

When you lose your way in the Ardennes, you're lost. What use are plans and prayers. A landscape without faces is like air nobody breathes. A landscape in itself is nothing. The country through which German Sergeant Gauthier Bachmann was making his way on the second Monday before Easter was green but lifeless. [ . . . ]

And then the unexpected happened. From a hole in the ground no bigger than a fox's burrow popped a creature with his finger pressed to his lips. Pst, pst, he went, and a man, small, dark, and skinny, crawled out of the hole, shook his fist in Bachmann's stomach and yelled: You're caving in my entrance, you damn fool.

Get away from me, you! Bachmann was scared stiff. He hauled off and poked his stick into the ghost's side. It writhed with pain and made faces. You've hurt my kidney, the critter whimpered. Good, said Bachmann and got ready to strike again. Then it dawned on him: the ghost spoke his mother tongue. You're not a mole?

Me a mole? Are you crazy? I'm a German.

A German? Bachmann wasn't going to be made a fool of. He was delirious with hunger. In such a state, he knew, all sorts of things can happen. The critter held his side and limped around him in a circle.

You're a liar! Whish! He tried to shoo him away, but the little fellow kept nimbly beyond his reach. Whish, Bachmann went, get away! He spun around, brandishing the stick. How can it be a German? Must be some cross between a man and a beast, like those mongrels that sometimes get born in out-of-the-way places.

But I am a German. We talk the same language, don't we? The argument had its effect. Standing by the entrance to the burrow, Bachmann lifted his right boot. Don't, the other cried out. Don't do it! That's my home! His home? ran through Bachmann's head, then he must be lying. That's no kind of home for a human being. He brought his right boot down with full force. The boot vanished in the ground. The construction was frail, further proof that the whole thing must be a trap. [ . . . ]

What's your name?

Xavier Schnotz, my company is over there. He pointed in the direction from which Bachmann had come. You know that? Bachmann was amazed. You know that and you stay here? I didn't see a thing. I haven't met a soul in a whole month. If it weren't for the planes, I'd have thought I was dead long ago. The Elysian fields.

Don't insult the fields, said Schnotz. Without these fields I'd have been dead long ago. Do you realize how warm it is down there?

No.

Plenty warm. You're a stinker. You've wrecked my house. But I won't go with you. If you keep on going, you'll be at the border by tonight. Without me. I'm staying here until it's over. Have to dig myself a new hole. It's too risky in the hut.

Hut?

Too risky, I tell you. It's up against the wall for the like of us, or the noose.

Bachmann stood up: I'm beginning to catch on. You're a deserter.

Sure, what else.

And I thought you were lost. So you're a deserter. That's great.

Schnotz detected something wrong in the tone.

What do you mean: So you're a deserter? What are you, a Wehrmacht patrol?

Not at all. But I'm not a deserter either. Not by a long shot. The opposite. I'm looking for my regiment.

I don't get you.

Oh yes, you do. I'm looking for my regiment. And if I don't find my own, I'll join another. Been on sick leave long enough. High time I was doing something.

Schnotz was thunderstruck. He must be pretty far gone. Or he's an informer. Crazy idea. They wouldn't send out an informer like that. [ . . . ]

What Bachmann was telling him struck him as so implausible that he didn't trust his ears. Plan A, said Bachmann, is maybe the simplest. I creep into an army camp at night and hide in the cellar. I wait for a fresh batch of recruits to turn up, and as soon as I hear them marching through the gate, I pop out. I wait till they're in the shower room, naked everybody looks alike. Then to the quartermaster's, I draw a new uniform, and I'm in the clear. Sure, I lose my rank, but I get a second chance. That's worth the sacrifice. What I need is an old camp building with as many passages, rooms, and storerooms as possible. You don't think much of it, I can see that by your face. Plan B. Combat situation. It's hard to get there. There are sentries, patrols, and manned trenches all over. But once you've broken through, you're in the clear. After that you just have to show you've got what it takes. I'm no coward, friend, you can take my word for it. Mortars and such things don't scare me. The more noise there is the better I like it. You don't know me. The only part I don't go for is wet trenches and mud. Aside from that any kind of terrain suits me. Once the fighting is over, I lay my cards on the table. I tell them frankly who I am—but they reward me for bravery in battle. My discharge is canceled. It stands to reason; because I proved I'm a man, I showed them I've got what it takes. I'll even come in for a decoration. But that's not what I'm out for, don't get that idea. [ . . . ]

Plan C, Schnotz, may sound fantastic. But it has its points. Would you kindly cut out sniffing and running around? Listen to me, you can learn a thing or two. I'll need a military cemetery. I pick out a suitable spot between two graves and bury myself.

**“IT IS THIS BOOK THAT CONFIRMS  
LIND’S STATURE AS AN AUTHOR OF  
INTERNATIONAL IMPORTANCE.”  
—NEW YORK TIMES**

Like you in your fox burrow. Only I can't afford to leave such a big hole. The air shaft mustn't be any bigger than a water pipe with a diameter of two and a half inches. Otherwise people would notice it. So I lie in this

grave and wait for a funeral. I'll need about a dozen people in civilian clothes. Uncles, aunts, parents, and such. As soon as the services start, in between the priest's blessing and sermon—before the visitors and relatives have recovered from their emotion—I rise up out of the grave. Anyone who sees a soldier in uniform rising out of the grave is bound to stand up for him. People can't say no to a soldier with catalepsy, that's a safe bet, they're too sentimental. And what does the man want? Nothing, except to be marked fit for active duty. He wants to join his buddies at the front. It's sure to work, there's only one possible hitch. ||