FLANDERS LITERATURE

Still Bread to Eat

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p 32-39

The trembling soldier

The half soldier is dead.

Daelemans didn't even want to start on him.

'Look at that,' he groaned. I wasn't sure if he was talking about the soldier or about Yolande who had hit the floor.

He stormed up to the stretcher-bearers and gave them dog's abuse. I was too busy with Yolande and had no idea what he was on about. I had filled a bowl with water, moistened a clean cloth and dabbed her forehead. She opened her eyes and smiled when she saw me, but then pulled a face when she heard Daelemans grunting.

'Calm down,' I whispered.

Daelemans is a bastard. He thinks he's bigger than God the Father and hates it if the grim reaper steals a march on him.

'What do you expect me to do with him,' he roars. 'How can I save half a body? Bloody idiots! From now on, pick up all the pieces first before you bring people in!' He points outside to the front where it's been rumbling and thundering all day long, like a storm that refuses to pass. Bombs and bullets whistled overhead, hit their targets or missed. Grenades exploded, sometimes far in the distance, sometimes nearby, close enough to make us all dive for cover. Everyone except Daelemans. He would just keep on shouting and screaming and pointing at every corner of the hospital. As if the war was an orchestra and he was conducting it.

I hate the man. He's an animal.

'Bring me that one,' he shouted. He pointed at a soldier who had been waiting for a while on a chair next to the barrel. The barrel with wheels was where amputated limbs were tossed: arms, thighs, lower legs. On days like today, the barrel was full to the brim with bleeding and rotting human

flesh. Yolande and me don't see it anymore. It's as if we've taken pills that make us immune to all the horror. We even laugh at it. 'Look, that one's waiving at us. What a sweetheart. Look, that soldier's giving us the finger. Ungrateful bastard!' But when I dump the barrel's contents into a hole in the ground that same evening I cry and throw up.

Just like the trembling soldier.

Odette let him in half an hour ago and made it clear he would have to wait. The dying get priority. She didn't say that, of course, but she thought it. Anyway, he looked the picture of health. Trembling wasn't an illness.

The soldier looked around, at the ceiling, the walls, the improvised doors. He ignored the barrel at his side. Yolande and me were waiting for him to catch sight of its contents. We kicked each other, as if our pet hamsters were in competition at the fairground live animal stall: first across the line wins a major prize. He looked into the barrel, out of the corner of his eye at first. You could see he wanted to look away but couldn't. He threw up and his trembling got worse. First prize!

'Bring him here!' Daelemans bellowed. 'But first wipe his mouth.'

I wiped away the vomit from his mouth and chin with the other side of the cloth I had used to dab Yolande's forehead. Tille and Yolande helped the soldier to his feet. He glanced left and right in a panic, as if he was being abducted by Germans.

'Easy does it,' said Tille.

'We're off to see the doctor,' said Yolande, as if she was talking to a child.

They accompanied the trembling soldier to the hospital bed where Daelemans was waiting, snorting impatiently.

For the first time that day it was quiet. No stretcher-bearers, no nurses coming to ask Daelemans or Sister Justine for help.

Tille pushed the soldier onto the edge of the bed. He reminded me of one of those three-fold pre-cut greetings cards.

Daelemans stood in front of him, lifted his chin, examined his neck, fingered his jaw, and pulled his eyelids open so wide that I thought for a moment his eyeballs might pop out and bounce across the floor. Daelemans placed his hand on the soldier's shoulders and squeezed them, as if they were old friends.

The soldier said nothing, just trembled. Daelemans asked if there was anything wrong with his legs. The soldier seemed to have to think about the question at first. Maybe he no longer knew what legs were.

'Missing home?' asked Daelemans, without a trace of ridicule. Yolande and me exchanged a glance. Was Daelemans actually concerned? The soldier appeared to stop trembling for a moment, peered up at Daelemans through his eyebrows and looked him in the eye. Then he nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'Badly,' he said. 'My friends.' He rummaged deep in his jacket pocket, fished out a photo and showed it Daelemans.

Yolande, Tille and me peered over his shoulder to get a look. We saw a buxom blonde with skin whiter than the white edge of the photo. She was wearing a blouse with puffed sleeves and gaudy polka dots. She was smiling, but there was also a sadness in her eyes. The soldier joined us as we stared into his girlfriend's cheerless eyes.

'The photo was taken just before I got my call-up papers,' he said.

I nodded and looked away.

'You've stopped trembling,' said Daelemans. The soldier looked at me and then back at Daelemans.

'What did you say?'

Daelemans slapped the photo out of the soldier's hand and it landed on the floor behind the bed. The soldier looked at Daelemans and then at the bed behind him where the photo had landed.

'You forgot to tremble,' Daelemans sneered, his mouth barely an inch from the soldier's face.

The soldier shook his head, looked behind him a second time and then back at Daelemans. His Adam's apple bounced up and down like a nervous animal. He was astonished that the doctor could be so cruel. Almost as cruel as the hours of waiting in the trenches, in the pouring rain, with lice crawling all over you. Almost as cruel as the battle itself and the sight of your comrades being torn apart by shrapnel in front of you... He had stopped trembling and I could see what he was thinking.

I dived behind the bed, where Yolande and Tille were on their knees, giggling, searching for the photo.

'Where did that fat cow go?' Yolande whispered into Tille's hair.

'Deserters? Firing squad!' Daelemans barked.

'B... But...' the soldier stammered.

'Get out of my sight, coward!' Daelemans spat the words at him. He despised battle-weary soldiers who feigned illness or wounded themselves to be able to calm down a little in hospital or be sent home. But his anger was even worse when he felt powerless. Soldiers with nervous disorders were the nail in his coffin. He didn't know what to do with them. You could almost see the relief in his eyes when a badly wounded soldier landed on his table. Daelemans liked clarity: bleeding gunshot wounds, the devastation of a grenade in the belly, chest or head. He liked an immediate diagnosis and a quick patch up, so that the soldiers could be deployed again without too much delay. 'Back to the front line, my friend,' he would say, a cold smile on his lips. A slap on the back, on the jacket the nurses had washed and deloused in the meantime.

'But my head,' said the soldier. He took it in his hands as I emerged from behind the bed.

'What's wrong with your head?'

'It hurts.'

'A little headache, eh?' Daelemans hissed.

The soldier grabbed his chest. ‘My heart.’

‘Is it still beating?’ Daelemans asked.

The soldier stared at him in bewilderment, repeated the question in his head for a couple of beats, but still didn’t know what to make of it.

‘If your heart’s stopped beating you’re in serious trouble,” Daelemans laughed. ‘Now get out of here.’

I gave the soldier the photo of the girl.

Daelemans tore it from his hand, rolled it into a ball and tossed it into the barrel with the limbs, blood, bandages and pus.

‘Get out!’ he yelled.

A rattling sound gurgled from the half soldier who was still lying in the corner of the barrack, something between a groan and a cough. He lifted his remaining hand as if to catch the ball of paper. His hand fell on the wooden floor beside the stretcher. A second sigh escaped from another part of his body.

‘Dead,’ Daelemans muttered. ‘What did you expect?’

Together with the two stretcher-bearers on night duty, I empty the barrel into a small crater left in the ground next to our barrack by a stray projectile.

‘I’ll take care of it,’ I say to them as they stand at the ready, shovel in hand.

‘You sure?’

I nod and start to shovel earth onto the human sludge. I catch sight of a tiny white ball surrounded by flesh, soil and blood. I kneel and scoop it up. I unfold it on my lap to flatten the creases. The girl’s face is notched and jagged. It fits the smile and the anxiety in her eyes. I fold the photo into four equal parts and pop it into my apron pocket. As I fill the pit with soil I picture meeting the trembling soldier after the war and giving him back the photo. He’s beside himself with joy.

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Wippe here we come

They had arrived at Aunt Kee’s house in Wippe.

Small, thought Simon. Knowing it was to be their hiding place made it seem half its actual size. Simon put down the cart and rubbed his hands together. He felt blisters forming. His upper arms

trembled. He straightened his back and cracked his neck a couple of times. He sensed his father was looking at him, but didn't know why. He blew his nose into his hand.

'Simon, bah, stop that,' said his mother.

Simon wondered whether they had brought handkerchiefs with them, but didn't ask. He didn't want to remind his mother of what they had left behind at home.

Smoke spiralled up from Aunt Kee's chimney. Simon thought he could already smell the soup. But Aunt Kee's house always smelled of soup, even when there was nothing on the stove. Father had to knock hard four times before Aunt Kee dared to peek through a chink in the door. Her face was the colour of stale bread. Simon realised she hadn't been outside in a while. Her eyes had to get used to the light. She cupped her hand over her eyebrows, focused her pupils and asked what they wanted. In the meantime she peered nervously right and left.

'A good afternoon to you too,' father laughed, diffidently.

Aunt Kee disappeared into the house. She didn't open the door wide as she had in the past, just left it slightly ajar.

'What do you mean good afternoon, there's nothing good about it,' she said.

Mother was still in the cart, under a blanket.

Simon pushed open the door. It was pitch dark inside. He blinked. There was nothing on the stove. On the table he saw what looked at first like a cat, but the flames in the hearth flickered and danced and made the things in the room appear to move. It wasn't a cat, it was a loaf of bread. That reassured him. Not that he was afraid of cats, not even rats, but bread reminded him of better times. 'As long as there's still bread to eat, everything's fine,' said Nelle's father in his head. He was talking about his shop, of course, and not the war, but the memory did him good all the same.

Simon looked back at his father who was still outside as if he didn't quite trust the situation.

But Aunt Kee shouted that she hadn't lit the stove to heat the street. 'And not for the kraut either!' She slammed her mouth shut before the last word was out, so fast that Simon heard her gums clack together. Her lack of teeth, wide mouth and wafer-thin lips made her face look like a wrinkled apple, the two halves of which had been poorly matched. Aunt Kee actually looked extremely funny. He almost had to laugh.

Father helped mother out of the cart. She kept the blanket wrapped around her, in spite of the warmth inside the house. She crumpled in Aunt Kee's arms and quietly sobbed. Aunt Kee stroked mother's head, loosened her long hair and arranged it carefully on her back, as if she thought that such beautiful locks weren't meant to be hidden.

Who cares about the war.

'There, there, child,' said Aunt Kee soothingly.

But it only made my mother sob even harder.

‘They’re all over the place,’ said father in mother’s stead.

‘Tell me something new,’ said Aunt Kee. She let mother go and took the kettle from the stove, filled it with water from the pump without saying a word, and returned it to the heat.

‘It’s a miracle you made it this far,’ she said with her hand on the kettle.

If you only knew, Simon thought.

They had run in to the Germans in the woods near Elverdinge. The pickelhauben galloped past them on huge, shiny horses. The first tugged at the reins. His horse reared up for a second and neighed. The other five or six horsemen galloped on. The horseman asked Dré in German where we they were going.

Dré said nothing for a couple of moments.

Simon broke into a sweat. His heart pounded in his chest. He wondered whether it could be heard in the silence between the bombs and pinched the handles of the cart so hard a shooting pain ran from his wrist to his armpit. He refused to set the cart down, because it would have looked as if he had done it for the German. He would rather have died on the spot. Simon wanted to look round. To give his mother a reassuring glance, but nothing would move, he was paralysed from his belly to his scalp. Don’t let them see you’re afraid, he thought. He was worried for a moment that he had said it out loud.

The horseman stared down at him.

Simon gulped painfully. It felt as if his Adam’s apple had wedged itself somewhere in the middle of his neck. The sweat tingled on his upper lip. All the horror stories he had heard joined forces in a single thought. What would happen to mother if the Germans were to shoot father and son? The Germans had maltreated women in Mechelen and Antwerp, beaten them and raped them. He closed his eyes at the last word, if only for an instant. But the German soldier noticed it.

‘Müde?’ he asked.

Simon understood that he meant tired. He nodded, without really intending to.

The horseman asked something else. Simon didn’t understand, but his father apparently did. He pointed and said something in German. It didn’t sound anything like the soldier’s German, but it still filled Simon with pride. He understood aunt and Wippe and visit. They were on their way to visit an aunt in nearby Wippe, that was all.

The soldier nodded.

We’re going to get through this, Simon thought. But the German jumped from his horse and walked slowly towards the cart.

Mother started to pray out loud..

The soldier had a grin on his face and he said something to her, something like ‘don’t be afraid’ or ‘easy does it’. Whatever it was it didn’t sound unfriendly.

Simon was still unable to look over his shoulder, but he felt in his arms that his mother had changed position. He presumed that the soldier had checked what was hidden under the blanket, beside my mother, some crochet work, and a great deal of anxiety. Mother kept praying until the soldier got back on his horse.

'Be careful,' he said to Simon. At least that's what it sounded like. He pointed to the ground, to the muddy tracks of previous carts.

Simon nodded.

The soldier shouted something at the horse's head, slapped it on its rump and rode off.

Simon, father and mother watched him depart until the woods filled with silence. They stood motionless for several minutes without saying a word. As if the grim reaper had just passed with scythe in hand and had spared them by sheer accident. There they stood, until one by one they started to look around, to satisfy themselves they were still alive, in the woods, not on heaven or hell or purgatory or wherever fate might have hounded them.

Father nodded and said hoarsely: 'Let's get a move on. Wippe here we come.'

'Wippe here we come,' Simon repeated with a sigh of relief. As if they had no other choice now that the German horseman knew where they were going, but also nothing more to fear.