

Thanksgiving with Klaus

--

ONE: 17-20. Handsome.

TWO: 17-20. Blonde.

Western Front, late autumn.

--

*Dark.*

*Suddenly, light; toxic yellow gas; screaming; gunshots; explosions; the sound of men dying—raw and terrible. Finally, the chaos fades to a low, distant rumble and everything goes slowly black. Occasionally, an explosion flashes.*

*A choked-off scream.*

*Dim, dirty light. Two young men are sprawled just below the lip of a no-man's-land ditch, abandoned. ONE wears an American uniform and a gas mask, TWO German, missing his mask. ONE clutches his hand to his chest, curling in on himself with pain. He's lost all digits on his right hand except for his thumb. He is bleeding from an indeterminable number of small shrapnel wounds and several larger wounds.*

*TWO is pale, his breath rattling tellingly in his chest. He's missing his helmet, skin severely burnt and blistered, bleeding so heavily and so universally that it's impossible to locate his wounds. It is obvious that he has dragged himself up out of the bottom of the ditch.*

*Below them, the gas pools menacingly.*

*ONE pulls his mask off to look at his hand. His mouth moves soundlessly for a moment before he moans, a high, keening wail. TWO coughs violently, his eyes wide open and sightless, but he can barely move. He is panicking. He hacks up blood. A not-quite distant explosion silences the both of them.*

*They lay still. TWO coughs. ONE is suddenly aware of him. He turns himself over, watches him with a strange sort of curiosity. He cracks a broken grin.*

ONE: You're fucked, ain't you, mister.

*TWO does not look at him, but it is obvious that he hears him.*

ONE: You're fucked.

*He laughs, sort of. TWO coughs. ONE regards him curiously for a long moment. He pulls a pistol from his belt. He waves it in front of TWO's face as if teasing a dog.*

ONE: You want me to? Huh? This what you want? Huh? Want me to?

*He puts the gun to TWO's temple. TWO stills.*

ONE: Should I? It'd be my Christian duty, wouldn't it? You want me to?

*ONE pulls the trigger. TWO tenses. An empty click.*

ONE: Well, joke's on you, pal. Empty. It's not even mine. It's Davy's. Davy's dead. Poor bastard. Poor Davy.

*He pulls the trigger again and snuffles.*

ONE: I liked Davy. He was a good guy. I liked him. He'd bum cigarettes offa me til I was out, though, and I wouldn't even notice because he was always just so nice about it. But he'd pay 'em back. Eventually. When he remembered. Poor Davy. Poor bastard. I liked him.

*Long pause.*

ONE: That was his given name. Davy. Not even short for David or anything. Just Davy. His girl broke it off with him last week. In a letter. You'd never even know, though. Poor Davy. He just smiled. I heard him crying, though. At night. Over the letter his girl wrote. Poor bastard. Cold-hearted broad, lemme tell you. Poor Davy. He probably just wanted to smile because everybody was so goddamn miserable all the time, maybe. Poor bastard. I liked him. Everybody liked Davy. Except Tommy. Tommy doesn't like anybody who likes him. He sings good, though. He sings sometimes, Tommy. I don't like Tommy. He likes me just fine, though. Prolly because I don't like him. Didn't like Davy, though. Poor Davy. Tommy doesn't like getting called Tommy. He likes Thomas better. So we all call him Tommy.

*TWO coughs. ONE seems surprised he's still there.*

ONE: Shit, you don't understand a word I'm saying, do you? Lousy Kraut. You're fucked anyway. What's your name? ...Hello? Name? What's—oh, right. Um. I don't know. Vas eess... uh... name? Jesus, I don't know.

*He lays back and listens to TWO for a moment.*

ONE: I bet it's Klaus. You're all called Klaus or something. Or Hans. All you Krauts. Klaus or Hans, maybe. *(Pause, then, with true remorse)* I'm really sorry I can't kill you. I am. Poor bastard. You're fucked. I just gotta wait for the guys to come back for me.

*TWO is having serious difficulty breathing—he is lying on his back, choking on his own blood. ONE watches him choke for a moment, then pushes TWO onto his side and thumps his back once for good measure. TWO spits blood and gasps.*

ONE: You can't die til I say so. Don't leave me alone. All by myself in a hole. Just too sad. It'll just be til the guys come get me. They'll take care of you then. I'll make sure. You know what? I'll even do it myself. Quick. I promise. Real quick.

*He tries to mop some of the blood from TWO's chin with his sleeve.*

ONE: I'm real sorry you're a Kraut. I am. I knew a guy looked like you. Davy. I told you about Davy. Didn't I? Looked a little like you. Not really, I guess. Same hair, though. Poor Davy. I liked him. He ran a bakery with his ma. He told me. Told me I could visit, get an apple pie for Thanksgiving, on the house. You ever had a Thanksgiving? Prolly not, I guess. No Indians in Germany to tell the pilgrims how to grow corn, right?

*He looks at TWO for a long moment.*

ONE: You would like it, I bet. Thanksgiving. *(Pause.)* Gotta get a pie first, though. You'd like that. Apple pie, I mean. You got apple pie in Germany? Prolly not. The Indians prolly taught the pilgrims that, too. I don't know. But you'd like it.

*A moment. Then, casually, TWO sits up. He stretches, stands. He looks down at ONE and smiles brightly.*

TWO: Well, come on. Better get a move on.

ONE: Another hour on the turkey, my ma says.

TWO: Come on. Sometime before next year would be nice.

*He gives ONE a hand up. Suddenly, a bakery. Warm light. Warm voices.*

ONE: Aunt Pauline's prolly gone and burnt the green bean casserole again. She does that every year, though. We just never expect green bean casserole.

TWO: I don't like green bean casserole anyway.

ONE: I don't even remember what it tastes like when it's not burnt.

TWO: It tastes like green beans.

ONE: What's wrong with that?

TWO: I hate green beans.

ONE: What's wrong with green beans?

TWO: They're green beans.

*He coughs. Blood. He doesn't seem to notice.*

ONE: You okay?

TWO: What?

ONE: Never mind.

TWO: She says it'll be a bit longer, the pie. She gets really specific with how long you gotta bake it, I don't know.

*They sit at a table by a window. TWO stares out of the window while ONE examines his mangled hand curiously. He wiggles his remaining thumb. He looks back at TWO.*

ONE: Are you sad?

*TWO looks up and grins.*

TWO: Nah. Not me.

ONE: Okay.

TWO: Are you?

ONE: Yes.

TWO: It's Thanksgiving. Cheer up.

ONE: Okay.

*They sit in companionable silence for a moment.*

ONE: I've got something to tell you.

TWO: What?

ONE: I'll tell you later.

TWO: Alright. You got the time?

*ONE looks at his wrist.*

ONE: Four-fifteen. This is yours.

TWO: Oh. S'pose it is. How come you've got it?

ONE: I took it.

TWO: Can I have it back?

ONE: No.

TWO: How come?

ONE: Mine's gone.

TWO: What, d'you lose it?

ONE: No. I wanted yours.

*An explosion rocks the bakery. The lights snap out. When they fade back up, ONE and TWO are lying in the ditch. ONE stares at his hand, fascinated.*

ONE: They still bend.

*He laughs shrilly. TWO stirs.*

ONE: 'S cold. Damn cold. Ain't it? Damn cold. I hate being cold. I'm cold all the time. When it's cold we always bunch together. When we're awake we move in these big funny clumps, all bunched up together. We sleep in bunches. We eat in bunches too. That's hard. Eating in bunches. 'Cause you can just *smell* everybody else while you're trying to eat and it's just... ugh. But they proly smell you too. Ugh. You gotta make sure you bunch with guys you like okay, though. Some guys are better at it. They know when to rotate out, let you in the middle. Some guys just try to get warm themselves. You gotta bunch with the guys who'll make sure you get warm too. Good guys. You don't want to get stuck with somebody nasty. Like Paul. Paul Mackenzie, though, not Paul Thompson. Paul Thompson's okay. We play cards a lot. He doesn't cheat or nothing. Mackenzie, though. I don't know. He won't even look at you. I don't know. Most guys are okay, though. Even Tommy's okay. I don't like him, but he sings sometimes. When he thinks you're not listening.

*Ponders this for a moment.*

I'm cold.

*He glances over at TWO, just remembering that he's there. He reaches out and touches TWO's face with the thumb of his mangled hand.*

ONE: You're burning.

*He shifts slowly and painfully toward TWO and gathers him up. TWO sobs at the contact.*

ONE: No, shh. You're burning. I'm cold. Sh-sh-sh-shhh. Remember last Friday? You were here for last Friday, weren't you? Remember how cold it got? Was it as cold over on your side? Remember how it got so cold your eyes would water in the wind and it would freeze? Right on your face. Just freeze. Maybe you weren't there. It was last Friday. Or Thursday, maybe. Anyway, it was damn cold.

*TWO moans. ONE presses closer.*

*The lights go out.*

*When they come back up, ONE and TWO are seated at the table in the bakery. TWO is shuffling a deck of cards. ONE is tipping his chair back.*

TWO: You're gonna fall over.

ONE: No 'm not.

TWO: Just stop, you're making me nervous.

*ONE leans back further. TWO nudges ONE's chair with the toe of his boot. ONE nearly loses his balance, only just managing to catch himself with the edge of the table in time.*

ONE: You ass.

*TWO laughs and coughs. He deals cards to them both for gin rummy. ONE goes to pick up his cards with his right hand. This is not possible. He huffs in frustration and gathers the cards with his left. He tries to take the upcard, fumbles it awkwardly off the table and onto the floor with his thumb. TWO watches, amused.*

TWO: Today?

ONE: Shut up. I'm a goddamn cripple.

*He puts his hand down and retrieves the card.*

TWO: You're not a cripple. You've got legs.

ONE: Shut up.

*They play for a little while.*

ONE: Remember last Friday? How cold it got?

TWO: No.

ONE: It got real cold.

TWO: I don't remember.

ONE: Oh.

TWO: It's always cold.

*ONE discards a card facedown and knocks; they tally the deadwood. TWO loses the game and deals the next hand. ONE tries to pick up his cards again and gives up.*

ONE: Chrissakes.

*TWO picks the cards up off the table and arranges them in ONE's hand. ONE scowls at the cards.*

ONE: I don't want to play anymore.

TWO: Yes you do. Stop moaning.

ONE: No I don't.

*They play anyway. Under the friendly noise of the café, gunshots and screams can be faintly heard.*

ONE: Shut the window, will you?

*TWO does. The noises get quieter. They play. The lights fade out. Once again, they are in the ditch, still tangled together. TWO has lost consciousness.*

ONE: *(sleepily)* Gin.

*He takes a moment to orient himself. He notices that TWO is unconscious.*

ONE: Hey. Hey. *(Shakes him.)* Hey, wake up. *(Angry.)* Hey! Wake up, you son of a bitch!

*He shakes TWO harder. TWO stirs and mumbles deliriously in German. ONE pries one of his eyes open with his fingers.*

ONE: Wake up. Chrissake. You're not allowed to do that.

TWO: Few more minutes, she says.

ONE: What?

TWO: On the pie.

ONE: Oh. Right.

TWO: Damn cold today, isn't it? Forgot my coat.

ONE: Well, you can't have mine.

TWO: What day is it?

ONE: It's Thursday.

TWO: Is it?

ONE: I have no idea. I made that up.

*They laugh.*

TWO: You look lousy, by the way. Have I mentioned?

ONE: Thanks.

TWO: No, really. You should sleep more.

ONE: I can't sleep.

TWO: What were you gonna say earlier?

ONE: Later. It's not important.

*Silence. A distant explosion.*

ONE: It's damn cold, isn't it?

TWO: (*nonchalant*) It wasn't even a proper letter, you know.

ONE: What?

TWO: What Mary sent. It was a telegram.

*Pause.*

TWO: She's having a baby in the spring. They've moved to Boston.

ONE: I know.

TWO: You know?

ONE: I read it. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to.

TWO: Oh. Alright, then. I knew him. The guy she's with. He's blind in one eye and he's got a nose like a rotting tomato. Their kids are going to be ugly as shit.

*Pause.*

TWO: You're right. It's *damn* cold.

*He coughs violently. The lights go out, but he continues coughing. The lights come back up, and he's slumped over the table in the café, half-conscious, coughing and shaking. ONE looks drowsy.*

ONE: How much longer, anyway? It's got to be done by now.

*TWO doesn't answer. He can't. ONE props his chin on his hand and mumbles sleepily, half to himself.*

ONE: Proolly any minute now, right? Ma's gonna have a fit if we're late. You should see her cooking dinner. She's about four foot nothing, my ma. Never drinks a drop except for Thanksgiving, she's always got a whole bottle of wine on hand. Every year. Her face goes all red and she starts barking orders like a drill sergeant. By the time dinner rolls around, she's made every kid in the house cry at least once. We have to say grace at five on the dot and if you're not there, God help you. Say, it's not five yet, is it? Is it?

*He looks at his watch and frowns. He taps it.*

ONE: Broken. How d'you like that? Hope you didn't pay too much for this. It's junk.

*TWO slumps out of his chair and falls to the floor on his hands and knees, coughing and moaning in German. ONE determinedly ignores this, but speaks with more urgency.*



ONE: Listen. Before we gotta go, there's something I've been meaning to tell you.

*Two continues mumbling in German.*

ONE: No. Shut up. Listen to me. I have to tell you—

*He gets up and goes to TWO, kneels beside him. Two rambles on deliriously.*

ONE: Shut up! Shut up, listen to me! I have to tell you—

*TWO goes on sobbing. ONE grabs him and shakes him. The noise of the café begins to swell.*

ONE: Stop it! Shut up!

*Two continues.*

ONE: SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!

*They struggle. It's very one-sided. The café noise is deafening. ONE uses his weight to pin TWO to the floor and covers his mouth and nose hard with both hands. He holds him there while TWO chokes behind his hands. A long, long moment passes. TWO stops struggling. He is dead. ONE collapses. He lays there, eyes closed, unable to move.*

ONE: *(softly, exhausted)* Just... I always liked you.

*The café noise fades. The lights dim.*

*END.*