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To Die in Spring
Novel

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The mill came into sight after three-quarters of an hour's drive. Its cap had been shot off; only tatters of sailcloth remained hanging from the sails' lattices. He stopped the car at a wayside cross and looked through the binoculars. Not a man in sight, nor a dog or any of the scrawny goats that had climbed around here a few weeks ago, nibbling limp thistles from the rocks. The gate destroyed, the stables just a pile of rubble and many of the old olive trees along the wall were charred or shattered. August released the safety catch of his machine pistol.

A soldier wearing a combat smock over his uniform appeared from behind the house and waved. He wore an SS garrison cap and a colourful neckerchief. Walter drove up the road and turned into the farmyard. The three paratroopers, all older than them, late twenties or early thirties, were sitting at a table in front of the barn and spooning preserves from large jars. "Dammit, why are you so late?" the commander, a corporal, asked, and his voice sounded as if he had a cold. "We've been sitting here so long our arses are sore!"

He hadn't shaved in days, his cheeks were hollow and his nose was made of skin-coloured Bakelite. A bottle of schnapps, half-filled with plum stones, glinted in the sun and Walter turned the car in front of the dome-shaped oven and said: "Heil, Hitler! I'm sorry. They only sent us an hour ago."

In the rear view mirror he saw the owners of the farm standing in the open barn. He got out, saluted and held the orders out to the corporal. But the latter took no notice of him; he ate a piece of cheese from the blade of his knife, scrutinized the red headed August, who had limped over to the well to fill his bottle without saluting, and said: "Pity he's not a girl, don't

you think?" He drew his tongue over his teeth. "What is it they say: rusty roof, damp cellar." The others, both storm troopers, laughed and Walter put the orders on the table and turned around. In the middle of the barn, lined by streaks of light falling through the gaps in the wooden boards, the ancient miller, his blind wife and the humpbacked goatherd were standing on the blue stools on which they normally sat in front of the baking furnace, a glass of tea in their hands. Their faces grey, their lips cracked, they kept their eyes closed and did not seem to notice him when he came and stood directly in front of them.

The black headscarf of the woman, who clawed trembling toes into the straw stool, was crusted with salt; the men's trousers were wet in the crotch. The wire used to tie their hands behind their backs was cutting deeply into the swollen skin, almost disappearing. Some fingernails had burst out of their purple nail beds; the nooses around their necks were very tight, but still allowed them to breathe. The ropes hung from a beam under the grain store, which was empty at this time of the year, a high room, echoing the cooing of the pigeons.

The hunchback, his chin close to the throat, was breathing loudly as if he were asleep standing up, and looked completely resigned. The miller, who still wore his wooden clogs, no longer seemed to be quite all there either; a fly crawled over his motionless face. Yet when his wife's shaking suddenly became so severe that one of the stool's legs banged on the stone floor, he opened his toothless mouth and let out a warning "Zsuzsa!", groaned more than spoken, which she did not reply to; but it gave her renewed strength. Traces of dried up tears on her cheeks, she raised her head and gasped.

Outside someone clapped their hands. Walter looked around and he now recognised the neckerchief that one of the paratroopers was wearing. It was made of yellow silk, embroidered with blue flowers and belonged to the couple's daughter, a thirty-year old widow, who had hung a cage full of songbirds next to the gate every morning. Decorated with small mother-of-pearl shingles, it lay empty and crushed between the ruins. "Well ..." the corporal said and got up. "Stuffed yourselves enough? All done? Let's go then!"

He pushed the spoon into his boots and folded the map. As customary with paratroopers, he also wore the protective jump smock with short legs and big pockets over his uniform. August capped his water bottle and asked: "What about the people?"

The man turned around. His right sleeve was brown with dried blood. "What people?" Frowning, he looked at Walter; "Who's he talking about?" And when Walter pointed behind him with his thumb, the corporal spat out and said: "Oh, them ... No idea. They have been standing there all night. Probably waiting for someone".

Laughter echoed from the oven. One of the storm troopers, a bald bloke, carried his cloth

bag to the car; grey parachute silk pouring out of it. “They don’t eat, don’t drink, simply don’t get tired,” he said and opened the boot. “Me, I would have fallen off the stool long ago.”

The other one stowed away their rimless steel helmets and kneepads and placed the weapons, three MP 28s with side magazines onto the back seat of the Horch. “They’re spies”, he said. “They don’t have a shred of dignity, just look at them. Shitting and pissing where they stand. You can bump ’em off if you like!”

He offered him a pistol, but Walter turned back to face his superior. “I wish to report: These are not enemies,” he said. “I know them, corporal, we were housed here recently. That is the miller and his blind wife. Their daughter, Boglárka, was married to a German, a Danube Swabian, who was killed in action near Budapest. She cooked for the entire troop. And the other guy herds the goats.”

The man raised his chin and narrowed his eyes, a toothpick between his lips. “What? A driver wants to tell me how to do my job? Where are the goats? What goats? I don’t see any goats ...” He pointed to the house with the smashed windows. “Let me show you what they have in their cellar, my boy. If he’s a miller, then I am a dead loaf.”

He pushed the map into the leather pouch dangling from his chest and looked for his men. “Let’s go, damn it, we need to move on. Fetch the left-over schnapps from the kitchen and let those birds fly!”

Wind turned the leaves in the trees to show their silver underside and again a quiet “Zsuzsa!” could be heard. The bald soldier lit a cigarette. “How old are you?” he asked kindly. “Seventeen? Eighteen? Just out of school, right? Not a scratch on you. Have you ever bumped anyone off?” Walter said no and the other furrowed his brow. “Really? My God, what exactly do they teach you ... baking? Well, come along, I’ll show you.”

He pulled his chair into the barn, placed it behind the hunchback and climbed up. When he loosened the rope, Fredo, that was the goatherd’s name, moved his cracked lips without making a sound; a whitish film had formed on his half-opened eyes. “With this vermin you have to make sure the knot is at the front,” the man said and turned the noose. “If it’s at the back, then only the neck breaks, a matter of two seconds. But here, under his chin, the bastard benefits more. He will remain alive a little longer and will groan away nicely.” He smiled at him. “You simply owe that to his victims.”

Getting down from the chair, he nodded invitingly, but Walter stayed in the doorway of the barn, crossed his arms. “Lord, what victims are you talking about! They’re not partisans!” he

repeated and swallowed; his throat was dry, his voice feeble. “They are normal civilians, nice people, they let us sleep in their front room.

They tended our wounded and fed the pack animals! You can’t just liquidate them!”

Then the other guy, the one with the neckerchief, pushed him aside and said: “Stop blabbering man! All it needs now is for you to start crying. Partisans, Jews, whores, who cares? Ever heard of martial law? Come on now, one each ...”

The wobbliest of the three stools broke into pieces when he kicked it out from underneath the miller, and for a second it looked like the man, who gave a surprised sound, was going to fall face forward onto the stone floor; the white hair floated upwards. Then the rope caught and jolted him into an upright position with a force that seemed out of proportion with the frail old man – as if an invisible force, presumably from high above the grain store, was pulling up the rope with a jerk. Only when the body had stopped swinging and had spun once more on its axis did the shoes slip off his feet.

The wooden clogs made a clear sound on the concrete floor, and the goatherd, lids scrunched up tightly, was already swinging. A gurgling and groaning sound emanated from his thick throat and the bare feet were peddling through the air. For a while the storm trooper with the bald head, still holding the stool in his fist, studied the distorted face, which reminded one more of a whining child rather than a hanging man, despite the stubble. He smacked his lips disapprovingly and said: “Don’t be so greedy, man! Let go. Let it all go ...”

But Fredo did not want to die and it was probably his deformities, the calloused vertebrae, which prevented the noose from closing completely. Twitching, he ground his teeth and sought support for his ever-faster peddling feet, spittle bubbles burst before his nose, and the other man threw the stool aside and stepped in front of his victim. “What an obstinate bugger,” he mumbled. “He does not get what life is all about, does he? At some point it’s all over, doesn’t matter how much of a fuss you kick up. We all have to go.”

Cigarette in the corner of his mouth, he pulled on some gloves and waited a couple more heartbeats. Ash fell off the end of the cigarette, and then it looked as if the wide-shouldered soldier was embracing the goatherd – which ultimately he was: without paying any attention to the drenched trousers, he gripped the goatherd’s hips, so as to break his neck in two or three powerful movements, a downward tug, causing the beam to crack.

The pigeons had gone silent. Light grey and white feathers floated down from the loft and swirled back up in the draught, and the men turned to look at Walter. “That was it,” the bald man said, fists on his hips. “No big deal, right? Something everyone should try.

Come here, the woman is yours.”

Fredo now also hung motionless, a little dark blood in the corner of his mouth, and although the storm troopers were his superiors, Walter tapped his forehead – a quick, involuntary movement, his hand shaking. He turned and went to the car. “Oh my!” the man with the silk scarf called out. “We’ve got a right pious one here. Doesn’t want to dirty his soul. Can I come to you for confession? – Never mind, as you like, the old woman can just stay put. The rats will have her.”

Detonations could be heard from the mountains, the echo of fighting in the valley. After all the parachutes, bottles and ammunition bags had been placed in the boot of the car and the men had sat down next to their commander on the back seat, Walter turned on the ignition and looked in the mirror. Smoke was rising from the house, and the corporal polished the shaft of his machine pistol with his sleeve and blew the dust from the perforated barrel jacket, which made a whistling sound.

They had actually left the blind woman standing there between the hanged men, who had blood running out of their eyes and faeces and urine dripping from their feet. Shadows on the sunken eyelids, the grey face furrowed by wrinkles, the woman laid her head to the side as far as the noose would allow and moved her lipless mouth – or was it her shaking? The legs of the stool shook. Then he heard her calling quietly, again and again, it did not actually sound urgent or panicked, but just the same as she had probably done all her life – as if her husband were in the next room: “Kristóf?”

The voice was surprisingly high, almost girlish, and Walter put the car into gear and drove out onto the road. The heavy car’s leaf springs groaned. “They always get lucky, the womenfolk,” the commander said. “Her partisan friends are probably lurking in the bushes and will get her down so that she can cook some goulash soup ...” He bent forward and tapped the triangle on Walter’s sleeve, the corps colour. “Hey, you noble Samaritan, what I always wanted to know: why do strapping young lads like yourselves duck out with the jam stealers and blanket stackers in light-blue? Why are you transporting bread rolls to the front and not fighting with the troops?”

Walter shrugged his shoulder, but said nothing. He drove through a puddle, the axle made a cracking sound, water gushed up in front of the wayside cross. “Well, because we have a drivers licence,” August answered in his stead and scanned the heavens with the field glasses. “Right before left, even in war, corporal.”

The man laughed, a barking sound, and slapped August’s helmet with a flat hand. “Not bad,

my son ... you're a right clever one, aren't you? Student, I expect; recognised that straight away. But they will kick your butt too, don't you worry. – How are you equipped on the estate?"

August quickly looked over to Walter, who shifted up a gear and said: "Supply situation A, hospital operations. There are beds for the senior staff. It used to be one of General Balck's command posts; there's an officer's mess in the residence's former library, with a samovar and armchairs. And you can play pool."

"Good God!" the other man called out and removed his artificial nose, which was fastened onto the bone with silver clips, flapping it out in the airflow. "Did you hear that? So this is how the supply troops live. We sleep in our enemies' guts, and they have beds! And books! We'll have a really good browse then, won't we? I always had a penchant for Karl May. Whoever trained under Winnetou sees more than the rest." He fastened the prosthesis again, put a cigarette between his lips and casually asked: "But seriously boys, if you are so well equipped with all that luxury, why on earth do we need this old stool? Why are we dragging it behind us?"

Brow furrowed, Walter braked suddenly and turned around. August, too, shifted his helmet up his forehead. The bald storm trooper scraped the hollow groove of his bayonet clean with his thumbnail, the other one looked out into the countryside, with a grin, and their commander flicked his lighter.

The old woman's stool, now just three-legged, lay in a puddle a few meters behind the car, and Walter tried to breathe deeply while he got out and went to the tow hook. His knife was blunt, he bared his teeth when he cut the rope, and he squinted upwards to where a narrow trail of smoke drifted westwards. But the barn was no longer visible from down here, just a bit of the mill tower, its destroyed cap, and pigeons with their neck feathers ruffled by the wind.