

AT MIDNIGHT
IN A FLAMING TOWN

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with
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KARNAC

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To our parents

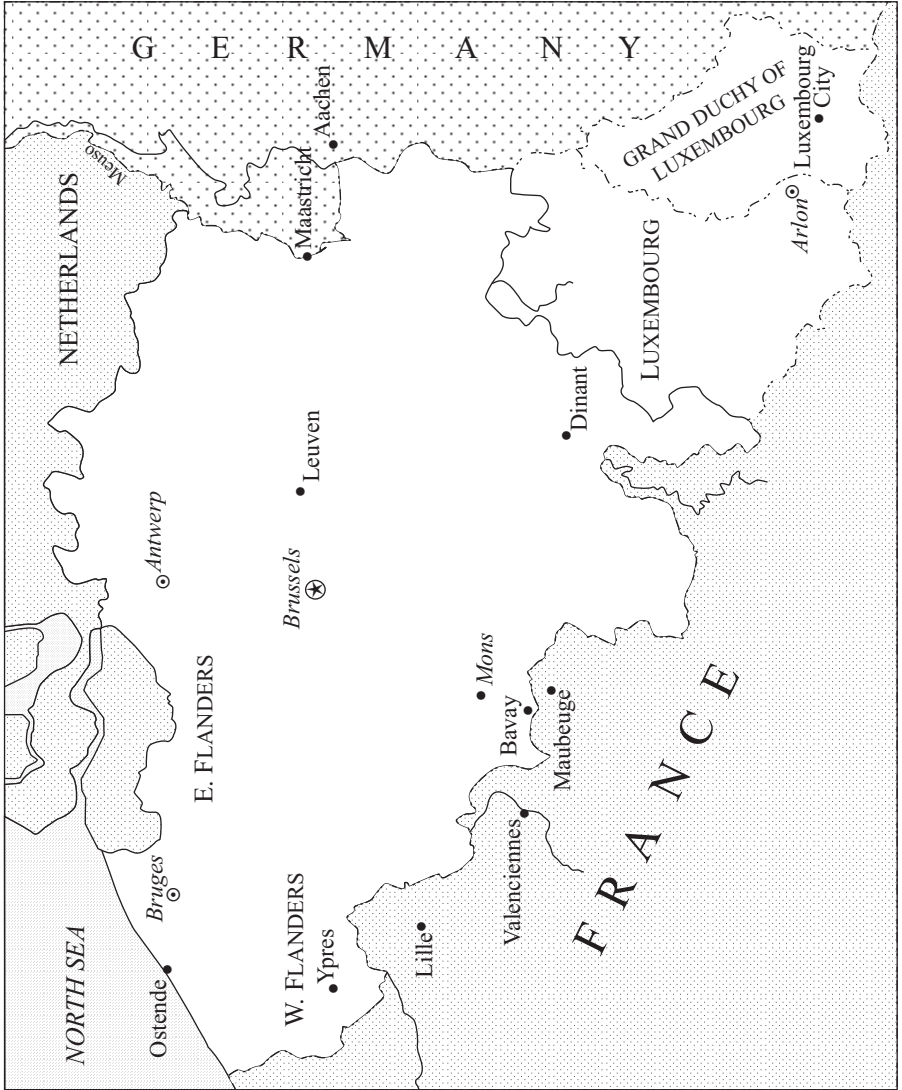
I HAVE A RENDEZVOUS WITH DEATH

*I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple-blossoms fill the air—
I have a rendezvous with Death
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.*

*It may be he shall take my hand
And lead me into his dark land
And close my eyes and quench my breath—
It may be I shall pass him still.
I have a rendezvous with Death
On some scarred slope of battered hill,
When Spring comes round again this year
And the first meadow-flowers appear.*

*God knows 'twere better to be deep
Pillowed in silk and scented down,
Where love throbs out in blissful sleep,
Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,
Where hushed awakenings are dear ...
But I've a rendezvous with Death
At midnight in some flaming town,
When Spring trips north again this year,
And I to my pledged word am true,
I shall not fail that rendezvous.*

—Alan Seeger (1888–1916)



25TH AUGUST 1914

LEUVEN, BELGIUM

25th August 1914
Leuven, Belgium
Therese

Therese scabbled to get away from him, tearing her fingernails on the stone floor. She writhed and twisted, but was trapped by her skirt beneath his knee. His breathing was heavy and his body and breath rank. The harder she fought the more there was for him to vanquish. Veni, vidi, vici. He came, he saw, and he would conquer. He pinned her down and his thickset fingers worked himself free from his uniform. He yanked his belt undone and pulled it in one movement through the loops of his trousers; the metallic sound of the buckle clattering on the floor was lost amid the cries and screams of women. She grabbed the belt and bit on it to withstand the pain and silence her screams, but she did not submit. In the final moments she was determined to find his eyes; she turned her head, held his glazed gaze, and tried to lance his soul with her look.

He finished quickly, fuelled by drink and domination. There was no movement from her. He looked down at the crumpled robes and for a moment saw them empty on the floor, as if discarded at the end of a day. He pulled himself backwards, up to his feet, and staggered to regain his balance. He almost forgot his belt. He bent to retrieve it, and wrenched it from her grasp. The heavy buckle caught in the folds of fabric released with his tug and was soon in place, on his

waist, the words "*Gott mit uns*" (God with us) standing proudly engraved.

He was dressed and ready to regroup before many others; for him one was enough. He was more interested in food than another woman. Some would later boast of three or four conquests, depositing Prussian seed in each of their unwilling hosts. He moved away and saw another soldier climb onto her; it was easy for him, she lay still with those piercing eyes closed, her spirit broken. Her lips moved as she mumbled like the mad. Therese had retreated to prayer.

ONE MONTH EARLIER,
26TH JULY 1914

LEUVEN, BELGIUM

One month earlier, 26th July 1914
Leuven, Belgium
Russell

Having satisfied himself that the porter knew the address of his hotel, Russell left him at the railway station with his luggage, an American size tip in his pocket and the diversion of a trip across town. Russell had only travelled from Liege that morning so still managed a tidy, pressed look. His youthful vigour, long limbs, sun-tanned and handsome face created a stir when he passed people, but this was something he rarely noticed. Guidebook in hand, he strode towards the tram-cars, paid 12 cents and settled himself for the ride down Rue de la Station to the Grand Place. He could have walked, the temperature was moderate and it was no distance, but his seat on the tram made an instant connection, for him, with the town. He was in its flow, moving at the pace of the people.

With its silent commentary, his copy of Baedekers led his eyes to a monument of a revolutionary, then a bronze statue of a scholar, and offered details of architecture from pavement to rooftop. Russell swivelled around and ducked his head to spot the treasures, and received a few grunts from the man sitting next to him as he caught him with his elbow one time too many for him to let it silently pass.

"Pardon, excusez-moi," said Russell in French, tinged with his American accent; he had no Flemish to call upon. He received a

grunt in response, but this had a more cordial tone: his apology had been accepted.

The highlight of Leuven was Russell's first destination. He was not disappointed when he alighted from the tram in front of the Hotel de Ville and the church of St. Pierre, in the central square. The Grand Place was indeed grand. He moved away from the disembarking passengers, and stood for a few minutes to absorb the scale of the impressive facades. It was not a market day, so there were no jostle of shoppers or mixtures of smells. The movement of people in the square looked choreographed: a matrix of unseen tracks were followed as walkers angled themselves, from their entrance on one side of the square, across the expanse, to their purposeful departure on another.

In no rush for detailed examination, Russell headed to a café and, with his pot of coffee ordered, soaked in the grandiosity of the medieval architecture; he knew that the majesty of the buildings was in the structure and external decoration. Russell had done his homework on Leuven or Louvain as it was also known and he was in the best café to admire the sights. Leuven was the last stop of his tour before Brussels and he had structured his visit, but first he wanted to enjoy the atmosphere, a drink, and some moments to catch up on the news. As he opened and began to peruse his copy of the daily paper, *L'Etoile Belge*, his attention was caught by the headline that the Serbian Army had mobilized against Austro-Hungary; he wondered what escalation would follow.

Trouble had been brewing in the Balkan area of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in recent years, with Serbia fighting its neighbours for more land, and encouraging nationalists to speak out against their imperial masters. It was a Serbian nationalist who had assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28th June, the day Russell had set out on his European trip. He had kept a close eye on the news ever since; the murder of the heir to the throne would not be allowed to pass without punitive measures: of that, the politicians, and newspaper editors, it seemed, were sure. When Russell was in Liege, a couple of days before, the emperor, Franz Josef, issued his ultimatum to Serbia. It was designed to bring the Serbs into submission, and to hand over the murderers of his nephew. Instead the Serbians secured Russian support and both began to ready their armies. In response the Austro-Hungarians prepared for war, assured that Germany would protect their eastern flank from Russia.

Russell understood enough about international politics to know that brinkmanship was at play, but he assumed that diplomacy would still win out. The picture his newspaper painted was more pessimistic; it referred to the pact between Russia and France, which placed Germany between two adversaries. The German Army had started its own preparations to fight on two fronts. All were poised, but would one of them strike?

The latest telegram from his parents had urged him to get back to England; news that trouble was brewing in Europe had hit the headlines in the USA. He imagined their concerned breakfast conversations and wished they could picture him now, relaxed and enjoying the view in front of him. His parents would not appreciate that Belgium was neutral in these matters and, even though it might be in the thick of it, geographically speaking, it would not take sides; he was in one of the safest places in Europe. Even if he wanted to leave, it would be easier said than done. His tickets were pre-booked and pre-paid; a great value deal at the time, but with little flexibility for last minute changes, without extra cash, and of that he was short. At railway stations during the previous days, he had seen queues at ticket booths. There were some heated exchanges when homeward bound travellers put the infrastructure, and themselves, under stress to head west. There are always those who panic, but he was not one of them, and he enjoyed a rueful smile. Russell had been determined not to miss out on Leuven and his visit to the university: for him the European sister to the blue spires of Oxford.

Similar to Oxford University, with its numerous colleges, Leuven's academic history was just as prestigious. The university lay behind the Hotel de Ville, and currently out of Russell's sight in Rue de Namur. Usually when he set himself a timetable, he stuck to it. The university was on day two of his itinerary; but perhaps in response to the edginess that seemed increasingly to pervade these July days, he walked around, instead of up to, the Hotel de Ville, to the main building of the university. A medieval hall that housed the cloth market in centuries past, it was intricately decorated. Baedekers kept in step with his progress and delivered information when he scanned its pages, but his personal interest was with the library. He established his bearings there for his appointment the following day and then headed back to the Grand Place.

Russell followed closely the written descriptions through the large rooms of the town hall, and then attached himself to a group of tourists as they entered the church of St. Pierre. With its many ornate chapels and bell tower, all designs were for the glory of God, and to him, it seemed, for the intimidation of man. There was nothing soft or comfortable in the Gothic lines and the cool air. Although initially welcome when he stepped in from the street, the chill soon seeped through his jacket and skin, almost into his bones; he became conscious of his shivers. He left the church, and walked past some "sweet little houses", into Rue de Malines and a sun-filled street that warmed him. The transition was so swift and easily made that he never, in weeks to come, recalled his moment of discomfort, that a person with pre-cognition might have called dread.

His steps soon brought him to the church and convent of St. Gertrude. He had no more appetite for religious artifacts: they oppressed, rather than impressed, his spirit of wonder. A chapel man himself, he needed no symbolism to focus on his God, just solid wooden planks to surround and underpin his spiritual communion. Instead of entering the church Russell looked at, and into, the windows of the surrounding houses that formed part of the convent. They looked like every other building in this part of town, but Baedekers informed him that the blue door led to the schoolroom, the green one was used by the sick and behind the two white doors were housed some of the nuns of St. Gertrude. He could make out very little inside the rooms and soon felt embarrassed by his peering curiosity and moved on.

Rue de Malines crossed a couple of tributaries of the river Dyle that meandered alongside the street, north to south, and ended at the ramparts that encircled the city. Russell walked along the ramparts, stopping whenever he fancied, in sun or shade, to enjoy the vantage point and rooftop views of the town, home to 45,000 residents. He had no need to rush. During one of his stops he mentally retraced his steps through Europe, recalling the highlights of his tour, and his thoughts returned to Oxford and his studies.

When Russell arrived at Oxford the previous October, he had deposited his bags in his rooms at Merton College, and almost run to the Bodleian Library in his desire to inhale the historic air. He could recall the tingle of electricity that coursed through him the first time he handled historic documents, and imagined travelling

back through time. His Oxford. The intensity of his passion for the place made him call it his own. Not for him the familial rite of entry; he was an interloper from another continent who competed to prove himself worthy of attendance and his acceptance had made the national as well as local press in America. A Rhodes Scholarship was a known path to significance.

He could clearly remember the day when, a student in Washington, he was called to the provost's office. This was an invitation, or more accurately a summons, without precedence. So unusual was an audience with the senior college administrator he had to ask directions to the office, which took him to a corridor he had not known. Along the walls were details of the long history of his Georgetown University and, with time to kill, he lingered at some of the pictures of benefactors. He adjusted his tie and was ushered in.

The wood panelled walls of the provost's office stood in solid guard over the many conversations they held secret. The provost poured each of them glasses of water and had them both seated before Russell even considered how to announce himself.

"Let me get straight to the point, Mr Clarke, Russell, and tell you why I asked to see you. I want you to apply for a scholarship. It would bring honour to this university, be an example to your fellow students, and probably change your life. I know you can be successful."

Without seeking a response he went on.

"Hear me out, go away and think about it, and come back and give me your decision, perhaps after you have talked it over with your folks, and if they need to be convinced, bring them in to see me."

With his silence taken as agreement the provost launched into what was probably going to be one of the most momentous conversations of Russell's life; a turning point, fed by another's belief in him.

"The deal is the Rhodes Scholarship, named after an Englishman called Cecil Rhodes. Actually not after him, named by him. It's his vision and money that fund it, so it's really his legacy. It's an international award to study at the University of Oxford with all expenses paid."

He suddenly had Russell's full attention.

"Competition is tough for this, very tough. There are only 50 places worldwide each year."

Russell was a man of words, not numbers, so did not even attempt to get his mind around the odds that were represented by these statements, but he was not daunted by the thought of competition. If the provost said he was good enough, then Russell was ready for the effort.

“You’ll need to prepare your application and Professor Atkins can tutor you on this. You have all the credentials scholastically, and your captaincy of the tennis team shows you as an enthusiastic sporty guy. I’ve heard you’re quite popular too. You speak French and Spanish and your downtown internship with those Mexican immigrants will make a distinctive contribution. All you need is to work out your philosophy for your life and convince them of your worth in service to others, and what you want to study, of course. Do you know Atkins, he’s our head of philosophy?”

Russell had almost staggered out of the room, dazed and disoriented. It was a surprise to have his achievements and activities so well known by another and to have them used to create, in one brushstroke, an image of himself that seemed fully formed. Throughout the 23 years of his life he had driven himself down each path of achievement, but had never stepped back and joined the dots to admire the result. Instead he was always more conscious of the next mountain to climb, and yet here he was, singled out, and expected to surpass his peers.

His parents had been delighted and were beyond proud when he won a place; Professor Atkins had groomed him well.

The scholarship had taken him to England and his summer tour to Europe. Now in Leuven, with a privileged ticket for the reading room, he had access to the priceless collection of medieval manuscripts in the library. He could not wait.

His hotel was easily found, in Place du Peuple, as was the dining room that he waited to enter at the time stated by the receptionist. There was a slight jostle as the crowd that had formed in the vestibule surged forward when the doors opened. He was in the middle of the restaurant before he had even begun to take in the room, propelled by the tide of guests. He looked around and did not know where to sit, but was rescued by the head waiter who directed him, by a movement of his head, to a table next to a window. The restaurant had 12 tables in all. The white tablecloths and napkins brought

a starched freshness to a room that was otherwise a nondescript brown colour. Russell was not alone for long; he was joined by a couple, in their late twenties, he thought, also American. Russell quickly learnt they were on their honeymoon from the conversation that tumbled out of the newly-weds. He was charmed by the way their words bumped into each other and she sometimes corrected his. He liked the way they talked over each other and their need to have him listen, his quips or a question every now and then enough to set them off onto another memory that just had to be described.

"Tell him about Certosa di Pisa, honey."

"Those three-dimensional paintings ..."

"And amazing tiled floors that leapt up at us ..."

"We were on our way to Florence ..."

"From Pisa ..."

"We just stumbled upon it ..."

"It was empty of people ..."

"Awesome."

Their pride at their "off the beaten track" discovery could not have been greater if they had actually unearthed treasure at an archaeological dig.

"The paintings covered the walls ..."

"And ceilings ..."

"You felt like you could put your hand behind the figures ..."

"Geez, they were so old."

Russell did not want to steal their delight so kept quiet about his own visit, specifically to see the trompe d'oeil paintings in the 14th century Carthusian monastery in the town. He had planned his circuitous route from Florence to Lucca via this site, and they were correct, it was largely overlooked. The couple re-lived each moment and he could see they were storing their memories for future access. Russell was happy to provide the prompt.

They progressed through the initial formalities of their meal and placed their orders, the selection matching the budget, and Russell hoped, his palate. The newly-weds turned their attention to learn more about him. Every fact he proffered, to their questions, was matched by one of their own. They echoed his "I'm from Maine," with "We're from Iowa." His "I'm a history student, on a programme at Oxford University, England," with "We're teachers." Then followed, Russell felt, a somewhat defensive description of how their

schooling, in Iowa, was not as grand as Oxford, but they were sure they were going to make it good. Her "Weren't we already as we're on honeymoon in Europe," and his "You should've seen the size of our wedding," provided the introduction for her to describe their wedding, until they were almost through to dessert. Russell heard all the details; it was an easy interlude for him.

Introductions were not always easy for Russell. With his accomplishments and good looks, he stood out from the crowd, but he was not always at ease in company. His attempts to pare down answers about himself could make him seem aloof, awkward, and even slightly patronizing. It was too easy for a new acquaintance to assume he carried disdain for another's more mundane life, when this was far from his actual perspective.

To distract further conversation from their wedding, or more questions about himself, Russell drew out of his dinner companions their plans for the following day. He was able to pass on snippets of his experience to help them with their itinerary. When he described his planned days in the reading room of the university library, she, Mrs Felson, laughingly said: "You'll have to wash off the grey dust of ages past, before you come in for dinner."

Her husband said she sounded "quite the poet", and Mrs Felson seemed to melt at his compliment. Russell experienced his solitary distance from their entwined world when he withdrew for his coffee and they retired to their bedroom. He imagined that neither husband, nor wife, wanted too much time to elapse from compliment to embrace.

Russell breakfasted alone, ahead of many of the other guests, and enjoyed his Belgian pastry. He returned to the university and made his way to the library. With his student documents, and letters from his professor and the librarian at the Bodleian, all found to be in order, he was invited to step from the public corridors, into the inner sanctum of the reading-room. Russell was led to his assigned seat and glanced around while he waited for the manuscripts he had previously ordered. The room was magnificently decorated, with wood panels and exquisite carvings of a bygone age. Here time had stood still. He intended to savour every moment.

Along with the manuscripts came a pair of white gloves, the type worn by butlers and magicians. These were not to protect his hands,

but to ensure he left no mark on the documents that crackled at his touch. His research project at Oxford was to determine the roots of jurisprudence by tracing the way law was created and developed throughout the medieval period. Today's legal documents had been the property of Burgundian dukes, and while his ability to make sense of the writing would be limited, the experience of seeing and touching them was one of reverence; Russell marvelled that they had kept safe and significant to this day.

Russell settled himself into a day of total absorption, and remained blissfully unaware of the increased tensions that ricocheted throughout Europe. He little realized that these manuscripts would never see the light of day again.

28th July 1914
Brussels
Marion

With matron away, Sister Wilkins had called a meeting for later in the day. Not even a declaration of war, it seemed to Marion as she tugged and tucked in the crisp and clean sheets, could upset the training routines. She put her hands to the small of her back as she righted herself, before she shuffled the pillows into their rigidly starched sheaths. She stood and admired her work. There was not a patient in sight, but the room of beds was pleasing with its regimented rows, stiff with anticipation. With time in hand she stood and gazed out of the window. She was lost in a reverie of dream-like thoughts when Clara, one of the domestics entered the room with a bucket and mop. She nodded when Marion stepped past her and out of the ward. They held no conversation; Clara's English was as poor as Marion's German. The best for them was when they both spoke French, but today they had nothing to say and too much to absorb.

The morning's newspaper contained the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war against Serbia along with a flurry of editorials opining what needed to happen to curb further aggression from other countries. Upset had been created and offence caused. All could and must be settled, Marion had read, before any further shots were fired.