

## The Heart Escapes

I count the wormholes in a cluster — twelve in all. The beam supporting the dugout roof is riddled with them, stoic little buggers. Dank air wheezes in and out of my chest. My heart pounds against my ribs. It wants to disown me, to batter its way to freedom.

Machine gun fire is relentless. My brain detects an odd kind of music in the noise, the sort of cacophony that might result were the war-God mars to join forces with a modern composer. Cymbals, drums, and discordant strings combine into a symphony depicting the fiery, red planet. Somewhere in the molten depths of the earth there are creatures who might find beauty in the music. It's only soft flesh and warm blood that recoils, and it's we poor creatures who are at fault. The noise merely tells of the universe as it is; the human race is an aberration of unnatural sensitivity. The war has been sent upon us as a purge, to burn us to a cinder so that creation might forget nature's latest folly; so it might return to the sanity of rock, fire and thunder.

The beam shakes and dust rises from one of the sandbags. The *boom* comes on the heels of the vibrations, the sound delay revealing a distance of three or four hundred yards. A little grey cloud of dust spreads itself — a grimy, desperate last hope such as Wordsworth might have envisioned in a deathbed

nightmare. The bard would have found no white puffy cumulous here, no celestial rays kissing the daffodils.

Charles stirs on his bunk beside me. Without turning I can sense that he is coiled. He breathes sharply.

“It must be close to the time,” he says.

It’s a statement of fact. I know this, yet a wave of hot anger sweeps through me, prickling the hairs on my neck, burning the skin beneath. Some time ago the lizard of cowardice crawled into my brain and attached itself there. I still can’t shake myself free.

I turn on my bunk to find him perched on the end of his own bed like a robin redbreast sitting on a fence. I shoot him a look.

“Sorry old man,” he says, “didn’t know you were still sleeping.”

His face — cheeks like fresh peaches, blue eyes clear and trusting — takes me into a whole other world.

“How long have you been out here now, Charles?”

“A week and two days.”

“You’re excited by this, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” He looks down, fingering his bayonet.

Charles thinks I’m accusing him, but my anger is already gone. Nothing lasts here and, in any case, Charles’s features have merged with those of his

sister. Or is it the other way around? Has memory remolded Louisa's face into that of her younger brother? Minutes are so lugubriously drawn-out here that it's impossible to trust either the future or the past. Both are as remote as dinosaurs.

There's a crash; everything shakes, dust rising again.

"Seems so close," Charles says eagerly, "like we were under bombardment ourselves. How could Jerry survive all that?"

"Let's hope he doesn't," I answer, urbane and world-weary. But a knot of fear tightens in my stomach. This is an old sensation, last felt in the first weeks in the trenches when my nerves hung like the wire demarcating our territory, when the whistle and boom seemed to comprise a heart-jolting overture to some great explosion. But the cataclysm did not come. There were only dribs and drabs; hunger, dirt, and diarrhea; stretchers for a few; darkness and waiting for the rest. And I have grown used to these things. This dugout has been home for so long, I can't imagine life without its protection. Now I am on the brink of losing my foul cocoon.

"What do you think will happen, Simon?"

"I don't know."

Surprised at my calm voice, I let my back rest upon my bunk and my imagination inhale the cigarette smoke I crave. Tobacco hasn't arrived at our trench even though we were promised it would before this morning. Is this a

good omen? A denied last request surely means reprieve. My bunk trembles and the distant bombardment intensifies — a monster’s belch repeating four times, five times, six times, seven . . . I glance at the disabled alarm clock on the floor; its spread-eagled black arms say five past seven.

Turning, I swing my legs, boots meeting the loose planks. I beat down my uniform. Charles shadows my movements, dropping from his bunk, standing, and checking his rifle one last time.

“So this is it, old man,” he says, facing me, an odd expression on his face; his cheeks are pinker than usual and his pale eyes are alive with some emotion I suppose must be fear. *Please don’t ask me for comfort.*

“Listen,” he stutters, moving forward half a step. I find myself backing off, eyes blinking as though confronted by the sun’s glare. This boy is at odds with everything in the world I now inhabit—the smell of the earth, the damp, and the constant booming; Charles is a flower growing from a grenade.

“I don’t want to talk out of turn, Simon, but I just know this is it. You’re going to get out of this. This is victory,” his lips break into a timorous smile and his eyes flash, just as Louisa’s used to do. “I can sense it.”

My hand gropes for the beam and I grip the dry wood. It isn’t fear the boy is feeling. It’s concern, pity even—*for me*. He supposes it is *I* who most needs to “get out of this,” not he. What has he seen? How have I betrayed myself?

I know he has seen my shame because his expression alters. He gives me an encouraging smile.

“It must have been hell,” he says more softly, “all this time here. I can’t even imagine.”

“Not at all,” I blurt, eyes stinging, “let’s get ready, Baxter.”

Charles holds my gaze for a second before breaking off and stooping towards his bunk. The look he has just given me is one of Louisa’s, an exchange of sympathy that, despite its businesslike swiftness, is as deep and reliable as a fjord. The Baxters — all of them, it seems — are practical, efficient, wise, and well-meaning. Charles, true to form, has taken even my rebuff with understanding.

He attaches his officer’s kit to his uniform. The tug, rattle, and clip of this procedure bring me back to the preparations before a cricket match. Charles excelled as a batsman at school. I did not, but being two years older and his sister’s suitor, it doesn’t diminish me in his eyes. I was always the adult world into which he desired entry. It seems I am still drawing on that account.

An improbable fragrance — rich and wholesome like leaves in early autumn — wafts into the dugout. There is so little alive above us, just acres of drying mud, but some genius spirit in the breeze has conjured the magical scent

as a subtle torture. It brings me back to September before the war when I fell like a spinning seed into Louisa's world.

Louisa Baxter and her tribe inhabit some golden part of nature most of us only glimpse. They are always at play, always teasing, but never unkind. They conjure visions of languorous days and endless green meadows. It was a shock to find through Louisa's letters, and through Charles, that even now they have not changed.

The world has been through fire. Lush meadows have withered. The heavens have darkened to falling steel. But the Baxters' innocence is intact, only the slight nibble of worry around a vision of pure virtue. For me their soft decency is unbearable — a grotesque practical joke. I have never felt as foul as during the last nine days during which Charles Baxter has been with the platoon. I have never felt so mocked by memory. "*I can't even imagine,*" Charles said, an infinite kindness in his eyes. But the chief of all horrors is that his words tug now me closer to him; they make me almost believe in those days before the war.

I pick up my own kit and turn to the dugout wall as I strap it on. My fingers are trembling, not in fear, but in a dreadful hope. *You're going to get out of this. This is victory.* Can it be? Are we really going to aim a fatal blow this very day, and come out into the light?

My sinews tighten. I turn to Charles. “You know the drill. Help the men out. Follow through with the last. As soon as we establish channels through the wire, catch me up.”

Charles nods. “Everything is ready.” He stands as though to attention, jaw clenching.

A soft breeze teases my earlobe. A sparrow rises into the blue above the smoking craters. It flaps its wings then circles, panicky in the silence.

“Going to be a walkover, boys, piece of cake,” the warrant officer beneath me mumbles. My feet tremble on the ladder, not so anyone would notice, I know. It’s freedom that scares me; freedom and hope.

My lips pinch the whistle and glance to the right, watching for the signal. Far down the line, almost on the horizon, a flag waves. A short piercing blast reaches me. I blow also — a fractured note from me — and clamber over the ridge, head down, still distrusting the calm. Stooping, I haul up the next man. The dull rumble of boots scoops up the rest of the silence. As far as the eye can see men crawl out of the trenches like overloaded ants. Ahead, in no man’s land, the advance line is already moving. A dull boom and the rattle of machine gun; our cover fire has commenced on schedule.

Charles is at the next ladder, giving each soldier a haul then a pat on the back as if encouraging them on their way to face a fast bowler. A private adjusts his heavy gear and starts marching forward.

I turn and follow the line of soldiers and warrant officers, embarrassed to be behind. I catch up at the wire. Two privates — Jarrot and Smith — lower a plank over the mesh. I try to help but my hands feel alien to myself, silent betrayers, as they touch the wood. The mesh springs back at first but is flattened as first Jarrot then Smith march through into no man's land. A sergeant and more privates follow.

Silent, unnoticed, I go after — an officer ghost.

Smoke rises ahead. Farther off, just before the enemy lines, our mortars explode. Great plumes of earth fly into the air like the leaves of some monstrously outsized crop. Machine guns rattle and there is the *ping* of metal against stone. One of the men halts and makes a pantomime gesture with his arms, entreating a non-existent audience. He remains for a moment, a scarecrow silhouetted by the smoke. Then he folds in upon himself, sinking to the earth. Another merely drops to the ground as though tripped. Once fallen, he remains — a kit bag and empty coat.

The machine guns I took to be ours, are theirs. Repeat fire echoes like laughter across the battlefield.



Something coils inside me. Men are falling all around me, string-less puppets in the drifting smoke. Ahead I see clumps of soldiers gathering at the enemy wire, like a congregation awaiting entry on the church steps. Then I notice some are hanging, attached to the wire. Is Charles Baxter one of these? My pace, already slow, slackens. *It isn't working*, says the part of me that still thinks like a soldier, *but you cannot retreat. You must push forward.*

*Go back* comes another, more intimate voice. Thick smoke spirals, bitter ashes creeping up my nostrils. *Retreat and crawl inside your tunnel, muffle your ears, and shelter your eyes. Become the lizard creature you are.*

I shrug off the lizard of cowardice and fix my bayonet, my heart drumming an overture to battle. There will be a counter attack; it is certain. The silence was a trap and our men are exposed. I have hung back disgracefully, but enemy blood upon my bayonet will wash away the shame.

Something stirs through the smoke, edging this way— I catch the dome of a helmet. *Already?* The counter has started. I fall to my knees, ready to leap forward. My ankles are like springs, feet sinking into the dust for greater thrust. The man looms before me and I jump into him blade-first.

Standing now, I take his weight, twist and pull back my weapon. He gasps, a hand groping my shoulder, then squeezing the joint till it hurts. The first

thing I notice is the size of his eyes, whites enlarged like those of a hard-boiled egg.

Does this mitigate my mistake? The question darts like a swallow through my thoughts. At this moment Charles does not really look like Charles. He is altered, like me, by the war. Will Louisa take this into account when she gets to hear that I have killed her brother?

“I’m sorry,” I find myself whispering. *Don’t talk*, a rasping thought tries to correct me, *Don’t say anything that will weave this moment deeper into reality. Run away now!*

“I was coming to fetch you,” croaks Charles. “I thought you were hurt.”

His face screws up into a ball of agony, moist eyes still bulging, brow furrows deeper than anything his young face would have seemed to allow.

He dies. I feel the life leave him, as easy as that. The hand that grips my shoulder is merely a hand, and nothing more. The arms, the neck, the head that I now ease to the ground are all part of a carcass like any from a butcher’s shop — spine, limbs, joints all within a sack of skin; I can smell fresh blood and offal. A moment’s panic as the hand will not cease holding, then I stumble back free, gasping for breath.

He lay contorted at the neck and shoulder, eyes gazing off into blue. Gunfire cackles and I spin around, first towards the enemy lines, the rising

smoke and the wire-pinioned bodies, then towards our own trenches, where a smaller number of corpses lay strewn over the pot-marked earth. Smoke drifts and coils and I see one of them, the closest to me, move — an arm rising, index finger stretched as though testing the wind. It's Smith, one of the privates who crossed the wire before me. I recognize him from those sunken cheeks; he had always reminded me of a consumptive, though I knew he could not be. Medical checks against were frequent and thorough. I pull my gun and bayonet close to my chest, aware suddenly of the sticky blood on my fingers. Smith's forefinger hovers, seems to point in my direction, then his arm falls back into his coat. I think I see a hint of a smile upon his thin lips.

My heart hammers and blood rushes in my ears. Did Smith see what happened? I turn again, my fingers trembling as I shield the weapon with my body. My head shakes involuntarily like that of a dog besieged by fleas, and suddenly I'm off, bounding hard toward the enemy lines, a deafening rush in my ears.

A tumult of gunfire rises to my embrace.