NATIONAL THEATRE CONNECTIONS 2012

The Grandfathers

By Rory Mullarkey

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This script is only available to National Theatre Connections 2012 companies between July 2011 and June 2012, for a maximum of five performances at the Company’s home venue and one performance at the Partner Theatre festival. Any performances outside this period will need to be negotiated with the writer’s agent.
Roles may be played by actors of either gender.

I: Kol

Kol: When I wake up I don’t know where I am.

A hillside in Central Asia. Gunfire, explosions. The section is pinned down, behind a wall of sandbags. Kol opens his eyes. Kol opens his eyes. He is heavily wounded. Zhen is holding him.

Zhen: Look at me Kol stay with me.
Kol: Zhen…
Zhen: I’m here Kol look at me mate.
Sash: Kol!
Zhen: Kol look at me mate, fucking look at me.
Kol: What the fuck am I looking at?
Zhen: What?
Lev: Taking heavy fire.
Kol: What the fuck am I looking at?
Dim: Kol.
Zhen: Me Kol, you’re looking at me.
Kol: No, what the fuck are you looking at? What the fuck are you looking at Zhen mate, what the fuck are you looking at?

Zhen: What stay with me Kol!

Kol: Haha you remember Zhen? What the fuck are you looking at? Haha! You’re crying Zhen!

Stas: He’s delirious.

Kol: Crying! You’re crying!

Zhen: *(his hands are putting pressure on Kol’s wound)* I don’t have a free hand here someone fetch me a tourniquet! Anyone!

Kol: Haha why you so concerned about me?

Sash: Everyone, stay down!

Kol: If you receive this letter, Sash! Sash think about the letters going home!

Val: Machine guns, snipers, we’re completely pinned down!

Tol: Mortars soon too, that means. We’ll need to fall back!

Val: We can’t sarge, we can’t, we’re completely pinned down!

Lev: This wall won’t hold, sarge!

Kol: In terms of defence, Lev, there’s nothing better than a wall! Haha!

Zhen: Stay with me mate!

Kol: What the fuck are you looking at? Haha, you remember, there’s nothing better than a wall!

Tol: Return fire!

Dim: They’d shoot my head straight off sarge, I can’t even. And Kol sarge and Kol –

Kost: Mortars!

Dim: Sarge we have to get Kol out!

Kol: For fuck’s sake Dim we’re trying to get some sleep over here!

Zhen: Don’t close your eyes, Kol!

Kol: You’re keeping us all awake Dim we’re on parade in the morning!

Zhen: Stay awake!

Stas: Grenade!

Val: We’re pinned down!

Stas: Grenade!

Kol: You named him Hector, Stas! Haha you named him Hector but he’s only a baby!
Dim: What about Kol?
Tol: Just keep him talking!
Kost: I don’t think we’ll have a problem doing that.
Kol: I can see my face in your boots, Kost. All shiny and new, haha, they’re like mirrors!
Tol: We’ve got machine guns at twelve and two, snipers at eleven and one.
Kol: Scoff at six and PT in the morning haha!
Val: There’s too much fire!
Zhen: Count for me, Kol, count to ten!
Kol: Val what makes the grass grow?
Zhen: Don’t look at your wound!
Stas: Incoming mortars!
Lev: Heads down!
Kol: Val what makes the grass grow?! What makes the grass grow?!
Lev: Heads down!
Zhen: Count to ten Kol, I’m here, don’t close your eyes, count to ten!
Kol: One. You’re crying!
Zhen: Count!
Kol: Two.
Sash: Stay down!
Kol: Three.
Lev: Heads down!
Kol: Four.
Dim: Is he going to make it?
Kol: Five. I can’t feel my legs!
Stas: Grenade!
Kol: Six.
Kost: We have to fall back sarge!
Kol: Seven.
Val: We’re completely pinned down!
Kol: Eight.
Tol: Mortars!
Kol: Nine.
Zhen: We’re losing him I think we’re losing him!
Kol: Five hundred and forty seven! What the fuck are you looking at?
Zhen: He’s going cold oh God Kol please don’t die!
Kol: Hahaha! Five hundred and forty seven! Five hundred and forty seven!

A large explosion. The sandbag wall is destroyed.

Kol: Five hundred and forty seven days!

II: Tol

Tol: Five hundred and forty seven days. Your country called you up, and you came.

A barracks room. Months earlier. Tol, a non-commissioned officer, is speaking to the conscripts, who stand fresh, green, in a line.

When men in suits fuck up, the soldiers get sent in. You ask me why you’re here, I tell you someone, somewhere, made a right royal pig’s ear of things. There’s a high chance that you’re going to get sent to battle. There’s a high chance that you’re going to end up on a hill in some shithole cursing the God that made you young. You ask me why you’re here, I tell you so you don’t get your arse shot off as soon as you land. You ask me why you’re here, I tell you: training.

Lights change. The conscripts are doing press-ups.

Tol: What do you call that, conscript?
Zhen: A press-up, sarge.
Tol: Very good. And what do you call that, conscript?
Val: A press-up, sarge.
Tol: Very good. And what do you call that, conscript?
Stas: A press-up, sarge.
Tol: Very good. And what do you call that, conscript?
Kol: A press-up sarge.
Tol: A what?
Kol: A press-up, sarge.
Tol: That is not a press-up, conscript, that is a mediocre impression of a snake having sex with a donut. Look over there (*indicates Zhen*). That, conscript, is a press-up. Watch him. Now you try.

*Kol does a better press-up.*

Very good. The press-up is your lover, the press-up is your friend. Those burning arm-extensions are the closest thing you’ll get round here to a hug. The ache of your chest-muscles in the morning is the closest thing you’ll get to a broken heart. You can even kiss the floor if you like, while you’re down there. Do you like press-ups, conscript?

Sash: Very much so, sarge.
Tol: Well you’ve come to the right place.

*Lights change. The conscripts are on a jog.*

Tol: The average teenager nowadays has the constitution of a seventy year-old man. Generally, the most strenuous exercise he is able to perform is reaching to turn off his Xbox before bed. His diet has all the nutritional value of the smell that comes out of a tramp’s arsehole on a lazy Saturday afternoon. Would that be fair to say, conscript?

Lev: Not at all sarge.
Tol: Then prove it.

*Lights change. The conscripts are doing star-jumps.*

Tol: This is not just your job now: this is your life. You sleep when I say, you go to scoff when I say. There isn’t a bead of sweat that falls from your nostril without my say-so. You’ve met your maker, conscripts, and he’s me. You are moulded in my image, so you’d better mould good because I’m proud of myself. Forget personal liberty, forget personal space, erase the word “personal” from your vocabulary. It was even never there.
Lights change. The conscripts are crawling across a field.

Tol: Think of me as your centurion. If you hate me, it is only because I love you too much. It is only because I know that if you want to fight easy you have to train hard. Train hard.
All: Fight easy!
Tol: Train hard.
All: Fight easy!
Tol: I want you to suffer. When you lie in bed at night I want you to be in pain. And in the morning we do it all over again.

Lights out.

Tol: We wake up!

Lights. The conscripts are doing press-ups.

Tol: What do you call that, conscript?
Dim: A press-up, sarge.
Tol: Very good. And why are we doing press-ups?
Dim: As a punishment, sarge.
Tol: Speak up, conscript, I don’t have supersonic hearing.
Dim: As a punishment, sarge.
Tol: Correct, conscript. A punishment for what?
Dim: I didn’t make my bed properly, sarge. The sheets weren’t straight enough.
Tol: What do we do to test the tautness of the sheets?
Dim: We bounce a coin on them, sarge.
Tol: And what did the coin do on your sheets, conscript?
Dim: It rolled off, sarge.
Tol: Correct, conscript. It rolled off.

Lights change. The conscripts are on a jog.
Tol: You are part of a large conscript army. Your term of service is five hundred and forty seven days. After that term is up, victory or none, you go home. Cross the days off on a calendar, count them backwards in your head, it won’t make them go any quicker. And when you’re old and stupid and look back over your life, you might even remember these days fondly. You might even smile. You might even think to yourself “They made me who I am.” That won’t make them feel any better now, though. They feel like Hell, and they’re supposed to.

*Lights change.*

Tol: Occasionally, you may be given short periods of recreation time, for chatter and the like.
Kol: Did you see the football last night?
Zhen: Well obviously not.
Tol: That’s enough!

*Lights change. The conscripts are doing star jumps.*

Tol: You did not choose to be here. But you will never forget that this is now your life. One!
Val: Two!
Kost: Three!
Stas: Four!
Dim: Five!
Lev: Six!
Sash: Seven!
Zhen: Eight!
Kol: Nine!
Tol: Ten! And in the morning we do it all over again.

*Lights out.*

Tol: We wake up!
Lights. The conscripts are doing press-ups.

Tol: What do you call that? One!
Val: Two!
Kost: Three!
Stas: Four!
Dim: Five!
Lev: Six!
Sash: Seven!
Zhen: Eight!
Kol: Nine!
Tol: Ten! We train hard!
All: We fight easy!
Tol: We train hard!
All: We fight easy!
Tol: And in the morning we do it all over again.

Lights out.

Tol: We wake up!

Lights.

Tol: And in the morning we do it all over again.

III: Val

Val: I’m not sure I’d describe myself as happy. You get used to it, I suppose. I guess happiness is something different nowadays: waking up with a start but realising I’ve still got an hour left in bed before reveille; that occasional Friday at scoff when they get the custard just right. So I guess what I’ve done is I’ve
changed the meaning of the word happiness. It wasn’t actually that hard to do. It’s just a word, after all.

_A field. Val is stood motionless in front of life-size dummy, his bayonet fixed to his rifle._

Tol: What makes the grass grow?  
Val: I can’t.

_Slight pause._

Tol: Right.

_Slight pause._

Tol: Well we’re not going anywhere until you do.

_Slight pause._

Tol: Conscript.  
Val: It’s just, it’s its eyes, sarge. I feel like it’s looking at me.  
Kost: It doesn’t have any eyes, Val. It’s a fucking dummy.  
Val: It’s just, well you know what I mean don’t you?  
Kost: Not really.  
Val: It’s looking at me. What’s inside it?  
Zhen: Meat. Pig guts.  
Dim: He’s joking.  
Lev: It’s just sand.  
Val: It’s just it’s not like on the range, is it? It’s not like with a rifle, a bullet, you’re not asking us to pull the trigger dead cold like you’re asking us to stab, with our arms and our strength, it’s a stab you’re asking me to do. Get right close and stick it in the guts.  
Lev: In the sand.  
Tol: Well we’re not going in until you do. We’ll stand out here through to dark, if that’s what it takes.

Kol: Come on Val mate, it’s cold.

Val: This doesn’t happen a lot, does it, I mean like, up close?

Zhen: Well who fucking knows mate.

Val: But like with, you know, bayonets. Even the word sounds old, savage. Makes me think of trenches.

Kost: For fuck’s sake, Val!

Val: I’m sorry!

Kost: Fucking Zhen over there, he twatted the shit out of it, left his looking like a crocodile’d been at it.

Zhen: I just got carried away.

Kost: He’s a regular fucking Rambo.

Kol: You nearly had my eye out, mate.

Zhen: Sorry.

Kol: You should be.

Zhen: Well you shouldn’t stand so close then.

Kol: I wasn’t close I was –

Kost: Oi save the lovers’ tiff for later, yeah? Come on Val, it’s not that hard, just imagine it’s him or you. Just imagine he’s fighting back.

Val: But he’s not.

Kost: Just imagine it.

Sash: See it in your head mate, it’s him or you.

Lev: You’re at the front.

Sash: You’re deep behind enemy lines.

Stas: You’re in a corridor.

Zhen: A long, dark corridor in a bombed-out house.

Dim: One of those ones with dirt on the floor, you know, grass sticking through the floorboards.

Kol: In the mountains. High up.

Zhen: In the mountains.

Lev: And suddenly, he’s there.

Stas: He strafes out from an obscured doorframe.

Kol: And he’s there.
Zhen: And it’s him or you, at that moment, coz if you let him, he’ll stick you where you stand.

Lev: And if he gets away, he could stick any of us.

Stas: Any of us.

Sash: He could be the one who kills your brothers.

Zhen: And he’s not even looking at you now, but he could be the one, if you leave him.

Lev: A bomb in the road or a sniper’s round screaming towards our heads.

Zhen: And you could be the one who lets your brothers die.

Kol: It is not justice, it is not politics.

Dim: It is animal.

Zhen: So do it, for fuck’s sake.

Stas: For us and for you.

Kol: Do it.

Kost: Do it.

Stas: Do it.

Dim: Do it.

Lev: Do it.

Sash: Do it.

All: Do it.

Slight pause. Without much force, Val sticks the bayonet into the dummy.

Tol: Good. But now again. Mean it. Kill him. What makes the grass grow?

Val sticks the bayonet into the dummy again.

Tol: What makes the grass grow? When the enemy practise this they use the rotting corpses of our troops. What makes the grass grow?

Beat.

Val: Blood, sarge.

Tol: What?
Val: Blood, sarge.
Tol: Speak up, recruit, I don’t have supersonic hearing.
Val: Blood, sarge.
Tol: Yes. What makes the grass grow?
Val: Blood, sarge.

*He sticks his bayonet into the dummy with more force.*

Tol: Yes. What makes the grass grow?
Val: Blood, blood, blood. *(he begins stabbing the dummy on each beat)*
Tol: What makes the grass grow? If you don’t kill him he will kill your brothers. What makes the grass grow?
Val: Blood, blood, blood.
Tol: What makes the grass grow? It’s either him or you. What makes the grass grow?
Val: Blood, blood, blood.
Tol: WHAT MAKES THE GRASS GROW? LOOK HIM IN THE EYES! WHAT MAKES THE GRASS GROW?
Val: BLOOD, BLOOD, BLOOD!
ALL: WHAT MAKES THE GRASS GROW?
Val: BLOOD, BLOOD, BLOOD!
ALL: WHAT MAKES THE GRASS GROW?

*Val closes his eyes and repeatedly stabs the dummy. Eventually, breathless, he subsides.*

Tol: What makes the grass grow?

**IV: Kost**

Kost: When it comes down to it, I just really love twatting stuff. So it’s kind of the perfect job for me, really. If it wasn’t for this war I’d probably still be twatting
stuff, just I wouldn’t be wearing a uniform. Makes no difference to me, I just love twatting stuff. Some of the other shit they make you do, though, you know what I mean? Gets right on my tits.

The barracks room. The conscripts are cleaning their boots.

Kost: “So I can see my face in them?” I mean what does that even mean? I mean literally, what does that mean? I mean what possible fucking reason could I ever possibly have for wanting to see my own face in a pair of combat boots? There’s a mirror on the fucking wall!

Lev: No mirrors in the field though mate.

Kost: And why exactly, Lev, do you think I’d need a mirror when I’m out in the fucking field?

Lev: On account of your extreme vanity, I’d imagine.

Kost: Oh fuck off. I mean literally, so I’m out in the field yeah, I’m pinned down taking heavy fire from several machine guns and snipers, my mates are being blown up all around me and God knows if I’m gonna get out alive, so I know what I need to do right now, I need to check my fucking quiff. I mean literally. Bullshit mate, bullshit.

Lights change. The conscripts are ironing their combats.

Kost: I mean it’s camouflage for crying out loud. Why do I need to put perfect creases in my camouflage? Where am I gonna be hiding, Burton bloody Menswear? Do you really think our ability to combat insurgents is directly proportional to our velocity at ironing? Sarge takes me aside the other day he says:

Tol: Are you disrespecting our country?

Kost: Of course not, sarge, I say.

Tol: Then why does the crease on your jacket not go directly through the centre of the flag badge on your arm?

Kost: He asks me, I mean fucking hell.

Stas: We remember, Kost.

Sash: We all did the press-ups.
Lights change. The conscripts are polishing their belt-buckles.

Kost: I mean, I’m the best rifleman in the section.
Zhen: Second best.
Kost: Well that’s debatable.
Zhen: I mean it’s not.
Kost: I’m the second best rifleman in the section, I have the fastest sprint time in boots –
Zhen: Well –
Kost: One of the fastest sprint times in boots, put me on the range and I’ll own, give me a bayonet and I’ll take you to town, I’m just great at twatting stuff essentially, but I keep getting brought up coz I’m not some kind of domestic fucking Goddess.

Lights change. The conscripts are making their beds.

Kost: I mean it’s just gonna get slept in again tonight.

Lights change. The conscripts are doing press-ups.

Tol: Discipline. Integrity. Respect. These values do not just extend to others, they extend to yourself and to your appearance. You are a unit, a machine working in perfect synchronicity, a sleek, beautifully ironed, nicely polished aesthetically pleasing machine. You keep yourself in order, you keep your life in order, you follow your orders and you keep your life. Do you understand me, conscript?
Kost: Yes, sarge.
Tol: He is your responsibility and you are his. Do you understand why you are being punished, conscripts?
All: Yes, sarge.
Tol: One.
Val: Two.
Kost: Three.
Stas: Four.
Dim: Five.
Lev: Six.
Sash: Seven.
Zhen: Eight.
Kol: Nine.
Tol: Ten. Attention!

They stand to attention.

Tol: Quick march!

They march off.

Kost: You guys just wait till I get in the field.

V: Stas

Stas: The worst part is always now. The old men say the worst part is always now. They say every part is the worst part. And then, looking back, they say parts they once said were the worst are now the best. And the worst part is always now. But what do we care for “they”? We have no use anymore for they or he or she or you or I. For now, it is only we. Now, in the worst part, in the very worst part, it is only us.

The barracks room. Stas and Sash are crouched over a cardboard box.

Sash: What are you gonna do with it?
Stas: Dunno.
Sash: Well you can’t keep it.
Stas: Why not?
Sash: Well just because.
Stas: Because what?
Sash: Just. Because.

*Enter Kol.*

Kol: What are we looking at? *(he sees what’s in the box)* Oh.
Stas: We’re trying to work out what to with him.
Sash: So it’s a him now?
Stas: Well.
Kol: Well you can’t keep it.
Sash: That’s what I said.
Kol: Sarge’ll burst a blood vessel.
Sash: He will. He’ll burst a bloody blood vessel.
Kol: How’d he get in?

*Enter Dim and Lev.*

Dim: Alright.
Lev: Fuck are you doing? *(he goes over and looks in the box)* Fuck is that?
Kol: It’s a bird, Lev.
Lev: Yes no I realise it’s a fucking bird Kol but what the fuck is it doing in our barracks room?
Stas: He flew in through the window.
Dim: When?
Stas: Just before. But he hurt his wing in the flying in, see, and now he can’t fly, so we’re working out what to do with him.
Dim: Well you can’t keep him.
Sash: Exactly. Exactly.

*Enter Zhen.*

Zhen: Hey. What’s going on?
Kol: Zhen there’s a bird.
Zhen: Shit, where? Has anyone got any deodorant?
Kol: No, not like a bird a bird, like *(points inside the box)* a bird.
Zhen: Oh. Right.
Stas: He’s only a baby.
Sash: So he’s a baby now?
Stas: Well yeah, he looks like a baby.
Sash: He’s not a baby, he’s just small. You’re just saying he’s a baby coz he’s small but he’s just a small bird.
Stas: He’s a baby.
Sash: He’s just a small bird. All birds are small.
Stas: But he’s –
Dim: What about ostriches?
Sash: Well no yes not ostriches.
Kol: Or flamingos.
Sash: Okay –
Lev: Flamingos are definitely gay.
Dim: What?
Lev: Definitely.
Sash: I don’t think that’s the issue here.
Lev: Going around in pink like that, I’m sorry, but: gay.
Dim: I don’t think they choose to be pink, mate.
Lev: I don’t think you choose to be gay.
Sash: Look –

*Enter Val and Kost.*

Kol: What about female flamingos?
Val: What’s going on?
Lev: We’re discussing whether flamingos are gay or not.
Sash: No that isn’t the issue here.
Kost: Definitely gay.
Lev: Thank you.
Sash: There’s a bird.
Val: What? Where?
Sash: Stas found a bird.
Stas: He flew in here but he hurt his wing in the flying in, and now he can’t fly. I don’t really know what to do with him but I think I’m going to keep him.
Val: Well you can’t keep him.
Sash: Exactly.
Stas: Yes I can. I’m gonna nurse him back to health.
Val: Well you can’t.
Stas: Yes I can. I’ve already named him Hector.
Sash: Oh for God’s sake.
Lev: Hector?
Stas: Yeah, Hector. I like the name, I think it suits him.
Dim: It actually does kinda suit him.
Kost: Let me have a look. *(he has a look)* I’m sorry mate, but we’re going to have to twat him.
Stas: What?
Kost: We’re in a barracks yeah. It’s a military position. That bird just made a clandestine incursion into the sovereign territory of this country.
Stas: He flew in through the window.
Kost: It’s still an incursion, mate. It’s fine, I’m happy to twat him for you if that helps.
Stas: We’re not gonna twat him.
Kost: He’s infiltrated –
Stas: He’s a bird!
Kost: But still –
Stas: A bird!

*Pause.*

Kol: Kost is kinda right though.
Stas: What?
Kol: Hector’s really not supposed to be in here. If sarge finds out he’ll go mental. He’d burst a bloody blood vessel.
Sash: Exactly. He will.
Stas: He won’t find out.
Kol: And anyway. Look at him. He’s wounded.
Stas: He’ll get better.
Kol: That wing is fucked mate. And what’s a bird gonna do without a wing?
   Flying’s like the main thing they do.
Zhen: So we should kill him just because he’s wounded?
Kol: Well –
Zhen: If you were wounded, would you want to be killed?
Kol: Depends where I was wounded I suppose.
Zhen: So you’d be happy if I killed you just because you were wounded?
Zhen: Don’t expect any help from me, then.
Kol: Fine.
Kost: Just in case it helps, my offer to twat the bird still stands.
Stas: No one’s gonna twat him.
Val: Well we’ll have to put him outside then.
Stas: What?
Val: He’s not one of us. He’s only our responsibility coz he flew in here. If we put
   him outside he’s not our responsibility. He’s not on our terrain, then.
Zhen: But he’ll still be wounded.
Val: But that’s not our responsibility.
Stas: Why not?
Val: Coz he’s not on our terrain. I’ll take him over to the woods.
Stas: So that’s all we should do then, is it? Look after our own.
Val: That’s all we can afford to do.
Lev: Val’s right.
Stas: So we shouldn’t help him?
Dim: We can’t. He’s not one of us. He belongs outside.
Sash: We need to leave him. We need to forget about him. If shitloads of wounded
   birds came in you’d just help them all, would you?
Val: Outside.
Stas: But there aren’t shitloads of wounded birds, there’s only one.
Dim: Outside.
Lev: Outside.
Stas: There’s only one.
Zhen: Outside.
Sash: Outside.
Stas: But –
Val: Outside.

Kost has taken off his boot and tries to drop it into the box onto the bird.

Stas: No Kost fuck off no!

Stas tries to pull the box away.
The boot misses.

Stas: Fuck off!

Kost picks up his boot and tries to hit the bird.

Stas: Fuck off!

Stas grabs Kost. A struggle ensues.
The conscripts pull Stas and Kost apart.

Val: Hold him back.

Val picks up the box, and moves off.

Stas: No Val no fuck off there’s only one! Hector!
Kol: It’s for the best mate.
Stas: Hector! I’m sorry, Hector.
Lev: He wasn’t one of us.
Stas: I’m sorry, Hector.
Dim: He wasn’t one of us.
Stas: I’m sorry mate.
Sash: He wasn’t one of us, mate.
Kol: He wasn’t one of us.
The conscripts let go of Stas. He is crying a bit.

Stas: (to Kost) What are you looking at? You can fuck off and all.

He goes to leave. Zhen blocks his way. He turns back. He sits on his bed, his head in his hands.

VI: Dim

Dim: The night always seems a bit brighter when there are other people in the room. Have you noticed that? It’s as if we give off light.

The barracks room. After lights out. The recruits are in their beds.

Do you guys ever get scared?
Lev: Fuck off Dim.
Dim: Seriously –
Lev: No.
Sash: We’re trying to get some sleep, Dim.
Dim: Fine.

Pause.

But don’t you, ever, just a bit?
Sash: Fucking hell!
Val: Just shut up!
Dim: Like now, when we’re all lying here awake.
Kost: Dim!
Stas: Dim, I swear Dim.
Dim: Okay.

Pause.
Dim: But this is the time, isn’t it, when these thoughts come to you?
Kol: For fuck’s sake Dim.
Stas: We’ve got fucking parade in the morning mate. And I swear.
Dim: No just. Just hear me out.
Lev: I’m not even listening to this.
Zhen: Just shut up.
Dim: Okay. Okay.

Pause.

I don’t think I’ve ever actually seen any real blood.
Sash: AAARGH.
Dim: No I don’t think I have, I mean like you know real blood real actual blood not like the blood on telly or dressing up blood vampire blood not even like beef you know meat blood I’ve seen that obviously and nosebleeds too I guess and papercuts yeah lots but I mean actual blood like from a whatcha called an artery is that it? Yeah, like a lot of blood all flowing out or spurting or whatever it does after a proper cut or like a gunshot depending and I was wondering if the colour was different coz I feel like it might be you know darker I feel like it might have more of thickness to it, that kind of blood.
Kol: For fuck’s sake.
Lev: Just don’t even bother. Just don’t even bother listening to it.

Slight pause.

Dim: Nights I wake up I think I’m covered in it. Mine, or someone else’s, I can’t be sure.

Slight pause.

Because that’s what they say, isn’t it, that when you’re wounded that deep, when it really hits you bad that it doesn’t actually feel of anything really, that you just feel I dunno kind of light and wet, obviously, from all the blood.
There are others things that people can do, to make you feel the pain much more.

_Slight pause._

Do you think about being captured? I do. Sarge says everything you can imagine has already been done, he says try and imagine something and it’s happened, and that there are people whose job it is to imagine the worst thing and then to do it and these people have way worse imaginations than any of us. A wire round the testicles, a loop which lops them off, being nailed to things, having my eyes popped like balloons and then the dogs lick them out, my testicles in my mouth and all my skin going down my gullet that’s what I imagine so that means it been done and that there’s people to imagine worse. Sometimes I think it’s better not to think. But they’ve done it, in the past, when it was just land that they wanted, just land that we wanted, but now the people that fight us and we fight have different ideas to us and we can’t take their ideas off them like we took their land, we can cut off someone’s nose but we can’t drill into their head and cut out their ideas, so that just makes me wonder if it will ever ever end.

_Slight pause._

I saw a video where they cut off a journalist’s head. It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. It was cleaner.

_Slight pause._

And that’d be an alright way to go, maybe, well at least that’d be an end to it, at least that moment would be the worst moment of all, but I do worry more about other people, and what they’d say when they heard, how they’d feel, and whether that would be the worst moment for them too. My mum, you know, my mum particularly, because I love all my family of course I do, but I like really really like my mum. Coz just my dad, he. And my granddad. But my mum.
Slight pause.

And I know we’ve got parade in the morning, but still, these things. They’re always there.

Pause.

Are you asleep? Is everyone asleep?

VII: Lev

Lev: I keep having dreams that I’m a Roman soldier. I’ve got a sword and a shield and I’m wearing one of those skirt things you didn’t get teased for wearing coz everybody wore them, and this wave of enemy are coming at me. Tribesmen, like. And they’ve got swords and shields too and we stand in the middle of the field and we hit each other. And that’s all there is to it. Hitting each other with swords and shields. No IEDs, no RPGS, no Apache attack helicopters no Dragunov sniper rifles just swords and shields. And hitting each other. And it just seems way more fair like that.

A field. The conscripts are building a wall out of sandbags: passing the bags along a line, laying them out, straightening them up. Their movements are deft, together.

In terms of defence, there’s nothing better than a wall.

Slight pause. The conscripts are working.

Bloody hard work to build, though. There’s a rumour going round we’re getting deployed. That true, sarge?

Slight pause. The conscripts are working.
Sarge?
Tol: Eh?
Lev: There’s a rumour going round we’re getting deployed, sarge. That true?
Tol: I am unable to confirm or deny any speculation on that front.

Beat.

But yeah. It’s true.
Val: Fuck.
Kost: Woohoo!
Zhen: Well that wasn’t exactly the world’s best-kept secret.
Kol: Yeah, HQ have been tiptoeing around, looking at us all shifty like for weeks.
Lev: Any idea where, sarge?
Tol: What’s that?
Lev: Any idea where?
Tol: None as of yet.
Sash: Some shithole, I suppose.
Stas: Some sweaty, guff-smelling, foreign, why-is-there-a-desert-we’re-half-way-up-a-mountain shithole.
Tol: I wouldn’t be surprised.

Pause. The conscripts are working.

Lev: We’ll finish up our terms out there, I suppose. Then back home.
Dim: Telly.
Sash: Trainers.
Kost: Mum’s food.
Stas: Privacy. Holy fucking privacy.
Val: My bedroom.
Zhen: Safety.
Kol: Sleep.

Pause. The conscripts are working.
Lev: Then I’ll have to find a fucking job.
Tol: Yeah good luck with that, conscript.

*Slight pause. The conscripts are working.*

Lev: When the Romans got back from campaigns they’d get given land. Villas in the countryside. Horses, slave-girls, gold. Not like that anymore. There’s fuck all anymore. My granddad got back and drunk a hole in his liver. Mate of mine ended up on the streets. They risked their lives and there’s fuck all for them. People can be ungrateful fucking bastards.

*Pause. The conscripts are working.*

Here, Zhen. Can you carry two sandbags?
Zhen: You what?
Lev: Two at a time. You reckon you could do that?
Zhen: Could have a go.
Lev: Bet you can.

*Zhen lifts two sandbags onto his shoulders.*

Zhen: Easy as pie.
Kol: Here let me have a go.
Lev: No way could you do that.
Kol: You wanna bloody bet?
Lev: Go on then.

*He tries. He can’t lift them.*

Lev: Haha. Told you.
Kol: Fuck off. I can do it.
Lev: You just bloody tried.
Kol: No no I can do it.
He tries again. He puts the sandbags onto his shoulders. He topples slightly.

Zhen: Careful!
Kol: No I’m. Arrgh.

He falls over under the weight of the sandbags.

Zhen: Bloody hell Kol. Are you alright?

He helps him up.

Kol: Yeah I’m fine, I’m fine, argh.
Zhen: You bloody idiot. You sure you all right?
Kol: I’m fine. Why you so concerned?
Zhen: I’m not.
Kol: Why you so concerned about me all of a sudden? Thought you said you’d just let me die. Why you concerned about me?
Zhen: I’m not.

Pause. The conscripts are working.

Kol: You concerned about me?
Zhen: I’m concerned about the section. I’m concerned about the productivity of the section. We’re a team and if one of us is incapacitated it puts us all at risk. We’re a team, you know, so I’m concerned about everyone.
Kol: You’re concerned about me!
Zhen: Shut up.
Kol: Haha you’re concerned about me!
Zhen: Shut up.
Kol: You bloody softy.

Pause. The conscripts are working.

Lev: What’s the weather like where we’re going, sarge?
Tol: Let’s just say you’d better pack your sunblock.
Lev: Well, at least it’ll be warm.

*The conscripts finish building the wall.*

There. Perfect. That’ll hold. Good work.

### VIII: Sash

Sash: Something always matters more when you know it is going to end.

*The soldiers are at bus stops, at airports, on station platforms, in front gardens, in hallways, saying goodbye.*

I used to count the days through in my head. My favourite parts of the day were the parts that would pass as quickly as possible.

Val: The time at scoff, those extra hours of sleep.
Sash: I often just wished this time.
Kol: This five hundred and forty seven days.
Sash: Would pass entirely. I just wanted to age. Fuck it, you know, I’d much rather be old and safe than be young and be sent off to die.
Stas: They say the worst part is always now.
Sash: But then the time came before deployment and I just wanted time to slow down.
Stas: Is always now.
Sash: I was at home on leave but I just started doing press-ups in my bedroom because I knew that periods of intense physical exercise have the ability to make time pass incredibly slowly.
Tol: What do you call that, conscript?
Sash: Something I learnt from my training days. Nights I’d lie awake completely unable to sleep.
Lev: At home.
Val: In my bedroom.
Kost: In my bed.
Dim: Do you ever get scared?
Tol: And then in the morning we do it all over again.
Sash: And my dreams.
Lev: A Roman soldier.
Dim: Covered in blood.
Sash: When I did get to sleep, were the worse I’d ever had.
Kol: When I wake up.
Sash: I know that whether I’m different now.
Val: I guess happiness is something different nowadays.
Sash: Or exactly the same.
Kost: I just love twatting stuff.
Sash: That these days.
Tol: That they have made me who I am.
Sash: I’m part of something bigger than myself.
Tol: Erase the word “personal” from your vocabulary.
Zhen: I’m concerned about the section. I’m concerned about the productivity of the section.
Tol: A sleek, beautifully ironed, nicely polished aesthetically pleasing machine.
Sash: And I’m proud of that. I’m intensely proud of that.
Tol: We trained hard.
All: We’ll fight easy.
Sash: We trained hard and I hope with every part of me that we will fight easy.
Stas: But it is only us.
Sash: And it doesn’t always work like that.
Stas: In the very worst part.
Dim: Everything you can imagine.
Stas: In the very worst part.
Lev: We’re completely pinned down.

Quietly at first, the sound of gunfire and explosions begins to underscore.

Sash: It is only.
Kol: Ever.
Zhen:  Us.
Kol:  One.
Tol:  Two.
Val:  Three.
Kost: Four.
Stas: Five.
Dim:  Six.
Lev:  Seven.
Sash: Eight.
Zhen: Nine.
Kol:  Us.
Sash: And they made me sit down and they made me write. And if you receive this letter.
Zhen:  And if you receive.
Kol:  If you receive this letter.
Tol:  If you receive.
Val:  If you receive.
Sash: Then you know that the worst.
Stas: In the worst part.
Dim:  And if you receive.
Lev:  If you receive.
Sash: Then you know that the worst has happened.
Kol:  The worst has happened.
Zhen: The worst has happened.
Val:  We’re completely pinned down!
Tol:  And if you receive.
Stas: Grenade!
Zhen: If you receive.
Tol:  Heads down!

_The sounds are louder now._

Kol:  If.
Kost: If you receive.
Lev: If you receive.
Sash: We’re completely pinned down!
Tol: Grenade!
Val: If you receive.
Stas: Grenade!
Dim: If you receive.
Kol: And I have a terrible feeling.
Sash: If you receive.
Kol: When I wake up I don’t know where I am.
Zhen: If you receive.
Val: What makes the grass grow?
Kol: And the thunder closes in.
Tol: If you receive.
Kol: And I see omens in everything.
Sash: If you receive.
Dim: If you receive.
Stas: The bird with the broken wing.
Sash: And if you receive.
Val: What makes the grass grow?
Tol: We’re completely pinned down!

*The sounds are deafening.*

Dim: If you receive.
Kost: Grenade!
Stas: And now, in the worst part.
Zhen: If you receive.
Dim: Grenade!
Stas: In the very worst part.
Zhen: It is only.
Stas: Ever.

*The sounds stop.*
Kol: And if you receive this letter, then you know that the worst has happened.
Stas: And now in the worst part.
Tol: It is only us.
Kost: It only us.
Kol: Will you be there to meet me –
Val: What makes the grass grow?
Sash: When I wake up?
Dim: When I wake up?
Zhen: Will you be there to meet me –
Kol: When I wake up?

IX: Zhen

Zhen: On the first day of training I was the first one to arrive at the barracks. I was so homesick and I was crying *(he starts to cry)*. And you came in. And you saw me.

The barracks room, months earlier. Zhen is crying. Kol enters.

Kol: Wow that train journey was a nightmare, had to stand the whole way, I can barely feel my legs now. I’m Kol by the way.

Slight pause. Kol notices Zhen is crying.

Oh, sorry, are you alright?

Slight pause.

Are you alright?
Zhen: *(through tears)* Just fuck off, okay?

Pause. Zhen starts to busy himself. Kol is watching him.
Zhen: What the fuck are you looking at? Stop looking at me. What the fuck are you looking at?

*Zhen looks at Kol. Kol is silent. Zhen goes back to busying himself by unpacking his things. Pause. The rest of the conscripts slowly trickle in, in silence. They start unpacking their things and making up their beds. Kol continues to watch Zhen for a very long time.*

**END**