

1.

He was awake but he might be dead.

Light broke through weakly, pushing at the edges of the cloud cover like a bleary-eyed teenager reluctantly emerging from their duvet. Cool air smelled of moisture, remnant of the night's rain combined with morning dew. The stillness persistent. Hills slowly being illuminated, revealing their treeless profile. Mist rolled across the tops, folding and unfolding, white feathers unveiling and covering in a teasing burlesque routine.

Somewhere in the distance, a solitary robin uttered its mournful winter song; a jangling jumble of notes that always started so strongly and then just petered out. Almost as if the bird lost interest part way through, shrugging its shoulders at an apathetic audience. Maybe it never found the knack of getting to the end before it ran out of breath; forever genetically locked into repeating its lung-emptying, avian mantra.

The quiet, an interloper, uninvited, most definitely unexpected. Not unwelcome now it was here, but unable to still the turmoil and horror in his head. Try as it might to soothe, it was fighting a losing battle. As was he.

The bodies were scattered around him. Limbs detached from some, contorted death masques, blood.

Blood.

Blood.

Like a brushstroke of death across the landscape, blackened in its dehydration, but no less potent for its crimson metamorphosis.

Lying on his back, he tried to move, but nothing much seemed to be working as it should do. There was a curious lack of pain. Perhaps the scale of the trauma suppressing. Perhaps shattered nerves causing paralysis or his subconscious forcing him into playing possum to save his life. Maybe he was dead? If he'd succumbed, he was in good company. Friends, colleagues, enemies, family, a lover...spent.

The robin seemed to sense he was listening, serenading him, it flitted through his peripheral vision.

Arcing red and screaming, crunching, violent struggle. Hot, putrid breath.

He lurched back into the morning. His head moved from side to side, but it felt like a hollow victory given the aspect afforded him. He was hyperventilating, trying to relieve the stress by looking straight up into a clearing sky. Powder blue gently and serenely replacing pale grey. Streaks of pink.

Warning.

That was a moan, surely? No, just him. Feeling was returning but the reception committee was less than enamoured with its re-appearance. Pain shot up his leg like a wriggling electric eel. His torso ached and throbbed, arms were leaden. He was dampened but not drenched. Cold though. Bitterly cold.

*That* was a moan! Yes, and a cough?

He needed to move.

Get up.

*Get up!*

He rolled onto his right side. Shock waves coursed through him, his voice easing out in a grinding moan. He unscrewed his eyes and steeled himself for the next agonising motion. Pushing up on fast-recovering arms, he rocked back onto his buttocks, arms supporting either side.

His left leg was throbbing. The pain indicated possible fracture, but no blood seeped. No blood meant a chance. If he was bleeding then it was hopeless: he really was dead already. The cool air in his lungs, the smell in his nostrils and the images streaming live to his brain clearly suggested otherwise. A vivid dream? Hell? Heaven? A past life revisited? An alternative dimension?

There *was* a moan. There was another cough too.

The near thirty dead were littered across an area of a few hundred square metres. There were those that fell together and on top of each other as if clasped in a lover's embrace - despite the cataclysmic outcome of their union. Some requiring their component parts to be gathered from across the field in order to create whole persons again. Others lay farther off; tantalisingly close to making an escape.

Surveying the scene, looking for any flickering movements, he noticed the small puff of steaming breath. A dormouse having a surreptitious cigarette behind the School for Rodents' bike sheds would have produced a more obvious smoke signal. But it was a smoke signal that raised hope. The moaner was close; or at least they would be considered close by anyone with both legs in full working order.

After two, excruciating, aborted attempts at standing, it became apparent crawling was going to be the only way to reach them. He questioned the sense of this. A titanic, agonising effort that might simply bring him to an enemy's side.

Still within reach, where he must have dropped it, the gun. Still loaded. He would risk it.

Crawling proved more bearable than trying to stand and walk, just. No matter how hard he tried to protect his incapable limb, it bumped, scraped, and seared all the way across to the moaner. The clouds cleared. The ungrateful bastard expired by the time he reached them.

Enemy. Dead. Fuck 'em.

He put a bullet in their head. Best to make sure.

It took time to rest and recover before trying to reach the cougher. This crawl was a real drag.

Not coughin'. Coffin. Friend. Fuck it.

He was exhausted. The hunger pangs were a minor distraction from his insistently complaining leg, but they were there nonetheless. His desiccated throat rasped its disapproval at the apparent lack of moisture coming its way. The nearest vehicle, and the promise of the refreshment it would hold, taunted him from another agonising fifty metres away. It was vital he got there. A chill breeze sprung up as he snaked in slowworm fashion through the undergrowth. Already squeezing through his garments, it would be whispering coldly in his bones soon. A harbinger of rain; the serene blue was short lived. Deep, ominous grey stole in, hijacking the sky.

The longest crawl was just that. He imagined being overtaken by a sauntering tortoise so languid was his progress, but Aesop-like, he got there in the end.

The muddied and dented Land Rover was as welcome a destination as he'd ever reached. Arms burned with the effort, but it helped stave off the frigidity. He could have wept tears of joy when he found the keys were still in the ignition. Instead, he sobbed like a baby.

Sheltered from the bitter breeze, he began to warm. Mindful of saving fuel in such a thirsty beast of burden, he resisted switching on the engine and the heater. Every precious drop of refinement might yet be required. Searing leg pain became a thudding ache, the timpani in a symphony of discomfort. He found an overcoat in the back seat. Although a trifle spacious, nonetheless enveloping and cossetting. A splint might help silence the drums but there were no branches big enough lying conveniently nearby, he had no axe, and no idea how to go about it. In any case, driving would be rendered virtually impossible.

Rain began to bounce on the roof of the Land Rover with increasing ferocity - like a thousand drummers paradiddling to their heart's content, oblivious to the annoyance caused to the occupant. A bottle of water lay on the passenger seat. He drained it. Shuddering, he retrieved a bar of chocolate from the glove compartment, devouring it as if it was his last. It might well be.

Warmth. Sleep. Safety. Peace. Thank you.

Something about the paradiddles made him snap awake. There were actual drummers playing them on the windows and bonnet, with hands rather than sticks. Fumbling for the key, he turned it. One of them rattled on the door handle. Another was on the bonnet, pulling himself up by the windscreen wiper. The door opened. He planted a slug right between the revived cougher's eyes. He would re-enact this terrible moment in his dreams innumerable times, but he had no choice. She lurched back, crumpling like paper.

The manoeuvre to get into first and drive off was less than elegant. Right foot on the clutch, right hand reaching down to floor the accelerator, hanging onto the steering wheel with his left, swinging the vehicle wildly from side to side. The enemy on the bonnet lost his grip on the wiper and fell under the wheels; he drove over him without any remorse. Sitting upright, and using his right foot on the gas, first gear was his only option. The engine whined in disapproval at being revved so hard. Ignoring its protestations, he careered out of the field.

Drive. Blood. Safety. Friends. Death. Hope.