

The Playground

By

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She sat staring; her grey hair had coiled across her scalp. It was thin and sickly, her fingers curled in aches as her eyes watched a distance measured in years.

Her voice trembled as a whistle followed her longer words. Her cheeks swollen as she leaned back for a moment, only to readjust from the pain. "It used to be a playground made from metal, stone and wood. Around it, food trolleys would tender to the crowds and a news seller would have magazines on display. I would sit on the swings, just dangling my legs watching my shadow."

Her nose nudged in the direction of a car park around it tall buildings cowered in blandness. She watched a different view. Children laughed as they spun in innocence, they had eternity ahead of them and now locked away inside of her mind, like prisoners of joy, she smiled.

"It was good then, it was that way for me and my family but Then I never could imagine things ever not being good."

A bitterness stained her mind, she licked her lips as she thought about what would come next. "No one took the news very serious at first, it was all far away. We had done nothing wrong, I was just finishing school and helped my family with work. I was more interested in a new dress or meeting a sweet boy than I was in politics."

She stood for a moment, leaning forward she flicked a dried crust onto the ledge, she waited and watched for any birds to take it. She observed them in the distance as they rested on the grim concrete ledges of faraway buildings.

"We used to get a lot of birds here, they loved the trees." Her eyes scanned for a tree, she could only see the green of the leaves that struggled in a pot that she maintained. She ran her hand across the leaf of her Peace Lilly, "You can not climb a lily, unlike the trees we had. They were all cut down when it began, they pulled the playground down also. The wood and metal you see, it had value. I remember when they did, children would still play where it was. The raised concrete and bricks kept the outlines of where it once was."

Somewhere in time she watched as men in trucks uprooted the play equipment that she had eaten ice cream, fallen from and giggled all afternoon among. The men were in coveralls, they did not smile. Afterwards, neither did any of the children.

“It was like a storm, it was distant, exciting and then when it reached us it was terrifying. It was not natural though, nothing in nature is so cruel or relentless. My brother, he was sixteen when they took him. All of the boys they were useful, like the playground they were taken away.” She smiled softly, “It was the last time I ever saw him.”

A teenager, awkward with curls and uneven teeth grinned as he waved, he tugged on a school uniform and then an apron, he turned and held a paint brush in his hands. She remembered the day, when they all helped to paint a neighbors fence.

“He only helped us all paint that fence for the cake at the end of the day, how he loved cake.” She pressed her hands together, anxiously she felt for something to hold, his hand. “He loved cake; he would do most things for sweets. I once baked him a small treat when he was unwell. It made him so happy. I would get very good and clever with them, it was what I made for his birthdays.”

Then she saw him in his uniform, the drab great coat pulled at his shoulders and concealed his hands, he was shorter than the other men and boys as they marched away.

They had only weeks of training.

He disappeared with the others, onto trains slowly they eroded into the distance.

“We were expected to go without, make sacrifices. It was all for the effort. I knew some girls that worked for the party and the military. They saw how those in charge lived. It seemed, well the sacrifices were for us and not them.” Again, she peered over her ledge, looking skywards. Dark clouds lingered. They were distant but those that she could see through the fog of the city interested her. “It will be cold again soon.”

She unwrapped a small blanket folded by her side. Slowly it fell across her slender legs, her fingers carefully pulled it into place across her lap. “We

were losing, the news was censored but we all knew. Victors feel the opposite of what we had. I remember one afternoon; I was digging with my girlfriend on the outskirts. We were made to fill sandbags and cut the ground in trenches, suddenly ahead we heard buzzing. High above where the clouds can not reach, we saw hundreds of these shapes. Then the sirens. They played loudly, warning us to go underground. Wardens with whistles guided us. We were all scared."

The old men with tin helmets and vests had pulled the women and girls from the trenches and led them into pits and down the shelters.

She jarred suddenly; a thread had caught her finger. It startled her. She jolted again, the bombs. The loud shocks and painful jarring.

Deafness.

"No thunder was that loud. One time my brother had kicked a ball and it hit the back of my head hard, I was dizzy for minutes. Each blast was like that but harder. Inside our lungs we coughed and heaved. We cried even if we did not want to."

After, the blasts and roars calmed. Wailing babes and moaning survivors competed with the groans of destruction. Smoke and flames devoured the buildings and houses. She turned her head to study the twisted wreckage.

"We all lost our homes, our city." She rubbed her legs, a tiredness numbed them. Running people, some aimless and others with direction pulled survivors clear and helped to pile up the dead. "We were unprepared, we thought we would be fine. We were told that it would never happen. But who would have believed that men could do that? How could a kind person drop bombs onto us? We had never hurt anyone, my brother only ever wanted to play football."

She stopped for a moment, she saw the smoke, the haze of anguish, "and eat cake", she smiled again. She felt the flames on her face, a cough escaped her throat as the taste of acrid haze curled across her and down her lungs.

"It was the first time that I smelt death." Bodies, charred, broken and shredded lay on the street. Hours before it was a place idle and calm. Now she could see with detail the frozen stare of the people that she knew, their eyes locked with fright. Blood dark and congealed, arms bent and extended

in contortions that could not be drawn. "It was a smell that was not like any other, burning bodies and stone. Imagine smelling cooked bricks and metal, or the boiling of blood."

Her eyes remained on the shattered legs of a young girl, a child she had watched for whenever the child's parents went out to socialise. The young girl was no longer moving, no longer dancing or climbing. She watched the child curl from the flames like a broken doll discarded in a furnace.

"Three more nights we suffered like that. More bombs and more dead. What was left to destroy? We could not sleep anywhere. We lay in the shelters; they became toilets and beds all the same. It was uncomfortable but we were all so very tired."

She could see when they arrived, men in war machines. Metal trucks and armoured tractors bristling with guns. She was one of the first to notice the dust as it climbed into the sky.

"The noise of the guns and cannon was different to the bombs. It was loud and almost musical. Unsettling and frightful. I was given a rifle. I had only ever shot once and it scared me then, it was heavy and long. I was pushed with my friends down a trench, we were told to shoot at them. To kill them. If we tried to run, then we would be shot ourselves."

Old men, the very young, women and girls were lined in rows, some with sticks, shovels and forks others held vintage rifles and carbines. They cluttered together and watched the battle ahead. Behind them policemen pointed machine guns at the enemy the barrels above her head as men in official uniforms marched at the rear yelling patriotic slogans.

"I never fired my rifle that day, I would not have hit anything I don't imagine. When the fighting began, I hid. I remember getting dirt in my eyes and mouth. A blast threw it at me, and I could not see. So, I sat at the bottom of the trench. This likely saved me. My girlfriend lost her head"

The day dragged on; the trenches ran red with blood. Swollen with the dead and those who were lost in between life and death, trapped in agony. She could see and hear them. The screams. The children squealing as their helmets wobbled on their heads. The police and dark uniformed men had abandoned her and the others.

“When they arrived, the city was dead. I could not hide from them. I did not understand what they said to me. They pulled and pushed at me and those of us who survived. We could not speak with them. I saw some of our people get shot. They lined him up and shot him in the head, it was the old barber. I was so scared.”

A breeze pushed at the Peace Lilly, it flapped gently. She watched the crust as it moved slowly on her window edge.

The sounds of trucks and yelling strangers barked at her. She was taken into the back of a lorry. Pushed to the wooden floor, angry men climbed between her legs. They spat and cursed her. She remembered every stab as though it was from a bayonet.

“They did it all with hatred. I was already dead.” The crying of the survivors sobbed; a distant storm crumbled on the horizon as rain tempered the flames. It could not wash away all the blood, that remained in her pants. Instead it ran rivers of grime down her face. “We were put in a camp. It was makeshift and sparse. The fed us a soup that tasted vile. We could only feel pain and then numbness. The old men were taken, then girls like me. We had a special quality.”

Showers at the sides of trucks were set up; she could see the other women stripped down. None could afford any modesty. They were washed like animals. Scrubbed and drowned in cold water. Lined up they were reviewed. Shivering from fright and the cold they could only bite down on their lips.

“I was given a gown, it felt like a potato sack. I was taken to a big tent; they spoke at me. I could not understand. Important soldiers looked me over. I knew that the other girls were outside. I could hear that they were there, as scared as I was. We all cried. I felt them test my body, they were not kind.”

She closed her eyes, and with trembling hands she reached for a cup of cold tea. She sipped at the sweet liquid. She considered the taste for a moment.

“The nights all seemed like one. Some of them tried to be kind and nice, I learned their language. I put on a mask. I wore a smile. It helped to get fed. I would sometimes sneak food to my friends. Those not pretty enough to work like I did. They had to work outside and wash clothes or peel vegetables. The war was long. Then it seemed like it was ending. They were now desperate, less arrogant.”

Soldiers ran across her eyes with desperate expressions. They cowered in the same makeshift ditches that she had. They hid from the bombs that she remembered, and they watched the approaching army. She did it too alongside them.

“I should have been happy to see men like me come but I did not feel any happiness. The enemy were pushed back, I had hidden from the fighting. Like a scared little girl cowering away from her parents arguing I made sure to not be seen or heard. Then when it silenced, the fighting was over. I could hear my language. I heard men, speaking my language. It was like a song. I came out happy to see them. They were not happy.”

By the light of day she saw the playground again, what was left of it. The outlines of the swings and slides like shadows of joy, they teased her with a fondness for a faraway place in time.

The soldiers that had spoken her language had pulled her by the hair and dragged her to the alter of her past and took her.

“I was a traitor!”

She closed her legs and watched the shame. Girls that had been left behind were beaten, she could not remember if she too had been bludgeoned. She felt her lips swell, her eyes heavy and her body ache. She bled.

“They took us and stripped us down, we were called ‘whores’. We were washed and government priests told us that our only redemption was to serve. To serve what? I never knew. I did not choose any of it. None of us did. They cut our hair. They ripped and hacked it from our heads.”

She reached for her thinning scalp; she felt the scars from their scissors on her head as she watched the crying girls as their hair fell into their laps. Crowds had gathered and cursed them, friends called at them and the soldiers jeered. Her slight hands fell to her lap as she looked at the buildings in front her, they blocked the detail of what would come next.

“Every second girl was shot or stoned. I was whipped. Some were hung. I had to say what they demanded to hear, and I had to do what they wanted me to. It was only because I was beautiful that I was spared, spared what? To live?”

She raised her glasses and rested them onto her nose, her eyes scanned the newspaper as it sat nearby. She looked at the triumphant photos on the front page, it was a great day.

“It is the anniversary for the day of victory, when they won over the others. I know I should be grateful. It is over now. I am told that it is over.”

She stood up from her chair, and turned to the room behind her with a momentary gaze into the emptiness. She was not tired, but she felt that she should rest. It would be her time soon, finally. She would see them all again.

“I should sleep now. Sometimes I see my brother, it is his birthday soon. I should make him a cake. He is not so fussy any more. Just as well, I am not so good at making them these days.”

The End