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## "In Place of Dreams"

by Thompson Girl

*"A man is not old until his regrets take the place of his dreams." - Yiddish proverb*

The taxi sped Gil Hanley down Taraval Street toward the Pacific. Window gazing was pointless; San Francisco was soaked in. Nothing but fog, damp and cold, smelling of salt and wet asphalt. House facades flashed by, brightly painted, as if promising there was more to the city than grey weather.

Pointless too, because his gaze was internal: on the house in Santa Monica and that last spectacular argument with his wife. *Ex-wife*. Over and over the scene repeated in his mind. Each time, it grew a little richer for the "should-haves" bitter hindsight added to it. Each time, he distanced himself and blamed her a little more.

He didn't want to be here, in a foggy, dirty city he hated, responding to a curious, urgent summons from someone he didn't know.

He wanted to be home.

Home. What home? She'd get it in the divorce settlement. That was a given. He'd end up with some second-rate apartment while she squandered all his alimony checks each month on new outfits and hats and parties for her Home and Garden Society friends. It didn't matter. Bitterness protected him from the ache beneath it all.

The address from the letter took him to one unremarkable home in a block of Victorians jammed together like tawdry romances on a bookshelf. All identical, except for the paint jobs and the filigreed woodwork. The open maw of a stairwell greeted him. Grey light from the skylight barely alleviated the inner stairwell's gloom, and the air smelled heavily of Chinese food. He trudged past the first floor doorway and climbed to the top landing.

He didn't want to be here. *Shouldn't* be here, the cryptic letter be damned.

He knocked.

Footsteps approached, then a chain lock detached and dropped to bang against the door. The *thock* of a deadbolt sliding back, and the door slid open. The face that stared out at him was young, male, suspicious. "What do you want?"

"You tell me," Hanley said.

The face changed. Not suspicious any longer. The young man looked him up and down, evaluating, studying. A nod of the head, and he drew the door open wider, made room for Hanley to enter.

The upstairs apartment was too warm, the air still and heavy with the reek of lavender candles that couldn't entirely mask the antiseptic odors and stale cigarette smoke. Hanley missed the Chinese cooking permeating the stairwell. The walls of the apartment closed in, unfamiliar, threatening. The green carpet was dirty and worn. The gold, patterned couch sagged, and the shade over the table lamp was torn. A sharp rent of light from the rip splayed across the wall in an otherwise dimly lit room.

"This way," the young man said.

No introductions, no small talk. Hanley relished the directness of it, the strange inevitability of it, so far removed from the cloying babble of his wife's friends. Ex-wife.

The young man pushed open a door on the right. A bedroom: two windows overlooking the street, closet door crooked on its hinges, an oak bureau that was the most expensive thing in the apartment Hanley had seen so far, and a bed. A man lay beneath the sheets, propped into a sitting position by pillows. A tall man, long face thin with illness, blue eyes large and sunken, but still intelligent and keen. Those eyes settled on him, recognized him, and Hanley felt the hatred. He almost smiled. This unknown man had nothing on his wife's projected hatred. Nothing. Hanley thought himself a human mirror and almost laughed -- he could bounce such inconsequentials right back off. They no longer penetrated.

But curiosity... that suddenly consumed him. "Who are you?"

The man smiled. "You saved my life." A German accent. The voice, familiar, but Hanley couldn't place it. The man's gaze flicked to the young man. "Leave us."

The door shut behind him, and the room felt close, unavoidable.

"Well, I don't think I can save you a second time," Hanley said. "You're dying." He took perverse pleasure in saying it aloud, dishing painful truth back for that palpable hatred still radiating from the man.

"Cancer," the man said and cocked his head slightly to one side. "You don't remember me. I didn't think you would. Do you remember Private Stark?"

Hanley shook his head, then stopped. No, he did remember the name. A memory slotted into place, and the voice and the bedridden owner had an identity: 1945, France, the German soldier who wouldn't shut up despite Hanley's threatening gun. Lie after lie spinning glibly off his tongue in a dark, dank pillbox. He wasn't sure what his own face displayed -- he thought he'd mastered the art of blankness with his wife -- but the German laughed softly at what he saw there.

"That's how I found you," the German said. "I didn't know your name, but I knew Stark's. I located his wife -- you surprised me there, Lieutenant. You kept your promise. You went and saw her after the war."

"Yes," Hanley said, tight-lipped.

"She gave me your name, Lieutenant... Hanley." He seemed to savor enunciating it.

The bedroom was bright, the curtains open on the foggy day, the overhead bulb shining yellow through a smoke-stained glass cover, and yet, the room felt as close and confining as the remembered bunker. Impotence gripped Hanley, as strong now as it had been during that moment during the war when he'd been unable to stop the German

soldier from talking and talking, poisoning the air with his earnest, deceitful words. Unable to shoot the Germans in cold blood, unable to get Stark out, unable to save the dying American private after promising him safety over and over. Unable to do anything...

*Lieutenant. Lieutenant, help me.*

He'd failed Stark, and he'd saved the German. This man in front of him.

His bitter facade cracked with the weight of his own emotions. Memories of the war were like that, he'd found. Strung on a hair trigger he could never predict. Unexpected, emotional, unstoppable, and with a clarity so brilliant, he was there again, reliving the buried past. War memories mocked the most solid walls he'd erected during the last two years with his wife. Where she couldn't harm him any longer, bits of the ETO still could.

"What do you want?" Hanley said, trying not to swallow against the sudden dry mouth, the stabbing ache of anxiety in his belly.

The German sat up straighter, grimacing in pain and unable to hide it, but not stopping until he was leaning toward Hanley. Hanley could see the man's younger self in the aging, dying face, the same grimace etched on his face that he'd worn back then as he'd fought the pain of the gunshot wound.

"I want to know why," the man said, intense. "I want to know why you came back. You were right and you knew it. You knew I made it all up. I didn't care what happened to Stark. I wanted to get out of there alive. So why did you come back? Why did you carry me out of there, why? I must know *why!*" He hit the sheets with one clenched fist and stared at Hanley.

Hanley blinked, gritted his teeth to keep from gaping at the man.

The German dropped back against his pillows, chest rising and falling. He licked his lips, then said quietly, "Let me tell you a story, Lieutenant. From your aid station, I was transferred to a hospital. They operated, got me healing. When I was well enough, I was sent to a P.O.W. camp to finish recovering, to sit out the rest of the war, a prisoner.

"I didn't stay there long. I escaped, made my way back to German lines. But I was not as recovered as I thought. I nearly didn't make it. I was captured by an American soldier, but we were in a skirmish, and he was shot." He was silent a long time, his gaze fixed on Hanley's face. "His life was in my hands, Lieutenant. You know what I did, of course."

"You left him to die."

"Lieutenant, I wanted at all costs to survive the war. He was the enemy, he would have killed me."

Hanley said nothing, letting silence respond for him.

"Yes," the German said. "I left him to die. And not one day has passed since, that your face hasn't haunted me." He bent forward across the sheets again, as if proximity to Hanley alone would drag the answer he wanted from him. "I must know *why* you saved me, Lieutenant! Me, the enemy, after what I did. I must! Twenty years and your face, mocking me, day after day, year after year... *Why did you do it?*"

Flippant answers passed through Hanley's mind, his first response nowadays to anything demanding candor from him -- a side effect from the arguments with his wife. He discarded them. Why *had* he gone back for the German? Like a petulant child, he

wanted to complain: how the hell should he know why he'd done something twenty years ago? It was a lifetime ago.

It was yesterday.

He'd given up on honesty since the start of the divorce, particularly with himself. Lying was easier, less stressful. Why had he gone back for the German? He didn't know why. He caught himself this time before he slipped into denial. He did know why. All too well.

His shoulders slumped, and he asked, "What's your name?"

"Dorfmann."

Hanley nodded, absently, repeating the name in his mind. He'd never even wondered back then what the man might have been called. Humanizing the enemy was not a habit he had cultivated. The enemy... Germans, his wife, war, himself -- he was abruptly and overwhelmingly sick of it all. No, more than that. Livid that he'd flown up from Los Angeles, come all this way, for what? To meet the enemy. To relive more memories he didn't want to remember. Roughly, angrily, he said, "You know why I did it."

"No, I don't--"

"Stop it!" Hanley snarled, paced a few steps before facing Dorfmann again.

"Who are you kidding? You can probably tell me why better than I can tell you. Why else would you have been dwelling on it all these years? The only reason it's haunted you -- the *only* reason, Dorfmann -- is because you recognized the holes in your own morality."

Dorfmann was shaking his head. "Right and wrong, they have no place in war."

"They have every place in it, because we have to live with ourselves afterwards!"

Hanley caught the metal footboard of the bed with both hands and leaned toward the German, his sudden grin full of taunting superiority. "You forgot that part, didn't you?"

Dorfmann sank back against the pillows, staring at Hanley.

Hanley shivered at the man's look. *Déjà vu*. He'd been here before, suffused with his own righteousness in the face of Dorfmann's admission of guilt. He gained no more satisfaction from it now than he had then. His smile disappeared, and he straightened wearily. "What do you really want, Dorfmann? Forgiveness? Absolution? See a priest. You won't get it from me."

He turned to the bedroom door, hand reaching for the knob, his desire to get away from the apartment, away from San Francisco, away from the past overwhelming. The sense of *déjà vu* rattled him again.

*Lieutenant. Lieutenant, help me.*

He closed his eyes, pulled his reaching fingers into a fist, and turned back a last time to look at the German. Dorfmann couldn't be much older than he was, but the cancer's ravages had aged him. Maybe more than the cancer. Personal demons. Those Hanley understood all too well. Sometimes the demons gained solidity in the people you chose to live with. Sometimes they were a single regret. Whatever. The demons were personal, real, but they could be exorcised. For awhile, at least. He said quietly, "The young man outside. Your son?"

Dorfmann nodded once. After a moment, he said, "My only son. I had hoped he'd be married by now. I would like to have had grandchildren."

"The past is over, Dorfmann. You can't change it. Don't waste your last days."

"And you, Lieutenant?" Dorfmann cocked his head slightly to one side, one eyebrow quirked up. "Have you found happiness?"

The edge of mockery in the German's voice provoked something deep and nearly forgotten within Hanley. He gave the first honest answer about himself he thought he'd voiced in a couple of years: "Sometimes." The more important rejoinder he didn't say aloud, but he was thinking it, surprised that he actually meant it: *And I'll be happy again.*

Dorfmann nodded, an acknowledgement, an affirmation, a closing door. "My son will show you out."

The young man bounced off the couch like he had springs as soon as Hanley stepped out of the bedroom. He blocked the young man's passage to the bedroom and firmly closed the door. "Give him some time first."

Concern and curiosity warred on the young man's face, until he blurted, "What was that all about?"

He was too young to have worry creases like that, Hanley thought. "The future," Hanley said and surprised himself by smiling.

The young man opened the front door and Hanley inhaled deeply. He had a couple of hours before the return flight to L.A. He paused on the landing and glanced back at Dorfmann's son. "Is there a good Chinese restaurant around here?"

end