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Interlude in Serbia

Rainer Holden went down the stairs of the town hall. The little afternoon concert of the army hospitality center was over. The classical music which the program had promised was attended by not many listeners, so that only the front rows of the little hall had been filled with perhaps eighty soldiers.

During the concert Rainer had sat opposite a corporal from another company of his regiment, and while pensively contemplating his quiet features, his thoughts had wandered to Walter, his friend. He had compared the two faces — the one before him with the one distant from him. How different was this brown, sunburned, dark-haired, and irregular face sitting before him from the blond regularity of the features of Walter! During the concert Walter had been with him with singular intensity. It was music in which he felt himself most united with his friend. Playing the piano for four hands with him — they were both excellent players — he lost many doubts that otherwise frequently threatened to absorb him when he thought of his attachment to Walter.

Now Rainer walked slowly down the steps, when he encountered again the corporal. During the concert he had made himself so familiar with his face that to him, usually so reserved, it seemed quite natural to approach him and ask him a question. Yes, the other was also glad to have heard the concert: he also regretted, as did Rainer, the poor attendance.

This exchange brought them before the door of the town hall. The brooding heat of the Serbian summer beat against them in suffocating swaths. They stood for a couple of moments in sight of the treeless square, which offered not the slightest shade. Then they looked at each other. The unknown comrade introduced himself, his name was Christoph Wagner — Rainer spoke his own name. Their steps turned together to the center of the little city, where several bars were. They began to talk about their service. Rainer learned that Christoph, like himself, was a wireless operator in one of the companies that were stationed about six miles outside the city.

They reached the center of the town with its bars, but it seemed to Rainer almost a matter of course that Christoph now asked him whether he would not like to walk home — for the realm of the company spelt home to them — because after the concert, nothing about these bars appealed to him. Rainer agreed to the proposal but asked that they would not take the return route until later, when the sharpest heat had declined. They found in the suburb one of the little Serbian cellar taverns, where for their always scarce Serbian money there was a good red local wine, and began there a conversation which was to last without pause until they got home.

The cool of the evening lay already in the fields when they left the little city. Christoph seemed to know the region better than Rainer, for he quit the highway very soon after the last houses of the city, and turned aside into the fields.

The fieldpath stretched itself into the infinite range of the Serbian landscape. All was flat here; far lay the dusty road that they had turned from. The corn billowed like a sea around them, and only along the horizon emerged quite delicately a few spurs of the mountain range, so remote that they seemed to belong to another world. The last houses had disappeared; now and then they passed a corn-shed, or a bucket-well whose high crossbeam wakened remembrances of the nearby Hungarian steppe.

But all of this was only background music to their conversation, which not until the last, almost in sight of Christoph's company barracks, crept into the personal. Now they learned the decisively human of each other. Christoph told of his North German home and cast, in little sharp sketches, an image of his passionate, vehement wife, whereas Rainer, more restrained than his companion, told of his friend, Walter.

In the weeks that followed, this brief conversation was to be the only one of its kind about those people who were closest to them; at the second meeting, both already were reluctant to name again the names of those who were distant from them and yet always near.

This first walk together on a June afternoon was for the two men the beginning of an interlude which — while it lasted — seemed timeless, and which yet was compressed into a few months.

Slowly and imperceptibly they slipped into familiarity. They were not entirely aware of the full extent during its course. Many hindrances lay in their way. Both feared being talked about by their comrades, and gossip was always ready to lift its head. In the first days they found themselves in the same truck that brought the off-duty personnel of the two companies to the city. They left it separately and met again in one of the little cool wine-cellars. Here privacy offered itself, to which they both hurried without being aware of it. Again and again they managed to take the homeward way together and return to the familiarity of the first conversation.

It was Rainer's candor which brought Christoph slowly out of his taciturnity. Slowly there broke forth from this man all that for five years he had locked inside himself — the torment of having to live in a world where not man but rank ruled. Here Rainer came to know another world, one which was completely alien to the one of his friend Walter. It had only taken a few months that Walter oriented himself to military life, in order to overcome easily everything with the full, unbroken strength of his body, to storm forward until with surprising speed he had attained officer's rank. In Christoph, Rainer found a man who rejected his soldier's environment because he had perceived its deadly levelling.

On a late afternoon in June, the two men found themselves upon the highway. Both had night-duty. It would not have been worthwhile to go to the city. So for the first time they followed the road into the country. Some little farmstead farther, there was a bend in the road and the travellers lost sight of the barracks. After a half-hour's walk they crossed a bridge over a little stream that flowed down to the Temes. The land on both sides was choked with reeds as far as the eye could see. Rainer and Christoph turned off the road and continued along the edge of the reeds. Here it was teeming with waterfowl whose polyphonic concert enchanted the late afternoon. The hikers found a place where the stream, unobstructed by reeds, rushed onward. There was hardly a meter of free water, and it was scarcely knee-deep, but it was clear, cold and clean, an ideal place for bathing.

This small stretch of river-bank, free of reeds, became to them the spot to which they both escaped in every off-duty period. Here they had the tranquillity which only the evening walk from the city had been able to give them before. Christoph hollowed out a part of the streambed, making a sort of trough into which the streaming ice-cold water gushed. They sat in this shadowed spot for entire afternoons, captured by the summer's heat. Two old trumps served them

as seats. Here they read and wrote, smoked and talked, and when it became too hot, the small trough which had been won from the stream enticed them. Nothing broke the peace of these afternoons. The chirping of the crickets, the cries of the waterfowl fitted into the familiar image of the landscape. Perhaps a Serbian child with a cow came along past them: or an old shepherd with his flock drew along the margin of the reeds — otherwise everything remained still. The summer which stood over them in a fullness they had never before experienced, surrounded them like a radiant bell.

Friendship had been all they had shared so far: scarcely a flash in the look of one to the other showed that, almost unperceived, a fire grew — thus the second half of June slipped by. It was only in the middle of July that their friendship came to the turning point. Again it was Rainer who brought about the change, just as on the day of the concert when he had introduced himself to Christoph.

On each day of the last weeks the sun had seemed to blaze down more mercilessly. The two friends lay in the clearing of the man-high reeds. In the oppressive heat they had stripped off their bathing suits. Christoph seemed slowly to fall asleep. Rainer still crouched on his blanket and read the letters which the mail had brought that morning. When he had finished the last one he let them slip to the blanket. His gaze fell upon Christoph lying near him, his head buried in his arms. As Rainer looked at the dark brown back of the man who had become so familiar to him, and for the first time consciously saw how beautifully his hips glided down — what was it that compelled him now to lay his hand on that back?

The hour had just begun to strike which was to announce to them the changed period.

But as his hand found the way to his friend's shoulder-groove, Christoph half lifted himself up. They looked at each other. Then Christoph slowly took him in his arms.

The summer stood silently around them: silent remained their embrace, and as they found each other, the tone of a flute died away out of the innermost thicket of reeds.

Later — they had by this time loosened themselves from each other, and Christoph had slipped into a light nap with his head in Rainer's lap — while Rainer looked at the sleeping face and saw how very much it had altered, almost as if an angular layer had fallen from it, showing it for the first time in its true form — he began to reflect. Even more than the inner intimacy of these past weeks, the complete relaxation in his friend's face told him where his duty lay. Being the stronger of the two it was up to him to support Christoph in their soldiers' life without in doing so wanting anything for himself. He was already in this moment aware that Christoph — and not merely because he was married — would never belong to him, that it must depend upon him to remain a margin figure in this other life. What would be his, would be his only temporarily. And yet — it was worth it, every hour of it.

Fate granted these lovers two weeks of fulfilment. No more. But even these two weeks in the hurrying lapse of their days seemed timeless during their passing. Around the two men who had found each other spread the whole fertility of the Serbian Summer. The maize ripened, the melons increased, grapes, plums, apricots — all was theirs in abundance.

During these fourteen days of whose finiteness they had no inkling, they managed almost every day to take off some time from duty and escape to the

security of their reeded stream. Christoph became very silent in these two weeks, but Rainer respected this silence. He knew his own strength was great enough to lift the lover at his side out of himself for the first time in years and return to him the consciousness of his own worth and dignity.

At the end of that span of time came a telegram to Rainer's unit, notifying him that his mother was gravely ill. Special leave was granted. There remained to the friends a single afternoon which they spent in the security of a sunflower field whose nearly man-high plants with huge flower wheels stood over them like trees and in whose shadow they lay as in an unreal twilight.

The next morning a truck took Rainer to the little railway station. In a short time he had reached Belgrade, and some time after he sat in the leave-train on the way to Vienna.

It was a long journey until he reached the Luneburg Heath, where his mother lived in a little village. Day and night he attended to the nursing at his mother's bedside — for a short time Rainer forgot all else. After two weeks she improved, and Rainer was able to depart, suffering again one of the countless goodbyes that senselessly emerged out of this war.

He went back to Serbia. Again he took up the endless track, overloaded troop-trains, low-flying enemy aircraft strafing, alarms — he was accustomed to all of this, and his heart hurrying on ahead was already far in the Serbian distance.

At last his steps went again over the uneven pavement of the little town. He rang Christoph's company from town. Did it merely seem so, or was his friend's voice actually strained? They agreed upon a meeting in the fieldpath. A party which both companies gave that evening furnished them the opportunity of solitude.

No, Rainer had not deceived himself. A look in his friend's face, and the almost fierce power with which he drew him into his arms told him that something had happened. It was only a few minutes until Rainer found the courage to ask and Christoph the strength to answer. Yes, something had happened. His house in Northern Germany had been destroyed during an air raid and his wife had been injured. He had his special leave papers already in his pocket.

Rainer breathed a sigh of relief. This was really nothing more than a second separation of two or three weeks — how slightly it weighed against the time that still lay before them. He succeeded in bringing his friend through the difficult reunion in which renewed separation lay enclosed. He saved for them this last evening, which they spent deep in the fields in a spot where, visible far off, a single tree raised itself out of the otherwise treeless landscape. Leaning on its trunk, they sat under the southern stars.

The next day's duty list was favorable. Rainer was able to accompany his friend to town. But something in him constricted, nevertheless, when he saw him with the heavy knapsack on his back. This dread was not permitted to matter; the only thing that counted was to overcome this second parting with as little damage as possible. It was an almost cheerful conversation in which he went with his beloved over the fieldpath to the station.

It was the delay of the train's departure, the unexpected pause, that led their conversation to the only topic they had avoided discussing in all their time together.

They sat on a bench in front of the station. Rainer's gaze rested on the face and form of his friend. «It is strange,» he said pensively, «that I know you

only in this yellow tropic uniform. I cannot even imagine how you would look in other clothes.»

Christoph looked at him and said, «Keep me so in your eyes, for this image of me belongs exclusively to you.»

And when he had said these words, Rainer found the strength in the last period that had been given to them because of the train's delay, to tell him of the way he looked upon their love. «I know you'll be returning to your wife now. Your marriage is a fact we both cannot overlook. But do not worry about me. You know that I belong to you. But you know equally well that I have no demands upon you. This love of ours is a thing which has to stand apart. And, anyhow, it's no use thinking about it all as long as this damned war is going on. The only thing that matters is that we should both survive. Let's leave it at that, — there is enough strength for me to draw from the mere knowledge that I can be as sure of your love as you can be of mine.»

Christoph looked at him silently. To him who is full of feeling, expression is often denied. But Rainer gathered the answer from the familiar features.

When the little train finally arrived that would carry Christoph to Belgrade, Rainer climbed with him into the empty compartment and there with a last embrace took leave of his beloved. Then he stood for a few minutes outside: a couple of words went back and forth until the noisy train rattled away, and soon the brown-burned face in the window-frame was shrinking away.

His own leave had fallen in the first half of August. In the first days of September Christoph would be back with his unit. Eight days after Christoph's departure the mail brought the only letter Rainer was to receive during the separation from his friend.

Christoph wrote, «You know that I have returned to my marriage, even if on the other hand, it is to be only for a short time. But you know also that I have no wish to dissolve it. My wife is part of me. For the very reason that we have spoken so little of her, you will have sensed this. I don't know yet how our life — yours and mine — will turn out after the war. We have promised each other not to think of it while this accursed war lasts; but you should know that in the house of my life, wherever I shall build it, there will be a room to which only you and I will have the key. And when I unlock it and go to the window then you will be beside me, and in the old familiar movement lay your hand on my shoulder, and then we shall be able to see into the distance, with our glance to penetrate the room. For us again and again the shimmering sun will gleam over the Serbian plain and see us two going over the small field path — for this summer will remain in our hearts.»

Toward the end of August Rainer knew that he would not see his friend again in Serbia. The war's course had made necessary a transfer of the regiment to which they both belonged. He learned that Christoph had already been notified of the new location in Marburg on the river Drave, and that he would return there.

Thus he let the last days of the Serbian summer calmly pass by — for he was certain of the permanency of that which the summer had brought.

The shipment of the regiment began in the first days of September. The troop-train was to go through Belgrade. But on the morning of departure the schedule was interrupted by an air raid on the capital.

The attack assumed the heaviest form. The carpet of bombs fell in a thickness never before experienced. Finally the report came through that the great

Danube bridge which led to Belgrade had been destroyed. This made it impossible to route the train through the capital. It was decided to send them across Hungary. So as not to expose the regimental staff aides, most of them girls, to the dangerous journey, they were sent to the capital by bus from there to take the main line northward. A detachment of ten soldiers was assigned to them. Rainer was among them.

Thus a little later he found himself with his comrades in the bus that would take them to the Danube. There a ferry would transport the bus to the other side.

At first Rainer's gaze lay on the two familiar spires of the Serbian church in the little town — the friends had sat frequently in the cool interior of the church and listened to the monotony of the responses — until the spires became smaller and smaller, and finally disappeared. Then the heights arose before his eyes on which Belgrade was towering above the Danube and the Save. The morning's air raid had been heavy: the city was still burning from one end to the other. Yet Rainer was conscious, even as a shiver overtook him, of the harmony with which the hills, the city, the rivers and the sky blended. What caused him to shiver? He told himself sternly that this was only the departure from a familiar landscape after all. But was it a departure only?

The heavily loaded ferry pushed slowly from the bank and started across the broad Danube. In the middle it struck a floating mine, sank, and of the people who found themselves on it — soldiers and girls alike — only a very few were known to have been saved.

Among the dead was Rainer Holden.

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Christoph Wagner, who returned eight days afterwards to his unit in Marburg on the Drave, suspected nothing. He arrived at night in the strange city. After he had reported back to his company office and stowed his baggage in the barracks, he hurried forth again into the dark night in search of his friend.

He passed the army moviehouse. The evening performance was just over. The last men were leaving when Christoph saw a soldier from Rainer's nightshift. He knew the man and went up to him to ask him about Rainer's whereabouts. In the dimness of the passage way the other soldier looked strangely at him. The other knew that Christoph and Rainer had been pals. He suddenly realized that Christoph had no idea of what had happened to Rainer on their last day in Serbia. The soldier hesitated for a moment. But the truth had to come out. So he told Christoph quickly and briefly of how Rainer had met his death. Seeing the stunned look on Christoph's face he turned and left him alone. There was no consolation he could give him.

Christoph wandered aimlessly through the streets of the strange town. His feet carried him on and on, his mind was a blank. At last he found himself on a seat by a garden which lay high above the edge of the Drave. Slowly his gaze grasped the surroundings; he noticed the fine curve of the old houses lying on both sides of the river in the moonlight. But then this perception vanished again. He leaned back. While his eyes, without apprehending, surveyed the immense range of stars surrounding him, he felt as if strong, sunburned hands lay on his shoulders. He was conscious of the familiar smell of dark hair against his cheek. The night dissolved. He saw beyond its darkness two men walking under the merciless southern sun. As the first liberating tears gathered in his eyes, his face burned with anger and love.

by Christian Graf.

Translation by h. r.