

After the War
Per Wiger

I woke with a start, too scared to scream. The house was still. My wife, accustomed to my habits, slept on. Unable to bring myself to lie down or slow my racing heart I slipped out of bed with a slither like steel on leather.

The cold floor stabbed my feet as I padded out of the room, down the miraculous corridor - painted drywall, floor to ceiling, insulated, free of bullet holes. In the kitchen I drew water from a tap and drank it without boiling. The window was open and a gentle breeze sighed in through the mesh screen, and it didn't smell like sulfur or screams.

The shaking bled from my fingers as I stood in the dark and I relearned how to breathe. Eventually I noticed a light blinking on my answering machine and hit the play button.

I recognized Cullen's heavy breathing immediately, the curse of the asthmatic marathoner. "Hey," he said, "I know it's late, I hope I didn't wake you up - which is a funny thing to hope since... Ah, hell, it's been four years. Call me." And then the beep. The tape clicked off. I continued to sit as the darkness settled in around me.

Four years... It was a long time. Enough time to rebuild infrastructure, exhume the mass graves, lay the bodies to rest. But the bullet holes still pockmarked the walls from Leary's pub to the capitol building and nothing grew in the charnel house along the river Sky. Across the hall in the living room my arm chair could be broken apart and in it I kept two pistols with extra ammunition, a Thompson carbine with the collapsable stock, and a long straight bladed knife.

The legal parts of my bug-out bag I kept by the back window for the day the Royalists forget their agreements and we have to go back to the hills and make our stand.

And now Cullen was calling me, four years after he kicked down my front door all jackboots and great coat and started shouting my name.

He woke me up then too, and if he hadn't made such a noise about it I'd not have made it out the back window and away in time. All they found in the house was my poor Mary who stood them down dry eyed, sent them searching into the streets.

I hadn't had time to think, just run. To the hollow where we stashed our heavy kit and then north into the moorland to the caves where Aberly was hiding from the death squads, where our cell knew we could fall back to.

By the end of the night two thirds of us were gathered there; Miles and Hurley, Rowan and Waters, Lem the Red and Lem the Tall and pretty Cathy Grimes. The rest we never saw again, only we found Amelia's body rotting on the banks of the Sky when all was said and done, kissed clean by her waters and looking as peaceful as you can with maggots in your eyes.

The Royalists came hunting us, swarming like ants out of town and we met them across the river. Aberly held them down until her rifle was dry and then they made their crossing and she fell back. Tall wired the radio to the top of a lightning struck ash and kept calling for help. Red and I had machine guns and lay still until they came onto land and then we made them pay in gallons for inches and the other three came at them from the west.

We were all out of bullets. Red was whetting his sword and I had my knife when the boys from Lester stormed the field. But Waters was dead and Aberly had been shot and she hasn't walked since, Tall was burned when they found him and torched the tree so his left hand is scarred tight and useless. Rowan lost an eye to shrapnel and Cathy doesn't sing anymore, I can't sleep.

And Cullen called, he wants to talk.

I sat for a long time in the dark, staring out the window. Every so often a car would drive by. Drunken couples staggered home laughing like the curfew had never come down. There were no checkpoints on the corners, no late-night firing squads. *Fine then, we'll talk.*

I picked up the phone and dialed his number by heart. It started to ring.

Cullen was one of those that the P and R people had championed. He wasn't acting by his own volition according to witnesses, the Royalists took his family and forced him to turn. The Peace and Reconciliation committee loved making excuses for death squaddies, but they made excuses for me too - for the sons and daughters I'd murdered - so I couldn't complain about that. I could wish they hadn't made him a Peer.

By the fourth ring I grew worried that Cullen had changed his number, then thankful that I wouldn't have to face him. I was about to hang up when I heard the click on the other end of the line.

"Hello," Cullen said.

"You called."

"Kehry. God damn."

"You said you wanted to talk to me," adrenalin narrowed my hearing, I held onto the counter for dear life, "So lets talk."

"Hey, no need to be hostile Kehry, love, I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry what happened. It's a hell of a thing we all went through but we come out the other side now." He trailed off. I said nothing, "Kehry, I'm getting married."

"Who's the lucky lady?" I said, with all the venom I could muster.

“Look, I realize you’re upset with me. You probably hate my guts and I understand if you do. Just please know I’m coming to you with the humblest of intentions, for the memory of Kells Lake and the summers we spent together, I have a favor to ask of you.” Cullen sounded choked.

“What is it.” I had to sit down.

“I want you to come swimming with me tomorrow.” The words came in a rush.

“What?”

“Come swimming with me. I’ve got an estate now with a lake and everything. Just south of town. Come down tomorrow and we’ll talk. Like human beings, that’s all I want, I don’t need you to like me again. I just need to remind you that I’m a person.”

“Fine.” I wanted to ask if he’d been drinking, “What should I tell Mary?”

“The truth, same as ever.”

I agreed to come up and he gave me directions to his estate. When he hung up I started taking apart my armchair. *Human beings indeed.*

It was easy enough work. I’d made it myself, all interlocking parts. It was solid enough to sit on, lean back in, carry with us when we moved but pull the right pieces in the right directions and the whole thing slid apart in no time. I was too anxious to go back to bed, so I cleaned my guns while I waited for dawn.

When Mary woke up she looked in on me and then went to make coffee. She came back carrying a mug. “What’s this?” She said.

I told her what had happened, the truth like Cullen said.

“Are you going to kill him?”

“I don’t know.” More truth.

“Don’t bring the guns,” she said at last.

“Why not?”

“Too easy to kill him without thinking that way. If you can’t look him in the eye while he dies he’s not worth killing.”

I could see she didn’t want me to go. She could see there was no stopping me. I wanted nothing more than to stay in that apartment forever and forget that the war had ever happened the way the rest of the world seemed to.

“If I do it I won’t be coming home.”

“If you’re not back by midnight I’ll get rid of everything.” Her voice is level, her concerns practical. The war had never been hers, but she owned me body and soul and that had hurt her more than anything. This wouldn’t be the first time I’d died as far as she knew.

“I love you,” I said.

“You’re a bastard,” she said. She was biting the inside of her lip.

I crossed the room to her. To hug Mary was like dancing and there was thunder in her eyes. Her hair smelled like honeysuckle and old books. I didn’t say anything. She shivered against me.

The drive out to Cullen’s estate wasn’t short, just getting out of the capital took over an hour. When the war ended our traffic modernized in months but our roads still haven’t caught up, meandering spider-legged from the cathedral the way they’ve done for hundreds of years.

Beyond the low crumble that marks the old outer wall I passed swathes of new construction, the skeletons of houses sprouted up across the heath and dirt and cut heather filled the ditches.

When I broke from the sprawl I found myself in clear moorland. Dusk colored birds flitted through wildflowers and scrub and the mid-morning sun cast gold into the shadows of craggy boulders. I felt my heart skip and swell with pride, it was beautiful. *It had better be, we watered those moors with our blood.*

My knife was strapped to my arm, hidden by a loose jacket. My grip on the wheel was painfully tight.

The estate was framed with white-skinned trees that arched together over a wrought iron gate and stretching back and back into dappled shadow. At the end of the lane was a solitary ray of sunlight, a promise of something beyond the darkness.

Our lives are made up of choices, one after the other. In each moment we commit to the path we are on or we switch to a new one. It struck me that this was equally true of men and nations. In that moment I had a choice to switch to a path that would lead me back to Mary or commit to the path that I was on.

As I sat, car idling, considering the view the gate swung open.