

DEVASTATION ROAD

Jason Hewitt



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LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

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By Jason Hewitt

The Dynamite Room
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To my brother

*This only is denied to God,
The power to make what has been done undone.*

Agathon

Contents

[OWEN](#)

[JANEK](#)

[IRENA](#)

[MARTHA](#)

[IRENA](#)

[JANEK](#)

[OWEN](#)

He woke to the insistent pip of a bird, its distant trill coming to him through a dream. He felt heavy, lying on his back, as if every organ within him had sunk to its lowest position and now could not be lifted. One hand on his chest, head turned, not a position he usually slept in, and now he could feel an awkward crick pulling in his neck. He lay for a while, mind groggy, the last remnants of sleep still swilling in his head. He was cold but the sun was warm on him. He listened but there was no sound of traffic or distant voices, just the stir of leaves and the pip of the bird. He shifted and a pain shot through his head as something crinkled against his ear.

His eyes opened.

For a moment he was blind but for a sharp light that wouldn't shift, even when he tried to blink it away, and then its brightness slowly receded as a watery sun burnt through. The sky was blue and blurred above him with wisps of cloud hanging, duplicated. His fingers flexed and there it was again, the tickle and lick of grass.

He sat up. The pain pulled.

He was not in a bed. He was in a field.

He was in a field and sitting in the grass.

He looked around, unsure. Everything was smudged and ill-defined: the field tilting away from under him, the blurry line of trees on every side, and nothing between him and them but the shifting grass and occasional blink of a daisy. The pain sharpened, and a wave of nausea washed through him so that he was forced to hold his head between his knees as a sour taste filled his throat.

Head still swimming, he stared down at his hands, scratched and stained with tidelines of dirt. A button was missing from the linen shirt he was wearing – not a shirt he recognized, but nevertheless it hung open at his belly like a lopsided mouth.

He looked about again, carefully twisting right around this time, and thought that for some reason he was in one of the fields behind his parents' house in Hampshire, but he couldn't understand why and nothing looked familiar anyway; there was just the hazy perimeter of trees and the sudden streak of a chaffinch that blurred into two and then one again. He rubbed his eyes. He was still asleep. But the ground felt real and the bird was real, and so was the breeze and the ache in his head. When he brought his fingers to it he could feel a swelling against the back of his scalp, and a pain biting beneath his ribs.

In a field in Hampshire, he told himself. He couldn't think where else. He'd see his father in a minute come huffing through the hedge in his tweeds and brandishing one of his walking sticks, Cedric bounding on ahead. There would be some explanation.

I should be at work, he thought. Mr Camm would be having kittens.

He struggled to his feet and squinted at the flaring sun. He wavered for a moment, unsure if he could move, then checked his pockets, looking for something – wallet, keys, papers – but there was nothing but grit and some red cotton threads; and the jacket wasn't his anyway. It was a blue-grey serge and tatty. Not at all like something he'd wear. No bag, he thought. Nothing lying about. Nothing fallen from his pockets. He tried to focus on a pair of sparrows as they darted over the grass at the bottom of the slope and disappeared into the trees in a furious bluster of wings. Then, unsure what else to do, he decided to follow after them. It seemed as good a direction as any.

As he took his first uncertain steps he could feel the ache in his head expanding, groping into every

corner of his skull and fingering its way down the back of his neck. He felt bruised all over, the waistband of the trousers rubbing at a soreness at his hip, and his bottom lip split and swollen and crusted with dirt. Another wave of nausea flooded through him, and when he stopped and hunched over his knees, a sticky liquid seeped from his nostril and was salty in his mouth.

As he set off again, the grey flannel trousers flapped at his ankles and pinched around his crotch. These couldn't be his trousers. Even the shirt was too tight, the sleeves not even reaching his wrists; and the jacket, though it fitted, was ripped and scuffed at the shoulders.

He cautiously glanced back, hoping something might jog his memory, but there was only a trail of trodden-down grass. It wasn't far to the edge of the field where a rock with a painted face sat half buried among the undergrowth: white rings for eyes and a snout and teeth. It watched him, hunched like a stone golem. Beyond the trees he could hear the rippling of water, so he pushed his way through the branches, the ground steady for the first few feet but then quickly tumbling away, until before he knew it he was crashing through a mesh of twigs and spasms of light, falling out on to a narrow and stony riverbank.

The river was fast-flowing, with rocks protruding here and there. He stood for a moment taking it in: the weeds coasting through it like long lingering thoughts and the bank on the other side rising up over him. He crouched at the edge and cupped water over his face, washing the blood and dirt from his hands and pressing his fingers over his eyes. He took a few deep breaths, feeling the pain pull beneath his rib as he breathed. But when he looked again he was still there, the sun splashing down on him, the river's slop and swill and leap of droplets spattering over the stones. As he watched, strange bits of debris drifted past: branches with sprigs of leaves still attached; clothing – a grey cap, a shawl, a handkerchief; the sodden pages of a newspaper; a single book; another branch; another shawl; a flimsy shoe. He would wake in a minute. Perhaps he *was* awake. If he saw someone he might call out and ask them where he was.

He lifted the side of his shirt and looked at where the pain was, but he could see no mark. He cupped his hands in the river again and drank, and for a time at least the water quelled the empty ache of his stomach. The river drifted away.

He made his way upstream, picking his way over the narrow streamlets that threaded out from the trees and lost themselves in the flow. He tried to think of the names of tributaries, as if in the finding of a name he might then find himself, but the only thing that came to him was the line of a hymn that looped in his head, something about redeemers and pilgrims.

He stopped and listened. He scanned the trees. Nothing seemed real.

He rubbed at his eyes, trying again to clear his vision, but everything looked watery and barely there at all. The swill of the river slopped in his head; it was hard to keep his balance. *You're being bloody ridiculous. You know where you are*, he thought. *You just need to think.*

As he walked on an empty crate floated into view, bobbing and turning in the water, a magpie strutting around its rim and peering in; and then the smeared shape of a handbag, a half-eaten apple, and a pamphlet, and there, glinting in the shallows, a tin with its label washed off. He stepped gingerly in to retrieve it, and for several minutes he tried to smash it open on a rock, denting and bashing it out of all shape, and then looked for something to pierce it with before, with frustration, he flung it back into the river. If he could have found a voice somewhere within him he would have shouted out.

He barely noticed it at first, thinking it to be nothing more than an oddly shaped rock wedged up against others on the opposite bank. It was only as he drew parallel and his vision cleared a little that he saw that what he had also assumed was a trapped branch pulling in the water was in fact an arm. A turned face, grey and bloated, was staring at him. His chest tightened. He glanced around. He couldn't

see anyone to call out to. He stared closer, not sure what to do. He had never seen a dead body before but there it was, still floating, the shirt ballooned with air.

He carried on, walking faster, his heart banging. But barely minutes later he came across two more. They were tangled together on his side of the river this time, caught among the overhanging foliage. One might have drowned, he thought, but surely not three.

He searched the trees, seeing nothing in his hazy vision but the blurring of leaves. Cautiously he edged nearer and saw that they were two men, both smartly dressed: one in shirt, trousers and braces, another in a sodden jacket, his arm sprawled across the other as if they had been lovers. As he dared to lean closer, he saw that beneath the water the face of the first was smashed and raw, while the other floated on his back, a line of ribs bursting through his shredded, bird-pecked shirt.

He turned, fearful now that someone was watching him, and tried scrambling up the bank but it had grown too steep. Instead he drew himself beneath the trees, picking up a dead branch and gripping it tightly. Had they been attacked? *Had he been attacked?* He half expected to hear a voice, someone coming after him, or perhaps not even that but one last piercing shot that would return him to sleep.

Edging on, he approached a bend in the river, the surge of water growing into a tumultuous roar. The banks on either side were rising higher and higher, the land veering up to form a steep and rocky gorge. He had seen no more bodies, only a pair of ladies' stockings snagged on a branch, the empty legs weaving in the water like eels trying to swim upstream.

As the river arced around, he ducked under some branches and was brought to an abrupt halt. Some distance further upriver stood the remains of a stone bridge, both sides fallen away to leave nothing but two central arches standing unbuckled and helpless on their piers among the rubble below. The girders of a railway track stuck out like huge twisted hairpins from one end, bending down towards the water. There beneath it lay the broken wreckage of a locomotive, carriages mangled and up-ended, doors thrown open, piston rods bent and wheels torn away, the carcass of an engine, around and over and through all of which the river thundered. He stared at it, his eyes still blurred and blinking. He would open his eyes for real in a minute. His heart might still be pounding but he would find himself in a bed, in a house, in a home he knew, and all of this would be forgotten.

In front of him the crows nosed around the bits of wood and metal, and then took to the air in a flurry of wings and water, their sudden laughter filling his ears, but still he did not wake.

He clawed his way over the carriages, clambering on to the side of one that, overturned in the water, now formed a sloping roof, and from there on to another, occasionally losing his grip and slipping, fighting against the water that blasted and buffeted through every crack and hole. Here and there bodies lay caught among the bent iron and broken wood: pale-faced men in drenched suits or women in buttoned coats and flowered dresses; others were soldiers or guards, their uniforms unmistakable within the carnage.

A single door was now a skylight, and peering down through the hole he saw bodies floating among the benches and luggage racks. A teddy bear with one eye missing bobbed against a shut window. He watched it nudging at the glass and then turned away, the sight of it making his stomach flip and clench into a fist.

He rummaged for a while, climbing over the wreckage as if the piled carriages were rocks on a beach. In the pools and crevices he scavenged for food, one eye nervously on the blurred slopes around him as his feet slipped about on the wet metalwork. In among the broken sleepers and mangled rods of iron, smashed glass glinted like broken shards of sunlight and wet rags of clothes haemorrhaged from burst cases before being carried away downstream.

He found the pistol in the holster of a grey-uniformed soldier crushed between two wagons. With his hands shaking, he pulled out the magazine and counted eight bullets, then somehow fumbled it

back together and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

As he carefully made his way down to where the engine was he noticed a backpack caught by a branch. Cautiously he lowered himself and waded in. The water was cold and fierce, pulling at his legs. It took some time to unhook the pack but he managed it and clambered back up on to an iron-frame ladder and then the footplate and the top of the engine's cab. On the tilted side of the tender he perched with the backpack on his knees. There were scratches and rips in the canvas where something had tried to tear it open, and on the top a faded number had been scrawled: 4993. He unfastened the buckles and took out a small parcel wrapped in sodden paper. He peeled the shreds of it away until, buried within its soggy folds, he found a hunk of rye bread, now a sodden mush that disintegrated like oatmeal and crumbled into the water. There was nothing else except, in a side pocket, a clutch of tightly bound letters that were soaked through as well, the ink drained away to a wash of watery lines. He tossed them into the river and then hurled the empty bag in after them, watching as the letters, like waterlilies, drifted away downstream.

After a while the gorge became shallower but the terrain along the river grew too overgrown to navigate, and he was forced up the slope back into the trees. He struggled through the dense woodland and broke through to open land. He wondered whether he should retrace his steps back to the field, double-check whether he had dropped anything or whether he might see something familiar coming at it from a different angle, around which everything would fall back into place. He must have been robbed. *Had he been robbed?* There would be a simple explanation. He was not the sort that panicked. He simply needed to think.

Yesterday, he thought. Surely he had been at work, seated at his draughtsman's bench with Harry beside him. He remembered his section had been working on the new wing structure of what would be the Typhoon. He had been drawing out the stringers that went across the wings' ribs, his logarithmic tables beside him, and his set squares and rulers. Had that only been yesterday? He tried to remember anything else but there was nothing there.

Ahead and behind him, the fields ebbed away over the horizon. He looked in the direction that he had just come from but even the landscape he had walked through only minutes ago now looked unfamiliar.

He put his fingers to the back of his swelling scalp and winced; then he took his head in both hands and let out a desperate sob. He couldn't walk any further. He couldn't think what had happened. He slumped in the grass, so tired and hungry. He didn't even know how long he'd been walking. Perhaps it had been days.

He looked at his clothes. Not his trousers. Not his shoes. He rummaged in the pockets and, feeling something weighty in the jacket, he was surprised – alarmed, even – to pull out a pistol. Was it his? It couldn't be his. He turned it over in his hand. He didn't remember having a pistol, yet something about it was familiar. He emptied out the magazine – eight bullets – then pushed it back with a click and slipped it back into the pocket. Jesus Christ, he thought. He prayed to God he hadn't shot anyone.

He studied the shoes, the laces twice broken and twice knotted, and the stitching straining to keep them together. When he took them off he found that there was nothing written inside. He felt down each trouser leg, and then to his surprise found that something had been sewn into them: something flat and round and hard, and embedded within a tiny pocket that had been cut into the seam. He prised it out with his finger. It was a rusted metal button. He turned it in his palm, confused by it, then smelt the tin and felt its scratches, the raised ridge around its edge and four tiny eyelets. It seemed an odd thing to have, hidden away like a secret. Someone else's button. Someone else's gun.

He pulled himself to his feet and carried on walking. After an hour he passed a half-buried rock in the undergrowth. It had a painted face on it. He could have sworn that it was grinning.

The house across the meadow was a ramshackle attempt at a wooden-framed building. Curling paint crumbled on the slatted walls and the veranda rails were loose and leaning, while glass was strewn across the boards from a shattered window at the front. Beneath the broken guttering was a barrel, a bucket, a pair of boots and, pushed against the wall, the mound of an overturned rowboat with a hole the size of a foot through it, the wood all gone to rot.

He didn't know how long he had been watching from under the trees. His thoughts kept sliding out from under him; he could barely keep himself conscious. The only constant was the hymn in his head that same refrain riding in and jerking him awake.

He should approach and see if someone might help him but, other than the strutting chickens in the yard, everything was still. At the side there was an overgrown vegetable patch and he felt the sudden pang of his hunger. The plants looked underdeveloped for this time of year though, the runner beans no more than scrawny infants reaching their arms up the canes. He stayed nervously crouched. It felt too quiet – just the chickens clearing their throats and the occasional surf of dust.

Eventually he ventured out, stalking low across the grass, the pistol in his hand. He gave the house wide berth, avoiding the shattered plant pot in the yard and the dead plant limping, saggy-limbed, from it. He crept in closer. He wondered if he should call out something. Hello? Is anyone in?

The chickens clucked around his ankles as he edged between them. The strange liquid seeped from his nostrils again – not mucus but something else that stung at his lip until he wiped it away.

On the veranda the front door was ajar. He nudged it just hard enough to open it, waited and listened, and then cautiously stepped in.

To one side of the hall was a room stuffed with oversized dining furniture: an overbearing redwood table that had been polished so intensely that the sunlight pooled on it, and far too many chairs with narrow backs and finely crafted marquetry of two birds entwined in flight and splintered into different shaded pieces. There were paintings that, like the furniture, were too large for the space, and their gilt frames seemed entirely at odds with the wooden walls and stubby nails that they had been hung from. It was as if two worlds had collided, one consuming the other, the contents of a wealthy townhouse now hiding within the dead shell of a farm.

Across the hallway the sitting room had been ransacked and the window smashed. There was a carved bookcase and matching dresser with a foreign newspaper on it, and a chaise longue and padded chairs, one with several penny-sized holes in it that coughed out puffs of stuffing like spittle on to the seat. His shoes crunched on bits of mirrored glass and the discarded books on the floor. When he turned over a broken photograph frame, the picture inside was gone. Sunlight pierced through two holes in the wall and fell on the debris, illuminating dried spatters of blood. He held still and listened but heard only the soft crinkle of china quietly splintering beneath his feet.

In the kitchen, drawers hung open, gaping, but he could find nothing to eat. He gripped the sideboard with both hands and tried to shake off his faintness. No sink and no running water. He slammed the work surface hard with his hand and cursed. He couldn't even drink.

At the top of the stairs he found three small bedrooms, all untouched and tidy, bar a double room at the back where the bed had a large dried bloodstain spread across its sheets, the rest of the red-soaked bedding pulled out like innards across the boarded floor. He pressed himself against the wall and then stepped over it all to the window. The sun was shining in through a pale film of fingerprints and the dusty flecks of grime. He realized that he had no idea what time it was and his gaze went to his wrist but there was nothing there. He wiped the window clean with his sleeve and looked out, his breath catching in his throat.

Across the meadow was a figure. A boy, shovelling soil. He was tall and lanky, wearing a grey woollen jacket with what looked like patches on either elbow. He stopped and rested on the shovel, and then started again. There was something foreign about him, like the house and its furnishings, so

that he was beginning to wonder if he wasn't in England at all.

~~There were two plots, one already completed, and he watched as the boy shovelled more on to the second and then threw the spade down. The boy glanced around before wiping his nose on the back of his arm and holding it there for a moment, and then taking a few deep breaths. When he had regained his composure, he picked up a couple of whittled branches and, pulling a ball of some sort of line from his pocket, he tied them into a cross, threading the line around the join several times and pulling it tight with a couple of hard yanks before he finally knotted it. He chewed it off and threw the cross down, but before he started work on the second, something made the boy turn, and in that moment before the man at the window bolted, they both caught each other's eye.~~

The pain in his head swelled like a storm. He could feel the pressure of it building, and that niggling discomfort beneath his ribs that felt like the ghost of a bullet. He moved his shoulder stiffly in its socket, feeling the grate of cartilage, and touched the tender split in his lip. If he could find something to eat, he told himself, if he could push the hunger and the pain aside, and roll his thoughts back to the beginning and start the day again . . . Nothing about it seemed familiar. He wanted to kick himself, just to feel it and know that he wasn't asleep. He was not the type of man who lost things. And yet here he was, losing his mind.

Yesterday, he thought.

Had he caught a trolleybus? A murky memory leaked in of having a bag in his hand and being short of change. *Not to worry, sir. 'Sonly thruppence.* He couldn't recall when this was though. It couldn't have been yesterday. He usually cycled to Hawkers and kept his bike, like most of the others, in the back garden of Mr Levin's. If he'd been on a trolleybus he couldn't think where he would have been going. But there it came again: waiting outside the terrace houses, and a figure in the distance; then off the bus, the babble of other passengers and the sense that even then he hadn't quite been there. He couldn't have been, not yesterday. Somewhere else entirely. The memory felt too distant. And where was the bag now? Where was the ticket? Not in the jacket. Or in his pockets. He searched but nothing was there.

Besides, he thought, that day had been so much hotter than this: people fanning themselves with papers and hankies, all the upper windows of the trolleybus wide open, an English town feverish in the summer heat. When now it felt like a different season entirely. The trees were still in bloom.

It was as if part of him had melted away, an indeterminate amount of time and the memories within it faded to black, or evaporated entirely. He groped in his head but all he could think of was the trolleybus. Was there nothing between that moment and this? A break in time stitched together, so that whatever had been in the middle now simply was not there.

He found himself on his knees, bending over the water, drops falling from his nose. He stared back at his wavering reflection. He had needed to see his face.

He leant further. He could hardly believe it. The eyes had pulled back into their sockets, and what hair there was – cut short, almost to the skull – was receding at the temples where it had not receded before. It was a face that once had been full but now looked lean and wasted, all its youthful plumpness worn away. A gash of blood above his left eye was thick and dried and scabbing. There was bruising on the opposite temple, a cut along his jawline, a split lip and a bruised forearm, as if he had slammed it against something. The pain in the back of his head still pierced through him, along with the sharp ache beneath his ribs – the bullet that wasn't there.

He brought his fingertips to his cheek and around his jaw, feeling the skin and his fragility, the part where even beneath the skin's lining he felt raw and ravaged.

My God. It was not a face he remembered. There were just the hidden reminders of his old self

buried beneath fresh lines, paler skin, a darkening around his eyes . . . He wondered what on earth had happened to him. ~~One didn't step on to a trolleybus and simply disappear.~~

He wrote his name on the bank with a twig just to know that it was true, scratching the 'O' into the dirt, and then the 'W', the 'E' and the 'N'.

That at least was automatic, something that he could be sure of, the tip of a first thread by which he might pull everything else back.

He did not sleep. A cold bit into him that he had not expected after the relative warmth of the day. He had lit a fire quite easily, rubbing a stick between two rocks until the kindling had caught; but keeping it lit was a different matter. A dampness had crept through the countryside so that three times he'd got up to relight the fire until eventually he had given up and pulled the jacket tighter around him, his hands pressed into his armpits.

He lay there trying to recall a house, a room, a bed, a warm arm wrapped around him, but in the thickness of the night – in his own private darkness – there was nothing there.

OWEN

Owen woke as cold as if a frost had set within him, and his head felt muddy and confused. He had hoped the new day would bring with it some clarity or an awakening from the dream. Now, maybe an hour later, the strange world lingered.

He was tired too. Most of the long night had been spent trying to thread his thoughts together, quite convinced that in time he would recall something that would explain everything, but the harder he tried, the less he was certain of. He could find no last fixed point.

The memories that did come were old and childish and looped in his head: a dog called Cedar; another name – Suzie Sue; a picture of himself as a child running through fields with his arms outstretched; flying a kite with his father, its red wings spread like a buzzard's, feeling the tug of the string in his hands as if, in his dreams, the kite was trying to wake him.

As he walked he felt so hungry that he could feel his stomach gnawing. The state of his shoes concerned him, and with that the state of his feet. His head hurt and occasionally, if he turned it too sharply, dizziness soaked through him, or a distant tree or gatepost would divide, doubling in his vision. When that happened he would have to stop and steady himself, and wait for the world to eventually find its form.

As his path took him over the brow of a hill, paralleling a lower road, he became aware of a line of travellers a short distance below him, moving through the sun-drenched mist. There were two four-wheeled carts, each pulled by a bony horse, their wooden wheels creaking and stumbling over the potholed road. In them he could see piles of furniture: wooden tables, thin-limbed chairs interlocked together, and the antlers of a deer hooked over one of the sides. Children sat on stacks of mattresses, cradling pans or wicker baskets, or clutching the corner of a blanket to their nose, or a doll, or a straw donkey, while adults walked alongside, bundles strapped to their backs.

He followed, keeping out of sight, and watching them as they trudged through the smoky sunlight, their horses straining to haul the carts, and the rickety rattle of their furniture bumping around inside.

After a while the road began to edge westerly, taking the procession with it, until it tipped the travellers over a hill and they disappeared into the sunlight.

He had walked long distances before, he thought, for now a recollection was pooling. Not just the muscle memory of walking for hours, but days, and not in the full blush of spring either, but through deep snow with blizzards buffeting through a pine forest and whipping hard against his face. Then, just as quickly, the memory was gone again. He wondered if there was still a war on – a war that felt so distant in his mind and yet he was quite sure had barely begun.

He remembered a radio announcement, and the next day at his desk, carefully marking out the line of a plane – a precision laid out for something that, in his mind at least, had not yet been ruined in its reality – he had barely been able to concentrate. A worry had seeped into him that everything was about to change and with it, him too. Everyone would be altered. Lines would be redrawn, population recalculated, trajectories of bombs and bullets scrutinized. No one would look for beauty in design anymore. The womanly curve of a plane's belly would be bastardized, bloated to make room for parachutists and weapons of destruction. *At least we ain't getting called up*, Harry had said. And yet everything had changed.

As he sat on the verge feeling for other cuts and bruises on a body that no longer felt like his own, and in clothes that weren't his either, he found a pocket in the seam of the trousers and was surprised

to find a metal button. He turned it over in his palm. It looked familiar yet he couldn't remember whether he had seen the button before.

He skirted a wheat field – the crop already waist-high, and the soft stalks rustling in the breeze. He had spent the morning wondering just how long he had been gone. He stopped for a moment and watched the wind casting ripples through the shifting leaves. If he tuned his ears he could hear them whispering to him, the reedy *hush* of their voices.

He glanced around and then, seeing that no one was about, he took a step in, slowly venturing further and then feeling the lure of something stronger than he was pulling him in deeper. The tips of wheat licked at his arms as they had done when he'd been a child, that familiar smell of dusty dirt, and the crop swilling and swaying around him. He wanted to run through it. And then, in the memory that swept in on the breeze, sweeping him into it too, his brother was suddenly in front of him, the back of his head bobbing through the crop, the stark whiteness of his shirt against the tan of his arms. *Max*, he shouted. *No, Max, wait!* The two of them running through the wheat, their arms knocking against the stalks and the sun burning so bright that sometimes Max would disappear in its flare; or, without warning, would drop like a dead bird into the crop so that Owen would lose him and panic. He would stand in the middle of the field calling out to him: *Max*, he would shout, *where are you?* Then Max would burst out through the stalks beside him and with a holler knock him down into the dirt. *I was here all the time, stupid*, he would say, laughing, as Owen picked himself up. But not this time.

Not now.

He stood in the middle of the field, anxiously scanning it for that same movement, that rippling path, an unseen disturbance quickly coming for him through the wheat. He stood, waiting – watching and waiting – until another breath of wind blew through the crop, taking his fear and his brother with it.

The seven soldiers were laid out along the verge like ninepins, each dressed in red green uniforms and missing their shoes and socks. Around them flies patrolled, alighting on stony faces or disappearing inside an open collar, or up the tunnel of a trouser leg and through a bracken of hairs.

Owen edged closer then nudged one of the soldier's ankles with his boot. Even knowing that they were dead, he squatted down and nervously touched one. The soldier's hand was still warm. He stood up again sharply, pulling the pistol from his pocket and looking around, then pacing back up the path several yards and scanning the trees on one side and the fields that rolled out on the other. He thought he could sense eyes watching him but he could see nothing there. Whoever had shot them must still be close; these men were not long dead.

He made his way back, still alert, and crouched down beside them again. The flies had already moved back in, pitter-pattering over the skin.

After some awkward digging around he found a torn map in the breast pocket of one and a small notebook with a blank page at the back. He ripped it out and slipped it into his pocket along with the stub of a pencil; their pistols, bullets and cigarettes, or any chocolate they might have carried, had already been taken.

For some time he sat on the grass trying to piece the sheets of map together but the place names all looked foreign. He didn't know whether they were German or Dutch or something else entirely. He folded the pieces and pocketed them. When he stood back up, he could have sworn that one of the soldiers had turned his head.

If there really was a war on and he had no idea where he was, then it was much safer not to be seen. The pain in his head still felt like eyes drilling into him and several times Owen had abruptly stoppe

distinctly sure that someone was following him. He kept hold of the pistol and checked his pockets: paper, maps, button, pencil. He had to keep checking that everything was in place.

The morning slowly dissolved, and at times the train wreck and the soldiers laid out like ninepins were gone from his mind entirely, so that it was only when he saw the scrap of paper in his hand that the recollection sprang back and he remembered it was true.

MAX, he had written.

How despairing of him his brother would be.

Lost? Oh, for God's sake.

Snatches of thought like that constantly peeled away, though he tried hard to cling to them: drawing the stringers of a wing at his desk; the red trolleybus following the overhead wires down the hill. He stepped on the back. *Not to worry, sir. 'Sonly thruppence.* The conductor had punched out a ticket anyway. Names, too, blew in and away again. Barnes and Budgie and Peri . . .

You need to make a note of everything. Nothing in his head felt safe.

And then his father was grabbing the strings just in time and swooping the kite back into the blue. *say, he said, that was close.*

It was only as these thoughts dispersed that he realized that he had somehow wandered on to a narrow road and was standing in the middle of it. The sky had opened up into a rich wide blue. Dandelion seeds drifted like parachutists across his path. He stared behind him at the road he must have walked along, at the gentle haze in the distance shimmering above the dirt. Then, for a moment, there in the watery blur, he thought he saw the silhouette of a boy standing maybe half a mile back – boy, tall and thin and watching him. The silhouette quivered and disappeared.

The terrain hardened, the hills forming into jagged edges and the trees into prickly furze. For a while he sat on the verge and could not stop himself crying.

He wondered if there was someone waiting for him. He had no wedding ring or photograph. If he were married would he not feel it? The memory of it might be gone like so much else but there would surely be something deeper within him that could not so easily be cut away. In time, the sense of someone might come, he told himself; it might bring a face, a name. He would not die. He would not give up. He would somehow get himself home.

He took out the map again with fresh determination and searched within its sheets. Somewhere he was lost within it: the most indistinguishable pinprick trapped beneath its contours. He scanned the symbols, the railway lines, the rivers and the strange-looking place names. Harry had once said that the cartographer was to the land what the draughtsman was to aircraft: bringing a plan and order to something that would otherwise feel unnavigable. The map, though, was faded and stained, and staring at it he realized what nonsense this was, even if he tried to think of the contours as no more than arcs and the rivers as no more than cables wiring the land together.

As he moved the sheet away, his eyes were drawn to a name. *Sagan.* It sat at the edge of the sheet. He faltered, stared and then turned his gaze back to the other parts of the map. But his eyes kept being pulled to it as if within him two wires had touched, sparking the slightest flicker of something in his head. He scanned around the name with his finger but nothing looked familiar. Only perhaps the shading of a forest. A symbol printed below looked like the Roman numeral: *III.*

Sagan. He wondered if he had read about the place recently, or heard it on a broadcast. A place so far at the edge of the map as to be almost hanging off it.

In the end he pulled out the scrap of paper and stub of pencil and wrote it down anyway, then found it again on the map and twice circled it. His finger followed the faint railway lines that threaded away from it in either direction but nothing else caught his eye.

As the evening drew in, the fields and woods gave way to forests that rose up over the steepening hillsides, capturing the swelling darkness within the clutch of their boughs. He found a clearing and rummaged around for kindling, but beneath the trees everything was damp. As he poked about he sensed movement nearby – a figure, he thought, changing shapes between the trees and shifting with the shadows.

He pulled out the pistol. ‘Who’s there?’

Then, in German: ‘*Wer ist da?*’

He held still but all he could hear in the darkness was the nervous fidget of birds.

He did not sleep but lay for hours, shivering and surrounded by the sounds of the forest. He squeezed his hands into his armpits once more and pulled his knees in tight, the ground growing damp beneath him until it soaked through his clothes.

He would not be afraid. But twice he sat bolt upright, swinging the pistol furiously about at the shapes of bats that were sweeping between the trees.

Images, recent and opaque, and untethered to anything else, rose in his mind like air bubbles to the surface and just as quickly burst: sunlight burning through a skin of leaves; water rushing around him. They flashed when he least expected: these leaves so close to his face; or the scuff and scratch of gravel being hauled away from under him as if it was the earth, not him, that was sliding. There was no catching them – these sudden openings into what might have been yesterday or the day before or even the year before; it was difficult to tell.

The trolleybus came. He sat by the window. The street melted away.

He jerked awake, aware of the stench of smoke and the fizzle of flames. When he turned on his side he found that a shabby-looking boy was squatting in the undergrowth, staring right at him. Owen scrambled to his feet, dropping the jacket that had been draped over him, and pulled out his pistol, but the boy did not flinch.

In the clearing a fire had been lit and a crude spit constructed with a small animal roasting on it. Moisture from its skinned body dripped and the flames hissed and flared. The smoke was so infused with cooked meat that Owen felt it pulling at his stomach.

The boy didn't look much older than fifteen, and was squatting with his outstretched arms resting on his knees and hands lightly clasped. He had an impish quality: unkempt hair with dried bits of leaves caught in it, and a small snub nose. His eyes were narrow and dark, and he scrutinized Owen, then shifted and cleared his throat. He didn't look in the slightest bit scared, but gauged Owen and the shaking gun with little more than curious suspicion. There was a dried smear of mud across each cheek and another across his forehead. His trousers were dusty at the knees, and he wore a khaki-coloured shirt and black scuffed shoes. The jacket that had been draped over Owen must have been the boy's too; it had darker patches curling at the elbows. A tatty canvas bag lay beside him, with loose pockets and buckles, and something drawn on it in faded red ink.

The boy shuffled and tilted his head, chewing on his lips as if he had something sour in his mouth.

Owen took a step closer. 'What do you want?'

Instantly the boy was on his feet and much taller than he had expected. He unleashed a torrent of words and sounds that Owen couldn't understand. He came closer and Owen backed away. He was still talking, fast.

'I don't know what you're saying.'

'*Hledal jsem vás,*' the boy shouted. '*Dva dny. Dva dny!*'

'For God's sake . . .' Owen stumbled backwards over the jacket.

The boy gave him a hard shove and then another, and then grabbed at Owen's gun. Owen pulled it away and made for the trees, but before he knew it the boy had twisted him around with surprising force, tipping him over his foot and bringing him to the ground so that he hit it hard with a gasp and was winded. The boy snatched the gun from his hand, unleashing another string of words that Owen didn't understand.

He stood over Owen, pointing the gun.

'All right, all right,' said Owen, submitting. He was on his back and still breathless. 'Look, I don't know who you are or what you want but I don't have anything. I promise.'

He could see then that the boy was shaking. He pressed the heel of his hand to his eye and then, turning away, he threw the pistol down at Owen's side. He said something but the venom was gone. He took a few deep breaths as he paced away and then, finding some self-control, came back. He looked down at Owen and then nodded, and Owen hauled himself up on to his elbows. The boy signalled at the fire.

'*Máte hlad?*' he said. His anger had almost entirely drained but his frown still puckered. Whatever had happened between them was over. The faintest smile of acceptance flickered across his face.

They sat cross-legged across the fire from each other, the boy's eyes interrogating Owen as they both hungrily ate. Owen couldn't make him out. Using a small flick knife, the boy had cut the meat from

the animal with a swift and practised butchery that was equally impressive and disturbing, before serving the slices in wooden bowls with a watery broth and bits of root vegetable that had been simmering in a pan. Owen didn't know whether to be afraid or thankful. The food was slowly reviving him but doing little to quell his unease.

Did he know the boy? Had he forgotten? He wondered if more days had fallen away into the abyss. Nothing about the boy looked familiar, yet still he stared with an unflinching curiosity. Only occasionally did he get up to serve more broth or carve more meat from what Owen hoped was a rabbit and not a small cat. He poked encouragement into the fire while Owen discreetly felt in his pockets: pistol, paper, button, map. He pulled out the scrap of paper. There were notes he'd written on it in pencil – the words MAX and SAGAN and HARRY and HAWKERS – but nothing about a boy.

The boy lifted the bowl and drank the dregs, his dark eyes like polished wood still fixed on Owen. Not an imp, he thought, but a bird, in the way he cocked his head or turned it at every sound. He had a nervy alertness, as if he and everything around them was balanced on a wire.

He untied a canister from his belt and, without saying a word, offered it. Owen sniffed it and then took a sip. The water was warm and stale but he took another mouthful and handed it back. The boy took a swig himself and refastened the cap.

'Do I know you?' Owen asked.

The boy said nothing.

'Do you know where I am?'

The boy's nose twitched.

'I'm lost. I don't know where I am. Do you understand? *Wo bin ich?*' he said, trying German instead. 'Yes? Do you speak English? Where am I?' He signalled around at the trees.

The boy said something that might have been a name.

'I mean the country,' said Owen. 'England, yes? Do you understand?' He pulled out the scraps of map but the boy was already talking.

'*Čechy,*' the boy said. '*Sudety . . . Protektorát Čechy a Morava.*' He shrugged, as if you could call it what you liked; it didn't much matter.

'I don't know what you're saying. What are you?' The boy sounded Polish or Russian or something. His words came out buttery but like nothing Owen had heard before.

'*Československo.*'

'Chesko—?'

'*Československo,*' the boy said.

It sounded like Czechoslovakia, but that was ridiculous.

Owen stared at the scrap of paper, trying to make sense of the notes he'd written and the pieces of map.

'Here.' He held out the paper and pencil. 'Will you write the date?'

'Date?' said the boy, unsure.

'The date. Yes. Today. I need to know what the date is. What's the bloody date?'

'*Je květen.*'

'No,' Owen said, losing his temper. 'The numbers.' He held up his hand splaying his fingers and shook them. 'The numbers, yes? Do you understand?'

The boy took the paper and wrote something. He handed it back.

Owen looked.

What was that? March? May? That couldn't be right. He felt a heat starting to engulf him.

‘The year . . . Now the year. *Jahr,*’ he said in German. ‘Write the year. Please.’

The boy grinned. He wrote, slow and purposeful this time, as if this were a game that he now knew he was winning. He handed it over.

Owen stared at the numbers.

1945

His stomach tightened. His mind went blank.

‘Forty-five?’

‘*Čtyřicet pět.*’ He nodded.

No, Owen thought. That wasn’t right. 1940. 1941, perhaps, but . . . He couldn’t have lost . . . what? That was four years. It couldn’t be true.

He wasn’t sure that his legs could take him, but without thinking he started to walk. He pushed hurriedly away through the trees. He needed to get out, to get away, but the boy was suddenly coming after him.

‘*Musíte tady zůstat!*’ He grabbed Owen’s arm but Owen pushed him off.

‘No, let me go!’

He stumbled, crashing through the trees, away from the boy and his mouthful of lies. By the time he came out on to the lane he was breathless. He looked about in every direction at the steep slopes and fields and the endless woods. None of it looked real. It was as if he’d fallen through into another world. He didn’t know what to do.

He didn’t know how far he had gone before he sensed something behind him. When he turned around he could see the figure of the boy down the lane. He carried on, picking up his pace, but he could still feel the boy following him, the bag hauled over his shoulder, the water canister bumping at his thigh.

‘What do you want?’ he shouted. ‘Leave me alone!’

He had no idea where he was going. Sagan, he thought, but he didn’t know why.

At least we ain’t getting called up, Harry had said, but for some reason here he was.

He kept taking out the piece of paper and looking at it, uncomprehending.

3–5–1945

Nothing about it made sense.

When he stopped again and turned the boy had stopped as well, and was standing in the road, staring. Owen carried on, trying to ignore him, but he could feel the boy’s stare at the back of his head. He stopped and turned. The boy stopped too. The sunlight was burning around his frame but the distance between them was no different from before. Was he following him on purpose? Did he think this was a bloody game?

Oh, let him, he thought. I don’t care.

But he did. He carried on and then glanced back again.

He’s like a bloody lost dog.

When eventually he reached a junction he turned right, following the lane through a tunnel of trees. His anger with the boy was starting to dissipate. He was even beginning to feel strangely indebted to him. The boy had fed him, after all. He had watched over Owen while he slept. Again, Owen stopped and turned. The boy was teetering on the cusp of the hillock beneath the dark overhang of trees, the sunlight shining through from behind. This time Owen stood and waited. Oh, let him come if he wanted to, he thought. The boy would slope off to wherever he was going soon enough.

For over an hour they walked in silence. Owen felt as if he'd been taken hostage, and without a shared language he was completely disarmed. His fingers fumbled in his pockets as he walked for the telltale shape of the button.

'Where are you going anyway?' he asked, but the boy did not reply.

As the morning progressed the air became bracing as they kept climbing to higher ground. The boy lingered behind him but with increasing frequency he walked parallel on the opposite side of the lane and threw Owen cursory glances. Whenever Owen stopped to consider the map, trying to match a point on it with something he'd seen – the pinnacles of a remote chateau or the tops of cone-like mountains blurred by distant rain – the boy would stop too, and empty a stone from his battered shoe or swipe at something with a stick while he waited. And then Owen would pocket the map and carry on, and the boy would fall into line.

They followed the edge of a field that had recently been set ablaze, patches of the volcanic earth still black and burning. Behind it the trees seemed to melt, and with every change of wind the burning ash blew across their path so that they had to turn their backs to it and cover their eyes, some of the flecks still orange, pricking their cheeks and the backs of their hands.

They joined a lane that swerved down into a valley, a loosely woven fence separating the road from the farmland. At the bottom of the slope there was an entrance and a grey stone house in a yard with open-fronted wooden outbuildings housing a plough and a wagon. Parked behind the house a couple of small trucks could be seen. Three soldiers in olive drab uniforms were loitering in the yard.

The boy grabbed Owen's arm and pulled them both into a crouch. He then pelted, head stooped, across the grass and ducked behind the fence. He glanced over the top and slumped back down.

'*Honem!*' he hissed, signalling to Owen, who ran over and then squatted down beside the boy, both of them breathless with their knees up and backs to the fence.

'What is it?' Owen said. He turned to take a look.

Through the latticework of branches he could see the house and the uniformed men, bulky rifles in their hands, each held by a strap over a shoulder. One of them sat on an upturned pail, digging around in the dirt with the toe of his boot. The other two stood by the trucks, lounging against the bonnets, and talking the same Slavic language as the boy.

The boy squinted through the thin gap in the fence, glanced over the top and then through the gap again, trying to get a clearer look. Owen held the pistol against his chest. He could hear the boy's agitation in the heaviness of his breath.

Then, from inside the house, there came a commotion. A stout uniformed man with severely cropped silver hair and a square reddened face appeared in the doorway. He was dragging out a woman who was struggling and shouting in his arms.

The boy clenched Owen's arm, his fingertips digging in. The woman clung on to the doorframe and yelled desperately to someone inside – *Aleši! Ondřeji!* – before the soldier shouted something and wrenched her away.

The boy stood but Owen yanked him back down.

'Don't!'

The men at the trucks were opening the doors, one of them flicking a catch on his gun. Another soldier appeared from within the house hauling out two young boys. He gripped each by the upper arm and dragged them as they struggled and fought across the yard. He forced them viciously into one of the trucks, while the woman was digging her heels into the dirt, trying to lower herself to the ground, but the silver-haired man heaved her up as she screamed and shouted, and, with his comrades, pushed her into the second vehicle.

The door slammed as, beside Owen, the boy tried to stand again, shouting, '*Nacistický sráči!*' but

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