

*A man sits at his desk.*

This is it.

What's left for a man of war in a time of peace?

My entire life's work. My youth. My family. The sum of all my fears and the result of every victory is pinned across my chest. And for what? This? All of this feels foreign. It's too late to try and start a new life in this new society. One that has nearly blached itself of what my life has been spent doing. I'm a living anachronism. A thing that simultaneously is and used to be. That's all I am to them anyways. A thing. Like some toy. A sometimes useful item that's kept out of the sight of company when it's not needed. Packed behind other things and stuff. Collecting dust, but never for too long. They can't help themselves, can they? They want, no, need to bring the old war hero out when they're about to honk the trumpets. They need you until they don't. And they don't need you until they do. I suppose that's the way it goes.

*The man removes a bottle of scotch and a glass from his drawer. He pours himself a few thick fingers.*

Even this peat smells bitter to me now. It tastes dry. There's no moisture in the valley of dry bones. I'm no Ezekiel and they're no Israelites. These are modern times with modern solutions. The way you speak about the present shows you where you are in its plans. By that logic, I guess I've been left behind the times. Where do you go where you can see the future and it has no place for you? A happy ending for some is the damp beacon of catastrophe for others. Peace is murder for a man like me. I'm not the only one, but certainly others like me could adapt. Peace is bad for business, but look at Volkswagen, Krupp and all the other Nazi war machine makers from all of those years ago. They're fine. That should be inspiring.

*He inhales a good portion of the scotch. He fills it again, though it was not empty.*

I can sit here and go through all the times I was needed. All the times I laid blueprints to manufacture success out of impossibility. All the times we stared at the jaws of annihilation and tore out the enemy's throat. How many times did I turn certain defeat into glasses of smoke and stars? My battledress feels pounds heavier with all these pieces of metallic glory. These honours are now coffin spikes. There was a time when they meant something. A status of worship and an homage of reverence. Now it feels like I'm holding immense wealth in a country that declared bankruptcy, unable to trade millions for a heel of bread.

It's crazy to think that I'd be more anxious on the night before peace than during all my nights of war. I've used the sounds of gunfire and bombs splatting in the distance to sharpen my wits for what seems like forever. I grew more captivated the closer that they came. My anxiety became so familiar that it felt like a child's excitement when they're about to open a gift. There was no fear of a noble death, only a lust for battle and a reproach for surrender. Death is inevitable and I should've probably died twice for every accolade that I've earned. Each medal must have cost the lives of hundreds if not thousands of good men and innocent civilians. Evil never dies quite how we like it to, does it? We envision its destruction with the wettest lips and most dreadful intentions, but its punishment and execution never quite seems adequate. Such is the unfulfilling nature of victory. My body became used to the hymns of battle serenading me to sleep. I would close my eyes and wave my hands like a musical conductor, knowing when the dropping of every missile would occur. A beautiful symphony. It's not the destruction that enthralls me. That would be sadistic. I'm not a villain and I don't enjoy commuting destruction or trading deaths. I place no importance on death tolls, unfortunately, always more innocent civilians than enemies.

Sadly, it became as commonplace a sight as a sin-less calf to a butcher. Instead, I heard the poetic fluidity of a well-paced orchestra. It moved me as sublimely as any score. My victories felt like the success of an offspring and I the humble pride as its progenitor. All while our people lapped up the veal and returned to the line to ask for more.

*The man stood up and eased a sapphire needle onto a recording of Mozart's Requiem.*

Some men are content to return home from a day of work to rest. I, however, abhorred the interim periods between our great wars. The stretches of time when others in the organization put their feet on their desks and patted each other on the shoulder. The glad-handing. The vacations with their loved ones. A fool's bliss. A commemorative stamp issued with mindless abandon. How quick they were to forget the infectious wounds that were papered over with shallow treaties and weak promises. I refused to have a goldfish memory. They'd never stared into the eyes of a worthy competitor. Their noses had never been pressed against that of an equal. One who is equally confident of your adversarial relationship and paranoid that the other will strike first. They had no respect. I have more respect for my enemy than my ally. In a short time, their allegiances replaced each other. In the long-term, they were the same. I respect the sniper and not the bullet.

It's incredibly ironic that a man they venerated as a master strategist had somehow failed to build a contingency plan for his ultimate victory. To win always meant to live to fight another day. For your freedom, your flag and your nation.

The *ententes* inevitably cratered and the cheap thread that held the alliances together eventually snapped. Again and again, they were forced to dust off the man they placed on the shelf after he did his job; who was in opposition of every rash ceasefire; who was already studying the weaknesses of the enemy before the ink had set on the truce. Conflict is an mandatory companion in our existence. Chaos refreshes and bloodshed cleanses. The gears of the planet would whine and rust without the friction of progress.

I always fought with victory in mind. As a soldier, a commander and a general. I never fathomed that true peace was unattainable. It was the roadside billboard that sold the message for the product. This product being my product, and a damn quality franchise at that. The thought of peace was nothing more than a fairy tale. Something I sold to the grown children as an end to the means that I practiced and believed in. If war was the invention, then peace was the fuel to which our drills could always reach a rich supply. Victory and peace always seemed mutually exclusive. When one side has peace, it means that the other failed. I have to admit; they seem to have done it. Meticulous. Such tactical brilliance is something that I have no choice but to respect.

Was it my time in the academy that molded me this way? My service overseas and my years as a prisoner of war? Was it the wife and daughter that I lost, one and then the other, in different ways but inextricably connected? Was it the wisdom of age and experience? Where was the watershed moment? One of my incalculable battles that felt like a replaying of the same song in a different pitch? It may as well have been the Pavlovian routine of doing it to do it all again. And again. When a loss or victory ceases to incite any response out of you, you've graduated from the professional into the profession. The act of performing the job becomes meaningless and you're left with a personal objective to obtain. Good and bad days bleed together into a grayish, oblong state of perpetual nothingness. But it's more than that. Why is it that I, we, crave victory and are nauseated by loss? Because I am the job, and the job is to win.

My youth and young adulthood were spent tightening my nerves and talents like a piano-string. I had all the doubt and fear erased from my soul and felt the sacks that the average man fills with those weak emotions desiccate, shrivel and all but disappear. Though they couldn't be removed, they became a

memory of when simple fear could trigger a genuine response in me. How confusing it must be for the average human to watch someone who has whittled their ability to become scared away. To stand with a barrel to their cheek or a blade to their throat as naturally as if they were waiting in line for the cinema. The only thing I ever felt in those moments was impatience. It's about control. Even when the situation was out of my hands, I remained in control of myself. Even when separated from my battalion while the enemy holds a lop-sided advantage, I have mastery over myself.

During the years I was captured, the thought of surrender never once slithered its repugnant hide across my mind. I was not certain that I could escape or would ever be freed. That would be a difficult situation for the average person. I was part of a larger cause and had arrived there because I did what I was told. When you allow your ego to be quashed the doubts and denials of individuality seem inconsequential. It sounds dehumanizing but it's actually the opposite. It's freeing and obviates indecision. I've always known who I am. Until today.

*The record finishes. The man removes the needle and stands, looking out the window over the festive city.*

When I was a grunt, to live and die was the same. What was my life worth compared to the ultimate goal of victory? My rank was the only thing that changed, not the way I thought. Instead of only controlling my life, I influenced the lives of millions.

As chief, my modus operandi remained the same. As long as death remained honourable, let the Devil be generous. There's a certain pride that comes with outmaneuvering the prongs of his spear so many times. For so long. I'm guilty of this. I can see that I've outlived my usefulness. I should've died but instead became harder to kill. Less accessible and more symbolic.

I can't join them in the parades. A macabre thought, to celebrate your own destitution and demise. Paralytic but sentient during a surgery. Now, I fear. Now, I groan with trepidation. Now, I realize that I'm alone. The godheads wouldn't want me to be included anyways. I declined the backseat of a convertible to smile, wave and catch roses many times when that was the custom. Their armistices were still stained with the mark of defeat, if only for not having delivered the crucial blow when we had their necks beneath my boot.

I only let them paint me as a war hero once. I was beside my wife with my little girl on my lap. It was for them. Without them, what's the point? The offer wasn't even extended this time. As soon as my mission was over, they were quick to get me out from under the lighted areas. Away from the mics and pens of journalists, out of the sights and minds of those who would see me as a symbol of the status quo. It would be impossible to embrace the future with such a stern reminder of the past.

I was good. Too good, and now there's nothing left to win. By removing the barriers of freedom, I've annexed my own. I worked myself out of the job. I just don't understand. We won. A lifetime of dedication and hard work. My magnum opus. Did I simply never see this as the ending? Did I transcend into a state beyond post-traumatic stress disorder? I have to believe that there would've been signs that I was sick. I'm not a warmonger, but like any intelligent person, I prefer conquest to a defensive position. Was the notion of peace removed from my ability to even conceive it? Did losing her change it all? I've never asked any of these questions until now. I never had time. I was always buried in a map and flanked by my top men. Did the other top men envision what victory would entail? Did the president believe in peace, or did he just say it like another slogan or empty promise to potential voters? I was Sisyphus. Pushing the boulder just to push it again. I liked pushing the boulder. I like exercise and the outdoors.

In time, a person will squander all the gifts that they're given. Once a privilege is internalized, it's taken for granted. How poorly freedom is treated by those who eagerly forget what bondage feels like. Those who have never been in chains can't imagine the feeling. See how freedom is a death device to those that cannot manage their impulsiveness? Their urges and their selfishness? The key is to keep the prize illusory. Able to be seen, but still out of arm's reach. Heaven may be the best example of this. It's nothing but mere fantasy that's made the masses toe the line without proof. For so long. But not without the fear of hell as its stick.

The poor man is quick to forget his years of poverty after winning the lottery. He will end up poor again. He will squander the gift of his rebirth and arrive in a worse condition than he was previously. Not only will he be broke, but he'll have the painful memory of being flush with cash. If you think that the memory of wealth can heat or feed the penniless, you've never tried to eat or light a fire with the dry bones of the valley.

So, what will they do with all this peace and calm they didn't even know they wanted? That's not to say that they didn't ask for it. They may have very well prayed for it every night before bed, much like the Promised Land, never having seen or felt it. Praying and earning are two very different things, however. Weber knew this. Marx knew this. Did they earn peace? Were they feeling it in their bones while they slept in their comfortable beds and privately owned homes? Peace will mean the end or torture to many, but it will also mean the absence of familiarity for others. Some will be rightly jubilated and spend their morning disarming dirty cluster bombs and trip mines. Even without gun powder and detonators, there will still be pitchforks to lunge and hands to make fists.

My scars and stump remind me of the time when I too rested on my laurels and was assuaged by the tranquil sounds of lightly rippling water. I was still young enough to hold onto the belief that we'd accomplished a portion of our grandiose vision. I'd allowed myself to be disarmed. Not without scepticism, but I had a wife and daughter. It was strange to care for something so deeply.

I liked my wife. We had a suitable arrangement that was more or less required to advance to the next stage of what *they* called a career. We met and wed. We didn't plan for a child. It was never part of the plan. I was not the supreme tactician that sits here now, but I'd still dealt with many surprise incursions and blinding weather patterns. A speed lump in a long-term strategy.

*I loved my daughter.* I was taken aback by how natural holding my baby felt. It felt like all the empathy I'd previously lacked had been stored up in hidden sacks for Lana. The sweetest little angel. That was the only time that I feigned an understanding of peace. I saw it as a better future to give her. A gift that I'd never seen, but had heard of its beauty and demanded that she have it. I now know how far off my understanding of peace was. It wasn't a global peace, per se. All I wanted was to have more time to spend with her. Her sitting on my lap and reading the newspaper and field reports to me.

Peace could mean different things to different people. For example, the peace to do what one wants, unencumbered by the threat of whatever force is determined to uproot them. By that definition, yes, I experienced peace at one point in my life. I enjoyed it. I'm not a monster. I focused on maintenance of that state; de-militarization, as I was asked. I still remained vigilant, however. At the behest of my superiors, or at least the last time I had any, I rescinded from the intensity of my strategizing, but not without apprehension. The voice in the back of my head never quits, even on a wonderful day holding the hand of my most beloved and walking on the long, too-wet-to-cut grass, picking spring-kissed wildflowers. A quiet doom. The weight of darkness that looms above the horizon and pushes the light beneath the earth. They told me that I was being morose and ungrateful. Paranoid, which I took as a compliment.

“Enjoy the spoils! The champagne and the fireworks! You’ve worked for it, Lieutenant. Take your wife and your little girl away to the sea or mountains. Take a vacation! You resemble the silos, what with your surplus of destructive thoughts leaking waste into your bloodstream. Leave at once! No, that’s an order from your General. Son, my family and I are heading to the South. There will be many an opportunity to smoke cigars and drink the finest imported liquors while our children frolic on the beach and our wives busy themselves with the other officers’ wives over games of trump and pinochle. Yes, all the officers have properties in the South. That’s where the real decisions happen, young man. Who would have thought something as innocent as all this would be the biggest boom in your career? The diversions, the war games, your battle record and your willingness to fight alongside your grunts. All of that pales in comparison to a few socials in the proper setting.”

I can’t blame my naivety on a dead man. I was swooned by the talk of career men who saw the army as a type of celebrity. Their ambition was deflated by their salaries and status. They’d grown fat. They stopped looking ahead of them and rested their eyes on their plates and their stomachs that slumped onto the tables in front of them. It was a hard sell, but it came from all angles. They related it all back to my family. I couldn’t care less about what fashions and accessories my wife could have, but the life that I could give to Lana.

The voice in my head never stopped, but her little laugh washed out the ringing of dread. This voice was like an air siren that the citizens had learned to ignore like a background noise that never let the hairs on the backs of their necks rest.

Civil wars are the filthiest wars.

We weren’t engaged in conflict with our historical nemeses nor struggling for resources or the balance power with any other state. Our bargains with them were paper cranes floating idiotically atop the flesh of the pond, but they were still afloat.

Nobody knows your weak spot like the people closest to you.

With a few well-placed bombs and ancillary firepower, they mowed the top flight of military personnel down. The General, his top men, their families, my daughter. I wish that it had been me. It would have given me eternal peace to know that she would have been safe for at least another day.

They had intelligentsia and artillery, essentially picking off a row of unsuspecting goslings. I lost a leg and some pieces of my fingers. I sifted through a coast of ash and tides of gore to find what remained of Lana.

I see my angel at times. In my dreams and while I’m awake. She hasn’t aged because she never had the chance. She comes to me in an up close mirage. My hands pass through her little head when I try to stroke her hair and little body when I try to lift her to my knee.

“Papa, don’t be angry,” she says to me.

She always begins to snuffle. It kills me that I can’t wipe the spiralling tears that riddle her round cheeks. She’s the most beautiful thing. She asks where her mother is. What can I tell her? Her mother is somewhere else living a life, possibly with a sister that she never had the chance to meet. She’s my innocence personified. Fittingly, a ghost.

*The man opens his drawer and removes a melted barrette and an incinerated locket. He pours another stiff drink.*

They thought they'd taken the head off Leviathan. They must've thought that the body would wriggle helplessly before lying cold and stiff. In reality, they'd done nothing more than clip the tail from a salamander. I could grow another tail.

It's true, the getaway was influential in my career. Due to the time-spent system of rank that ignored pure talent and merit, I was far from their main objective. I had a plan in the event that a power vacuum presented and unfurled itself with no opposition. My wife said that I was being disrespectful to our daughter, but tell me, what's more venerable than vengeance? She left not long after, stating that I'd changed. I hadn't, I'd just changed back.

Naturally, our arch-enemies saw this as a great occasion to celebrate our perceived strife with raids and insurgencies. Little matter. They saw a collapse and I let them believe their eyes. The eyes often deceive. We were far from weak. All that our own citizens had done was trim the fat that medical advancements had allowed to fester. This was my army now. My country. The senate demanded a wartime General and I was that man.

I told the President to smile for the cameras and keep our national image spotless while I fought as uncleanly as I could behind the scenes.

I told God to take a seat on the bench while I brought Armageddon to all those who deserved it.

We hunted and rooted out every last rat. We did things that would've made the Romans and early settlers squeamish. The goal wasn't only to punish the faceless assassins that destroyed all the beauty in my life, but to do the job properly and ensure that no one ever thought about dissent again. Now we had the informants. We had a monopoly on people's mind. I made it so a person who had a passing thought of rebellion would swallow a bullet.

The battles fought outside our lands were even worse. Whether a terrorist was camped out in the mountains or in apartment complexes, why would I waste my good men in fire fights that could drain my own platoon? I much preferred them to shovel through the rubble to earn their kill than risk their own lives.

During the first lull after this counteroffensive, I was honoured and told to back off. I'd learned that this period was the most dangerous for our country, and me. I was never idle for too long. They thought that because we'd snuffed out the rebellions and orchestrated extended moments of calm that the job was done. Fools. We were not alone at the top of the pyramid and it would only be so long before another apex organism saw our lack of assertiveness as nothing more than complacent stagnation.

They used their times of peace to create new inventions that praised indolence. They wanted me be unseen and unheard in times like these. The way they celebrate incompleteness confuses me. They finish their final task on the last workday of the week and act like they'll never return. As long as we exist, our work is never complete. They drink, feast and laze about without forethought as to what might come next. I never allowed myself to stultify and accept these small victories as charity for my own sake or that of anyone else. There's always a threat, and so, there's always a need for someone to stand guard.

I suppose that it was the others, the other superpowers, who pushed for this worldwide truce, the destruction of war and its machinery. It's probably for the best that they held the negotiations without me and those who think like me. My contemporaries hold the same beliefs and moral uncertainty regarding the plan as I, without a doubt. I've fought with them enough to know how they think.

They did it fast. They pulled the rug out and signed the treaty with so little lead up it resembled a hoax. I was preoccupied with strengthening our strongholds in distant lands and beefing up our security forces after receiving some valued intel. Real or not, who cares. It doesn't matter now. The fortresses have been abandoned and the arsenal decommissioned. Great fiestas were held where the tons of steel and iron were melted down to make monuments and plaques for governments to give each other in commemoration of the historic event.

*The man removes a revolver from his desk. He checks the cylinder, nods, and gives it a spin.*

That does it for me. My job has been eliminated. There's no need for a wartime general in peacetime. There's no need for an army, navy, air force or anything else. It all has to be removed and banished so that they don't fall back in strenuous or weak moments. I could wait. It's only a matter of time before they're at each other's throats, scrambling to get table legs and garden shears to storm into battle with. They've destroyed the factories, but I bet they saved the blueprints.

I refuse to be lost. I will not swallow the medicine, prescribed to all no matter their condition. What's left for me in this world, one that I believe to be as false a fantasy as the dreams of my Lana? There's no place for a vulture in a world where death doesn't exist. What's the point of living if it's not to die? I can't answer that. At least, I can't offer an answer that would leave me satiated.

I'd always spoken to my men about dying nobly and with dignity. I lectured, instilling my revulsion of surrender and defeat in them. After one turn, they all knew something of sacrifice. For their country, people and flag. None of those things need to exist anymore. Something only exists if it's worth defending. Everything else is spectre.

We won. We've brought the heavens down to the people and erased hell from the map. A good life's work and a job well done. Everyone take the night off. In fact, take tomorrow and the weekend off. Enjoy your families and your children. At ease soldier, rest ye weary head.

*The man places the revolver in his open mouth. He sets his teeth on each side of the barrel. The locket and barrette are still in his hand. Both of his hands are dry. His breathing is without acceleration; his composure befits a man in uniform.*

Soft padded footsteps are heard down the hall from the General's office. He sits back with his head reclined, the revolver locked in his finger. The footsteps are spritely and excited, if tapping sounds can show emotion.

"Papa," a little girl steps in while holding on the doorknob above her head. "Papa, papa, wake up."

The General takes a deep breath and shakes his head slowly. His eyes flit as they open, confused, looking around the room for the voice.

"Papa," the girl runs around the high desk. She stops and looks at the man, her hands behind her back. She wears a white dress with little flowers in some kind of pattern and little white shoes.

"Lana," the General's eyes lift and his mouth spreads wide. He hesitates. He drops the gun. He reaches his arms towards the girl slowly. His face wrinkles as his arms curve around her, closing, clasping and lifting her into the air. Lana wraps her arms and legs around the General. He holds her for moments, minutes or hours. Time passes differently now.

"I thought I lost those," she lisps, referring to the barrette and locket.

He sits her on the desk and buckles the barrette into her hair. He secures the shiny locket around her neck. "Very pretty, young lady," he says.

"My leg... my fingers," he says shocked. He moves to a plaque and inspects his face. "My face. I'm young"

"You're old," Lana laughs.

He picks her up and hugs her again.

"Papa, you're not angry. Are you sad? You're crying."

"No, honey. I'm so happy. These are happy tears because I'm smiling so much."

"Is mama here?"

"One day she'll come visit us."

"Papa, did you win the war?"

"Yes, angel, *we* won the war."