

Dirt

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The sun glared down on the field, baking the dirt even harder and forcing a trickle of sweat and filth to run down the man's back. He leaned over again, shoulders straining, and hauled another shovelful of dirt into the wheelbarrow. It was the hottest time of day, and his tongue and mouth had been coated by dust many hours ago. Water was but a memory at this point, and he wasn't thinking about the truck until it arrived, engine grumbling and small rocks crunching under the heavy tires. Loaded down with grubby coolers, the vehicle jerked to a stop. The man stood upright, fully extending his spine for the first time that day, sighing softly as he felt everything grind into place. He followed the herd of other men - husbands, fathers, sons, and grandsons - to the dusty truck. A line was formed, small metal cups were passed around, and within fifteen minutes the man had been corralled back to his section of the trench. He dug until the sun slipped below the barren horizon, and he still couldn't see more than shadows after wiping the grime out of his eyes. He paused, and looked out at the rocky, uneven field, riddled with so many craters from so many bombs. The men digging the trenches in front of him were negatives against the final throws of sunlight, amorphous stamps on the world. He wiped his brow. His shoulders and neck stung with sunburn, and his hands ached, grooved and red from the unwieldy shovel. A whistle blew, and everyone around him stood up too, unfurling towards the dying sky like vines, stretching and dropping tools that landed on the ground with a muffled clank.

Walking back towards already-dug trenches and shacks squatting behind barbed wire, silence spread, hushing even those young, eager fellows still inclined to believe in life after the War. They talked often during the day, drawing ragged breaths between each scoop with the shovel or swing of the pickaxe, spewing their stories to anyone who would listen. They had arrived later, dragged kicking and

screaming or willingly, with a nervous determination, and their first look at the War was of red, cracked ground beneath a heavy sky. These men made friends quickly, stayed up late playing poker for cigarettes, and often gave out jovial pats-on-the-back. When it was mail time, they were the ones to sit by the door, pace to and fro in the cramped barracks, and, after the letters had arrived and were read and re-read, tuck them into breast pockets and silently start to smoke. Usually, on the brief hike back to the barracks, if the skies were clear and the air-raid siren sat quietly, chatter would start, and sometimes a song or two was organized. Today, though, a great quiet fell, and the crackle of dirt under boots and breath leaving lungs were the loudest noises to be heard. When he entered his dugout, the last of the 17 who slept there, the man glanced, out of habit, to the sky once again. Grey light, and approaching stars. There was nothing. There had been nothing for days, and the man shook his head at himself for worrying unnecessarily. He walked in, latched the door, and joined the other men in removing their sweat-soaked clothes. Cigarettes were smoked, mail was delivered, and a few hours later gas lamps were switched off. Once again, the sound of breathing was the only thing the man could hear.