

A Beautiful Silence

The abhorrent smell of smoke hits my nostrils like the slap of a thousand men as I wipe the black crud off of my hands. The machine is broken again. Grunting as I get up off the floor, I pray that this time the conveyor belt will work. I wince as I press the button, desperately waiting for the growl of the motor. A jolt of relief floods through me as I see the once motionless belt moving across the factory, although my triumph is short-lived as the engine comes to a halt once again. I slam my foot on the side of the machine, I have never been so apoplectic with rage.

What has my life come to? I have spent 30 years putting caps on bottles and only making pennies for it. I'm in too poor a condition to be enlisted so I'm stuck here hoping that my country can win the war for me. The only thing I have to my name is a wife and two good-for-nothing children, who can barely read or write. I often think about who I could be. I could be a soldier, a hero! Someone people look up to. But I'm a nobody.

I start to hear a whistle, no, a scream. Like a child. I don't get much time to think about it before a resounding bellow sweeps through the factory like a gust of wind. This is followed by an almighty clattering of bottles smashing against each other, a sea of dark carbonated liquid flooding the floor, the lights above me violently shaking and falling to the ground. I hear yells out on the street. I begin to smell smoke again. This smoke is different. It reeks of death.

I slam the door of the factory open. I'm immediately suffocated by the violent fumes of burnt buildings and streets. I see smouldering planks of wood laying on the streets next to shattered homes. I see children running for their lives. Sirens blaring in the distance, ushering everybody to get to safety but the damage is done. Family homes being destroyed, places of worship falling to the ground. This is the work of the Krauts.

While searching through the refuse a sudden wave of shock hits me as I realise that I need to find my children. I pull out a photo from my wallet and look at my family. James, Robert and Laura. I always forget how ugly Laura's smile is. I don't remember why I married her, she never stood out to me - I don't even remember our first date - but we made a family nonetheless, crammed into a tiny home that we can barely afford. It doesn't help that my boys manage to destroy everything inside. There's this one painting I absolutely hate, hung above our mantelpiece. It's meant to represent something bigger, according to Laura, but I have never seen anything other than an ugly mess of paint. We spent a fortune for it too. It is a reminder of my life, a mess. I'm always looking for a bigger meaning but I can never find it. Every time I walk through the living room I see it, taunting me, constantly reminding me that I'm useless.

I start to navigate through the city. I usually take the bus, but I presume it's been destroyed just like the rest of this town. Looking around I see bereaved parents and orphaned

children. Devastation is everywhere. I start to run. I have never run in my life but I felt a compulsion to run as a sense of urgency sweeps over me. I thrust my head left and right, searching for them. I'm getting closer to my home but the destruction isn't getting any better. Firemen spraying water to get the aggressive flames to cease, policemen helping children find family, ambulances carrying corpses upon corpses god knows where. As I approach my street I hear screaming again. It's not like last time. I run to follow the noise, desperately gasping for air as my unfit body tries to keep up with my sprint. Looking round the corner I see a woman and two children, covered in ash. Straight away I realise it's them. Walking closer I see the blacks of their pupils gleaming in their tired eyes. Their dirty knees were covered in blood. We look at each other but don't speak. We don't need to.

We must have stood there in silence for ten minutes before I started to hear the whistle. It was the same as last time. I knew what's coming but they didn't. It was quiet, with a quietness that was tall and far, delicate as a leaf, and soft-footed as the grass. I took Laura's hand and it took me back to our living room. I could see the painting, and for the first time I didn't look at it with my loathing eyes, I could finally see it for what it is, it was beautiful. I could smell the burning candles on the dining table and could hear the crackling of the warm fire. I looked at Laura, she squeezed my hand as she smiled at me. She had a beautiful smile. And as I look up into the sky to see the lump of metal falling I realise that maybe life wasn't so bad...