***INNOCENCE LOST***

***By Ian Connor Duthie***

*Brieulles, France 1915, North of Verdun*

I remember the day like no other.

It was a late Saturday afternoon—that time just before dawn. You know how it gets: Everything is sharper, harsher, more focused. I blamed it on the October air, cold enough to burn my lungs and condense my breath, just not enough to breach my heaviest leather coat.

As it was, I was stepping lively on that thin, crunchy gravel pathway that led up to the train station. It had been that way as long as I could remember, and I knew the route well enough to know exactly when to get there to be right on time. Still, for an occasion as special as this one *even I wanted to be early*. Even so, it seemed to me that I was somehow late; I heard what I thought was her train in the distance, and broke into a run fast enough to catch a glimpse of its occupants. I remember thinking later how there wasn’t a single woman, or jubilant child, trying to peek out of the windows. That was the norm, I was used to it, and I didn’t pick up on it ’till I actually arrived at the station itself.

My neighbors carried their panicked expressions out the heavy oaken door just as I was trying to walk through it. Something was wrong, I could tell. However just as soon as the growing crowd diffused enough to let me pass, someone tripped and caught me on the shoulder, nearly bringing me down.

“Whoa, be more careful!” I said impatiently.

“Ugh, Anders? Sorry you know how it gets…”

“Dear God, Franz, I can smell the liquor on your breath. You’re *still* drinking? This early in the morning? Never mind, what’s going on here?”

“Fine then, interrupt me, you ruddy sod, that’s no way to ask a man a favor. I’ll need to pinch some champagne from you later to supplement that.”

I let the old drunkard continue, knowing protest would be futile. “So there I was all peaceful like when the train finally stopped. All of a sudden—BAM!—Germans everywhere!”

“Were they on the train? What about the passengers? Have you seen Monica?”

“Whoa, slow down, slow down! Yeah, the Germans were on the train unless they’ve somehow figured out how to materialize from thin air. There weren’t no passengers neither, your girl included. Sorry mate.”

“Can’t I just get in there?”

“Ho boy, I sure wouldn’t do that, Benji, and Clarke had some problems with the whole situation, and, well…”

“Oh, they have guns, eh? Well, that shouldn’t mean a thing! Go! Get them some help! Besides, I need to find Monica.”

“Hmm,” muttered Franz. “How very disconcerting of you. Fine, I’ll get the constable.”

“Thanks, Franz!” I yelled as I ran off to the back of the building.

“Wait! You’re not making me do it alone are you? Dammit Anders! You owe me a drink!”

Sprinting around the corner, I was suddenly colliding into someone for the *second* time today. Whoever it was though seemed to be nice enough—they even offered me a hand! “Apologies, *monsieur*….” I began to say. But as I looked up and then around: *Germans, all eight of them*. Whoever I had run into was looking at me with the fury I had only seen coming from one of my old schoolmasters; someone “important” most likely. However, in the ones with their harsh brown boots still planted firmly on the ground, I saw only pity and contempt. Faster than I could blink, the man was on his feet—scratch that, *foot*. One was colliding with my head.

Nun Le-Piet, someone you could recognize everywhere—she always had a dirty grin on her face and somehow always smelled of fresh rosemary—yet I had never known any to grow here. She’s much more difficult to spot when her head is arched to the celling and snores as loud as a backfiring automobile rise to compliment the pulsating agony of your *own* head. “Ugh, my aching head…” I began to moan. The way Le-Piet jumped, you’d think she’d been faking sleep all this time. “Mugnh? Oh, no, I can explain Madame, I was merely showing…”

“Excuse *me*?” I exclaimed. “Madame, eh? Nothing’s changed since the last time I checked hopefully? ”

“What? Umm… Oh, oh! Anders! Ha! Thank goodness, I’d thought someone had caught me dozing off there, but never mind, your finally awake! What happened? Oh, that knocked you out… I mean, obviously you weren’t quite right in the head in the first place to trip in an open field,” she said, chuckling at her own joke.

“Ha, very funny. A*ctually*, I was ambushed by an entire platoon of Germans.”

“Yeah, right. I’m still going to go with how you tripped over your own feet. Now,” she said while pulling out her medical kit, taking a seat adjacent to me, “tell me where it hurts the most.”

“Wait a second. You mean you don’t *know*? There’s an entire German army regiment in town and you*’*re just now hearing about it?” She pulled away and sat back into her chair.

“Your serious aren’t you, “she muttered, leaning forward now. “You must’ve gotten hit harder than I thought…” She moved to steady me in my cot, “Easy there, Anders…” I pushed her away.

“No! Easy there yourself! The town needs to know about this! This is real! Don’t you get it?” I stood up to vault out of the balcony into the red-orange sunset. I imagine I must have looked quite dramatic.

“Anders, wait…”

“No! If you won’t listen to me I’ll find someone who…”

“Wait! Stop. Don’t you hear that?” I paused, as her voice softened to a whisper. “Don’t you hear that*?” Mhwhrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr…* She had my attention now. I’d heard it: a faint, far off sound of… what?

“I know that sound,” She continued, “My brother went off to fly one of those things in the army. It’s a….. It’s a….. umm, aeroplane?”

We move to stare into the growing dusk. There wasn’t very much see—just the vague outline of the town, the surrounding hills, and the gently moving river. The clouds were a deep purple. It was one of the most beautiful sunsets I’d ever seen, yet what came next would shape my nightmares for years to come. Through the wispy shreds of purple you could *just* glimpse them. Six. Dual-winged things. Buoyant. Barely a hundred meters of the ground and almost level with the priory, our vantage point. They flew in a tight formation, then all at once arched towards us and spread out. Majestically yet chaotically they sliced the sky like knives. “Incredible,” I murmured. The town seemed to agree, people everywhere had turned their attention skyward to watch the spectacle.

And suddenly, as if on cue, gunshots erupted from Aumins Street. Awed expressions melted into horror as, one by one, the aeroplanes swooped in and dropped ***firebombs*** on our beloved town. Explosions lit up the night with a crimson matched only by the sun itself. Screams resonated from all over town.

Dumbstruck with shock, and I suddenly had but one thought. “Monica… I was… I was going to ask her to marry me tonight…” Feeling sheer dread in my heart, I vaulted the balcony, just as I’d meant to earlier. I sprinted down the hill at breakneck speed into Brieulles, the only home I had ever known.

I stopped for nothing. Running faster than I ever thought possible, the world seemed nothing more than a blur. As I ran, an odd memory took root: My father’s bar. I’d met her there the first time, oddly enough. The sudden April deluge, the first of the season, had brought her in seeking shelter. I’d brought her a towel, and in my haste to make her a hot cup of tea, I started a fire on the old greasy coal stove.

***Monica’s View***

It turned into quite the ordeal with Anders and his entire family trying to put out the fire. I had to join in to keep the bar from burning down. I joked later that at least he’d kept me from freezing to death.

It is strange how your thoughts seem to stray when you have no idea what to do. I’d been part running, part panicking for a while now. After finally leaving that damnable train station, I spent the better part of the evening trying to enjoy the walk home. I met a few old friends, bought a crepe’. In general, I was having a decent time. That is, until fiery death and destruction rained down and I was running for my life.

Where was I? No matter which way I ran, my path was blocked. Ruined homes. Fire still ablaze. Germans. Charging horses. Loriamo Street was blocked, so I circled back through the carnage of Rue de Brieulles and onto Havales Avenue. No! Blocked, blocked, all of them blocked! Finally… I see an opening on Grain Street where a bucking stallion is trying in vain to free itself of a burning carriage. I dash blindly… a firebomb alights the granary just meters ahead of me… nothing else I can do… I run on! I can make it, I can make it, make it, make it, make it! ***Fwhooooommmmmmffffff***. The grain explodes out of the superheated metal, tearing and searing me with a fiery caress.Eyes beginning to swell, I trip, and much of the explosion flies overhead. All this in a split second. Then I’m running again. My new silk dress, ruined! And I didn’t look much better: Patchworks of silk had melted into my beet-red skin. Yet despite my desperate exterior, I had perfect clarity. I knew exactly where to go.

***Anders’ View***

It didn’t matter how long I stared at the inferno that was the Crown & Thresher—the situation wasn’t going to get any better. The ancient thatch roof had fallen in some time ago, and the blaze was spreading towards the door. “No more time to waste, Anders, now or never.” I told myself, what that I Gripped a deck chair, chucking it through that wonderful plate glass window I’d found myself staring through on nary a winter night. The glass was hot enough to feel beneath my shoes as I blatantly crashed in. Smoke poured out behind me and rushed up in front of me as I vaulted the counter, out of the common area, into the kitchen. “Father! Monica! ***Is anyone in here!***”

My eyes turned to the entry hall. Franz was there, burned and disoriented. “Franz, you need to get out of here! shit- Dad?” Franz was struggling to lift one of the old wooden beams off of Father’s waist. Together we make short work of it and we make it out alive.

We stand outside what would’ve been a funeral pyre. We’re all worse for wear, but that dosen’t seem to matter much at this very moment. “Go,” wheezes Franz. “Find her. I’ll get ’im to the priory.”

“Son?”

“Yes, father?”

“We haven’t always seen eye, I know, and I regret that now more than ever. But there’s no time for this. ***Ahem***, Anders, I give you my blessing. I grant you part ownership of all that I own, that this to be split with your brother. Always be honorable in your endeavors, and uphold our family name.” He pauses, then says, “Good luck son, make us proud.”

“Sir yes sir,” I say with a proud smile, filled with the pangs of sorrow. And regret.

“Now, go before you make me regret it.” He firmly held my gaze, smiling back at me now. A brief silence, Franz rises to stand. “Well then, I’ll take it from here. You’ll get to the priory, Mr. Ruisdael, you both have my word.” We help Father stand, “Goodbye, son.” We embrace, tears running down our cheeks. “Goodbye, Dad.” Then it’s over and we go our separate ways.

***Monica’s View***

The Germans hadn’t moved for some time, but they certainly had plenty of good reasons for it. Many were injured, some had severe burns, the few that were standing only looked fearful. I shiver in my silken rags, at the time, getting a better vantage point had seemed to be the best, if only, option. Now however, I was regretting it. The regiment was going nowhere fast, and many were ransacking the buildings. Can’t they supply their own troops?

My precarious situation was getting worse, a young solider, about my age, seems to have spotted the garden that adorns my rooftop. Dammit, he’s in the building now… Ok, what can I do? Next roof? Too far! Hiding spots? None good enough. I wonder if I can get the jump on… No, no, no! A trained solder? It will never happen! Ok, you’ve a minute at best! Calm down, Monica, dammit! I hear the soft creaking of the ladder and know my time is up. I rise to meet my fate, my adrenaline is gone, there’s nothing to be done. Standing calm, I hold my composure. First hand, second hand, then a face just as sooty as mine. He stops, no doubt shocked, dumbstruck.

“***Monica?”*** It’s my turn to be shocked, and I find myself in a tight embrace. I push away. “The hell are you?” The stranger in the German greens steps back, looking confused, then gives me a rueful smile, one I know all too well. “Anders…” and that’s that, I lose my stone hard composure, burst out crying, and we embrace—properly this time.

“Dear God Anders… There’s nothing left! Everything from the Rue, to Monte Carlo, gone… and the people, ***all***  of them, dead! ***Why*** Anders, ***Why?”***

*“Shhhhhhhshsh, shuuuuushh,* it’s over ok? It’s done with, and I’m not letting anything ever come between us….. Listen, we’ve got to…”

I tear away, tears are streaming down my face, ***“Stop***, just ***stop***! Don’t you get it?! *I’m* here now because other people ***aren’t***! I could have saved them, but you know ***what***? I didn’t stop! I didn’t stop because I couldn’t ***bring*** the injured with me, the elderly, the weak, the helpless, ***the children!*** They’re ***dead!*** Because I never stopped to value another damn life as much as my own, they’ll never go home!” Anders starts to open his mouth to speak, but no: “And  ***you***, Anders, you’re no better than the uniform you’re wearing! These men, these soldiers, these, these… ***murderers***! How many did ***you*** pass?! ***Twenty?! Fifty***?”

I watch one tear, then another stream down his face.

***Anders View***

Before she says anything more, I push her against the highest wall of the rooftop and embrace her. Her eyes spray fiery tears across each my shoulder. My hand is behind her neck as I pull my face up to meet hers. With a quivering voice, the kind that’s thick with emotion, I say: “Mona… Monica… your right… we are ***monsters…*** no better than animals. We saw the way that’d let us live, and we took it. The consequence didn’t matter, but now it will, and it will for the rest of our ***lives***. But in the end ***that’s*** what matters. We. Are. Alive! What we *choose* to do with the lives we’ve taken is our decision. Today we ***are*** monsters. But tomorrow? And next year? The endgame… we can be human, real, caring, ***feeling*** humans. That’s what matters.”

Minutes pass. “Monica?” She says nothing. “Monica? Are you alright?”

She looks into my eyes, then to the floor. “Yes, well yes, I suppose I am…”

“Can you look at me? Will you listen?” She brings her soot-shadowed eyes up, to match my own. I join my hands with hers. “There couldn’t be a worse time for this, but I fear we may never have another chance…Monica do you remember that day I came to visit you on Paris? I remember how you teased me, just on the other side of the academy wall. ‘There’s no **way** you’ll make it,’ you said with the most devilish grin on your face. I still see that very second when I peeked over the top, grinning back, and offered you my hand. I remember how we paraded around the city, not a care in the world. And that night, under the Arc de Triomphe, I kissed you for the first time. I thought it then, but I know it now…

I knelt and I offered up my ring. “Monica Jacques Anisulles, will you marry me?”

Tears flooded her eyes once more, and she hugs me hard enough to steal my breath away. “Yes, dear God yes…”

***Monica’s View***

We haven’t moved for some time now; it doesn’t seem right to. There are no streetlights tonight, just a perfect full moon. We watch it from our solitary rooftop, the stars soften our words, we talk of nothing, and yet we talk, afraid I’ll go mad if we don’t. The ever-present Germans put an end to it.

An excited murmur of voices drifts over from the market square. It takes a while but we eventually make our way over. The men are huddled over a large… radio? All of a sudden, the excitement is lost. Voices grow serious, orders are given, and they move out as a hulking mass, bearing the stretchers of the few who aren’t dead.

Anders taps my shoulder. “If we’re going to move we should do it now. More will come, Germans or not.”

I stand to stretch my aching muscles, my back clicking and clacking. “Where would we go? If nowhere is safe, why bother?”

“Well, I guess… Hey, wait, do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” But I already know. Every man and woman in every corner of Europe knows that sound. Men on leave, if they talk about it at all, speak of it with terror. Exploding, metal casks of fragmented death. That’s all you really need to know.

“Shells” we both say, in near perfect unison. After sharing a glance full of fear, we leave our rooftop without another word.

It’s strange isn’t it? You live your whole life in a place, but when you look at it in a different way, nothing is the same. The moon’s bright beams cast shadows over our faces, crawling through buildings we used to know. I think: *This is wrong. Brieulles isn’t like this, not my Brieulles, where I shopped, ate, played, and even drank… on one or two occasions.* But it’s gone. A shadow of its former self, this is all that remains. Hand in hand, we race through the fractured cobblestone streets. The shells have long since passed over us, and rain down torrentially, unendingly.

After a while I find it harder to breathe. Anders isn’t doing much better—he’s practically dragging me. Finally he collapses onto the cobbles next to some scrawny German wearing a very strange apparatus on his face. I stop too, oh so tired. I begin to see the world in an almost dreamlike state. I breathe deeply in, then out. A sigh of relief—the shelling has stopped. Anders starts to cough, I wait for it to subside, but it doesn’t, and I become increasingly panicked. “Anders, Anders are you alright? What is it? What’s wrong? Do you need water? I’ll go get some… Stay, stay right here!”

I look around for the dead German, but this damn fog! My eyes begin to burn. Even if there *was* any light to see by, wasn’t this bad enough already?

“Ach- Caach-Caah- air-**cachh**, no-**ach**- **Air!**”

“Air?” My mind races a million miles a minute… air… no, not air… fog? No! Gas! ***Gas***! I finally spy the green-uniformed German. I don’t bother with his canteen, or pockets; I go straight for the mask. Anders is coughing up blood, and without another thought I jam it onto his convulsing face. He struggles even more. A terrible thought comes to mind: Why was the German dead? I franticly pull the mask away, but no, *he* pulls it back on. I let him, and he begins to breathe normally.

I slump to the ground beside him. Seconds later Anders hands the mask to me, rasping, “Breathe, you’ll feel better.” I do, realizing just *how* close to fainting I was, so lightheaded that I didn’t even know it! God, how long had we *been* here? I return the mask to Anders. Suddenly, I am overcome in a fit of coughing, and he quickly passes back the apparatus. “It’s getting worse,” he warns. “We need to move while we still can. Can you move?” We lurch, we limp, and we share the same face. To separate now would be to become lost and die. We go now to the last sanctuary of life, and light for miles. The priory beckons us: What choice but to follow?

The imposing gate of the priory stands ajar, revealing small candles and murmured prayers within. A young priest stands to open the front door, saying not a word of our passing. The entry hall’s fine red carpet is tarnished by the hundreds of footprints of the other survivors. There are no greetings, we are just more refugees, more mouths to feed, more heads to shelter. However, as soon as we pass into the sermon hall, a commotion begins.

“Mama, Mama!” yells a child. “The green men are coming up the hill!”

“Shuush, sussh darling,” Coos the mother, “it’s going to be fine…”

Some things don’t need to be said, even when people come out and say them. “No, no, no, no! The Germans are coming!

“What do they want with us? Hasn’t enough damage already been done?”

I, nor Anders bothers to look, we’ve seen enough Germans for one day. You sure can hear what is going on though; our ever fearful neighbors continue to panic about what is happening. The Germans have dug trenches into the hillside. Shell cannons, and allied flags are made visible from the rising sun.

I wake up Anders and fill him in. “If we don’t do this now, we may never get another chance.”

He matches my gaze, and then my words, “Your right, we can’t go betting against the odds. Not when any of these moments could be our last.”

I bring my gaze towards the ground, “Anders…”

“I’m sorry Monica, that was too far…”

“Anders do you love me? Do you love me for who I am? For the girl you know who loves weekends, wears her hair in a knot and knows you? Tell me…” I let slip, fear clouds my judgment. “Please…”

At this he I hear nothing for a few seconds, then he pulls my head back up to look into my eyes. “Monica, how could I not? How else could I see you every day, talk to you, and yet never be able to say what’s in my heart? How else could I miss you when you’re away, count the days, and when you’re a minute late, come get you, no matter *where* the heck you are?”

He’s smiling now. “I love *you* Monica, not the way you dress, not your hair, not your friends. I love the way I can say whatever I need to, and you’ll listen. I love how I can put a smile on your face, and make you grin when nobody else can. *I love you,* and nothing will ever change that.”

That was what I needed to hear. I manage a fearful ghost of a smile. This is what I want, I know it. Still, that does not make it any easier. What would Father say, Mother? What if he is not the one? Would I ever be able to tell him how I truly feel? All of these thoughts swirl around like a mental whirlpool. “Well then,” I whisper, “let’s do it.”

Prior Benjario is usually pretty hard to find. He’s actually quite reclusive, even timid. Yet from the way he conducts his sermons—you’d never guess it. Not so today however. He drifts about, comforting and praying with those in need. As tired as we all evidently are, he still finds cause to object.

He looks between both of us reading our faces. “And you’re sure that this is what you want? Truly?”

“Yes,” I say, speaking for both of us.

“Without each other,” begins Anders, “after today more than ever… Prior, we need each other, we share feelings I’ve never felt so intensely in my life.”

He seems to consider it a while longer, than speaks once again: “I do not know fully if this is the best choice. What would your parents think? What will people think of the lot of us. I do know, however, that you two care very much for each other. Time has proved to me that at least. Today’s events do naught but reinforce it. Fine, yes I *will* do it. If I don’t marry you someone else will. Come, I fear we don’t have much time.”

We make room at Benjario’s podium to begin the ceremony. As we do I begin to take stock of the folks who are “gathered here today” as the Prior says these very words. The men, hearty, strong—farmers most of them, still in their overalls, full of grain seeds from the late harvest. Most of the women wear cotton dresses that drape down to their shoes. Funny, they look nearly as bad as I do.

The wedding continues to proceed as normal. I should really be paying complete attention to it, but I’m not. Right now my neighbors have caught my eye. As the ceremony continues more and more of them begin to sit down to watch, and to pay homage to what they’re witnessing. Some I know, but most I haven’t even met. It’s heartwarming to tell the truth.

We’re only half way through when the shelling begins in earnest. People begin to panic once more, as Benjario speaks faster and faster. “Do you vow to love each other through thick and thin? Will you respect and honor each other—***PHEEEEEEEEEEEEEW BOOOOM—***when you patience is tested most?”

It just keeps getting worse; they’re getting closer. Finally we arrive at the end. The walls shake as if in an earthquake, and the prior yells, just to be heard. “**Do you, Monica Jacques Aniculles, accept this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?”**

“I do!**”**

**“And do you, Anders Monte-Carlo Ruisdael, accept this woman to be—‘PHEEEEEWWW’—your lawfully wedded wife?”**

“I do!”

**“As is my honor as prior, I now pronounce you man—‘BOOOOM’—and wife! You may kiss the bride!”**

We do, it’s one of the most beautiful yet horrifically terrible moments of my life. I have the man of my dreams to kiss for as long as I like, yet at that same time shells open the hall to the air. Screams follow the rain of rubble as we run to help. We are finished being monsters. May God have mercy on our souls.

***Fin***