

The Soul of This Land

When we arrived at Otxandio, I hoped to sleep, but the priest was trying to take the three women's confessions, and The Butcher, spotting our uniforms, pulled us from the crowd and asked if our rifles still had bullets. We said yes, and he gave us a bottle of wine and told us to wait in the back of the lorry. At least two dozen people crowded around, spitting curses at the women.

I put my nose over the bottle. It was vino de pitarra—a severe, soil-flavored wine that reminded me of the fighting in Elorrio when the earth erupted around us and I couldn't get the taste of dirt out of my mouth no matter how many times I was sick. The wine's grapes grew everywhere in the valley, and even at my hungriest I'd yet to eat any.

I tipped the bottle back but kept my lips pursed and then gave it to Isidro. My hands still shook. The houses in Otxandio alternated between those made of cobblestones and those that were stucco and as white as the snow-capped Mount Gorbeia in the distance. The moon was full and low, and the white houses looked as if they had been scrubbed or painted that day, as if the villagers were expecting somebody of importance. Isidro nudged my knee with the bottle, but I waved it away.

A little girl was with one of the women. She had a tight grip on her mother's shirt and wouldn't let go. The other two climbed into the back of the lorry. I turned my hands to see the dark spots that were Francisco's blood. Finally, The Butcher grabbed the girl and lifted her into the back with us. Her mother followed.

"The girl, too?" I asked.

There must have been a crack in my voice because The Butcher laughed. "She's just coming along for the ride," he said before opening the passenger side of the truck.

The road snaked along the base of Mount Gorbeia. To my left, the silhouette of a beech forest stood out against the night. The trees looked like monstrous hands growing out of the earth—their naked branches, grotesque and skeletal fingers, reached towards something in the sky. They were there, I knew, to remind me that there was a force out there other than us. One of the women had her leg pressed against mine. I felt its warmth but was too tired to move.

When the road straightened, the truck slowed to a stop. The woman's leg tensed. The Butcher came around the back and motioned to the mother of the girl. The woman hugged her daughter and wiped the tears from her face, kissed her on the cheek, and said to hurry home that she'd be back soon enough. The Butcher held out his hands for the girl, but the woman spat at him and lifted the girl over the tailgate and set her on the ground. Hurry home, she said. Isidro looked over at me, but there was nothing in his eyes. I imagined he was as tired as I was. It'd be impossible to think that he wouldn't have been. "Hurry home," The Butcher said, and soon we were off again and the girl disappeared in a cloud of dust tinted blue by the moon. I expected the mother to cry or to search through the dust for her daughter, but she set her jaw forward and remained as still as a monument, the only movement coming from the bumps in the road.

Off in the distance I saw the village of Legutio and the steeple in the plaza and felt the cold air coming off the lake's surface. We got close enough so that I saw light coming from a window and then the driver parked the truck but kept the engine rumbling. He stepped out and lit a cigarette and walked until his shape disappeared into the darkness.

The Butcher ordered the women out, and we followed them from the lorry's bed. He walked with them to the side of the road. They didn't resist but resigned themselves to their stories' end. I suppose the furthest one on the edge the mother of the little girl, could have tried to run, but she didn't, and Isidro tipped the bottle of wine back until there was nothing left. He tossed it on the ground then wiped his mouth with his forearm while retrieving his rifle.

The Butcher made a grunting sort of orgasmic sound and in a jerky motion grabbed one of the women by the hair,

and I saw the white of her neck for a moment, exposed as it was to the moon, and then he plunged his knife into her throat. Blood burst from her and spurted onto his face. It all looked black. The other woman ran, and Isidro and I shot at her until she crumpled and cried out in pain. I hit her in the leg. The mother of the little girl just slumped to the ground as if she'd been shot or stabbed, and waited. The Butcher laughed as he finished with the woman. His teeth shone. The other woman had been trying to crawl away, but her ruined leg was a weight. The Butcher put his boots into her face, and it went dark with blood so that I couldn't make out her features anymore. Her arms shook but this was only the nerves. The mother sat still through this and remained so even after The Butcher squatted in front of her and whispered something in her ear though she didn't give any indication that the words reached her. He tapped the bottom of her chin with his bloody knife and looked into her eyes. He said a few more things to her that I couldn't make out and then stood up. He walked past her but as he did he sunk the knife into the back of her neck just as the matadors do with the bulls, and she fell with a defeated finality just as those bulls do when their spinal cords have been severed, an exhausted mass on the ground.

The Butcher called for the driver and from out of the darkness I could see the glowing cherry of his cigarette. "What about the bodies?" I asked.

"They bury their own around here," The Butcher said.

The drive back to Otxandio took less time. I thought we would come upon the girl, but we never saw her. Eventually, the truck pulled up to a tavern, and The Butcher slapped me on the back. "My valiant ones," he said, "you earned your drinks tonight." The blood had dried on his face.

The priest and a few other men had been waiting inside for us. They shook our hands and poured us some of that god-awful wine, and the priest said a prayer for us and our souls and our land and the fight ahead. I think it was a prayer, but maybe I thought this because he was a priest. Out of anybody else's mouth the words wouldn't have been all that special. We raised our glasses, and I tried to force the wine down but coughed it up, and Isidro hit my back several times. The Butcher called for another round. Isidro and I didn't know anyone so after a while we sat by ourselves against the wall and looked out the window towards the mountains. The sun had broken over the horizon, shadows moved across the plains. The snow was as bright as before and the houses just as white. I wouldn't have been surprised to see someone going by each one scrubbing them clean. I'd never before seen a village so polished to the bone.

Isidro's eyes were half closed. "How many days ago did Francisco die?" he asked.

"That happened today," I said.

"Don't fuck with me," he said.

I leaned my head against the window. It was cold and I felt that I could stay there forever. I realized that we still needed to find lodgings. My skin itched. It didn't feel like my own.

"I think I'm losing my mind," he said.

Across the street an old man left his house. He looked toward the square where the people had gathered earlier in the evening then went back inside.

"You're not touching your wine?"

"I can't stand the taste of the stuff," I said.

He reached over and raised it off the table. "To Francisco," he said.

We'd been together since those first days in Markita and then his head popped like a squeezed grape. Just like that. It was the only bullet fired. The day had been a peaceful one and after the gunshot's last ripples faded, the sounds of nature returned, and the rifleman, wherever he had been, never fired at us again. We couldn't find him, and we spent the rest of the afternoon digging a grave for Francisco in the cemetery outside of Arrazola.

"My valiant ones," The Butcher said, "join us. We're in this fight together for the soul of this land. We should also

drink together.”

“My skin doesn’t feel like my own,” I said to Isidro as we stood. “I need to get some sleep.”

“One more drink,” Isidro said, “and then we’ll see which one of these guys can put us up for the night.”

The sun’s light came in squarely through the windows now, and The Butcher moved over on the bench to make room for us. The priest was drunk and hummed a song popular among the Loyalists in those days.