

## Smoking

The match head burst to life with a fierce snap and surge of flame, faded quickly, lasting just long enough to pull the heat through my cigarette and draw out the precious aroma of tobacco. My back hurts, my head hurts, my arms hurt, my legs hurt, my soul hurts. Listing hurts is a waste of time, figured that out early on, but it won't stop me from doing so, no sir. When all is lost all that's left is complaining, take complaints away from a man and you might as well take his humanity.

I look left and see Jake and Rudy trading whiskey for boots. I look right and see Drew sleeping hard, and if it weren't for the gear and the filth he could be lounging at home in his favorite chair next to a cozy fire. No fire here, just the orange glow at the tip of my cigarette and a feeble curl of smoke drifting from between my fingers. Up and down the row a river of weary souls waits for dawn with the nervous energy of a drinking doe that just heard the snap of a branch in the nearby reeds.

The sunrise will set fire to the horizon soon. I look up at the slowly lightening sky, the comforting dark rolling back like the tide, taking in the quiet dignity of the stars before my eyes are blasted by the flares of explosions, my ears corrupted by the screams of dying men and the crash of breaking things. Day always comes too soon.

I take another drag on my cigarette relishing the sweet sickness. Going to war turned me into a smoker, and a killer. The former is the harder to swallow oddly enough, maybe because I didn't see it coming. No one tells you how to deal with the stress. They prepare you for it sure, and they train you to function in spite of it, but not to really DEAL with it, to reconcile the person you've become with who you used to be. I can end a man's life more easily than I can pick up a pen and write a letter anymore. What would I say to the people back home anyway?

I'm tired. I should try to sleep, but every time I close my eyes I see them writhing in flames, screeching and flailing, the enemy. They're supposed to die. Everyone says so. But everyone doesn't have to pull the trigger, to spread greedy hot death that moves like liquid and smoke and terror.

A runner is coming down the line. One hand grips his helmet like a talisman, the other waves urgently when he stops to relay orders. It's almost time. I clench the cigarette in my teeth and hitch up my gear. My finger starts to twitch and that makes me nervous. The twitch is more noticeable now and I don't know if it's fear or desire that makes it move on its own.

The sun is nearly up and the agony of sight makes me want to jam the cigarette into my open eyes for a few more minutes with the dark. Instead I take one last pull, long and slow, and let the smoke spill from my mouth in an eruption of twilight haze. It's time to do my duty, time to repress my fear, time to set the world ablaze. I only hope there's smoke enough to hide my deeds from the distant stars as they fade into the obscurity of day.