

The Flares of Night

By: Ethan Fox

It didn't matter what he did because he was still involved. Only after, at daybreak, the piles of young men, women, and children came to haunt him: when the survivors returned to the city.

Major Bell gave the order: "Pile 'em up, doesn't matter how. Just get them out of the way."

It was Paul Webber's job to stack; to carry out the order. He didn't question: he just threw body upon body in the alley. It was tiring work for him; he'd never really seen a dead person before, nor did he know the term genocide. Purging was the word he knew, and he never applied it to the events of the night until he moved to America.

Another body: a man, no more than twenty, eyes open in silent pain. Another body: a fat man, eyes closed, three bullets in his chest, one through his head. Another – an old man. Another – A scrawny boy. Another, another, another...

The bodies in the side street reached the height of Webber's chest, and he couldn't keep them from spilling onto the street. And then he was ordered to wait for more orders. Webber intruded upon a vacant house and sat down, listening to the sounds on the street.

A woman's voice came from the door. It was in another language, but she was in despair and her voice was coarse with worry and fright. She approached Webber, speaking, gesturing. She was right up against him, frantically gesturing and pleading in her foreign language. The woman made Webber uneasy so he shouted to *shut the fuck up*, but it didn't work.

Another body.

Major Bell found Webber still in the kitchen smoking a cigar, the woman sprawled across the floor. "Soldier," the Major barked. "New orders."

Webber crushed the half-finished smoke under his boot. The orders were simple, wait for the flares to converge on, and kill, the remaining civilians. There was no logic to this, except for the logic that went through Webber's head: the people were the rebels and must be punished.

The sky was dark, and the stars were clearly visible. Webber tried to locate the two constellations he knew. There was Orion's Belt, but he couldn't find the big dipper, which meant he couldn't locate the North Star. Webber was still searching when the first flare went up.

At first, it was a small number. The flares rose up and burned down. After a few seconds the flares seemed to outnumber the stars, and the whole city was illuminated in a ghostly-warm light. The shadows stirred as the flares sank and hit the ground, building small puffs of sand.

A flare landed down the street to his right, so Webber went to it. Before he got there, two soldiers hurried around the corner, into the house on the right (from Webber's perspective). He heard the screaming of a young child the laughter of the soldiers, and counted seven shots.

The soldiers emerged and walked casually by Webber, as if nothing had happened; as if he weren't there at all. Webber paced towards the house, afraid of what he'd find. A few feet away, a familiar whistling sounded a missile.

Instinct took over: Webber spun away from the house, dropped flat on the ground, and covered his head. The house behind him was obliterated. Debris pelted the ground around him, targeting his bare hands. Webber got up, dust cascading down his uniform.

There was no more house: that was certain. Webber swallowed, and took a step towards the rubble. A piece of wall came loose and tumbled down, and with it, a loose hand that flopped carelessly to the ground, and started to leak the rest of its blood. And then he saw the face of the child with black pigtails in the rubble, a bullet hole through her eye.

Webber panicked, vomited dinner, and ran. He didn't know where he was running, he just ran. Gunfire up ahead. Webber didn't even slow, but out of the corner of his eye he saw a soldier spinning in circles yelling and shooting at the sky at nothing. There was a louder shot, and the constant rattle came to an abrupt halt. Webber kept running.

Eventually, he found a dark place without flares; without other people. He could hear shouts, screams, and shots in the distance. He collapsed and started to rock back and forth, his arms pressing his knees into his chest. His mouth let out a low moaning sound and his eyes tore apart the endless darkness.

Hours passed, and the sun gently rose. Webber started to walk aimlessly around until he found himself, around mid morning, facing the entrance to the city. There was a crowd of women and children: dusty, defeated, and disoriented. Soldiers were herding them out of the city, when a red Mercedes streaked to the gate.

A man with a megaphone got out; "You are to stop the shooting," his voice carried across the city. "All citizens, return to your homes!" He got back into his car and drove off. There was silence for a long time, before the soldiers continued to walk out, and the survivors back in.

The survivors lumbered in a downtrodden manner. The majority of the survivors were women who started wailing and moaning, crying out in despair. It was in foreign language, but Webber could tell what they meant from the tone of their voices, and the tears in their face.

Where are we supposed to go? There are no more houses: they've been destroyed.
My husband! What have we done to deserve this? My daughter! Son!
You've killed my son! What are we supposed to do?

And Webber didn't know what else to do except for stand there with a morose look in his eye and watch the survivors saunter back in. So he watched them... and he watched them... and he watched them...