

# EROS



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## WALK TO A DEAD END

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After the third day, there were no more guest-houses or paved roads. After the fifth, no more farms. When Sean saw smoke curling up from a valley on the ninth day, he shrugged his backpack into a more comfortable position and left his compass direction. He would be glad of some human company and variation in his food.

There are many ways to go hiking. As a boy, between the wars, Sean had joined the Wandervögel, walking through Switzerland along fastidiously marked trails, between grim little cities and manicured villages. He remembered the walking songs, and the beer by the open fires in the evenings. But now he cultivated his taste for independence, loneliness had long since lost its melancholy.

Summers are for walking. You can follow a detailed plan like a German tourist his Baedeker. You can go with a friend, sweet weariness together. Sean had developed his own style over the years, whether by default or by choice; he walked alone. When he began his trek, he had studied a map, imprinted the main features and dangers on his memory, and left the map behind.

The curling smoke came from a large cottage, almost a farmhouse, but old and falling into disrepair. The father and daughter who lived there, with some sheep and goats and a vegetable garden were ungrudgingly hospitable. The idea of a walking tour seemed to be at once strange and perfectly comprehensible to them; no doubt they filed it with the doings of the world, and it was a familiar fact that these doings were strange. "Aye, and I'll go kill a kid" said the father. "Sarah, make us some tay." Sarah was a bony woman well past her youth. She obviously wanted to talk, so Sean followed her inside; but the words seemed to stick in her throat. She pushed her chair toward him, with a quick half-smile, and began to fill a kettle with water from a large urn. Sean began to talk. Her face became intent, while she busied herself with the fire, her eyes returning to him at every pause. Sean talked, the music of his words seeping into the dark space between them. For himself he created familiar furnishing; for her, unfamiliar adornment. The father stood outside, skinning the kid; the blood ran down his forearms. Preparing the kid took up much of the afternoon.

At the evening meal, the father began to talk, halting, rambling, recalling the time when this old wooden house was still part of the inhabited world. During the first few sentences, he was looking away, as if searching the horizon of his past, groping for the dim landmarks in his memory. But as the remembered scenes glowed into life again, he began to address Sean. His eyes would note Sean's reaction, and then quickly glance up again, as if to catch his face unguarded.

"And then Angus left, he was the last one. He left Sarah with child, but it was still-born." Sarah turned her head away, sharply. "It was a boy, too, if he had lived he would have been helping with the sheep now." He paused, groping. "Sarah and I can't handle them alone.... We need somebody to help with the sheep...we lose them in the quicksand. They stray all the way down to the sea, something draws them." Clearing his throat, he reached behind and took down a large Bible. A faded ribbon marked the place, and he read a chapter from it, in monotone and artificial accents from which all meaning had long since drained away. With

no change or halt, but clasping his hand to his eyes, he intoned the Our Father, and Sarah repeated "Amen."

There was a ladder up to the attic. The woman showed Sean up with a candle; there was a clean smell of old wood and beeswax. She walked over to a chest of drawers, lit an oil lamp, and took out a towel. It was her bed Sean was to use, and she wouldn't hear otherwise. "I can sleep below" she said; the attic was hers, clean woodsmell and rough linen. Outside the wind was getting up, a window rattled below. The bed was covered with a heavy quilt, and Sean touched it awkwardly. "It still gets cold at night," she said, looking at him. Then she picked up the candleholder again, and went below.

Sean slept. The unalienated dark of the room condensed into a black cube before him, slowly shrinking and turning violet, then rushing at him. He woke in the dark and Sarah's hand was on his shoulder. She was kneeling by him, her arm across his chest, her head pressing against the quilt. Burnt kid smell drove out the wood, and in the dark he saw, as clear as day, her stringy hair and jutting bones, the soft parts strung up in a bag in front. "No," he said, "No." "I can't." She pleaded without talking and he clutched the blankets, as if afraid of force, and the force of his daylight vision drove her out.

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Sean did not know how long he remained lying there, before some sense of the practical returned, but it was still dark. He got up quickly, grabbed his bag, and stole down the ladder. The fire had not died, a new log had been added. By its half-light Sean saw the father sitting in his chair, a shotgun lying across the table. He did not speak. He grunted acknowledgment of Sean's presence, and motioned to the door beside the fireplace. Sean dropped his bag, laid his jacket over it, and went through the door.

He entered a place of old sweat, his eyes still aching from looking into the flames of the fire. A dim half-light came through the window; it fell on a large bed that filled the room almost entirely. Behind the window were large moving shapes, trees bending in the wind. Dimly he saw Sarah's shape, huddled under the blankets. He moved forward, his hands before him like a blind man, until the bed hit his knees. As if by old and half-remembered habit he took his clothes off, all his clothes. Awkwardly he lay down beside her, pulling the blankets over. She was lying with her face turned away, as if he were not there. Through the rough linen gown he felt her jutting bones, and anger filled him suddenly -- was he to be like a ram shown the ewe then? Was the mating smell to heat his blood, like a beast's?

She lay in the bed crying, quietly, steadily, as in a grief that took her out of this world altogether. Lying there in submission, to be taken, to be slain, obeying a fate she accepted but did not understand. And his anger raged -- wasn't it she that had wanted it? She who had come to his bed, she forced on him by a gun? If she was in heat why didn't she act like a whore, seeing that whores act as if they are in heat?

She neither talked nor moved. She lay there weeping quietly, and his anger subsided. He touched her hip through the rough linen, and something tendered him. Her lank body filled the place enclosed by his arms and his taut muscles relaxed along hers. She moved toward him then,

turning, until her face was pressing against his chest, and he put his arms around her. Was it pity, was it lust? Could lust have made that strange body warm to him, could compassion have moved him beyond that linen gown?

Afterwards he laid her gently down and left her resting. His head cleared as if clouds had been blown away, out of the room and out of the house. With all the clarity of a remote observer, involved neither in suffering nor in action, he looked down at her resting body. This was her father's bed and she was no stranger there.

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Late the next afternoon, crossing a hill, Sean suddenly found himself at the sea. He had walked out of the farm, his rucksack hanging on one shoulder, into the early morning light. Without even thinking about it, he had continued on his planned route, checking his compass once or twice, but mostly just keeping the sun on his right. There was that heady, free feeling that comes with walking at dawn, the earth still bare, the day still empty. But then the night started going around in his head. He had walked out of there detached, rejecting it as over and done -- why couldn't he put it out of his thoughts now?

At mid-morning he abruptly changed course, walking into the sun. He did not want to continue his trip now, couldn't understand now why he had simply gone on. He would give the farm a wide berth, then guide himself by the mountain range, follow it back. He had to force himself not to start hurrying; everything felt threatening now, as if he were an invader.

Crossing a hill then, he found his way barred by the sea. An inlet or a bay, of course; he must be on a peninsula. Across the water he could see the mainland mountains, blue and smudged by fog. He was tired and realized that he had miscalculated; but the sight of the sea water gave him incongruously a burst of energy. He dropped his pack and ran down to the shore, heading for a big rock far out on the sand. He ran swift and lightly, feet scarcely touching the ground. But two yards from the rock his weariness struck back, and he fell. The wet sand tugged at him; he felt himself sinking. Scrambling, his arms flailing, Sean gained the rock. Behind him the quicksand gurgled quietly and smoothed itself again.

Sitting on the rock, Sean laughed. What gods were after him, what long-forgotten hubris had brought him to this place? He wondered where the quicksand began. If it extended far toward the shore, that meant he had been running over it. If so he could get back over it simply by running very fast. But perhaps the quicksand started only a few yards from the rock, and that was what had made him fall down. In that case, however, he did not have far to go to safety. He should be able to make it by lying on his belly and scrambling, dividing his weight over as large an area as possible. Panic would just get his legs stuck in deep, and that would be the end. But which should he try, running, or scrambling? How could he know where the quicksand started? Testing might quickly turn into destructive testing.

Should he stake his life on a guess then? As Sean sat there resting he had been looking around at the water, and suddenly he laughed with relief. The tide was coming up. From the look of the shore, the water would go a long way past his rock, and he could swim back. All he needed to do was rest, gather his strength -- sleep if he could.

The sun glare breaks the sand. Sean remembered the sun stars dancing on the water in the Marseille harbour. The Moorish towers in the hills around Valencia...he tried to gather his thoughts. Everything would be ordinary. His flat would be waiting for him, everything would be the same. He tried to remember what he had planned for the fall, but there was nothing. Just the usual round, to work in the morning, a movie once a week, as necessary as fresh vegetables. The temptation to have another large brandy to make sleep come. He had forgotten to make plans. These last few years summer had not ended with new enthusiasms.

Faces appeared before him, dim and half-remembered scenes. A girl walking in. He stood there, just holding the door, dumb. Then in a great rush, happiness filled him...you've come back! She smiled, that sad smile, forever disappearing. Her face turned into Sarah's face, that shy astonishment in her eyes when she first found him knocking at the door. And then she was bending forward into his arms, her hair rough on his face.

Waking up, after hours of fitful dozing and dreaming, he saw that the stars were out. There was about a foot of water around him, and he waited anxiously, impatiently, for the tide to come farther in. But the tide went back again.

Sean woke again shivering just before dawn. He felt weak-headed with hunger. All he could think of was Sarah and her father. The straying sheep, would they stray this far? Did she sometimes come gathering cockles or mussels along the shore? She was his hope now. He kept scanning the beach, but no one came.

About noon, his eyes aching from the sun, Sean tried to scamper over the sand on his belly. His knees and elbows went in deeper and farther, one foot got stuck. Terrified, he flailed himself back, pulled himself painfully back on the rock. He should not have panicked. He should launch himself with a long jump, landing on his belly. Or he should try running fast first, and resort to belly scampering only if that did not work. But when he imagined it, his breath would not come.

As the night fell, the sea crept in. The water crept one foot up the rock and stopped. He thought of trying to swim in one foot of water, and the dark defeated the thought. He would wait till light.

The dawn broke his half-sleep, half delirium. The dawn light cleared his eyes, and the abstract monsters of the night fled away, no longer rolled him around between them. Sean stood up and pitched himself forward, running, running, then heaving his knees up, trying to get his belly his elbows sinking. He sank, and got one leg out, and sank on his hip, and rolled over, and sank on his elbow, and lifted his head out, and sank again and lay down. Then he started up again when the mud seeped around his mouth. And his eyes. And he closed his eyes.

As the end came it seemed to him that Sarah was lying beside him, stretching her long body closer. Stretching closer to be touching along his hip and thigh and calf, to nestle into his arms. So it seemed to Sean as he let the sand fold about him, holding in his arms the last woman, at the end of the world.