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ASH TREE HILL PRESS

THE MAN FROM PHILADELPHIA

A novel

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**Andre Infante**

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**Prologue**

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It’s a bright, cloudless day, and people are looking for the battleship.  It’s been gone for more than an hour, and panic is beginning to set in. The rescue divers have turned up nothing and the harbor remains empty, except for the distant noise of surf.

A few people in Hawaiian shirts are listlessly scanning the bay with binoculars, without any real hope.  Most of the scientists just look sick.  The more politically inclined show the unique desperation of someone trying to figure out how to explain to a senate finance committee that they’ve misplaced a thousand tons of steel.

And then there is boy, of course.  Most of them liked him well enough. The official line is that he and the boat might well be fine, wherever they are.  The unofficial line is that there is going to be a service in the morning, and that somebody ought to tell his mother. The very unofficial line, which nobody actually says but gets around anyway, is that he was a good kid, and someone ought to be shot for this. They all saw what happened to the mouse.

Up on the balcony, overlooking the docks, Mr. Black shuts his notebook, and goes back inside.

**Down and Out In Mother Russia**

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There’s a sound like a million eardrums popping. A shower of clean-cut Iowa corn falls to the ground and the traveler bursts onto the field, staggering to one knee. He sits there for a moment, panting. The little dog sits at his master’s feet, head down, growling at the wind.

When he has his breath, the traveler stands up, and scans the horizon. He’s on an open plain, cut with the deep scars of trenches, echoing with the distant noise of gunfire and startled birds. Ah yes. Russia. He dives for the ground. A handful of anti-personnel rounds shriek over his head.

The traveler begins to crawl, as quickly as possible, towards a trench near the base of a hill. The dog is accustomed to this sort of thing, and follows its master, keeping low.

He pushes his way between craters and dead grass, pausing only once to lift a canteen off a corpse, having lost his own to pellets from the farmer. Overhead, bullets hiss back and forth from the Russian and German lines.

It’s getting to evening here, and the sky is a dull iron color, bruised with storm clouds to the east. A dry, hot wind brushes over the dust and sparse grass, stirring up distant clouds of grit.

When the traveler reaches the trench, he finds that it’s not military; it’s an old, dry ditch with uneven stone sides. The traveler lies down on his belly and rolls into it. Overhead, he can see a red barn at the top of a hill, looming over the battlefield.

He sits up against the side of the trench, and takes a moment to collect his thoughts. The dog sits on his lap, and he absently picks burs off its coat and sips from the canteen. When he’s ready, he pulls a small Beretta pistol out of his greatcoat, flips the safety, and begins the long crawl down the ditch. He hears a noise behind him. He turns to look at the dog, which has something wedged between its jaws.

The traveler leans over.

“Drop it.”

The dog whimpers, but obligingly opens its jaws. A small black bird with a white belly rolls onto the ground. The traveler picks it up gently. It has a hole in its stomach that goes right through. The little breast goes up and down very fast, and its wings beat limply in his hand.

The traveler turns it over in his hand. Its feathers are broken and muddy, and its eyes are bloodshot. He looks back at the dog, which whines and licks its chops.

“Look at this,” he says, turning the bird to face the dog, “Have you no mercy in your soul?”

The dog gives him a long, blank stare.

The traveler sighs, and returns to the bird. He says,

“How did you get out here? Don’t you have the sense to stay away from battlefields?”

It squawks half heartedly.

He stares sadly at it.

“What are we going to do about you, little bird?”

The bird flaps helplessly in his hands. He sighs, watching the blood drop onto his hands from the wound.

“No, don’t be silly. You aren’t going to live.”

He turns back to the dog.

“What do you think?”

The dog salivates and wags its tail.

“Probably right. No sense in waste.”

He sets the bird down on the ground on its back with a trace of reluctance, and smiles at it.

“I’m sorry about this, but it’ll only hurt for a second.”

He produces a long, metal knife from a pocket, lifts the hilt, and crushes the bird’s head in one fast motion. The skull breaks, the bird twitches once, and then it is still. He removes the head and entrails, and then gives it to the dog. Not enough for a human, anyway. He wipes the blood off his fingers in the dust, and starts crawling, the dog’s happy crunching barely audible behind him.

After a dozen yards, he hears rifle rounds shriek over his head, and he starts to whistle.  Crawling isn’t easy, since his pack and jacket weigh about forty pounds, all told. He keeps whistling. It’s an old tune that his mother taught him, and he only half-remembers it. Another bullet buries itself in the dirt over his head. The traveler hesitates, and then continues, still whistling with a certain intensity, repeating when he gets to the end of the part that he knows. The soft clay on the bottom of the ditch feels good on his hands, which are calloused and webbed with scars, and have dirt ground in at a subdermal level.

He crawls another fifty feet before the ditch ends. It’s been slowly curving left as he’s been crawling, and he’s now behind and to the right of the barn. He can see pine forests in the distance. He considers making a run for it, but there’s too much open ground to cover. Besides, if it’s going to rain, the forest would not be a good choice. He crouches in the edge of the ditch, staring at the clouds, considering his next move. He can see heat lightning crawling from the ground to the sky in flickering stop-motion. Well, the barn is probably safe enough.

He tucks the dog into his coat for safety, and creeps around the hill, moving as fast as he can without exposing much profile to the battlefield. When he’s safely behind the barn, he lets the dog go. Glancing at his hand, he realizes that he’s still holding the berretta, and he turns the safety on and pockets it. He glances at the dog.

“Stay close.”

This, at least, the dog understands. The traveler bends to the hole in the back of the barn, and step through. He stands up.  A dozen Russian soldiers turn and point their guns at him. The traveler blinks. Damn.

The soldiers are standing around a table with a radio and a map on it. The radio hisses unintelligibly in Russian. Overhead, in the loft, two or three snipers draw a bead on him.  The traveler freezes, and gives the room a bleak smile.

One of the Russian soldiers says,

“- --- --- ----?”

The traveler gingerly raises his hands, and pulls the earplugs out.  He can suddenly hear the dog growling behind him, which would be a lot more helpful if the dog were a Doberman or something instead of a lopsided terrier mongrel.

“Beg pardon?”

The Russian officer’s face looks hard and unamused. Overhead, the traveler can hear raindrops start to spatter on the roof, and the warm cotton sound of rain on the dust outside. The officer repeats himself.

"Я сказал кто ты такой?"

The traveler sighs, glances at his watch, and recites the only phrase he knows in Russian.

“Я солдат союзников! Я не говорю по русски!”

This means ‘I am an allied soldier.  I do not speak Russian.’  He knows similar phrases in German, Japanese, and French.

They obviously don't believe him, and that’s okay.  They aren't really expected to. Their eyes trace a familiar path over him. The traveler waits, patiently.

They look at the dog. They look at his battered, stained British greatcoat. They look at his pack. They look at his Nazi first aid kit, and they look at what is probably a katana. They look at his pockets, which are bulging with cat food cans. They look at the dog again. They look back at him, and, after a long stare, confer amongst themselves. They don’t lower their guns.

The traveler sighs and sits down on a crate of ammunition, waiting for them to sort it out.  After a while, a tired, reedy little Russian man with wire frame glasses comes forward and talks to him.

“Spreken ze deutch?  Francais?  English?”

The traveler nods, warily.

“English.”

The translator gives him a long, hard look.  The traveler looks more like a vagrant than a soldier.  His coat is wet at the bottom, his hair is a mess, he has an ear of corn stuck in his pack. There is the distinct impression that he hasn’t had a proper bath in some time.

“You’re a British soldier?”

The traveler flips him a salute.  Absently, he says

“Paratrooper, RAF 43rd, at your service.  Got dropped behind enemy lines, had to fight my way back.  Is it okay if I go sit over there?”

He gestures towards a pile of hay towards the rear of the barn.

The translator says something that the traveler doesn’t catch. The Russian who appears to be in charge shrugs. The translator shrugs. The traveler nods, walks to the hay, and sits down. The dog comes and sits to his right.

The translator walks back to the others, who are looking uncertain and suspicious. Not a winning combination. The commander says,

“Что он сказал?”

The translator glances back at the traveler, and then says,

“Говорит что с британского флота.”

“Думаешь он врёт?”

The translator chuckles.

“без сомнения”

The traveler pulls a can of cat food and an army knife out of his pocket, opens the can, and splits it with the dog.  The can happens to be in Russian, so the others, all else forgotten, watch this with a kind of clinical fascination.  After finishing the can, he wipes his mouth on the back of his hand, and glances at them.

“You chaps happen to have any fruit?  Citrus, maybe?”

The translator confers this to the others.  After further debate, one of them walks to a burlap sack in the corner, and tosses him a rather soft orange.  He bisects it with his knife, and eats it.  Then, discarding the peel, he removes the canteen, takes a swig, pours a little into a cracked ceramic dish for the dog, and leans back into the hay.

It’s raining in earnest now. The Russians stand at the table, talking in low voices, occasionally turning dark glances his way. The officers seem to be arguing. The barn hums with the quiet roar of the rain. Distant thunder shakes the ground, and the light hanging from the roof fades, but does not go out. After a while longer, the translator stands up and walks back to him. He sighs.

“Okay, they want me to ask you, all bullshit aside, who the fuck are you, and who do you work for?”

The traveler glances at his watch.  He still has nearly twenty minutes. He smiles up at the translator, who pales. It’s not a kind smile, and it seems very old. The traveler says,

“I don’t work for anyone. My platoon was stationed out East, and we were wiped out by a German squad. I deserted, I’m not paid enough for this crap. Look, don’t tell anyone, alright?”

The translator looks at him coldly.

“I think you’ll find that there isn’t anything to the east except ocean. Or do you mean that you were a *naval* officer?”

The traveler barely hesitates.

“Yes, that’s it. Royal Navy.”

“Mmm.”

The translator gives him a long, clinical stare, like a butterfly collector staring down at a sodden moth he’s captured by accident.

The traveler smiles genially.

“I’m not going to kill you guys!  We’re on the same side.  Go on, don’t mind me.  I think I saw the Germans trying to sneak up the back way.”

He nods enthusiastically. That’ll keep them busy for a few minutes.

The translator glances back at the others, and says, a shade reluctantly,

“Говорит немцы подходят.”

There’s a burst of activity. One of the Russians ducks outside and there is a brief exchange of gunfire, followed by some distant yelling. The traveler raises an eyebrow. Well, if the Germans are going to oblige, he’s not going to argue. He pitches the can against the wall, and tucks the dog and the dish inside his coat, which has a flak jacket sewn into the lining.  Another shot.

“Блять!”

More shots.  Silence.  Finally, the Russian comes limping back inside, dripping rain and bleeding from a bullet to his shin. He collapses against the wall, crying and swearing under his breath. He looks up at the others.

“Блять, суки в меня попали. Чёрт возьми!”

 The traveler pumps his arm in the air triumphantly.

“Yes!  Stick it to the German bastards!  Fight the good fight, that’s a good man.”

Water and wet hair run down the injured soldier’s face.  A Russian medic hops down from the loft.  The traveler closes his eyes.  He hasn’t slept in fourteen hours; he’s spent a long time in the ocean, then that cornfield, now this.  He’s so tired that his hands are shaking, and still there is no sleep.

The dog whines as another shell goes off outside.  He pets it, absently.  A bit less than fifteen minutes, now.  He sighs.  He hates Russia.   The last time he was here, somebody shot him.  *Shot*.   He can’t wait to get out, and doesn't much care where.

He hears the doors slam open.  The traveler opens his eyes, and sees a dozen German soldiers standing in the door, pointing machine guns at the Russians. The Russians swing their guns around. The snipers draw beads.  The traveler shrugs the dog into a harness pocket behind his arm, and crawls slowly behind the ammo crate. He reaches into his pocket slowly for the Beretta.  There is a long, tense silence.

The commanding Russian stares at the German captain, a fat man with a nasty rash on his neck. The commander makes eye contact with him, and speaks to his men out of the corner of his mouth in a slow, measured voice.

"Ладно, никому не двигаться."

He glances at another Russian, who’s drawn a grenade.

"Лейтенант, кладите гранату на пол... осторожненько.”

The Russian kneels down and sets the grenade on the floor. The commander glances back at the German.

“Мы все просто выйдем отсюда, понятно? Ты понимаешь меня, немец? Прекрасно."

He sighs, and then waves his gun.

"Ну это-то ты хоть понимаешь? Прекрасно. Мы будем делать это очень медленно. Мы отходим очень, очень –”

And then one of the Germans trips on a sack.  Ten seconds later, all of the Russians and most of the Germans are dead on the floor.  The translator lies in a heap near the traveler's feet, half of his head gone.  One of the survivors, a scrawny German kid with bad acne walks over to the traveler, and points a gun at his face.  The traveler smiles up at him.  He recites the only phrase he knows in German.

“Heil Hitler!”

The butt of the rifle comes down on his head.

Φ

The traveler wakes up. His head throbs horribly.  He’s being marched by a big soldier and the German kid down a muddy half-road between rows of dull green Nazi tents. The sky overhead has a gunmetal glow, and the rain is coming down in sheets, pounding on his shoulders and running down his neck. Blank-eyed soldiers stare at him, huddled by fires or under the lips of tents, out of the rain.

He checks his watch surreptitiously.  Five minutes now.  The air around him is starting to go all strange and slick, and horizon is pulsing uncomfortably around his head.  He has a moment of panic as he searches his pockets, then relaxes when his hand finds the warm mass of the dog in his coat. In the dark, a tiny tongue licks his hand.

He searches further. The Beretta is gone. Bastards.  The sword is still chained to his back.  The German kid probably didn’t have a pair of bolt cutters handy.  He shifts forward, under his own power, now, mostly.

He can feel his skin starting to buzz, like a lightbulb about to explode.  The ground feels different, too.  It feels like he’s walking on soft rubber instead of hard-packed mud and rock.  The kid behind him must be able to feel it, but he doesn’t know what it is yet. He feels vaguely unreal.

Muddy water slops into his boots as he walks, softening his socks, which are caked with dry sea salt. He stumbles, and something hard jabs into his ribs from behind. They come to a large tent, and he’s shoved in through the flaps. The tent is crammed. There’s a desk and a chair, and filing cabinets held up on pallets out of the wet. An electric light hangs from the ceiling.

Behind the desk, a middle aged man in a Nazi uniform looks up at him. He has a hell of a face, all age lines and sharp corners. He looks like some kind of predatory bird, unconvincingly miming humanity in a stolen skin. The uniform is smart, black cotton and leather with a cape and heavy boots. He’s SS, probably a colonel. Say what you will about the Nazis, they have style. The German kid passes him the Beretta.

The traveler smiles at the Nazi, and hopes like hell he speaks English.  He’s formed rules over the years, by sheer force of necessity, and one of them is this: Smile at everyone.  You don’t have to deal with them for long, and it just makes everything go smoother.

In the dim light of the tent, he can just see that the air around him has taken on a certain glistening quality. He smells ozone, and relaxes a little. The Nazi looks up coldly. The traveler nods politely.

“Hello, I’m a British intelligence analyst, and I’d like to defect.”

The Nazi peers at him over the desk for a long moment.  When he speaks, it is in heavily accented but understandable English.

“I find that extremely unlikely. What agency?”

“MI5,” he says promptly.

“What branch?”

The traveler, having exhausted the half a spy novel he read years ago, does not say “Uh.” Instead he says, calmly,

“I’m not telling you anything until I have some guarantee of protection.”

The Nazi leans back. The rain drums on the tent roof.

“As you wish. You, being a spy and well versed in these matters, will of course understand a certain level of skepticism on my part.”

The traveler gives him a studiously blank look. The Nazi raises an eyebrow.

“To do with your uniform? Or should I say lack thereof? You look like a clown. Spies do not normally look like clowns. I do *not*,” he says, giving the traveler a significant look, “like clowns.”

The traveler makes an effort to look stressed and tired. It’s not hard.

“Look, I’m an analyst, alright? I was just supposed to be a liaison. That’s what I do. I liaise. I never signed up for combat duty, but, whoops, we need another man in the field, here’s a rifle, get moving. Then my platoon gets mowed down by one of *your* machine gun nests, and then I’m left wandering around with no idea what in the hell is going on. I had to scavenge this crap together just to survive. You know I’ve been out here for a month and a half, and I haven’t had a decent bath that whole time?”

The Nazi nods absently, and considers the idea for some time, giving it all due consideration. After a while, he seems to reach a conclusion.

“Bullshit.”

He nods to the German kid.

 “Schießt ihn.”

The German kid produces a pistol from somewhere in his uniform. The traveler takes a step back, and runs into the large soldier behind him. He glances at his watch. Thirty more seconds. He can make it thirty more seconds. Easy.

“Hold on. Just, look, hear me out. I just need ten seconds of your time.  It’s very important that you hear what I have to say.”

He stands up, positioning himself almost exactly five feet back from the desk.  His body is throbbing, now. His hands are ever so slightly translucent.  The air around him feels heavy, and slick as oil.  There’s a sense of incredible pressure building inside him and in the air around him, like a spring slowly stretching towards its breaking point.

He pauses as long for dramatic effect as he thinks he can get away with, realizes that he’s got nothing to say, and grabs the first thing that comes into his head.  With gravitas and deliberation, he says,

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!”

The Nazi just stares at him, slack-jawed.  The traveler is into it, now, gesturing wildly with his hands, the picture of a man delivering a message of vital importance.

“Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun the frumious Bandersnatch!"

He reaches up, grabs the earplugs, and stuffs them into his ears.  He empties his lungs in a dramatic exhale at the end of his oration.  Then, he turns and gives the Nazi his best, most winning smile. Then, he starts to laugh.

The Nazi seems to snap out of it.  He grabs the Beretta off the desk, and raises it, pointing it at the traveler’s face. There’s an odd hissing sound. The Nazi hesitates.  The German kid, who by now has backed against the tent wall, notices something very wrong with the air around the traveler.

A sphere of air, ten feet in diameter, suspended on geometric center of his body, has taken on a shimmering quality like molten quartz.  The Nazi’s arm protrudes into it.  Inside the sphere, the traveler, blurred, is laughing and laughing and laughing. His laughter comes in jagged bursts, cut to ribbons by the barrier. The alarm on the watch dings, once, a clear, high note, and then the arm, the traveler, and a good bit of the desk are simply gone.  There is a lot of blood.

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The traveler feels a thunderous burst of freezing air that sends him staggering, clothes streaming.  He groans and blinks his eyes, stinging in the cold, under the suddenly bright summer sun.  He definitely fell in elevation, and he's somewhere very cold and very dry.  His ears pop. The Nazi’s arm lands on the ground a few feet away with a meaty thud, along with a chunk of wood from the desk.  The traveler retrieves the Beretta, which still has the safety on, and glances around.   A few pounds of Russian soil are piled around his feet.  Beneath is the hard packed permafrost:  Antarctica.

He sighs. Well, for all Antarctica’s flaws, it is not Russia. At least people don't try to kill you here.  For starters, what people?  He does a cursory check for any convenient towns or naval bases on the horizon, but there’s nothing but snow and ice that stretches away in every direction. The blood from the stump of the arm is already freezing to the ground.

He works with automatic efficiency born of practice.  He pulls the dog out of the greatcoat.  It stares at him reproachfully, hopping on the ice.  He pulls the bedroll out of his pack, but doesn't inflate it.  It has a new bullet hole in it, and it’s worth more as a blanket, in any case.

He sets an alarm on his watch for thirty five minutes, rolls himself and the dog up in the oil cloth bedroll, stuffs his hands into his pockets, and goes to sleep. It feels good to sleep, finally, even in the cold.  He's gotten quite good at going to sleep under conditions a lot worse than these.  It's cold, but there's dry land, it's quiet, and there's not much wind.  It'd take hours for the temperature to kill him out here.

He dreams of banana milkshakes.  He hasn't had a banana milkshake in three months.

Φ

The alarm wakes him up. Rubbing sleep out of his eyes and wind-raw face, he yawns. The air scorches his lungs with cold. He rubs life back into his freezing hands. Then he glances at his watch, and gets to work. He picks up the dog, sleepy and whimpering, and tucks it into the pocket of the coat.  It's not much fond of the pocket, but has grown accustomed to it.  His fingers are still cramped, and his face feels rough with windburn.

Fortunately, it’s coming already. The air is humming at the edge of hearing, and the horizon is flexing imperceptibly. He moves a hand through the air, and can just see the trail it leaves behind. He rolls up the bedroll and hooks it into place behind his shoulder.  He checks the earplugs and then does a little dance on the permafrost, and glances at his watch.  Five seconds.  He takes a long breath in, and empties his lungs completely.  It's a trick he learned early on.  If you jump ten thousand feet in elevation, it’s not a good idea to do so with a chest full of compressed air.  The watch dings.  The bubble of greasy air vanishes with a crack like breaking wood.  Aside from a very shallow crater, the debris, and the hand, the plain is again undisturbed.

∞

The traveler crashes down into the ocean, plunging briefly below the surface before clawing his way back up. The sky is deep gray streaked with pink and rimmed with clouds - it’s either very late evening or early morning.  He starts to sink under the weight of the pack. He unhooks the bedroll and starts to inflate it. The air hisses pathetically out of the bullet hole in the top. After staring at this, briefly, he takes a few valuable minutes to swear at a passing cloud. Feeling a bit better, he gets to work.

He frees the dog from the coat.  It bobs to the surface and paddles in circles in the water.  He fishes a tube of model airplane glue out of the pocket of his coat, and a small envelope of rubber patches squares.  He finds the hole and hurriedly patches it. Then he treads water for five minutes, holding the patch above the water while it dries. When he thinks it’s dry, he begins to work the hand pump furiously, slowly inflating the bedroll.

The bedroll is an ancient piece of equipment. It began its existence a decade before as one-man rubber life raft with a small hand pump for inflation. However, it has had oil cloth glued to both sides, and has been patched and modified so many times that the original structure is almost undistinguishable. When it’s full, the traveler climbs onto it and hauls the dog onto his lap.

  The roll sags considerably in the middle, but does not sink, which is important when the water is sub-zero.  It's not now, but sometimes it is.  Actually, it's rather pleasant at the moment.

He dangles his feet in it to warm them against the fierce Antarctic chill, and considers the weather.  It's fairly warm, maybe getting to be fall, though.  Must be near Hawaii.  Pity he couldn't have landed on the island itself, he knows a place on the air force base that serves a good banana milkshake.  He catches ten minutes of sleep, and wakes up feeling much better.  A thunderstorm is moving in; his knees hurt, and the dog is whining.

A light rain is starting to fall, and he tucks the dog under his coat.  He can feel it coming.  His skin prickles, and the raindrops hiss off his skin like a hot stove.  The sea gets choppy underneath him.  His stomach clenches unpleasantly, as the bed bobs up and down under him.  The waves are getting higher.

He lies down and looks up at the black cauldron of the sky. It’s getting darker, and the clouds are gathering. He pulls his feet out of the water. He can see lightning strikes in the distance, and has no desire to find out how electricity interacts with his condition.

The rain is coming down quite hard now, and his little raft runs between cliffs of dark water. A wave lifts the bed and then drops it. It falls a good three feet, and he nearly loses his footing.  The dog cowers against the patchwork oil cloth.  Rain sleets down, getting in his eyes and soaking his hair.  He looks outwards.  A dark column of boiling clouds stands out on one horizon.  The seas have turned the color of volcanic glass underneath him.  He clings to a handle on the raft with one hand, cradling the dog with the other. He slips the dog into his coat, out of the rain.

The world around him warps like the reflection in a soap bubble.  The sea beneath him begins to sizzle along the boundary of the bubble, forming a circle of boiling water.  The tension builds and builds and builds, and then, suddenly, he's gone.  The rain fills in the hole where he used to be in an instant, and the storm continues on schedule, short only a few gallons of saline.

∞

The traveler falls about five feet, toppling off the bedroll, and crashes onto asphalt, hard.  A fair amount of seawater tumbles down around him, running out across the pavement.  The traveler climbs gingerly to his feet, pulling the dog out of his coat.  He drops it onto the ground.  It lands and shakes itself, hair flapping in limp rags around its body.  The traveler deflates the bedroll, rolls it up with practiced care, and hooks it over his shoulder.  His greatcoat is still wet, but the sun is hot and all of his equipment is already drying.  He brushes his hair out of his face.  There are two or three layers of salt drying on it, and it sticks out, stiff as straw.

The traveler wipes the seawater out of his eyes.  The dog is furiously trying to lick the salt out of its coat.  After standing there for a while, he drags his fingers through his hair again, and tries to figure out where he is.  He takes a few minutes to consult a pocket sextant and do some mental arithmetic.  In the middle of these calculations, he hears a yell, and glances up to see a car careens around a corner in both lanes.  A pretty girl leans out of it to shout at a man on the corner.

He nods triumphantly and stuffs the sextant back into his coat.  Late spring, beautiful women and the world's worst drivers.  This can only be France.  He smiles. He likes France, but hasn’t been back in some time.  He heard the Germans had taken it, and you can tell. The propaganda posters all have excellent typography.

He notes two soldiers on the corner with swastikas.  He heads in the opposite direction at a casual jog that is, never the less, very fast.  Another one of his rules:  Do not fuck around with military police.

After some walking, he ducks down an alley between suburban homes. The alley is lines with low fences and overhanging trees. He walks casually until he finds a small home with all the lights out, and then hops the fence. The yard is oddly clean. There’s a small pond in one corner, but there aren’t any fish in it. There’s a total lack of lawn decoration. He wonders if the house is deserted. Well, so long as the water works.  He produces a lock pick from a pocket, gets the backdoor open in a couple of tries, and goes inside.  He locks it behind him, to be polite.

It’s not a large house, but it’s nice enough: modern, lots of white plaster and big windows. A bit of exploration reveals a bathroom. He sees the shower and breaks out in a wide, earnest grin. He tests the water. It’s cold, but it’s on.

 He sits down on the toilet, and begins to break down his gear. His coat has five padlocks harnessing it onto his body with steel cables and leather straps.  He enters a different combination for each one, twisting his arm a good ways to get the one in the small of his back. With the last lock undone, he lines them up on the bathroom counter, and undresses. First his pack comes off, and then his greatcoat. He now stands wearing nothing but a filthy white cotton shirt, blue jeans, and a solid pair of combat boots.

He removes these as well, prying his feet out of the boots with difficulty.  His body is scarred, heavily muscled, and filthy.  Not counting minor scrapes and burns, he has two bullet scars in one shoulder from a German sniper, a British slug lodged in his hip, and a ragged scar down his stomach where he was stabbed by a Japanese soldier.  His right arm is oddly twisted from being broken in three places.  His left thumb and wrist are covered in little strands of scar tissue, and his ring finger has a fused middle joint.  His nose has been broken, probably more than once.  His right ear is missing a piece the size of a postage stamp.  He's got a scar under his right eye that hasn’t healed right.  He notes several fresh cuts on his legs, and disinfects them with iodine from the medicine cabinet.

He folds the coat, which is stiff with age, patches, and salt, against the toilet, throws his underclothes into the bathtub, and climbs in after them.  He checks his watch.  Twenty two minutes.  He stands under the hot jet of the shower, scrubbing grime and salt and blood off himself with a threadbare washrag. A bit of shampoo removes weeks worth of salt from his hair.  By the time he gets out, he feels like a new man.  He pries a window open, and hangs his clothes out to dry, taking a moment to thoroughly wash his underwear.  He then stuffs his coat into the shower and goes at it with a bar of soap and a grudge.  The dog goes in too, with some resistance and he spends a little attention on it, too, getting the larger mats out of its hair, and most of the salt and grease.  The great coat gets marginally cleaner.  He tries to rinse his socks, but they tear is in his hands from wear.  He settles for washing the mud, manure, and rocks out of his boots and removing a pair of backup socks from his coat.  He puts his shoes back on. He closes the medicine cabinet, combs his hair in the mirror, and leaves the iodine bottle sitting in the sink.

He searches the bathroom cabinet and finds a small woman’s razor. Using bar soap, he shaves in the bathroom mirror. Satisfied that most of the hair is gone, he produces a battered toothbrush from one of the pockets of his coat, and brushes his teeth from a tin of baking powder from the mirror.  After rinsing, spitting, rinsing again, he straightens up, and put his clothes on.  It's hard to do so.  It feels enormously freeing to be walking around without the forty-pound dead load of the coat and gear.

He sighs.  It’s a tempting prospect, and also probably lethal. The temptation is why he doesn't bathe often.  He shrugs the coat over his shoulders; padlocks the internal harness onto his body; puts the pack on, locks it down, puts the dog into the pocket. He heads into the kitchen and checks his watch again.  Four minutes.  He can feel the air getting slick to the touch.  Barely enough time to stock up on food.  He goes into the kitchen and finds the pet food.  Just dry dog food.  He sighs.  He prefers the taste of cat food, and the stuff never goes bad.

He checks the refrigerator.  There are a few bananas, which he takes, and half of a pork chop. There’s nothing else. He frowns, and stares around the house. Not much furniture, no decoration on the walls. The bananas are fresh, so someone clearly lives here, but it isn’t anyone’s home. Interesting.

He eats the porkchop cold, and gives the bone to the dog.  He decides to check the cabinets for jerky or canned fruit.  Maybe there'll be limes.  He hasn't been feeling well, and he’s worried about scurvy.  He turns and walks to the front of the kitchen, with a clear view of the living room. Light streams in between heavy gray blinds on the window. There isn’t any carpet on the floor.  The front door is open.  He steps towards the cabinet, opens it, starts scanning.  The front door is open.

The front door is open.

He freezes, hand halfway into one of the cabinets.  He stands very still, listening.  There is a long, long moment of silence.  The door hangs open, light streaming in.  There’s the distant noise of traffic. A fly buzzes over the stove.  The floor creaks behind him.  He starts to turn.  There's a loud, brutal yell, and something slams into him with stunning force. A knee comes up into his gut, knocking the air out of him. He bends over, wheezing, white sparks glowing at the edges of his vision. He tries to straighten up, and then a bottle breaks over the back of his head, splattering wine down the sides of his face and driving him to the floor. His attacker lunges onto him. He yells as arms lock around his neck.

“Get off!”

His head slams into the hardwood floor. His nose starts to bleed. A hand grips his hair, and his head hits the ground again. He turns around, sputtering in incomprehension.

“It's only your *shower.*"

He rolls over, and she punches him in the nose.  She's in her mid twenties, probably, and her eyes are blazing, dark hair in disarray around her face.  He has time to think that she’s quite pretty, and then she hits him in the face again, spraying blood, and his mind gets back into the game. He elbows her in the jaw with more force than he intended. Her head snaps back, and she loses her balance.

She yells at him as he drags himself out from under her.  The air is humming around him, now, and he can feel the floor sliding under his hands and feet as he rolls over and staggers clumsily towards the door.  Her voice is thick, angry, and shaking

“Qui êtes-vous le foutre, connard? Qui vous envoie? Que fais-tu dans ma maison? "

He almost reaches the door when she lands on his back for a second time, arm around his throat in a credible choke.  The tension in the air around him has reached its peak.  The alarm on his watch dings.  The dog, squashed under her, growls loudly.  He takes one more step for the door, and with scarcely a sound they are gone.  Somewhere in the distance a cat yowls, hungry.

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END OF EXCERPT

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