The Boy and the Rest of His Life

by Thomas Shaggy

The hills through Central Belgium were cold and quiet. This line needed to be held. I could feel the evil stirring in the night. From the North Sea to Switzerland we kept the Nazi's at bay. Small pockets of soldiers would arrive now and again as if they were cattle testing the electric fence. I lay on my back looking up at the stars thinking of Her. Was this the same sky she looked up at? Was she doing the same? The trees that towered all around me were not familiar to me. The air smelled of stale gunpowder and men's stretched conscience. Never did I think that I would be a 19 year-old boy surrounded in a foreign country by men that wanted to kill me.

We were all tired. The men slept all around in their lean-tos with small fire's burning close by. The patrols kept a tight perimeter. We had constructed some towers to keep watch over the out-laying territory. The two men up in the closest lookout laughed while dealing cards to one another. I closed my eyes, thought of Her. Her dirty blonde hair in the wind and her bright smile. She hung laundry with that half smile on her face.

The watchtower exploded next to me.

The two men that were in it lay crisped on the dirt below and the sky begins to rain the deck of cards. I could only hear the screaming of Nazi's in the distance. It was an ambush. I scrambled about for my rifle. I was still half deaf from the explosion and my vision was fuzzy. I ran to the next lookout and found refuge behind one of the large trees. Many men ran about, some retreating fully and others digging in along side of me. Some of them without a

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shirt or helmet, but all with blood shot eyes. My brothers and I dug in hard and set our sights on our enemies. We held this line for months and it would not be broken on this night or any other.

The Nazi's were relentless in their onslaught of our camp. They had accounted for all the necessary factor's, except for one. We had been taken by surprise and as the night progressed a fog rolled through making an air assault impossible. The weather was on our side. What they had not factored in was our will to fight relentless spirit to endure.

The fighting had progressed for weeks. Many of my brothers had been lost and I had made new ones dozens of times over. Fighting from the early dawn until dusk sometimes without a break was a normal routine. A parade of bullets and explosions would be the alarm clock to a new day. Our lines had retreated for weeks until finally, Christmas Day had come and we began to push the Nazi's back. Their supplies had begun to run low and their spirits were broken. Our will continued to grow as theirs floundered.

The week following Christmas Day kept us busy. We pushed the Nazi's back to line of which they had begun their assault. Fighting over the same ground of which my fallen brothers lay. Our spirit had shown through more than ever now. Men screamed as their rifles exploded with redemption. It was as if the fallen Allied Forces were coming back to life to push the now cowardly enemy back from whence it came.

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January 3, 1945 was the day I lit my first cigarette. I sat with two friends, which I had only known for about two weeks. After the ambush a lot of the companies had been mixed in together. We sat sharing stories of home. I sat under the towering trees once more and shut out the conversation. We hadn't bathed or shaved in

weeks. Many of us had full beards. Our uniforms were tattered. I never thought I would enjoy the sensation from a cigarette so much as I sat back with my feet up. I pulled back until the cherry burned my fingertips. I couldn't even feel the burn.

The sky was blue. Smoke from the burning fires billowed. Bodies lined the forest trenches. We had won the battle, but at a heavy cost. We were being sent home. All of us.

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I stood under the shower. The percussion outside rattled the walls. The crowd roared. I only needed to see one person. She had been waiting two years. I had waited an eternity it seemed. I turned the water off and wrapped the towel around my waste. My uniform seemed to slip right over my skin. I buttoned it up and placed the metals the correct distance from the inseam and buttons, dusted my slacks and polished my boots. I placed my hat up over my neatly combed hair. The bandage over my eyebrow was the only sign of wounds.

I stood in front of the mirror and reflected on my time spent in Belgium. The casualties we suffered and the victories we'd won. It had showed me so much about the people of the world and myself. So many countries lined up together in hopes to oppress a massive force with such radical ideals and plans.

We moved into our formation.

We had overcome one of the most terrifying and deadly armies ever put together. I lived to speak of it. I would speak of the tale of bravery that was endured through weeks of blood, sweat and tears by all of my brothers.

The doors opened to the runway. Light flooded the corridor. The CO ordered us out.

The light was bright and the crowd welcoming us home began to shout louder. We came to a halt in front of the color guard at the center of the bleachers. Our families standing behind us. I stood saluting our flag and shed a tear for my fallen brothers that lay in the caskets being pulled from the back of the cargo plane.

The Colonel stood up at the podium.

"Good afternoon families and friends and soldiers of the US Army. We are gathered here today to welcome home our husbands and brothers, fathers and sons. Men who have fought valiantly in the face of one of the deadliest forces known to man. The men that stand before you today are the men who held the last remaining line of defense from the Nazi's trying to invade Europe in a last ditch ambush. For three weeks these men. raised the American flag along with the flags of the Allied Forces nations to preserve the freedom that we value so much in the United States."

I began to cry.

"The men laying behind me are a tribute and a symbol to the strength of this nation and all who fought so bravely. Young men willing to give their lives to protect the ones they love and the country that they love. Welcome home troops and God's speed."

The crowd roared and we saluted the Colonel. I needed to look away from the caskets. After breaking formation I began searching for Her. The crowd had cleared the benches and gathered around their respective relatives. I walked aimlessly through the masses, until finally.

She stood on top of the bleachers in all white holding a red rose. I ran to her. Looked at her square in the eyes. I could hardly control myself. The tears continued to flow.

"I love you." She wrapped herself around me with her arms and her legs.

"I love you more." She kissed me. A kiss that you only see in movies. She had to put her feet on the ground.

We walked down the bleachers onto the runway again. We looked at each other as if it were for the first time.

"So where to?" She asked.

I thought for a minute and reached into my pocket. I grabbed a cigarette from my pocket and lit it. She looked at me with such mystery, I'll never forget that look. I took in a deep breath and pointed.

"This way."

She smiled and held me tight.