

Mind Games

By S. A. Tomlin

This story is part of a genre that I would describe as ‘a Slice of Life’. It is a story that we could all experience and be involved with. And for that reason I deem it a true story. True because it could happen or may have already happened to absolutely anyone of you. Parts, if not all, have happened to me already.

It also acts as a reminder. A reminder that; you never know exactly what is going on inside other people’s heads, so treat them with kindness & humility.

Also, there really is truth in the phrase, ‘smile and the world smiles with you,’ so put it to use and bring a little bit of happiness into the world.

Quote of the Story:

“Reality leaves a lot to the imagination.” - John Lennon

Brat-a-tat-tat. Bang. Boom.

“Christ that was close, we better make our move before they get another chance.”

“I second that. *Squadron D4 move out, over.*”

We’d been in battle for mere hours, but it felt like an eternity. This was a siege that would be written about for millenia to come, no history maker would give up on the chance to write about ‘The Two Tone’ battle.

War raged across the continent and we were stuck right in the middle of it. Trench foot was setting in as the mud rose up our overalls and plastered our slacks, like gelatinous sinking sand. Myself and my brothers would have to be extra cautious today. I had heard of tales of tuberculosis or gout and I’d been horrified, but now that the horrors lay before me, it was the least of my troubles.

Bones and carcasses surrounded my feet, making it incredibly challenging to keep moving forward.

That will be me.

That *will* be me. If I step onto enemy territory, if I make one false move, if I get strafed by an arrow. There are so many ways that this could end terribly.

Putrid gases filled the air. My nasal cavities felt hollowed out, burnt and exposed to these toxins. Not only was chlorine gas at play, but rotting flesh was a dire smell at the best of times, least of all after being left out in the sweltering heat. On top of all of this was my own stench. And let me tell you, it was a smell to behold. The sweat had stuck all of my

undergarments to my skin, like mid century war paint, and had started pouring down my spine like a great river.

I had never experienced such a sensory overload. It felt like I was being bombarded with constant information and matter. Blood sprayed across the tiles and over my face. Arrows whizzed past. Bullets flew. A ghastly, animalistic and guttural war cry echoed out. Final breaths, of the stench of death, were drawn. Knights atop horses charged into the battle, galloping into the middle distance, jousting spear held aloft. They were almost unstoppable. The horses, pure flesh and muscle, a force to be reckoned with on their own. But accompanied with our knights? Nothing could hold them back. So much so that we only ever sent two of them into each battle. They would go in fighting and not return until the battle had been won. They would be remembered as the heroes, the saviours.

And I knew that I would be forgotten, lost in the spoils of war, just another pawn in someone's game of chess.

Thinking back to previous battles, the London siege was incredible and it was played masterfully by those cockney gangsters. They knew how to wage war on a place and they knew how to set up an impenetrable defence.

See, we English fight for King and country, for absolute monarchy, and we will sacrifice anything, if it means protecting them. Our allies also respect this and have been known to give incredible gifts and treasures, such as exotic animals and beautiful unknown plant species. Most of these were kept in our Royal Botanical Gardens or by the Royal Zoological Society at the Tower of London, but they had filled up quite quickly. We had soon become overrun with elephants, of all things, so our generals put them up to action. That time, we went to war with extra reinforcements.

Some of our religious scholars sat atop the mighty beasts, ready with spears to throw into the fight when needs must. Ready to harpoon unwitting knights. Ready to sway the battle in our direction.

You should have seen the look of shock and terror on the enemy troops. Their faces were a picture.

Slowly we trudged through the dirt and grime, but it was tough work. My legs were as heavy as lead, and about as awkward to move too. The struggle really saps the energy out of you, and turns a flat plain into what seems like a mountainous trek. That being said, it was still rough terrain, even without the human remains. Little boulders bounced and rolled excitedly as the tremors of the battle rang out over the land. Shock waves could be felt intermittently. Sudden rushes of gas and thunderous claps of sound. It was these smaller details that made the war even more insufferable.

You had no peace. At all.

As I looked about, the realisation that I was completely stranded slapped me in the face harder than if I were to run into one of the rooks at full pelt. In the midst of it all, I had become separated from my squad. The billowing plumes of yellow smoke had surrounded me and made it near impossible to see my hands, let alone 6 feet in front of me. I was going to have to traverse the field solo, before hopefully meeting with my brothers up ahead. So on I trudged.

Fortunately the smog had begun to clear in places, so there was a very rough outline of some buildings ahead of me. Surely it is there that they would be waiting for me, I thought.

Fires raged to the east, burning the horizon and causing the great above to glow with incredible intensity. As they licked the sky, the clouds gained a reddish hue. Like a blood moon in the dark and starry abyss. A beacon of terror.

It wouldn't be quite so bad, if the fires didn't also decimate the land, but as it was, even if we won, there would be no hope of recovering those life enriched soils. They also become treacherous to walk upon, once the flames have settled down because the ground becomes a mass of hot coals ready to melt through your rubber soles with great ease.

On I went. Across this harsh terrain. I could make out the building much clearer now, but it didn't fill me with any hope. It was instead completely desolate and deserted. Just a shell of what used to be a lovely little bakery. Where the fresh goods would have been on display, was broken glass and other crushed fragments of times before the war. The

window must have been smashed in the mass exodus. And in the entrance lay a mutilated corpse, who wasn't quite as lucky to escape.

As I walked ever nearer, I noticed a dark foreboding shadow, lurking in the darkness to the side of the property. A long protruding cylinder peaked out amongst the unbounded figure. This small terror, which wouldn't even spark anxiety on a normal day, has brought about a hair raising, pulse fastening, adrenaline coursing reaction. Once again, if I hadn't lost my comrades, I would have stormed over and asserted dominance, like I was trained to do, but that was far from my mind.

I slowly removed my bergen and hoped that I could become as quiet as possible, my movements covered by the incessant cacophony that was the war. The charred shrub in front almost completely covered me, providing shelter and also a place to think out my next move.

Were they armed? That cylinder had definitely looked like a rifle, but I couldn't be too sure. Have they seen me? Surely if they have, they would come over fighting immediately. Or maybe they were waiting for me to emerge, to catch me unawares. I was a dead man now.

As my life began to flash before my eyes, I decided to make a move. It was now or never, and at least this way I'll go down fighting.

Yes I will be forgotten, but at least I will still have my bravery.

I went to stand up when two things happened at once, two things that I will never forget until the day I die.

The first was a shout. Actually more of a cry for help than a demand. A raspy scratchy sound that grated on your ears, and was increasingly unpleasant to listen to. Water was a scarcity and I hadn't seen fresh sources in years. You had to make the most of every last drop, so no wonder they sounded rough and inhumane. At first their utterings were completely inaudible, but the more they spoke up, the smoother the tones became.

After trekking out onto the battlefield alone, you were guaranteed to lose some abilities and beliefs that originally came so easy to you. One of the more unexpected ones was your humanity.

Instead of caring and wanting to help this person, I stayed completely still, and tried to not move a muscle. It was every man for himself out here.

Still the noise rambled on, becoming louder and louder, and emanating towards me. A croaking jarring sound, a language that I couldn't understand, and now there were footsteps. Although the footsteps could barely be heard over the loud whining droning that had just begun.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

I looked round quickly to see this slight dishevelled bag of flesh and bones. His skin taught around the skeleton, he was almost paper thin, with a similar complexion too. A gaunt expression haunted his face, as he looked with terror in my direction. The clothes that looked no nicer than a worn out dishrag, hung off his emaciated frame, undulating in the wind, like something that you would find draped across a window in a picturesque mountain villa. Sticks of bamboo that must have been his arms were outstretched towards me, his hands cupped together in a pray for help. If this wasn't haunting enough, the blood strewn across his rags and body told of yet another horrendous tale. He had suffered fates more grievous than my worst nightmares and here I was thinking of him as a threat. My god.

This was what war did to you, it played the most horrific mind games. Tortured your mind and spirit and laid waste to your humanity and morality. I cannot believe that I almost killed him.

And it was right here, when the second unforgettable thing occurred.

All of a sudden it became really really dark, like someone had turned off the sun. And as if someone had turned off the sun, an incredibly strong wind whipped around my ankles. I had never experienced a solar eclipse, but I could imagine that this is what it would feel like. The darkness was intense and scary, a very peculiar life draining experience. The air felt dry and scorched, depleted of its usual smells and scents. But it didn't feel cold. No, the heat had amped up, and if anything was feeling drier than the Sahara, like the centre of a furnace with the flames playfully biting at my limbs.

My acquaintance was now trembling on his knees before me, crumpled and shaking. Tears of blood were streaming down his face, and his hair glowed orange. The flames erupted engulfing him entirely. This monumental beast, that I had only heard of in fairy tales, ravaged the man. His now charred and crunchy skin must have provided a delightful treat

for the monster. The claws slashed into his flesh, pulling him limb from limb, as he wasted no time at all devouring his meal.

By this point I didn't care which direction I ran in, or whether I even followed orders, but I had to escape as fast as physically possible, otherwise I was certain to meet the same fate. My rifle would be of no use to me here, not against the thick leathery flesh of my opponent. Its scales were most likely impenetrable and looked like solid copper dinner plates found at grand balls. I ran for my life, tripping and stumbling over the brittle bones of the fallen. Christ, they must have met this fate too!

Once I'd got a safe distance away, I looked back to survey this mythic beast. A complete and utter darkness was trapped under the wings, a place where no hope existed. If you found yourself trapped there, at least you wouldn't be able to see what was coming next. These wings, like tarpaulin over a campsite, were topped with yellowed spikes of bone, each with the strength to melt through human flesh. A colossal coil of scales wrapped around the beast, circling off the arena that marked your death, slowly twisting and tightening until you have nowhere left to run. At the end of this coil, was yet another cluster of skewers and jagged fragments of bone. These had a deep red paint which must have been the blood of the fallen, smeared like a kill streak.

I looked up towards its face where two gargantuan horns erupted from its skull to the heavens, crowning this creature the king. Layers upon layers of teeth lined the ragged jaw. And then there were the fangs. Humongous ebony tusks that protruded up and down, every single one bigger than myself, and weighing more as well. The biting force of this brute could easily crush great oaks and tanks, especially as the jaw opened wide enough to fit the heavens and the earth in one bite.

From this maul spewed forth swathes of searing bubbling magma and even from this great distance I could feel the heat. The fire kept coming, incinerating the bakery and now making it into a mound of molten rock. The monster finally stopped and let out a piercing shriek into the night sky, and as it readied its wings for flight, I stupidly thought I was safe. But that's when it trained those gold and waxy eyes on me.

“That’s a good start. Pawn to D4 is always a good move, I remember Harvey teaching me that,” Hannah said.

“I wonder what Fin knows about chess. His dad is always playing so maybe he’s picked up some of the basics and rules.” Fin and Joel played joyfully with the chess set, moving about the pawns, without a clue of what the effects would be. Then Fin picked up his toy and slammed it into the board repeatedly.

“Nope, he definitely doesn’t know the rules of chess,” Paris continued, laughing to her friend. “A dragon shouldn’t be involved at any point, even if you’re losing.”

“Well it looks like they are having fun together regardless. I just hope that Joel has an equally vivid imagination when he gets a bit older.”

“Yeah. I wonder what they’ve come up with, much more interesting than standard chess anyway.”

“Thank you for doing these play dates Paris, it’s helped Joel settle in at nursery so so much. I’m indebted to you,” says Hannah, a glint in her eye. “I mean it! Mornings were terrible, he would never want me to leave and it was so hard to watch all the tears and tantrums.”

“You’re welcome Hannah. It’s nothing, really. I remember how it was with Joel as well, sometimes you just need a helping hand. How’s work going, now that you’re back?”

“Same ole same ole, you know.”

They both laugh happily, remembering the good old carefree days.