

Karl's Return

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The automobile flies down the road at full speed, the tires are singing, the road is straight, the windows rattle quietly and Strasbourg and Metz are already far behind us. Next to me Karl Broeger sits and eats a buttered roll, but he's not really concentrating. His thoughts are elsewhere.

It's been two hours since we ate lunch. After we recovered from the agreeable surprise of a half lobster with mayonnaise for twenty-five francs as an *hors d'oeuvre*—to say nothing of the reality of other appetizing things—and the enormous cheese platter of this memorable meal, Karl began to give me an account of his plans and future opportunities in great detail.

I don't understand much of that, for a whole mess of if's and but's and accounts and people were tied up in it. Whether as the result of the lobster or wine, or perhaps that they were both so astoundingly cheap, his hopes pile up until they are lost in the clouds of Mount Everest—in ten years he will be a manager, in twenty director, executive officer, president, and so forth. Currently Karl stood on such a low rung of the ladder that he could safely fall all the way down without a serious injury. He is a bank clerk and has a healthy constitution. That's why he can eat again just two hours after the lobster—a good, simple buttered roll. In the meantime, in order not to get ahead of his ideals, he's busy dreaming about what he would do first as managing director. *That* is Karl.

The automobile continues to careen through the villages—peaked gables, cows, colorful dresses, autumn wind and dung heaps whiz past our windows, curve after curve, hill after hill, until the alleys and trees end; the roads fork and narrow; sluggish, lumbering buses with fat painted letters and slogans approach, and on the road signs names appear, for which everything has to stop.

Karl packs his briefcase. Between bank papers he's crammed clippings from the sports section that describe the glorious soccer match *Rhein vs. Münster* (Karl's team won convincingly 6–0 and his performance was praised), but the most meaningful are a few pictures of charming ladies that he had gazed at during dessert.

The road ends in front of us. The automobile stops with squeaking brakes; we climb out and find ourselves in a marketplace of sorts. Cars are parked there, apprehensive chauffeurs stand around, the picture of competence in their peaked driving caps, groups of people gather and assemble, tour guides hunt around and collect their flocks and march out. All around us men conduct their business with quick, eager whispers;

yesterday's alleys of death have been transformed into boulevards with reputable post-war tourists, and where earlier every step meant blood and you choked on terrible fear, today there are boardwalks so the shoes of the tourists remain clean, and well-educated interpreters march out in front, so that everyone sees everything—guaranteed. Douaumont.

Someone is buzzing around us too, excited, quick, and eager—he wants to explain to us the strategy of things, to make us *au fait*, so to speak. Karl, strengthened by the lobster and the buttered roll, puts on a friendly smile and is all ears, and we allow ourselves to be led by carbide light through the fort; we even let him explain to us how clever the Germans were in that as soon as they had captured the fort, they installed machines in the cellar, electric lights, and put in cranes in order to lift the ammunition, all things that had not been there before.

Karl nods approvingly: Yes, that's how it was. But as we stand before the rusty helmets, the twisted rifle barrels and UXO and the tour guide even here begins to ramble and next to us yet another begins to let loose with the same story in English, Karl motions he's had enough; we push our way outside. In front of the helmets, body armor, and shrapnel down there he has fallen silent.

Outside, after the stifling air in the tunnel we come against a breeze, so soft and mild that you'd just love to lean up against it. It's still somewhat light, but it's almost that mysterious hour when day and night are in balance, and the scales stop for a moment and appear to pause and stand still—one more heartbeat and the magic is over, suddenly the weak gleam of evening is there, a cow moos in the field and night closes in.

Wave after wave of hillocks lay in violet shadows before us. The tour guide has followed us and starts up again behind us: "The pillbox over there was a point of great strategic interest —"

He doesn't go on. Karl looks around angrily and clearly says, "Shut your trap"

He doesn't say it aggressively, but rather quietly and therefore conclusively.

Then he goes ahead of us, away from the strategic emplacement, away from the inarticulate chattering of the tourist groups, away from the lobster, buttered rolls, pictures of girls, bank papers, away from the ten years of peace.

He goes and his face becomes ever more serious; his eyes narrow, they look intently at the ground; grass rustles, stones grate, a sign still warns of danger somewhere, but Karl doesn't care about these things anymore. He's on the hunt.

The tracks lead over the shell-peppered fields out through the rest of the entanglements. The interpreter keeps his distance after he yells heaps of warnings at us. Bunkers that were entombed and then dug up come into sight, rockets and completely shot up canteens lay about, a pathetic rusty fork sticks out of the yellow clay, half of a spoon hanging from its end.

We continue on for a bit. Karl stops every so often to check the lay of the land. Then he nods and presses on. The direction of a trench can be made out. But only the direction—craters, with a few tracks weaving between them that bend sharply around the corner.

A few more steps. One more glance. Karl has found what he's looking for.

He keeps quiet for a moment before he says “Here —”, then stops—and continues “It must have been right about here—we were here then—everything raged, a few shots and then ‘Attack’”. He repeats: “And then ‘Attack’”.

With that he leaves the trench behind, jumps up and is on the attack again. But this is no longer Karl Broeger, the man with the bank papers and the soccer reports; this is someone completely different, ten years younger, this is Sergeant Karl Broeger, whom the earth has grabbed again, the wild smell of ashes of the battlefield and the memory, which storms up inside him like a whirlwind.

His movement isn’t like it was before: no more hesitant searching; nor is it the pace with which I was comfortable; instead there is automatic, unintentional recall of an erratic, tense, careful creeping, the instinctive certainty of an animal; he doesn’t notice how he has drawn his head between his shoulders, how his arms hang loosely in their joints, he is ready to fall, he doesn’t notice how he avoids showing himself clearly, as if he didn’t want to be seen and he always stays under cover.

In this way we go forwards. A few hours before he probably would not have been able to find his way around like this; now he knows every groove in the dirt; the past has captured him again. We follow the trail—two men in tailored suits with caps and canes—we follow the trail along which he and his platoon crawled in that terrible night when the flares hung over the destruction like arc lamps and all the ground near Thiaumont and Fleury rose and sank under the fountain of explosions like a sea—we keep going along this path and around us is the peaceful twilight, but in the ears of Sergeant Broeger the battle rages, he holds his cane like a hand grenade, once again he leads his men through the craters to storm the city.

And the city is no longer there. It disappeared, leveled; never rebuilt because the ground is still mined, crammed with explosive material, too dangerous to be built upon again.

Karl leans against the memorial that marks the place where Fleury once stood, the village of horror whose ruins were stormed and lost six times in one night.

“There was a young recruit,” he says. “He was right next to me the whole time. When we had to pull back, he was gone. And later —”

Later, when they had captured the position, they found a piece of a corpse, but they didn’t know if it was him. And so he was reported as “Missing in Action” and his mother hopes even to this day that one morning, grown-up, strong, and broad-shouldered, he’ll step inside her plush living room and sit down next to her on the sofa.

“There’s no reason that he shouldn’t still be alive,” Karl considers and looks at me grimly. “Do you think he became a musician? That’s what he wanted then.”

I don’t know, and we move on. Twilight has given way to a dark blue. Karl stops again and says with a disparaging gesture, “See here, I just don’t understand it; it used to be that you couldn’t even think, it was hell, it was pure hell, it was the ultimate, it was the end, a witch’s cauldron, hopeless, and a person sat in there and was no longer human, and now we’re walking around here and it’s only a small valley here in the darkness, a harmless hillock —”

The mausoleum looms white in the darkness. The touring buses are ready to go. Abuzz, they drive away with their upholstered seats.

The dark landscape rolls past the automobile again. Cenotaphs, lots of cenotaphs, slip through our headlights. Most of them speak of *Gloire* and *Victoire*. Karl shakes his head. “That doesn’t tell the whole story, no, not at all. But they’re right, to have erected memorials, for nowhere has there been more suffering than here and this whole area. They’ve only left out one thing: Never again. That’s missing. You —”

The road stretches out white in front of us and continues slowly on. From behind the clouds the moon, red and funereal, comes out. Little by little it becomes smaller and brighter, until it shines silver over the American Cemetery of Romagne. Fourteen thousand crosses shimmer in the pale light. Fourteen thousand crosses in rows behind each other—your eyes burn, they’re so astoundingly straight, vertical, diagonal. Under each of them a grave. On each of them an inscription: Herbert C. Williams, 1st Lieutenant, Chemical Warfare, Connecticut, 13th Sept. 1918—Albert Peterson, 137th Inf., 35th Div., North Dakota, 28th Sept. 1918—fourteen thousand—there had been twenty five thousand. Killed in the attack on Montfaucon, killed a few weeks before peace. Only one cemetery for so many. Everywhere, in hundreds of places, lay the others, the white wooden crosses of the French, the black ones of the Germans.

In the middle of the fourteen thousand crosses, distanced and small, a solitary man walks back and forth on the main path, back and forth. That’s more dismal than it would have been if everything were still. Karl pushes on.

In the cities children play in the squares. All around them are businesses, houses, churchyards, newspapers, noise, screams, streets, the world; but they keep playing, lost in their simple games, they play like they do all over the world.

“Children,” says Karl, and in the darkness you don’t see what’s wrong with him, “Children are the same everywhere, aren’t they—children don’t know anything about anything —”

And while I think about that and throw him a look, he turns around to me: “Come on, let’s go—why are we standing around here?” and turns his head and looks tensely out the window for the rest of the drive.