“How would you know I'm new here? You can't know everyone in a town.”

She seemed slightly surprised by his reply. “I meet a lot of people from this town. I never met you before so I assumed you were from somewhere else.”

“I am.”

“Are you going to tell me where?”

He paused, not sure how much he wanted to tell. But he had nothing else.

“I just got back from the front.”

“Did you?” He felt ashamed at the sympathetic look she gave him. “Tell you what, it's all on the house.”

“You can't do that—”

“I insist. My uncle's the owner, he won't mind.”

“I left my dogs outside, I have to go get them.”

“You have dogs? What kind?”

“War dogs. Alsatians.”

“May I see them? I like animals.”

He shrugged and she followed him outside. The dark dog nosed her hand when she approached them, though the other two hung back.

“They're beautiful,” she said, kneeling and stroking their ears. “Do they have names?”



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“No,” said the soldier. The woman looked perplexed.

“How long have you had them?”

“Not too long. A day or two.” *A week? A month? How long since the woods?*

She stood up and eyed him. “Where did you get them? I thought you had them with you when...”

“No, no, I didn’t have any with me on the front.”

*“He was hit.” Another soldier holds the body of a dog, once-golden fur matted and black with blood and dirt. The head is limp, swinging as if it will snap off the shoulders at any moment. He turns away, wondering why he isn’t as sickened as he thinks he should be.*

“You okay there?”

“Sorry. I...I found them in the woods. They must have been abandoned. But they’re well trained.”

“Certainly. And you can take them inside I hope?”

“I can. I’m going to bring them in now.” He untied them with trembling hands, felt more flashbacks coming and did not want her seeing him when he remembered. He was used to the feeling of being trapped, the air condensing, memories caught in his throat and hands, but he was sure frightened others. He stopped before he went back inside. “Thank you,” he said, “for the offer earlier. I hate to be a nuisance but it is...helpful. I can handle the next few nights myself, though, please.”

“Fair enough,” she answered, smiling. “How long do you think you’ll stay here?”

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“I don’t know, I’m tired now, I’m going to go back to my room. Nice to meet you,” he added.

He walked quickly inside before the memories overtook him and he thought he could hear the gunshots in his footsteps up the stairs. The dogs’ clicking nails on the wooded floor boards echoed, the sound of bullet casings.

She met him in the dining room, in the evening, two days later. He did not expect it, and he pushed his plate aside when she approached.

“Hi,” she said, smiling.

“Hello,” he answered.

“How was your day?” she asked brightly. “What do you get up to around here?”

He searched for a response. He did not want to tell her about the flashbacks or how he did not leave his room except to walk the dogs.

“I still have to walk the dogs today,” he lied.

She shrugged. “I can walk with you. There’s not enough air in here.”

He nodded and walked outside quickly, clenching his fists inside of his pockets, her following.

“You should name them,” she said, petting the dark Alsatian.

“I might,” he answered. She watched in amazement as the dogs followed him without leashes.

“Were they this well-trained when you found them?” she asked.

“They were.”

“Were there a lot of dogs abandoned after it ended?”

“Tell me about your family, do you have any siblings?”

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She paused and regarded him curiously for a moment, then smiled again. “Sure. I have a sister, younger...that’s it. What about you? Are you going back to your family?”

“Not yet. I only have a cousin in the country. It’s a long way, I’m probably going to wander for a while.”

“You’re welcome to stay here as long as you need.”

“I appreciate it.”

“My father is the mayor here, actually, that’s how I know so many people from here. He’s been mayor since I was only five years old.”

“You’ve had the run of the town since then, I imagine.”

“Hardly. My parents don’t like me out of the house much, or out too late at night.”

“Surely you’re not young enough for them to tell you what to do.”

“You think I listen to them? I sneak away all the time. They hate it when I visit my cousin...there’s been a feud between my mother and her brother for a while.”

“Does it matter about what?”

“Not really.”

“Why do your parents care where you go so much?”

“They’re worried I’ll meet someone other than a rich banker.” She glanced sideways at him and he half-smiled, almost laughed.

### **III**

The soldier and the young woman met frequently over the next few weeks. She learned not to ask him about the war, and to let his mind wander if it had to; she learned that he

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would not speak if he did not want to. But he would talk about before the war, where he lived with gardens and books.

One night in late September, the two of them walked the dogs together. The three dogs padded ahead of them, occasionally sniffing the ground and looking back to make sure the soldier was still there. The weather was still warm and the sky clear of clouds; the constellations sharp and luminous. She told him the names of a few of them. In the war, he only remembered chill and a blank sky, always smoky grey.

“That one’s Cassiopeia,” she said, pointing to a W-shaped arrangement above them. “The stars make up her throne. That one might be my favorite.”

“How do you know about all these?”

“My brother taught me, a long time ago.”

“You said you only had a younger sister.”

“Did I? I’m sorry. I don’t see him anymore.”

“What happened to him?”

She smiled, a dismissal. “Well, I can teach my younger sister the stars now. She loves learning about things like this.”

“I like it too. Never got to before. The stars are bright here, you must get to look at them all the time.”

“Actually, this is the first time in a while I’ve been out at night like this, just walking with someone. Usually I’m alone. But...now I have a better excuse for staying out.”

“You think so?”

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The soldier listened to the soft click of the dogs’ toenails on the pavement, the light rustle of disturbed pebbles. “It’s been a while since I’ve had anyone to talk to,” he continued. “There was someone...during the war.” He waited for the flashback, but found he could keep speaking even though his hands felt clammy and his throat dry. The dogs stopped in front of him, looked back, their eyes reflecting the dim yellow streetlamps. “He told me about his family all the time, even gave me a picture of his fiancée. I didn’t know who she was but I kept looking at that picture. I couldn’t forget that she meant something to someone, that she loved him back.”

“He died, then?”

“Crawled out of the trenches one day and didn’t make it back.” He saw the scene in his mind, colors faded, the other soldier scrambling over the bank of the trench and the sound of explosions, dulled in his ears. But he also saw the dogs in front of him, the constellations above him, and felt intently the presence of the young woman walking beside him. She looked at the ground, inscrutable.

“Were you ever engaged before the war?” she asked quietly, self-conscious in her bravery.

“No, I never had time before.”

“I might have told you already that my parents want me to marry someone rich.”

“You mentioned it, yes. But you have no problem not following their rules.”

“Trust me, I don’t even bother meeting the people they want me to. I can meet someone on my own, and I have.”

“No one else has been good enough for marriage, yet?”

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“Not exactly. I’m not even looking to get married, at least not yet. Of course everyone expects me to plan for years ahead, but I never understood that. I can’t tell anyone about how I think, it’s too different and strange to them. I work in my own way, I don’t believe what every other girl believes. Look at what we’re doing now, just walking together. It doesn’t have to be so formal all the time. All these other girls...think they’re so brave for following all these rules telling them how to behave, what’s right and pure. I hope I can teach my sister to think this way, too. I just think that if you want something, or someone, it doesn’t matter what formalities have to go along with it. I’m sorry, I’m probably confusing you.”

The soldier regarded her closely for a moment. They walked slowly, caught up to the dogs.

“It’s not confusing, just not something I’ve heard before. What prompted you to think this way? Your parents certainly didn’t influence you.”

“There were a lot of factors. I’ve never really articulated it before.” She suddenly stopped, turned to face him, blocking his way. She grasped his hands; he tried to meet her eyes but found he could not stare at her earnest gaze for too long.

“You know, I am glad I met you,” she said, startling him. He wanted to respond, tell her about the strange absence of the war in his present moments. She moved her grip, holding on to his arms. He felt almost trapped, but the dogs watched them calmly. She rose up on her toes and kissed him, without trepidation. “What’s the fun in acting demure?” she said with a half-smile.

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He let her hold his hand for the rest of the walk back to the inn, his thoughts muddled, taken aback and marveling at her straightforwardness. The soldier remembered the old woman in the woods.

“I should tell you—” he began, making himself speak before he changed his mind. The dogs’ ears folded back, they stopped, and the young woman stared at the door of the inn.

“Oh, no,” she said under her breath, contemptuous. “My father and mother are there,” she whispered to him, but did not let go of his hand. She approached defiantly, but he felt the familiar quickening of blood through his veins, the shallowness of his breathing. Her father’s dour face was angry and her mother seemed intensely distressed.

“Who is this?” her father asked gruffly when the soldier stood before him. The young woman answered.

“A very good friend I met here.”

“We needed to find you,” her mother said in a strained voice. “Someone found... a body. In the woods. An old woman.”

“Stabbed in the neck,” her father added, and the mother coughed lightly, fiddled with the buttons on her coat. The dogs tensed, their eyes like stones. The young woman stared at her parents, incredulous, then turned to the soldier.

“Did you see anything before you got here...?”

He stood still and trembled, felt his skin prickle with the heat of guilt. Her face was in front of his eyes again, grabbing his arm. He covered his face with his hands and sunk to the ground; the black Alsatian pushed its nose under his elbow, whining.

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“You—” the father jabbed an accusing finger at the soldier and the mother balked, screamed as one of the dogs lurched forward and snapped at her ankle, tearing the thin, delicate stockings and drawing blood. The young woman’s father grabbed the dog by the neck and yelled into the inn for someone to get a gun.

“What are you doing?” His daughter grabbed his arm. “The dog was startled. Just let this go, nothing’s wrong.”

“How do you know about the woman in the woods?” her father asked, dangerously quiet.

“I didn’t know what was happening...” the soldier pleaded. The young woman’s uncle handed her father a shotgun.

“Get the police out here,” her father said harshly. “We have a suspect for the murder in the woods.” The uncle nodded, frightened, and ducked back inside. The soldier heard the slug tear through the dog’s face.

He woke up on a thin, mean mattress in a jail cell, and for a moment his mind was blank. Then the trembling started again and he remembered, frantic, and sat up quickly. His vision blurred and went black for a moment. Once again his life had shifted without him, leaving him in a time not finished in his mind.

He sat in the cold silence of the cell, but could not tell how much time passed. His thoughts flickered between the young woman and constellations, back to his dogs, following them and their stoic calm. The rest of his thoughts seemed thin, empty; it took effort to remember the war, the old woman, the woods.



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He fell back asleep and woke again disoriented and hungry, with a bored guard staring down at him.

“You have a visitor,” he said, and the young woman walked in, uncharacteristically agitated. She waved to the guard, who nodded and left, glancing suspiciously at the soldier.

“How are you doing?” she asked, sitting on a feeble chair. Her eyes were wide and concerned.

“I can’t tell.”

“What happened, what was my father talking about? Did you really kill someone?”

“I didn’t know it was happening when I did. But yes, I killed someone, I killed someone even after the war.”

“You didn’t know what was happening...I don’t understand.”

“I don’t know if you would. It’s hard to explain what happens to me sometimes.”

“I know we couldn’t talk about the war. Does that have something to do with it? I can try to understand. I might be able to help you.”

“Sometimes...when I remember the war it’s as if it is happening again. I don’t just remember it, I relive it, it comes back. At least, that’s the way it feels. But I only realize it’s not real after the flashbacks are over. They happened a lot more before I met you.

“It happened with that woman in the woods. That’s where the dogs came from. They just followed me after I killed her. She grabbed my arm, I don’t even remember what she wanted. But she grabbed my arm and I saw another soldier in front of me and I

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killed him with my bayonet like I did in the war. She was dead and I couldn't have stopped it.”

“I know what you are talking about,” she said, almost imperceptibly, after a moment. She stared at the floor and tore at her fingernails. He had never seen her do that before. “My brother was in the war, too. I didn't want to mention it, because I knew that subject scared you. But he was, and when he came back he was different. Like you, disrupted. He had those memories, too, described them as ‘too strong to be awake through.’ He slept a lot, drank. Disappeared for days.

“He taught me about the stars before he left for the war. Then two months after he got back he shot himself in another inn across town, one where my uncle used to work. My mother blames him for not protecting my brother. He sold that inn and bought the one you were staying in, one without my brother's ghost.

“I had hoped, when I met you, that maybe not everyone who comes back from the war goes bad like he did, I thought that maybe even if you had the memories like he did you could be different. But I suppose the a war like that follows everyone, it isn't picky about who it ruins.”

“It ruined someone else through me.”

“I believe that. I don't want to think it was your fault, that you killed her on purpose. The war did. I know lawyers through my family, I can try get one for you who could help you.”

“I have no money.”

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“I know. My family does. If my brother were here...he would steal from them. I don't know yet what I will do. I will figure it out, I don't want to leave you here without trying something.”

“Who else is going to understand memories like these?”

“Someone who knew my brother. If I can find a lawyer who knew my brother after the war I think you might be able to get out of this.”

The soldier looked at her. “Thank you,” he said sincerely. “I don't know why you're doing this for me but it doesn't matter. Tell me though...what happened to my dogs?”

“They killed them all.” She her hands together and looked back at the floor. “I'm so sorry,” she choked. He said nothing. “I have to go,” she said, rubbing her eyes with a gloved hand. “My parents don't know I'm here. Normally I wouldn't care...”

“It's all right,” he said flatly. “Go ahead.”

“I will let you know if I find someone,” she said. “I am sorry about your dogs. I tried to save them.”

She waited for his response but he was silent. He watched her walk away, and, in the cell, fully aware, he entered another part of his life.