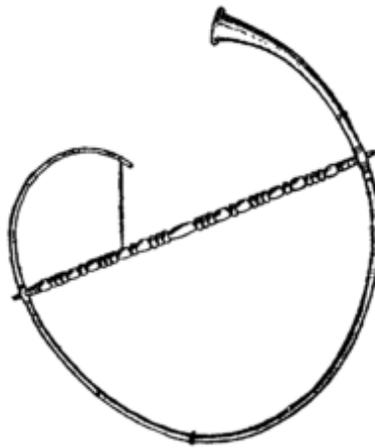


GUILT

By
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He awoke, eyes fluttering open to a half-light. Face down in mud, there was no pain but no memory either. He raised his head slightly and saw scratches in the sodden ground next to his hand. Pushing himself up into a sitting position, he realised the marks were actually letters – ‘BUCCINATOR’.

He could make nothing of that, so he filed it away for consideration later.

Standing, a building was visible a few minutes walk away, downhill into the wide valley below. The young man set off, without looking back.

Rain again, but he hardly noticed, soaked as he was. Nearing the building – the hostelry, yes, he remembered now – he realised he had been there before.

Flashes and images slewed past the numbness in his mind, dreamlike memories of warm days; a long journey. It was cold here, so cold, and he had travelled so far. Even moving, there was no warmth to be found.

The distance closed, the building quickly reared out of the rain. The front door hung off its hinges. Stepping inside cautiously, for there was little light as darkness closed without, he waited for his eyes to adjust. His vision did not improve, no matter how he blinked or squinted; he wondered at that.

Straining, he could make out smashed pots, plates, mugs, stools, benches, tables and stop!

Bodies – many broken bodies, torn, bloody and worse.

The man stumbled against a post, unbalanced by shock. What had happened here?

All drifted out of focus as a veil settled over his mind’s eye, a bright and cheerful filter smothering the wreckage of now in warm glow. Other memories flooded in with this soothing light: singing, laughter, women.

They had travelled all the way to the northern edge of the world, he and his – were they his friends? Comrades? Both perhaps? Once here, stuck for the next twenty-five years, deciding to make the best of it was all they could do, and getting blind drunk seemed like as good a beginning as any. He had ended by throwing up all over himself. This recollection brought a smile as he checked his tunic; yes, the stains were still there on his chest, so this memory was clearly a recent one. Vaguely, he recalled being helped to a bunk for what remained of the night.

The smile faded quickly as he made his way through a charnel house to the room he believed to be his; or rather, the one in which he had finally passed out.

His breath caught upon entering. On the bunk was a buccina, a long, curved war horn. Striding over to pick up the instrument, feeling it in his hands, he knew it was his. Instinctively knew it. Lifting the buccina to his lips, all the missing memories howled through his mind like furies.

The first recollection was panic, shouting, men running and banging doors. Helping hands had dragged him indelicately to his feet and shoved him out of the room; someone bellowed, “Move! Or it’ll be a flogging!”

His squad had been route marched to answer a call for help up on the crags he had so recently walked away from. Following his memories, the soldier stepped out into the rain once more, retracing his earlier steps. The dusk was black cloud heavy.

Was it just this morning when they arrived upon these crags in force? He neared the rocky outcrop, surrounded by memories of a frantic shuffle for position, armed men on horseback coming at them from both sides. They were strange creatures these men, feral, painted and vicious; worse still, they were many.

Outnumbered, ill-equipped and sick, the only escape routes through the enemy or over a cliff; how had he survived?

That was this morning; this evening the solitary man slipped and scaled his way back up onto the crags into the encroaching dusk. Striding away earlier, he had not seen the bodies, but they were everywhere.

Panic tore through him like a gale. "If I can just get help," the young man spluttered frantically, over and over to no one who could hear.

Reaching for his buccina, he stared along the arch of its length, feeling the little dents with his fingers. Dents he had allowed to happen over the long journey from home. Damage he had paid for with a beating, more than once.

A brief moment of clarity bloomed; the scratches in the mud where he had awoken earlier swam before his eyes. "I'm the buccinator," he breathed the words, the icy wind ripping them away. To the instrument he said, "I didn't have you earlier, when you could have done some good. I was drunk and sick and I left you behind. Even the chance that help might have come to your call may have been enough to give those savage animals second thoughts; may have been enough to save my friends."

He took a deep breath and wound the horn again and again, for several minutes. Finally spent, he sat on a rock, looking away from the destruction of so many lives.

The rolling moorland was completely deserted; he wasn't sure what he could achieve by continuing to call, so he steeled himself to walk among the men who had been cut down. Some of the injuries were terrible, unnecessary and born more of malice than of war.

Presently, he came full circle to the word scratched in the mud, and the body adjacent. The letters were obscured now, the icy rain continuing, some of them completely unrecognisable. He turned the face over and stared for a moment before collapsing to his knees. He looked down into dead eyes and began to sob uncontrollably.

He knew the face like it was his own, because it had been; he was looking at his own corpse.

The lost man was incapable of movement for many minutes until something in the distance caught his eye. Getting stiffly to his feet, he wiped his tears away to see more clearly.

Miraculously, from the south-west, torches were flickering brightly through what remained of the twilight. The steady thrum of horses' hooves at a slow gallop grew louder, carried on the wind.

He quickly bent to pick up the buccina, prepared his breathing in the way he had been trained, and blew the horn several times. He saw a dozen or so men split from the group and head for the hostelry, whilst the lion's share of the force headed straight for him, perhaps eighty men and horse in all. He helplessly hoped against hope that he would be saved and that all could somehow be set right.

The men approached, slowed and dismounted. They walked to the bodies, these riders who shared some similarities in dress with himself, but with little differences which set them apart as their own.

Though they seemed to have heard his horn cry, they neither saw nor heard *him*. Looking down at the buccina in his hands, he wondered if it, or any of it, was real.

Exhausted beyond endurance, he succumbed and lay, literally *by* himself, in the muck. In this half state, his mind fixed upon his lost love, the girl from whom he had been pressed when the soldiers came. Closing his eyes tightly around her face, he slipped away.

Warmth on his skin; he opened his eyes.

The day was bright and cloudless blue, even as the sun was low in the sky – the Ides of October. Rising, he walked to the top of the hill and sat alone on the rocks, seeing not a living human soul all afternoon or evening.

He closed his eyes.

When he awoke it was to a storm; torrential rains and gale force winds laid the grasses flat to the southern side of the slope.

Each awakening was to a new situation but never an inch from where he had fallen that day, scratching a reminder of what he should have been into the hillside for his soul to bear.

Rain, shine, snow, storm – upon his crag, the solitary soldier endured...

Days blurred until something new appeared. He opened his eyes and there were men everywhere. Mules and ponies laboured, carrying stone to workers who were making the most of fair weather during the closing days of the building season. Almost all of them looked like soldiers, the uniforms familiar, but not entirely. They were building what seemed to be a huge footing, fully ten feet wide and stretching many, many yards in both directions.

As the sun began to set, he wound his buccina, his one method of communication with the world around him and laughed for the first time in what seemed like decades. Mirth born from the relief of being alone no longer, mixed with the startled reactions of the men nearest him – the builders left site in a hurry that evening.

When he woke next, the men were gone and a huge wall crowned the top of his crag, fifteen feet high and lime-washed white. It now seemed to run off far to the distance in both directions, dazzling in the rays of the westering sun, and to the west he could just make out an encampment with men and animals labouring still.

“Why am I still here?” he asked of the wind.

It was the Ides of October; it was *always* the Ides of October.

He cried softly, alone again.

The wall and towers rose and decayed, were renewed and decayed once more. Finally, they started to shrink as if the stone was being stolen by the men of the land. During his lonely sentinel, he had lost count of the times this crag had greeted his waking eyes.

The landscape changed slowly, buildings came and went with the movement of man. Roads decayed into muck and ridges, eventually remade over, moving slightly hither or thither. He watched it all, but no longer cried at his loneliness.

There were no longer any tears.

One.

He closed his eyes.

He awoke to sunshine; the Ides of October. He heard a scrambling from the cliff face; looking over the edge, he was surprised to see a man and a woman in brightly reflective coats and strangely shaped helmets. The couple were attempting to scale the cliffs with multicoloured, magical ropes, looped through many metal hoops and accoutrements.

Over the centuries, a fairly easy path had emerged to either side of the crags; he often saw people strolling along the length of the wall's ruin. This latest incident baffled him, however; he could not quite believe his eyes. Why should they take such a route when an obvious safe path was so near? Why would a woman be dressed as a man or climbing rocks at all?

Then, with the inevitability of a falling stone, to his mind at least, one of the fixtures gave way. The man plummeted twenty feet or more and collected the woman on his way down. They both screamed and hit the ground hard.

Moans and small, breathless cries reached the top of the cliffs; they must have survived, for the moment at least.

He looked around hopelessly, powerless to help.

His eye finally alighted on the buccina, propped against a rock, his only companion through these many years. He raised her to his lips and blew.

The noise she made was a braying, parping noise, and may even have been comical were it not so often the harbinger of war. All across the known world through centuries of carnage, of battles and fields beyond counting, her voice sang death or salvation for someone.

For approaching two millennia, the lost soldier had agonised about his morning of hangover and vomit that long-gone day. Fretting to the point of near insanity over whether the buccina, his simple horn, may have averted the tragedy which was to shape his eternity.

However, today her cry brought help, and in time. Today his call was made and answered and before he knew it people were there, bewildered by the sound of the buccina, but they were there.

A man on top of the crags shouted what must have been words of encouragement down to the injured people, words that the buccinator could not understand. A nearby woman spoke more quietly at a small pink box covered with glittery bits, twinkling like stars in the light of the low sun.

Within minutes an enormous flying demon approached from the east to fill the sky overhead.

Terrified, he flattened himself against the wall. The monstrosity disgorged yet more men on hugely long ropes down to the bottom of the cliff. The demon hovered; the noise all encompassing. He couldn't understand – why was no one else afraid? The injured people were swiftly lifted and borne away in the belly of the beast.

Moments later he was alone again, always alone again.

Before grief could claim him once more, he took the buccina in his hands one last time and blew – this time her cry was a cry for victory. Help had come, the imperilled had been saved. However long he had endured or must endure still, he knew that he had called and it had made a difference.

The buccinator could lay down his guilt this day.

How he wished he could peel back these centuries of despair to tell his companions, his friends, that he was sorry; he was so sorry that he had failed them in this very field of blood and screams.

He looked down from his crag across the wide valley, as he had so many times. These moors often so bleak, often so brutal, glowed radiant on *this* day; the sun's late burn finding fresh colours from earth and sky. His gaze followed the southern slope downwards.

Shock – his jaw dropped as he saw faces he recognised; laughing, cheering faces, calling to him. Half stumbling down the hill in disbelief, he virtually crashed into the waiting men. Like passing from a room to another room, all was as it had been, back slapping and banter.

Slowly, the soldiers parted, and behind them stood his father and mother. Running the last few steps to clasp them in his arms, he squinted over their shoulders.

Out of the low sun she walked, luxuriant black hair swaying in the breeze. The young man had been torn away from her by the army; a girl who had never married, but had wasted away in grief after he left.

He pulled the horn from around his shoulders, kissed his mother's cheek and ran to her with the buccina, his bi-millennial companion, still gripped tightly in his left hand. He reached out and held them both with all of his strength.

For centuries uncounted, these forbidding moors had been separated from the fields of Elysium only by the hair's breadth of his guilt.

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