

# The Reflections

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**p 7-10**

I love my secrets. They understand me better than anyone and they keep their lips shut. Our most essential secrets remain closed even to us. We knock at their doors but they rarely answer. We peer through their keyholes or put an ear to their planks. What is it we hear, what do we see? Not much more than sighs, footsteps in the hall, stifled sobs, a glimpse of an ankle, a hand scratching incomprehensible prophecies into the plaster of a wall: mene tekkel.

I love waking and watching the day, no matter if it's grey or sunny, light up behind the ochre curtain at the attic window as if the world is emerging from the darkness in thick strokes of oil paint, transformed, with no other goal than to change colour. The city stands up out of the bath of the night, takes a proffered towel and puts on its costume of bricks and street patterns, of duty rotas and opening times. The light hauls itself over the ridge beams and slips away, fugitive, across the pantiles. Shutters are rolled up, exposing shop windows full of mannequins motionless as a daydream without denouement. Vendors hang the fresh daily papers to dry in kiosks, in the sour smell of their ink.

There ought to be a history of sunlight, of sunrises and sunsets, an inventory of twilights, of noontimes, eventides and those nameless hours between three and five. A history of the angles at which the light shines on our cities and calls down the seasons upon us – an incomplete, endless encyclopaedia of what thousands of windowpanes once reflected. It should also be a history of the bodies we've known and that have known us, in the darkness, in dazzling midday light, open and naked, yet which still remain secrets to one another. Rarely have civilizations ventured upon such refinement.

I ought to tell of your hand, reaching over the edge of the bed for my fingers as they grope for a hold between your bed and mine when the nurses come yet again to squeeze the sick broth out of my body. I feel the pain grind right into my backbone. The groaning that rebounds off the ceiling and annoys the others is mine, but so bestial a thing that no one would call it his own.

‘Stick it, my friend.’ The first words you address to me. Your hand closes around mine.

I look at the shaft of sunlight shining through the high attic window onto your pyjama jacket; you've lifted yourself half-upright in the sheets.

‘Stick it, my friend. Steady as she goes...’

I didn't know that being called back out of nothingness could cause such godawful pain, as if the laws of nature rebelled now they'd met with defiance. I fixed upon the grip of your hand around

mine and on the square of azure in the top window.

We must have ended up next to each other by chance that afternoon. It shamed me to know you would hear me cry out.

I think you saw my fear when the nurses took off my bandages and helped me to turn on my side. I was drowsy from the morphine they'd given me, but I knew it would do little good.

You must have noticed the sweat breaking cold on my brow. My body knew what I was in for; our bodies aren't stupid. I was relieved that a screen hid the rest of my bed from you.

I could see it was an effort for you to stay with me like that. One of your arms was bandaged. You must have been in an awkward position.

'Stick it, my friend.'

I clench my teeth while nurses' hands knead the fluid out of my seams – they dab me dry with cloths.

I look in turn at the high window, at the impassive blue of the sky and into your chestnut-brown eyes.

I hear the murmur of the sea and above it the distant roar of ordnance that seems, however strange this may sound, to throw a protective dome over the barracks, an illusion of safety.

'Matthew,' you say when it's over, just before you let go of my hand.

'Edgard,' I say.

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**p 22-29**

It was the birds that told me something was imminent, the song, high and shrill, of larks rising up out of the glistening expanse of earth and water that looked so peaceful in the light of August. They flew up in thick clusters, one after another, as if the breeze was tossing rags this way and that. Could they feel vibrations in the earth that the soles of our feet failed to register? Their warbling cut through my eardrums. Then they fell silent, and I knew it was too late.

I woke in a world of clarity, with windows that showed a strip of creamy white sand, a band of sea, now narrow, now broad, and above it clouds or a blue sky.

I didn't mind that it was rarely quiet on the wards. I liked the rustle of the nurses' skirts, the thumping tread of their shoes on the floorboards and the mutter of the kettles on the stoves. Their spouts, and the mouths of the coffee cans, sometimes produced a gentle whistle, although mostly they settled into a simmer that sounded like prayer. They resembled nurses in miniature, some plump, others slim, images of saints or small household idols that watched over us and tried to quieten the roar on the horizon with their murmuring.

I had no need of them to rock me to sleep. The rumble in the distance was enough, dull, deep, in slow waves. Only when it grates and grinds, when the leaden growl breaks open and shrieks and clatters, do you know that the war is close by.

The smell of hospitals comforts me. Sensing yourself enfolded in the odour of ether, soap, clean linen – to this day it evokes a calm happiness in me. I'm content for heaven to be a ward. We can recover there from the obscure malady of our existence.

The nurses were angels. I realize that expression means little and they didn't busy themselves with hymns or harps. A strict order governed their corner of paradise. Their eyes saw everything, their hands detected the slightest fever or chill. They were hundreds of Argus' eyes and antennae belonging to a single huge creature, a gentle yet resolute white being that constantly

observed us, handled us, freshened and pondered us. It was the sisters, their hands, their fingers, their look and their soul, ever alert, that saved the most lives.

Their voices, when I was brought in amid the drone of the engines, the groans and the pouring rain: 'What's *he* been up to? Where did you find *him*?'

I thought: if I roll my tunic and trousers in the mud, if I soak them in mud, and I'm lucky enough to have sun, they'll dry out, they'll cake hard, they'll hold off the air and the dirt. But I hadn't considered the nights, the cold that crept up out of the ground. 'Never seen a lump like that before...'

A man's voice: 'He's lucky, poor thing, truly lucky...'

A woman's voice, uneasy: 'How long has he been out there?'

The ceiling lamps swung and went on and off, light and darkness, darkness and light. I asked myself: what on earth is that, what's happening? Until I realized it was my eyelids opening and closing, and my head tossing to the motion of the stretcher bearers.

'He caught the impact on his right side.'

'That's one consolation, surely.'

'For his heart at least.'

'We used to have decent wars, with decent wounds...'

A nun with a long wimple, I thought it was, appeared in the light: 'How long...'

Fingers tapped my cheeks, the nun and the lamp swayed. 'Two nights? Three?' 'How long...?'

'It's no use, Maggie dear...'

'Haul 'im onto the table, chaps. Bring on the scissors. *Le ciseaux, vite!*'

The ceiling sank, lifted, sank; the lamplight seemed to swallow me up and release me again. I felt the hard planks of the table-top in my back, an exhortation, a gruff order: you will live.

A second nun, sharp nose, pointed ears, Anubis, came to hover in front of the glow like a solar eclipse and she raised her eyebrows when a ranting, apparently from my own mouth, rose to greet her. No words but hunks, dried gouts of blood, earth, gibberish.

'Quiet now.' She pulled my fingers loose from the textile of her apron. 'Leave go, my lad. You're safe here.'

She gave me morphine. Her thumb and forefinger pressed the grains between my lips.

An animated nest of hands, groping hands, investigative fingers, hemmed me in. My feet seemed weightless as I felt myself being relieved of my boots and there was that flood of warmth, more and more warmth, as the scissors opened my trouser legs, my sleeves, and the hands didn't so much help me out of my clothes as peel off the fabric, stiff with earth and spilled blood.

'Poor kid. Nasty bit of work the Fritzes did on 'im.'

The stern nun, though, the pointed one, Anubis, shook her head and without taking her eyes off me said that the smallest wounds were usually the nastiest, death is not demanding. 'A keyhole, that's all he needs.'

I started to shiver, the first time I ever shivered from heat, I thought in my haze of morphine. Even the scissors felt warm as they slid down my legs and tugged at my trousers.

'He's cold as ice...'

'Wash him clean.'

The water felt cold. The morphine sent waves of repose through my body. The lamps swung serenely. I tried to push the nurse's hands away, to keep the cold water at a distance.

'No need for prudery, son. Nothing there Nurse Pyke hasn't seen before...'

Anubis disapproved of the joke but said nothing.

'No stomach wounds, it would seem,' she concluded, turning her head away. Her profile nodded a couple of times in space. 'Two dead, over there in the corner. No time to wash them. We'll do that later.'

A door opened, then closed again.

'A stomach? A knee? A head? I haven't had a head in weeks. I demand my head!'

'I've got a very interesting hip, doctor,' Anubis whispered grumpily.

'I never thought I'd ever hear you say that, sister.' He rubbed his hands. 'What are we waiting for?'

She sniffed. 'He's too cold for your table.'

'Warm him up.'

His footfall died away, the door shut.

Fingers pushed yet more narcotic grains between my lips. The walls, the beams, the lamps undulated. Hands pressed wads of cloth to my body, laid hot water bottles next to my ribs.

'It seems at least this one will keep his leg.'

'Thank God for that. Such a drag, legs.'

It was the rain that first told me I was safe – although that didn't yet mean saved. Not the cold haze of vapour and droplets that had soaked my clothes but the rain that murmured to the tarpaulin enclosing us in the tray of the truck; perhaps our cradle, perhaps our grave, but safe.

With every bump or hole in the road, and the road was nothing but bumps and holes, the planks threw us into the air like dice, and every time they caught us moans rose up. I don't know whether I wailed myself. I wasn't just one body, I was a tangle.

From time to time the tarpaulin flapped aside, revealing a curtain of rain, the flanks of other trucks, rows of houses, drowned fields, artillery, the heads and shoulders of men in the roadside verge.

They knew there was no time to lose, those who had found us. You could almost feel their silent apologies with every jolt or jerk of the vehicle and the cries that reverberated in the tarpaulin casket behind them. But there was no time to lose. I felt the tangle dying around me. I was a mass of arms and legs and balls and lungs and throbbing intestines and rushing blood.

There is something mystical about intense pain, something transcendent. I miss it sometimes. It has grown too doggedly loyal to me, my pain, when it rises in my seams. It's no longer shared, it no longer flows over into another man's pain.

The nurses always grew nervous when all at once groans arose from one bed and then from the next, and yet another body began to roll back and forth in the sheets. Within a minute the ward became a chorus of wails and lamentations, made rhythmical by the anxious drumming of the sisters' heels on the floor.

They didn't know where to start. The white creature with a hundred Argus' eyes and the perpetually pricked-up ears was perplexed. They could understand individual groans but not this collective howl. They went to the window to see if it was the moon. Or was thunder on its way, the air filling with vapid moisture?

But it wasn't the moon or the weather, it was our rite of pain, when one body threw off the dressings of language and, followed by another, and another, and another, returned to the state of the world before there were words.

No one knew exactly why that song sometimes rose or why it subsided, not even we knew, let alone whichever God we prayed to, whichever abominable name. Relief flowed through the white creature when our moaning stopped and in the air the distant din, the breaking waves and the seagulls' mocking laugh had free play again.

I felt the tangle that surrounded me, that I was knitted into, dying under the tarpaulin. Somewhere

in the half-light a foot grew cold, a chest cavity stopped breathing. More and more cumbersome dead weight jolted upwards and landed back with a thud, until I could hear the air scraping through only my own throat.

Thrumming of rain, rattling planks, the noise of the engine and somewhere in the now quiet tangle someone moaned softly. That was Pierre. I recognized the timbre of his voice and his stifled groans, even then – ah, always such restraint, that boy.

He tells me I started to sing, or something like it. Snatches of melodies that tried to wrest themselves free of my moans.

‘I didn’t understand much of it, *patron*,’ he says. ‘*À toi mon coeur, à toi mes bras...* Something like that.’

As for me, I only recall that I thought: I must let him know I’m still here. That I sang surprises me.

‘The rest is too Catholic to repeat,’ he usually adds.

When he fills the bath for me and I take off my dressing gown, he always averts his eyes. And when he helps me to stand up out of the tub and puts a towel around me he acts as if he doesn’t notice my body. Before I know it, I’m wearing clean underwear and he’s knotting my dressing gown round my waist again.

‘Spick and span, *chef!*’ he says then, in casual tones.

He comes at night. He waits until there’s no longer a strip of light skimming the carpet on the landing. Then I hear him come in. He unbuttons his shirt and steps out of his slacks.

His throat always smells of soap, always that scent of soap as he creeps in between the sheets beside me.

I like to look at his throat as he dries me. I have a weakness for throats, one of those inconspicuous intimate places on a man’s body, between the earlobe and the collar bone, where just beneath the skin a frail artery throbs.