

Xylophone

The sound of xylophones. Bold, round and resonant. It makes the dust under his nose bounce, just faintly. He pauses his breathing. Listens.

His eyes are smarting. The beats remind him of something. Home. His father's father liked beating on things. He beat on tins, empty buckets and upside down basins in the sweltering heat of the afternoon. For such an old man, why did he not opt to take a siesta. Maybe he foresaw this – the smarting of his young eyes.

Those afternoons were made memorable by “drum” beats. Snores in the afternoon probably would not have stuck to his mind with this kind of attachment.

Now he listens. The xylophone beats rise, ever slowly. He can't possibly keep his breathing paused any longer. He takes a long draw of breath, breathes in the dust under his nose. Sneezes. He hasn't had a bath in weeks. He has been trekking through the dusty plateau alongside other children like him - casualties of the war.

Two months before he had watched as the place he'd called home, ever since he knew himself, was razed to the ground. With it had gone his mother and father. His grandfather as well, that old beat-maker. Most of the few people he knew in this world too. He would never see their faces again. Never touch their hands, laugh with or at them. Never share another meal together.

Right after the xylophone beats though, he did take a bath. Most of the children did. They also got hot meals and beds to lay their heads on. The war was over, and with it came new order. The United Nations had been formed in place of the League of Nations. With it came UNICEF and a semblance of human assistance became evident.

There was still hope. He made other friends. Touched their hands, laughed with them and sometimes at them. Ate countless meals together. He forgot most of those encounters. Days fading and running into each other. But the xylophone and its beats stuck, etched to his memory.

This somewhat drove him to learn how to play it – the xylophone. In his twenties he would tour most of Europe with some of his friends from the times after the war – people he'd lived with since that day of the first bath. He would meet the mother of his child during one of their performances, in the most commonplace of situations – looking for a toilet.

They would have children. Three sons. None of them would take to music like their father. Sometimes one or two of them would sing in the shower, though, that would be the most of music from the three.

Wilshire, one of his sons, while still in school, had begun volunteering with UNICEF following his father's praise of it within the household. He liked the paper on the books that they issued to

elementary school children. Thick, white and blank. It must have awakened a creative genius in some of them, he liked to think. To him it was a symbol - of freedom, space and creation. He liked such things. He also liked to take long draws of breath in open plains. Most, if not all of those times, the skin on his upper lip would be clean and fresh, not a speck of dirt on it - a contrast to his father's back then.

Wilshire fathered a son. A brooding child. Quiet and always seeming to be in thought. A child that liked observing things. People. Movements. The wind. Dust and drizzle. But most of all, this child, who was named Trilby, liked to watch his grandfather play the xylophone. Trilby would sit with him on some afternoons and gaze into the expanse of their land. Listen as grandpapa practiced new beats, old beats and beats that did not sound like beats. Joyful, irritating and sometimes sombre beats.

Grandpapa would tell him stories of the war when he sat there. Of pain, suffering, death and destruction. Of times when his skin would get so dusty he'd feel as if he'd been showered with glue. Trilby would listen to him and to the beats as well. Some would have dismissed him as too young to understand his grandfather's musings, but the stories he wrote in his twenties would have proved them wrong.

Yes, Trilby grew up. He grew up and wrote stories. Most of them were centred around percussion and wartime - a mirrored look at his grandfather's escapades. He brought out the sentiment that had echoed from grandpapa's voice as he told his tales. A voice that he would hear no more.

Grandpapa died. This would have been his seventieth year - seventy years since he'd gotten that bath from UNICEF.

This is a fictional story inspired by the post WWII UNICEF initiative to feed, clothe and provide healthcare to European children facing famine and disease. Elements of music, a passion of mine, are also evident.