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Germans Searching For the Wounded (pp. 60-62)

Suddenly, in the darkness he heard an outcry on the field and burp guns simultaneously erupting. He lay, clutched back into himself, shrinking into the earth under him, convulsing back into and under it and the network of branches over him. He lay in unbreathing silence and then heard slow rushing movements on the field near him. There was another series of cries and a sustained firing: he lay rigid and shocked with horror. They were sending out squads to locate those they could find hiding or wounded on the field. They were shooting the wounded!

For a long while there was no further sound, then the rushing movement sounds further up the field and then a sustained shouting and crying and shouting and then the guns again, the guns. He was as though slapped, stricken with horror. It wasn't that it struck him as a violation, just as a fact, a fact.

He and his buddies were, after all, "enemy" soldiers, he and the others now lying within German lines, and more dangerous for being concealed and wounded, unable to do anything but strike at anything that came near them—if they had weapons. He felt this because he knew his own dangerousness had he a gun should any German come near him. It was just the sudden recognition that they were searching for him, looking for him, probing for him in the darkness—that was the terror. He smeared black mud and dirt on his hands, over his face and neck.

For a long while there was silence and then he heard slow, furtive new sounds, now in the wood where he was, but far. And as he listened, his

scalp as though capped with a numbing hand, he could make out the slow, scattered, occasional but continuing and nearing sounds of some who were edging their way in the almost total darkness towards his end and fringe of woods. Suddenly, a stick snapped, hard, sharp, clear, not twenty yards away. He did not breathe, only desperately trying to press back his exposed hands into and under the earth and branches. It was as though his ears were points, that the silence was a great complete weight and space and that he was focused like the point of a steel probe to quiver to life with the minutest scratch, touch, breath in the world: the whole universe come down to that focused space. And then, the sounds. He no longer heard those further off—oh, they were there—but really heard only the slow sliding brushing movement of something, someone angling towards him through the night.

How many hours in how many seconds—long, long silences with only an occasional wind or a far outcry, occasional gunfire far up the field, and then the slow sliding, occasional crinkling heaviness near him, approaching him in the darkness. He was as though one dead, his eyes straining, pushing against darkness. And then it was seemingly just at his feet, a sense of a mass in the darkness, a sensed presence of something huge and looming and coming over him. And then he saw, just near his feet, not moving, a new outline of darkness discernible now as it had moved up to be able to blot out a rash of stars that had suddenly by cloud movement been revealed, a black mass of darkness.

His eyes were hard squinted down to the barest line of sight, lest they might be seen looking up as he lay on his back in the hole and under the brush and mud, but he saw carefully and slowly the unmoving outline of a man just standing there. And then that darkness moved, the soldier moved forward and upon him. He was prepared to cry out and kick, thrust up and out at his death, to cry out, to scream out, in German, but the man, sliding stepping a foot forward, stepped down noisily into the shell hole edge though the branches. The foot was drawn back and up in a flash, the man instantly freezing in his movement, stifling his own muttered in-cry. And there he stood, directly over the wounded man beneath him now, dark and silhouetted against the night stars, neither of them breathing now, neither moving. Nothing. After a long while, the soldier leaned, crouched, and probed down and into the shell hole—he was searching for his feet!—turning, reaching towards his knees, missing his uncovered but branch-concealed feet, probing, touching the mud, the rocks, the dirt above him where he lay. Probing, probing. Then he

stood back up, neither of them breathing or having breathed. Carefully, a foot moved forward, delicately, like a living night creature, and it came down directly on his hand, on his hand where it lay under the mud and dirt. A huge crushing, enormous breaking weight of a steel shoe on the back of his right hand. And there the man stood, rearing like an obelisk in the night, his entire weight bearing down into the earth upon that broken hand.

For how long, for how long did he stare up at this now very clear black shape of a German soldier, a machine pistol cradled in his right arm, his helmet against the stars, standing there like some outgrowth of his own body mirrored up and against the skies. For how long—it was as if someone had driven a spike through the back of his hand!—the unchanged breaking weight on the back of his hand, the man above him trying to peer down, stare down into his eyes, he staring up and against the eternal night? He would forever after be lying there staring up at this darkness against darkness, at this death against living stars. In how many dreams through how many years would he confront this ambivalent shadow of himself rearing up and as though from his own body and placed like a shadow against blackness upon the night? And then the man moved, moved, as slowly as he had come, on, away, joining other faint sounds like his own that were moving off to his right further in the woods, joining the sounds, faint but able to be interpreted, of others like himself slithering, drifting, probing through the woods. At last “they” were down in the far woods beyond his head, and he took his first breath.

Terms With Death in the Shell Hole (pp.69-70)

In the later afternoon, there was a soft golden light in the air, and in it, he was certain that he was going to die. The day was beautiful, the air fresh and, now, even warm, but he had no feeling in his hands or in his lower body, and he could not see any way in which he might be able to survive. If he did not die by the shells or the Germans, he would die of hunger, thirst, cold, sickness, the breaking down of his nerves and his strength. He wanted desperately to live, and he cast through his mind to find the

terms on which life would be possible, to see himself in any fashion possibly returned to life. When he had written his last note, he had made a list on the back of the page, which placed him in history: it began with his identity, name and address, military outfit, his age, 19, the year, and day, and placed this time of his life in his galaxy in the universe and descended down to his world, the earth, and to Europe, and France, and to a field outside Metz near Gravelotte and to the hill of Forts Driant and Jeanne d'Arc and to this field and wood's edge and this shellhole.

Now he similarly ranged through all those he knew and all the experiences he had known and had. He realized that his legs could not be saved, one was shattered, but both were long ago frozen and without feeling, probably in unarrestable gangrene, but he well knew that life without his legs was a question of amputations and adjustment. He accepted that—if only he could live. He had also largely lost feeling in his torn and frozen hands, and he wondered if, indeed, it was a sentimentality to believe that he would be willing to live life as a quadruple paraplegic. He considered that question soberly and long and knew that, yes, he could accept that—if only he could live. But he knew that life was more impossible than that, that after this long time of freezing he probably had pneumonia and, to judge by his chest pain and his occasional lapsing away towards unconsciousness, he probably was ill and shattered in some way beyond reparation, and he wondered if he was willing to accept his quadraplegic life if he were not surrounded by the love of those he loved.

So one by one, he thought of those he loved: of Lee, who was his girl, who was the center of his life—and he knew that he would be willing to live, if he lost her, without her, for could he, after all, wish upon her what he would be if he survived? And, similarly, he thought long and carefully about his brother and mother and father, and slowly, reluctantly, let each fall from his hands, fall from his consciousness, knowing that life, to be had at all, had to be had at that severe a cost, the loss of all and every one of them. It was not as though he were falling into death so much as though he was releasing them, one by one, to a great darkness, letting them fall like irreplaceable jeweled stones of solid weight irretrievably through space and away into an impenetrable darkness. They were the sacrifices and the cost. Not he. At last then, seeing himself alone, in an empty room in a ward somewhere, and without a soul about him, near him, caring for or aware of his existence, he asked, BUT

WHAT IF you were not only a quadruple amputee but also blind? Could you accept life on those conditions? Yes, yes, said his heart. Yes. But what if you were not only a quadraplegic blindman but also deaf and dumb? You know what I am saying, you hear what I am saying? And he, inside himself, shouted yes, yes. Even then, Yes! All right, You, You Nameless, you Trunk of Body, you Flesh, you Thing, what if you were only Torso, to be propped by day against the rotting doorway of a shitted mud hut in the wastes of Siberia, and deaf and dumb and blind? Would you truly settle for life on those terms? And he felt the soft wind of evening go across his cheek, and he said yes, yes, if only to feel the warmth of sunlight in the morning move across the side of my face, to be able to feel the coolness coming on of evening; if only to feel the wind touch my hair, touch my cheek, if only that. Yes! And at that moment he knew he began to live.

SS Officer in the Orchard
(pp.118-121)

“N ahh?” The sergeant stood up, They all stood up, hauling me to my feet, and began to buckle up. One asked their leader “Wo?” and he gestured with his head towards a field and young orchard hard on the other side of the road. I was slung again between two of them, and we, in a straggled group went on down the road to where an opening appeared in the matted tall hedgerow on the other side of the lane. Into this we turned, where the indentations of car and wagon tracks had made a primitive orchard road, and we moved on it and along it to the right towards what I saw was again a young relatively new orchard. As we entered this, suddenly ahead were large numbers of soldiers, lying about—at least a company on break. But we continued forward, angling towards what I saw must be a field set up, with table and chairs and a field telephone—what must have been the C.P.—near which stood two tall well uniformed men, undoubtedly officers, smoking. As we had made our obvious way through the orchard, groups of soldiers had attached themselves to us, exchanging some words with my captors, or joining us as we advanced. Here was an American, captured and being brought in. As we neared the heart of the matter, one of the officers broke off and ad-

vanced on us, and as he did so, my captors no longer half carried me, but stopped, and, half supporting me where I stood, awaited his command.

“Warum haben si Ihn nicht geschossen?!” [Why didn’t you shoot him?] The words cut through like a knife, and I was chilled to the bone. Without waiting for my captors to irresolutely or indecisively reply, perhaps sensing that this officer was different stuff and was not to be trifled with, I myself took my fate into my own hands. Reaching back into whatever high school German I had, desperately reaching for articulateness in the midst of my ignorance, I blurted out, directly to him, “Denn si können das nicht tun. Es gibt die Genevische Conventionen, und ich bin ein Kriegsgefangene und verwundet, und ich habe kein Gewähr. Ich benutze Hilfe, Medezin, und, bitte, etwas zu essen.” [Because you can’t do that. There are the Geneva Conventions, and I am a prisoner of war, and wounded, and I have no gun. I need help, medical help, and, please, something to eat.] All this improbable speech poured out. Undoubtedly, there was method in my madness—for I wanted to impress him with my value, as a person, as a human being, as someone who could communicate and arbitrate the conditions of my capture, as someone who understood the situation and could discuss it. After what he had said, I simply wanted, I suppose, to immediately seize the moment, to direct it away from the fate he had suggested. Perhaps I somewhere understood that in verbalizing this in this way before the crowd of my captors and the others, I could win support and create sympathy and embarrassment, and in some way cease to be unnecessary baggage and be a person. “Warum haben sie Ihn nicht geschossen?” It still rang in my ears, like the death it told of.

He studied me, while the other officer came up and joined the group, and in that moment I studied him. I could see that for the first time in my life I was confronting an SS officer—I read the dual red lightning bolts upon his lapel. He was everything powerful that the “Why We Fight” films had warned me of, and he met the image I had been given. He was in his thirties, meticulously dressed for someone “at the front,” and manicured and polished in his manner, icy in his rigor. And yet I had, I saw, impressed him, intrigued him. “So . . . you speak German?” “Ja, ich habe ein bischen in Hochschule studiert. Nur das.” [Yes. I have studied it a little in high school. Only that.] “Nur das?” he echoed, and then, cajoling me, “aber es ist *parfait!* Sie sprechen gut Deutsch.” I wasn’t going to let this become an “after you Alphonse” exchange of pleasant-ries masking malice, so I refused the denial and instead continued, “Ich

habe ein bisschen in Universität auch studiert, und dafür kann ich mit sie etwas sagen." I lied. I hadn't studied German at Princeton, where I had gone for one semester before being drafted, but I was reaching for all the straws I could grasp to draw him away from his first idea. I was shamelessly appealing to his snobbery, to that sense in him I might stimulate that indeed we could talk together, I was trying to snare his curiosity and his interest.

And it worked. By God, it worked. I watched the exchange of a glance and a smile he gave the other officer. The group of soldiers about us was thick but I think he and I now never took our eyes off one another. "Slowly he articulated, mocking me, "Die Ge-ne-vi-sche Conventionen! Aber es gibt keine hier! Hier ist Krieg. Wir sind ins Mitte des Kreigs. Verstehst??" [But there are none here! Here there is war. We are in the middle of a war. Do you understand?] I had to continue where I had begun. To lapse now and leave the initiative to him might be fatal. "Nein. Hier sind wir ins Mitte eine Feld an die Grenze, und ich bin sicher deine Kriegsgefangene." [No. Here we are in the middle of a field on the border of a war and I am certainly your prisoner of war.] He was back at me, "Es gibt keine Grenze in Krieg." [There are no borders in war.] And I was back at him: "Wir können unser Grenze selbst machen. Hier." [We can make our own borders. Here.] And his report was immediate, "Und hier können wir unser Krieg selbst machen. Auch!" [And here we can ourselves make our own war. Also.] Perhaps trying to shift the basis of our exchange and give me greater leeway, I sidestepped, "Aber si können Englisch vielleicht sprechen, besser als ich Deutsch?" "Nein," he demurred, "Ihrer Deutsch is gut genug." [But perhaps you can speak English, better than I can speak German? No. Your German is good enough.] From the way he was enjoying our exchange, I knew that I was, I would be, probably, finally safe from him.

The Cellar Room (pp.182-86)

The door was opened, I was helped through the doorway and into the hands of two aid men who advanced up a set of narrow descending stairs on the other side of the door. They arm-lifted me and brought me down those badly lit stairs to the wall at its foot, propped me to the left of the stairs where

I briefly balanced on one foot, and I was in the Cellar Room. . . .

Here, in the large basement room that opened out at the foot of the stairs, better but starkly and frighteningly lit with candlelight and acetylene torches, was hell itself. Before me, about me, pressing against me on my left shoulder, at my feet and standing, propped as I against all available wall space, lying on stretchers, on the stone floor, almost on top of and against each other, was an army, a defeated army, a ravaged and destroyed army of bodies, of alive or barely alive shattered soldiers.

The floor before me and leading forwards towards a blanket and canvas curtained area beyond was glistening red with blood, the men about me were daubed everywhere, on their torn faces, their wounded or missing arms, about their bodies and missing or torn legs, with mad scarlet and striking insulting reds—as though a mad painter had swept his demonic brush over all surfaces. The smell was deafening, the smell of blood and bodies and of guns and dynamite and smoke, of every visceral foul smell the world has. It was really, however, as though my eyesight had grown inordinately intense, as though every sensation informed me through my eyes. There was sound—my God!—a steady undertone of moaning, of cries, punctuated by shrieks underwritten by a steady drone of a never-ceasing voice, like the needle of a record stuck on a demented chant, coming from behind the curtain wall where, I instantly knew, the “business” of the cellar was being transacted. But I only really saw!

Mostly German field uniforms of infantry soldiers, mud marked and cancelled, but also a wild array of uniforms of those of all branches—engineers, tank corps, artillery—including non coms and privates, officers: All were piled indiscriminately on the stone cellar floor and against the limestone cellar walls of that enormous room. It was at once too large and too small. Everywhere was the mass of writhing, turning, agonizingly moving bodies—striking the air in pain, beating against the floor, or just lying inert and as though for nothing, nothing—so that the room seemed a field or a cellar-full of broken torn men: all waiting for what care they could find. And the numbers that were there, pressed against and upon one another, so that it seemed jammed and filled to bursting with these maimed! Many of them still held, cradled, or were lying with or beside their guns, and most were still clothed as they were when hit, in their stained and clotted and blood drenched clothing.

Even as I stared, aid men were bringing another soldier down the stair—a man, his right arm torn away, in tourniquet and shock. And there was another, who came in with him, a grim-faced corporal cra-

dling his machine pistol. Why is it that my memory is of these guns, still seemingly hot to the touch, and, even, smoking? It could not be so, but that is how I remember it, probably because they brought with them the sense of being just minutes from the place of their wounding, moments away from the battle in which they had been hit. I have what must be an invalid memory but one that is distinctly “there,” of, as I stood there, at the bottom of the stairs, my arm being touched by the flash protector of a machine-gun barrel and wincing back from its heat.

Going about, as they could through the many bodies on the littered cellar floor, aid men and occasional nurses—German (French?) Sisters of Charity, some in huge incongruous white winged bonnets—moved hurriedly and sporadically. Even as I stood there, the curtain flap raised and I could see the more brightly lit interior of what was the “operating” space or room, with its blood-glistening floor, its glint of light on steel, the doctors, most in regular uniform and others in hospital garb, bloodspattered and drenched white. Screams and shrieks from behind these curtains were intermittently or sustainedly there. Sisters or medical assistants moved in and out from this inner space, unconscious (or dead?) or stricken operated-upon men being moved out on stretchers and away. Where? Others were quickly picked from among those before me and brought in to their own saving or destroying ordeal.

And I, among the others, standing there, waiting. For what? For my turn behind the curtain? For someone to question me, deal with me? I was now weak and laboring to continue standing, propped as I was, trying to keep my weight more on one leg, though there was no pain. I grasped an otherwise useless wall bracket and so took my weight off my legs. I saw the sudden hemorrhaging of a man lying before me, blood pumping out his mouth. I saw the truncated ends of torn away limbs, the torn faces where wads of cloth were held in place where no flesh was. Some were, it seems, young yet hardened veterans of the line, others old men, too old surely for the uniforms they wore, the wounds they bore, and many were no more than boys, fifteen at the best.

Far more incisively I saw the eyes of those who stood propped near me and beside me, of those who lay grim and silent and watching, the faces of broken and dying men whose eyes seemed to strike and probe and come to rest like nails, like bludgeons, like bullets, in me. I saw some, unaware of me suddenly recognize me, the enemy among them, others who steadily smoked in stoic relentless silence while watching me. And I could not bear it, I could not bear it. Each set of eyes was a sharp hard blow.

And then, the man who stood to my left across the stairs at the foot of the stairs, apparently wounded through his left arm, rummaged in his upper pocket, took out a cigarette with his right hand and placed it in his lips; the man to his left lit it for him, and he deeply dragged, exhaling a cloud of blue-gray smoke. His eyes were watching me watching him, slowly, silently, relentlessly. The sense I realize I increasingly had was of a great well of silence, an inverted bell-cone of some oppressive sealing force and form, holding us all, in this whole scene like one organism, down in a great wail and shriek of sound that had gone beyond sound, through broken eardrums on into a muffling encapsulating silence. And it was in this great shock of silence that I saw and felt.

The cellar room was like an icon, a sign of ultimate hell. It was a vision of pain and death and terror and violence brought up to a breaking point of intensity: it was *felt* pain, *felt* agony, *felt* madness, *felt* delirium, *felt* death, and, in its fragmented fractured images of dripping and spasming bodies, of sticky pools of fresh blood, of bright lights beyond the blanket bearing down on screaming amputated men, it was one single integrated image of utter devastation. And I saw the faces, like white disks of judging searchlights playing upon me and over me. I saw the young faces, the human faces, the near and comprehended faces of my enemy in agony. And I saw myself, standing there, large and portentous and dominating in that increasingly narrowing closed in space as the single and only source and cause behind their suffering. I saw myself as though I were looking with their eyes, as I stood propped there like an insulting revenging reminder of what had killed *them*, and my mind shrieked "Kill me! Kill me! Kill me! Kill *me!*" I could not bear any more!

Suddenly, the smoking man reached across the interval between us and held out his cigarette to me—to me! to Me! to ME! I felt as though every eye in every head in that convulsed and spasmed room was watching—in a total silence. I reached out what felt like my totally naked arm and took the cigarette from his hand, my eyes not leaving his level eyes, and I took a deep long and unending drag on the cigarette. Then, I kept the smoke in my lungs, letting it fill me, and reached back across to his hand with the returned cigarette. I slowly released the deep draught I had taken: "Danke!" The room reeled. I steadied myself to keep from falling.

A Sister detached herself from somewhere and was before me, touching my arm, the wide-spread flanges of her bonnet reaching up like

white wings above me. “Is there something I can do for you?” “Do for you?” “Do for you!” “Do for YOU!” “DO FOR YOU!” It was as though the whole room had risen up in a great bloody wave of concrete and flesh and slapped me in the face: “Do for YOU!” I looked steadily at her through my tear-smashed eyes. “Do for ME?” How would I ever speak again? I could not see, for tears.

“Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!” How could I answer her?

The Language of War Tales (pp. 54-56)

Some may ask just why it has taken me until now, my 62nd year, to begin to tell this tale? I suppose because I have had to go first through a series of disillusioning awarenesses and beyond a cynicism fostered inevitably by the vast gulf between tales of truth and *truth*. However urgently a tale seeks to be true, it necessarily at last resorts to the imprecision of the imperfect vehicles of words, and whereas words in ordinary interchange are remote enough and abstract enough to help our usual fastidious desires to be remote while talking, and hidden while revealed, and deceiving while confessing, they are too rude and imperfect a means for the most important communications. That’s why the most important things we have to say find their way into poetry, which usually must “do” something to language, as it uses it carefully and sparingly, to get it to be “true.” I suppose one might define poetry as supremely important communications hovering on the limits of language’s imperfect means. And therefore I have been forced over many years to admit that what I had to say about my war could not be confided to language, yet. Now, I see, as I look back over a paragraph or two of what I have written, that it has been written only because I at last am willing to accept the compromises my youth and earlier years could not. I seem to be easily using terms like “action,” “advanced,” “pierced by,” “cries from my wounded . . . buddies,” “my movements,” the “next wave,” “I considered.” They are all false, false, false. They are totally untrue—NOT because they intentionally distort truth but because they inevitably distort truth. Nothing, nothing is sensed so simplistically, monistically, in such isola-

tion from other apprehensions, sensations, or recognitions. Nothing is done so or perceived so. And my experience in my war has been too valuable to me to be translated into lies, to become what it was not. I suppose, always, our realest truths are never spoken or written, and the love poem received is really an ominous sign that the love can look at itself in its linguistic surrogate and find satisfaction there. Usually, we confide dying or dead values to words, or use words to slay them, while waiting for the writer who presses at the edge of his unwilling compromise to force feeling back towards its sources, which it will only know in an escape from its medium. Living values are lived, and when the values are thus true, they seem like my war experience, untranslatable, too true for language. That's what the poet is trying really to say as he stammers over and over about the insufficiency of stars to compare to his mistress' eyes. It is true: to write something is to be rid of it. I think that the one thing of which I never wished to be rid was my war, my battle, myself on that field, myself as I was and became, there.

Then why have we, over these many centuries settled for, as we seemingly have, this imperfect means of transmission of what is most vital? Because, I suspect, the business of life must always remind us that it is business, and sensibility must be kept in its place, back where it belongs, inside the sensibility. And the bluntness of language itself as vehicle is one means of keeping us human and ungodlike, or of keeping us within importantly insensitive human dimensions. Sensitivity is not a primary desideradum but rather sensitivity in a functioning human being, and functioning implies a certain callous disregard of most things. The millwheel does not ask how many fish it crushes, nor the hot water heater, who died of silicosis young to hack coal from damp and dark corridors in slagheaped mines in Pennsylvania. "IF we move," says D.H. Lawrence, "the blood rises in our footsteps." How utterly right he is, but most people, or "mostpeople," as e.e. cummings would choose to say, couldn't care less or refuse the recognition: "What in the world are you talking about?" they say, wiping their bloody hands off on the bloody sheets. Our sentimentalities are outrageous. That's why I would much rather have a General look after our peace than any politician who has small consciousness if any of his culpability and bloodletting.

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