

Sorrow, Not Fear

Sorrow, not fear. Too late I know the truth. My father's eyes were haunted by sorrow yet to come, not by the fears of his past.

I lie now, with blood running in rivulets away from my wounds and know too late the wisdom in his eyes. Around me the battle rages, creating a chorus of screams and a symphony of clashing metal. Distracted from my reflections by the frenzied feasting of hordes of winged insects, I am pulled back into the presence of pain, back into the hell of the living. No clouds dot the sky to challenge the heat of the summer sun. No trees shade the field on which I lay dying. A whirl of wind carries the stench of rot and emptied bowels and flings a fresh covering of dust into the cracks that score my lips. I long for a skin of wine and struggle to turn over, trembling with fatigue.

Sorrow, not fear. My father's eyes blink once and turn to the herald, chasing him out of our home. I refuse to look again into those eyes as I lift my shield and fumble with my sword belt. I am ashamed of his cowardice, of his refusal to bless my leaving.

I awake with my head pillowed on the cooling, sticky thigh of another fallen warrior. My belly is numb. The pain there has receded. I attempt to inspect the rest of my ruined body, but my arms refuse to support my decision to move. Frustrated, I turn my head to study the man—no, the boy—whose leg comforts my head. He wears no armor or kilt and carries no emblem decrying who owned his allegiance. There are calluses on his upturned hand, and though his

skin is gray with the pallor of death, it is clear that when alive, he was deeply tanned. He is much like me, I realize, a farmer's son who imagined himself a hero of war. Together we lay, no longer burdened with the immature dreams of youth.

Sorrow, not fear. I stumble out of the house and smile nervously at the herald, unable to hide my doubts from him. Behind me I hear my father scoff and mumble about the loss of a generation.

"His words will change. When we reclaim what was lost, his words will be filled with praise." The herald emboldens me, and I cast aside my trepidation.

My father was a survivor of an earlier war, when our people lost our lands. Can he not see that I go to fight for him, for his honor?

A horse thunders by, and I force my eyes to open despite the crust trying to seal them shut. For a moment I am blinded; the sun has moved only a little and its intensity overwhelms my dilated pupils. When again I can see, I realize that I am facing back the way I have come. Sloping gently down before me is the ground I helped to win. The tips of the toppled wheat are painted with blood, and the field has become a dirty canvas awash in hues of gold and crimson. At the bottom of the hillock is the tree line from which I joined the charge, certain of the glory this battle would bring to me. Though a league distant, I see the vibrant green topping the pines ... and I see the details of the dead scattered before them. Without a sound many had dropped, pierced by arrows announcing the start of the battle, and I was shoved forward to fight before I could cry out in horror. I thought at first their deaths were meaningless, but now I know they help define my father's sorrow. Among the dead were village leaders, husbands, and fathers to many children. Lives wasted by un-aimed arrows, in a battle over a rocky field they never would have

worked.

“Folly. Prideful sin,” I rasp, announcing my newly learned wisdom through a throat raw from screaming and thirst. “Rest easy, my brothers.”

I will join them soon, and together we will ask God for his mercy. How could He refuse us? We are a rabble of sheep led to the slaughter.

I sputter a cough, sending flecks of pink spittle onto my chin.

Sorrow, not fear. My siblings, too young to seek glory, escort me from our village to the crossroads where the rest of the army has gathered. They are singing and laughing, proud of the soldier in their family. They compliment me on my bearing and on the quality of my sword. It is father's sword, I tell them. Mother gave it to me when father refused to pull it from hiding. I will give it a name, I say, when father's failure is purged from its history.

Agony. A hundred blood clots tear open as a warrior trips and falls onto me. He fights desperately to ensure he does not stay down forever. Every movement, every dodge, feint, and thrust he makes elicits a garbled scream from me. Oddly, I remain awake, my senses sharper than they have been since my father's sword, and my innocence, were shattered. The torture ends with the thunk of a battle-axe. The man shudders once, and I feel the warmth of blood or urine flowing down my legs. My breathing is labored; each breath shallow and quick, drawing in too little air. A frothy mass of bubbles fills my mouth, and I feel the scraping of my lungs against my ribs.

Sorrow, not fear. As I walk, I remember the playful sparring I used to do with my father. Dead branches served as swords, and our shields were woven out of reeds. Father proclaimed himself the better swordsman but admitted I had greater constitution and stamina. I laughed, knowing

he meant I stood up to his gentle beatings and returned for more. I pretended to battle for my life, and he allowed it, confident I would never know the reality of war. We were a defeated people, defended by our conquerors. We needn't fight for the land; we need only to sow it.

There are no sticks on this battlefield, and no laughter. The man's bulk slides off of my chest but still his body is draped over mine. His sweat and his hair and his filth are abhorrent, and I wish him gone.

"Mind you my view," I gurgle, "I cannot see what we have reaped."

I am amazed when the dead man sits up and falls away. I blink in disbelief until I realize he was thrown aside by someone still living. Shadows cross my face, blocking the sun; unfamiliar eyes devoid of emotion stare at me through the gloom. For a moment I have an unimpeded view down the slope. My vision blurs, but I recall the hundreds of dead ...and know fully the loss we have suffered.

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"Look at his eyes."

I look down at my face and into my eyes.

"Such sorrow in them, for someone so young."

I turn to agree with whoever has spoken, to tell him I have my father's eyes.

"He's looking back across the field. We won —he should be happy...proud."

The survivors dismiss my grief, failing to see a lost generation.

They shuffle away, prodding the bodies they pass. My ordeal is over. I am free from pain, the heat of the sun, and the smell of the dead.

My father suffers now, not me. Ghosts of his sorrow drift through his eyes.

Tell him I understand.