

Pain

by

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Caudron 4B-2

“I never thought I would live to see our airplane all built up again,” Antoine said loudly. His voice sounded more like he was yelling in the quiet of the museum and his French might not have been understood by most of the patrons. “She crashed pretty hard.”

“You’re yelling again and you’re not living... you’re dead.” Georges replied in equally loud French. “I was there and now I am here. These engines have not run in a long time so there is no need to be deafening. No one else can see or hear you in any case.” He thought for a moment and then added, “I never thought I’d go through eternity tethered to my gunner.”

“I am not being loud but you are, Antoine countered, “And I can be seen whenever I want to be seen. I just haven’t felt like being all that sociable these days.”

“That’s because you’re dead,” the former pilot muttered, “You’re not supposed to be sociable.”

“But what is the point of sticking around then? It’s not like we’ve any more missions to go on and I’ve seen things. There have been many more wars with plenty of downed aviators, all of whom went off to wherever it is we’re supposed to be off to. I’m tired of waiting for whatever it is we are waiting for Georges.”

“I do not have an answer for you,” the pilot replied, “As I never have an answer for you. We have gone through this how many times before. This is our aircraft. We were killed in it and to it we are anchored. I wish to God it had burned.” He raised a finger. “There was the farm where it crash landed and the barn where it was stored for years and years and years.”

“True and all of that seems like yesterday.”

“It always feels like yesterday.”

“What happened to our bodies?”

“I don’t know,” Georges replied flatly, wishing he had a cigarette, not that he could smoke it if he did. “I think perhaps we were buried at the farm. It was behind the Boche lines so that would make sense, would it not?”

“Then there was the hangar when the ship was initially rebuilt,” the gunner continued, “If you had not been in the cockpit with that idiot when he flew our aircraft the first time he would have crashed it all over again.”

“That is true. All of my yelling and cursing at him fell upon deaf ears so I finally had to take over. His body felt very strange to me and I know I left scars in his memory.”

“The idiot deserved it. I was overjoyed when I saw it was you at the controls.”

The pilot’s smile was hardly noticeable. “So was I, though it cost me much pain. I had returned in the final state of when I crashed landed all those years before... but... I did get us back on the ground. I wonder why it is we do such things to each other?”

“You mean?” And here the gunner made machinegun noises.

“Yes... the wars.”

“Because the enemy must be beaten!” Antoine hallooed to the ceiling and then listened for his echo which he did not hear. Turning back to the pilot he said, “I remember you sitting in the cockpit for a long long time after that incident. You did not move at all. I stayed with you then for all that time in the hangar and then to another barn again all covered with hay.”

“There was another war,” the pilot told him. “You might remember some of those who passed close enough to shout their greetings to us?”

“I do. They asked us to come along.”

“Hey mister,” a small voice said from below the airplane, “You’re not supposed to climb on the airplanes. My Dad said they’ll kick you out of the museum.”

Antoine looked down at the child talking to them. Always it was the children who could see them and yet the adults saw nothing. "It's all right little man," he replied affably, "We are just a part of the exhibit. Look... this is how I moved the gun from forward firing to over the wing firing." He made to move the old machinegun but could not. "I am sorry, but I forgot they bolted it in place."

"It's all right," the child told him. "I'm not allowed to touch things neither."

Georges cupped his hand around his mouth. "Merde alors! I hear your mommy calling you. You'd better run off now and find her before she give you a spanking for running off."

"You should not curse in front of the children," Antoine hissed. "It is rude and unseemly."

The little boy put his thumb to his nose and blew the pilot a raspberry and then ran off.

Georges smiled at his gunner and gave him a shrug of the shoulders that spoke volumes of what he thought about their little visitor.

There was a period of time when no one was about and then, only an hour from closing, a new person came to sit on the bench in front of the airplane. Taking out a note pad she looked at the aircraft and then began to write.

"I think I am in love," Antoine said aloud, slumping down in his seat and resting his head on his hands which he'd placed upon his little windshield, "And she writes of me."

"If she was writing about you she would also be writing about me; so she is obviously writing about us," Georges told him.

The gunner unbuckled his belt tether and leapt down from his small cockpit. His feet made no noise as they reached the floor and his legs hardly bent to absorb the shock of his landing. "Look Georges, she is beautiful."

"Any living breathing woman is beautiful to you," the pilot sighed.

"That is beside the point," the gunner hissed, looking back at his partner. "She is everything I have ever dreamed of."

The pilot let go of the aircraft's control stick and peered over the side of the fuselage trying to see through the space between it and the starboard engine. "She looks like your mother," he chided, "Get back to your place, you are my gunner and not supposed to be wandering around. You are protected there."

Moving around to a place behind the woman, the gunner bent down and read her words. "You are right; she writes of us Georges."

“Don’t be silly,” the pilot replied, “She writes of a fictitious crew on a fictitious airplane in a fictitious war. It is but a romantic fantasy. You are wasting your time.”

Antoine came around in front of the woman and looked down upon her. Reaching out his hand he touched her on the chest with a finger and she froze. “I was hit here first,” he touched her next on the neck, “And then here,” he reached up and then touched her between the eyes, “And then here. I was dead as I stood.”

The writer heard the engines of the aircraft roaring. There was no start up, there was no instrumental background music, there was no introduction; she simply saw and heard and felt.

Antoine bent down from his lookout position and pounded on the fuselage to get George’s attention. When he had it he pointed behind indicating the lone German fighter pursuing them. It was more than obvious the pilot was bent upon their destruction. The Caudron B4 was a stable aircraft but it was extremely slow, making at best a mere 77 miles per hour. Nor did it have the capability of out maneuvering the other aircraft. Its wings lacked any ailerons which were faster in reaction than the wing warping it used for flight control. Georges, looking grim behind his goggles, nodded his head and pushed his stick forward beginning a decent. In this one thing he might squeeze out a few more miles per hour. Their strike on an ammunition dump far behind the German lines had been more successful than the crew knew; and the enemy was very upset with them.

The gunner pulled the pin on his machinegun’s mount and, standing precariously in his seat, managed to get it set up on the rearward facing mount above the wing. Working the mechanism he charged the weapon and then braced himself by holding onto a cabane strut with his left hand. When he was finally ready he attempted to fight off their attacker using just his right hand to fire off a smattering of five round bursts.

Georges, glancing back over his shoulder, watched the occasional tracer rounds pass far to the right of the German. In desperation he pushed his stick further forward trying desperately to get back towards the earth as quickly as possible; hoping their wings would not rip off. If nothing else he would land and they could make a run for it away from their machine.

And then the first of two bullets hit him in the back. It pierced his left lung. The second bullet passed through his shoulder knocking him forward and for a moment he lost control of his aircraft. When he managed to sit back up he found his gunner’s sightless eyes staring at him from where he’d fallen. The tether, at least, had kept him from falling forward and into the propellers.

Kicking his rudder to the right he put the aircraft into a spin as he bled out.

When the writer’s eyes again focused she found herself looking into the soft eyes of the pilot who’d died nearly a century before. He was dressed in heavy flying clothes and one of the lenses of his goggles was shattered. “And now you too know our pain,” Georges whispered to her in French. “We did what had to be done but that does not mean we did not suffer.”

Reaching out, she touched his cheek. "I am sorry," she whispered back. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Georges sighed. "Remember us," he told her softly. "We did once live. Doing our duty we felt much pain and then we died. It is but a truth; we were not just words in a book."

Standing he saluted her and then motioned to his gunner that they should remount. Climbing back into their seats both faded from sight with the announcement the museum was closing.

The ghosts were never seen again.

Speculation surmises they found peace once their story was told... but... occasionally a child will come running to their parents in tears with a report of a mean man having a strange accent who told them to, 'Go away little mouse and find your mother before she leaves you here'.