

Sal moved, lurched sideways heavily and with a pronounced limp. His jaw felt like it was broken, he could feel the skin in his cheek begin to swell like a suddenly activated lifejacket. He pushed his tongue against the wall of meaty fluff and it forced out a high pitched moan that emitted from the center of his throat that was alarming and foreign to his ears. The man was said to have moved this way, and yet how would there be any way of finding him? All the grass looked the same, as if every inch of it had its color smashed out, again and again, by long strands of sets of sadistic boots. All of them trying to stamp the life out of nothing. These past few days, the sun had come out from behind the clouds and filled the afternoons with a bright light and an irregular heat. It seemed to Sal, that places like this should only be cold, but as it turns out, heat can be just as much of a murderous captor. Sal longed for the days when he could leave things. Days when he didn't have to seriously consider the possible usefulness of any object that came into his sights and wonder if he would need it in some very serious circumstance he was not yet aware of. Days where he could put things down and think there was a chance of them still being there. Days where his whole life wasn't contained in the small bulks he could manage back between the sweaty lumps of his shoulder blades.

The sunlight was harsh and blinding. It would have been beautiful, and it was. But for Sal it felt as if the ozone had been ripped from the atmosphere and his skin and clothes were being exposed to a heat that was cruelly cooking him at a slow boil. He now knew how those patches of grass felt when they were burned out in the open, grounded in their roots with no possibility of shelter. He could feel the impossible whiteness of his skin, covered in freckles like grated rust, yielding with no defense. And murderous boils and welts seemed to be pitching tent in the nape of his neck not covered by his overcoat. His forearms too, sleeves rolled up as if moving flaps of cloth locationally around one's body might provide relief, they too were now the color of rotted beats. Sal had always imagined that there might be some type of freedom to war. Some type of place in his humanity that would be choked to the forefront, some inner valiant, righteousness that would be polished to its fullest golden potential by the possibility of goodness. The truth was something else. Having no secure shelter, no secure comrades or promise of food and water were still not enough to push Sal to feel the weight and burn of his humanity and soak in it like one who can be aware of their body while burning on the stake. It was not so. Instead the horrible truth was that there were further places still that the mind could go inside itself. He discovered that his insides weren't made of smaller innernesses, inlaid upon each other like the inward procession of identical replicas, akin to a Russian doll. The truth was much more like a work of banal black magic, the trickery of a labyrinth with no discernible meaning or reason or sense-potential. The doors blocking you from happiness, or contentment, or simple confrontation with reality, present in 'real life' may have been outwardly more vacuous. The ones that came about here were of a different ilk. Polished hardwood may have replaced itself by the heavy marble of mausoleums, but the horrible truth was they were simply new backgrounds on the same set, a new material of the same design. The things that held you up, kept you in your head and separate from experience in your normal state - thoughts of yourself, thoughts of what others think of you, thoughts of what you think of others, thoughts of things you want or need - all of these thoughts come about again and surround your experience even in the most dire of circumstances,

save perhaps the few moments before death. You never thought they could follow you here, but they do, and you wonder whether or not they are saving you, and you wonder whether when things go back to normal – if they ever do - if they will once more become the things that keep you from living.

Sal felt the dense pulse of his blood beneath the thick scabbing folds encrusting his eye. The image in his mind of his potential appearance made his skin crawl and he had the thought that he would rather rip the entire scabby tumor off and live perpetually taking care of a bleeding, pulsing, raw wound than to feel this crusty shell morphing in grotesque molting phases on his own face. And yet this would not be a possible state to live in, but it was still one he wanted. If I were not afraid of madness, I would rip this off right now and face the screams that it would pull from my body, he thought. Instead Sal moved underneath the sunshine and shielded his face like a little child, how shameful that after all this he was still reactive to the normalcy of senses and small pains. He could still only see through one and, sometimes, a half eye. The cobblestone road that lay before him seemed to gleam like in the cartoons back home, that would give off the *ding* sound effect in the shiny spot of highlight. There was such a strangeness to his bulky lumbering presence in this sunshine filled street. He was aware that he had for too long been alone, and for too long in the open having run into no one. This must mean that there are more who have seen him than he can imagine, the hiding people must be aware of something he is not. He reached his hand across his body and over his shoulder and did a mad dance of blindness, trying to feel out the things hanging from his pack to find the canteen. His hand found it and he twisted the cap off and poured some water directly onto the crusty tumor hanging from his face.

The man could not be far. If he had marks on him, like the ones Sal knew he had left, he knew that he could not disguise himself. The countryside was wonderfully calm, and the air blew smells of sweet lilac and honeysuckle. Sal received the scents and again was aware of the putridness of his appearance. As the wind tossed around sweet scents, the sight of corpses piled up in the ditch along the road appeared almost normal. As if the earth and the countryside were conspiring together, gave permission to some lesser Gods of Nice Days, to do something with the rubbish the humans were making of the earth. Go ahead, work your magic, like one might do with a canvas you have already written off as ruined and are able to work freely upon in a way that you'll never be able to recreate somewhere else where it's important. Was there any difference to those Gods up there between what was beautiful or not? Surely to the Demi Gods at least, certain things are beautiful and many things are ugly. The thin three-tiered homes on either side of the road seemed distorted, as if their cake-like layers were being held together by bungee cords and could slide off from all angles at any moment. Sal could sense that he was not well, he was sweating and he felt compelled by a strange lightness in his limbs and gait that filled his body with an eerie buzzing sensation. A perpetual struggle was happening in his forehead where it felt weighed down with the heaviness of dumbbell and pulsed like he had been smacked with a two by four. This strange contrast made him get a strange image of how he must look, all smushed and contorted upon himself, like Wiley Coyote after being hit by a boulder. There was one house in the distance though that was compelling to his eye, it seemed sturdy, lived in and taken care of. It was a small one story cottage and it was made of black stones. Large plumes of smoke billowed from it's fairytale like chimney. Sal thought of the years of his childhood, when his mother would do the final wipe of her red calloused hands on the kitchen dishrag and come to the blue bedroom to read Brothers Grimm fairy tales to him and his brother.

Sal shuffled towards the little stone house and noticed that the patch of green grass surrounding it was vibrant and lush. Bright pink wildflowers bloomed next to yellow dandelions and seemed brash and

dangerously out of place. Sal slowed his movements, made his body smaller, and stealthily tiptoed towards the corner of the house, furthest away from its two windows. On closer approach, he smelled the sweet and smokey waft of meat boiling in a rich broth. Sal pictured thick ladles of rusty red and brown sauces, imagined himself drizzling gravy over a heaving, steaming pile of mashed potatoes. Sal was brought back to his going away party. His stomach twisted into dusty knots when he thought of the hunks of meat and portions of potato that had been pushed into the trash bin, it made him angry. "Nothing more American than a good ol' fashioned barbecue for our hero". The way her yellow dress had clung to her body, and laid around the shape of her waist and hips. The thick salty kisses exchanged around fingers smeared in barbecue sauce, and the intertwining of the sweet tastes in their mouths. When getting dirty felt so good because you hadn't even considered the possibility that you might never get clean again. He longed for that sound of the birds singing and the echo of Gracie Fields hits in the background. He sat on these memories a moment too long, like an empty pot simmering on a hot stove.

He hugged the little house and hunched down on the ground and crawled towards noises coming from inside. Careful to keep out of view of the window, he put his ear to the cold stucco between the black stones. He strained his ears and unconsciously focused his vision on the tiny body across the road that was hanging, half dressed, half out of the ditch. He looked into the face of a seemingly perfect infant, apart from its black dead eyes, and he could hear the click, click, clicking of a record player still spinning at its end. He could hear someone inside lift the needle and replace it with light static. Sal heard the gentle lull of violins and accordions playing a light tango tune that hummed from the speakers and seeped through the wooden window frame. He waited. He deftly moved and positioned himself so that he could peer into the window past the thread-bare lace drapes. He got one eye over the edge and could see the back of a woman. She was small in frame, and from the back she looked quite queer, like she were a little girl modeling her mother's clothing. A thick wool skirt hung low on her hips and was pinned in the back such that whole chunks of fabric were folded over each other to hold it up around her tiny frame. The harsh shoulders of the olive wool overcoat wore heavy over her back swallowing her, and her stick thin calves peeked out beneath the skirt's hem and revealed an odd incongruity between the bulk of the material and the fragility of her body.

She moved in sharp swift sways to the melody of the tango, originating from her hips and gently rippling up and through her body. Sal watched through holes in the corner of the lace from which he felt he was disguised, he was being lulled by the music while his temples pounded in his heavy head. He studied this strange vision, his eyes moving with her odd movements, and scanning down to her feet, which were sticking out from a set of black pumps. Her heels had smashed down the backs of the shoes and hung out and over the edges such that the shoe only covered about three quarters of her foot. The back of her heels were beet red, they were swollen from what he could tell, blistered, looking as though they had recently been bleeding. He watched the woman sway in her odd little bursts and realized that she was standing over a stove. She was holding a large long wooden spoon and pushing it around gracefully in a large pot that sat atop the dark steel gargoyle. Smoke billowed from its metal grates that looked like the teeth of a metallic monster. She stirred and at a sudden trill in the music began to dance around the room. Hunched and hidden beneath the thick clothing, she was twirling and lifting her hands in the air as if she was partnered with the smoke. Sal's right hand lifted in the air weightless, as if moved by something paranormal, he oddly moved his hand to the music as it hung limp from his wrist. His toes too, found the rhythm inside his boots and he rose on his tiptoe, light in his position. He could hear the simmer of the pot and the smell of meat wafted to his nose and he took in large gulps of his own saliva. Sal blinked heavily

and tried to imagine how he could get inside without her screaming. He had only his fists now, and they had betrayed him, turning into helium filled marionettes. He felt the need to swat them down or they would keep trying to fly away. The woman did pathetic twirls around the room, she turned towards the window and nearly saw him, he fell lower hiding his face near the dirt. He cautiously peered up again and saw the eagle insignia on the shoulder of her coat sleeve.

He pushed open the wooden door which caught on the uneven floorboards causing a cracking screech. The woman turned her back to the stove, clutching the wooden spoon tightly, causing her side cap to slide off her head. Spools of her stringy platinum hair pinged into the air from static electricity. The woman looked far from a little girl in dress up now. Her cold stare, straight as an arrow, pierced out of the one ice blue eye she could see out of, the other was swollen shut. The hunger of many winters hung from her high cheekbones. She stood with her weight shifted to one foot, and the oversized clothes moved as gracefully upon her as large cuts of carpet pinned to a piece of cardboard. But she held up the odd garment unashamed. She did not seem afraid of this man, and the two stood in a silent standoff, quite a pair with matching facial wounds. Sal stood in the doorway and a wave of lightheadedness came over him, his vision unfocused leaving purple blots in the spinning room, and he held hard to the doorframe remembering that she had no way of knowing he was an American Sargent in his tattered civilian clothes. They were both aware too, that she had on an SS uniform, ill-fitting or not. She stood motionless, cat-like and wide-eyed, as Sal tried to move his tongue in his mouth to speak. His cheek had taken over half of his mouth and was swollen so much that Sal almost felt well-disguised as the animal-monster he felt himself to appear. What language would he choose anyway, the first words in the language of the wrong allegiance could cause this woman to attack this wounded creature. He looked at three or four pots and pans within reach of her hands and, needless to say, there was the pot that sat on the stove boiling and spilling into the room an aroma that might as well have well been aphrodisiac to the hungry. Sal imagined her throwing the scalding pot in his face and calmly gathering the scattered scraps back into the pot for her dinner as he writhed on the floor. Better to wait. The woman seemed to calculate the stranger's weakness, and she hooked a slight smile onto her troubled, cracked face. She backed towards the stove and twisted the dials behind her back. She took a step forward and straightened her oversized lapels composing herself, and gestured for him to enter, holding her thin gray hand towards one of the wooden seats with a slight tremor. Sal shuffled forward and pulled the door shut behind him with a heavy thud.

Sal sat in the wooden chair with his back to the lace draped window. The sun streamed in over his shoulders and the smoke from the stovetop made the entire room very thick, such that the black stones seemed to be greased in condensation. The woman went back to the stove top and moved the pot to the cold burner on the other side of the black chimney pipe. Sal stared straight ahead, his vision still blurry, it moved in and out of focus. He heard a buzzing start to bleed into the german tango music, he felt large hairy horseflies landing on his arms, on his head, his crusty wound. He flicked them away and accidentally smacked the side of his own face, a searing pain ripped through him like a knife gauged into the wound and twisted hard left and right. He gnashed his teeth and leaned forward on the table letting out a few grunts of anguish. He felt a heat run up his spine and was filled with such a rage that he again wanted to rip the thing from his face and scream the screams wrapped around his guts and packed into the cracks of his blood. He reached around to one of the small pouches hanging from his back, tortoise like as he was, and retrieved a cloth pouch, pulled out a tiny glass bottle, and took a few hefty slugs from its contents. He winced a little and blew air loudly through his teeth.

The woman pulled small hunks of meat off of skewers onto a plate. The pieces, though not the neatest cuts, were cooked just right. They lobbed onto the plate, so plump, and she placed a few of the cooked onions next to the glazed pieces. Sal's imagination was already at work turning the scent of overwhelming smoke to the pleasant memory of opening the lid of the barbecue back home when he'd lost track of time. He remembered the crisp bright onions instead of these weeping dregs. For a moment he could even imprint his mother's image over this woman's, standing over him, gold hair side swept aside with inlaid curls, serving him with a smile. Sal looked down and in front of him she had placed a small plate, half a palm's size piece of meat, and three overcooked onions. The woman sat down across from Sal placing a plate in front of herself too. The woman and Sal stared at each other, eye to eye. She picked up the piece of meat and brought it to her lips, eye wide open, but quickly let it slap back onto the plate. She stood abruptly, wiping her red fingers on the crisp olive green wool of her officer's skirt. Sticky fingers grabbed the record needle and started it to spin from the beginning. The music again, and she kicked off her heels and plopped down into the chair, avoiding Sal's eye. She started to eat, chewing delicately at first and the gnawing away until her plate was nearly clean. She made soft moaning sounds and gentle coughs as the food replenished her, and she moved onto her second plate-full giving Sal her eye's full focus now, her thoughts preoccupied elsewhere. Sal brought the meat to his lips as the tango rhythm swirled absurdity around an otherwise stagnant room. He chewed at his piece and found it to be stringy, and soused in whiskey and onion, so much that it made him choke a little when sniffing it. Still his fortress of a mouth subsumed to the desperate naturalness of mastication, and made way for it even amidst it's swelling. Sal bit and bit again, and soon he allowed the tearing and swallowing and licking to swell into a crescendo of beautiful simplicity. Sal felt elated and docile, so much that he even attempted to pick at his teeth before flashing what was probably a pitiable ear to ear grin to his gracious hostess. The woman was somewhat off-put by this expression at first, but much the way a dog who has been whining for food distractedly darts his eyes around the room after diving his snout into a bowl full of kibble, so too she used these mechanics to think for a moment through her chews. Sloppily happy and getting pleasure from her gentle confusion, Sal decided to animatedly lift his hand, moving in time like a conductor to the music, and tip his cap to her with a lift of his shoulders. The girl's blue stare swelled through sadness and tenderness and landed on hilarity. She choked out a deep belly laugh that exhumed her teeth from her lips and revealed the fuzzy meat bits covering them, looking like a mango slice flipped inside out. Sal was sent into stitches with ripples of tee hee hees, and the pair fed from each other so that their laughter brightened the entire room. The two continued to chew through the laughs, holding their mouths closed through tightened facial muscles and squinty eyes. Sal grabbed another piece of meat and walked over to the record player, attempting a dance step that left him howling at his own feebleness. He turned the knob to increase the volume and started slowly moving his feet in the step of an old two-step he could remember while he licked his fingers and sucked at a bit of fat. The woman had turned in her seat to watch this madman, his face looking as cooked as the hunk of meat in her hands. She swallowed a large piece hard and felt her stomach beg her for a lull her hungry eye could not yet relent to. She watched him smiling, and grabbed the last two pieces from the stove and shoved one into her mouth greedily. Sal moved towards her and attempted to pull her into his dance and she pulled back violently, still smiling strangely and chomping at the meat. Her hands tangled red in the meat she bit her finger hard and yelped, dropping the last small piece on the ground that rolled over near the feet of the humble dancer who still gently gestured for his partner. Suddenly, Sal watched as the woman became very small before his eyes. Her cold light blue eye pierced him and she held him at bay with it as she furiously removed the pin from her humungous skirt, dropping it to the ground and kicking it from around her ankles. She backed towards the kitchen stove and

slammed into the coat hanger near the wall, it fell to the ground her along with it. She stumbled up and frantically ripped a rucksack from it's arm and began to smash the skirt into the bag with all parts of her, hands, fingers, elbows, knees. She ripped the overcoat from around her body and clumsily stuffed it in too, stomping on it so hard to make it fit that Sal could do no less than stop dancing and stare. She looked like a twig bug he had just glimpsed in its camouflage, moving so fast, grabbing things all over the place with that eye staying on him like her center of gravity. She knocked over her chair to get to the side cap on the kitchen floor, stuffing it in the sack and throwing it over her shoulder. She struggled to pull a bucket of water from behind the stove and poured it over and into the pot on the cold burner, creating clouds of hissing black smoke. Then she lifted the bucket with all her strength and poured the rest of it on the table. Screaming sloshes knocking the two plates to the floor and soaking herself in the process. She let the bucket drop and before it fell to the floor she was out the door and gone with a hollow thud.

Sal staggered back dumbstruck. The crackling record player and the hissing room and the choking smoke and the cruel dance. He lost his balance and fell backward and landed hard on his ass and sat there like a stunned child. His hands still covered in red, he waited in the room watching the smoke settle and the flies re-swarm from their panic. Sal watched them move, they tried the wet pot, too smokey, they tried the table scraps, too wet, they tried his wretched face, too much opposition. Sal watched them leapfrog in procession from his face, and then consolidate their swarm in large numbers near the wall, to the left of the door, beneath the other window. Sal watched them spin in the air and move in graceful arabesques, circling over a wooden knee-high chest half covered in a gray sheet. Sal felt his blood knocking in his temple and tumor. He grabbed the threadbare sheet and wiped his fingers on it thoroughly, one by one, and tossed it to the ground. Boot slap and the creak of wood settling on uneven floorboards.

Skin as fair as snow, lips like overripe cherries, stiff in rigor. She lay on her side with legs curled underneath her chin and and both hands resting beneath her soft cheek and charcoal locks in a prayer pose, as if modeling for a pinup. Black negligee, the garter from her top facing leg was caught on the latch. A pudgy barrel of a woman, Sal swiped at the garter caught on the latch and it unhooked and flicked back onto her, slack.

He would have closed the lid, had it not looked so much like she might still be living from the glow of her rosy tinted cheeks.

Even though he had seen very well with his own eye the localized, grisly, hacks of flesh missing from her upper thigh. The frayed meaty flaps still clinging from uneven cuts and blackened veins. The rest of her was a dream.