

"This is a beautiful war story, if there is such a thing....Have you read *All Quiet on the Western Front* lately? You should. Then read *Schopenhauer's Telescope*. They are in the same league."

—ROGER ROSENBLATT



# SCHOPENHAUER'S TELESCOPE

A NOVEL

GERARD DONOVAN

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Gerard Donovan

COUNTERPOINT

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*for Mary*

*What is your substance, whereof are you made,  
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

SCHOPENHAUER'S  
TELESCOPE

## PART I

# Noon





## ON THE WAY TO THE FIELD

As often happens when snow falls, the morning was mild, but around eleven the wind picked up, snow and ice fell together, and the temperature went below zero. Even though they gave me no time to bring anything with me when they came, I regretted I didn't grab my cap with the furry ear-flaps that hung from the coat hanger by the front door. Simple: just grab, it would have taken a second. Now my ears were sore and swollen and I had all the seconds in the world to feel it.

The snow fell heavier as noon approached. It stuck to the track that led to the field as I marched in front of another man and two soldiers. We slogged along as if we were out for a walk on a winter's day, and our boots sliced into the snow. I stepped into a hollow, and clumps of it slid down my heel and cold water pooled under the arch of my foot. We passed under pine trees that showed green under the branches like coloured light under a white lampshade. I suppose I could say it was a beautiful day, but we said nothing to each other.

The man caught up with me, lit a match and then his cigarette, quickly returned his free hand to his coat pocket and hunched his shoulders as he pulled the cigarette until it glowed.

My ears went numb, but that numbness hurt somehow and penetrated into my spirit; I felt lifeless. The crunch of steps could have been my heart. I looked back at the soldiers. Three steps behind. I thought I might make a run for it. Leave the whole mess behind me and reach the forest and then freedom. Frozen air ballooned from my lips as I took deep breaths and prepared myself. My feet, however, refused to move faster. My legs shook.

I wouldn't make it, anyway. They'd see me make the break, snap out of their own misery, unsling their guns and spray fire until I dropped to the snow and leaked onto it and died.

This far north, sometimes days can't lift themselves above the horizon, can't get down to the door and open it for the sun to shine in. Since dawn very little extra light had filtered down through the clouds, though the snow reflected what light there was. I thought how the time of day seemed perfectly disguised. Twilight? Dawn? Noon? Some days don't ever get going at all.

The field was about a hundred yards ahead. I knew it well, I played there as a child. Eleven acres of flat grass, a small farmhouse, and a barn in one corner that used to house two ponies. The owner was dead, the property claimed in back-taxes by the town. A pine forest bordered on three sides; on the fourth, a wall ran alongside the track. I smelled the forest, tasted the sharp tang of bark on the air.

As we passed the first of two gates into the field, I heard a mumble and looked around. One of the soldiers had raised a hand and I glanced to where he pointed; I nodded, trudged over to the second gate, and waited as the man stood to one side. The younger soldier swung it open and motioned me in.

We entered the field, I first, the man behind me, the soldiers behind him. The soldiers sat down behind a gun emplacement. The man and I crossed to the middle of the field to a section where the snow dipped about a metre deep in a rectangular cut, about six metres by two. I knew when the man stopped half way to the hole because his boots no longer crunched in the snow. The next part of the journey was mine alone.

I looked up at a pickaxe as it flew through the air. It landed a few feet ahead of me. One of the soldiers threw a shovel that dropped and skidded between us. I picked it up and walked to the edge of the depression, took a deep breath, looked around me once more, and stepped in.

## THE HOLE

I grew up in sight of this field. I played here as a child on my way home from school, though usually on my own, because I was never that popular, for reasons I now understand. My impulse was to be alone, and by my sixteenth year I no longer played with the other schoolboys at all, not even football, not even in warm weather. Instead, I read books over there by the wall or under that tree. The field inclined from south to north so that in rainy times a pool gathered at the south end where in autumn migrating geese landed to rest. They cackled so much the field itself seemed alive. In summer, the ground softened under rain and felt like brown flesh with grass for skin, perfumed with all the flowers that found their way through the surface. In winter it was a hard field, not made of flesh at all, not made of anything except the hardness that stops your boot from sinking for ever into the snow, a hardness that says, *Ground*.

I took the shovel and heaved to the side the snow that had fallen on the partially dug hole, all under the disinterested gaze of the man who stood six metres away. He plucked another cigarette from a silver case, tapped it, and placed it between his lips, never took his eyes off me, his left hand snug in his pocket.

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Hardly a day for momentous events, and anything written in the book of history about today would be erased by fat grey clouds that shed cold crystals everywhere and anywhere, on the pine trees, on the lights and spires of the town visible a mile away in the dim morning light. This was a day to hide things in. The gusty wind found every footprint and filled it, along with its direction, and our presence in the field would leave little impression and even less evidence. In fact, that November 25th offered nothing to the senses to distinguish it from any other winter day in earth's rotation and the rotation of air through every pair of lungs or under every pair of wings. But it's well known that all events have to occur in a day of some kind.

Although a baker by trade, today I was a digger. I shovelled for maybe twenty minutes and alternated with the pickaxe to loosen the hard clay. A good rhythm. The man went through three cigarettes. In no hurry, I scraped a thin film of snow with each swing and spread it wide in the air to give the illusion of volume and so keep myself busy longer. After I hit clay I did the same. The man made no move to correct my method, if he did notice anything. With each upward movement I took stock of my surroundings. A tractor with mud frozen on its wheels stood in the doorway of the barn, along with forks that hung from the beam, and the stable for the ponies that hadn't been seen since the day before yesterday, when the soldiers first came to the town. Snow on the barn roof, on the fence that circled the barn, dropping off the branches in the rising wind.

I shovelled to keep warm, to keep my heart beating, yes, my heart beating. I repeated these words in time with my

dig and swing: *Ice and snow, wind. Ice and snow, wind. Stay alive. Stay alive.*

We were in the middle of nowhere, we had a baby blizzard growing bigger, and, despite my attempts at delay, I was already a metre down into the hole.

## WHEN GENIAL MEN COME

It's remarkable how quickly you can get into trouble.

The war had come to our town and left it in the space of two days. Some smoke still rose from shelled-out buildings in the town; otherwise a vast silence lingered in the air. The battle sounds of the days before had grown distant. I guessed that our neighbours in the next town, fifteen kilometres down the road, must be in the middle of it now. They'd die like most people do, in a panic, one hand on their children, the other to their god, if they believed in one, or in a fight to the end if they didn't.

After the fast battle for the town had ended, and the blackened soldiers had moved on or been put in hospital or buried, I noticed a new breed of men filter from the main approach road into the town streets. They wore pullovers and caps, and one of them even smoked a pipe. Could have been a hunting party or a golf crew. A few at first, they went through the town pointing at important buildings and getting in and out of nondescript cars. Then some hours passed and more came in, better dressed. They set up headquarters in the beer hall. These men were genial. I heard they liked wine and dined at the local restaurant. With a detachment of green-uniformed soldiers following them in jeeps and on foot, they went

through the town's records, consulted tax documents, property lists.

By eight o'clock that evening, they had drawn up a different kind of list, written, I was told, in pencil and in capitals. My name must have been near the top of that list, because they came to my house that night, directly from the beer hall.



## THE TEACHER

When I noticed him, it was too late. The man almost on top of me. Caught me off guard as I dug. He walked up to the edge and looked into the hole in the winter field, not far from thick woods and a wall that trailed like a child's aimless scribble across the cold blade of that November day.

I let the shovel drop and spat a piece of glass onto my gloves and rubbed them uselessly together for a little warmth, as I'd often done on chilly spring mornings when I was still the town baker and I eased the door shut behind me as dawn rose above the rooftops behind my bakery. There, I could work in peace among the empty ovens lined up for the poultices of flour and water and oil, on my own, the way I was used to. I could work in peace then because I was noticed less than I was now.

My hands froze to the shovel. Nothing could warm my fingers now, not even fire, I thought. I looked at him with a sideways swipe of the eyes then, since he made no effort to greet me or shake my hand, just stood at the hole. His long coat fit him, herringbone tweed perhaps, but too thin for this type of weather, the hat expensive, made to measure, I suspected. His glove drew out yet another cigarette from a silver box he flipped open expertly.

Those things would kill him.