

Mark Burgh

Claire de lune

Now he played the African's flute. The French guns drummed along with him and with Klaus who beat a tin ammunition box.

"Fucking French can't keep time," Klaus said to him.

"Fucking French," Corporal Miesner echoed.

"Fucking French," Klaus sang.

Joss had lost the clarinet at Ypres two years before, but during Verdun he found the wooden flute in the sack of a dead French African Colonial and he had yet to lose it. The dead African must have carved it himself: the wood was scored, not lathed smooth as on a fine instrument. The tone was vivacious and sweet, but not at all tempered, so Mozart sounded strange on the African flute. Joss was not at all concerned about strangeness anymore. The flute kept him alive, he feared. The Magic Flute. The Magic *Schwartzzer* Flute. And where was Pappagallo? Dead in '16, shot down by an English school boy in a Spad. His crushed body burned on the ground like everybody else's.

Joss was growing more stupid as the war went on, more superstitious. Before he had only believed in Mozart rather than God and all that Catholic shit they tried to shovel down his throat. What would Mozart do if he were in a bombproof like this one? Where the timbers shook and the unending supply of dust showered down on them. Go mad, the little shit? Go totally mad and rush above ground expecting to live like a normal man was supposed to do and get his wonderful head shorn off by a 75 burst? Or would he be a modern man, like Joss was, and stay safe below the earth like a fucking worm and play the wooden flute?

Klaus beat the tin box harder. He sang:

“Fuck the English
Fuck the French
Fuck the Yankees
Fuck this trench.”

Joss played light trills and flourishes around the song. Would Mozart sit below the ground like a corpse and play such a thing? Would Mozart draw staves in the dirt to compose on? Or would he stab himself in the neck just so he would not have to look at it anymore, hear it anymore?

Hello Mozart. All that beautiful music you wrote turned out to be useless shit.

The Lieutenant came back into the bombproof. He waited for the expected salutes and got them. Even Joss stopped playing to salute. The Lieutenant looked up as a heavy round shook the bombproof, spilling more dirt on them. The lieutenant swatted the dirt off himself with a pair of leather gloves he held in his hand. To have that kind of sang-froid, Joss thought. French 75s know nothing of sang-froid.

“Now, lads, we’re going to give it to them good. I’ve just been with Major Eberstahl to Regiment and the divisions from the East are in place.”

The weary men looked at one another. Joss looked at Klaus, who winked back. They all knew what the Lieutenant’s news meant. Over the top again. To the French lines. Again. The High Command wanted them to think this time would be different, but no one in his company had the slightest bit of hope or sanity remaining. Not this promise of all those new divisions freed from fighting the Russians, not anything short of the promise of an end to the war could bring them out of their murderous stupor. “Tomorrow morning at 4:00 am, we go off. There’s going to be gas.” The Lieutenant looked at the company as if assuring them of their manhood, nodding. “The French will die.” The Lieutenant nodded to Sergeant Faust and walked out of the bombproof. Faust took a deep breath.

“All right, you heard him. Check and recheck your gas masks. We don’t want our own shit to kill us, do we Wechsler?” Klaus looked up.

“Our shit, their shit, it’s all shit, and we all die,” he said.

“Ah, well,” Faust said, rubbing the corners of his eyes. He had thick black hair now lightened by dust. Faust looked past Klaus and found Joss with his sharp eyes. “Play something, Joss,” Faust said.

Klaus opened his gasmask bag and took out the pig-faced breather. He slipped it on. “Oink, Sergeant. You want to eat my hock or my chops?” His voice was soft beneath the treated leather.

Faust did not hear him. He was sitting on the steps of the bombproof looking at his own gas mask. Joss played the Turkish March while the men of his company turned to pigs without even the enchantment of the beautiful Circe.

Mozart was dead, Joss suddenly remembered, as he put the African's flute away and got out his own gas mask. Mozart got it at Douamount in Verdun, his precious ears deafened by the gunfire in the concrete tunnels. Mozart had taken a grenade in the dark, right in the stomach. When it went off it lit his instant decomposition like an El Greco. Mozart splattered on the walls in a roar greater than anything he had ever written for an opera or requiem. But that was nothing. Whole orchestras disappeared on the hour in the war. The entire Opera Company of Vienna were drowned in their U-boat by the American Navy. They were costumed for *Così Fan Tutti*, and all the brilliant wigs and ornamented coats floated to the surface of the cold Atlantic. Beethoven got caught on the barbed-wire at dawn and the Tommies machine-gunned him. He called out *Kamerade* for a full hour before he died. No one tried to get him. Schubert was in that trench at Metz that took a direct hit from a mortar. Nobody bothered to try and dig him out. All the members of Vienna String Quartet died with him. The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra was crushed by tanks as they rehearsed the Clarinet Concerto. Some lived for a while, but the hospital was too far away to save them. Bach died early, in '14, at the Marne, of a simple blessed bullet in the heart. Brahms had his lungs seared by Phosgene at the Somme. Handel was in an English prison. Vivaldi, armless now, lay mad in some dark ward screaming tonelessly. Haydn and Scarlatti had fought hand to hand at Caporetto and killed each other with trench knives. So why should he continue to live? It was March and still chilly up on the earth. Down in the bombproof it was close and hot. The gas mask made him sweat as soon as he slipped it on. He could hear his own breathing. The celluloid lenses were scratched even though Joss took better care of his equipment than anyone. He looked through them into the world, now changed to a dull patina of worn surfaces and scored planes. He began to feel frightened. He looked at Klaus, who stared back at him, twin panes instead of eyes, a snout in place of a face. He tore off his gas mask and breathed as deeply as he could.

Faust, bare-faced too, was looking at him.

"Scared, Joss?" he asked.

"Yes, Sergeant."

Faust nodded. "Play some more. Make me think of a woman."

Joss put his gas mask back properly before he took out his flute. His mouth was dry; he sipped from a canteen, hot, stale, dirty. Now he played Debussy's Claire. Faust rested back and shut his eyes. Claire of the Moon. The 9/8 time a total antithesis to the War, lacking the stomp of a march, or the speed of a drum.

Flowing, languorous, a lover watching a lover sleeping, or dressing afterwards. To be in that kind of love. Only a Frenchman could turn that into music. The Original F-sharp of the piece made it all the more beguiling. Mostly the black keys on the piano, a rush up and down the keyboard, the melody on the B# the E# and F#.

Debussy, the French bastard, was dead too. But he had died in his own bed, of old age. Thank God. The barrage finished, the rain of dust halted. Debussy had done that, Joss knew. He played in the brief silence, sweet and clear.

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