

The Lyon Squawk Box

Cecil woke up. Nothing seemed familiar to him. In fact, Cecil didn't even know he was Cecil. There was dirt in his nose and ringing in his ears. The sky was torn, the clouds ripped to hell, pockets of smokey black grime like sad balloons lingered from gun powder explosions. All distant plane clamor sounded like last ditch efforts. The ripple of manmade thunder permeated the airwaves. It was the end of the world.

Cecil sat up and felt the pain. No blood, but a deep, unfriendly pain that ran through his entire body and made him see black whenever he mustered the courage to breathe. He pressed his hand to the ground in order to steady himself and the road was harder than he expected it to be, as though he expected to find himself in a hayfield or atop a grassy moor. That's when he noticed the debris. Broken glass and stripped pieces of blackened wood laid about the ground. The wood reminded him of the lumberyard back home in Ashford, Connecticut, where the rain fell straight and the women were decent. But the wood in Ashford, he recollected, smelled different, clean in a way. All Cecil could smell now was the earthy scent of the dirt in his nose and the rubbery odor of burned air. This confused and alarmed him, but Cecil felt relieved to have any sort of memory, and he recalled reading in some medical journal, at some point in time, that smell was the sense most closely related to memory. It struck him how sadly ironic it was that he could remember that detail and a lumberyard, but not his own name.

There was a war on. Now he remembered. There had been some kind of explosion, a hellish firebombing, if his memory served him. He tried to think back, but the images in his mind were fuzzy and there was no dial for him to twist or antenna to bend in order to make them clear. Just then, an image of a man with grey in his hair bowed over a radio came into Cecil's mind. The man was shouting at a woman seated on a floral-print sofa, asking whether or not the music was coming in all right. He didn't know why, but this image soothed him in his heart. When he closed his eyes again, he only saw walls of flames. That's where the memory ended. He clinched his teeth together, trying to drive the footage from his brain, and as he did so, he felt something *come loose*. One of his teeth had become detached from his gums. He stuck his hand into his mouth

and yanked the molar free. There was only a spot of blood and, surprisingly, no pain. He examined the tooth. It was dry. He tossed it to the ground and it became mixed up in the rubble. Cecil's instincts told him he was intended to die in this bombing, and given the destruction around him, his enemy had nearly succeeded in their intention. His instincts also told him that this same enemy would soon be along, weeding out any survivors and eliminating them, as any competent pest control service would do. If he was going to give them the dodge, he'd better move. So, Cecil somehow managed to get to his feet. The pain was excruciating and he instinctively held a hand to his abdomen. He then looked around and saw the town at a greater view. It was in shambles, a pit of ash where life used to commence. He glanced to his left and saw what he imagined had been a market. There was a stripped banner hanging from an awning, one end blowing playfully in the dark wind. Squashed strawberries were scattered in front of it and they looked like spilt blood. Still, had any one of them been edible; he would have gladly eaten them, for he suddenly became very aware of being famished. He determined to find some food and try to locate an outpost of some sort. It was clear to him that he was a soldier. His helmet and uniform confirmed this. His black boots were now brown from mud. The rest of his company must have been nearby, he thought, trying to calm his racing heart. Something struck him as odd, however. Not since he had awoken had he heard the slightest sound. He listened carefully, but couldn't hear anything. Sticking the chubby tip of his index finger into his right ear hole, he attempted to clean out some of the dirt. The microscopic crystals of rock felt like sandpaper against his fingertip. He listened again, hoping for some sound to assure him he was still on earth. He closed his eyes and concentrated. Only the faint crackling of a long-off fire became audible. He felt then that he might have been the only person alive for miles. His sense of aloneness now bloomed and he felt his organs shrink and his guts twist. He wanted to scream. He wanted to cry. He wanted his mother to emerge from the ruins and hold him in her arms. He wanted to let thick tears dampen her blouse as he belted silent screams into her bosom. He thought about his mother, but he couldn't see her face. This war had taken everything, even his memories, he mused in a moment of poetic poignancy. Then suddenly, while Cecil stood abandoned by life, it began to rain. The droplets were hot and one managed to slip through the back of his shirt collar and roll down to his lower back, feeling like a tear. Maybe God was weeping, he thought. And right was God to weep if he could see what Cecil was seeing.

Cecil began to slowly hobble down the road. One foot was completely useless. He wasn't sure which direction he was moving. He could have been walking directly into the enemy's nest for all he knew, but it was better than lying on the ground, waiting to die like a snail, he thought. His eyes scanned the landscape nervously. Each sight was more disturbing than the last. He was searching for refuge without knowing it. Anything that contained a shred of hope would do. It would keep him hobbling. Finally, he could see an apple tree in the distance. It was emerging from fog, the heavy haze that lingers in the air after war did its dance. The tree looked like an impressionist painting. The skyline was watercolor, but the blood-red sunlight bent around the apple tree in such a real way that it appeared fabricated. His mouth was dry and his lips were splitting. He could taste the blood coming from them. It was delicious. He imagined it was the savory aftertaste of

olives or the bloody juice of a steak. Now to finish off his meal with a crisp apple, it'd be like he was never at war at all. Cecil looked at the long road ahead of him. It was one-hundred paces, give or take, to the base of the tree. He'd make it. His hunger would drive him. The taste of the apples would jog his memory, perhaps; bring him back to when he was a child in Ashford. He seemed to recall running boney-kneed through vast orchards and collecting bushels of over-ripened apples so his father could make cider. He had his origin, now he just needed everything else; he cogitated with an undercurrent of black humor, wryly smirking at the unluckiness of his circumstances. Cecil figured Ashford must have been an important place to him, even a joyous place, for he had no trouble remembering its name. Why had that memory remained and the others not? What about Ashford fixed itself so snugly into his coconut that not even dynamite could pry it up? He was sure about nothing, but he was happy that he had at least one memory to cling to. A man needn't much else than vague purpose. He was from somewhere; he was someone. That, he could confirm. He had lived a life before the war, he had probably loved and been loved, he had gone to school, he had been drafted into the army, he had more than likely made friends with fellow soldiers. He had trembled with them, prayed with them, fought beside them, and he had probably watched some of them die. Having a think on it now, he was almost relieved not to remember the latter parts. He might have been the luckiest of all soldiers as a matter of fact, for he had seen the horrors the others had seen, but not forced to live with them.