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*Journey to the End
of the Night*

To Elisabeth Craig

Our life is a journey
Through winter and night,
We look for our way
In a sky without light.

(Song of the Swiss Guards, 1793)

Travel is useful, it exercises the imagination. All the rest is disappointment and fatigue. Our journey is entirely imaginary. That is its strength.

It goes from life to death. People, animals, cities, things, all are imagined. It's a novel, just a fictitious narrative. Littré says so, and he's never wrong.*

And besides, in the first place, anyone can do as much. You just have to close your eyes.

It's on the other side of life.

HERE'S HOW IT STARTED. I'd never said a word. Not one word. It was Arthur Ganate* that made me speak up. Arthur was a friend from med school. So we meet on the Place Clichy. It was after breakfast. He wants to talk to me. I listen. "Not out here!" he says. "Let's go in!" We go in. And there we were. "This terrace," he says, "is for jerks! Come on over there!" Then we see that there's not a soul in the street, because of the heat; no cars, nothing. Same when it's very cold, not a soul in the street; I remember now, it was he who had said one time: "The people in Paris always look busy, when all they actually do is roam around from morning to night; it's obvious, because when the weather isn't right for walking around, when it's too cold or too hot, you don't see them any more; they're all indoors, drinking their *cafés crème* or their beers. And that's the truth! The century of speed, they call it! Where? Great changes, they say! For instance? In truth nothing has changed. They go on admiring themselves, that's all. And that's not new either. Words. Even the words haven't changed much! Two or three little ones, here and there..." Pleased at having proclaimed these useful truths, we sat looking at the ladies in the café.

After a while the conversation turned to President Poincaré,* who was due to inaugurate a small-dog show that same morning, and that led to *Le Temps*,* where I'd read about it. Arthur Ganate starts kidding me about *Le Temps*. "What a paper!" he says. "When it comes to defending the French race, it hasn't its equal!" And quick to show I'm well informed, I fire back: "The French race can do with some defending, seeing as it doesn't exist!"

"Oh yes, it does!" he says. "And a fine race it is! The finest in the world, and anybody who says different is a yellow dog!" And he starts slanging me. Naturally I stuck to my guns.

"It's not true! What you call a race is nothing but a collection of riff-raff like me, bleary-eyed, flea-bitten, chilled to the bone. They came from the four corners of the earth, driven by hunger, plague, tumours and the cold, and stopped here. They couldn't go any further because of the ocean. That's France, that's the French people."

"Bardamu," he says very gravely and a bit sadly, "our forefathers were as good as we are, don't speak ill of them!..."

"You're right, Arthur, there you're right! Hateful and spineless, raped and robbed, mangled and witless, they were as good as we are, you can say that again! We never change! Neither our socks nor our masters nor our opinions, or we're so slow about it that it's no use. We were born loyal, and that's what killed us! Soldiers free of charge, heroes for everyone else, talking monkeys, tortured words, we are the minions of King Misery. He's our lord and master! When we misbehave, he tightens his grip... his fingers are around our neck, that makes it hard to talk, got to be careful if we want to eat... For nothing at all he'll choke you... It's not a life..."

"There's love, Bardamu!"

"Arthur," I tell him, "love is the infinite placed within the reach of poodles. I have my dignity!"

"You do, do you? You're an anarchist, that's what you are!"

A wise guy, as you see, with only the most advanced opinions.

"That's right, you windbag, I'm an anarchist! And to prove it, I've written a kind of prayer of social vengeance, it'll bowl you over: *The Golden Wings*! That's the title!" And so I recite:

"A God who counts minutes and pennies, a desperate sensual God, who grunts like a pig. A pig with golden wings, who falls and falls, always belly side up, ready for caresses, that's him, our master. Come, kiss me!"

"Your little piece doesn't hold water," he says. "I'm for the established order, and I'm not interested in politics. What's more, the day my country asks me to shed my blood, it'll find me ready, and no slacker." That's what he said.

It so happened that the war was creeping up on us without our knowing it, and something was wrong with my wits. That short but animated discussion had tired me out. Besides, I was upset because the waiter had sort of called me a piker on account of the tip. Well, in the end Arthur and I made up. Completely. We agreed about almost everything.

"It's true," I said, trying to be conciliatory. "All in all, you're right. But the fact is we're all sitting in a big galley, pulling at the oars with all our might. You can't tell me different!... Sitting on nails and pulling like mad! And what do we get for it? Nothing! Thrashings and misery, hard words and hard knocks. We're workers, they say. Work, they call it! That's the crummiest part of the whole business. We're down in the

hold, heaving and panting, stinking and sweating our balls off, and – meanwhile! – up on deck in the fresh air, what do you see? Our masters having a fine time with beautiful pink and perfumed women on their laps. They send for us, we’re brought up on deck. They put on their top hats and give us a big spiel like as follows: ‘You no-good swine! We’re at war! Those stinkers in Country No. 2! We’re going to board them and cut their livers out! Let’s go! Let’s go! We’ve got everything we need on board! All together now! Let’s hear you shout so the deck trembles: “Long live Country No. 1!” So you’ll be heard for miles around. The man that shouts the loudest will get a medal and a lollipop! Let’s go! And if there’s anybody that doesn’t want to be killed on the sea, he can go and get killed on land, it’s even quicker!’”

“That’s the way it is exactly,” said Arthur, suddenly willing to listen to reason.

But just then, who should come marching past the café where we’re sitting but a regiment with the colonel up front on his horse, looking nice and friendly, a fine figure of a man! Enthusiasm lifted me to my feet.

“I’ll just go see if that’s the way it is!” I sing out to Arthur, and off I go to enlist, on the double.

“Ferdinand!” he yells back. “Don’t be an arse!” I suppose he was nettled by the effect my heroism was having on the people all around us.

It kind of hurt my feelings the way he was taking it, but that didn’t stop me. I fell right in. “Here I am!” I say to myself. “And here I stay!”

I just had time to call out to Arthur: “All right, you jerk, we’ll see” – before we turned the corner. And there I was with the regiment, marching behind the colonel and his band. That’s exactly how it happened.

We marched a long time. There were streets and more streets, and they were all crowded with civilians and their wives, cheering us on, bombarding us with flowers from café terraces, railway stations, crowded churches. You never saw so many patriots in all your life! And then there were fewer patriots... It started to rain, and then there were still fewer and fewer, and not a single cheer, not one.

Pretty soon there was nobody but us, we were all alone. Row after row. The music had stopped. “Come to think of it,” I said to myself, when I saw what was what, “this is no fun any more! I’d better try

something else!" I was about to clear out. Too late! They'd quietly shut the gate behind us civilians. We were caught like rats.

* * *

When you're in, you're in. They put us on horseback, and after we'd been on horseback for two months, they put us back on our feet. Maybe because of the expense. Anyway, one morning the colonel was looking for his horse, his orderly had made off with it, nobody knew where to, probably some quiet spot that bullets couldn't get to as easily as the middle of the road. Because that was exactly where the colonel and I had finally stationed ourselves, with me holding his orderly book while he wrote out his orders.

Down the road, way in the distance, as far as we could see, there were two black dots, plunk in the middle like us, but they were two Germans and they'd been busy shooting for the last fifteen or twenty minutes.

Maybe our colonel knew why they were shooting, maybe the Germans knew, but I, so help me, hadn't the vaguest idea. As far back as I could search my memory, I hadn't done a thing to the Germans, I'd always treated them friendly and polite. I knew the Germans pretty well, I'd even gone to school in their country when I was little, near Hanover. I'd spoken their language. A bunch of loud-mouthed little halfwits, that's what they were, with pale, furtive eyes like wolves; we'd go out to the woods together after school to feel the girls up, or we'd fire popguns or pistols you could buy for four marks. And we drank sugary beer together. But from that to shooting at us right in the middle of the road, without so much as a word of introduction, was a long way, a very long way. If you asked me, they were going too far.

This war, in fact, made no sense at all. It couldn't go on.

Had something weird got into these people? Something I didn't feel at all? I suppose I hadn't noticed it...

Anyway, my feelings towards them hadn't changed. In spite of everything, I'd have liked to understand their brutality, but what I wanted still more, enormously, with all my heart, was to get out of there, because suddenly the whole business looked to me like a great big mistake.

"In a mess like this," I said to myself, "there's nothing to be done, all you can do is clear out..."

Over our heads, two millimetres, maybe one millimetre from our temples, those long tempting lines of steel that bullets make when they're out to kill you were whistling through the hot summer air.

I'd never felt so useless as I did amid all those bullets in the sunlight. A vast and universal mockery.

I was only twenty at the time. Deserted farms in the distance, empty wide-open churches, as if the peasants had all gone out for the day to attend a fair at the other end of the county, leaving everything they owned with us for safekeeping, their countryside, their carts with the shafts pointing in the air, their fields, their barnyards, the road, the trees, even the cows, a chained dog, the works. Leaving us free to do as we pleased while they were gone. Nice of them, in a way. "Still," I said to myself, "if they hadn't gone somewhere else, if there were still somebody here, I'm sure we wouldn't be behaving so badly! So disgustingly! We wouldn't dare in front of them!" But there wasn't a soul to watch us! Nobody but us, like newly-weds that start messing around when all the people have gone home.

And another thought I had (behind a tree) was that I wished *Déroulède** – the one I'd heard so much about – had been there to describe his reactions when a bullet tore open his guts.

Those Germans squatting on the road, shooting so obstinately, were rotten shots, but they seemed to have ammunition to burn, whole warehouses full, it looked to me. Nobody could say this war was over! I have to hand it to the colonel, his bravery was remarkable! He roamed around in the middle of the road, up and down and back and forth in the midst of the bullets as calmly as if he'd been waiting for a friend on a station platform, except just a tiny bit impatient.

One thing I'd better tell you right away, I've never been able to stomach the country, I've always found it dreary, those endless fields of mud, those houses where nobody's ever home, those roads that don't go anywhere. And if to all that you add a war, it's completely unbearable. A sudden wind had come up on both sides of the road, the clattering leaves of the poplars mingled with the sharp crackling sounds aimed at us from down the road. Those unknown soldiers missed us every time, but they spun a thousand deaths around us, so close they seemed to clothe us. I was afraid to move.

That colonel, I could see, was a monster! Now I knew it for sure, he was worse than a dog, he couldn't conceive of his own death. At the

same time I realized that there must be plenty of brave men like him in our army, and just as many no doubt in the army facing us. How many, I wondered. One or two million, say several millions in all? The thought turned my fear to panic. With such people this infernal lunacy could go on for ever... Why would they stop? Never had the world seemed so implacably doomed.

Could I, I thought, be the last coward on earth? How terrifying!... All alone with two million stark-raving heroic madmen, armed to the eyeballs? With and without helmets, without horses, on motorcycles, bellowing, in cars, screeching, shooting, plotting, flying, kneeling, digging, taking cover, bounding over trails, sputtering, shut up on earth as if it were a loony bin, ready to demolish everything on it, Germany, France, whole continents, everything that breathes, destroy, destroy, madder than mad dogs, worshipping their madness (which dogs don't), a hundred, a thousand times madder than a thousand dogs, and a lot more vicious! A pretty mess we were in! No doubt about it, this crusade I'd let myself in for was the apocalypse.

You can be a virgin in horror the same as in sex. How, when I left the Place Clichy, could I have imagined such horror? Who could have suspected, before getting really into the war, all the ingredients that go to make up the rotten, heroic, good-for-nothing soul of man? And there I was, caught up in a mass flight into collective murder, into the fiery furnace... Something had come up from the depths, and this is what happened.

The colonel was still as cool as a cucumber, I watched him as he stood on the embankment, taking little messages sent by the general, reading them without haste as the bullets flew all around him, and tearing them into little pieces. Did none of those messages include an order to put an immediate stop to this abomination? Did no top brass tell him there had been a misunderstanding? A horrible mistake? A misdeal? That somebody'd got it all wrong, that the plan had been for manoeuvres, a sham battle, not a massacre! Not at all! "Keep it up, colonel! You're doing fine!" That's what General des Entrayes,* the head of our division and commander over us all, must have written in those notes that were being brought every five minutes by a courier, who looked greener and more shitless each time. I could have palled up with that boy, we'd have been scared together! But we had no time to fraternize.

So there was no mistake? So there was no law against people shooting at people they couldn't even see! It was one of the things you could do without anybody reading you the riot act. In fact, it was recognized and probably encouraged by upstanding citizens, like the draft, or marriage, or hunting!... No two ways about it. I was suddenly on the most intimate terms with war. I'd lost my virginity. You've got to be pretty much alone with her as I was then to get a good look at her, the slut, full face and profile. A war had been switched on between us and the other side, and now it was burning! Like the current between the two carbons of an arc lamp. And this lamp was in no hurry to go out! It would get us all, the colonel and everyone else, he looked pretty spiffy now, but he wouldn't roast up any bigger than me when the current from the other side got him between the shoulders.

There are different ways of being condemned to death. Oh! What wouldn't I have given to be in jail instead of here! What a fool I'd been! If only I had had a little foresight and stolen something or other when it would have been so easy and there was still time. I never think of anything! You come out of jail alive, out of a war you don't. The rest is blarney.

If only I'd had time, but I didn't! There was nothing left to steal! How pleasant it would be in a cosy little jailhouse, I said to myself, where the bullets couldn't get in! Where they never got in! I knew of one that was ready and waiting, all sunny and warm! I saw it in my dreams, the jailhouse of Saint-Germain to be exact, right near the forest. I knew it well, I'd often passed that way. How a man changes! I was a child in those days, and that jail frightened me. Because I didn't know what men are like. Never again will I believe what they say or what they think. Men are the thing to be afraid of, always, men and nothing else.

How much longer would this madness have to go on before these monsters dropped with exhaustion? How long could a convulsion like this last? Months? Years? How many? Maybe till everyone's dead? All these lunatics? Every last one of them? And seeing as events were taking such a desperate turn, I decided to stake everything on one throw, to make one last try, to see if I couldn't stop the war, just me, all by myself! At least in this one spot where I happened to be.

The colonel was only two steps away from me, pacing. I'd talk to him. Something I'd never done. This was a time for daring. The way

things stood, there was practically nothing to lose. "What is it?" he'd ask me, startled, I imagined, at my bold interruption. Then I'd explain the situation as I saw it, and we'd see what he thought. The main thing is to talk things over. Two heads are better than one.

I was about to take that decisive step when, at that very moment, who should arrive on the double but a dismounted cavalryman (as we said in those days), exhausted, shaky in the joints, holding his helmet upside down in one hand like Belisarius,* trembling, all covered with mud, his face even greener than the courier I mentioned before. He stammered and gulped. You'd have thought he was struggling to climb out of a tomb, and it made him sick to his stomach. Could it be that this spook didn't like bullets any more than I did? That he saw them coming like me?

"What is it?" Disturbed, the Colonel stopped him short; the glance he flung at that ghost was of steel.

It made our colonel very angry to see that wretched cavalryman so incorrectly clad and shitting in his pants with fright. The colonel had no use for fear, that was a sure thing. And especially that helmet held in hand like a bowler was really too much in a combat regiment like ours that was just getting into the war. It was as if this dismounted cavalryman had seen the war and taken his hat off in greeting.

Under the colonel's withering look the wobbly messenger snapped to attention, pressing his little finger to the seam of his trousers as the occasion demanded. And so he stood on the embankment, stiff as a board, swaying, the sweat running down his chinstrap; his jaws were trembling so hard that little abortive cries kept coming out of him, like a puppy dreaming. You couldn't make out whether he wanted to speak to us or whether he was crying.

Our Germans squatting at the end of the road had just changed instruments. Now they were having their fun with a machine gun, sputtering like handfuls of matches, and all around us flew swarms of angry bullets, as hostile as wasps.

The man finally managed to articulate a few words:

"Colonel, sir, Sergeant Barousse has been killed."

"So what?"

"He was on his way to meet the bread wagon on the Étrapes road, sir."

"So what?"

“He was blown up by a shell!”

“So what, damn it!”

“That’s what, colonel, sir.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, sir, that’s all, colonel, sir.”

“What about the bread?” the colonel asked.

That was the end of the dialogue, because, I remember distinctly, he barely had time to say “What about the bread?” That was all. After that there was nothing but flame and noise. The kind of noise you wouldn’t have thought possible. Our eyes, ears, nose and mouth were so full of that noise I thought it was all over and I’d turned into noise and flame myself.

After a while the flame went away, the noise stayed in my head, and my arms and legs trembled as if somebody were shaking me from behind. My limbs seemed to be leaving me, but then in the end they stayed on. The smoke stung my eyes for a long time, and the prickly smell of powder and sulphur hung on, strong enough to kill all the fleas and bedbugs in the whole world.

I thought of Sergeant Barousse, who had just gone up in smoke like the man told us. That was good news. Great, I thought to myself. That makes one less stinker in the regiment! He wanted to have me court-martialled for a can of meat. “To each his own war!” I said to myself. In that respect, you can’t deny it, the war seemed to serve a purpose now and then! I knew of three or four more in the regiment, real scum, that I’d have gladly helped to make the acquaintance of a shell, like Barousse.

As for the colonel, I didn’t wish him any hard luck. But he was dead too. At first I didn’t see him. The blast had carried him up the embankment and laid him down on his side, right in the arms of the dismounted cavalryman, the courier, who was finished too. They were embracing each other for the moment and for all eternity, but the cavalryman’s head was gone, all he had was an opening at the top of the neck, with blood in it bubbling and glugging like jam in a kettle. The colonel’s belly was wide open, and he was making a nasty face about it. It must have hurt when it happened. Tough shit for him! If he’d got out when the shooting started, it wouldn’t have happened.

All that tangled meat was bleeding profusely.

Shells were still bursting to the right and left of the scene.

I'd had enough, I was glad to have such a good pretext for making myself scarce. I even hummed a tune, and reeled like when you've been rowing a long way and your legs are wobbly. "Just one shell!" I said to myself. "Amazing how quick just one shell can clean things up. Could you believe it?" I kept saying to myself. "Could you believe it!"

There was nobody left at the end of the road. The Germans were gone. But that little episode had taught me a quick lesson, to keep to the cover of the trees. I was in a hurry to get back to our command post, to see if anyone else in our regiment had been killed on reconnaissance. There must be some good dodges, I said to myself, for getting taken prisoner!... Here and there in the fields a few puffs of smoke still clung to the ground. "Maybe they're all dead," I thought. "Seeing how they refuse to understand anything whatsoever, the best solution would be for them all to get killed instantly... The war would be over, and we'd go home... Maybe we'd march across the Place Clichy in triumph... Just one or two survivors... In my dream... Strapping good fellows marching behind the general, all the rest would be dead like the colonel... Like Barousse... like Vanille (another bastard)... etc. They'd shower us with decorations and flowers, we'd march through the Arc de Triomphe. We'd go to a restaurant, they'd serve us free of charge, we'd never pay for anything any more, never as long as we lived! 'We're heroes!' we'd say when they brought the bill... Defenders of the Fatherland! That would do it!... We'd pay with little French flags!... The lady at the till would refuse to take money from heroes, she'd even give us some, with kisses thrown in, as we filed out. Life would be worth living."

As I was running, I noticed my arm was bleeding, just a little though, a far from satisfactory wound, a scratch. I'd have to start all over.

It was raining again, the fields of Flanders oozed with dirty water. For a long time I didn't meet a soul, only the wind and a little later the sun. From time to time, I couldn't tell from where, a bullet would come flying merrily through the air and sunshine, looking for me, intent on killing me, there in the wilderness. Why? Never again, not if I lived another hundred years, would I go walking in the country. A solemn oath.

Walking along, I remembered the ceremony of the day before. It had taken place in a meadow, at the foot of a hill; the colonel had harangued the regiment in his booming voice: "Go to it, boys!" he had cried. "Go to it, boys! And long live France!" When you have no

imagination, dying is small beer; when you do have an imagination, dying is too much. That's my opinion. My understanding has never taken in so many things at once.

The colonel had never had any imagination. That was the source of all his trouble, and of ours even more so. Was I the only man in that regiment with any imagination about death? I preferred my own kind of death, the kind that comes late... in twenty years... thirty... maybe more... to this death they were trying to deal me right away... eating Flanders mud, my whole mouth full of it, fuller than full, split to the ears by a shell fragment. A man's entitled to an opinion about his own death. But which way, if that was the case, should I go? Straight ahead? My back to the enemy. If the gendarmes were to catch me roaming around I knew my goose was cooked. They'd give me a slapdash trial that same afternoon in some deserted classroom... There were lots of empty classrooms wherever we went. They'd play court martial with me the way kids play when the teacher isn't there. The non-coms seated on the platform, me standing in handcuffs in front of the little desks. In the morning they'd shoot me: twelve bullets plus one. So what was the answer?

And I thought of the colonel again, such a brave man with his breastplate and his helmet and his moustache, if they had exhibited him in a music hall, walking as I saw him under the bullets and shellfire, he'd have filled the Alhambra, he'd have outshone Fragson,* and he was a big star at the time I'm telling you about. That's what I was thinking. My heart was down in the dumps.

After hours and hours of cautious, furtive walking, I finally caught sight of our men near a clump of farmhouses. That was one of our advance posts. It belonged to a squadron that was billeted nearby. Nobody killed, they told me. Every last one of them alive! I was the one with the big news: "The colonel's dead!" I shouted, as soon as I was near enough. "Plenty more colonels where he came from!" That was the snappy comeback of Corporal Pistil, who was on duty just then; what's more, he was organizing details.

"All right, you jerk, until they find a replacement for the colonel, you can be picking up meat with Empouille and Kerdoncuff here, take two sacks each. The distribution point is behind the church... the one you see over there... Don't let them give you a lot of bones like yesterday, and try and get back before nightfall, you lugs!"

So I hit the road again with the other two.

That pissed me off. "I'll never tell them anything after this," I said to myself. I could see it was no use talking to those people, a tragedy like what I'd just seen was wasted on such stinkers! It had happened too long ago to capture their interest. And to think that a week earlier they'd have given me four columns and my picture in the papers for the death of a colonel the way I'd seen it. A bunch of halfwits.

The meat for the whole regiment was being distributed in a summery field, shaded by cherry trees and parched by the August sun. On sacks and tent cloths spread out on the grass there were pounds and pounds of guts, chunks of white and yellow fat, disembowelled sheep with their organs every which way, oozing intricate little rivulets into the grass round about, a whole ox, split down the middle, hanging on a tree, and four regimental butchers all hacking away at it, cursing and swearing and pulling off choice morsels. The squadrons were fighting tooth and nail over the innards, especially the kidneys, and all around them swarms of flies such as one sees only on such occasions, as self-important and musical as little birds.

Blood and more blood, everywhere, all over the grass, in sluggish confluent puddles, looking for a congenial slope. A few steps further on, the last pig was being killed. Already four men and a butcher were fighting over some of the prospective cuts.

"You crook, you! You're the one that made off with the tenderloin yesterday!..."

Leaning against a tree, I had barely time enough to honour that alimentary dispute with two or three glances, before being overcome by an enormous urge to vomit, which I did so hard that I passed out.

They carried me back to the outfit on a stretcher. Naturally they swiped my two oilcloth sacks, the change was too good to miss.

I woke up to one of the Corporal's harangues. The war wasn't over.

* * *

Anything can happen, and I in my turn became a corporal at the end of that same month of August. Many a time I was sent to headquarters with five men for liaison duty under General des Entrayes. He was a little man, he didn't say much, and at first sight he seemed neither cruel nor heroic. But it was safer to suspend judgement... What he seemed to value most of all was his comfort. In fact he thought of his comfort

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