

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/4

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GUILT

Jean remembers it as 6pm. He remembers it as October. Listless leaves on footpaths. A chilled late autumn drizzle that came midday and stayed until the next morning. Shiny roads and sidewalks. His frayed, blue sweater inadequate against the seeping cold. Its cloying smell of wet wool.

He remembers the rumble of a solitary truck along the road behind him. Its sudden stop. The slammed door. The clatter of jackboots. His measured steps, willing himself not to run, not to panic, not to show his fear. Willing himself to appear unsuspecting.

The reactions of a guilty man, he knew. His guilt, his only guilt, to be a Frenchman under German occupation. To speak a language different to that of the occupier. To be the occupier's enemy. A wrong look, a wrong word could be enough to condemn him.

He does not remember others passing him on the way home to their meager meals. He does not remember the young couple kissing in a shop doorway, a dog barking in the distance, or the soldier strutting into a bar, a French woman on each arm. He does not remember the bright red lipstick on the women's mouths.

All that stays, like a weight, deep and heavy inside him, is the thud of footsteps behind, his neck muscles tight as he forced himself not to turn around. The effort to control his arms, his feet, his breathing. The sudden relief when the boots stopped.

There was a scuffle. Still he didn't turn around. A voice, rough like sandpaper: "*Kommen sie mit mir.*" *By then everyone in town knew the meaning of those words. They'd heard them each time someone was taken away. Come with me.*

Some went obediently, heads down. Others dragged their feet. Still others walked proudly with a swagger of defiance. Occasionally they sang the Marseillaise, risking a cuff across the head, a hard push with a rifle butt. But never, until that moment, had he heard the arrested speak.

"Why? I've done nothing wrong. I've done nothing wrong."

The voice was young, in turns both puzzled and indignant. And disturbing familiar. It was the familiarity that made him forget, for a moment, his efforts to be inconspicuous. He turned around.

The young man's arm was in the grip of a soldier's gloved hand, trying to pull himself free. But his slight frame was no match for his captor's bulk. Jean was surprised at the young man's efforts to resist arrest. He was making things worse for himself.

It was then he saw the books and papers littering the cobblestones, and understood. Renee, the name he knew so well, wanted to bend down and save his teaching materials before they were damaged by the wet ground. His mind had not yet caught up with what was happening to him. He would not see his classroom again for a very long time, if ever.

Jean's instinct was to speak up and defend him. Don't take him. His heart is

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weak. His students need him. But his mouth was dry. The words stuck before he could give them sound.

He wanted to save the books, to step forward and gather them up. His feet wouldn't move.

Like a statue he watched as the soldier hit Renee hard across the head and dragged him to the truck, kicking the books to one side as he did so. Like a statue he waited while the young man was thrown into the back of the vehicle. Only then did he turn and continue on his way, as the sound of the speeding truck grew fainter, fainter.

He remembers feeling certain that Renee hadn't noticed him, and hoping that no one else had. He remembers the relief that it wasn't he who was picked up and the overwhelming sense of guilt that came with that feeling. It never leaves.

But most of all he remembers the question circling round and round inside his head, the question that made him want to walk, not toward his home, but away from it; to walk and walk until nothing and no-one was familiar. How was he to tell his daughter of her fiance's arrest in the town square, without admitting to his own presence there and his inadequacy?