



THE HOUND OF HEAVEN

It was quiet and warm in the room and the boy fought against the inevitable sleep that was mastering his small body, falling over him like a wool blanket. Lifting his head from where it was leaning against his grandfather's shoulder, he saw that the old man's eyes were closed. They were sitting in front of a fireplace. The logs were burning steadily. Through the window, in the half-light of dusk, feather-light snowflakes fell from a grey sky. The boy nestled back and sighed contentedly in the crook of the old man's arm. He did not wish this time to pass. He did not wish it to disappear into dreams and ashes on the hearth.

'Tell me a story, Grandfather.'

The old man opened his eyes and shifted the child's position somewhat before he answered slowly.

'I'll recite a poem, child.'

'A poem?'

'Yes, listen carefully. It's long.'

The child was satisfied and closed his eyes as the old man began in a sonorous voice.

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;

I fled Him, down the arches of the years;

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind and in the mist of tears

I hid from Him, ...



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He paused for a moment and the child opened his eyes, worrying out loud with a petulant voice.

'I don't understand the words, Grandfather. Can't you tell me a story instead?'

The old man smiled and put his hand on the boy's cheek.

'A story, child? Always must you have a story?'

The child rubbed his cheek like a cat against the hand. He knew his grandfather would tell him a story. He always did.

'The poem, child ...'

'Oh, Grandfather, not the poem please.'

'Listen, little one. Listen. Or the story you are looking for will disappear.'

And the child closed his eyes again and listened.

The old man continued staring out into the softness of the snow.

'I will explain the poem to you, child. That poem is about someone who is trying to run away from God – about someone who thinks he can live without God. Ah,' and here the old man stroked his beard thoughtfully and smiled to himself, 'but we never can, of course. We never can. If God will have us, then He will have us.'

'The story, Grandfather.'

The child spoke impatiently, while he kept his eyes closed.

'Yes. Yes, the story. Listen, then, for the story is beginning.'

'I fled Him, down the nights and down the days. That is how the story begins. A long time ago ... ah, so long, child, that my beard had not even begun to grow, there was a young man who enlisted in the army. It was a time of war – a time of great war for his country. It was also a very uncertain time and the soldiers in the army were not always sure that



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they were doing the right thing by fighting. But,' and here he paused reflectively, 'they had to enlist and they had to fight. Because if they did not, their families would be in trouble. They would be put into jail and shot.'

'For not fighting, Grandfather?'

'Yes, child, for not fighting.'

'Why didn't the young man run away? If I don't want ...'

'Hush, child! Hush and listen.'

The child, who had sat up to expostulate his thoughts, leaned back again. The fire crackled and the old man went on.

'The young man was not strong-willed. That is to say, he did not stand up for what was right. Even though he questioned the right of his army to fight, and even though he did not agree with the leader of his country, he still went on to fight. There were others in his country who did stand up – other young men who would not be bullied into conscription.'

'Conscription?'

The child questioned the word sleepily.

'Conscription is compulsory ...'

The old man stopped and then went on, trying to make his words sound simple.

'It's when they make you serve. When the government tells you that you must be part of the army, or navy, or air force. It's when you have to be a soldier.'

'Oh.'

The child said nothing else and for a while there was only the crackle of the fire.

'Then what happened, Grandfather? What happened when they made the man to be a soldier? Was he scared to fight?'

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'No. No. It might have been better if he had been scared. But he was not. As a matter of fact, he carried out orders devotedly. His superior officers praised him highly. Perhaps it would have been better if they had not praised him quite so much because he became proud.'

The old man's hands tightened around the child as he spoke and he repeated his last words for emphasis.

'Yes, he became quite proud.'

There was a quiet again and the child sighed.

'What happened then, Grandfather. When the man became proud, I mean.'

The old man slowly began to recite again:

From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

But with unhurrying chase,

And unperturbed pace,

Deliberate speed, majestic instance,

They beat – and a Voice beat

More instant than the Feet –

'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'

'Grandfather,' the child began again, irritation overruling sleepiness.

'I know. I know,' the old man answered, turning his face toward the fire, 'You don't like poetry. You want the story. I will go on. I will go on with my story.'

He stroked the child's head and continued.

'The man became a storm trooper, a member of the Sturmabteilung ...'



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'What's that?'

'The soldiers in the Sturmabteilung were part of the Brown Shirts - especially tough soldiers who went into other people's countries and attacked. They attacked without mercy.'

'Was he mean? Did the man become mean, Grandfather?'

'Yes, I suppose he did. He thought that no one could touch him. He thought that he was in control of everything and he liked that. He knew inside that this was not right, but the feeling of power drowned out the feeling of right and wrong.'

'That wasn't very good, was it, Grandfather? Did his mother not tell him ...'

'His mother had died, child.'

'Oh.'

'But she did tell me ... that is, she told the man, Bible stories when he was a little boy.'

The child sat up and looked at the old man.

'Were you the man, Grandfather?'

'Yes, child. Yes, I was.'

For a while there was no noise. The child sat very still. His eyes were wide open now and his mind groped around for words. He finally phrased a question and it fell softly like the snowflakes against a dark background.

'What happened to you to make you not mean, Grandfather?'

'It was the Hound of heaven, child. The Hound of heaven pursued me.'

'I don't understand.'

'How can you understand. Even I don't understand. But I will tell you what happened.'

The child leaned back again.



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'In December of 1941 my army, the German Army, invaded Russia – Russia that big, huge slab of a country. My unit, the men I was fighting with, penetrated as far as the Crimea. The men around me murdered and killed everyone they met – the peasant farmers, the people on the road, anyone ...'

'Did you ... did you kill too, Grandfather?'

'Yes. Yes, I did, child.'

The boy swallowed audibly and then the clock chimed and when it was done the old man continued.

'At some point I was separated from my regiment. We were in a forest and perhaps because of all the bush and all the trees, I became disoriented. All I remember now is that suddenly I was alone. I could hear shots every now and then and I was very much afraid of being captured. After all, we, the German Army, had annihilated so many Russians, so many of them. I thought that if I were captured I would be shown no mercy. And rightly so. Rightly so.'

The fire sizzled as the dampness of one of the logs dropped some moistness into the flames.

'I wandered through the forest for hours and hours. It was very cold and I had no feeling left in my feet. Perhaps, I remember thinking, perhaps I will not die from a Russian bullet wound but from the Russian cold. It became dark, and my heart felt dark and I was afraid not only of death but of what lay beyond death. Then I saw a light shining between the trees – a light not too far away. My eyes riveted onto that light and my feet, numb though they were, walked in its direction. *If the people who live by that light, I vaguely thought, if they will not let me in, then so be it. I will not have lost anything. And if they do let me in, well then so be it also.* After what seemed like an eternity, I reached the source of the light. It was a small, wooden cottage. I knocked once and waited warily for someone to answer the door. And someone did.'



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He was quiet for a moment.

'Who did, Grandfather? Who answered the door? Was it the dog, the hound of ... of heaven?

Impatiently and wide awake now, the child pulled at the old man's jacket sleeve.

'An old woman answered.'

The old man took up his tale again.

'I saw that she was very old and immediately lost some of my fear. Pushing her aside, I walked in. She lived alone. I could see that straightway. There was no sign of anyone else being there. Perhaps her husband or sons had been killed. Perhaps she had no family. I still do not know that. What I do know is that she was not hostile. She was not angry with me, a German soldier. She looked at me with pity, with compassion. Pointing to the wood stove, she motioned for me to take off my outer clothing.

After I had done so, she took out a towel, knelt down and began to rub my almost frozen feet. Then she gave me some hot tea and some bread. We could not speak to one another because she knew no German and I could not speak Russian. Then she offered me her bed while she slept in a chair by the fire that night.

For three days and nights she cared for me as if she were ... as if she were my mother. I could not understand it. She must have known that I was an enemy soldier. My uniform was obviously German. She must have known also that her people were being slaughtered on every side by the Germans. And she must have known that if the Russian army caught her harbouring a German, she would be shot alongside me. Why, I asked myself a thousand times, why was she showing me such love. Why was she doing this for me?

At the end of the three days, before I left, I managed to ask her this through sign language and through gestures. She



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smiled. She only had a few teeth, but her love and care truly made her beautiful. Turning away from me, she pointed to a crucifix above her bed.

‘I escaped through the Russian lines and made it back to Germany. Physically and mentally it was not possible for me to rejoin the army. Something inside me had changed. It was as if I had, after all, been captured. But not by the Russians. No, not by the Russians. I had dreams, vivid dreams, of people I had killed. I could not eat and every time I closed my eyes there were pictures – terrible pictures of the past.’

The child plucked at his sleeve.

‘I do not think that I like this story anymore, Grandfather.’

The old man stroked the child’s head.

‘Better you live this story through me, than live it yourself, child. Hear it out, and grow.’

The child settled back into the crook of his grandfather’s arm.

‘Finally I could bear my heavy thoughts no longer and I visited a pastor – a man I had once seen beaten for harbouring Jews. I asked if I might speak with him. He looked at me strangely. He did not trust me and rightly so. But he consented to see me. When I told him what had happened to me, he was silent for a long time. Then he asked me what it was that I wanted him to do. I shrugged and looked down at the floor.

‘I am not loved,’ I said, ‘and I do not love myself. I am sorry for what I have done and would, before God, that I could live my life again. But I know that I cannot. But as it is, I cannot live the way I am either. Ah, I don’t know why I came or what I want you to do. I only know that I despise myself and I know that there is no hope for such as myself. When the old woman pointed at the cross, something awoke within me. It has not let me go and it will not let me go. It torments me to think, to look, and I know not what to look for.’



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The pastor was quiet and then touched my eyes.

‘Perhaps,’ he said slowly, ‘perhaps the Crimea was your Damascus and I am your Ananias.’¹

‘At the time I did not understand what he meant though I understand it now. I stayed with him for a few months and in that time he opened the Scriptures for me and prayed with me. And I stopped running. The Hound had me.’

The child snuggled against his grandfather. He yawned broadly, closed his eyes and sighed.

‘Rise, clasp My hand, and come!’

Halts by me that footfall:

Is my gloom, after all,

Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?

‘Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,


I am He Whom thou seekest!

Thou dravest² love from Me, who dravest thee.’

The old man was quiet after reciting the last part of the poem. The fire still burned and small flames, like tongues of fire, danced on the uppermost log casting shadows on the walls about the room. Red-hot embers glowed beneath and the child was asleep.

¹ This refers to the apostle Paul and his experience on the Road to Damascus. This story can be found in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 9.

² Drive is the archaic form and past tense of drive. It means, in this case, compel by force or compulsion.



*'For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my
flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!'*

Job 19:25-27