

Bleak Horizons

World War II had ended months ago, but the destruction remained evident in the sprawls of abandoned neighborhoods and piles of debris and rubble scattered among the once serene landscape. Everything seemed a little grayer, a little more meaningless, and to catch anyone smiling was a wonderful rarity.

Under the dim light of the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling, Boris observed his wife, a concerned yet understanding look in his eyes, as she stared blankly into her oats, not moving, not saying a word. They lived in a simple home, its walls made of concrete blocks, with a heavy wooden front door that opened over a rugged and jagged set of steps leading to the dirt street below. One window let in light from the north, but they kept the curtain drawn most of the time. Boris knew what Vera was thinking about, for it could not have been anything else, and before he could attempt to console her, his mind fell down the same path as hers.

“Dad, I want to join the fight. I’m young and I want to be a part of something bigger than myself. I need to fight.”

“Son . . . I know you think this is what you have to do, but -”

“But what if you never come back?!” chimed Vera, holding back sobs. “What am I going to do in this world if my boy isn’t here?”

“Mother, I have to do this. I’ll be back next spring, I promise.”

“You don’t know that,” she whispered despondently.

Boris looked up, awakening from his daydream, to see Vera still peering with a dull gaze into her bowl.

“Vera . . . Vera?” asked Boris gently.

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking.”

“I know.”

“He might come back, you know.”

“Maybe he will, sweetie.”

Boris knew that was not true. The War was over. Other families had already received their children home safely. Others were not so fortunate. Life had finally begun to take root again, and anyone who was not back by then never would be.

He watched her lazily lift her spoon to her lips and take a sip. He worried about her, watched her become more and more withdrawn every day. As she rose from the table, picked up her cane and walked towards the door, Boris let his mind wander again. He thought back to his son's fifth birthday, of that sunny day when he played together with the dog out in the field. He thought about every time his son told him that he loved him. He remembered watching his little boy playing out in the yard by himself, sitting in the pen with the goats, entertaining them as well as himself with his imagination. As he sat, arms folded, head bowed, thinking about his son and the countless weekends they spent together, he realized he had lost not only a son, but also a friend. He could feel the hollowness taking him over a little more each day, but he fought it, knowing that he had to be strong for Vera.

Then Boris rose from his seat, walked quietly to the door, and peeked out through the crack. There she sat on the left side steps, her feet in the dirt road. She held her cane in her right hand, but her eyes were focused to her left, toward the main road. To the right of the steps sat the family's last surviving goat from when their son was a boy, also staring off to the left.

Boris stood still, watching his neighbors go about their lives. He saw men who had lost children, brothers, and friends to the war, but they seemed to have moved on. He recalled the weeks when most of the soldiers returned home. Every day he had waited to see his son among

the ranks of the survivors, every day let down yet somehow optimistic for the next. After a while, fewer and fewer soldiers returned home until eventually they stopped altogether.

He looked at his wife, still staring. Without thinking about why, he sat down beside her like he did every day. He did not know why he waited there every day, except that he could not manage to leave her out there alone. As he sat beside her in silence, waiting for a lost boy who would never return, he knew that his wife would never give up, never stop hoping to see a familiar silhouette on the gray horizon. He could not take that away from her, toxic as it was. So day after day, week after week, they sat-- man, woman, and goat-- and every day grew more hollow, as what was left of their lives drifted away with the passing months.

-Timothy Fradella '14