

The Sun Eaters

by Alex M. Pruteanu

We ran together on the frozen mother land like a pack of disoriented hyenas. Children. Boys, mostly. All ages. Starving. Shit-poor. Ill-dressed. Some dying from tuberculosis or dysentery. Others living with pneumonia, coughing up liquefied guts and bile and epochs of cruelty and the violence our fathers bestowed upon us with belts, shovel handles, tree limbs, chains. We puffed on used, dry butts we found in the rubble of the war. Shit, Russian or Romanian, half-smoked, hastily-rolled cigarettes; some abandoned by their owners in a hurry, running into the trenches away from whistling mortars, others interrupted by a sudden, violent end. All tainted by once-infected lips. Herpes. Blisters. Cankers. Split lips. Remnants discarded by the dead. Faint footprints. We made up games and stories, all the while subsisting in the shadows of destruction, vagabond concrete, and petrified bones:

"Enemy sniper dragged his last breath on this just before he was clipped by his counterpart."

"He was shot through his own scope."

"On the last day of the war."

"Before he was to come back to his wife."

"And then he was eaten by feral dogs."

"By feral cats."

"By hungry villagers, hiding in their cellars."

"By us."

There was no food (we found 120 grams of bread under a fallen oak tree once), just the winter earth under our thin, worn-out soles. (Our thin, worn-out souls.) Some had no shoes at all. Others improvised. Gabriel wrapped his feet in gauze. It was soaked in dried blood that looked more like cracked, satiated clay. He had removed the bandage from the frozen head of a captain, propped up against a tree in the forest, on the outskirts of the city. He had removed the captain's stripes, as well, and ate them.

"He died heroically after fighting at Stalingrad."

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"There was a sign nailed to his chest that warned of resistance."

"They tortured him but he gave away nothing."

"On the last day of the war."

"Before he was to come back to his wife."

We starved and became insane. We ran together and apart and together again. There was no food. Just cold. Gabriel lost a toe to frostbite. We slid on ice on the bare flesh of our baby feet. We shat in abandoned outhouses. In February, Caesar found a bombed communication truck in the middle of a ravine, hidden by a pyramid of burned out tree trunks. Three men were frozen inside at the controls. Parts of their flesh were black, missing, a leathery-smooth nightmare. It looked like they were smiling, only we knew...it was the grimace of pain and death in that unavoidable instance you cross the bleeding fields or wherever in hell your religion tells you you're going.

"All made from wax by Madame Tussauds."

"Keepers of the Chamber of Horrors."

"You idiots, check their pockets for cigarettes."

"Imbecile!"

"Animal."

"Sodomite."

And in the end, when there was nothing left and we had all come to look like whispers, we ate the sun. It was Pavel who taught us. It was he who convinced us that we'd fill up our bellies with it. There was nothing to eat anymore, and when you have nothing, you will believe anything. Even Pavel with his provincial tales. And so he showed us how to find the few sunny spots, kneel down, turn our faces up to the star, and open our mouths. That was all we had. And so we ate sun. And our mouths became dry and burnt and full. And that is how we died, one by one.

