



Sweet Speed

David Zane

They did what they were told.

They did it well.

Is that a crime?

Since it was complicity or death.

Their Leaders needed to be sure they'd do anything.

Absolutely sure.

The World could only watch and shudder.

Chapter 1

The ground begins an angry rumble.

Faster and faster in this darkened tomb of stale sticky air.

Arno has his place though, right where it will all eventually end.

Under his feet the vibrations start to really pick up... like always unfortunately. The steel tracks start to really screech something awful off of every wall, tightening his whole body. Arno

remains glued to the concrete because he swears he can feel electricity going through him...

starting at his helpless legs. He knows he's stone-faced while this is all happening... utterly

hopeless while this roar grows and the single light appears down the long black tunnel...

faintly... always faintly. His heart beats out of his chest because of those memories... because of

the deepest memories that will never leave him... because of all those memories that will always

be triggered at the same damn time going back more than half his waking life! Arno can't control

his legs... he tries... but he can never control the quivering that travels through him like a virus.

One would think that after having to perform this ritual at 7:25 of every working day of the

week; the light quickly beams brighter and brighter as the seconds pass like a blade. Arno

clenches his jaw because he can't stop the memories; it is a deafening noise... a horrible noise.

He can never get used to it... ever! All these years standing straight as an oak at the farthest

end... because it's the only place Mr. Arno Klein can survive the horror - amazing what this place

still does to him. Arno hates having to lie. He hates that fright is still in total and complete

control. Arno hates that he's never gotten over it, that he's never had a damn choice about any of

it, at least not a conscious one! Arno's just trying to survive from another lifetime ago; suddenly

a blast of humid wind shoots through the tunnel. The train's single light follows, shining

everything up like its 10,000 volts... or Dresden. "It's almost over", Arno keeps reminding

himself while wiping his now soaked brow with a handkerchief that sits always-ready in his

breast pocket. The rumbling reaches its absolute loudest; there is always a spare just in case.

Like usual the platform is full; rush hour in Berlin looks like any other working city in Europe...

the train slowly creeps to a stop... full of blurry-eyed humans ready to assume their robotic-roles

in order to make a wage. "Pardon me", to survive until, "excuse me", until it can be repeated...

and repeated. The German People are very organized in war or peace... unfortunately.

The whistle blows warning everyone to clear the doorway; the last entrants scramble to push a

few feet further-in despite the Mob's apathy. Arno grabs a piece of metal... and looks around

quickly, making sure no one catches his curiosity. He's shy. The packed subway couldn't care if

he is or if he isn't... it begins to crawl forward towards the next station. A bead of sweat rolls

down the side of Arno's face from the screech of metal on metal. The train sways back and forth

as it keeps screeching... everyone that is standing grips a little tighter on whatever they're

holding on to. The cabin periodically goes dark... everyone rubs shoulders as the speed picks up.

Life cares little about One's soul-destroying trauma; Arno made a promise... he just has to get to work.

It's been said that the war was won by British brains.

American brawn.

And Russian lives.

“ATTENTION! ATTENTION!”, blares the loudspeakers, “STATIONS EVERYONE! SCHNELL! SCHNELL!”, our Commandant yells in the most frightening tone for a twenty year-old.

The noise of hundreds of scurrying boots responds immediately.

In less than ninety seconds flat everyone’s assembled in the courtyard in long straight lines.

Perfectly-groomed and wide-eyed to take in what comes next from our Aryan leader.

It is an amazing silence.

The Commandant paces back and forth in short deliberate squeaking steps like he is alone... not appearing to be in any kind of a rush to break this extreme stillness that I’m now trapped in... it is very strange to be amongst such obedience. “You are the best and brightest of the great Aryan race.” He stops his pacing... and faces us all, “You are the rightful custodians of the human race.” Then he starts back up.

His stiff shiny full-length black leather scapes in the pre-dawn incandescent... twenty feet in either intimidating direction... along with plenty of medals... only our eyes move watching him go from side to side. Operation Barbarossa was what he was calling it - Lebensraum... or “Space for Life” was the reason why.

“EVERYBODY REACH IN AND TAKE OUT ONE PERVITIN!”

We all respond.

Then wait for the next order from our Man-God; Germans have enough obedience to fill the oceans and more.

At the end of every line is a Lieutenant, a raging blue-eyed Acolyte who finished his three years and was deemed most competent by ‘The System’ - that invisible belief by a Military that one’s heart and mind are both in the right place, and therefore will follow every order regardless of any personal notions. Armies are formed with such ideology, have been since the beginning of time - but to win a war requires more... lots more!! One only knows that if they’ve ever been in one, fighting that is... otherwise it’s just damn Hollywood.

“IN ORDER WE WILL NOW SWALLOW.”

Pervitin made us as alert as litres of coffee - so incredibly zoned-in to each one of our many exacting responsibilities that have been repeated and repeated at least twelve hours a day. It was a pill that we took before each battle.

My turn.

Every one of my worries disappeared within minutes of taking this miracle little pill... I mean really disappeared, vaporized in fact. Making me clear as a bell and able to repeat my training to the tee; Germans expect perfection in everything they do.

Checking to avoid a growing contraband market - it comes with the obedience - opening my mouth proudly to show my Lieutenant an empty orifice.

We were United & Strong. None of us cared what was in it.

Every time I ride the train... *loud screeching heading into the next stop...* which I’ve no choice in order to get to my well-respected, yet modestly paid bookkeeping job across town. My mind always wanders back to the past; never have I been able to stop it.

The doors open into a crowded station.

Curtail its power; maybe if I'm lucky that day. You see memories like these seem to have their own weighty agenda.

The doors close after a quick stop.

Now did I think going to war was going to be tough? Sure, I'm no fool... guns aren't made for the supply depot.

Gripping the bar tighter as the train picks up speed.

It's just that these scars... well these scars run deep - patting down my fleeing perspiration as this cold steel tube with little luxury screeches and sways... and goes dark for a few seconds at a time. My scars are the kind that will never leave me; they are a daily battle that's for sure - especially those first few agonizing stops. One day at a time is my Philosophy - putting my handkerchief back in my breast pocket for now - I just try and will myself back to normal. I've seen way too much.

Down time throughout the barracks is always a barrel of fun, there's always ground-shaking laughing going on somewhere amongst the rows and rows of double-decker beds. Some are playing dominoes... or cards for keeps... while some are merely in a group of two playing a pensive game of chess. Germans love to concentrate.

Some are horizontal on their bunks reading peacefully, or penning an 'I-miss-you' letter to family or that special fraulein back home.

"Ah come on not an eight", throwing it down with disgust, "that just cost me four beers."

The crowd of big-eyed onlookers grin as I exit; the next one quickly pushes in to try his luck. It's a scrum... nothing less. After a full day of hiking up a mountain in full combat gear, which included a twenty-five pound survival pack strapped to our backs - we're all just really happy to finally be finished with another 80 degree day in the Third Reich's Army. Although Third Reich... Storm-Troopers... Hitler's Army - whatever one calls it - the end of the day also means the end of us being Soldiers. In our civilian clothes every one of us. "What I wouldn't give for a night with Marlene Dietrich instead of all you smelly mugs." The group cackles. "Yaaa right... like she would give you a second look."

We weren't ideologues... far from it.

"You couldn't even get her to notice you if you were lying dead on the street."

We could have cared less about natural selection... murder... rape... hate-filled rage... Jews - we were 18, 19, 22 tops in my squad, an age where mortality is nothing but an older Person's problem. We were being trained like one trains to be an Engineer or a Carpenter... as crazy as that sounds now.

Guess that's why we made the best Soldiers.

When the doors open... people exit and enter with purpose.

Twenty-five... thirty seconds.

Then the whistle blows.

Arno grabs tightly... and prepares amongst the sullen faces. In fifty-six years he's found a seat only a handful of times for his ride in; Berliner's don't have the luxury of riding to work in their

comfy cars like in other parts of the world. And in those early days after the war there wasn't even a subway! Took me a good two hours through the rubble and the stench and the many broken faces... it was horrible... worse than horrible. "Arno... Arno...", a smiling face slithers the crowd... "Good morning Arno."

"Good morning Emil."

"What a glorious day."

"It is that."

Always an upbeat time summer is; makes all forms of small talk that much more palatable.

"Me and the Missus are going away this weekend... up to the country."

Screeching.

"We stay in this wonderful bed and breakfast in Carwitz that's so Kaiser-Wilhelm-Bavarian."

Swaying.

"The schnitzel is to die for."

I resent his routine of lightness, but always remain polite - it's only for a few stops.

"How are Celia and the kids... and the grandkids?"

Some of the seats shake something awful as the train starts up... quality is not part of my ride... it's merely transportation... with plenty of jerking.

"They're good, everybody's good thanks."

Funny how when the train gets to top speed the seats stop shaking?

"We should go out for the festival?"

Every German knows what Oktoberfest means... it's like Jesus' birthday in other parts of the world. "Just name the time and place." Only with lots of alcohol and endless 'Sound of Music' costumes. "That's great, just great... I'll let you know", moving closer to the door. "Have a good day Arno", he fights to exit through the chaos.

He then turns back for one last smile through the glass.

Emil was too young to fight.

Damn lucky.

Blood surging.

Heart pounding.

Possessing a feeling that can out-think and over-power anything that might choose to stand in our way; a few hours before dawn and four thousand of the absolute best from the Master Race are feeling the same. "Squad 47 over here!", our Lieutenant screams.

God Bless Pervitin.

After fighting through the mayhem... we assemble in perfect formation in front of our barracks.

"We are crossing the border in three hours from now... everybody synchronize your watches... it is exactly 3:28 am."

3:28 am on June 22nd 1941 – synchronized.

"Stations! Schnell! Stations!"

Today is officially unique; Operation Barbarossa was sold to us as the rightful answer to a Master Race that needed room to expand its' greatness, plain and simple. All of us are running to our stations with the incredible focus of this 'Master Race'. Oh, and we were also told that those Godless Cossacks to our east were standing in our way.

Europe needed our Leadership - The Thousand Year Reich was the answer... the only answer. I'm breathing heavy, but don't need to stop in the least. "Europe would thank us later", they kept telling us.

Putting on my goggles... and then my hat - I was in the Panzer division that blitzkrieg-ed an awesome trail.

Jumping up, and then in.

Which was vital for providing an assured trouncing for the good of all those Soldiers that had to fight this war on their feet.

My head quickly gets buried in a stack of papers... I've moved the longneck light to exactly where I need it. This is my job; since the second I landed in this steel box I've been studying our orders. I work the co-ordinates for our crew of three; numbers on a page have always been fine with me. Hans handles the driving... all twenty years of him, while Klaus works the big guns... at nineteen. The foot Soldiers follow a few kilometers back.

Hearing the engine begin its' rumble.

Killing and destroying anything we might have missed.

Our crew of three quickly prepares to get into our Squad's formidable formation.

Nothing to the East matters to any Third Reich Soldier... it is only collateral damage, 'things' in the way of meeting our goals, of getting our rightful 'Lebensraum'. How else is a kid to be sold such work? Remember this was Europe... where hatreds had been running deep for close to a thousand years. As Hans moves us ahead with all the other tanks there is a deafening roar.

Americans could never understand such things. The smell of gasoline is everywhere as our Squad starts to move faster. Our job is to leave nothing standing but the bridges.

Our tank is now close to speeding through the open fields that go on forever.

This was vital.

Little girls were to be raised to be selfless to the cause... submissive to the required Paternalism of the task. Our Leaders spoke often, and forcefully, of the need for our women to do their duty and procreate often. Boys were another story altogether. From birth they were to be reminded over and over that they were special - both physically and mentally; but most importantly they were never to be poisoned with the weighty entanglements of feminine emotions. Future of the Empire; these Aryan men were to be clear-minded and wholly pragmatic. Mothers were warned... and rewarded. Like vitamins and minerals for the body; this was my only nourishment when my uniform was either on or off. What were my Peers and I suppose to do in such a place? In such a mindset?

Hindsight... huh.

One needs to experience human hell to understand... period! I was merely one piece of a Squad which - rumbling the countryside at close to forty kilometers - was being depended on to do a job. "Take a left at the bridge ahead... it should be there in roughly a thousand meters", my face stays buried in paper. "OK, but I can't see shit in this darkness", Hans shouts above the noise. "The sun should be up in less than ten minutes", Klaus pipes in. The rumbling that 400 Panzer-4 Tanks creates is something that no human can ever erase from their mind.

Rumbling.

It is a shaking that.

Rumbling.

Starting at your feet.

Permeates every fibre of your being without mercy; I know it's the reason why that subway always releases those God-awful memories. "Turn here", I yell over the rumbling. For almost two years now our Battalion has been fighting both day and night... but yet this battle was feeling different?? I keep one eye on the road, and one on my mess of papers. "Where to now Arno?"
I could feel this battle was going to be way bigger.

"I beg your pardon."

Whistle-blowing.

"Sorry."

Doors closing.

Smirks from new faces that happen to randomly catch my eyes... in return I project a forced grin, a happy grin - that's all anybody would have seen from me over the years. I know how to control my emotions... that's what war teaches you. But not all of us succeeded in that. No Sir. Some never made it out between the ears; which is God-awful when it happens. Trauma does unspeakable things to the mind, to what the eyes see. Every morning without fail the vast majority of us on this always-crowded train look like we'd rather be somewhere else.

Screeching.

Somewhere above ground of course. I look back into the horde and think something strange... wondering for a second what these fellow Berliners must see when they look back at me. I know they definitely don't see a Soldier... a Soldier that was promoted many times for his performance in 'The Greatest Fighting Force' the world has ever seen - for four years it sure as hell was. What they see now is a banal old man, not a decorated Soldier... not a War Hero. My God that man hasn't been alive for some time... at least I keep telling myself that. War keeps some things alive forever... and kills other things right away; the Sands of Time have always baffled me.

What we were.

What we eventually became.

I'm not the only one. People have a Past.

"Bloor Station", comes across the speakers.

By this point in my commute I've been able to negotiate with my runaway emotions... barter with my exploding phobias... and make friends with my inner catalogue from hell.

But there are more Stations to go.

I stand glued in the last subway car, since being in the middle of the crowd is never a good thing at all. I catch my reflection in the glass... this cute old man is far from banal.

Chapter 2

Blitzkrieg.

Shock and Awe.

Smouldering Landscapes.

I wasn't wrong.

Operation Barbarossa was the largest.

BOOM BOOM.

The most destructive.

BOOM BOOM BOOM.

The most complete military assault that had ever taken place in human history.

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM.

It made Poland look like child's play. When daylight hit, my Squad and hundreds just like mine were itching to show the enemy we were prepared and ready... oh were we ready! Explosions all around our tank... the constant whistling of the low-flying Luftwaffe above our heads dropping their payloads up ahead to soften any resistance... we just kept rolling over anything and everything in our path... soldiers, animals, buildings... anything with the unfortunate luck of being in the way of 'The Greatest Fighting Force Ever'. Something we were told at least a hundred times a day. Straight was the only direction I pointed this tank. "Take the wheel", I force Klaus. Curiosity had a hold over me that's for sure... I move quickly after giving Klaus the wheel. Hans is reading some magazine in the corner like we've won the war already. I move fast towards the opening, and stick my head out the top to see the Russian countryside. Instantly my eyes freeze, as does the rest of my body... that smell - spinning around to take it all in. To this day I'll never forget that stench... that utter devastation we inflicted on those Godless Cossacks. Feeling like throwing up, but knowing I can't - I bite down hard against the urge... trying like hell to keep my stomach... while staring into a sight of burning fire... of putrid fire; I'd be a deficient Aryan if I lost my stomach now. They would tease me forever.

"I want to see", Klaus lunges towards me after sliding my shocked frame down the narrow opening.

When he returns a few minutes later he says nothing.

The best Soldiers must deny the undeniable... develop a chronic psychosis to do our jobs well - to conquer and conquer only... and keep conquering. Twenty-five million out of sixty million lives lost during the war sadly belonged to Russia. Millions more after the war, but that's another story - not our fault.

Me and my Squad learns fast... that firing our massive 75 millimeter high-explosive shells is an easy way to destroy everything in our way... so that the troops behind us can have an easy time of it. Sparing them a high-casualty count, and hopefully being commended for it... Hitler's Army loved pomp and circumstance... part of the insidious molding process I see now as a man who's walked this earth seventy-nine years. The last fifty-five of which have been wholly remorseful - not like that naive twenty year-old; that person had no God-damn chance at all.

By dusk our Squad had travelled almost a hundred miles into Soviet territory... a confounding number considering we'd budgeted for twenty-five... thirty tops.

“Take that you Godless Cossacks”, we’d sing after setting up camp, and after the alcohol really started to flow. “Nobody messes with the Master Race”, dancing in jubilation... twenty... thirty... sometimes fifty of us making all kinds of noise. Commanders included. When the Pervitin wore off the bottles always seemed to magically appear ready to fly open. Cases and cases embedded in the supply chain along with bread, milk, coffee, meat, vegetables, and sweets... Germans love their sweets. Logistically perfect; it did seem as if it was pre-planned or something.

My eyes widen all by themselves.

The whistle blows.

Not him again.

And then the doors slowly close.

The mornings he enters my car my heart always gets an unwanted kick-start, forcing me to start all over again... to calm myself down all over again... to prepare once more for that unconditional hug I’m going to get in six stops. As he approaches I grow anxious; the worst part about days like this is that I never know when he’s going to show up. My heart starts to really speed up... I can feel my palms sliding on the metal.

If Addicts are anything they’re predictably unpredictable.

“I need a drink!”

“You need a shower.”

Everyone laughs at me.

“And then another!”, dancing, “and another!... and another!”, I’d scream as we’d continue singing verses that became as much of a battle cry as any other amongst these well-tuned Warriors that needed to blow off steam. Speeding through Nations encountering feeble, even downright cowardly defenses, sure did wonders for our mounting egos. These were Epic Triumphs. Epic Aryan Triumphs. Even the highest-ranking Officers in our Battalion drank and sang with us under the stars. “Danka Feeneshka.” Pervitin by day. Alcohol at night.

“Feeneshka Danka.”

Merry into the wee hours.

Maybe we were the Master Race.

His red-eyes and disheveled clothing heads my way, the stench of alcohol fills the car... as he gets closer... there’s little doubt he spent the night in those rags. “You’re almost there”, I keep whispering as he stops only ten feet away. Turning away, grabbing the bar tighter as anxiety performs a complete takeover of my muscles; I force myself to picture her sweet face... her Angel face. It’s been over fifty-five years since I’ve had a drink... *focusing*... I mean a real all-night bender... thinking of her fantastic smile. I don’t count the nursing of one beer an entire night in order to make everybody around me happy. Of her porcelain skin.

Germans love their beer way too much to avoid alcohol completely.
Of her arms wrapped around me.
I've gotten good at spilling the odd one on the floor.
I don't move... not one muscle... I remain fixed at the glass; I've hated myself a long time for having such weakness.

Lately I've been obsessed with writing letters home... we all have. We've been whining constantly to the Camp's Doctor and all the Nurses about needing more Pervitin... to anybody who can score us more Pervitin really.

"We need to stop this madness", is what we should have been screaming. Instead, amazingly enough, we'd become hollowed-out Junkies while celebrating our magnanimous Conquests. Hallucinations.

Dizziness.

Even uncontrollable bouts of the sweats.

Some shot themselves, fatally even, in their psychotic hazes.

"Perhaps you can get me more Pervitin so that I can have a back-up supply."

"If at all possible can u PLEASE send me more Pervitin."

I'd write home every other day like a crazed lunatic.

"Protect the lines! Make sure you protect the railway lines!", our Lieutenant would yell a hundred times a day during drills.

"Protect Pervitin", was all we heard. "Protect the supply of Pervitin!", with our black zombie-like eyes.

Only after the war did I learn the nation's top Medical Officers were warning often enough about the serious and very debilitating side-effects of this drug.

Hindsight... huh.

They sure did creep up on you.

Padding myself down.

Screech.

Trying to repel this trigger that's come so close to me.

Swaying.

Making sure not to have any eye-contact with him... or anybody else; all this steeliness matters little when matched against what's buried deep inside me, my body never forgets that I too needed to drink every day to numb the pain. We all did. Pervitin to kill, maim... completely destroy beyond a reasonable doubt. Then like clockwork, copious amounts of alcohol back at our barracks to forget; some greatest fighting force ever.

"Franzen Station."

One after the other these were the coldest days I'd ever felt in my life - not that the past few weeks were all that balmy. Trying day after day to move deeper into enemy territory... NEVER will I ever forget the head-to-toe pain of those bitter wind chills.

Sitting in my tank freezing because I couldn't bear to go outside and face how unrelenting it was out there; the human body makes plenty of noise when it can't stop shivering. Every time I exited the porthole to get a better look at the battlefield I was slapped sober by that incessant wind. This place is not fit for humans, I can't stop thinking, and those Godless Cossacks are tougher than I thought! From meeting such spirited resistance we all got deflated. At best our clothes were good for a colder than usual autumn - not this Russian winter from hell... this Arctic hell! My body's shaking so bad my muscles ache from the fatigue. What were they thinking sending us into this frozen tundra without the proper gear?? These damn Russians don't seem to mind. For the first time since boot-camp I begin to worry... I mean really worry that our Master Race might not be so 'Master'. Last night, like so many others of late, but especially last night, was the last straw. An eerie noise suddenly filling-up the air... nothing to do with the fighting - it felt like a million pin pricks on my skin. It was Gunther running around camp yelling hysterically... "THE MOSQUITOES ARE COMING! THE MOSQUITOES ARE COMING!"

Yes Mosquitoes.

It doesn't help one bit covering my ears. Minus 30 degrees here on the eastern front and a foaming-at-the-mouth-feverishly-shaking Gunther is screaming about tropical insects!

A million and one pricks and growing by the hour.

When he eventually does sit down, or more like collapses, I can see his body shaking violently, not from the cold, but from the withdrawal. His pupils are black like saucers; I didn't think he'd make it to the end of the week. I had my own battles too, as every man in the Squad did; but a once sweet and innocent blue-eyed blond named Gunther was now the poster boy for what was happening to us all. Hardly Aryan-like; even our Officers grew flaccid and unpredictable.

Fighting a resistance getting tougher by the day; Pervitin was now being handed out every other day... and the alcohol was being distributed by the glass.

This continued for days... a few small skirmishes here, there. Then quiet, painfully quiet.

Running low on every type of supply that a fighting force needs to be victorious; I could see the fire leave every one of us from General to Private.

And I could hear the enemy getting closer.

Doors open.

A passing glance at the incoming herd... tall, short, skinny, plump... most waste little time racing to get the few seats that suddenly become available. Others simply plant themselves in a spot, and reach firmly to hold.

Whistle blowing.

Then fix to a newspaper folded small. Packed like sardines; the train starts to budge. My fingers wrap tightly around the metal. The air of discomfort fills this cold metal tube.

The first months of Cossack-routing saw us occupy hundreds of miles of Enemy territory - and with it total dominion over millions and millions of people. Tired. Starving. Disabled. Very Sick People. Our orders were crystal clear; herd them into railway cars by the thousands. Then hear them scream for days. I forced myself not to think for even one second about how they were going to survive being packed in there so tight... like cattle.

“SCHNELL!”

My Squad leads them to the Station platform.

“SCHNELL!”

Wood batons are swinging indiscriminately, bodies are dropping from the direct contact.

“SCHNELL!”

German Shepherds keep barking with their teeth dripping.

“SCHNELL!”

Some Prisoners are being shot trying to flee.

Our orders were to round up the local population and tag them under three categories...

Worker - Jew - Extra... then send them back into Aryan-occupied land.

It took three years after the war ended for me to find out what EXTRA meant; straight to the gas chamber.

Is it a valid excuse to say I had no idea? All of us heard their screams in the smouldering summer heat... seeing arms reach outside the small barbed-wire opening begging for food... water... even air. Is it a valid excuse to say I was merely performing my task as a Soldier?

“I Said Choose God Damn It!”, the broad-shouldered square-jawed Colonel barks.

“I beg of you... please”, the broken-down woman pleads with tears all over her face.

“Choose!”, showing no emotion.

“I can’t...”, sobbing hysterically.

“Choose or I’ll shoot one. I don’t care which one”, pulling out his pistol... a shiny Luger.

“I can’t... I can’t... I can’t”, wailing and begging.

BANG... my insides jump. The woman leaves her young daughter and races towards her son, crying over him as blood pours out of his head.

“Take him away”, the Colonel orders as if removing a sack of potatoes.

Chapter 3

He's around my age... *locking eyes*... he's both tall and has a good posture, a weathered face from probably being outside too much, and a lack of cranial hirsuteness; it is a glance of rare familiarity.

The train starts to speed up. He grins back half-heartedly at my deep stare.

Screech.

It is as if we've shared the same burden of memories.

Swaying.

The eyes tell all; I've just spotted a fellow soldier from Hitler's Army.

Shaking wildly from both the cold and the painful withdrawals... moaning in pain like a child and unable to stand... we are all galaxies away from the rapacious bunch that steamrolled the land only months earlier. Thank God nobody could see that we could have easily been overrun by a group of kindergarten kids. As dawn slowly approaches something is telling me that, like back on June 22nd... this day was going to be unique. Bundled up in front of only embers; nobody cared about the fire.

At first light... *BOOM BOOM BOOM*. The firing starts... *BOOM BOOM BOOM*. Piercing the quiet... *BOOM BOOM BOOM*. And hitting us from every direction... *BOOM BOOM BOOM*.

"Incoming! Incoming!", the Lieutenant yells.

You'd think we'd have cared enough to run for cover... especially with hot shrapnel flying everywhere. In the grips of a full-on offensive by our disrespected foe... some of my fellow soldiers were now screaming in pain from having their limbs ripped off by that hot shrapnel. As smoke billowed... most of us just plopped down in the snow as if there was no fight left... the fight or flight response looked like it had been cut from our DNA. My tired eyes were reporting back to a wayward mind that was in its' own death grip... all of us preparing to die right here and now... I swear on my Mother's life the chaos seemed like it was happening somewhere else.

Cuddled up in the snow... for the first time in my life I was feeling nothing, absolutely nothing! How could I ever explain to my kids that I was part of... excuse me that I'd become a whacked-out Junkie who had his Soul ripped out at twenty?? All of us hopped-up on 'Sweet Speed', we affectionately and very naively called it, taking them like one would vitamin c or something.

I'm shivering on the frozen ground and I can't get up.

Those first few years on the battlefield made us Aryan Gods.

I can't even get up to save myself.

The Master Race was such an indescribable feeling.

I'm hallucinating better times.

The night before battle we were so incredibly excited, not an ounce of trepidation, not anywhere in Camp. I trusted the man beside me, and he trusted me... and we all trusted our Leaders. We would assemble like clockwork, synchronize our watches, pop our pills... then proudly show our mini-Eichmann's an empty mouth.

Then we were off to conquer; we couldn't get there fast enough!

I'm in and out of lucidity.

These secrets have stayed with me... every God-damn one of them.

Hindsight... huh.

Continuing to stare intermittently, as if being pulled by an invisible string... I make sure he doesn't catch the curiosity in my eyes; I quickly turn back into the tinted glass. He catches me a few times in the reflection... and grins strangely, before going back to his reading. You see someone around your age, around your height... you can't help but wonder?? Ask any Judge or Policeman - they know how much People try, but the eyes never lie.

"GET UP EVERY ONE OF YOU! SCHNELL! SCHNELL! YOU ARE SOLDIERS IN THE THIRD REICH! GET UP! SCHNELL!" , hearing his boots collide with the frozen earth in my surreal haze. "SCHNELL! SCHNELL!" The sound gets closer, "EVERYONE GET UP!", and closer in these long trenches. "GET UP!", he's now in front of me. I don't budge... rather I can't. "I SAID GET UP!"

My eyes open... and look at his raging face. Then they turn away. Then back. Then away. I'm hollow; shame is not something an Addict gets to keep. "ARNO KLEIN YOU ARE GOING TO GET UP NOW", seconds before I feel his hand clamp down on my collar. He heaves me up in a testosterone-fuelled rage. "SARGENT ARNO KLEIN." My Lieutenant then slaps me across the face. Opening my eyes from the harsh reverberation... a skin and bones ragdoll... he slaps me again. Pitiful. And again. Gutless. Guess I don't look like a Third Reich Soldier. "HERE..." , handing me a pill, "TAKE THIS AND REPORT TO YOUR POSITION!"

With barely enough strength to swallow; I put the Pervitin in my mouth, and wash it down with a fistful of snow.

Within minutes my legs return, and return hard. I'm able to put on my jacket, and gloves, and my goggles and hat; the pain is miraculously gone. Everyone is now running to their positions. I imagine my pupils are just as big and black... *moving through the mayhem...* and my ears have smoke flying out of them.

Finally I find my tank - and take one last look before mounting my beautiful Panzer. Even the sky looks different now.

"Glad you could make it Arno", Hans is already there.

Grabbing my papers the second I'm settled. "Gentlemen... two tickets for the war please", Klaus slides in with overwhelming lightness. Hearing the engine start... and getting a handle on our co-ordinates. I casually look up at two faces reflecting back the fearlessness of Pervitin. Ten minutes ago we were glued to the snow begging for death... and now. "OK men we're off to kill us some Cossacks", I feel great. "Fucking right because we are the Master Race", my sidekick replies heading into battle. "Yes, the Master Race", I whisper to myself, "the Master fuckin Race."

After the war it was terrible for any man over six feet tall and fewer than thirty, they were gawked at with such anger... such extreme resentment.

Screech.

It was as if they'd been responsible for the Lebensraum policy all by themselves? Or the murdering of all the Jews?

Swaying forward.

The train stops suddenly in the darkness between stations. The interior lights stay on... barely... they all keep flickering with no pattern. I aim towards him because his face looks so familiar, any man over six feet tall, criteria for being accepted into Hitler's Elite Troops, always draws my deepest curiosity. It's as if the shame can be transmitted through our stares. I've seen him before? Didn't he? Who are you kidding Arno, the whole thing was a blur, my logical mind screams. Wasn't he on the eastern front? Like an old fool I keep trying.

After the awkwardness of my memory's runaway motor, we usually end up staring at the ground in order to stop the pain; reticent doesn't even begin to cover it... not even close, it's deeper than merely being sad. What we saw. What we did. We were around Monsters. We became Monsters. This is when I need to forcefully stuff every last memory back into my deepest chamber marked - *War is hell* - because I know it'll never stop.

Living in paper-thin timber shacks crammed with double-decker bunks... and not one damn mattress, not even straw! Those Savages! In freezing conditions on barely-starvation rations while working from dawn 'til dusk on back-breaking tasks as they laughed at us. "The Master Fuckin' Race", cracking rocks in the quarry of our barbed-wire P.O.W. Camp, "the master Fuckin' Race", I can't get out of my head with every exhausted swing of the mallet, "the master fuckin' race."

Blind obedience never ends well.

When it was over... I mean really over, life remained a living hell - worse than the actual war. The complete physical ruins, the total gutting of the Aryan psyche, to say nothing of the deep emotional scars that had been left on an entire world. I can still remember the day; it was a Wednesday, a cloudy dreary nothing-special Wednesday. After the peace was signed... and after finally making it home from that God-forsaken Cossack land of crap and more crap. I can still feel it like it was yesterday. Finding a private spot deep in the forest; I was hoping, truly hoping, that this was going to mean something... a type of healing. Taking my tattered uniform out of my backpack; unfortunately life's not that simple.

Once I got the fire going I unfolded it... and threw it in, there wasn't an ounce of hesitation. "The master fucking race", I barked while sitting patiently... watching every fibre go up in smoke... all of it... turning it into nothing but smoke and ash. For the first time in my adult life I cried... and cried... I couldn't stop.

"Remember absolute Patriotism is the domain of the bankrupt", a fellow prisoner once said so nonchalantly. He was a former Professor.

Such shame has unfortunately never left; now I just cry on the inside.

Swaying forward.

Finally we're heading into the final station.

Sitting on the front steps of our broken-down barracks... my pet rat keeps me company as I feed him some scraps. My friend Jan the Slav is next to me, whittling down a piece of wood that seems to have no apparent use in the real world.

"I remember something my Grandfather once said", I blurt out in a rare mood for sharing.

“You can remember anything in this shithole?”

Two emaciated Souls come and give us a small cup of putrid, rancid, watered-down potato soup.

“Thanks.” Our daily rations.

I take a spoonful... and swallow reluctantly. I put the rest down in disgust; I’m not starving enough for this drek today.

“Aren’t you going to eat that?” “No... you can have it.”

Within seconds it’s added to Jan-the-talkative-Slav’s rations. Uneducated... but ironically still a know-it-all, we call him ‘Slippery’ because he can get anything, anything you can possibly think of. Wandering off on his many all-night excursions beyond the wire; Jan’s never returned from the adjacent forest without the latest in seasonal berries, mushrooms, even dandelions for me. He’s a good friend in a place with no humanity. “Education means nothing when it comes to a man’s loyalty”, my Grandfather once said. In this hell these last two years, Jan’s been loyal; in return I’ve tried my best. “Last night when I was out in the forest I heard shells going off. You think the war will be over soon?” “After what we’ve done to the world, I don’t think it will ever be over for us”, feeding my pet while Jan gorges. “I do not know a more deplorable condition than that of a people unable to defend itself... or provide for its’ own wants.” “Your Grandfather said that?” “No he just quoted it.” “Sounds like our Hitler youth rallies if you asked me.” “He was quoting the famous French philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville.” “Never liked the fucking French”, my toothless friend snickers.

Only now do I see that Master Race indoctrination in such a different light; politics and hate are nothing but lethal.

It’s been thirty-eight minutes of an emotional rollercoaster.

Screech.

But finally I’m here.

Everything’s tingling.

The train finally comes to a stop.

Some days are better. I’m excited. Some are worse.

The doors slowly open.

I don’t know what I’d do without her. “PAPA PAPA PAPA”, running towards me... jumping up to wrap her little arms around my neck. Her Angel face is lit up. “And how is my Princess Victoria this morning?”, showering her with kisses. “I’m better now that I’m with you Papa.” I’m always overwhelmed with the fragrance of youthful optimism.

“Hi Papa.” “Hi Susanne.”

“You Ok? Did you get enough sleep last night?”, my loving daughter asks without fail. “I’m great”, reaching in with a loving kiss, “because I’m with my two favourite girls”, plus a big smile to hide that daily battle of mine. I grab both their hands on either side of me... and squeeze tight. I then lead them up the stairs.

It’s definitely all worth it.

To the light of the street.

We are all laughing together.

For this anything’s worth it.

They make this Soldier’s guilt survivable.