

The Coward

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A slight breeze raises a dry, copper-like film of dust and sand that billows out and covers him. Like a dog he wipes his face and blinks his eyes. The hot wind touches the outer edges of his ears as if an army of spiders were climbing around on them. He shivers. When the film of sand lifts, he again tries to look at it. Eyes, a nose, cheeks, chin, a rather large mole on the chin, long, curly hair, a ribbon in the hair.

For a while the snapshot had remained in good shape, but sweat, dust and the hot, sandy weather had caused it to fade. The edges had already become worn down. It'll make it through the year, he thinks. She's quite beautiful. Her marriage will be no problem. But will he be able to see it? Will he get out of this sendpit alive? He wants to. At least this time he wants to. He wants to return alive to see the wedding of his only daughter. How is she getting along? Is her anut taking care of her well? If only her mother were alive.

Her mother — he tries to picture the face of his wife. She died six years ago. Even though he wants to, he can't remember what she looked like. Strange. His

memory can't puncture the wall of time. Not only that, can he remember anything besides taking out his daughter's picture? No, nothing at all. Except for some meaningless stains, he sees nothing. Nothing at all, her way of speaking, her smile, nothing at all.

The butt of his gun was pinching him a little at the belt, so he rolled over on his other side. After he put the picture of his daughter back in his pocket, he took out a few pieces of torn paper. They had once been one and the same piece of paper, but after all the use, they had become three separate pieces. On the flat of a rock that protruded out of the hot sand he placed the pieces next to each other. They made a recognizable form, the picture of a naked woman. Who knows when, where, and from what wreckage he had scavenged it. Since then, it's been in his pocket. It comes out often. When he can't remember how someone looked, he takes this out, spreads it out somewhere, and tries to remember. Sometimes it would come to him this way. Quite clearly. Then slowly the image would get hazy. Even though it was only in three parts, each piece of that naked woman's picture was practically ruined.

When he had the pieces together, he tried to focus his concentration on it, but finally it seemed to him that he was trying to place his feet on a stair that wasn't there.

The hot wind raised up another film of sand that billowed over him. Quickly he gathered the pieces of paper together and stood up. Another cloud of sand.

After that, the hair on his body stood up like the hair on a frightened cat's back. The blood in his feet went cold. Somehow he turned and looked back at the

mounds that had arisen by the trenches. Could he escape now? Raise up his gun?

In front of him was a sound like that of jackals and vultures when they pounce on dead bodies. Can iron pulleys and chains produce such a sound?

Tanks — they could indeed be tanks. Heavy, like black boars, came the tanks of the enemy. He wanted to scream, but it wouldn't come out. He fled, alone, and wildly. While running, he felt that suddenly either machine-gun fire would rip the rags off his back or a tank shell would blow the earth out from under him. But nothing like that happened. Those terrifying tanks of the Panzer Division just kept on advancing without any opposition. Bounding along like a seal, he dove into a trench. There a peculiar helplessness reigned. Again and again the men looked at their own insufficient weapons and then at those tanks. In the next line two soldiers tried over and over again to load a bazooka, but their hands were so sweaty and their fingers trembled so much that they were unable to. While continually talking incomprehensibly, the lips of the commander of the English company trembled badly and his face became pale and rough like zinc. Suddenly, he threw off his headphones and leaped up out of the trench. Outside, he turned and looked back for a minute. The line of tanks was advancing in a wall of dust, as if in a field somewhere hundreds of wild buffalo had come swooping down in a herd.

The company commander screamed like a monkey who had touched a live wire. The next moment he set out to the rear on all fours like a wild iguana. The two men put the bazooka down near their knees. Each looked at the other, and with the help of their guns they jumped up out of the trench. They hesitated

slightly and fled in the same way. After that, one-by-one, the soldiers got out and fled to the rear.

He, too, jumped out along with them. He thought that this time for sure shells or bullets would be sprayed on them. But that didn't happen. He wanted to look back, but he didn't have the courage. Crawling along on the sand like a frightened animal, he quickly fled. How fast a man can go even on all fours! He neither stopped nor hesitated. With his hips up in the air, he awkwardly propelled his body along with his hands and feet. And furthermore, he wasn't concerned if he was with someone or not or if he was going in the right direction or not. But the more he fled, the closer the sound of the tanks came.

His feet sank in the sand, and his palms were flayed on the rocks. He had no idea if his eyes were open or closed. He felt that despite everything, he wasn't stumbling. But just then, rushing forward, he fell down like a rooster with its head cut off. The left side of his face struck a stone. He felt a deep numbness, and then that part of his face disappeared. Feeling it, he realized that that side was there, but it had lost its sense of touch.

Perhaps he won't be able to run away now. But then what will happen? These bone-crushing tanks that are coming? Why are they advancing so silently? why don't they fire their shells? He turned himself over and raised himself up on his elbows. He jerked his rifle off his shoulder and shot his bullets in the direction of the line of tanks without looking at anything. After just a few shots, the tanks responded with a spray of machine-gun fire. Hot sand and tiny piece of stone covered him like a quilt.

It's okay. It's okay now. To escape, even to be a coward, requires some motivation. After he emptied another magazine, he crept along like a lizard toward the rear. But he couldn't rest at all. Knocking against rocks, bushes and sand he crept and tumbled below like a package someone had thrown away.

WHO KNOWS how long he had been unconscious, perhaps two hours, maybe two days. When he woke up, he felt that his body had dried up or that a hard outer covering, like the bark of a tree, had covered it. He lifted his neck and surveyed his body. Most of it was covered with sand. Before putting his head back down on the ground, he noticed something on his left that suddenly took the life out of him even more. He felt as if someone had implanted a warm needle in that area below the spine where what is left of the human tail sits.

A glistening, blue-black, coal-tar-like stream was flowing from his fingers to a hillock of sand a few yards away. It wasn't liquid tar. It was a convoy of ants, an innumerable swarm of ants that had big, wide jaws, protruding eyes, and huge heads. Like a film of liquid tar, that black swarm adhered to the middle knuckle of his fingers. Only to the second knuckle, not beyond, and nowhere else on his body. The reddish-yellow bones of his fingers could be seen glistening between the ants as they wobbled up and clung to the knuckle.

The hot needle that had penetrated the lower end of his spine made a hole and came up as far as the back side of his skull. Without moving his left hand, he pulled the bayonet out of his belt and deftly and forcefully struck at his fingers where the ants were attached. Once, once more. Scrambling for their lives, the ants fled. Lord knows what cowardly impulse made him lift up that hand with the cut

fingers and run away uncontrollably. He felt that that swarm of innumerable ants had become an army of terrifying tanks and was following him. He kept on going for some distance, dragging his feet in the sand and using the bushes to keep himself upright.

Finally, he arrived at a place where it seemed there wasn't sand beneath him but a bog of some sticky substance, and his feet were caught in it. After standing upright and panting for a few seconds, he slowly sat down on warm sand. As soon as he sat down, a sharp pain suddenly struck what was left of the ends of his fingers. It seemed that the palm itself had caught fire. And then, not just there, but his whole body seemed to be burning. All the scabs that had formed on the places where he had been scraped and cut popped open. The blood began oozing again. He shook once, and then suddenly bit his lip and burst into tears.

In an excruciatingly horrible voice, without any hesitation, he kept on crying shamelessly. Amongst the long grass trembling in the scorching heat and among the twigs of shrubs and bushes, his voice seemed like that of a stuck pig. The blood and the swelling caused by his injuries made his face horrible. Thick, dirty tears ran down it, but he didn't wipe them. Putting his cut hand on his knee and the other one, the one with the bayonet, on a clump of dry grass, he kept crying.

Just as a moving object in space, without the obstruction of the atmosphere, never stops, so too his crying had nothing to stop it. No hindrance, no obstruction, no assurance, no compassion, no command, no exception, nothing at all was there, and crying, he kept on crying. Finally, he himself became aware of his own presence. He heard the horrible sound of his own crying. And then he stopped.

Nothing was in front of him. Nothing was nearby. Before his eyes was only the constant repetition of tall grass and dusty bushes in the sandy soil. His throat was dry. Is there water somewhere? Water!

Again he was helpless. He wanted to put the bore of his rifle down his throat and shoot at that scraping that had begun because of lack of water. But he couldn't do that. Like a thirsty, half-dead horse, all he could do was repeatedly slide his tongue from his lips to his throat.

The torture continued, but the existence of another, the presence of another being, stopped his tongue.

A few yards to his right, near a thick stand of tall grass, an animal that had a shape somewhere between a lizard and a crocodile was slowly bending its lithic, scythe-shaped tail, and in front of it a young-looking, fat, swarthy snake was slowly but steadily creeping toward it. The tongue of the dwarf, crocodile-like, frightening beast was repeatedly coming out of its jaws with a peculiar excitement. It must have felt strangely ill at ease, because when it saw the snake approaching, its jaws opened slightly out of irritation, and it rose up a little on its two front legs and began to sway back and forth like a bewitched woman. When the snake came even closer, the beast's jaws were filled with rage and began moving as if they were going to open again, and a sound was audible, as if someone were frying prawns at the bottom of a well.

Getting nearer, the snake hissed like a cat and halted. Then, like a spring toy, it pulled back that part of itself that was near its neck.

Another wave of pain came over his slashed palm. Helplessly, he looked at

the lifeless flesh around the bones of his fingers and at the blood that dripped faster. He threw away his bayonet and tried to squeeze his wrist and stop the blood with his thumb. The blood came even faster. He felt that in the pulses of blood in his heart a worn-out soldier was staggering. He began to despair. Was he going to have to die here in this wilderness, his blood slowly oozing away while he witnessed the battle between these two horrendous creatures?

His vision was attracted to the animals again. A strange rush came over his staggering blood. The fat, dwarf snake had tightly constricted that disgusting animal as far as its forepaws, and with much patience and politeness, it was swallowing it from the tail up. Not chewing, swallowing. It was amazing that that crocodile-like animal was only baring its abominable teeth and panting dreadfully. No struggle, no resistance, no opposition, as if it were a bitch in heat making love. Slowly, with much care and effort, the snake kept swallowing it and expanding.

As he stared at this disgusting sight, suddenly his lungs lost their strength, and he himself began panting. It seemed as if a great many lizards had begun creeping around inside the muscles of his calves and thighs. He became excited. A strange thought came to him, or was it just an image or a feeling. It seemed that his wife — even though she had died years before — was flopping around like a naked fish in the lap of some dirty stranger, a dirty, horrible stranger, who perhaps wasn't himself.

That thought filled his veins with a fever. The three pieces of the naked picture each crept away separately like a centipede that had been cut into three

parts.

After having swallowed that crocodile-like animal, the snake awkwardly lay right there on the grass, worn-out and swollen. Silent. Despite the fact that its eyes were open, a peculiar membrane could be seen covering them.

A bestial enthusiasm seized him, and he picked up the bayonet he had let fall. Keeping his left hand up, he crawled on his knees near the resting snake. Seeing this huge living thing creeping toward it for no reason, the snake moved its mouth ever so slightly, turned towards him, and silently stared at him. He didn't stop but kept crawling toward the snake. He nimbly raised his bayonet hand and let it fall on the forehead of the eyelash-less, staring snake. The tip of the bayonet barely touched it before the exhausted snake pulled its hood back, opened its jaws and hissed like a cat.

He didn't give it an opportunity; he jerked the bayonet out of the ground and attacked again. The snake couldn't pull its hood back any farther. The bayonet pierced its forehead and stuck in the ground. Immediately after that, perhaps because of the severe wound the snake's tail had given him, he rolled over on the ground. The snake summoned its strength, pulled its head, along with the bayonet, free of the ground, and turning from side to side, penetrated the stand of grass.

Despite falling, he gave the snake no opportunity. He lifted up the heavy rifle with his right hand. He could have even fired it, but he didn't feel right about being such a coward. He pulled the magazine out of it, grabbed it by the bore, and awkwardly stumbling along amidst the grass, he attacked the retreating snake

with all his might. Because of the thick grass the full force of the blows didn't fall on the snake; nevertheless, it coiled around itself.

With the butt of his gun he gave the snake two more heavy blows. The bayonet loosened and fell out of the writhing snake, and this time the snake turned and pulled itself back. Smearred with blood and shredded, its jaws were grotesque. Most likely it couldn't see a thing, but it smelled the direction from which the blows of the gun butt were coming.

That must have been it. He wanted to get the snake out of the grass. But because he couldn't pull himself back fast enough, the thick snake swiftly sprang and struck his knees, and he fell on top of it. It wasted no time. With the powerful part of its tail it quickly bound his two feet as if it were keeping a donkey from running away by tying its legs together with a rope.

But he didn't panic. Like someone insane, the snake began striking its blind head with the torn jaws against his hips. Paying no attention to the snake's head, he crawled on his right elbow toward the stand of grass. The terrifying grip of the heavy snake became even tighter. His muscles were about to burst. But on the fourth or fifth try he reached it — the blood-smearred hilt of the bayonet. He pounced in the direction of his feet.

Three or four times he struck the wounded head that was awkwardly trying to grab the flesh of his haunches. Despite being cut all over, the snake did not loosen its grip. Instead of trying to sink its teeth into his flesh, it reared up and silently opened its jaws wide.

He hesitated a few moments and then struck it again several times with his

bayonet. The snake's head unraveled like a rag. It's bones had probably broken because it's hood hung quivering near its abdomen.

Now there was no need to rush. He pierced the swollen part of the snake with the tip of his bayonet and slit the entire length of its stomach.

The back of that abominable beast that looked like a cross between a lizard and a crocodile was right there.

He thrust his bayonet in a thin part of the snake and broke the bones there. The snake's grip slowly loosened. As soon as the fat part came away from his calves, he lengthened the slit. So far, that animal had remained silent, but suddenly it seemed to come awake, and it rolled out the snake's slit skin. It swiftly ran away some distance and then halted. It swayed a little back and forth and then held steady, high on all fours. A little later it fell on its side and twitched.

Freeing his knees from the snake, he approached the beast. A strange savagery, a madness, filled his eyes. For a short while he watched that terrifying, trembling beast, then he suddenly pounced on it. The bayonet's deep wounds split open the beast's filthy gut and the putrid entrails spilled out. With that same look, almost of contentment, the beast opened its jaws slightly, looked toward its assassin, and died.

When he had finished killing the beast, he picked up just his rifle and ran as if the swarm of ants were engulfing him. Like an awkward animal tangled up by the bushes and plants, he just kept on going, far, and for a long time, like a blind, beaten animal.

HE STOOD by the door for a while with his left hand in his pocket. Perhaps

he thought someone who recognized him would come and embrace him. But nothing happened. Brushing the fresh dust off his uniform and checking it over, he put his footlocker down. Slowly, he tapped on the door. At first, the door only opened a little, then it suddenly opened all the way. And the person who opened the door took a quick, deep breath that sounded almost like a scream.

He held out his right hand to hug to his chest the figure that appeared in the doorway, but a peculiar shyness made her turn her face away and run inside.

She's gotten this big? he thought, and then lifted up his footlocker and went inside. The commotion he had hoped for didn't happen. It was as if people were afraid of him, or — another thought came to him — like people when they speak softly in the presence of a sick person or vainly smile at the effects of the disease. That was how their reaction was toward him. A few times he stirred things up and tried to tell some war stories, but they merely smiled and then avoided him. It seemed to him that they were like . . . no, nothing had happened to them. He sat there silently, alarmed by an indefinable image, perhaps the image of wild, galloping buffalo, or the image of tanks, or lines of ants.

While lying down at night, those images would creep around his calves and come all the way up to his neck, and afraid, he would roll onto his other side. And when he changed sides, a strange, unnatural pounding would surround him, the type of pounding he heard when he was scrambling on all fours in front of the tanks.

The sound of his own feet as he fled along with the rest of the wildly retreating English army in the African desert sounded like the pulse in his calves.

A slight apprehension arose. A very slight one. He looked through the grill of his eyelashes — his young, beautiful daughter, her arms glistening like that snake in the desert, was setting aside a glass of water for him.

“Listen,” he said, as he saw her about to leave. The sound of his voice made it clear that he was frightened.

He smiled. Strangely, she did, too. Then, like the beast in the desert, that was being swallowed, he opened his jaws slightly and panted. Just like that, without a sound, he stopped his panting, like that beast did, or perhaps out of a sense of frustrated rage.

The girl stopped.

“My legs hurt.” He didn’t know how or when he said that. He lay there wrapped up in that hideous frustration, and the girl, trembling, began massaging the muscles of his calves and thighs with her warm, smooth fingers.

Then suddenly that again — that feeling of a warm needle penetrating below his coccyx. Her smooth, warm fingers felt like the ants of the desert, and that swarm of ants that flowed like liquid tar was grazing on his legs.

His uncontrollably trembling hands grabbed the girl’s body. He felt like he had the bayonet in his hands. In order to feel that even more of his courage had returned, he held her down in his arms and pressed close to her. The cotton over her warm breasts made his injured hand feel the coolness of spring. He pressed to her even closer.

Then he suddenly felt that the tail end of that snake in the desert had entangled his legs again. Caught against the girl’s smooth, exposed thighs, his knees

began shaking like an animal's, and like an animal he became naked. He ripped apart the girl's clothes as he had the skin of the snake. He stuck his lips and teeth against hers. Like some mangy dog, he panted for a long time.

When he went flaccid and lay at her side, she ran away. Arriving at the door, she trembled and fell in a pile on her knees. Sobs pierced the darkness.