

The Roads

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I'll always believe that my father came back from the front late in the summer of 1917. I could barely remember the time when he'd lived at home, and his visits on leave had been brief, strained, somehow theatrical. He'd hand me creased-over postcards of foreign towns -- a few of them even had unsent messages on them, my name and address -- *We're busy here taking a bash at the Hun*. And I'd stare at them as he stood in the front room and placed his hands on my sister Marion's shoulders and said how she'd grown. My mother would wait in the corner -- nodding, smiling, lost of words, really, as we all were. I half-feared him, this green-clad man, filling our front room with his own rough scent and that of trains and disinfectant. Little as I was, I resented him, too. I liked being the only male in the house.

He'd change soon afterwards, bathing with his back shining though the open scullery door before putting on the clothes that fitted him so loosely now. My mother then ran an iron, steaming and spitting, along the seams of his uniform to kill the lice. Then tea and a cake from one of the neighbours, and everyone smiling, grinning. The house frozen with half-finished words and gestures, our figures blurred as if in a photograph, fanning wings of limbs, faces lost from all sense and meaning. Each night that my father was at home my mother's bedroom door would be closed and I would lie prisoner in the unloved sheets of my own bed, praying for that last morning when the cardboard suitcase reappeared in the hall.

"You'll take care? You'll look after Ma and Marion for me?"

I'd nod, knowing it was just his joke. And he'd stoop to hug me, encased once more in green and brass and buttons. The pattern remained the same over the war years; as much a fact of life as rules of grammar or the rank smell that filled our house when the wind blew east from the tanneries; and each time my father and the cardboard case he brought with him seemed smaller, more sunken, more battered. It was only late in the summer of 1917 when the war, if I had known it, was soon to end, that any of that ever changed.

I was wandering in the town Arboretum. You had to pay to get in in those days but I knew a way through the railings and I was always drawn to the bright scents and colours, the heaped confections of flowers. There was a lake in the centre -- deep and dark, a true limestone cavern -- and a small mouldering steamer that had plied prettily and pointlessly between one shore and the other before the war.

Each day of that changeable summer was like several seasons in itself. Forced outside to play by our mothers between meals, we had to put up with rain, wind, sunshine, hail. In the Arboretum -- watered and warmed, looming in flower scents, jungle fronds, greenish tints of steam -- everything was rank and feverish. The lawns were like pondweed. The lake brimmed over. I remember wandering along the paths from the white blaze of the bandstand, ducking the roses that clawed down from their shaded walk, pink-scented, unpruned; sharing in that whole faint air of abandonment that had come over our country at that time.

I saw a man walking towards me. A mere outline against the silvered lake -- but clearly a soldier from the cap he wore, from the set of his shoulders. I stopped. I could tell that he was walking towards me, and I felt a faint sinking in my heart even before I realised that it was my father.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said.

"Where's your case?" I asked.

He considered for a moment, his eyes hidden under the shadow of his cap. "I left it down at the station. Yes," he nodded to himself, "left luggage. My, you've grown..."

"You haven't been home?"

"I thought I'd come here first. See you."

I stared up at him, wondering how he could possibly have found out, all the way from those sepia-tinted postcard towns in France, about my habit of squeezing in through the Arboretum railings.

"We weren't..." I began.

"Expecting. No." My father breathed in, his moustache pricking out like a tiny broom. He seemed as surprised as I was to find himself here, but apart from the sunlit air and the birdsong and the sound of a child crying not far off in a pram, we were back straight away within the frozen silences that filled our front room. And this time he hadn't even remembered the postcards -- they were always the first thing he gave me. More than ever I wondered why he came back. All that travelling. Wouldn't it be simpler if he just stayed in France and got on with the war?

"I'd forgotten how nice these gardens are," he said as I began to walk with him. "What's it like here, son?" I felt, unseen behind me, the brief touch of his hands on my shoulders. "Does everyone hate the Germans?"

"They're bad aren't they?"

"Bad..." My father considered, turning the word over in his mouth. "I suppose you could say... But then..." It was unnerving; what I'd said seemed to mean something else to him entirely.

"Do you see many of them?"

"No," my father said. "I just build the roads."

I followed him out of the park through the turnstile.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "Do you think we should eat? Is the Mermaid Cafe still open?"

We crossed the street and walked past the old bakery into town. Carts and cars and horses went by. My father stopped and stared blankly at one driven by a woman. "Will you look at that? It's a different world here," he said, "isn't it?"

I nodded, already filled by the impression that I would remember this day, that these odd half-sensical things he was saying would become like the messages on those unsent postcards. Something I would study long after, looking for meaning.

It was growing darker now, the sun fading behind Saint Martin's church up the hill. A trolley bus went by, the sparks thrown by the gantry looming suddenly blue-bright. Layers of shadow seemed to be falling. It even felt cold now, so soon after the sun.

Across the square and through the doors of the Mermaid Cafe there was brass and linoleum, clattering cutlery, drifts of tobacco and steam. My father removed his cap and walked between the chairs. The gaslamps had been turned up against the sudden gloom, and I saw his face -- darkly, yellow-lit -- for the first time. The women sitting at the other tables smiled and nodded. A soldier. How they all loved soldiers then. A waitress who'd been about to serve someone else came over and took his order for tea and cordial, two sticky buns. He jumped when the trolley rumbled up. Outside, it started to rain.

"This is some place," he said, looking around in that same puzzled way he had in the Arboretum. "It's what I think about, places like this. When I'm..." He began to pat his pockets.

"Building the roads?"

"The roads..." He found his cigarette case. He cupped a match. His hands were trembling. "Yes, the roads."

I drank my cordial, which tasted bitter rather than sweet from the saccharine they put in it. In the yard at school I always just said that my father was a soldier. Sapper sounded like a corruption, a diminution -- as did the actual job, which was the same one he'd done in peacetime, of supervising the construction of roads. But still; the roads. I had, in my own secret moments, in times when I lay in that deep indentation in my mother's bed and the ceiling glowed with the pull of sleep, a vision of a man younger and crisper than the one who sat before me now, and of the roads. White roads, straight roads, wide roads narrowing into the shimmering distance. Ways to the future.

"This war," he said, drinking his tea, "isn't like anything anyone ever imagined. All the money that's been spent, all the lives, all the effort. It's like one great experiment to see just how far we can go." He ground out his cigarette. "Well now we know. The ones of us who are there. You think the whole world's there until you come here and you the prams in the park and the women with mud on their skirts. And that steamer..." He smiled and glanced out at the rain. "I'd like to have taken you across the lake on that steamer."

"It's not working."

"No," he said. "And we should go home..."

He stood up. The waitress came over to take his money, fluttering her brown eyes.

Outside, the gutters streamed and the facades of the blackened buildings shone like jet. I wanted to hurry as my father pulled his cap on and walked at his odd slow pace through the rain, his head held stiffly erect. Trickle began to run down the woollen neck of my vest, but at least we weren't heading back towards the station. The suitcase was forgotten.

We walked up the hill towards the houses, but instead of going left towards home along the alley at the back of Margrove Avenue we went on past the grocers on Willow Way. A black sodden cat, waiting on a doorstep, regarded us. Around the corner, we came to a brick wall.

"Isn't this right?" My father pressed his hand against it, as though expecting it to give way.

I said, "We should have turned left."

"Isn't there a short cut?"

Before I could answer, my father turned and strode off towards a strip of wasteland and some left-over foundations of houses that had been started before the war and would, so we were all promised, be finished as soon as it ended. The rain was torrential now. You could hardly see the grey roofs of Blackberry Road, and as we began to pick our way over sodden nettles our feet slipped inch by inch deeper into sucking mud. I tripped and stumbled over broken bricks, piles of rubble, loose rusting wire that had once been put up to keep out trespassers. Deep brown pools had formed in the depths of the foundations. I felt my feet slide beneath me, muddy gravity drawing me down into the water. I kicked away and heaved myself over slippery bricks. Peering back over the wasteland, I saw that my father was some way behind, grey again as the figure I had seen walking up from the lake, stumbling in the curtains of rain. I looked towards the houses of Blackberry Road. Grey water filled my eyes, my heart was pounding. For a moment, they didn't seem to be there.

"You go on Jack!" My father's voice. "Hurry home."

I clambered on, back over the last of the foundations and onto the loose clayey track that the builders had laid. I could see rooftops now, sooty chimneys intertwined with the clouds, coalsheds, sodden washing, ivied walls. I broke into a run, taking the narrow passage between 23 and 25. Then on around the corner.

Across the shining street.

I burst in through our front door. My breath came in heaving shudders as I stood dripping in warm darkness. The hall clock ticked. My mother was in the kitchen. I could already smell milk and nutmeg from the pudding she was cooking.

"That you Jack?" she called. "Get those boots off. I don't want you clumping around the house..."

I struggled with the laces and left my boots on the tiles beneath the coatstand. I walked into the warm brightness of the kitchen.

"Where have you been?"

I looked back along the hall, willing a shape to appear at the mullioned front door. But already the sun was brightening, shining in the diamonds of coloured glass, chasing away the rain. And Marion would be back soon, and tea was nearly ready.

I asked, "Have you heard from Father?"

My mother was rubbing my wet hair with a towel. "Your father..." The movement of her hands became stiffer. "No. He's always been bad for writing letters." She gave an odd laugh. Her hands dropped away. I felt loose, light-headed. "He thinks. You know he thinks, Jack..."

"I was just thinking -- "

"And you're like him." She pushed me out of the kitchen, upstairs, away. "Now go and change."

I got a card from my father a few weeks later. It just came in the post. The censor had run a black line through the name beneath the photograph, but you could still read the print if you held it to the light. Ypres, but I pronounced it the way the soldiers did -- *Wipers*; a famous enough name, although the newspapers reported that the great victory in Flanders of 1917 was at Passchendaele, and it was some years before I realised that my father was involved in that last great push and not some side-show. Given the choice, I always seemed to draw the lesser verdict of him. And in his cause of death, too, which remains vague to this day. But then there were no proper roads in Flanders in the late summer of 1917. The rain never stopped. Many of the advancing allied soldiers simply drowned in fetid mud.

I still believe in what happened in the Arboretum on that sunny-rainy day, although Marion, who died in the flu epidemic not long after the war, would have laughed and taunted me about it if I'd said anything to her, and I couldn't ever think of a right way of telling my mother. The sense of the ordinariness was too strong; of wandering into town and sitting, as I am sure I did sit, in the Mermaid Cafe with my father, although it's been closed for many years now and I never did find that brown-eyed waitress again, or any of the other people there who might have recognised us.

The little steamer that my father had so wanted to take me on crossed and re-crossed the Arboretum lake again for a few years after the war, although I could never quite bring myself to take the aimless journey. Still, I was there when it sunk one pastel winter evening in 1921. I stood amid the onlookers on the shore, biting my lip and with my hands stuffed hard into my pockets as it tilted down into watery caverns wreathed in smoke and steam, set alight by nameless vandals. Inside my coat that day, crumpled as my trembling fingers gripped it in the hot darkness, was a sepia-tinted picture of the square of once-pretty Ypres, and my name and address on the other side. I think that someone must have found that last postcard after my father died and posted it to me as a kindly thought, because the rest was simply blank. There was nothing but an empty space where my father, if he had survived and got back to the shelter of his dug-out on that sunny-rainy day, might otherwise have left a message.

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