The Enemy in the Wheat

The family was deep in bed the night the enemy came to live in their wheat field.

It was midnight. The war had burned the land only forty miles away. Two small countries had been fighting each other for years, but now the war was almost finished, both sides saying, "Ah, let us quit this foolishness and go back to being human."

And then, in the dark midnight sky, the family heard a single missile cry out, the air around it whistling, so they sat up to clutch each other in their beds. The bomb struck with a loud *whump!* in their field of autumn wheat.

Silence.

The father sat higher and gasped to the quiet rooms, "Dear God, why didn't it explode? Listen! Tick, tick! Better it blew us all to a million pieces, but no! Tick, tick, tick!"

"I hear nothing. Lie down," said his wife. "You

can search for the bomb tomorrow. It's away from the house. If it explodes it will knock a few pictures down."

"No, no, for God's sake, it'll flatten us all!" The father threw on a robe and hurried down and out into the wheat field.

He sniffed. "They say you can smell hot metal. We must find it before it cools. Oh, God, this misery!"

"A bomb, Father?" Tony, his smallest son, arrived behind him with a flashlight.

The father glared. "Why the flashlight?"

"I didn't want you to trip over the bomb."

"I can find more with my nose than with ten thousand flashlights." Before the son could back off, his flashlight was seized. "Did you hear? Bam! It must've knocked down a thousand trees."

"There's a tree standing over there, Father," said Tony.

The father rolled his eyeballs. "Go inside, you'll catch your death."

"It's a warm night."

"It's still summer," called his other children, swarming into the field.

"Stand back! If anyone gets blown to hell it'll be me!" cried the father.

The children went back in but left the kitchen door ajar.

"Shut that door!" The father orchestrated the flashlight beam wildly, as he stamped through the wheat field, sniffing.

When he strode into the house, his nightshirt was stitched with burrs and tassels. "Are you still up?" he yelled at his family.

"Must you jump around like a mad bull, crushing the wheat?" asked his wife.

"Mad bull? Crushing?"

"Look." Tony pointed out of the door. "There are paths in the wheat where Papa ran up and down, east and west, back and forth."

"How soon will you grow up?" said the father. "And become a writer?"

In the gray dawn he was out in the wheat field plunging recklessly about, and then, tiptoeing, eyes afire, mouth open, probing with trembling hands. The wheat rustled in the soft wind as he stood in the center of this great mystery. Where? Where!

Only hunger brought him in at noon, but then, sandwich in hand, he was back searching, his face both fearful and pleased, excited and depressed, a furious charge and countercharge evaporating his sweat, stopping to address the sky, the wheat field, or his own two hands. "Did you hear? Bang! Never in any war has a shell come near our farms! Woman! Bring me soup."

"Come in and get it," she replied.

"God, this waiting," he whispered. "Where's the crater? The shell must have buried itself. Dear God, the least breath . . . the tiniest touch of an ant or fly, thirty years from now. What a legacy for my sons. This enemy here, waiting to slaughter them in the next century! Think! The war ends. The heroes return. The years fly. And, one day, the hero aims his plow, cries 'Hup' to his horse, and. . . . Wham! Blown to bits!"

"Maybe it didn't land in our wheat field." Tony, his fingers laced atop his head, smiled a delicate smile.

"My God! Didn't you see the flash? It bleached the hills yellow!"

"The hills were yellow yesterday—"

"Like a great flying stove in the sky, it fell. I saw—"

"Our bedroom window's on the other side of the house," said Mother, arriving with a bowl of soup.

"So?" Father said. "Bam! Dead center in my field. God save us."

"We'll help you search," cried the children.

He stared at his wife. "Your offspring are mad." He gathered them like chicks with his beckoning and led them, whispering, to the edge of the field. "Listen, children. You're not to go near this field,

even if it takes forty years to find that bomb. Anyway, perhaps it is timed to explode at two or four or eight. Today!" They listened for a long time to the wheat in the warm sun.

"Tick, tick, tick, tick," said Tony.

The father glared. "Go tell the neighbors. Go!"

Tony ran.

"The thing for us to do is to move out and ask a government official to come find your supposed bomb," said the mother calmly.

"Government officials? Where they walk, grain rots." The father stiffened, eyes shut. "All right. Move to the village with Grandmama. Our neighbors will serve my meals. I will stay on, unafraid."

"I'm not afraid," said his wife.

"I shall remain, fearlessly."

"If you put it that way, I'll stay," said his wife. "As long as you keep your bomb away from the children."

"My bomb?"

"Here come the neighbors," she said, listening. "I must open the wine."

"Did I say bring wine?" He broke off to move to the door. From every direction, taking chances with their old hearts, men were hurrying on the roads and across the meadows, waving.

"Mostly men," observed the wife. "Fools!"

All morning long the neighbors, mostly men,

gathered to stand courteously at the edge of the wheat, listening with great attention to this neighbor whose harvest might be terror.

"It must have been from that big gun I've heard about," said the father.

"Tall Tom," said little Tony.

The father's hands froze in the air. He blinked and swallowed slowly as color rose in his face like wine filling a glass.

"From forty miles away they shoot this great cannon," he continued.

"Tall Tom is its name," Tony smiled gently.

"Why," asked the father, "are you not in school?"

"You told us to stay home," answered Tony. "So we won't miss the terrible explosion that will kill all our cows."

"Well, then, bring more wine. The best!" The father turned to regard his friends. "Remember, after the Great War, ten thousand farmers died bravely when they tripped on old mines, kicked ancient bombs, and went straight to hell!"

They all nodded, their faces serious but shining with light and anticipation.

"The least noise—bam!" whispered the father.

"A heartbeat even," suggested a neighbor.

"Yes, even a heartbeat."

Tony ran in. "Here's your wine!" he cried.

"Shh, in the name of God!"

"But here!" screamed Tony, holding up two bottles.

The father squinted at the labels. "No, no!" he cried. "This isn't the best!"

"Mother said," replied Tony in a sweet voice, "that second-best is first choice for good-for-nothings."

The bottle was uncorked in anger that melted in the warmth of the second-best wine as the men touched shoulders and laughed quietly.

"My wife," said the father, "is a wreck. Our children do not sleep well."

The neighbors peered at the house. In her kitchen, the mother calmly stirred soup and hummed a carefree song.

"Shut that door!" cried the father, then turned to his friends, remembering to whisper. "Now, let me tell you about this terrible bomb—"

"Enough," said Peter, his nearest neighbor. "We'll search the field."

"You mustn't," cried the father.

"But you can't leave it!"

"It will explode," said the father proudly. "I won't have my very dear, close friends blown to smithereens for me," said the father. "Besides, I have a strategy. In the end I will triumph over that killing device. But one must proceed slowly."

"Meanwhile," said Peter, "here comes Joseph with his metal detector."

The father recoiled in horror. "No, no, take it away!"

Joseph held the device up. "All I do is walk through the field and—"

"Bang!" someone said.

"Take it." Joseph offered the machine.

"No, don't rush him," said Peter. "He needs time."

"All must be done carefully," said another.

"Where's that Best Wine?" said a third.

The wine sparkled in the sunlight by the edge of the field. A cool breeze moved through the wheat and over the men, standing alert in the good warm day, shoulders bumping, elbows rubbing, voices mingling, mouths smiling, eyes bright. Among them, the father thought of all the fine mornings to come, getting up and striding to the field like a lad, gazing out at his splendid, mysterious harvest, sniffing the cool morning air, awaiting the arrival of his newfound friends for the replanning of strategies and blueprints. And each day, the voices of passing strangers calling: "Hey, I hear your farm's a graveyard!" Or: "You insured? When do you disappear? Is that bomb as big as your silo?"

"Bigger," he'd reply. "Oh friends, we shake in our beds, we quake and wonder when in hell it will blow us to kingdom come!"

"Sounds terrible!"

"Oh, it is, yes, it is!"

And he would smile as they circled the field, drawing little maps, sending to town for cheese and bread as more travelers tied their horses by the road and stood to stare.

But just when he was wine-deep in reverie and good fellowship, there was a great cry.

Out in midfield stood little Tony.

"Hey, Papa!"

"Tony!" screamed the father.

Tony jumped up and down. "Boom!" He skipped and did somersaults. "Boom!"

"Get out, child of hell. You'll be torn to bits!"

"Boom!" Tony laughed, stomping.

The other farmers blinked. "Hold on. Is there a bomb out there? Look. Your son's not afraid."

"The boy was damaged by God," shrieked the father. "Come out of there, idiot!"

Tony, smiling, moved from the field.

"What were you trying to do?" his father cried.

"Explode," said Tony, and walked off, hands over his mouth.

At supper on the fourth night, Mother stood for a long while at the window, gazing at the autumn wheat blowing in the wind.

"And you're just going to let the wheat stand there?"

"If we hire the reapers, who will pay for their coffins and candles?"

"In one more day, it will be too late for the wheat. Wine, visitors, talk, more wine." She turned calmly, went out the door, across the yard into the field.

"Come back!" he shouted.

An hour later she returned, gave him a long steady look, and said, "Tomorrow we harvest."

"But if we harvest—"

"People will not believe the bomb was ever there, yes? Well, I stomped every inch of that field and I still live. We harvest. Tomorrow."

The father did not sleep well that night. Several times he awoke to scowl at his sleeping wife. He scowled into the next room at sleeping Tony. "That boy knows something," he muttered. "Dancing up and down. Fool!"

In bed he lay listening to the rich wheat blowing and the stars turning in the sky. What a life he'd had. If he ran to the village shouting, "My wife just had a daughter!" someone would say, "So? My wife has delivered a son." If he arrived panting to announce, "My wife has birthed a son," someone would snort: "Hell, Roberto's wife just had two sons!" If he said, "My wife is sick," someone would counter, "My wife is dead!" Nothing balanced. His wheat never had the decency to rot or his barn to collapse, while all around neighbors' si-

los burned and grandfathers were ruined by lightning. Thus were his friends lavishly provided conversations for a lifetime with much left over. He couldn't very well say, could he, "Remember the summer my barn didn't burn?" No!

Nor were his crops huge enough to be the objects of jealousy. They were casual, on the norm. "Neither bigger nor smaller than anyone else's. What kind of crop is that?"

But now, here he was, very happy indeed, and tomorrow another day which could be as pleasant as wine and conversation or as full of doom as the gleam of a scythe or the color of his wife's stare.

Well, well, we shall see, he thought, and shut the trap on his thoughts and snuffed out the small candle in his head.

At six o'clock in the morning, the explosion came.

His wife sat up and said, "It wasn't very loud."

"It almost destroyed the house!" he cried.

Smoke rose in the sky. Other men were running from great distances as he leaped out his door.

"It was here!"

"No, over there!"

"No, that way!"

They ran into and around and across the wheat.

"It's outside the fence," called Peter.

"No, idiot, inside, inside."

The children hurried up in their nightgowns.

"There," said Tony, pointing beyond the fence, "like Peter said!"

Fifty yards beyond and outside the wheat field, down by a little stream, stood a fresh, smoking crater.

Father stared bleakly for a long time.

"It's not very big," Tony observed.

"It's big," said Father.

"It's no bigger than my head," said Tony.

The neighbors ran up, shouting. Father stood with staring eyes which saw nothing. "It was bigger than a stove," he said to himself. "Anyway," he added, "this bomb was certainly not my bomb at all."

"What?!" everyone cried.

"No," said the father seriously. "My bomb landed in my field. Like a locomotive from the sky. You could see the flames, the iron wheels, the steaming whistle, and almost, the engineer waving, that's how big it was."

"But, but, that would make two shells!"

"One, two, dammit!" said Father. "They both landed at once! But mine was a monster. Not like that midget there. Besides, it's outside my property."

"Just fifty feet," said Tony.

"A million miles!"

"But it's not logical both fell at once. No other bombs have come within miles in all our lives."

"Nevertheless, the enemy is still hidden in my field of beautiful wheat."

"Papa," whispered Tony, pointing.

Everyone turned.

And there, walking quietly through the field of golden wheat, a gleaming scythe cradled in her arms, nodding to all the neighbors, was Mother. She stopped before her husband and very slowly, quietly, handed him the scythe.

Many years later, when he was drinking wine at the village inn, the father would hold up his glass and, after many sighs and exhalations, glance at some stranger from the corner of his eyes and at last speak. "Have you ever heard of the great bomb that fell in my wheat field and still lies ticking there today?" A grievous sigh. "See these gray hairs? They come from living cheek by jowl with the fiend, the devil grinning under my crops all these terrible years. See how drawn and lined is my face from never knowing when, plowing or asleep, I'll be blown to oblivion."

"Well," all the strangers would say, "why don't you just pack up and move?"

"Do I look like a coward?" the father would cry. "No, dear God, we'll stay on, plowing, sowing,

reaping, living on borrowed time. And one morning you will see my name listed as a casualty of the war long finished, but which threatens and darkens my precious wheat. Yes, thanks, I will have a bit more of that wine . . ."

And with the burning of many calendars, and the children grown and gone, the father still could not tolerate Tony of the delicate face and the tiny white hands. Many times in the following years, Tony would write from London or Paris or Budapest, his face smiling his Madonna smile out of the delicate penmanship. Always, at the very end of his note, his parting salutation was one gentle word: "Boom."