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The Road North

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Major Horst von Nieder pushed his flat cap up off his sweating forehead, took off his sunglasses, wiped his eyes which were burning from the salty sweat running into them, and thought of how good a stein of beer would taste. He shook off the thought and put his sunglasses back on, reaching over as he did so to tap his driver, Sergeant Schultz, on the shoulder. "How much further is it, Schultz? We don't want to be searching for the damn place after nightfall."

Schultz, a phlegmatic red-faced Bavarian, who considered all war and soldiering to be nonsense, didn't look away from the road as he answered, none too respectfully, "Don't worry about it, Major, we're almost there—I told you that it would take some time." Let the Prussian stew, he thought—what the hell, the war's almost over.

The Major thought of reprimanding Schultz for his impertinence but then thought better of it—he would have had to shout to make himself heard above the roar of the truck's motor and consequently he would have lost all dignity, growing redder and redder and his voice getting hoarse while Schultz would sit there invincible in his peasant calm. He turned back to the map on his lap—damned Italians, he thought, can't even make a decent map—no wonder they were such miserable soldiers. They'd been big men against the Ethiopians who had only spears and animal courage, but the Greeks had fought them to a standstill—we had to pull them out of that mess, he thought bitterly, now they're about ready to call it quits. Always had to be on the winning side, the cowardly swine.

He was intent on the map when Schultz suddenly shouted something. He looked up and through the windscreen quickly in order to see what had made the usually stolid Schultz react so violently. They had just rounded a curve and before them on the dusty Italian road a very small battle was drawing to its close. A
long open German army car had been attacked by partisans and some firing was still going on, but the car was motionless, run up on the right hand bank of the road. The sudden appearance of a truck full of German soldiers and the heavy machine gun mounted on the truck was enough to discourage the partisans from coming out of cover to capture the car. With derisive shouts and a few parting shots they disappeared into the thick underbrush which covered the hillside above the road.

Even before the truck had come to a full halt the major, Luger drawn, was out of the truck cab and running toward the car. He stopped a few paces away from the car, keeping it between him and the hillside, just in case one of the partisans had stayed behind for a few potshots at the new arrivals. The red facing on the greatcoat of the officer lying sprawled out in the back seat denoted a general staff officer and so did the pennants fluttering from small sticks on both front fenders of the car. What bad luck, Nieder thought, to be cut down by a bunch of bandits just at the beginning of one’s military career. The dead man was not much older than Nieder’s own thirty-five years by the looks of him and he had already wangled a staff appointment. Probably family connections, Nieder thought sourly, as he walked up to the side of the car. His men had gotten down and had fanned out along the edge of the road lying prone and covering the hill-side with rifles and machine pistols while on the truck the machine gunner had fed a fresh belt into his weapon and was slowly traversing it back and forth looking for a target.

The driver and the officer in the rear seat were dead. The officer had been hit by a single bullet right in the middle of his forehead—sniper’s rifle with a telescopic sight, thought Nieder, probably one of ours. The driver’s head had been smashed into a ragged pulp by a shotgun blast. The partisans must have been waiting right by the road in the long grass in order for that to have happened—Nieder rubbed his chin ruefully, too damn bad they hadn’t rounded that curve a few minutes later; they would have caught the beggars in the open and the machine gun could have accounted for almost all of them.

The sergeant, who had been sitting next to the driver, was still alive. He had evidently stood up to fire his Schmeisser machine pistol when the attack had begun because he had several wounds in the lower body and legs. He had also been hit in the chest and in the throat. He was being worked over now by two of Nieder’s men, his Schmeisser still dangling from his right hand, the fingers caught in the trigger guard. Neider stood watching the man die,
the air whistling and bubbling through the bright red arterial blood which welled up out of the hole in his throat. He turned away to make a brief inspection of the car. Beyond a few bullet holes in the doors it seemed to have taken no damage—the swine were careful not to hit the car, he thought, well, that worked out to his advantage.

Suddenly a voice broke in upon his thoughts as he stood beside the car. As he turned and recognized the speaker a look of contempt came over the major’s thin face. “Well, Kramer, what the hell do you want?” Kramer was only a corporal but he was also a spy for the Gestapo, placed in the unit to report anti-party feeling. The men hated him but they also feared him, for a word from him to the right people in the army police and not only they but their families in Germany would die in any one of a number of unpleasant ways. Nieder didn’t fear him but he loathed the man almost instinctively.

“I merely said, Herr Major, that we should perhaps pursue the Communist bandits into the hills, they can’t be far away and we can...” Kramer was short and dark and as he peered up at the tall officer, his manner insinuated that there was some reason, probably traitorous, for the major’s failure to order prompt pursuit.

The major felt the blood rushing to his face as he roared out, “Gaddamn it Kramer, when I want or need your idiotic advice I’ll ask for it—now get the hell back in the truck where you belong.” Kramer ran terrified back to the truck; later, when his courage returned, he would begin mentally writing a report about von Nieder’s anti-party failings but at the moment all he wanted to do was to get out of the sight of the tall blond Prussian whom he knew capable of killing him without any hesitation or fear of party difficulties. Nieder felt that he had jeopardized his dignity by yelling at such a rat in uniform so he snapped at the men now standing around: “You Feder, Eisenhorn, Brenner, and Krummel—clear these men out of the car. Schultz, can you drive this thing?

Schultz had been standing by grinning widely at Kramer’s dressing down and now at the officer’s sudden question he was a bit flustered—“Well, if the motor is not damaged, Herr Major, I can, but...”

Delighted to have shaken Schultz’s usual composure Nieder felt almost jovial. “No buts, get in and start it—the hell with the blood man, it won’t ruin your uniform—you’re not going out with the girls tonight.” He opened the door and sat on the seat still
warm from the staff officer's body. Schultz started the motor after a couple of tries and turned triumphantly to the major. "All right, Schultz. You're a mechanical genius—I'll see about getting you transferred to the panzers—now let's get the hell out of here. We want to reach that farmhouse you've been talking about for the last two days." The truck rumbled into life behind them, the men still piling on, and they proceeded once more down the narrow dusty road between the thickly overgrown hillsides. Behind them, on the side of the road, they left three bodies stretched out in the hot sunshine—in a retreat there is no time for niceties. As Nieder leaned back against the leather seat of the staff-car, trying to capture some coolness from the heated air that flowed by, he thought of the fortunes of war, a feeling of embarrassment suffused him even when he used the term mentally, but hackneyed though it was, there was no other way to express it. A few minutes ago that youngish staff officer had been riding along in just this same fashion probably cursing the crazy Italians and the stifling heat of the day. Now he was sitting here and flies were settling on the small bluish hole in the other poor fellow's forehead. Well, what the hell, he thought, you're no philosopher. You're a soldier and he was a soldier. You could get it anytime, just like he did.

At the thought he scanned the passing roadside, perfect cover for ambushes along here, he thought—looked like a tactical problem back at the academy. "How would you proceed, Cadet Nieder?" "Well, Herr Instruktor, I would split my squad in half, then I . . . ."

Hell, he shook his head, mind's wandering. Where's that damn farmhouse, he thought. Ever since they had begun the retreat, just ahead of the advancing Americans, Schultz had been talking about a farmhouse where he had stayed before the war. Supposedly it was owned by a fascist, a man who could be depended upon to give them food and maybe even some petrol. Nieder fitted the last of his cigarettes into a small ivory holder and lit it, bending his head down as he did so to get out of the wind. He smoked slowly, enjoying the harsh bite of the tobacco. He was just removing the butt from the holder when Schultz turned suddenly from the main road onto an even smaller and dustier side road. They jolted along over pot holes and deep ruts made by farm wagons. "Are you sure—are you sure—Damn it, Schultz, pay attention—are you sure this is the right way."

Schultz turned his head and shouted, "If my memory serves me cor—"

"Watch the road you idiot," he shouted; they had been careen-
ing wildly toward the high bank on the right hand side of the road. Right or wrong way he wanted to get to wherever it was alive.

Finally, when he thought his insides were permanently jumbled, Schultz pulled into a high walled courtyard, surrounded by a large stone building, numerous smaller buildings being scattered around it. The major looked about him. Schultz had evidently not exaggerated. By Italian standards or even by German ones the farm was large and it looked prosperous even now.

The truck rumbled to a halt behind the car. He ordered the men down and then walked, with Schultz beside him, up to the farm house door. Schultz pounded heavily on the door but there was no answer. The courtyard, the whole place, seemed deserted. “Call to them in Italian, Schultz—tell them that if they don’t come to the door we will throw a potato masher through it.” Schultz shouted the threat and a moment later the large wooden door swung inward slowly. A very old woman dressed completely in black stood there. She talked to Schultz in Italian that was too rapid for the major to follow.

“She says, Sir, that the men are all gone, hiding in the hills from the Partisans. That’s about all that I can get out of her, sir. She simply keeps repeating it.”

“Good, Schultz. Tell her that since the men are gone they will have no need for any food at all. Tell her that we will take everything and burn down the buildings.” That did it, as he thought it would. Hardly had Schultz finished translating to the frightened old woman than she was pushed out of the way and a tall heavy man with a black moustache stood confronting them.

“I speak some German,” he said, “I be a good Fascist always, and here come you, say that you burn my farm, take all food, it is bad, it is too bad of you, you cannot, you understand, you cannot.”

“Schultz, I am glad that the gentleman is such an enthusiastic supporter of the regime,” Schultz blushed at the dry sneering tone, well, that’s one point for the damned Prussian, he thought. “Signior Delioni,” he said, speaking in Italian, “you remember me don’t you? Schultz, Schultz—the man who fixed your tractor—it was in ’38, don’t you remember me, surely you remember me.”

Delioni peered at the stocky figure in uniform, the flat sunburned face with the hard cynical mouth and the bland peasant eyes. “Signior Schultz, I remember you but here there is no food and there has been no food. I am loyal to Mussolini, but you Germans are deserting us—soon the partisans will come and kill us
all, that is what we get for remaining loyal to you—you desert us and you would steal our food as you go, there is no . . .”

Suddenly Signior Delioni broke off, the major had jerked out his Luger and with a single stride had cleared the two stone steps and stuck the short barrel there inches away from the fat face which went gray. “Signior Delioni,” he said, speaking slowly, “I don’t speak much Italian, but I will blow your brains out now if you don’t show us where you have hidden the food and petrol. Food you have, that I know, and if you have a tractor, you have petrol.” Delioni looked at the Luger, the toggles snapped down into firing position, and he looked at the face of the man holding it. The thin hard face was strained and the light blue eyes were a little wild, but they were cruel and cold as well and Delioni knew that if he remained silent this man would probably kill him, and might kill everyone else as well.

“We have only a little.” He spoke slowly, afraid of angering the harsh, half-crazy looking officer any further.

“It will be sufficient, Herr Delioni.” Relief courséd through the major as he holstered his luger—the fat swine did have food. He had hated being so dramatic and he hadn’t especially wanted to kill the man but they had no time to waste in bargaining. “Take four men, Schultz, and go with your loyal Fascisti friend to get the food and petrol, I’m going into the house for some wine.”

He pushed the door open and walked into the dim interior. Four or five women with several children sat huddled together in the farthest and darkest corner of the room. Three men, younger than Delioni, but from their looks brothers or cousins to him, sat around a wooden table. On the far side of the room, darkened by the closed shutters, a fireplace still smoldered. So, he thought, they doused the fire—must have heard us coming up the road. “Vino!” he said to the old woman. She stood, too frightened to move, and one of the younger women got up and moved to a cupboard. She opened it and took down a bottle and a glass and brought them to him. “Pour it,” he said in Italian. She poured a glass of the thin red wine and handed it to him. Nieder kicked a chair around from under the table and sat down, throwing his cap on the table, watching the hostile glares of the three men on the other side of the table with some amusement. A loyal fascist household all right, he thought, just so long as we were winning. He grinned at them arrogantly and sipped the sour wine. As he ran the fingers of his left hand through his bristly, very light-blonde hair, he realized that he was very tired.

A movement near him made him jerk his left hand down from
his head, and seize the wine glass from his right hand which slid down to his Luger. He relaxed when he saw that it was only one of the children, a small, big eyed girl with long black hair. She wore a thin cotton frock of light blue and on her feet she had a very small pair of sandals. Another fascist, he thought dryly. She had slipped away from the other children and she now walked boldly up to the tall figure of the stranger, “Why are you all white and red?” she said in Italian.

So the children at least had guts! “Because I am a fierce monster,” he replied in Italian, expecting her to run shrieking to the back of the room and her mother.

“No, you’re not. Don’t be so silly. You are one of the Germans. They have been here before but none were so white as you, even your hair is white. Are you old?” The child, her beautiful brown eyes wide and staring, climbed up in the chair next to that of the major.

“Yes,” he said, “very old.”

“I like you, Will you take all our food and burn our house?” The major felt strangely ashamed. How could he explain to this child that it had been partly bluff and partly real threat. He wondered if Delioni were her father. He tried to change the subject. “You know I have a little girl just like you, just about your age. How old are you? What did you say your name was?” He felt a little absurd, chatting in a language he didn’t speak very well with a tiny child.

“I am six and I am named Angela.” The little girl smiled at him. He might feel awkward but she was perfectly relaxed. “What is your little girl’s name?” she asked.

“Karen—she—she is pretty like you but in a different way. You are dark with black eyes, she is fair—white like me, with blue eyes and blond hair.” He had almost said that Karen was pretty; she and her mother had been killed when a bomb cut their apartment house in two. He still had the letter from the war ministry in Berlin, “We regret to inform you that your daughter and wife ... so on and so on, Heil Hitler!” He jerked his mind back to listen to the child.

“I should like to see such a little girl, we could play dolls together.” Angela looked very grave about the prospect of playing dolls with a little German girl.

The major pulled open the top button of his tunic and leaned back in the chair. He felt almost as if he were home again, just back from the parade ground with Karen sitting across from him,
telling him about her day and pleading for the empty cartridge cases he brought her occasionally from the firing range.

Just as he was about to say something else to his small companion, Schultz came through the door. "Goddamn, Herr Major, never have you seen so much food as this fellow has stashed away. Hams, canned goods, dried fruit, flour, wine, even beer—Goddamn!" Schultz was almost overcome by the size of the food hoard he had discovered and so the sight of his commanding officer in conversation with a little girl hadn’t yet really penetrated his consciousness—later on when he remembered it he would believe it to be a hallucination.

Schultz’s noisy entry irritated the major. "Shut up, Schultz. Spare me your greedy gab. Take what we need. Is there petrol?"

“Yes, Herr Major, not too much, perhaps one day’s supply for the car and the truck."

“All right, take it and the necessary food and let’s go. Well, you heard me—get the hell out of here!” Schultz had been staring, trying to make out the little girl’s figure in the gloomy room, he turned and hurried out, still not sure that he had seen what he thought he had seen.

The major stood up, regretfully, picked up his cap and drained off the last of the wine. "Grazie," he said, not to any of the adults in the room but to the little girl sitting at the table.

“Prego, Signior,” she answered, the perfect hostess preparing to say good-bye to her guest.

He put on his cap and strode to the door.

“Signior. Wait a minute.” The little girl had climbed down from the chair and run after him. He stopped and looked at her quizzically. She motioned him down with her finger as if she were going to whisper. He leaned down, not caring about the people in the room but hoping that his men couldn’t see through the partly ajar door. The little girl slid a small arm around his neck, her lips were cool and silky against his cheek in a kiss and then she whispered, “I like you. Come back again. I like you.” He patted her cheek awkwardly and straightened up.

“Good-bye,” he said it in Italian and there were too many R’s in the word for his German tongue. He wished that he had a piece of chocolate or something to give her. What the hell did children like. Shiny things—cartridge cases. He felt in the pockets of his tunic. He came across the envelope that Schultz had silently handed to him back on the road, the effects of the dead staff-officer. Through the paper he felt the hard familiar outlines of an iron cross. Why not, he thought, she’s got guts enough anyway.
He knelt again beside the little girl and hung the iron cross around her neck by its ribbon. She looked down at the cross, which to her was only a religious symbol. The shining silver filled her with a silent delight and she kissed the tanned cheek a second time. This time Nieder smiled and said, "Grazie, Signorina, mille grazie."

"Prego, Signior."

He wheeled abruptly and walked out into the harsh sunlight on the porch. His men were loading food onto the truck. Signior Delioni stood sulkily by, his dark nervous eyes lighted on the officer and he ran over to him. "You leave us nothing, nothing to live with," he said in his bad German.

"You are lucky to be alive at all, Herr Delioni," he replied in Italian, and he watched with satisfaction as the fat face went pale and the man stepped back as if struck.

Schultz already had the motor of the car going. He walked over and opened the door. Some of the other members of the family now were coming out on the porch to watch the Germans leave. He looked for Angela. She was there, standing in front of her mother, the young woman who had gotten the bottle and glass for him. The iron cross winked brightly in the sunshine. He smiled at her and was rewarded with as much of a smile as she thought proper, now that she was surrounded by adults. He got in the car and snapped out an order to drive on to Schultz who was luxuriating in a pilfered cigarette.

They turned around in the courtyard and headed back out onto the rough road and Nieder turned back only once. The little figure in blue, a spot of silver at the breast, waved. Then the truck cut off his view behind and he turned his eyes back to the road ahead.

As they pounded along the narrow rutted road Nieder thought of the little girl back at the farmhouse. He also found himself thinking of Karen and his wife, something which he hadn't permitted himself to do for a long time. War had always been a game or a profession to him and the death of the men that engaged in it had always seemed natural, but children, that was another thing. Dead children, of any sort, even the enemy's, seemed so strange with all their vitality drained out. He thought of the first dead child killed in war that he had ever seen, a small Polish boy lying like a smashed Hummel figure beside a bare wooden fence outside of Cracow. Hell, this wasn't worthwhile, he'd have to try to sleep.

They were back on the main road now and moving north again. His men were singing back on the track. "Ich hat' einen Kamer-
You're getting as bad as he is—kill him like a man or don't kill him at all. Well, there was plenty of time for that.

His men were singing another song, "Auf der Heide bluht ein kleines Blumelein, und das heisst Erika..." He whistled the catchy tune. In the meadow there blooms a tiny flower, and it's named Erika. Erika, Erika, Angela. He smiled. Maybe after the war was over he would get married again, perhaps in time... suddenly his thoughts were broken off by a startled grunt from Schultz. "Dammit, Herr Major I must have turned the wrong way, look there."

His words of reprimand died on his lips as he looked. They had indeed come back the wrong way. An armored car of the Feldpolizei, the military police, was pulled up alongside the three bodies on the roadside. They had come back to where they had picked up the car. Four men in black helmets and feldgrau uniforms had two bedraggled, bearded men—partisans probably—under guard. The machine gun in the small turret on top of the armored car pointed up the hillside. Nieder got out of the car, waving back to the sergeant to keep the men on the truck.

He walked toward the group of men. "What's going on here?"

"Major. Auf zu Befehl. We caught these beauties going through the pockets of these dead soldiers—look, Sir, a staff officer." The young Oberltnunt of police was dirty and his face was covered with a blond stubble. "We can't get a thing out of them, Herr Major. They speak no German. We were just about to shoot the swine. Perhaps the Major will want to examine them before we do."

The two partisans were standing arrogantly facing the police who had them covered with Schmeissers. One of them was about twenty-five, the other, with the beginnings of a heavy black beard might have been anywhere between thirty-five and forty-five. Neither of them betrayed any fear and despite their ragged, filthy clothing they had a certain hard dignity. Leaned against a tree was a Mauser rifle. Major Nieder walked over and picked it up, it was in excellent condition and the Zeiss scope on it had been carefully capped. "One of them, the younger one there—had..."
that with him when we came on them, Herr Major.” He had been right, he thought—one of our own weapons.

“Did they have anything on them?”

“Only these Major, the young one had this.” The Oberleutnant handed him a worn leather wallet and small wad of Lire, a few papers, and two photographs. He glanced at the papers, nothing there. Then he looked at the photograph. Looking up at him was Angela—despite the worn, cracked photograph and the poor focus, there could be no mistake.

He walked over to the younger man and looked at him. The fellow stared back insolently.

“What’s your name.” He said in Italian. The young man spat deliberately at the officer, missing him because of the major’s quick side-step. He remained silent, his dark eyes, much like those of the girl in the picture, full of a hopeless hatred.

The major held up the photograph. “Yours?” he said in Italian.

The man’s face softened in spite of himself. He gave an almost French shrug. “Si, mia bambina.” The older man growled something in Italian, obviously an order to the younger man to shut his fool mouth.

Nieder turned back to the Oberleutnant who had been watching him as a setter watches its master. He had been relieved when the Major had suddenly appeared. Now he could shift responsibility for the disposition of the two partisans to a superior—that was as it should be—he hadn’t minded killing the two men but often the Gestapo wanted to examine them first. Things were different now anyway, this was a retreat.

The major looked down at the photograph again. It looked like the same frock she had had on when he saw her—probably her best one, or perhaps the only one she had. No wonder Signior Delioni had been nervous, he thought, with a partisan for a son-in-law. “Major?” The Oberleutnant’s Silesian accented voice broke into his thoughts.

“What is it?”

“What shall we do with them, Herr Major. Do you...”

“Oberleutnant, you know what is to be done with Partisans. Shoot them!” He turned quickly and walked back to the car. Schultz passed over the box of cigarettes—English—the partisans had been in touch with the allies. The major kept his back turned to what was going on behind him. Schultz watched the police prepare to execute the men with detached professional interest. The major couldn’t help turning at the word “feur!” The short
burst from the Schmeissers hit the partisans in the chest and they crumpled together without a sound, save for the involuntary grunts they gave when the bullets knocked the wind out of them. The Oberleutnant gave the coup de grace with his Luger, two sharp cracks of sound, and then he waved cheerily at the Major. "Goodbye, Sir. Have a good journey."

Major Nieder got into the car as Schultz, the show over, started the motor. They headed north again. The major leaned back against the cushion and smoked the cigarette that the partisan had gotten from the English and had given to his father-in-law. Schultz swerved the car sharply to avoid hitting a dog crossing the road and though the Major was thrown roughly against the car door, he didn't curse Schultz.

**It's the Walking Alone**

It's the walking alone  
Under violet velvet sky-tones of night,  
When the whine and wail of the wind  
Calls upon the child in me.

And I aim my fervent soul  
At a solitary brilliant star,  
In hopes that hope itself will bring  
Again the spring that's gone in me.

I linger on, and wish upon  
That star with simple, childlike night,  
And, finished, watch it disappear  
Like snuffed-out fireflies in the night.

*AUTHOR UNKNOWN*