

1978 - Scars from the Eastern Front

Annandale, Sydney, 1978

I lived in a small unit, one of many within a huge building, within sight of the city skyline. Well, those on the other side of the building had a view of the city skyline. My unit faced the other direction, where I enjoyed an uninterrupted view of the rear lane and the endless row of garbage cans. My tiny unit was on the first floor, reasonably easy to get to. Those on the uppermost third floor heaved and puffed up six flights of stairs. A few people up there developed a very impressive talent. They could lean over the side of their balcony, take aim, and drop their bags of garbage directly into their garbage bin, sitting down in the lane, way below. I happened to be walking past the garbage bins the first time this happened, and the noise of the impact scared the hell out of me.

On working days I enjoyed a regular routine, walking to the bus stop, catching a bus into the city, then a train over the Harbour Bridge to North Sydney. I then walked a few blocks alongside hundreds of other people in their twenties and thirties, off to work. Everybody in the drawing office where I

was employed wore very similar clothes, almost a uniform. A business shirt, well cut trousers, a tie, and well polished shoes. Not a suit, but almost there. It was expected. At nine-thirty Nancy came around with the tea trolley, and there were rumbles of complaint if she were just a few minutes late. A cup of tea or coffee, a couple of biscuits, a ten minute break, then back to work. In the late afternoon, when work finished, the routine was reversed. Sometimes I jumped off the bus stop a little early, and purchased some groceries from the cluster of shops up the street. It just meant walking a few extra blocks back to the unit.

It was on one of these days that I first saw him. His appearance shocked me, and I tried hard not to stare. An old man – what age? Hard to tell. He wore tattered clothes, all different shades of grey. His feet threatened to spill out the hole in the side of his shoes. His hair – again, grey but glowing with a silver sheen. There was something about him – a steely grit of determination. He pushed a small, worn-out pram, another throw-away item, a picture in itself. All the wheels were buckled, so the small wheels wobbled this way and that, straining under the weight of several bags

crammed full of aluminium cans. He was fairly tall, and looked fit, almost thin.

After the first time, I noticed him every few days, doing the rounds, checking the garbage bins for cans. He appeared to be in a set routine, not all that different to my own. Often, when walking back to my unit I would see him, pushing his worn-out pram along a lane. I didn't know where he lived. No-one talked about him. But he made me wonder. He made me uncomfortable. Why? I felt I was slowly getting ahead. I had finished my Engineering course, and earned a slight increase in salary. After about a year, I was just starting to feel comfortable in my new job at the drawing office. It was like an awakening into another world, an exciting, professional world. Everything was done in a gradual process, in an orderly manner. Design, validate, check, progress to manufacture, one step after another. The old man, however, appeared to be stuck in the same position, unable to get ahead, resorting to collecting cans out in the street. Didn't he care about his appearance? Wasn't there anything else he could do?

One Friday night, travelling back from work, I collected a few groceries, and walked briskly down the street, ready to relax. For some reason, I took a short cut up the back lane. As I turned into the lane, I collided head on with his pram, the cans rattling in protest. I jerked backwards in surprise.

“Sorry!” I blurted out.

A pair of grey-blue eyes stared at me with an unusual intensity. He seemed to size me up perfectly. He held a hand out, and with one finger pointed to the sky.

“Once, when I was in Russia, I was an officer with a thousand men under my command!”

His raised, European voice possessed some authority, and he continued staring at me. He needed me to understand. I thought I could see images from the past swirling around in his mind, images that would never go away. I’m sure anybody within sight of us would have heard him. His eyes drilled holes right through my head. Finally, apparently satisfied, he turned away, and resumed pushing his dilapidated pram up the hill, leaning on the handlebar for support.

I stood there, transfixed. I understood.

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