Walk Through the Valley

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Abstract

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OF DEATH, and mud, everything smelled like mud. The hot breeze blowing over the ridge was mud, wet mud; the grass, what there was of it, was covered with mud; the man was mud. The sky—from the filth the dawn was unreal, frightening and the ghostly reds and blues floated above the soldier, unattainable, too far away to be thought about.

"Shit!" said Raschid. He was a small man with fine hands and high cheekbones. The face, almost obscured by the grotesque helmet, was dark and covered by a five-day beard. He was veneered with mud, his hands, his almost uniform, his weapon.

He looked around, wondering where everyone was. "Is everyone dead?" he asked. He eased himself to his knees and cautiously looked around. He was near the top of a small ridge that stretched away on either side. It was lifeless and bare. "It stinks," he said and stood up.

Below him was the dead patrol, sprawled on the ground as if they were expected to take root and sprout. He turned away and threw up.
After that, stumbling from weakness he slipped to the top, finally gaining a footing. The enemy had been there — depressions in the mud where they had waited were still fresh. “Stupid,” he said. “Stupid fools.” A bright cartridge winked out of the slime. He kicked a forgotten helmet down the hill and it rolled and bounced forlornly to the bottom. “Stupid fools,” he said again.

It was a no-man’s land, a no-man’s land that belonged to everyone that had the strength to walk into it, that had the misfortune. Raschid was there and the enemy was gone as fast as he had come. A no-man’s land of mud, a valley of death.

He pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and examined it carefully before lighting it. It was soggy and the smoke was bitter in the early-morning heat and the patrol was below. “Almost,” he said, “we almost made it.”

“For what?” he added bitterly. Stamping the precious cigarette angrily into the mud, he reached for his canteen and stopped. Someone was walking toward him, along the ridge. He jerked his rifle into position.

“Hold it soldier,” called the man. “I’m friendly.”

Raschid glared out from under his helmet. The intruder was big and unfamiliar. He was a very big man and he carelessly swung an issue carbine in his right hand. Raschid’s finger tightened around the trigger.

Whoever he was, he didn’t have a helmet and a brush of white hair swept low over his forehead. And he had a beard, a white, short beard that gave his face a soft look, but the features were hard, almost incapable of warmth. The small soldier eyed him suspiciously.

“Ease up fella, I said I’m friendly.” There was no trace of an accent. The big man came closer and Raschid watched his hands. They were big farmer’s hands, big rugged hands, the hands of a hunter. His uniform was fresh and clean, an unusual thing for a battlefield.

“Who are you?” he asked. Then he noticed the Captain’s bars and he relaxed — long training and tradition relaxed him — the man was an officer.

“You’re in a hell of a place to ask that,” said the big man. “I’m friendly, like I said.” A flicker of a smile darted across his face.
Raschid's cheek twitched nervously. "You're friendly?" He relaxed and dropped his gun to his side. "What are you doing out here?" He closed one eye against the sun. "Who in the hell are you?"

The big man smiled. "You all that's left of the patrol?" he asked, looking down the hill.

"That's right." The answer was curt, even if the man was an officer. Fatigue was painted over the small man. He unscrewed the top of his canteen and lifted it to his lips and dribbles of water ran through the whiskers. He replaced the top. "Kind of a surprise. They jumped us after dark."

"Things happen in places like this," said the big man.
"Like they were waiting for us."
"It happens," said the Captain. "Where do you go now?"
The small man fished for another cigarette. "Back to the company, I guess."

The Captain watched him as he lit the cigarette, then he reached for Raschid's arm. "I need some help."

Raschid looked at him.
"You can get back after that. Right now I need some help." Down the hill from them was a burned-out truck. The Captain smiled at the small soldier.
"Goddamned war!" said Raschid.
"Believe in what you're fighting for."
He tipped his helmet back. "What am I fighting for?"
The big man looked shocked. "You don't know?"
Raschid smiled over the cigarette. "No."
"That's too bad," said the Captain, shaking his head. "We'd better get going." He started away.

Raschid trudged after the man, feeling the heat on his back. He unbuttoned his shirt and rubbed his chest. They were walking along the ridge and wisps of vapor rose from the mud. The night had erased all of his drive, all of his ambition.

Suddenly the Captain stopped and faced the small man. "Soldier, what do you believe in?" His eyes were half-closed and he swung the gun slowly in his hand. "What do you believe in?"

Raschid stared at him blankly.
"What do you believe in?" he asked again, this time his deep voice was sharp.
The soldier dropped the stock of his gun into the mud and leaned against the barrel. "What difference does it make?"

"Do you believe in God?"

Raschid looked away, out over the bright horizon. "I suppose," he sighed. "What difference does it make?" His voice was tired and thin. There was no life in the mud except them, no birds sailed in the still rank air, nothing but the smell of death.

"Do you think God helped you last night?" The big man's beard gleamed in the sun.

Raschid laughed slowly. "I was lucky," he said. "God is worthless here, and anyway, what difference does it make?"

The Captain's eyes blazed.

Raschid looked up. "Could he get us out of this if we get caught?"

The big man stared for a second and then turned on his heel and walked away. Raschid sighed and followed, slipping with every step.

After walking for some time the big man again stopped and Raschid blundered into him. He was too tired to care. Below them, in the depression between the hills was the ruin of a farm house. It was naked and sterile in the field of mud, just a ruin. Behind it was a dead tree, stark and horrible as the house.

"Someone down there," said the Captain. He pointed. Beside a wall by the house was a body in a green uniform like Raschid's. "He might be alive."

"Shit," said Raschid, regarding the body. "Let's go around it."

"We're going down," said the officer.

"Like hell," said the small man.

The Captain grabbed his arm. "Let's go soldier!"

"If there's someone else there, we're both dead."

"There's no one there."

Raschid studied the hollow and slammed his rifle into his other hand. "Okay, you go first."

The Captain grabbed his arm and shoved him ahead. The two men walked silently across the flat open space and the tree behind the house was naked against the sky and the grass squished under their feet.
Nothing moved in the windows and Raschid’s cheek twitched nervously. “You for it,” he said.

The Captain followed quietly, his weapon dangling useless in one hand.

“I feel a hundred years old,” said Raschid.

“We have to see.”

“Shit!” Nothing moved and the sun burned his back and his lips were dry. His eyes darted from one window to another, trying to pick out something, anything. “I don’t want to die,” he said quietly.

“Shut up,” said the Captain. They moved carefully.

“Not after all that; not after I made it.”

“Shut up!”

Something glinted in a lower window and Raschid started. He watched for the spark again, his fingers white on the muddy stock. “There it goes! Get down.”

He slid on his belly into a depression behind an embankment. The Captain followed him and they were completely wet and covered with muck.

“What was it?” asked the officer, lifting his head.

“You and your goddamned curiosity.”

“What was it?” The Captains’ voice was harsh.

“Something.”

“That’s right,” said the Captain, “You don’t want to die.”

“Shit!” Raschid spat and craned his neck up to examine the ruin. “Something there.”

The big man glanced around. “Move out to the left and see what it is, maybe we can get them in a cross fire.”

“No cover out there.” He gestured toward the quiet figure by the wall.

“You’ll have to. You can’t stay here.”

Raschid regarded his companion for a minute and spat again. “You wanted to see, you go.”

The big man smiled darkly. “I’m in command.”

“You asked what I believed in a minute ago,” said Raschid. “An officer is about as useless as God out here.”

The Captain glared. “I ordered you, soldier.” The word was a snarl. “I ordered you to move out.”

“Useless,” he said under his breath.

“What was that?” The big man’s body was tense and his eyes drilled into the little man.

The Captain reached for Raschid’s collar and pulled the small man close. “You’re damn right!” he said into the other’s face. “Get moving.”

“You got us here.”

“You heard me.” The Captain rolled back and watched the house. “Disobedience to an officer under fire . . .”

“Why?” Raschid’s voice was bitter. “You’re everything and I’m nothing. Why should I die?”

The big man looked at him and he scratched at a place in his damp beard. “That’s your job. Mine’s giving the orders.”

The depression was the only low place in the open field and Raschid searched for cover. His knuckles were white. “If there’s someone there I won’t make it.”

The body a hundred yards away was motionless and Raschid stared at it. The big man shoved his carbine into Raschid’s face. “I’ll kill you if you don’t go.” His voice was quiet.

The small soldier’s body was tense and he was breathing hard. “Why did I come along?”

The other man’s white eyebrows were drawn together and his finger tightened on the trigger. “I said . . .”

“Shit,” said Raschid. He swung away from the carbine and drew himself up. “You want me to go bad enough.”

The big man was breathing hard and his eyes were blazing holes under the white hair.

Raschid was on his feet running, running for his life. His feet slipped and he almost fell and he ran, ran as he never ran before; he reached the wall and stumbled over the body. He was grasping, breathing in great heaving spasms. When he had recovered he glanced at the house. Nothing had happened. The captain watched him from the depression.

He reached out and turned the body over; it was lifeless, old, it was rotting. Raschid turned his face and vomited again.

“You bastard,” he sobbed, looking at the man across the field. He felt weak, burnt out. “You’re God and I’m nothing.”

Tears were running down his cheeks.
The Captain watched him.
"We're all dying," said the small man quietly, to himself.
The Captain slowly raised his carbine and aimed at the man and the impact of the bullet lifted the soldier off his knees and slammed him into the rough stones of the wall. The big man emptied the magazine and stood up, not even glancing at the two bodies. He walked away.

From Existing To Living

By Peter Proul

For a long while I stood in the shadows;
The sun shone seldom.
When it did,
I quickly ran back to the shadows — embarrassed.

But the sun somehow felt good;
From the shadows I slowly ventured willingly, but only for a short time.
It began to feel good;
Somehow I was enjoying it.
Towards me the others looked — ashamed.

Yet, I walked farther into the light,
They turned their backs.
I stood in the sun — smiling.