**Just a Man**

Sic vis pacem parabellum. It’s Latin. The boot camp sergeant made us recite it like a prayer. Sic vis pacem parabellum. If you want peace, prepare for war. Sic vis pacem parabellum I keep thinking, trying to force the idea onto my psyche: will myself to move, to run, to fight, and find peace in the world. And yet I can’t. I can only lie here on top this heap of rubble that only moments ago was my fortification. Was it only moments? Was it minutes? I realize I can’t answer that question. As hard as I think about it, the last thing I can remember is the thundering roar of a panzer tank firing several yards away.

Three of us had been up there and another two down below on the first floor. Were they still alive? I glance around as much as my body allows. The first one I notice is Montgomery. His body is pitted on a metal spike that had been torn from the building’s structure by the explosion. Not to say I am pleased with seeing him dead, but I don’t know him as well as the others, seeing him dead makes me think ‘at least it wasn’t the others’. Then something odd happens. As I try to look away, my eyes refuse. They force me to fixate on the body until I make the realization that Montgomery is no less or no better then any of the other men. We are all the same. Brothers sent here to fight a war that we don’t fully understand: teachers, barbers, mechanics, farmers, common men, and soldiers.

Finally, as if satisfied with my realization, I move to look at another body closer to me. It’s O’Leary. Small Irish kid, probably just out of high school. He’d never seen anything other then a school-yard fight before he was thrown into this hellish world. He wasn’t the best soldier. More times then not he pisses himself before fighting even starts. It feels odd being alive while someone much younger then me is dead. Back home, I am a teacher. O’Leary is only a little bit older then my students. I feel both saddened and helpless by his death. If this is what my students' futures hold, how can I possibly prepare them for it? The truth I realize is I can’t; not when I’m not prepared for it myself.

I actually laugh at the notion of anyone being prepared for a war like this. What happens out here was so different from what the world perceives. Back home, the propaganda posters depict a totally different war: colorful posters showing American soldiers doing all sorts of amazing things like gunning men down left and right. But it’s not like that. Once you’re actually here you realize how much of a lie those posters are. No one’s that bold, and if they are, they don’t last. I was like a lot of folks, coming on the boat over to France, I thought I was ready for this, I was going to fight for my country and be a real solider, a brave soldier. But it didn’t turn out like that, for any of us. The first battle you sit there utterly confused, ducking behind a wall pissing yourself and thinking how much of a coward you are. Then you look around and see everyone else is doing the same thing. This is when you realize you’re not a coward, you’re just a man.

Suddenly, as if ripped from within my thoughts and realizations by a fishhook, I am brought back to the situation around me. It feels like hours that I'd been contemplating the deaths of my regiment, but it seems as if only a few moments had passed by. Debris and dust from the explosion is still settling around me. This is one thing I learned in the war. In certain extreme situations time slows down for you to let you collect your thoughts before it violently throws you back to the action. I hear the sound of heavy boots on gravel making their way towards me. I know instantly they are Germans. No doubt the Panzer-Tank's escort. I scramble around, looking for a weapon, a rock, anything, but it is too late. Standing over me like Death himself is a German with his gun raised. I feel something hard and metal pressing against my back. My Colt! As the German shouts for his comrades to come, I slowly and quietly slide my hand underneath my back and unholster the pistol.

In one, quick, fluent movement whose alacrity surprises even myself, I pull the gun free from my back and point it at Death. For a split second, we both catch each other’s eyes. Again, time seems to slow down as we both stare one another down. My concentration is broken by the sound of a gun shot. At first I don’t really know who fired. I actually look down to see if I am hit when I notice the smoke coming out of the barrel of my gun. I look back at him to see the same dumfounded expression on his face. Then he drops over dead. His body falls on top of O’Leary’s, and as I stare at them both, I realize one final thing. The German is also a brother. He is an O’Leary. He is a Montgomery. Hell, for all I know he is a teacher, with his own students whose futures he prays for. All of us are fighting and dying for a war that is not ours. This war, like every war before it, was the Richman’s war, not the Poorman's. And yet, it is the brothers who go to war, pitted against one another because someone with more power, more money, tells us to. I have no idea why I was supposed to kill that German. I wonder what would happen if I met him outside of this war, met him in a bar or a library.

I lean back, head pressing into the gravel as I look up at the blank, white morning sky. I listen to the sound of more boots approaching. I toss my colt aside and sigh. I see no sense in killing more brothers.

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