

LET ME SLEEP WHEN I DIE

Time to say goodbye.

BY WENDY NIKEL

To my family, friends and whomever else it may concern,

If you're reading this, I'm dead now, and I'd like to stay that way.

Yes, I know, you'll miss me and wish we'd had more time. Yes, I know I never wrote that memoir I always said I'd pen. Yes, I know the fancy insurance plan you kids picked out for me includes a free body upload and five free years' maintenance and repairs, but there comes a time in an old man's life when he has to put his foot down, and this is a hill I'm ready to die on.

You see, there's things about the war I never told you.

The first man I ever killed, fresh out of boot camp on my first real mission, was a soldier by the name of Anstis. He'd lost his company and got left behind in the smoke-filled ruins of what used to be a city. I'd been ordered ahead

to scout out an old warehouse and happened to stumble upon him. Somehow, green as I was, I got my shot off faster.

I watched as the panic on his face warped into pain, then the pain slowly faded to blankness. The blood on his dog tags stained my fingers.

I left his body there. Maybe if I hadn't, things might've turned out differently. Maybe if I hadn't, I wouldn't be writing you this letter.

But that was before. The war was still new, and we didn't know yet what the enemy was doing with the bodies. We didn't know what they were capable of.

You saw the videos, I'm sure, released after the war, showing white-coated doctors playing Frankenstein with the wires of a man's bisected brain. Picking up a mess of tissue and nerves from one body and inserting it into another.

You saw the images of the troops marching through bombed-out city squares, clothed in the enemy's fatigues. The only thing to differentiate one pale, hairless form from the next was the patch on each chest, bearing the surname of a soldier we'd already killed — a man or woman they'd uploaded

into one of those pasty, cookie-cutter bodies, slapping glimmering medals on them for service to their country. Why train new men and pay death gratuities when a cheaper solution was now available?

We called them abominations. We learnt to aim for the head. And when the treaty was

How empty, white faces once considered ghoulish and grotesque are now held up as the pinnacle of style, "the perfect, fuss-free vehicle for your post-death life".

I've read the pamphlets. I've heard the sales pitches — that I'd still enjoy playing my sax and reading the Sunday comics, that I'd still appreciate the sun on my face and would still know and love each of you. I could see my granddaughter grow, attend her ballet performances, her wedding, and for that I'm sorely tempted.

But I also never told you about that time, decades after the war, when I thought I saw Anstis at a coffee shop. I had him in a headlock, my pocket-knife to his flabby, inhuman throat, before I saw that his eyes weren't the same — that it was just some poor, 're-lifed' sap clutching a bag of filled long johns — and realized what I'd nearly done.

The first time it happened, the cops let me go. PTSD, they said sadly. The second time, third time, they weren't so

sympathetic.

You see, they may be walking their dogs or mowing their lawns, driving their cars or attending a show, but all I see are those white faces peering at me across the trenches. They may be placing their order or greeting a friend, reciting a poem or giving directions, but all I hear are tinny, whispered threats. They may be my neighbours, my old friends, my grocer, but each time, that old hatred flares within me. Each time, my gut says to kill him.

You see, now, why I can't take his face, his voice, his skin, his body. I can't look at him in the mirror each day. Not when I've spent so much of my life trying to leave it all in the past. Trying not to become Anstis. ■

When Wendy Nikel isn't travelling in time or space, she enjoys a quiet life near Utah's Wasatch Mountains. She has a degree in elementary education, a fondness for road trips, and a terrible habit of forgetting where she's left her cup of tea. Her short fiction has been published by Fantastic Stories of the Imagination, Daily Science Fiction, Nature and various other anthologies and e-zines. For more info, visit wendynikel.com



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

signed, we celebrated by destroying their corpses.

That night, with the stench of burning rubber and plastic still sharp in my nostrils, I climbed into my tent to pen a letter to my darling back home and found someone already there, his face hidden in the shadows, his knife pressed to my throat, and venomous threats spooling from his tinny voice box.

My instincts kicked in and in the scuffle, the blade found his throat rather than mine, slicing it open with a jolt of electricity that left a burn scar on my thumb. When the bare bulb's light fell upon his fatigues, the name there was all too familiar: Anstis. He'd come to take his revenge on me — an act of hatred and vengeance, not of war — and the first man I ever killed also became the last.

I've seen a lot of changes in all the long years since. It's strange, how one era's abominations become another era's prize. How technology once deemed inhumane is tweaked, 'perfected' and slapped with a hefty price tag.

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