

MILITARY ROADS

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MILITARY ROADS

John Fraser



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Hunting

Da brennt ihre Fahne mitten im Feind, und sie jagen ihr nach.*

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Weise von Liebe
und Tod des Cornets Christopher Rilke*

THE DUNES stroll away like waves of the yellow sea.

My friend – Finch, we call him – has made a cityscape. It fills this little house – more like a shack. The room – could be a street in some Soho, London, New York, miniature, quite personal. He adds a small restored Colosseum, statue of the Colossus too – him, Finch, in his country clothes. On the sidewalks, blobby replicas of us, his friends. Friends of his, of our, youth:

Dea, the joyous, uninvited friend of life. Mansour, forever destitute, unaccepting of poverty as his destiny. Luca, the pure but not especially noble soul – slave to old books. Odile, mundane, untrusting, in a set of

* Their banner is burning in the midst of the enemy, and they ride after it.

mismatched clothes. The women, naturally, more beautiful, desirable, than now. Myself – between experiences, then as now.

There's other friends as well, no family, though Finch gets his power from relatives – this little country, just a hop across the sea from us, is almost his, there to pick up like a fallen fruit of good or evil – and we drop in when driven or when bored. Finch. Friend.

The miniature fills the only room, alcoves left for sleeping in, if the mood takes hold of you. Outside, the sand.

'It's to avoid nostalgia, this mock-up,' he says. 'See, you're all there, quite small. Just like real city life.'

I say, 'You could have stayed back there and seen us life-size every day.'

He pushes me out back – 'There is a cat. Quite desperate. There's lots of sand here, as you see, but not a lot to eat. I can't meet all its needs,' and he points around – there's not much here. We don't see the cat.

'The locals think a pet's a stupid luxury,' he says, 'You'll see, there's no rats here.'

I say, 'The locals seem to draw too fine a point.' At this, he nods.

'It's all memory,' he says, 'And yes, it's all a little false. All there even when you don't want to remember. Or can't.'

I say, 'You don't seem to have much time for us, individually. It's just a made-up scene. You might add figurines of people who you've never met,' and he says,

‘Yes! I might. This here, though, is all my living space. And friends – well, you need this little lump of them to fill a little section of your life. See – here’s the bar, that guy was shot there for bad debts. We didn’t drink there, after. Superstition! Whores lived here,’ he points, and yes – surely it is a Soho somewhere, where we passed our youth – guys selling strass from barrows, whispering of horses. Females that trade themselves, or promise to.

‘You see,’ says Finch, ‘It’s the whole range – titillation, bit of artistic stripping, little theatres, clubs. Lettuces too, and mangoes here. And in the buildings,’ and he pushes my head down to the painted roadway, ‘are waiting guys who I, we, never knew. They wait their cue – the famous ones, in photos, ready to come flitting through our lives. Leaders, groups, bands,’ and he laughs loud.

The figurines are roughly made, but there’s a tiny stamp of life, of difference. If you don’t recognise them, it’s because you forget the original.

*

In walks the cat. I say, ‘It has a most mature gaze.’

Finch says, ‘Don’t be so solemn about it all. No one keeps a record. It’s a cat, just don’t exaggerate to make a talking point.’

I say, ‘We have to throw ourselves in – this soup of life. Like laying down a fiche, staking, spinning the

wheel. It absolves you – everyone is in the game, accepts whatever. Whatever turns up. Like the cat.’

*

‘You need a cause,’ Finch says, sternly, ‘The game can last forever.’

Finch is an awkward guy. My host. He’s important too – his name, his family’s important, it passes to him, gives him a substance.

There’s uprising in the air – even here, rebellion. All this sand.

I scan his books – there’s *All You Need to Know about Shrapnel* and *Burns* – not poetry, I guess.

There is a lot of silence. He says, ‘Maybe we should try some shooting. I get good stuff, arms and the rest, quite locally – the market.’

I say, ‘No, not animals. And are there any here?’

He says, ‘No, there’s no animals. There’s people. That tree’s the frontier – just go beyond it, when the bad guys come in trucks ... We shoo them off. They can’t pursue – this here’s another country.’

‘It seems arbitrary,’ I say.

‘All wars are like this now. The killing, the real stuff, the quantity, it’s done in other ways – by famine, the price of pills and rugs ... Then, there’s prisons. And the sea. Back you go – the horsemen of the old apocalypse. But here, it’s all attrition – big bangs and bombs is out. It’s arrangements between the soldieries here, the risk is slight, and none at all for us. Or hardly so.’

I ask, 'You're sure the bad guys are authentic, evil?'

He says, 'Absolutely so. And then – it's back to eat. I hope you like my pickles. Even if you don't, that's what there is.'

He's shouting now – 'The rims! The rims, you fool. If you don't watch it, they jam it up, those bullets jam your gun.'

I say, 'Of course, I know all that, the loading magazines. It's just another rule, it's reason coming through. The guys here – they've got computers. They could reason, but they've got machines instead. Though it is true, that when the big wave comes, they say it is the Elephant, come to bathe.'

'Just owning things, even computers, doesn't make you rational,' he says. 'Besides, you must believe in something. If you don't anthropomorphise bad things, the universe is just a box of curios. It's not just you, that you're finite – it's life, unpleasant all the time. Things need a cause – and so do you. A big thing needs its Elephant.'

He waves his gun. Now, mine's prepared. He says,

'I give you just one magazine – even if you load it right, you get to shoot one guy thirty times or so.'

I'm not convinced. I say, 'You are the strategist, not me.'

He says, 'We put sheepskins on our heads, so's not to stick out. It's not a thing that I do well, this finalising, aiming. Lucky for them that they're bad guys and we're bad shots.'

I say, ‘I remember, last time I visited, there were lush houses here, not shacks like this. The people came for safety, now they’ve fled again. Brought it with them, anxiety and peril.’

It had everything, this place. Bars, massages. Just to visit.

Finch says, ‘The big change. Revolution. Coming to take repression off our backs.’

He says, ‘Even if you get to choose your olive enemy, you won’t know his circumstance.’

*

The truck drives by. We shoot. It stops – and here the bad guys come!

I say, ‘In the movie, we die.’

Finch says, ‘Into that shack – quick, and out the back. No movie.’

I say, ‘Wow! An egg. It’s quite enormous, on a stand, the mounts look ormolu ...’

‘Leave that egg,’ he says: ‘Don’t loot. And drop your weapon too.’

Whatever kind of bird or beast – a roc, a dinosaur – the only thing of interest here, of value. Poor people, just their egg, a conversation piece.

We run. It’s not betrayal. I say, ‘We could resist some more. More sacrifice.’

‘Go ahead!’ says Finch.

I wish – that egg. I could have stolen it. And then – tree in the yard, red waxy flowers, they last forever with a little care. The right wall. Right sun. Right family, lots of eyes that watch.

‘Yes,’ he says, ‘You could have tried a cutting. Forget the family bit.’

*

The bad guys move away. Back in their truck. All safe.

Finch carries on: ‘The good guys want democracy – each counting fully for himself. Or herself – maybe more complicated, that.’

I say, ‘If it’s about ones, and being one – they should do everything by themselves, one by one.’

‘That’s not possible,’ Finch says. ‘Besides, that leaves you out, nothing for you to do.’

‘I am your guest. Then, there’s the flags, the pride, the dignity.’

‘Pictures! You here for pictures?’

I say, ‘Finch, don’t be an uncle – every question, every doubt, you put the stopper in the bottle, cork the discourse up. Let things stand outside and open in the sun and oxidise.’

He’s offended. He says, ‘Don’t be embarrassed – everybody runs. That’s strategy, and tactics too. We could even catch a train – they must be running still. You need to find a station where they stop. Out here, they go too fast, you can’t jump on.’

He's laughing at me now, but he too is scared the bad guys, soldiers, come to look for us. He says, 'I'm well considered here. Some politics, some leadership – being dead, it doesn't do, if you've ambitions.'

*

Back in his house. We, the model memory, we're still in place, his friends, glued down.

He plays a record, says, 'Those old operas – all the sentiments are there, victory, pride, defeat, disappointment. Dignity. Good deaths – well merited. Some vindicated. All by castrati, at that time.'

I say, 'No talk of freedom, of good guys? All that?'

'There is a glimpse, of course. They weren't Neanderthals. Craftsmen, counts, and whores. Mind you, in adolescence, being a castrato's a good deal. I'm quite wistful – you gain years, intrigue in peace, and skip that drizzly time of yearn and loss. Then, back to rutting, with the rest.'

I say, 'All hard to arrange.'

He says, 'Don't be so fucking judicious.'

We sit and face each other. 'Well, what's the moral?' he asks, shoots out his legs, long boots.

We lie, and wait. The bad guys' truck. To take our shot.

Finch is a tiny, mouthy guy. He says, 'If you don't have a cause, you don't become responsible.'

I say, 'Responsible for everything? For all you do? For everyone? Who you do it to? The bad guys in the truck – they're not even our bad guys. I refer, of course, to local bad ones. And besides, there is a pretext always – maybe I mean a context – interests around there are. People – being forced, constrained to do ... what it is they do, what you do.'

He asks, ruffled, 'What you do? What you really do? Or what you intend to do, and what you hope transpires? Intention – before, after, during – what? your mission? Your impulsion?'

We're back to youthful days and arguments. I say – I half recall how it is done, the arguing – 'I mean – free will. Or do I mean free choice? How you put these things – it cuts and wraps up your intent in quite some other ways.'

'That's so much better,' Finch says, 'Leave will out, it's quite too coloured. Let's say you'll shoot because you're motivated. Forget the mechanics of it, free this, free that – or not.'

I say, 'So, being bad guys – you don't think that's part of it? Let's go back, and see what we're responsible for – a sentiment, I guess it is – responsibility, feeling easy with yourself. Suppose you've shot your guy his thirty times ...'

He says, 'You've surely done the thing, but after all, the guy had staked his chip like you. He lets you out. Reciprocity. Don't give it another thought. And there's

no law can make you virginal again – though your conscience can!’

We’re sweating now. The sun is overhead. He says, irritated,

‘If you can pass the time like this, with doubts, maybe you shouldn’t be here after all.’

‘But I’m your friend, your guest,’ I say.

There is a pause. I say, ‘You mean, the moment of the act is not the place you think of “why?” or consequence. Give battle, and that’s it?’

‘In the end, yes. I can’t resist, they move me, spur me on, our guys, the good ones. They’re so much brighter than the bad. Freedom! Loyalty too, of course. Procedure. Not some big random boss-god, with elephant goad and thunderbolt. Abstractions, rhetoric – that’s what draws us in and keeps us going all our lives. A bunch of guys, all waving flags, and shouting ‘freedom’ – who’s not stirred? They say they aren’t afraid, they don’t fear death. They are unique. Soft lad like you, you want to open doors, breathe in the rose-scent in the garden ... They want to scale the wall and throw it down.’

We sweat some more. I say, ‘Those guys and their “free”. You say, “I feel free”, quite casual, but “I’m free” has quite a different weight, and more specific too. Did Neanderthals say, “I feel free”? Could we expect that of them?’

He fidgets, says, ‘No! Not your Neanderthals again – even if they lived round here.’

‘Bred in our families. Maybe it’s an evolutionary thing. Brains,’ I say.

He says, ‘Talking of times past – now, you shoot guys the wrong colour, you’re in quite another movie.’

‘Yes,’ I say, ‘I should take care. Like shoots on like, guys like me, a tasteful olive colour, we choose the similar. Though olives are mostly green.’

‘That fits you, at this moment,’ he says.

I say, ‘You need a colour chart. Fear’s a thing, it turns you green. We’re all afraid.’

I say, ‘I want to chum along with you, seeing it’s your pickles that we’re eating. I hadn’t thought of taking sides. I’d no intention. Just a holiday, all switched off, or on idle.’

‘Hmmm,’ he says. ‘Being a guest that’s just dropped in – doesn’t exclude free choice, free will. It brings it out! The thing’s a mystery. Guys here – not the tourists, the real guys – they don’t have this gap, hiatus, between their will and action. Their lives – they’re like knitted sleeves. They don’t drop in on me, unless they’re family.’

I say, ‘I’m at a loss.’

‘If you get your history wrong, some cousin’s killed. There’s all his family – they’re on you all your life. And theirs. Responsibility – the other side of loyalty. You choose your banker wrong – and there’s a guy, he’s lost his job. He blames you, but it isn’t him who pays. You do. It’s reasoned out and knitted close, relations here. Cause, will, effect. That’s why they have a book that sets

the rules. There's just one book, that binds it up – the risk, responsibility – the things you've lost.'

I say, 'Well – mislaid. Got wrong.'

'Exactly. Got them wrong. It's like – you're on a winning cycle, and you can't get off. The same with losing – you must persevere until you win – or can't lose any more. On you go till you fall off, win till you lose. Insanity to stop and interrupt your luck. Luck nothing! It's blind chance, but cyclical.'

If you're in luck, you win until you lose it all. No rest, no pause.

The disc, it plays, and sings, '*cinto ho il crin d'alloro*' – 'my brow is bound with laurel'. We've won, we're safe, the soldiers don't come after us.

*

We spend the evening in a bar.

One of the backing group – she wears a short red dress – makes me see deeper into life than I have ever looked, have ever peered, before. I say,

'My, you're beautiful. Your skin.'

She's been bored out and filled with precious electricity. I say,

'You're Vietnamese?'

'No, I'm American.'

'I mean that too, of course.'

What might I become, being close to her. Even if she went around the world and sang, the being close would be enough – carrying gear, giving her lots of money.

‘You’re turning to stone,’ says Finch.

Now I understand – conversion, afflatus, the stars come down, it runs through you, with no syringe, just through the eyes as if benign juice was flowing in, has hooked you up. This is the spirit, the form you worship, terrible indifferent thing. She says,

‘I must go now. It’s been pleasant.

‘Yes.’

It won’t finish, ever.

‘You’re rather naïve,’ says Finch, my friend. Reluctant host.

‘That’s the first time the truck has stopped,’ he says. ‘And, if you don’t mind, don’t mention the sheep, the skins.’

I say, ‘I can’t imagine why you settle for your people here, boosting you up. Power – hmmm. Why don’t you choose freedom. Some kind of it. You know it isn’t in the state. Nor praying. Poetry. All those vain things.’

‘Settle for it?’ he asks, ‘It’s here, on hand. Of course, I’d have liked something – other. All my own. Who wouldn’t? Let’s get rid of the oppressor here, maybe the one over there, beyond the tree, the bad guys ... the real bad guys ... But – I still value you, old friend, and all the others. Old friends.’

‘What’s that to do with anything?’ I ask.

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