

Sunflower Fields

I shot upright in my bed; cold sweat dripping off my face as I tried to collect my breath. My brain, groggy from sleep, struggled to remember what I just dreamed. Slowly, I pieced it together.

I lay in a trench surrounded by cut-down swathes of sunflower plants. A massive tank was slowly advancing through the field. The sound of dead sunflower stalks being crushed carried over to me as the tank's turret was the only thing visible. I heard yelling in a language I didn't recognize and the steady brararararatt of a machine gun, among other guns.

A man ran and launched himself next to me, shouting something in my ear. He pointed at my chest, and I was surprised to see a grenade pinned there. I quickly thrust him the grenade that was on my plate carrier. "Plate carrier? Since when was I in full combat gear?" I thought. He heaved the grenade into the smoke-filled air towards the tank as it crawled into the cleared area. The grenade pinged mockingly off the tank, and the flames from its explosion laughed at our weak attempt to stop the tank's approach. That's when the tank turned its turret on us and bucked back.

The last thing I remember was a white Z painted on the side of the tank.

The memory faded, and I rubbed my temples as a painful headache set in. I slowly slid out of bed and into my clothes; the dream never really leaving my mind. The next thing I knew, I was on my bike pedaling down G-street. I took a right on Sackett Avenue, weaving in between lines of unused cars, and then I took another left on F. I had no particular place in mind, I just needed to do something.

My dream spun around in my head as I made the gradual climb up S-Mountain – the faded white S barely visible from the rest of the rocks. I had had many dreams that were similar to the one I had the night before. Many a time I witnessed death and destruction, but most of them led to that one tank.

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Ignoring the dream for a while, I thought about my current situation. My dad left not long ago with a group of other men from Salida to meet up with a much larger group. My mom cried the whole time he was leaving and cried a long time after he left. Now, she just walks around in a haze of alcohol.

I don't know exactly why they left, but I do remember walking by a group of the older men in town and overhearing:

"Fixing the corrupt government."

"I doubt they'll be back."

"All those guns won't stand up against the US army."

One spoke out, "We need a change, and this is the only way to do it. Revolution worked for our ancestors. It will work for us."

Many of the men stayed. They did not want to get involved in a "bipartisan" war. We haven't heard from the men that left since.

Not long after that, the internet went down in the town. People driving through said it wasn't just Salida, but everywhere else too. Panic swept through the town. The banks were rushed, but the banks didn't have proof of anyone having accounts, due to the accounts all being online. Riots broke loose. I spent many sleepless nights wondering if our house would be the next light filling the sky with smoke. Then, the military drove in.

The military was the last group to roll through our city, for the prices spiked so high on gas that it wasn't even worth it for the local gas stations to buy new gas. With the military came order of some sense. They told us that the internet going out was because of war waging across the ocean. Many of us wondered how so many satellites could be destroyed and how internet lines in the middle of the country were impacted by a war so far away. Few people openly questioned what they said though. We could trust the military and our government. They also told us that the rise in oil prices was due to this foreign war.

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I couldn't think about it anymore; I veered off the track and fell, breaking into tears. I sobbed uncontrollably for a while, but it felt good to get something out. Laying there, I resolved to never leave my mom like my dad did. I hardly remember getting off the ground, but the next thing I knew, I was back on the trail heading home. I must've been lost in thought for a long while for it took quite a bit of time for me to get back to S-Mountain.

Arriving home, I was shocked to see a Humvee parked in front.

I rushed inside, the words, "What is the meani—" cut off by the image of my mom crying and an officer sitting across from her filled my eyes.

The officer looked straight-faced at me and said, "Son, the age limit on drafting has changed. You have been chosen to serve." Baffled, I glanced between them to see if this was some joke, but their faces told me otherwise. I turned and swung the door open. I knocked right into the arms of a soldier I hadn't seen before. I struggled against his grip. The effort was in vain though. He was much stronger than me. Another soldier seized one of my arms, and together they dragged me to their Humvee.

My mother screamed in the background, "You can't take him too, he's all that I have left!" The door slammed behind the officer and muffled sobbing and the banging of her against the door could be heard. Tears streamed down my face as I realized that I too was leaving my mom, and the decision to stick by her I made a few hours ago was already broken.

The next few days were a blur; the only distinct memory I had was flying over a battlefield strewn with bodies of cars and men. The whole earth seemed to be black from burn scars. The fight had long been over, and the officer that originally took me from my home smirked at me looking down on it. "A bunch of idiots trying to take the capital. Fools should've known they couldn't stand against the US military." I gritted my teeth to prevent myself from lashing out and squeezed my eyes closed to keep from tears. *One of those idiots probably was my father. You're the fool to listen to people who order you to commit such atrocities.*

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And now I am here. I honestly don't know where *here* is. And this happens to put me in the same boat as all of the people in my squadron. Nobody knows.

I kept hearing things from officers that put me on edge. I heard one say something about the government withholding gas from people. Another officer said that shooting those satellites was like duck hunting, and I could only assume they were the internet satellites. Even more terrible things flooded in: soldiers talking about fighting against the Revolutionaries, cutting fiber optic cables, and gunning down gas trucks. After hearing all that, I needed to get out.

I knew all the patrols, so it was easy to slip out. I ran for days before coming across a village. The people there watched me warily while someone mumbled resentfully in a different language about Americans. I asked if any of them knew English. A man spoke up and said he did. I explained to him my situation, and they took me in. Before long, I was fighting for them. Fighting was all I knew, and the man told me the village had been fighting much longer than the Americans, but the Americans forgot what they were fighting for. I too had forgotten what I fought for.

One day, in a trench surrounded by razed sunflowers, a tank plowed through the field. I could tell by the turret and the sounds of dried sunflowers being crushed. A man ran to me pointing at a grenade on my vest. I gave it to him and he threw it at the tank. It pinged harmlessly off and blew up a soldier next to the tank. Memory hit me, and I realized I had seen this same situation hundreds of times in my sleep. I rolled up as small as I could and rocked back and forth. Through a torrent of tears, I mumbled, "I'm sorry, Mom. I couldn't come back to you." The turret swiveled, and the tank recoiled. I lifted my arms in an embrace as the explosion lifted me off the ground. I crumpled against the ground next to a pile of burning sunflowers; the light slipping away.