

Josef's Wife

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It was in the year 1919, and the elderberry was already in bloom when Sergeant Josef Thiedemann came home. Only his wife was with him. She herself had picked him up—she had not even taken the coachmen along.

The two of them sat in silence next to each other for the whole day. The gleaming brown horsebacks in front of them swayed lightly back and forth. They came onto the village road and drove slowly along it. In the evening sun people stood in front of their houses and a woman occasionally laid her hand on her husband's arm. But Thiedemann didn't recognize anyone—not even his wife or his horses.

In July of 1918 he had been buried by a mortar round as he sat with a few comrades in a dugout. It was only pure chance—a piece of the busted-up wooden planking of the dugout got pushed over him—that had saved him from being crushed. It was a few hours before they reached him, and everyone thought that he had already suffocated; but two of the splintered beams had wedged themselves in such a way that a small crack remained between them through which he could get a little air. That saved his life.

Thiedemann was still conscious when they pulled him out, and by outside appearances practically uninjured. He sat apathetically for a while on the edge of the trench in the dirt and stared absently at the corpses of his comrades. An orderly shook him by the shoulder and tried to force a cup of coffee with some schnapps between his teeth. Then he sighed deeply and collapsed.

He had obviously suffered a massive shock and for about a year went from one asylum to another. Eventually his wife succeeded in obtaining authorization to take him home.

As the carriage turned onto the road that led to the farmhouse and rattled past the shed, Thiedemann sat up. His wife became pale and held her breath. Pigs grunted in the stall and the smell of lindens wafted over. Thiedemann first turned his head this way, then that way, as if he were searching for something. But then he sank back down and remained lethargic even as his mother came in while he sat at the table. He ate what was set before him and then went on a round through the house. He found his way around easily, knew exactly where the cattle were and where the bedroom was. But he recognized nothing. His dog, who at first sniffed him excitedly, lay down by the

stove and whined. He didn't lick his hands and he also didn't jump up on him.

During the first few weeks Thiedemann often sat alone by the barn in the warm sun. He didn't pay attention to anyone, and they let him do what he wanted. He often suffered from choking fits at night. Then he jumped up and flailed around and screamed. Once he almost bled to death when he broke the window and cut his wrist. After that his wife had wire mesh installed in the bedroom windows.

Later Thiedemann was very happy when he played with the children. He made them paper ships and carved them whistles out of willow twigs. They liked him, and when it was time to gather blueberries they took him into the forest with them in order to find some. On the way back home they wanted to take a shortcut and go across a piece of open land. But as soon as he left the protection of the last trees behind him he became agitated. Frightened and nervous, he shouted something to the children and threw himself on the ground. They were taken aback. He pulled the smallest down on the ground next to him and couldn't be convinced to walk upright over the open field. He wanted to crawl and he bent over constantly. The children didn't know what they should do and rambled off to get his wife. And as they broke away over the field, Thiedemann, extremely disturbed, yelled after them and closed his eyes, as if something terrible was about to happen.

In the course of time he became fat and bloated—he did nothing and ate carelessly and too much. Little by little he learned to recognize the people in the house; but he didn't grasp that he was one of them. Their appearance was no long familiar to him. He was almost always friendly and content. Only now and then, when he saw a piece of freshly splintered, light wood, he cried and was not easy to comfort.

His wife managed the farm alone. She fired the foreman because he once made fun of a helpless gesture by Thiedemann at the table. The fellow came back after a few days in order to explain that he didn't mean any harm by it, but she simply gave him his wages without listening to him and then went out of the room. One evening when the miller's son made a pass at her and had shut the door behind her, she grabbed a sport rifle that hung on the wall and stood there until he walked away with a stupid grin. Others tried it too, but they weren't successful. The woman was thirty-five and of a dark, dignified beauty. She worked hard, but she remained alone.

In the first few months doctors often came to the farm. Thiedemann hid himself from them and had to be searched for every time. Only when his wife called for him was he willing to come. One doctor stayed at the farm for almost a full year to take care of him. When he departed the wife had to sell a few cattle. In this year the harvest was damaged by summer rains and the potatoes did poorly. It was a difficult year.

But Thiedemann's condition didn't change. His wife accepted the medical opinion impassively, as if she were completely unconcerned. But at night, when Thiedemann murmured incomprehensible words in his sleep and threw himself all over the bed, she pressed herself against him, as if the warmth of her body would help him—and she listened to him and asked questions and spoke to him. He did not answer, but became quieter and fell asleep soon afterwards. And so the years passed.

Once a comrade of Thiedemann came to visit for a few days. He had brought a few

photos from those times with him and on the last evening showed them to the wife. Among them was a group photo of Thiedemann's platoon. In it, the men squatted bare-chested in front of a dugout and grinned while they searched their shirts for lice. Thiedemann was the second from the right and laughed, he held his hand high, thumb and trigger finger pressed tightly together.

The wife looked at one picture after another. While she was engrossed in them Thiedemann came into the room. With heavy steps he went over to the stove and sat down in a chair. His wife took the group photo and held it in her hands for a long time. Her eyes wandered from the faded snapshot to the apathetic figure by the stove.

"So that's where it was?" she asked. The friend nodded.

The wife was silent for a while. Only Thiedemann's heavy breathing was heard in the silence. A moth flew in through the window and fluttered around the lamp. The quivering shadows of its wings flickered over the table and on the photos and gave them the illusion of movement and life. The wife pointed to the pictures of the trenches and destroyed villages. "Is it still like that?"

"For all I know", said the comrade. With a quick movement he took up a pencil and smoothed down a bag of sugar that lay in reach on the windowsill.

"Write down the name of the place. And the directions." The friend lifted his head.

"Do you want to go there?"

The wife scrutinized the picture in which Thiedemann, still laughing and healthy, sat in front of the dugout. Then she looked up calmly. "Yes", she answered.

"We'd all like to go there again", the friend said deliberately while he slowly wrote the letters. "You have to go through Metz."

It was a long time before everything was ready. The people didn't understand why they wanted to go and tried to deter her. But she didn't listen to any objections. She sat there quietly and resolutely packed everything together that was necessary for the trip. When the people questioned her she answered curtly. She simply said: "It has to be."

The journey was difficult. The trip gave Thiedemann headaches and the wife had no-one who would help her. She also didn't understand the language. But she just stood there and looked at the people until they understood what she meant.

On the afternoon of the third day they came to the place where Thiedemann's company had been deployed. It was a bleak, miserable village with long rows of gray houses. The ruins from the photo could not be seen. The place was fully rebuilt.

A few carriages with tourists drove up in front of the inn. An interpreter came to the wife and spoke to her. She asked if he could tell her something about the sector of the front, where Thiedemann had been buried. He shrugged his shoulders—now there were fields everywhere again; they had been farmed for a while.

"Everywhere?" asked the wife.

"Oh, no!" The interpreter began to show signs of understanding and explained that nearby, barely more than a kilometer away, there was an area with trenches and shell craters still almost exactly as it had been. Should he take her there? She nodded and hardly took the time to unpack her bags in the inn before they were off.

The day was pretty and clear. A light wind went over the hillsides and tiny blue butterflies fluttered back and forth between the trenches and the entanglements. Poppies and chamomile grew on the crater edges. Meadows which still extended into the

landscape here and there gradually faded, the village disappeared, and as they crossed over a ridge, suddenly the sallow silence of the battlefields rose around them, disturbed only by a few small groups of men working here and there between the craters. They were the metal collectors, the guide explained—they searched for iron, copper, and steel.

“Here?” asked the wife. The guide nodded.

“The soil is full of munitions,” he said. “Therefore the entire region has been leased to a scrap company. The corpses that they find will be collected and buried at the various cemeteries in the area.” He pointed to the right, where long rows of white crosses could be seen gleaming in the sun.

The wife stayed out with Thiedemann until the evening. She went with him through many trenches and craters, she stood with him before many collapsed and broken-down dugouts. She often looked at him and then continued on. But he went along apathetically and no light brought life into his dead expression. The wife was out there the next morning. Now she knew the way, and day after day the two of them could be seen there, how they went slowly over the muddy crater field—the man, tired and bent, and the woman, tall and silent. In the evening they returned to the inn and went to their room. Sometimes the interpreter accompanied them on the battlefield. Once he led them to a place where tourists seldom went. There wasn’t a soul to be seen except for a few groups of collectors at work.

At one place the labyrinth of trenches remained practically undisturbed. Thiedemann stopped in front of a dugout and ducked under it. He had done that often, but this time the wife paused and grabbed the arm of the interpreter. A few rotted boards, which had been the walls of the bunker, jutted out of the entrance. Thiedemann tested them with his hands, fumbling and careful.

At that moment a sharp pounding resounded from a few collectors who began to dig a few hundred yards away. It seemed so unbearably loud that the wife made a gesture with her hands as if she wanted to silence it—but in the next moment a powerful explosion shook the ground and after that there was whistling, howling, whizzing, followed by a desperate, screeching scream from the group of collectors.

“An explosion!” the interpreter yelled and ran over.

“They hit a shell while digging!”

The wife didn’t know how it happened but she was already kneeling next to a man whose leg was torn to pieces. She had ripped the sleeve from a worker’s jacket and wrapped it around his thigh; she took a piece of iron from the ground, squeezed it into the knot and made a tourniquet for the man, who became unconscious as he pushed up on his elbows in order to see the wound. His comrades carried him back to the huts. The wife stood up. The interpreter showered her with babble—this was the seventh explosion here in two weeks! She looked around for a tuft of grass with which she could wipe the blood from her hands. Then she suddenly became wide awake and pricked up her ears. The wounded man was already out of earshot yet there was a hollow, choked screaming to be heard. She ran back—

The scream came from Thiedemann. He lay flat on the ground as if he had madly thrown himself under cover. His shoulders heaved and he yelled into the earth. The interpreter looked at him, astonished, and wanted to lift him up. But the wife held him

back.

A few workers ran over from the huts. They thought that Thiedemann was wounded and wanted to carry him away. But the wife didn't let anyone near him. She was suddenly transformed: She moved hastily but forced them to leave; such was the power and the beseeching fear in her eyes. Shaking their heads, they finally went away, as did the interpreter, and the wife watched them until they lost themselves in the labyrinth of the trenches. Then she sat down on the steps of the dugout and waited.

Twilight set in, and Thiedemann became quiet. Now he lay on the ground as he had then, and the sounds of the Angelus floated over the nocturnal camp. But the wife still sat motionless.

Eventually Thiedemann stirred. He tried to push himself up on his elbows but he sank back down. After a while he tried it a second time. His wife didn't offer any help. She withdrew deeper into the darkness of the dugout.

Thiedemann felt his way over the ground. He unclenched his hands from a piece of the wood paneling. He tried to stand up, but to no avail. Then he sat there and kept sweeping his hands over the grass. He lifted his head and slowly turned it back and forth. And he did that for a while.

A bird began to sing over the heads of the two people. Thiedemann's hands quieted themselves. "Anna - " he said, slightly surprised.

The wife still didn't say anything but as she took Thiedemann's arm in order to lead him away her face suddenly twitched as if it would fall into pieces, and she staggered for a moment.

A few weeks later Thiedemann was able to take over the farm again. His wife had taken care of it well; the herd had grown by fourteen heads, and besides that they had also been able to buy the meadow and a few fields.