

The Return

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He returned to his native village toward evening. He placed his rifle in the chimney of the burnt-out house. The whole time his hands could not rid themselves of the feel of the rifle's usual weight. The sun, the familiar sun of childhood, set behind the familiar hillock. Overhead, amid the melancholy silence, the stars began to shine. A wind blew in from the field, as it had earlier. The peasant, who had been a soldier and was now a peasant again, let out a sigh. The spring evening of his return had come, just as he had dreamed of it in the trenches.

The village lay in chaos. During the winter the front had passed through it. In its center a military road had eaten into the earth. The village was destroyed by shells and burned by fire. The destroyed homes looked like candle-butts in a sand bowl. In them human life had begun, cooled, and come to an end. Human feet had trampled the earth in the yards. Generations had trampled it, beating out a ring around the candle-homes. The spring emitted a heavy fragrance. The convex horizon was turning pink from the sun. In the sky geese sailed by in a vee, like a boat. Little clouds crowded above them, nudging one another like young calves. Skeins of clouds passed by. A raven, so black it was dark blue, flew, as though breaking off its wings. "And so what!" said the peasant loudly.

With his hands he was catching the night that encircled him; he shot at the silent moon and seemed to see gleaming slivers falling from it. Suddenly the moon hid and the peasant fell asleep. It seemed to him that the trench was shooting all around him. A shell shrieked through the air, exploding somewhere behind him. The peasant awoke briefly, surprised that there were shells in the village. Then a real dream came. He settled more comfortably, sensing that this dream would bring something pleasant. Indeed it did. In the middle of the homestead sprawled a new green plow. The plowshare and coulter shone brightly. The plow beam was sticking upward, and the little plow cart stood comically on two crooked wheels. Grasping the plow handles brought a feeling of languor. The blinding sun beat against the wall of the house. A little sunbeam darted over the door. Through the windowpane, a fire was blooming on the oven's hearthstone. He looked at the blossoming sun singeing the sky and tearing itself from the azure background. The sun exploded into an infinity of fragments. The sky above the horizon darkened from the earth—it flew upward.

"This is a dream," he thought. He felt the struggle between the two

dreams: the house illuminated by the sun, through which the gloomy trench appeared to him. He knew for certain that he was sleeping in the ashes of the village. His brain, like an exhausted, tormented, and fragmented being, struggled with all its might, restoring the vision of his house. The trench thundered and obstructed his vision, but his brain in its dream exhaled this noise as if it were a narcotic poison in his lungs. Finally, his brain fused the two dreams together. A cloud appeared over the house. It was still far off, but its fingers were already appearing in the sky, and from below reflections of lightning bolts were streaming toward them. The open fingers of the clouds tightened into a fist, which took aim at the low-hanging sun.

It began to rain. The sun disappeared, having illuminated the brain with the warmth of its last rays. Once again he dreamed of the trench. The peasant knew that it was only a dream. Inhuman exhaustion bound and tangled his muscles. In this dream, this "trench" dream, he wanted to see another dream again. He wanted to fall asleep in his dream. His brain definitely knew that the ruined yard was reality. Everything else was a dream. Everything else was a dream.

A struggle was taking place. His brain was protecting the peace with a dream. It was raining. Streams of rain were reaching his body; raindrops were running down his face. The human being began to dream that he was wounded, that he was crying. The wound did not hurt at all: the tears were in gratitude for the wound. In the dream the person was utterly pleased that he has only been injured. Even the rain—it was completely real—could not awaken the person. It seemed to him that cold blood was flowing and running from the wound on his back. Somewhere in the depths of his brain there glimmered the realization that this was just a dream, that reality was the burnt-out village. But this dream was more pleasant than the dream about shells exploding. The thought flickered that reality is the return home from the war, to his native fire-ravaged village.

In his dream his wife appears. "My husband," she says. Near the well she stops to draw water. Her shadow breaks over the white house. He sees himself putting away the new plow. Together he and his wife carry the plow into the cellar. The cellar smells of frogs and damp earth. He dreams that he is explaining to his wife why he is storing the plow. He embraces his wife, breathing in her scent. Subconsciously an idea forms about this dream. How can he tell his wife that reality is the fire-devastated village, that the plow must be put into the underground cellar in the dream (the dream takes place earlier!), that after he wakes up it will be possible to find the plow? His wife clings trustingly to him with her whole body. The joy of return. A wave of desire stirs from the very depths of his mind. The peasant awoke on a spring morning on the ash-heaps of the village. He woke up and sighed deeply.

The orchards were destroyed. They had barely begun to turn green. Broken branches, like twisted arms and legs, lay scattered in the yards. Houses stood roofless. Burned walls and piles of clay stank of great, alien

misery and ashes. The sun rose from the chaos of the horizon. Army wagons, bogged down, were scattered along the road. The peasant walked through the village. He was alone among the streets and houses. Beyond the village, fog suddenly caught up to him. It enveloped him, as though transporting him to a foreign land. The peasant halted. In front of him was the precipice of the trench and a never-ending wetness. He jumped inside and clung to the breastwork. Instantly he felt like sleeping. Fighting off somnolence, he continuously observed the familiar picture: barren and deserted. Willfully, he tore himself out of the earth and went off to roam the field searching for field markers. The war had destroyed everything that was reminiscent of land divisions.

He found his field. On the slope of a hollow he recognized a corner of it. The zigzags of the trench ran along the hollow. How much work it will take to level it! The stench of corpses rose from the earth. The soil would be fertile. He took a shovel that protruded nearby. It fit his hands like a rifle. He began leveling his field. He hacked off the hands of corpses so that they would not stick out of the earth. He dragged away those that were lying on the surface. He found weapons and ammunition and gathered them in a pile. The sun set and rose several times, but he continued to dig. He ate tins of food instead of bread. They popped out of the earth like mushrooms—meaty, vegetal, and milky.

The village stood empty. Winds blew over it endlessly. One wet it, another dried it, and yet another chilled it. Storms came, one after another, and destroyed the remnants of the dwellings. He learned to think in general sentences. He thought "we" and imagined myriad ruins and a human wilderness. At times it seemed that people were walking around him; that the houses were standing, cheerful and attractive. He could not see that, although he wanted to say a word to someone. Inhuman torment filled his brain. Consciousness and eyesight told him that there were only ruins here, but somewhere deep in his subconscious he did not believe his eyes. Or his mind.

The field was now level amid the madness of the twisted trenches. He plowed it and sowed it with seeds. He was afraid to look at what was pulling the plow and walked on, pushing down on the handles. He walked along the furrow, looking at the ground. The plow and the seeds were found by those who had stored them away in the dream. The seeds scattered like small shot. Like heavy drops, they flew out of his hands. And practically before his eyes, they began to sprout and grow.

All around the peasant the field throbbed. His mind told him it was machines hurtling past, plowing and sowing. Common sense assured him that machines were conquering the earth. His consciousness said that the earth was reviving everywhere. Life experience told him to wait and see. But his eyes were blind, his ears were deaf, and his heart was implacable. Surely, the insanity of the trenches was all around. And the peasant saw it,

feeling his solitude amid the gigantic circle of the horizon.

The ears of grain were remorseful in the wind. In the stench of the half-rotten remnants of war, the field rustled, covered with level ears of grain. From underneath the earth victims of the war stuck out the remains of their bones. The peasant chopped the bones with his shovel—they were threatening to overtake his land. Something higher than reason, more powerful than consciousness, governed him, a feeling of solitude and despair.

He entered the yellow field with a sickle. Each swing of the sickle was brutal. Each severed stalk echoed like a shot. He mowed for a long time, an entire lifetime. Yet he could not cut down the entire field. It seemed to rise up ahead; it was turning green and yellow in front of his eyes. It rose up behind, like something living, and anchored its little stalks into the earth. The peasant felt old. Having begun to mow as a child, he seemed to have continued through his entire life. He could not finish mowing and fell asleep, falling onto a hot sheaf. The sun burned mercilessly.

He dreamed about the trench and the war. At the foot of the mountain a section of yellow field burned beneath the sun. The sun was covered by a veil of clouds that opened only over the sown field. The peasant saw the field. From beyond the horizon machines rattled. Like rain on the steppe, they lumbered forward, raising dust in front of them. People with rifles rose up beside the sown field. The peasant ran to help and instantly felt how difficult it was to run in his dream. The machines crossed a strip of the sown field. Their breath felt hot on the peasant's face. He awoke on the scorching earth of his field.

Inhuman despair and solitude. Fatefulness and weariness. He took the sickle and wanted to cut his throat. The sickle bent and tickled him. His throat ached, but life did not escape through it. Then he tried to pierce his heart with the sickle. He cut through his clothing easily. But he did not manage to find his heart. It was rummaging about in his chest and hiding in all the corners. The peasant stood up on his two legs on the hot yellow field. He threw the sickle far away. His throat and heart hurt. He looked all around himself and choked on his solitude.

He seemed to be under water. The water muffled all sounds. With a dignified stride he crossed the sown field. His whole life shrank to this one moment. To him death seemed the highest stage of life. He went off the field into the trench. He tied a rope, made a noose, placed his head in it, and began to sink along the wall, pulling the noose tighter around his neck. Life slowly left his entire body. His arms and legs grew cold. His chest ripped away and his heart contracted for the last time. The head lost the nose, eyes, ears, tongue. Slowly, his entire large brain transformed into a dot.

Consciousness—everything that was secret and most important—was concentrated in this dot. The dot had to break apart. Then everything would be over. The dot was overwhelmed by madness.

It could acquiesce to the destruction of everything but itself. It destroyed the body, destroyed feelings. But now, in madness, it set fire to the whole brain, and the person woke up, half-smothered.

All of this was a dream. The war was not over. The person was still in the war. Having fallen asleep in the trench, he had nearly hanged himself when his army coat caught on a knot of wood on the trench shoring.

He stared, his eyes wide open, gazing at everything around him as though for the first time. Joy enveloped him: he was still in the war. On the other side of the hollow trembled the bedraggled forest, smashed by shells. In the trenches the mud splashed drearily. His neighbors were dozing, rifles at the ready.

A look of mute enchantment froze on his face. At that moment, a bullet flew right into his forehead—it seemed to have been boring into his brain for countless years. Finally his mind’s eye stopped seeing. There was neither dream nor life. Slowly he fell like a crumpled sack of earth into the thin mud of the trench.

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