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Night Time in the Stalag

by Marion Umney

It's 4am and he's awake again. Memories clashing through his mind. Thoughts buzzing like abominable mosquitos, waiting to bite, then hiding away before he can catch and squash them.

He groans as he comes out of the dream and remembers where he is. Are the memories worse than the reality of the camp, the constant fear, the cold, the hunger, the not knowing? At least in his dreams he is sometimes at home; warm and safe. Although that can feel worse than the others; the dreams where there is noise, smoke, blood, screams. At least from those dreams he wakes to relief even though it may take time to calm himself. When he wakes from the dreams of home all he feels is longing.

"You awake mate?" the whisper comes from the bunk below.

"Yeah," he whispers back.

"Dreamin' again? Dancing girls and plenty of sex was it?"

"Yeah, somthin' like that," he replies with a soft laugh

It feels good to have a voice, another human being to bring him back to some sense of normality.

"Me too," says the voice. Then after a moment's quiet, "dreaming of escape – can't wait to get out of this place."

"You're obsessed mate. You know it's impossible."

He likes Jacko, but feels the familiar moment of terror when he talks of escape and wants to warn him - please don't! If one man goes it usually means everyone suffers.

“Yeah well,” says Jacko, with more than a hint of bravado in his voice, “it might be and it might not be. Anyway, obsessions are the only thing that matter. They keep you going. Me I’m obsessed with finding a way to escape and one day I will, you mark my words. You, you’re obsessed with keeping your head down; staying alive. It amounts to the same thing in the end. We both want this to be over.”

He was right about that, for sure. Four long years already and God knew how many more. Just staying alive seemed to be the only way to stay sane, and he could understand Jacko’s restlessness. Sometimes it was hard to remember a life other than this monotony, or to imagine that he could ever be back with his family again, going out in London with a girl on his arm and not a care in the world. Would he ever stop being afraid? A sound outside brought him to his habitual state of vigilance. The guards? No, it was just the rats as usual, but they would be around soon. Best to stay quiet, stay alive.

“You’re probably right mate. Ah well, one day. See you in the Ship and Anchor and mine’s a pint.”

There was comfort in the ritual of that phrase – that expression of mutual faith that one day this would be over; that they’d all make it and life would return to normal.