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# Thierry Hesse

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## Demon

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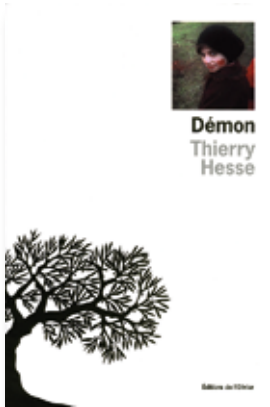
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Families are always the losers in war. Having traveled the length and breadth of the Horn of Africa as a distinguished reporter, Pierre Rotko is well aware of this. He feels this experience of defeat personally, however, when his father, after years of silence, tells him the history of his own family: the fate of his parents, Franz and Elena, Russian Jews murdered by the Nazis, his exile in 1953, and all the suffering shared by those caught up in the nightmare of the war. Pierre realizes that a page of his life, a page of silence and denial, has been turned once and for all. Abandoning his

job and his partner, he embarks on research that he hopes will bring him into possession of his own history. It is during this feverish quest that his demon appears. Does Pierre want to live in fear? In the presence of death? That is precisely what he wants: to experience for himself what is experienced by those cast aside by History. And it is to Grozny that he goes. For Grozny is a city in the midst of war, and, with Chechnya once more under the Russian heel, it turns out to be a tragically perfect place to experience utter desolation.

## Prologue

This morning around four I was awakened by the nineteen-year-old soldier in the room across from mine. He was groaning. Out on patrol in the region of N'Djamena in Chad, he stepped on a mine—an old model manufactured by Matra Armement, as Richir notes ruefully. Since my repatriation and admission to the Val-de-Grâce Hospital, Richir has been my surgeon, and he is trying to save my leg.

The moans of the young soldier alternate with mournful cries. A week ago Richir amputated both his feet, and yesterday he was visited by a captain, sent, I suppose, by the Ministry. I saw a straight-backed, stone-faced officer passing by my door in an impeccably creased uniform. He must have stood stiffly next to the young man just long enough to brief him about his future prostheses, his pension, and his return to civilian life. What could such a ramrod know? Does Matra Armement also manufacture prostheses? The young man's thighs, spleen and small intestine were all perforated by shrapnel. According to Marie-Agnès, who changed my dressings a short while ago, he cries in his sleep. I feel sure he is dreaming about his last patrol.

Sometimes I myself dream about my last day in Chechnya.

Merab, my Georgian driver, had picked the neighborhood of Michurin for me. A suburb to the northeast of Grozny, Michurin was where the Maïbeks lived. Merab had got to know the family when, after the first Chechnya war, he and his father came to repair cars. Night was falling on the city as we reached Michurin. Ahmad and Zarima Maïbek were quite willing to put me up. A journalist was

a rare bird in Grozny. They accepted my gifts—canned food, an electric razor, a watch—but would not take my money. Their apartment, in a small building at the end of a street, had been damaged but was still habitable. The major damage, Ahmad told me, dated from the second war.

Shattered windows. Façades in flames. Torrents of brown smoke. Debris hurled high into the air. Dismembered corpses. Piles of body parts. Streams of blood. By the end of February 1999, with the second war just three months old, Michurin was no longer Michurin. Almost the entire suburb had been transformed into a magma of great dark chunks of masonry, bristling with rusting metal bars and severed wooden beams, under clouds swelled with filth and dust. Beyond Michurin, Grozny as a whole had suffered a similar fate. A fate comparable to that of so many German cities turned into vast expanses of ruin by the Anglo-American air raids of 1942-1945. In those cities, the volume of debris divided by the number of inhabitants was in the tens of cubic meters: more than thirty for Cologne, more than forty for Dresden. And while one cannot compare the aggressors and victims in Dresden and Grozny, the two cities present the same apocalyptic vision of the end of the world.

No more than twenty or thirty buildings in Michurin survived the aerial assaults intact. Few families stayed. “People live here” read a message on the door of an apartment building alongside that of the Maïbeks, but the great majority had fled, between bombings, either north towards Ingushetia or south towards the Caucasus Mountains.

In December 1999, a few blocks from the Maïbeks’, a Russian tank regiment had come under attack from a commando of *boiviki* holed up in the surrounding ruins. Hours of fierce fighting led to a Russian withdrawal. It turned out that the *boiviki* had killed almost a hundred Federal soldiers, reducing a dozen armored vehicles to scrap metal. The bloody corpses of the Russians were left to rot on the street until the next morning. During the night, packs of dogs wandered among the burnt-out tanks, chewing on the odd crewman’s ear, tearing at a hand or dragging off half an arm. And now the Russians had got into the habit of shooting all dogs on sight. In this way they had destroyed thousands of them, or so it was said. The dead animals could be seen all over town, though the number of canine corpses never came close to the number of human ones.

*Boiviki* is what the Russians called the Chechen fighters. It is a pejorative term, closer in meaning to “scum” than to “rebels.” Russians also use the designations “Czechs,” or “black assholes,” or even “Jews” for the peoples of the Caucasus, and many believe, like Lieutenant-General Chamanov, former commanding officer of the 58th Army, which gave its all in Grozny, that the Chechens are the lowest form of life.

During my first six weeks in Chechnya I saw no fighting, and no bombs fell on my head. I was in the midst of the war, yet I was, so to speak, in the dark. I often heard shellfire, explosions. I stumbled over corpses, and I sensed

the despair of people abandoned to their fate. I snapped photographs and took notes. Occasionally I reminded myself that it was my job. The Maibeks believed as much, and no doubt it was best that they did so. That first evening, Ahmad had asked his wife Zarima to serve us tea and honey cakes. They both wanted me to tell them about Paris, about France. There were four of us around the table: Ahmad, Merab and I—and Zeinap, the “fox-woman,” who before long would come to occupy my thoughts. Once we got past the phrases of welcome, the customary niceties, our conversation languished. It was not merely a matter of language difficulties. Old Ahmad made an effort to be hospitable and friendly in every way, but things were simply not normal, not relaxed. And how could it have been otherwise? I already had it from Merab that the family no longer had their two boys: Timur, the younger, and Djohar, his brother. The first, killed; the second, missing in action. No one even mentioned them. When you invite a stranger to your home, you silence your troubles. The journalist might report on the Russians’ brutality, describe the destruction of a capital city, a people decimated, and strive to awaken the conscience of Western public opinion, but when it came to Timur and Djohar, that was the family’s own story, their secret sorrow. And yet, wasn’t this what I had come for? Not to alert public opinion and stir consciences, but precisely in search of these secret sorrows? A single idea haunted me: families are always the losers in war. That was what had brought me here. When the celebrations begin on the brightly-lit boulevards, when the victors are hailed beneath the bunting and politicians hold forth from their platforms, when the crowds hug and kiss, the families weep as they remember those they have lost, closing themselves up in their sadness

It was not yet noon on 27 January, 2002 when I encountered a column of tanks behind the bus station. On the former Lenin Avenue, their heads enveloped in scarves, three women were using long metal rods to delve into the remnants of the post office, searching for dry and not too heavy planks for firewood. I was photographing them when I heard the tanks’ engines. I crossed the avenue, skirted a great hole that had swallowed up half the sidewalk, and started clambering up the rubble. It was piled some ten meters high, coated with the grey and slightly greasy film that lay over the whole city—not just over houses and streets (or what was left of them), but also over the puddles, heaped-up household trash, wrecked cars, animal carcasses, and small bootleg fruit-and-vegetable stalls. A painted wooden panel that must have been a door broke under my weight as I tried to avoid sheets of broken glass; eventually I reached the ruined building’s rear wall, which was almost intact, and climbed onto a fairly solid platform, some four square meters in size, and shaped like a jigsaw piece, which was the remains of the second floor. Crouching down, I spotted five or six tanks less than a kilometer away to the west, probably T-90s,

followed by two trucks carrying troops. The convoy was heading in our direction. I signaled to the women. They looked up, exchanged a few words, then without even speaking to me they scrambled off the pile of detritus and bolted down an alley. The sun at this hour was weak, a pale gold, yet I had the impression that the line of tanks was emerging from a ragged fog of ash, water and dust. Advancing through this haze, the column halted every hundred meters or so. At each stop a trio of soldiers, heads hunched into shoulders, rifle in hand, would leap from their vehicles and slip away. At the head of the avenue the column came to a halt.

That morning, all of a sudden, I was afraid: the first time I had felt fear in Chechnya. But the fear was not for me. I was afraid for Zeinap, for her sister and her mother, for the Maïbeks too, for all the families that put me in mind of my own.

None of which prevented me from taking several rounds in the leg.

Tonight, from the window of my room, I can see athletically built young men in the courtyard. Some are missing an arm, and many are moving about with difficulty, in wheelchairs or relying on artificial limbs. For my part, I am back at square one: Paris-Grozny-Paris. I am just ten or so metro stations from my home, which is barely half an hour's walk from my father's. I have not been back to his place since he killed himself. Once I am able to, once I have pushed open the door to his apartment and set about clearing it out room by room, I am sure I shall feel better. In the meantime I propose to recount the story of my family, before, during and after the war that, some sixty years ago, destroyed Europe and half of the world. The same war which led me to Chechnya and made that history truly mine.

Thierry Hesse

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