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## **"The Lonely Mile"**

by Thompson Girl and White Queen

Lieutenant Hanley wakes slowly, reluctantly, clinging to the hazy remnants of a dream place where he is warm and comfortable and clean. He stretches, knee touching the bunker wall. The wool blanket rests over his head, keeping in warmth, and he listens for a moment, eyes still closed. Mess kits and soft conversation. Breakfast is started. The aroma of coffee. And another smell much closer. One that should alarm him, but doesn't. It's too familiar, too ingrained by now. It's the location that's out of context, but that doesn't sink in. Not yet. What strikes him instead is the dampness. His right arm is wet and cold. His side, too, where it presses against the concrete. Strange – if it rained again, why isn't he soaked through?

He sits up, pulling off the blanket. Looks at his sodden sleeve and jacket. Not rainwater, but blood. Deep and dark-colored. His gut clenches. Instinctively, he scrambles backward away from unexpected danger, smacks into the wall. He sits there, letting his breathing calm. No Germans. The half-destroyed bunker is still, quiet. Only three walls and floor of the bunker are still intact. The ceiling is an overcast sky brightening with dawn. Ordinary noises come from outside, and he can see men moving there, huddled in their jackets against the chill of the November morning.

His gaze shifts to the puddle he'd been lying in, tracing it back to its source. He exhales sharply.

Even without the spilled blood, Hanley knows Whitaker is dead. There is nothing natural about a corpse, fresh or old.

They are the only two in the small bunker. The radio and phone Whit had been responsible for sits near his pack. He leans against the intact wall, head lolling and eyes closed. One hand rests in his lap, the other arm and hand stretch across the floor, almost as if he'd been reaching out to Hanley. Hanley checks his watch. It's nearing six. Kirby will be coming to relieve Whit any minute.

Four hours Whitaker had been on duty. Hanley tries to remember how long ago he last heard the man answer the phone, how long it might have been since.... But he barely remembers acknowledging Whit's arrival before rolling over again and pulling the blanket higher, knowing Whit would wake him if something important came down from HQ.

He gets to his feet and looks out over the broken bunker wall. He's searching for

Doc, but he sees Littlejohn and Nelson instead. The two are crouched over a pile of sticks in the clearing, arguing softly over something. Littlejohn's lips are quirked in a half-smile as he fights to keep a straight face over something Nelson is trying to convince him to do. Like brothers.

Hanley wants to laugh, not from humor, but to fight the despair. He'll have to write a letter. And say what exactly? He knows the telegram will probably say killed in action. He was raised on honesty and George Washington and the cherry tree, and every day that gets taken away from him, bit by bit. Truth is inconvenient, expendable. There's no room in war for this kind of truth. He wonders if that thought will someday cease bothering his conscience.

Whittaker, lying with that curious relaxation that sleep never can quite mimic. Nelson tearing up ration boxes to catch the flame beneath their pile of sticks as Littlejohn strikes a match.

In here, death. Out there, life.

He finds his voice, calls for Doc.

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"Hey, Lieutenant, what—" Doc halts halfway through both his sentence and the entrance to the ruined bunker. "Oh, dear Lord," he says, more a prayer than an exclamation. "What happened?" he asks automatically, even though he thinks he knows the answer already. The amount of blood spreading out from Whitaker's body tells him his services won't be needed. He kneels beside the man anyway, touches one lacerated wrist with reverence, and wonders, *Why?*

Not *why* exactly, no. Doc can think of a thousand reasons a man might succumb to despair here in eastern France, in the face of so much death and destruction. The good Lord knows he himself sometimes feels he can't face one more day of pain and bloodshed, one more night of terror falling from the sky or creeping up behind you. And noncombatant that he is supposed to be, he knows the guilt of taking another person's life. The way that guilt can threaten to consume your every thought, the way the face of your victim haunts the edges of your vision, floats through your dreams. He can only imagine how that must compound when you've taken not one life, but many.

But to take your own life, that Doc can't quite comprehend. *How*. That's what he really wonders. Not the physical how – the open razor and the slashes on each arm, from the wrist up toward the elbow – those tell him how. But how could a man decide to reject God's gift of life, to put an end to not only the pain and suffering but also the joy and blessings that life can hold?

Doc shakes his head, knows he doesn't want to understand that. Prays he never will.

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Kirby shuffles toward the bunker for his shift. They are shorthanded again, all of them pulling duty fielding calls on the lieutenant's radio and phone. At least he got to sleep through the night. Some of it. Their artillery had laid in on the Kraut positions again, for all the good it seemed to be doing. It seems like they've been sitting here for

two weeks instead of two days, each side pounding the other, neither able to advance. Waiting on replacements, waiting on Supply to catch up to them with a kitchen truck and hot chow. Waiting waiting waiting.

It's chilly, but at least it's not raining. Yet.

Littlejohn and Billy tend a small fire, boiling coffee and heating rations. Larson and Bruckner hide under blankets in their muddy foxholes, grabbing those last few minutes of sleep. Doc had been writing a letter, but Kirby looks around and doesn't see him now. Caje is on guard duty with Pelusi, and Whit's in with Hanley in the only non-muddy spot on the line. That blown-up bunker may be no good at keeping the rain out, but it still has a concrete floor, and that beats a muddy hole in the ground any day.

Kirby's looking forward to this shift. It beats standing guard duty or going on patrol. But he isn't looking forward to seeing Whitaker. Whit's a good guy, good to have guarding your back, but he's too danged lucky at poker. Thirty dollars Kirby owes that guy after the game a couple nights ago. Thirty! It galls Kirby, but Whit had been on some sort of a streak that Kirby just couldn't break. He still doesn't have the money to pay him back.

He scratches at the back of his neck as he steps through the doorless entrance. He opens his mouth to say something witty about the charming weather, but at the last moment, he feels it: that weight, that sense that something's not right, and he stops in the doorway in silence. Hanley's tugging off his jacket and shirt, his movements almost violent. Doc is kneeling beside....

He understands then.

It's a lot of blood for just a couple of cuts. That's what he thinks, and he flinches suddenly, reflexively, imagining that smooth slicing of a blade across his own flesh. He rubs at his left wrist, then shoves both his hands deep into his pockets. How does one do it, consciously do it? "Takes guts," he murmurs.

Doc looks over at him sharply. "Guts?"

Kirby can tell Doc wants to say something more, so he cuts him off. He doesn't need a lecture to know what Doc's feeling about Whit's death. He can see it in every line of Doc's anguished face. Softly, Kirby says, "You know what I mean, Doc. I mean, I sure couldn't—" He breaks off and Doc turns away.

Kirby looks at Whit again. Thirty bucks. One more debt he'll never pay off. He wonders if that's how he'll remember these guys when the war is over. As debts he can never pay off. *Lucas Hayes. Owed him ten. And Shorty? Fifty big ones....*

"Kirby," Hanley says, his tone clipped, sharp. "Keep the rest of the men out of here."

Kirby's gaze flicks from the body to the lieutenant, surprised by the anger the words provoke in him. Why shouldn't they see? Whit had lived and fought with them. He'd died with them. So it wasn't a Kraut bullet that killed him. They have a right to see, to know. It's too late anyhow – he can hear Billy's voice approaching – and he makes no move to follow Hanley's order. Why shouldn't they all see?

*And then there was Whit. Owed him thirty.*

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"Hey, Kirby, come on! Littlejohn an' me've got coffee ready." Billy Nelson slips

a little on the half-frozen ground. Why's Kirby just standing there? He always jumps at the chance for hot coffee. Billy skids to a halt, peers around Kirby's shoulder. "What is it?"

Then he sees. It's Whitaker. Tom Whitaker. And he's dead. Dead for sure, with all that blood around him. But how? There was no attack during the night, not unless some Kraut snuck through their lines and killed him in his sleep. But no, that doesn't make sense. Because there stands Lieutenant Hanley, alive and well. What kind of Kraut would kill a private and leave an officer alive?

"What happened?" he asks, voice barely louder than a whisper.

Kirby says, "Whit killed himself."

Billy blinks, shakes his head. "No, I mean... what?"

"Sliced his wrists." Kirby points at the body.

Billy squints, trying to make out more details in the half-gloom of what's left of the bunker. "Oh." He sees now, sees the delicate wounds. How long must it take to die like that? Does all your blood come out at once, spurting like some of the worse leg or chest wounds he's seen? Or does it just ooze out, trickling over your skin and pooling around you? Did Whitaker have to wait to die, feeling his strength running out of him? Or did he faint from blood loss really quickly and not feel much pain at all?

And how come he did this, anyway? The anger pulses through Billy, the unfairness of it all at a time like this. Didn't Whit know they needed him? Needed every man they could get? Why'd he have to go and kill himself when the Krauts were sure to advance again soon? Couldn't he have waited until the battle was really over or they'd been pulled back behind the lines for a while?

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Littlejohn clomps up behind Billy, boots squishing in the mud. Billy doesn't seem to notice, so Littlejohn says, "What's wrong, Billy, nobody wants our coffee this morning?"

Billy turns and glares at him. "Whit's dead. He killed himself."

It isn't the answer Littlejohn expects, and he stares at Billy for a moment before looking over his friend's shoulder into the half-standing bunker. Well, Whit's sure enough killed himself, and that's a fact. Wrists cut, blood everywhere, Hanley grim and shivering in just his undershirt, a stained pile of his clothes on the floor, Doc kneeling and pulling a blanket over the body.

So, Whit killed himself. Funny more soldiers don't do it, really. All the killing, the fear, the death all around. You'd think more men would choose their own way out. Especially with night after night of shelling like they've had lately.

Littlejohn looks away from the body and back at Billy. He'd have expected the boy to be scared, shocked, horrified maybe. Instead he's angry. Angry at what? At Whit for taking his own road to death instead of waiting for a bullet or a mine or a grenade? Or at himself maybe? Does Billy feel he's somehow responsible for this?

He lays a broad hand on Billy's shoulder. "Maybe we should go," he says. If he can get the boy away from here, maybe he'll talk about what's bothering him. Get it out of his system.

When Billy doesn't move, Littlejohn tries a different tactic. "Lieutenant? I got a

spare shirt in my pack if you need it."

Hanley looks over at the men at the door, his gaze vacant. He rubs his bare arms, as if only now realizing he's cold. "Yes, thanks, I'd appreciate that."

"Be right back." Littlejohn turns to go, tugs on Billy's arm. This time Billy turns and follows him, brushing past Kirby.

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Caje arrives just as Billy lets Littlejohn pull him away from the entrance. He wonders why everyone is hanging around the lieutenant's bunker but, rather than ask, he peers through the doorway. The first thing he sees is Doc sitting on his haunches. There's the lieutenant over in the corner too, and they're both staring at something on the floor near Doc.

It's a body, covered with a blanket and surrounded by a puddle of blood. Must be Whitaker.

"What happened?" Caje asks Kirby, keeping his voice low, not wanting to disturb the occupants of the bunker.

"Slit his wrists." Kirby barely glances at Caje; he can't seem to keep his eyes off the body for more than a few seconds.

"Suicide?" Caje doesn't mean for the word to be quite so loud, and it echoes faintly off the three intact walls of the bunker. He shouldn't sound so surprised, so shocked, when everyone else is being calm about it. He quickly relaxes his facial muscles, not letting the slightest twitch betray his thoughts.

Suicide. When he was a boy, it counted among the dirty words. A word you whispered to your friends behind the schoolhouse when the Sisters weren't around. Definitely not a topic for discussion, except during Catechism class with Father Gabriel when they learned about the Mortal Sins.

He'd only known one other person who committed suicide: Old Andre, the town drunk, who'd shot himself with his muzzle-loader while on a bender. Even though everyone knew it was an accident, he still had to be buried outside of the churchyard. Not in sanctified ground. Caje wonders if Whitaker's family will be able to bury him in the church cemetery with his relatives. Will the Army tell them how he really died? Or will they bury him here in France and tell the family he died in the line of duty so they can remember him as an honorable boy and put up a marker to his memory in the churchyard with the other family dead?

Does it even matter? Caje knows if he dies here in France, he will be buried wherever the Army sees fit. Where a man is buried shouldn't make any difference in the long run, shouldn't shunt his soul toward one eternal home or the other. Should it?

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Watching. Silent. There is nothing to say, no one to blame but himself. Saunders stands smoking in his spot by the tree, unnoticed by the others. The squad clusters, splits up, re-clusters around the bunker's broken entrance, drawn back to this death that has caught them off guard. Littlejohn's hand falls on Billy's shoulder as they move away; Kirby touches Caje to get his attention. There's that need in all of them, to grasp at

physical reassurance. *You're real, you're still here, you're not going to do something like that, are you?* It strikes harder, this death. There is no enemy on which to take revenge. Not this time. No way to put it behind with the usual disturbing ease.

Saunders crushes the cigarette butt out against the tree trunk, savagely, skinning the tips of his fingers on the rough bark.

Whit had been an average Joe, that's what gets Saunders. Two weeks with the squad. Enough time to get his measure. He hadn't been a loner, hadn't been a complainer, had followed orders, and had handled himself well in a firefight. No panic, just the normal anxieties and tension they all felt. He had seemed to deal with it better than some. He joked, played poker, got regular letters from home, hated coffee, and hoarded chocolate bars. And yet... he's dead now. At his own hand.

Saunders had missed it somehow. The warning signs. They must have been there. Had to have been there. Was he so inured by the constant faces hiding fears, that the one who had needed something – a word, a listener, anything – couldn't be recognized?

He watches Doc leave the bunker, pushing almost angrily through the gawkers. The frustration and the shock the medic can't dismiss draw Doc's brow down, and Saunders knows Doc's thoughts run to a similar sense of failure. It isn't comforting sharing such ground, and Saunders turns away. He tugs his canteen out and tries to wash the bitterness out of his mouth.

In the end, Whit is one more man not going home. What does it matter how he died? He isn't going home.

end

