Redeployment

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Abstract

The wind, cold from Arctic seas, flattened like a crouching animal as it rushed in across the barren coastal hills...
He tried not to listen. The wind had only made a fool of him—he knew it now.

"Look, Tippet. . . ."

His eyes crept upward—and then they glimpsed a flutter of white in the corner. Unwillingly, he edged toward it—and then he knew that the wind had not lied! She was dreaming there, in a silvery dress—long fair hair and a pale tender face . . . and soft lips . . . the most beautiful princess in the world.

For a moment Tippet only looked at her, his eyes hurting with her beauty. Gently, very gently, he touched his lips to hers, and somewhere there was a lone harp-string trembling on a sweet high note. Her eyes half opened . . . and smiled at Tippet . . . then went wide and frightened. Before he could stop her, she was up and through the castle door.

Trembling, Tippet sank down on a velvety chair. He saw the silver staircases and fifty golden couches, a hundred lords and ladies yawning politely and starting to swirl in the long bright hall, their shadows dancing on the satin-hung walls. As they whirled past Tippet, the ladies smiled and murmured, "He has come." Clocks began chiming a hundred years . . . the wind hummed contentedly around the turrets . . . and perched gracefully on his gold-wrought chair sat Prince Tippet, velvet-suited, fingerling his gold chains and waiting. He had seen her eyes. The princess would come back to him soon—very soon.

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The wind, cold from Arctic seas, flattened like a crouching animal as it rushed in across the barren coastal hills. Bending low under a solid gray sky, it swept over the flat plateau and hurled itself in hatred against the monotonous rows of dark green tents, tearing the smoke from a hundred stove pipes and beating it to the ground.

The sergeant heard it snarling as he lay sprawled on his cot in Tent 219. The sound sometimes rose above the low mumbling talk of the men sitting around the little stove, and, as he watched,
the taut canvas roof vibrated with sudden fierce gusts. On the roof were chalk-written words, the dull and obscene comments of other men who had waited here day after day. The sergeant read them now, one by one, in methodical order, knowing in advance what each word would be. He paused on the last one, a crude calendar with each day of the last three weeks carefully crossed off. "21 days and still no ship," the sergeant read, mentally repeating each syllable. "21 days and still no ship."

In the corner the eternal card game went on, the players sitting lifelessly on a cot, speaking shortly in flat, tired voices. The sergeant rolled over on his side to watch them, fumbling for a cigarette as he moved.

"Open for five."

"I'll stay."

He lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. The smoke tasted flat and it burned his raw tongue. Holding the cigarette in his hand for a moment, he studied the thin spiral of smoke as it rose, then, letting his arm drop, he ground the butt out on the rough concrete floor.

"Raise you five."

"I'll call you."

The stove lid clattered on the floor. A man swore softly. The sergeant turned and gazed at the squat, black stove, splotched with cherry-colored spots of red heat. The men around the stove continued their murmur of conversation, telling and retelling endless stories, of their old outfits, of officers good and bad, of women they had slept with and men they had fought with. The man who had dropped the lid was picking it up, holding it awkwardly with two sticks of wood. He poked it into place on the stove and, sucking his burned finger, took his place in the circle again.

"But when we got up to Hoscht that day and ran into a couple of eighty-eights, the Major was so damn far behind us we couldn't even contact him by radio."

The door opened and a gust of cold air swept up the sergeant's back. He rolled over and faced the man who had come in and now stood blinking in the dim light. He was a clerk, the sergeant knew. He had the harassed, important look that army clerks always acquire.

"Sergeant Smith?"

The drone of conversation stopped, and in the silence the
fire made a low rumbling sound as it passed up the stove pipe. Outside, the wind buffeted the tent, but inside everything was frozen, motionless. The dealer held the deck of cards in midair, the game forgotten.

"Here," said the sergeant.
"Your men will eat at 5:30 tonight."
"Is that all?"
"Yes," said the clerk.
"Any ships come in?"
"No."
"Thanks," said the sergeant. "Shut the door when you go out."

The door slammed shut and the hum of talk started again, loud and angry at first, but quickly fading away as the muffling blanket of boredom settled down. The dealer shuffled the deck and began to deal rapidly and silently. The sergeant flopped over on his back and stared at the quivering canvas. "21 days and still no ship," he read. "21 days and still no ship."

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The Hitchhiker

Charles Merlet

THE sun warmed the crisp autumn air. The hitchhiker looked anxiously down the road.

"Maybe the next one will stop," he thought. "I hope so. Been here for 45 minutes already."

He fingered the gold discharge button in his lapel absent-mindedly.

A 1940 Ford came around the corner. The hitchhiker’s arm went up, the thumb extended. The car slowed down and stopped abreast of him. He opened the door and got in.

"Only going down the road a bit," said the driver, "but you’re welcome to ride that far."

"Okay. I’m getting kinda tired standing here."

The driver shifted gears and the car moved down the road. "Been out of the service long, son?"