

# X

LYING ON YOUR BACK WITHOUT ANYTHING TO DO and anywhere to go was kind of like being on a high hill far away from noise and people. It was like being on a camping trip all by yourself. You had plenty of time to think. You had time to figure things out. Things you'd never thought of before. Things like for example going to war. You were so completely alone on your hill that noise and people didn't enter into your figuring of things at all. You figured only for yourself without considering a single little thing outside yourself. It seemed that you thought clearer and that your answers made more sense. And even if they didn't make sense it didn't matter because you weren't ever going to be able to do anything about them anyhow.

He thought here you are Joe Bonham lying like a side of beef all the rest of your life and for what? Somebody tapped you on the shoulder and said come along son we're going to war. So you went. But why? In any other deal even like buying a car

or running an errand you had the right to say what's there in it for me? Otherwise you'd be buying bad cars for too much money or running errands for fools and starving to death. It was a kind of duty you owed yourself that when anybody said come on son do this or do that you should stand up and say look mister why should I do this for who am I doing it and what am I going to get out of it in the end? But when a guy comes along and says here come with me and risk your life and maybe die or be crippled why then you've got no rights. You haven't even the right to say yes or no or I'll think it over. There are plenty of laws to protect guys' money even in war time but there's nothing on the books says a man's life's his own.

Of course a lot of guys were ashamed. Somebody said let's go out and fight for liberty and so they went and got killed without ever once thinking about liberty. And what kind of liberty were they fighting for anyway? How much liberty and whose idea of liberty? Were they fighting for the liberty of eating free ice cream cones all their lives or for the liberty of robbing anybody they pleased whenever they wanted to or what? You tell a man he can't rob and you take away some of his liberty. You've got to. What the hell does liberty mean

anyhow? It's just a word like house or table or any other word. Only it's a special kind of word. A guy says house and he can point to a house to prove it. But a guy says come on let's fight for liberty and he can't show you liberty. He can't prove the thing he's talking about so how in the hell can he be telling you to fight for it?

• No sir anybody who went out and got into the front line trenches to fight for liberty was a goddam fool and the guy who got him there was a liar. Next time anybody came gabbling to him about liberty—what did he mean next time? There wasn't going to be any next time for him. But the hell with that. If there could be a next time and somebody said let's fight for liberty he would say mister my life is important. I'm not a fool and when I swap my life for liberty I've got to know in advance what liberty is and whose idea of liberty we're talking about and just how much of that liberty we're going to have. And what's more mister are you as much interested in this liberty as you want me to be? And maybe too much liberty will be as bad as too little liberty and I think you're a goddam fourflusher talking through your hat and I've already decided that I like the liberty I've got right here the liberty to walk and see and hear and talk and eat and sleep with my girl. I

think I like that liberty better than fighting for a lot of things we won't get and ending up without any liberty at all. Ending up dead and rotting before my life is even begun good or ending up like a side of beef. Thank you mister. You fight for liberty. Me I don't care for some.

Hell's fire guys had always been fighting for liberty. America fought a way for liberty in 1776. Lots of guys died. And in the end does America have any more liberty than Canada or Australia who didn't fight at all? Maybe so I'm not arguing I'm just asking. Can you look at a guy and say he's an American who fought for his liberty and anybody can see he's a very different guy from a Canadian who didn't? No by god you can't and that's that. So maybe a lot of guys with wives and kids died in 1776 when they didn't need to die at all. They're dead now anyway. Sure but that doesn't do any good. A guy can think of being dead a hundred years from now and he doesn't mind it. But to think of being dead tomorrow morning and to be dead forever to be nothing but dust and stink in the earth is that liberty?

They were always fighting for something the bastards and if anyone dared say the hell with fighting it's all the same each war is like the other and nobody gets any good out of it why they

understand. And don't talk about honor. The honor of a Chinese or an Englishman or an African negro or an American or a Mexican? Please all you guys who want to fight to preserve our honor let us know what the hell honor is. Is it American honor for the whole world we're fighting for? Maybe the world doesn't like it. Maybe the South Sea Islanders like their honor better.

For Christ sake give us things to fight for we can see and feel and pin down and understand. No more highfalutin words that mean nothing like native land. Motherland fatherland homeland native land. It's all the same. What the hell good to you is your native land after you're dead? Whose native land is it after you're dead? If you get killed fighting for your native land you've bought a pig in a poke. You've paid for something you'll never collect.

And when they couldn't hook the little guys into fighting for liberty or freedom or democracy or independence or decency or honor they tried the women. Look at the dirty Huns they would say look at them how they rape the beautiful French and Belgian girls. Somebody's got to stop all that raping. So come on little guy join the army and save the beautiful French and Belgian girls. So the little guy got bewildered and he

hollered coward. If they weren't fighting for liberty they were fighting for independence or democracy or freedom or decency or honor or their native land or something else that didn't mean anything. The war was to make the world safe for democracy for the little countries for everybody. If the war was over now then the world must be all safe for democracy. Was it? And what kind of democracy? And how much? And whose? Then there was this freedom the little guys were always getting killed for. Was it freedom from another country? Freedom from work or disease or death? Freedom from your mother-in-law? Please mister give us a bill of sale on this freedom before we go out and get killed. Give us a bill of sale drawn up plainly so we know in advance what we're getting killed for and give us also a first mortgage on something as security so we can be sure after we've won your war that we've got the same kind of freedom we bargained for.

And take decency. Everybody said America was fighting a war for the triumph of decency. But whose idea of decency? And decency for who? Speak up and tell us what decency is. Tell us how much better a decent dead man feels than an indecent live one. Make a comparison there in facts like houses and tables. Make it in words we can

signed up and in a little while a shell hit him and his life spattered out of him in red meat pulp and he was dead. Dead for another word and all the fierce old bats of the D.A.R. get out and hurrah themselves hoarse over his grave because he died for womanhood.

Now it might be that a guy would risk getting killed if his women were being raped. But if he did why he was only striking a bargain. He was simply saying that according to the way he felt at the time the safety of his women was worth more than his own life. But there wasn't anything particularly noble or heroic about it. It was a straight deal his life for something he valued more. It was more or less like any other deal a man might make. But when you change your women to all the women in the world why you begin to defend women in the bulk. To do that you have to fight in the bulk. And by that time you're fighting for a word again.

When armies begin to move and flags wave and slogans pop up watch out little guy because it's somebody else's chestnuts in the fire not yours. It's words you're fighting for and you're not making an honest deal your life for something better. You're being noble and after you're killed the thing you traded your life for won't do you any

good and chances are it won't do anybody else any good either.

Maybe that's a bad way to think. There are lots of idealists around who will say have we got so low that nothing is more precious than life? Surely there are ideals worth fighting for even dying for. If not then we are worse than the beasts of the field and have sunk into barbarity. Then you say that's all right let's be barbarous just so long as we don't have war. You keep your ideals just as long as they don't cost me my life. And they say but surely life isn't as important as principle. Then you say oh no? Maybe not yours but mine is. What the hell is principle? Name it and you can have it.

You can always hear the people who are willing to sacrifice somebody else's life. They're plenty loud and they talk all the time. You can find them in churches and schools and newspapers and legislatures and congresses. That's their business. They sound wonderful. Death before dishonor. This ground sanctified by blood. These men who died so gloriously. They shall not have died in vain. Our noble dead.

Hmmmm.

But what do the dead say?

Did anybody ever come back from the dead any single one of the millions who got killed did any

one of them ever come back and say by god I'm glad I'm dead because death is always better than dishonor? Did they say I'm glad I died to make the world safe for democracy? Did they say I like death better than losing liberty? Did any of them ever say it's good to think I got my guts blown out for the honor of my country? Did any of them ever say look at me I'm dead but I died for decency and that's better than being alive? Did any of them ever say here I am I've been rotting for two years in a foreign grave but it's wonderful to die for your native land? Did any of them say hurray I died for womanhood and I'm happy see how I sing even though my mouth is choked with worms?

Nobody but the dead know whether all these things people talk about are worth dying for or not. And the dead can't talk. So the words about noble deaths and sacred blood and honor and such are all put into dead lips by grave robbers and fakes who have no right to speak for the dead. If a man says death before dishonor he is either a fool or a liar because he doesn't know what death is. He isn't able to judge. He only knows about living. He doesn't know anything about dying. If he is a fool and believes in death before dishonor let him go ahead and die. But all

the little guys who are too busy to fight should be left alone. And all the guys who say death before dishonor is pure bull the important thing is life before death they should be left alone too. Because the guys who say life isn't worth living without some principle so important you're willing to die for it they are all nuts. And the guys who say you'll see there'll come a time you can't escape you're going to have to fight and die because it'll mean your very life why they are also nuts. They are talking like fools. They are saying that two and two make nothing. They are saying that a man will have to die in order to protect his life. If you agree to fight you agree to die. Now if you die to protect your life you aren't alive anyhow so how is there any sense in a thing like that? A man doesn't say I will starve myself to death to keep from starving. He doesn't say I will spend all my money in order to save my money. He doesn't say I will burn my house down in order to keep it from burning. Why then should he be willing to die for the privilege of living? There ought to be at least as much common sense about living and dying as there is about going to the grocery store and buying a loaf of bread.

And all the guys who died all the five million or seven million or ten million who went out and

died to make the world safe for democracy to make the world safe for words without meaning how did they feel about it just before they died? How did they feel as they watched their blood pump out into the mud? How did they feel when the gas hit their lungs and began eating them all away? How did they feel as they lay crazed in hospitals and looked death straight in the face and saw him come and take them? If the thing they were fighting for was important enough to die for then it was also important enough for them to be thinking about it in the last minutes of their lives. That stood to reason. Life is awfully important so if you've given it away you'd ought to think with all your mind in the last moments of your life about the thing you traded it for. So did all those kids die thinking of democracy and freedom and liberty and honor and the safety of the home and the stars and stripes forever?

You're goddam right they didn't.

They died crying in their minds like little babies. They forgot the thing they were fighting for the thing they were dying for. They thought about things a man can understand. They died yearning for the face of a friend. They died whimpering for the voice of a mother a father a wife a child. They died with their hearts sick for one

more look at the place where they were born please god just one more look. They died moaning and sighing for life. They knew what was important. They knew that life was everything and they died with screams and sobs. They died with only one thought in their minds and that was I want to live I want to live I want to live.

He ought to know.

He was the nearest thing to a dead man on earth.

He was a dead man with a mind that could still think. He knew all the answers that the dead knew and couldn't think about. He could speak for the dead because he was one of them. He was the first of all the soldiers who had died since the beginning of time who still had a brain left to think with. Nobody could dispute with him. Nobody could prove him wrong. Because nobody knew but he.

He could tell all these high-talking murdering sonsofbitches who screamed for blood just how wrong they were. He could tell them mister there's nothing worth dying for I know because I'm dead. There's no word worth your life. I would rather work in a coal mine deep under the earth and never see sunlight and eat crusts and water and work twenty hours a day. I would rather do

that than be dead. I would trade democracy for life. I would trade independence and honor and freedom and decency for life. I will give you all these things and you give me the power to walk and see and hear and breathe the air and taste my food. You take the words. Give me back my life. I'm not asking for a happy life now. I'm not asking for a decent life or an honorable life or a free life. I'm beyond that. I'm dead so I'm simply asking for life. To live. To feel. To be something that moves over the ground and isn't dead. I know what death is and all you people who talk about dying for words don't even know what life is.

There's nothing noble about dying. Not even if you die for honor. Not even if you die the greatest hero the world ever saw. Not even if you're so great your name will never be forgotten and who's that great? The most important thing is your life little guys. You're worth nothing dead except for speeches. Don't let them kid you any more. Pay no attention when they tap you on the shoulder and say come along we've got to fight for liberty or whatever their word is there's always a word.

Just say mister I'm sorry I got no time to die I'm too busy and then turn and run like hell. If they say coward why don't pay any attention because it's your job to live not to die. If they talk

about dying for principles that are bigger than life you say mister you're a liar. Nothing is bigger than life. There's nothing noble in death. What's noble about lying in the ground and rotting? What's noble about never seeing the sunshine again? What's noble about having your legs and arms blown off? What's noble about being an idiot? What's noble about being blind and deaf and dumb? What's noble about being dead? Because when you're dead mister it's all over. It's the end. You're less than a dog less than a rat less than a bee or an ant less than a little white maggot crawling around on a dungheap. You're dead mister and you died for nothing.

You're dead mister.

Dead.