

On Living Twice

At midday, we had the three Germans lined up against the clock-tower, facing the wall. Jenkins shot them one by one. When it was done, I wiped the sweat on my brow and stepped back to keep my shoes clean. I think Jenkins saw something he didn't like in my expression.

“All Germans are Nazis, Jones.”

I nodded.

The last one was a young girl, about as old as my daughter. That's how it was, sometimes.

Martin Jones is back on his bed. It's happening more often now, here one moment, elsewhere in the next. He likes to think in third person, because it requires a concentrated effort to narrate events in the *present*. A tether, of sorts. In his mind, he is speaking to someone. To you, perhaps.

There is a faint afterimage of the three Germans on the wall beside the TV. A little splash of red on the eggshell-white paint, like a wine stain. It fades away when he focuses on it...

He thinks he should describe the room for you now.

It is a neat room, as they tend to be in care homes. The TV mounted on the wall is small, and a little too far for him to see well. That is fine, Martin doesn't watch TV. On the right side of the room is a large window, with the curtains drawn. The nurse thinks Martin might react badly or hurt himself if he sees anything outside. He doesn't know if she is right.

On his bedside is a photo of Nancy. She is his wife. Or was, he supposed. She is

smiling in the photo, cradling their daughter in her arms. When he looks at her, he has the same feeling he had before he left to ‘help Uncle Sam’ and became what he is now. It is a warm feeling, the sort that starts in his chest and spreads like a blush. If there was an opposite feeling to that of bleeding out, to that strange numbness and prickling despair... it would be what Nancy gives him.

Beside the photo, he has Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, a worn bookmark stuck between its pages. It is hard to read now that the words don’t stop swimming. Though he suspected he would not finish the book even if he could.

There is also a phone, but Martin doesn’t get many calls. At his age, calls often bring bad news...

“Private Martin Jones, may I see you in my office?”

I stood and followed General Williams. He was wearing his full uniform, neat and crisp. I thought this was unusual. His eyes had a hollow look to them and he seemed tired. But then they all did.

“Jones, your brother died. Paul was killed in action in Dresden yesterday.” General Williams scratched his chin but stood straight and looked me in the eyes.

“My deepest condolences,” he said, with the same matter-of-fact tone.

I nodded but didn’t say anything. There was nothing to say.

Later, I would hold General Williams as his blood gushed from his side. He had taken a bullet to his liver. I pressed my hand against the wound but the blood seeped between my fingers anyway. He had the same expression as when he had told me my brother had died.

“They say that life flashes before your eyes, Jones. And then you die.”

“That’s not how the saying goes, sir.”

“But that’s how it is, sometimes.”

The General tried to sigh, but it was interrupted with coughs. His blood splattered onto my cheeks, and then his body stilled.

Sorry about that. Martin drifts away, but he finds his way back.

He wonders about what the General said, and finds he disagrees. Martin himself has been living his life twice, and feels it has been too long. Perhaps he has picked up whatever the other left behind. The little German girl, his brother Paul, and General Williams, that is.

He digresses. Back to describing the room. There is a bouquet of daisies from the last time his daughter had visited, sitting in a dull blue vase. It is completely withered and all the petals had fallen, but he had given the nurses strict instructions to leave the flowers untouched. The memory of her visit makes him smile. The expression feels strained and tight on his face.

It’s hard to pass the time. His sight is failing, which takes away many options. Instead, Martin waits for the calls, rare and sad as they could be. He also makes the calls, though the only number he has is the emergency contact in the registry, which is Nancy’s. He calls her once a day. They do not go through. But every day he calls, and every day he is called upon, Martin dares to hope.

He looks at her photo now. The corners are browned with age, and some of parts have faded. It doesn’t matter. Martin can remember her face clearer than his own...

Nancy stood in front of our bathroom mirror, rubbing at her cheeks. She pressed her

fingers against the skin of her forehead and frowned.

“Mart, I think I’ve got a new wrinkle.”

“I don’t see it.”

I looped one arm around her waist and spun her away from the mirror, twirling her like I did on our first dance. She paused and then rested her head against my chest, and we swayed in the dim light of our bathroom. If I closed my eyes, I could’ve pretended we were back in the ballroom, on the day of our wedding.

“Don’t ever leave me, Mart.” It was the barest whisper, as if it wasn’t supposed to be heard.

“I won’t, Nance. Never.”

“But that’s how it is, isn’t it? You either leave or get left behind.”

I looked down at her then, and gently lifted her face to meet my eyes. “What about the in-between?”

“What about it?”

I considered this, and then kissed her forehead. “I’ll kiss each tiny wrinkle, and hope I’ll be there for more.”

Nancy pouted. “So, I *do* have wrinkles?”

Martin drifted again. It was a good drift, however, because Nancy was in it. So, if it’s alright with you, there will be no apology this time.

He does not consider the driftings as part of the day—those moments belong in the past, even as they resurface. It is important for him, and for you, to understand that.

Thus, the nature of Martin’s every day could be summarised in one word: quiet. There is the traditional quiet, in the heavy, smothering silence. There is the quiet in the

room's palette, almost monochrome in its shades of greys. And a quiet in the stillness, his world frozen like a picture. Nothing much moves in the room, besides Martin himself, and even then, rarely so. The nurse comes in occasionally, but besides the shuffle of her slippers, the natural order of the room remains undisturbed.

Perhaps the driftings are his mind's way of coping with ennui. Martin almost laughs, but stops himself. A moment later, he wonders why he suppressed it.

He should do something. Move around, if only so his muscles don't atrophy. Martin stands and walks to the lounge. Sluggish, like a lumbering giant, except he barely reaches 5'9" now, with his stooped back and short legs.

He lost his good prosthetic a few years back, and now he walks with an uneven gait. His bad legs drags behind him, like rolling luggage. At each step of his good foot, which feels few and far between, Martin lifts up the wooden one and swings it forward. The wood stump makes a soft thud on the floor.

Shhhkkk. Thump. Shhhhhk. Thump.

And so on, and so forth.

When Martin arrives at the lounge, there are three men already in the room. He doesn't remember their names, though he has met them before. They nod to him when he enters.

"Hey, Mart, been a while hasn't it?", says one of them. There are streaks of ginger hair in the man's beard, fiery hot even now, trickling down the strands like fresh blood.

"Martin? That you? My eyes ain't so good," says the one with the spectacles. The golden frame is bent, so it sits on his nose crookedly.

The last one says nothing. Martin likes him the best.

Martin takes his seat by him. They are crowded around a coffee table, watching a

football game. He used to like football. Now he couldn't give you the name of two teams. That's how it is sometimes.

One of the teams scores, much to the Ginger's dismay.

"Goddammit. When did they get this shit? I don't remember supporting a pack of pansies," he says, and spits into an ashtray.

"Always was, George. Remember the '08 Finals?", says Spectacles. Martin starts to take note of the name, but ultimately gives up. He would forget it soon enough. Given Ginger's age, and his own, Martin would not have to remember it for long regardless.

Ginger grumbles something obscene, which makes Spectacles cackle like a madman. His laughter is punctuated by dry coughs. Such is laughter with old lungs.

The applause and cheers from the TV washes over Martin's ears, crackling like static. Or maybe it really was static. It was an old TV after all, the large boxy sort, with a thick frame of faded, gunmetal grey...

Jimmy cracked open a beer for me. One sip let me know it had gone tepid. But beer was beer. I took a long swig.

Greg took one for himself. He had become an entirely different person since the war. His belly had become bloated, his head the shiny sort of bald, and all the hair seemed to have gathered snow-white around his jowls.

I was no better. After Nancy left...

I drew deeply from my cigarette. Tobacco tinted my teeth, blackened my lungs, and righted the world.

Jimmy was the only one who still resembled his prime. His jaw still square, his eyes sharp. We had all fought in the same platoon, and that ensured a unique camaraderie. But

sometimes, it was hard to look him in the eyes.

“So, lads. How are the missus-es?” he said.

“Dead. Gone. Thass ‘ow it is, sometimes,” Greg said.

Jimmy’s face was carefully blank as he nodded. “And you, Mart?”

I shrugged, and nodded in Greg’s direction. “Not that. But not much different.”

Jimmy nodded again. He took a deep inhale, as if to sigh, but he doesn’t.

“Ah, well. Onto the game it is, then,” he said instead.

We all sat around the television. Greg and Jimmy on the couch, and me on the armchair. I undid my prosthetic and rested it on the floor.

On the coffee table, there were three stained circles the size of our beer bottles. From the last time were here, months ago. Maybe a year ago. The table was clean otherwise.

I laid my beer bottle on the table, lining it up perfectly with the stain rim. Then I turn my attention to the game.

There was a small pile of men in the midfield, stacked upon each other.

I had seen men do that before, but not for a ball, and not amidst cheers...

I took another drag off my cigarette, its smoke washing over my memories like rain on fresh paint.

The stack eventually dispersed, and a free kick was rewarded to Jersey 92. I followed the game with as much interest as I would a weather forecast.

Jersey 92 kicked.

Jersey 74 caught the ball.

Jersey 74 fumbled.

Jimmy groaned. “Bloody hell. Man deserves to get shot after that pathetic display.”

“Ya can’t say that. Not in front of Martin.” Greg glanced at me, but his eyes darted

away when he saw me looking.

They coddled me. That was alright. Nancy said I wasn't the same after the war.

"Oh, come on. We can say whatever we damn like. Cos we *saw* all of that. Cos *we're...*" Jimmy tapped a drum roll on the hard wood table—"war heroes'." He gave a soft chuckle, his face splitting in a cruel smirk.

I could look at him when he was like that. When he hated himself.

Greg wouldn't have it. "Ain't no such thing. Thassa... a whatsit. An awksymoron."

"A what, Greg?"

"Ya heard me. An awksymoron. A group of words that got no business bein' with one another." Greg knocked back the rest of his beer, and for a moment there was nothing but the sound of his swallows against the crackle of the game.

Glug, glug, glug. Aahhh. 'And he scores!'

When Greg was done, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and turned back to the TV. His eyes were glazed, perhaps from the beer or from something else.

It was a while before anyone spoke again. When Greg finally broke the silence, we barely caught his words. But then we didn't need to. It was old news to us. We always let ourselves repeat like that anyway, like one-gimmick parrots.

"Ain't no heroes in war. Just bastards on opposite sides," Greg mumbled.

Then there was a touchdown, a loud belch, and more silence.

Martin blinks. He is back in the lounge, with Spectacles, Ginger and the quiet one.

Nobody seems to notice anything off. The quiet one is watching him from the corner of his eyes.

Then the game winks out of existence. The power went out, and with it the light...

A bomb had gone off just below me. Bad luck.

The tower I was stationed at was one broken nail away from being a ruin. Its wooden frame rotted where it showed, and cracks spread out in webs from door frames and corners.

Each wall at each floor was riddled with holes. 'Perfect' for a flexible sniper. Terrible against bombs.

Bad luck, with the bomb. Or bad plan. Both were much the same for soldiers with no say.

So it was dark, and the ringing wouldn't stop. The dust scratched my throat as I inhaled, and I resisted the urge to cough.

I tried to move my arm. It was pinned above the elbow, though I could move my forearm. Then I tried my legs.

"My leg," I whispered. I couldn't feel it. I tried to stretch my free hand, feeling for the limb that should be there. It was. Just oh so flat and mushy.

I inhaled sharply, and coughed again as the dust punished me.

Nobody would come for me. How would they know?

It was so dark.

So suffocating.

Like a coffin.

"Nance... Who is going to tell my Nancy?" I rasped.

I imagined the news being told. Some nameless lieutenant, with the same frank tones as General Williams, at my house. Nancy knowing the moment she opened the door.

Then I thought of my mother. Her leathery skin, the circles under her eyes, her gnarled fingers. Both her boys gone.

“Mum,” I sobbed in the dark, and with each heave, the rubble pressed down on my chest.

I thought of Jenkins. He died last month. A headshot at Budapest. I wished I took that bullet for him. It wasn't a bad way to go.

Hours passed, maybe. Or seconds. Time was no more sensible without senses, and blackness to blackness was an eternity.

Then a light.

Drifting and drifting and drifting. Off Martin goes, down the rabbit hole. Falling, really...

Jimmy died at seventy-four years old. He passed in his sleep.

The day of his funeral was as beautiful as any other. The sky was clear, the birds chirped, and the sun shone like no one's business.

Greg was standing by the shade of a tree, away from the crowd. He wore a tired black suit that could have been as old as himself.

“E was a good one,” he said as I approached. “The best of us.”

I nodded. “He was.”

Jimmy had taken five bullets for us—and lived, the lucky bastard. He personally visited the widows of some soldiers, so that he could recount their heroic feats.

None of that was mentioned in the eulogy. Just the general words of ‘great sacrifice’ and that was that. It was enough, though.

Greg and I met up again two years later, then for the final time five years after that.

I only knew Greg had passed when I tried calling him one day. His son picked up.

Greg died in his sleep two years prior. Three people had attended his funeral.

These were good ways to go.

Martin is back on his bed, and the lights are on. He does not remember how he got back, or when the power returned.

Martin hasn't touched a cigarette in years, but he feels the same sensations now. Of the world being righted, and everything being so perfectly still.

The nurse comes in.

“Phone call for you, Martin.” Her face is stoic and unreadable.

In another time, Martin would have stood and answered the call. He would have dared to hope.

But there is no other time, not even a drifting. Today, Martin stays lying in bed, eyes pointing directly towards the ceiling. He sees the familiar cracks, clearer now than ever, but they are swimming in his vision like eels. And then he is hovering above his own body, looking down from the cracks. When he gazes down on himself, he sees the lines in his face have smoothed, the strain having melted away, and a gentle smile plays on his thin lips. He almost looks young again.

Martin's breathing slows, the rising in his chest rising less each breath. Just like going to sleep.

To you, if you are still there: This is goodbye.

One last exhale, and Martin let the world take him.