

Reflections

Short Story: First Place 2015

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The sound of cash register beeps echoed off the high ceiling of the grocery store as the buzz of conversation spread from wall to wall. Variations of people shuffled behind their overloaded carts zoned in on the list clutched in their fists. From college kids with buggies full of microwave meals, to grocery warriors armed with books of coupons, and married couples arguing over what to make for dinner the store was packed with people.

The hard bench beneath him offered plenty of discomfort and an occasional squeak if he was to move in the slightest. He'd become so accustomed to the noise of the machine dispersing oxygen that when someone questioned as to what the noise was he was clueless to what they were talking about. Although without the help of his hearing aids he couldn't have heard it anyway.

A young woman, around mid twenties, hastily set her items on the conveyer belt as her young daughter jumped around behind her questioning her every move. "Zoey, can you please calm down? Mommy is a little busy right now and you're very rambunctious." Zoey quieted down and studied her mother with her blonde pigtails on the top of her head bouncing as she hopped in place. 'Finally,' the mother thought as Zoey quieted down.

"Mommy what does rambunctious mean? Does it mean funny? If it does then yes I am very, very rambunctious," a toothless grin shined up at her while a sigh escaped her mother's lips.

"Zoey if you don't quiet down you're not going to that birthday party tonight."

Zoey's eyes widened and her mouth immediately shut. Her mother did seem to be very busy so she decided to find something to do. Looking around the grocery store she saw an old man sitting on a bench against the wall by himself. 'Why's he all by himself?' she thought, 'I might as well be his friend.'

The little blonde girl skipped over to him with a big toothless grin. Her pink tutu flopped with every skip as did her pigtails. "Hi. My name is Zoey. What's yours?"

He smiled back at her and took a deep breath of oxygen, "Hello Zoey, my name is Lou."

“Lou? That’s a good name. Do you have any friends Lou? If you don’t I can sit with you and tell you a story about my daddy if you want.”

He chuckled and moved his cane from the seat next to him and laid it across his lap. “Well I have a friend now. Why don’t you tell me about your daddy?”

With a skip and a flop she landed on the bench next to him and immediately dived into a story about her father. She told him all about him. How he was tall with short blonde hair, short because he had to keep it short for work, how he wore a lot of camouflage and carried lots of guns when he was working. She talked about how he always puts the flag up on the pole early in the morning when he’s home, which isn’t much because he has to work a lot. She talked about how he drives big tanks that shoot great big bullets and he gets to see so many camels that he says he hopes he never sees a camel as long as he lives. With big glistening eyes and finger paint smeared on her little hands she reminded him so much of his daughter at a young age that he felt as if he were back in time.

He smiled to himself as Zoey continued on with her stories. Zoey’s words about her father had hit him hard and the whole room seemed to spin. Though he sat in a busy grocery store he was immediately knee deep in snow. The sounds of men arguing and some laughter surrounded him and cold metal stung his hands. The temperature was so cold the steam that billowed out of his mouth seemed to freeze in mid air and drop to the frozen ground. Feet of snow covered the ground for miles and miles in late January of 1945. They’d been fighting a little over a month and already they’d lost many men, but he knew his own country’s death toll didn’t compare to the rival’s and that’s what kept him going. As evil as it sounded he woke up every morning eager to find opposing soldiers and let them pay their wages for the evil deeds they had done. The cold metal of his rifle seemed to cut into his skin but he did not complain. Aside from his fellow men his rifle was his best friend and had saved him more times than he could count.

“I swear if one more person steals my cigarettes I’m putting bullets in this entire platoon. The Germans won’t even get a chance to kill you, I’ll get to it first.” A stout man with a heavily scuffed face shot dirty looks at all the men around him.

“Ah Wills you’re all talk. You ever even fired that gun?” A skinny man with slicked black hair laughed with a cigarette dangling from his lips.

“You got a bone to pick with me Pilatino? I’ll send you back home to your meatballs I swear I will,” Wills’ heavy eyebrows furrowed over his eyes as he glared at Pilatino.

“Now if we’re gonna play that game how about I send you home to your girlfriend who just happens to be your sister,” Pilatino grinned at him with cigarette smoke snaking around his face and traveling to the sky. Laughter erupted from the surrounding men after hearing that. Wills’ face turned red and with a mumble he turned up the collar of

his thick wool coat and trekked his way back to his tank. They'd all known each other since boot camp but had never spent this much time in such close quarters. The inside of their tank had been more than their work it had been their safety, their church, their home, and so much more. From the time they drove into their first battle they'd developed an intense bond. It was a bond past being friends, or even them all being best friends they all depended on each other. Their lives lay in the hands of the men around them. It was an unspoken bond but they all knew it was there.

One of the two hatches on the front of their tank opened up and a slim redheaded man with thick glasses stretched out of it with the palm of his hands rubbing his eyes. "If y'all don't stop arguing I'm gonna shut all of ya up. A man can't get a wink of shut eye around here with y'all yappin all the time." Burk was their co-driver/co-gunner with Pilatino as the main driver.

"Burk if you keep complaining about sleep I'm gonna permanently put you to sleep. Don't think I won't either," Lou smiled at Burk and bit into his crackers from his MRE.

Burk snorted, "We both know I'm the only one that's got good aim in this whole tank. Wills is too busy hating the world to get a straight shot and Pilatino is too limp wristed to even hold his gun up."

Pilatino flicked his cigarette into the snow, "Yea I guess that's why I'm the main driver and gunner huh, Burk?" Laughter exploded from the men again.

A short man with dark hair walked towards the tank immediately hushing the men. "All right ladies let's get ready and get going to one more town till we're done in this god forsaken place. After this is smooth sailing to Germany so I can personally kill Hitler." His thick leather boots smacked against the tank's metal as he jumped his way to the main hatch and lowered himself into place. "Gimme a call off will ya boys?"

Burk sat back into his seat and closed his hatch, "Burk."

Pilatino climbed into the driver seat and hooked his latch closed, "Pilatino."

Lou stuffed the rest of his MRE into his pack and made his way to his seat where he loaded the rounds into the tank, "Lou."

From the seat behind the cannon, the seat opposite from Lou, Wills sat strapping his leather helmet on over his head, "Wills."

The short man strapped his own helmet on and took another look at the map, "All right let's get going, these Germans aren't gonna kill themselves." The short man, the tank commander, was Wayne. Though he'd been in the army as long as the rest of them had

he advanced in his rank rapidly. The military life fit him like a glove and in an odd way he gave a sense of security to his crew. The five of them had lived in their tank and shared their stories of their lives before the war, girls they'd dated, jobs they'd had, and even their deepest fears. It's something about a man and the overwhelming sense of fear; fear so strong you can taste it, which turns him very sentimental. No doubt these men did get their taste of fear when it came to their battles against the German troops. The German's tanks were bigger and more lethal but they didn't have the ambition that Lou's crew had. Their battalion had taken down six King Tiger tanks, four Panzer IV's, and countless German foot soldiers though Lou's crew alone had never been one on one with a German tank. So far no tragedy had fallen on them aside from an oil leak; they had been strategic aside from their lack of experience.

They rolled third in the convoy of tanks into the final Belgium town that they had to overtake. The town laid silent, so eerily silent that it rung in your ears. The rumble of their tanks was the only sound to be heard. The sky was a dark grey with streaks of black clouds that seemed to darken everything with the exception of the tall white buildings of the town. Massive holes gapped in the walls of the buildings as rubble lay in the streets. Bodies of innocent civilians lay scattered in the rubble with gun shells sprinkled like salt throughout the entire city. Every window in every building was either covered with sheets or broken allowing curtains to breeze through them and smack their wet edges on the outer bricks. Warning signs had been painted on the sides of the buildings with black paint though none of them could read them it angered them. It angered them knowing that the Germans had done this to the innocent people and had no remorse of it what-so-ever.

"All right boys here we go. Keep an eye out and shoot anything that moves," Wayne watched through his small glass ports that lead to the outside. Burk pressed his glasses against his scope that snaked through to the outside of the tank and into the war stricken city. The radio crackled and flicked on as the commander in front of them buzzed in, "All right men this is it. So far so good but I smell sauerkraut so keep your eyes open." The radio flicked off. Lou eagerly awaited orders to load the rounds. He looked over at Wills and watched him kiss the cross that hung around his neck. Before they went into anything that could lead to death, which was everything, Wills would kiss the cross around his neck and the picture of his wife that he kept taped to the tank wall next to him. Everyone was snapped to attention as Wayne broke the silence.

"Burk to your left there's a 'Kraut. Could you please escort him to his date with the Devil?" Burk saw the glistening of the swastika that hung from the neck of the German's uniform. He raised a radio to his lips and barked a few commands before Burk pulled the trigger. The radio dropped to the ground and dripped with blood. Everything seemed to oddly ease as they continued through the city. Then all at once the air was filled with gun fire and a deep boom exploded from one of the buildings. The first tank in the American convoy burst into flames as the top of it blew into the air and crashed into the opposite building. The radio immediately flicked on, "THEY GOT JAMES. HOLD YOUR GROUND, IT'S AN AMBUSH. LET'S GIVE THESE 'KRAUTS WHAT THEY'VE ASKED FOR." The radio flicked off as tensions ran high. Through the entire war they'd

experienced, never had they lost an entire tank and all its crew all at once. Lou felt the blood rush out of his face and his heart jump to his throat. His fingers froze over as every nerve in his body exploded at the sudden release of adrenaline. Wills grabbed the handle of the cannon and locked his eye over the scope sights. Burk unleashed a spray of bullets on the uncountable crowd of Germans that poured from the surrounding buildings as Pilatino guided them around the lost tank even driving over multitudes of the opposing German troops. A mess of Italian poured out of his mouth as he continued the unceasing fire alongside Burk. Lou automatically loaded massive rounds into the tank and prepared it for Wills to destroy the building where the lethal shot had come from.

“Pilatino take us left of the building!” Wayne eagerly watched through his port and radioed commands to the other tanks. Pilatino snaked around the left of the building as the other tanks took the right and the back. From every angle the tanks unloaded into all the buildings.

Another soul shattering boom shot from the building left of their tank and ricocheted off the hull of the tank where Lou sat. His blood pressure shot up as he studied the metal of the tank wall next to him. It was dented in and almost completely broken open. He knew the Germans knew where the loaders sat in the American tanks and they wanted to kill him first. If anything it fueled him more and increased his reload speed. The radio flickered on from the tank on the other side of the city, “THEY GOT WILLIAMS IT’S JUST YOU OUT THERE WAYNE HOLD IT DOWN.” The radio flicked off. Another deeper explosion erupted with a crumbling noise. The building across the street from them burst open as a King Tiger tank erupted through the bricks.

“Oh my god it’s a tiger. Lou shovel that ammo into that cannon this time we’re going in solo,” Wayne’s voice eerily lowered. Lou loaded the highest explosive they had into the cannon, “FIRE.” Without hesitation Wills fired at the tiger tank. The round seemed to fire and fly in the air in slow motion. Every second seemed like an hour as the round neared the tank. As it reached the thick German metal it burst onto the hull, leaving nothing but a massive dent.

“YOU CAN’T TAKE IT FROM THE FRONT WILLS, WE HAVE TO GET TO THE BACK ARE YOU TRYING TO GET US KILLED?” Burk’s voice cracked in fear as he shot the still oncoming German soldiers. They’d been coming in full force and been making their way close enough to the tank to touch the front of it. The tiger dug its heavy tracks into the rubble that covered the streets and strode its way towards them. Shots from the gunners pinged off the hull of their own tank with unceasing power. Pilatino clenched the sticks that directed which way the tank went with white knuckles and sweating palms. His face slammed against the scope while they semi circled the tiger tank. Burk successfully warded off and cleared the foot soldiers leaving it just the tanks that stood ready.

The tiger continued to follow the same circle motion that they were on, encircling each other trying to reach the back of each other. The main gun on the tiger retracted and fired at their tank. Pilatino automatically threw both levers of the tank forward sending it straight ahead in full speed. Everything seemed to move in slow motion, the bullet, the tank, and everyone's breath stopped all at once. The bullet flew closer as they rolled forward and grazed the side of their tank ripping open the metal and destroying the building behind them. The tiger changed its path speeding towards them, firing without mercy. "This is it boys. Unless we get a miracle we're all gonna die," Burk wiped the sweat off his forehead. They all rebuked his statement in full force. Without another thought a huge explosion erupted in front of them. The tiger stopped as its left track burst off the tank leaving it immobile due to a land mine.

"THIS IS IT BOYS.WE GOT THEM NOW!" Wayne barked orders as Pilatino eagerly hurried the tank around the back of the tiger. Lou, without instruction, loaded the most explosive rounds once again, "FIRE." Wills pulled the trigger as the entire tank shook. The explosion from the shot left everyone's ears ringing and dust filled the air leaving a thick cloud that interrupted the sight of anything around them. The silence rung as loud as the shot itself. As they waited for the dust to clear their finger tips tingled, with their hearts in their throats.

The dust settled as their blood pressures rose, "Am I imagining this right now?" Lou whispered. Pilatino burst into laughter with tears running down his face. Wiping his face with the back of his dirty sleeve he shouted in Italian, crossing himself. Burk laughed and grabbed Pilatino's shoulder shaking him. Wills took Lou's hand and shook it cheering.

"We did it men! We took it down!" Wayne slapped the metal of the tank and laughed from relief. The tiger sat in front of them with fire and smoke billowing out of the gaping hole in the back that they created with their own rounds. Never had they achieved anything that massive. They had never been as proud of themselves as they were in that very moment. With celebratory handshakes and cheers filling the small atmosphere of the tank tensions eased. The radio crackled with a message that the entire town had been cleared of all German forces. They had experienced the spoils of man's anger and they had seen what men could do to each other. They had done all they could to rid the world of the hatred they had experienced and they arose victorious. They posted the American flag above the city and paid due respect to their fallen brothers. The continued freedom of America rode on their shoulders and even the freedom of other countries. With their bravery and their acceptance at the possible death they faced they had taken down the enemy from country to country with their next step being Germany. Nothing could stop them as long as they had each other and their will to fight for their great country and the innocent people. Eight months later on September 2, 1945 the war was finally finished with the Third Reich being taken to its knees and extinguished. The Americans, alongside the English, Canadians, and even the Russians, had overtaken Germany and rid it of all Nazis. Concentration camps were liberated and all prisoners of war were set free. Lou and his crew went their separate ways after the war and went back to their homes all over America and starting their own families. Though

times had changed, years had come and gone, and they were thousands of miles away from Belgium the memories still invaded their thoughts and nightmares. The sacrifices men and women have made for America are ones that people who don't serve may never know. The marines, the army, navy, army air corps (now air force) deserve respect and so much more that we can ever give them. They are the unsung heroes without capes.

A small hand shook his shoulder breaking him from his reflection. "Hey are you paying attention Lou?" Zoey looked at him with glistening eyes. He smiled and patted the top of her blonde head.

"Yes ma'am, I'm listening to every detail."