

Fear in a Handful of Dust

by SEVAN

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FEAR IN A HANDFUL OF DUST

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CHARACTERS:

SIMON RAMSEY - 22, born in and raised in India. Quiet. Stoic. Methodical.

PATRICK 'BUCK' MAHONY - 25, born in Wicklow, Ireland. Mining family. Creative. Outspoken. Free-spirited.

Time: 3 September 1916

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Place: Nighttime in an assembly trench outside the town of Guillemont during the battle of Guillemont.

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'They fought together as brothers-in-arms. They died together and now they sleep side by side. To them we have a solemn obligation.'
-- Admiral Chester W. Nimitz

'What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.'
-- T.S. Eliot

NOTE: The dialogue has not been written to mirror an Irish or British accent, the actor should feel free to change words to match the dialect, i.e., 'your' to 'yer' or 'my' to 'me' and so on.

WHAT ROOTS CLUTCH, WHAT BRANCHES GROW?

The final moments of dusk. The sky is a bruised purple. The air is stale. The earth is wet. A muddy musk hangs. SIMON sits solitary in the tail end of an assembly trench. He's trying to be comfortable. He shivers as a wind passes over him.

He pulls out a cigarette pack and tries to find a dry cigarette. He puts it in his mouth and pats around for his matchbox. He pulls out a matchstick. It fails to light. A second one snaps. He takes out a third but stops himself. He knows better. He puts away the cigarette and gets up trying to shake the ache out of his bones.

A shell lands sending dirt everywhere. Screams of soldiers - those injured and those scrambling to the lines. More shells and dirt. A captain screaming 'Over the top! Get over the top!' Simon hesitates a couple of times. He starts to go when another shell hits. He drops to a crouch and covers himself. More screams. He steels himself and goes over the line. Gunfire is traded. It's chaos.

Another shell goes off and SIMON tumbles back into the trench with BUCK close behind him.

Neither recognizes the other and they pull their guns on one another. Neither speaks, but the war doesn't stop. More yelling to get over the top with threats of execution for disobeying. SIMON and BUCK wait to see who responds first. BUCK chuckles then throws himself up and over. SIMON takes a moment and starts to climb back up.

BUCK

Move!

BUCK dives into the trench taking SIMON with him. SIMON struggles. A shell lands on top of them and the trench collapses on one end cutting them off from the other soldiers. SIMON keeps struggling and BUCK puts his rifle across SIMON's chest to hold him down. The battle seems to be going on forever. Things start to quiet down. Eventually just silence, a distant ringing, and dirt particles dropping here and there. BUCK eases up and SIMON shoves him off. He quickly pulls his rifle up to BUCK. BUCK responds by slowly raising his without trepidation. Another stand off. Neither speaks.

Cén reisimint, acara?

BUCK
(Gaelic)

...

SIMON

Quelle regiment?

BUCK

...

SIMON

Was regiment, freund?

BUCK

SIMON cocks the rifle.

Surrender or I'll shoot.

SIMON

Englishman. . .Perfect.

BUCK

Hands - up - now!

SIMON

I can speak English.

BUCK

Rank and regiment.

SIMON

You're meant to be pointing that at the huns.

BUCK

Rank and regiment!

SIMON

BUCK smiles, lowers his gun, takes out a cigarette and lights it. He has a seat and smokes slowly while watching SIMON who looks ready to soil himself.

BUCK
(blowing out smoke)
Private Buck Mahony. 4th army. 14th corps. 16th division. You can lower that gun you know.

SIMON

. . .

BUCK

(under his breath)

Arseing ballbeg.

(continuing)

47th Brigade. 6th Battalion. A member of The Old Namurers.

SIMON

Irish regiment.

BUCK

The Royal Irish Regiment, thank you very much. Your turn.

SIMON

. . .

BUCK

Only polite to return the favor, oh ye English gentleman.

SIMON

Private Simon Ramsey. 4th Army.

BUCK sticks his hand out.

SIMON

15th Corps. 17th Brigade.

BUCK shakes his hand about.

BUCK

Shake it.

SIMON

I am not finished.

BUCK

Name's all I needed. Shake.

SIMON lowers his gun and slowly shakes BUCK's hand.

SIMON

I have not seen you before.

BUCK

Big war.

Around here. **SIMON**

Just over the ridge. **BUCK**

How did you end up here? **SIMON**

BUCK
Well, that's a fair boring story. There was a call for men in Dublin and a few of us from Wicklow / decided to join -

SIMON
No. I'm talking about here. In this trench.

BUCK
There's a war on.

SIMON
I know.

BUCK
We're fighting.

SIMON
Yes. And why aren't you in your trench?

BUCK
Over the top. Noise. Smoke. Confusion. Easy to get turned around. I saved your life.

SIMON
...

*He stares at SIMON - giving him the once over.
Then:*

BUCK
Four weeks.

SIMON
Pardon?

BUCK
You been here four weeks.

Three. **SIMON**

Feck. I'm usually better at this. **BUCK**

How did you -? **SIMON**

BUCK
You're holding that gun like you expect your mother's milk to come pourin' out of it.
And you don't stink like the rest of us.

SIMON
We need to get back over.

BUCK
No chance of that happening, I'm afraid.

SIMON
We could be charged with mutiny or desertion.

BUCK
If anyone's left to charge us.

SIMON heads off to a deeper part of the trench.

BUCK
Wouldn't bother if I were you.

SIMON
(offstage)
Jesus Christ.

BUCK
Warned you.

SIMON comes back on, queasy, he turns and retches. BUCK walks to view the same part of the trench.

BUCK
(still in view and whistling)
Jaysus, Mary, Joseph and all the saints. That's a fair sight. Those huns love those shells.
Tears apart earth and limbs like paper. Poor bastards should've run. You learn to tell
the difference. They're about a tone higher. This one: hmmmmmm rips up the ground.
But this one: hmmmmmm brings down a trench. Hmmmmmm. Hmmmm. See?
Hmmmmmm. Hmmmm.

SIMON

Stop that.

BUCK

Trying to be helpful, boy. You've got a lot to learn quickly and we might as well make use of this time.

SIMON

(cocking his gun)

Private Mahony / we are under orders -

BUCK

MA-hony.

SIMON

Pardon?

BUCK

MA-hony. Not Ma-HO-ny. You're saying my name wrong. And I'd appreciate your lowering / the gun.

SIMON

Private Mahony we are under orders to go / over the top and we -

BUCK

You try going over the top and you'll lose your head.

SIMON

You're a coward.

BUCK

(sighing)

Starting to get old, this is.

*He takes off his helmet, puts it on top of his rifle
and hands it to SIMON.*

BUCK

Take this. Stand there. Raise it up.

SIMON

...

BUCK

Go on then. I'm not going anywhere. Got the rest of this fag to worry about.

SIMON slowly takes the rifle and walks to the front line. He raises it. Just as it clears a rifle shot sounds and the helmet flies off.

BUCK

(collecting his helmet)

And that, my boy, could have been your brains splattered all over. This one's a cracking good shot. Almost dead on.

(shouting over the top)

Gut Schuss, Schweinekopf!

A German voice yells back.

SIMON

You speak German.

BUCK

Picked up a few phrases here and there. Gun? Drives them mad to hear us speak their tongue. Take a seat, Simon.

SIMON

Private Ramsey.

BUCK

How about we drop the formalities? You can call me Buck, I'll call you Simon and we can get friendly while we wait for your good old boys to find us if the huns don't first. What do you say?

SIMON finally starts to 'relax' and lowers his gun.

BUCK

Now that's what I call progress. Shall we try knee-bending and sitting?

He does - opposite him.

BUCK

Aw you're hurting my feelings there, Simon. Can't say I blame you. By the smell of me I wouldn't sit by me either. But after a couple more months of no bathing you'll match me scent for scent.

SIMON

Months?

BUCK

Best forget all the comforts you're used to. Where you from, Simon?

SIMON

...

BUCK

Jaysus. . . Look, talk don't talk - makes no difference to me. But the more our jaws move the less our eyes close and the quicker the minutes fly by.

A quick moment.

SIMON

Born in South London.

BUCK

Ah right? London lad.

SIMON

Family left when I was 5.

BUCK

Gambling debts?

SIMON

No. Father took work in India.

BUCK

India. Well that's a quern distance away from London. When'd you get back then?

SIMON

Four weeks ago.

BUCK

Shite. Haven't seen home since you were a lad?

SIMON

India is my home.

BUCK

Ah right. Fair fair. How many years you got on you now?

SIMON

22.

BUCK

Well now that's a nice trench age. 25 myself. Haven't seen Wicklow for a good year now. You get any word over there in India about the state back home?

SIMON

Not much.

BUCK

Fair fair. So what brought you out here then?

SIMON

I would rather not talk about it.

BUCK

Aw we were doing do so well, Simon. Come on.

SIMON

I would rather not talk about it.

BUCK

Well then don't mind if I do. As I said earlier when I mistakenly thought you were asking me then, and just in case you weren't listening properly being all - cautious - I hail from Wicklow. Glendalough to be exact. God's own country. Got five brothers and sisters. I'm the eldest. Love my younger brother. Hate my oldest sister. I know family shouldn't speak ill of one another, but I do, in fact, hate her. Mining family we are. And when the voluntary service went up in Dublin the lads and I figured we could spend our days choking on soot and ash or make some decent money in the war that was only supposed to last until Christmas and what a fecking joke that turned out to be. My sister and I are the only ones old enough to make money but she fecked off with her unionist lover and I'm playing dad to the family out here in these god forsaken pits. And so my speech ends.

SIMON

What happened to your father?

BUCK

Well, now, I don't know - I'd rather not talk about it. Relax your brows, Simon. I'm only teasing. He died. Mining accident.

SIMON

How old were you?

BUCK

17. You?

SIMON

Pardon?

BUCK

How old and who did you lose?

SIMON

...

BUCK

They way you asked. You've felt the loss.

SIMON

. . . My mother. I was five.

BUCK

Want to tell me what happened?

SIMON

Soon after we arrived in India. A fever from a plague.

BUCK

You've got my condolences.

SIMON

Quite alright. I have very few memories of her.

BUCK

Losing yer mam don't have to do with memory - has to do with a feeling. Any brothers or sisters?

SIMON

Only child.

BUCK

Lucky. Bet your father was sore sad to see you go.

SIMON

Sure.

BUCK

Ah right - am I sensing a bit of family drama?

SIMON

. . .

BUCK

You'll eventually tell me - depending on how long we last in here - so might as well do it now.

SIMON

Are you always like that?

BUCK

Hm?

So end of days. **SIMON**

It's a war. **BUCK**

I know. **SIMON**

Do you? **BUCK**

I know where I am. **SIMON**

Three weeks - one year. Trying to help. **BUCK**

And I have not asked for help. **SIMON**

Didn't have to. **BUCK**

Are you always this infuriating? **SIMON**

Me da said I could give Lucifer a headache. So - yes? **BUCK**

Oh for God's sake. Look - you just sit there and I'll sit over here and we'll patiently wait - in silence - until we get rescued. **SIMON**

If we get rescued. **BUCK**

That's enough of that! **SIMON**

BUCK smiles, leans back, and starts to whistle 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary'.

Time shift.

TO SAY, TO GUESS, TO KNOW

BUCK sketches on a small piece of paper. SIMON is asleep seated against the trench. The sketching is punctuated by SIMON reaching and itching his armpits, then his neck, then his crotch which finally wakes him up.

SIMON

(jumping and screaming)

Shit shit - what is that? Shit!

BUCK

Best to keep your voice down.

SIMON

Something is biting me.

BUCK

Many somethings probably.

SIMON

What - what somethings?

BUCK

Well the last time I tried / to help you -

SIMON

(being bit)

Bloody hell!

BUCK

Chats.

SIMON

What?

BUCK

You've got chats. Lice.

SIMON

What??

BUCK

Take off your under clothes. If you've got them.

SIMON

I am not taking off my clothes.

BUCK

You haven't got anything I haven't got. Do you??

SIMON

You are not helping.

BUCK

Lice. Had them four or five times myself. Probably more. Right now they're creeping around your underclothes getting into the seams and making themselves comfortable. You're a giant-sized fecking banquet for them. And they'll be having little ones of their own in no time to feed on you as well. Had a mate that was driven mad by them. Woke up one night screaming and ran out into no man's land. Poor bastard got one through the heart.

SIMON

Help me!

BUCK

You could take off the underclothes and find them and break them with your thumbnail, but in this dark that would be impossible. Run a lit candle along the seams to burn them, which would also give our position away to the sharpshooting Hun across the way. Or off with the underclothes and hope they haven't already spread to your uniform.

SIMON hesitates then gets a violent itch around his back. He sheds his clothes and underclothes. [Actor's choice: use a military blanket as cover for modesty's sake or ride the moment as is.] As SIMON removes his clothes, BUCK pulls out a cannister from his pack and gathers the clothes. He douses them with the liquid.

SIMON

Wait - I need to put my uniform back on!

BUCK

(throwing the boots back to Simon)

These you can keep. These need to be treated.

SIMON

But you said / you only needed -

BUCK

They spread, Simon. Fast. And I don't need it again. And I don't need you going crazy on me. The naphthalene should get rid of most of them in about an hour or two.

SIMON

You expect me to stand here stark naked?

BUCK

(looking around)

Who's going to see you? And I'm not looking too closely. Enjoy the liberty of it. Into the world naked you came as the good Lord intended. Don't sit down though - you don't want to get mud up yer arse.

SIMON

Absolutely ridiculous. Mad.

BUCK

What creeps and crawls is worse than the huns, I tell you. Ah especially those rats. Miserable feckers. Over in that Passchendaele insanity soldiers and horses didn't need the huns to shoot them dead - the mud and water were so deep it drowned everything. Heard a lad tried to pull his friend out the next morning. Barely awake and moaning. Was buried up to his waist all night, poor fecker. Only half of him came away. And out of the hole came streaming all these rats - fat and bloody.

(SIMON looks horrified. BUCK seems pleased. He looks at the sketch)

And you've bollocksed this up so I'll have to start again. I was having trouble with your cheekbones anyway.

SIMON

My cheekbones.

BUCK

Prefer softer features but you work with what you have.

SIMON

You were drawing me.

BUCK

(handing it to him)

Here. Will take your mind off your pecker floating in the breeze.

SIMON

Rather good.

BUCK

'Rather' kind of you to say, milord.

SIMON

You have a skilled hand.

BUCK

Full moon helps. Natural light makes the skin look more alive.

Captured my eyes quite well. **SIMON**

Made them look a bit happier. **BUCK**

SIMON smiles nostalgically.

BUCK
Well feck. The boy can smile. Do it more often. Suits your face better.

SIMON
May I keep this?

BUCK
It's shite but help yourself.

SIMON
A friend back home will be jealous. She's never been able to get my eyes right.

BUCK
Oh - there's a 'she' then is there?

SIMON
No / not really.

BUCK
No no - I heard you with my own two good ears - well one since the other got a HmMMM blow up next to it and now it rings all the time - but this one definitely heard a 'she'. Who is she then? Some daughter of a rich ambassador? The general's youngest?

SIMON
Rubina.

BUCK
A native?

SIMON
Yes.

BUCK
Why, Simon - you scandalous lad. Details, boy. Begin!

SIMON
I'd rather not / talk about -

BUCK

Oh feck off, Simon. You're standing there bollocking naked - I think the boundaries are gone now. Speak!

SIMON

She works in the Raj's palace.

BUCK

I knew it - you're royalty. That posh accent and all.

SIMON

Tailor.

BUCK

Feck?

SIMON

My father is a tailor. Had a friend in the army who called him over to India after the plague took out more English than they had counted on. Liked the cut of my father's suits. My father was tired of London and my mother always wanted to see the world so off we went. After my mother died, he took to working longer hours, making clothes for the military brass and Indian royalty. I spent my days with tutors or playing with the local children. Rubina and her brother, Ranjit, took me under their wing. Their parents worked in the kitchens.

BUCK

And you fell in love with her.

SIMON

Well -

BUCK

And now you're running from an arranged marriage to keep your love for Rubina pure. Figured you were hiding a poetic soul behind all that ice.

SIMON

I'm here for Ranjit.

BUCK

Oh? Ohhhh. Fair fair.

SIMON

No no no. I promised her I would look after him.

BUCK

He's in one of them Indian regiments.

SIMON

Wanted to show his people were stronger and more independent than the English were giving them credit for.

BUCK

And where is he?

SIMON

Not sure. None of the majors or sergeants will tell me anything.

BUCK

Typical. Bastards.

SIMON

And none of the Indian regiments here have heard of him. Hey may be on another front line.

BUCK

I'm sure you'll find him, boy. I'm sure you'll find him. If God can save a useless fecker like me over and over I'm sure he's got a hand protecting your Ranjit.

SIMON

(going to his pack)

Here - she drew this before I left.

(sitting next to Buck)

She used some colored powder to give it more life.

BUCK

Fair fair. She's got a good hand. Got your cheekbones down she did.

SIMON

Buck - blood is running down your leg.

BUCK

I know.

SIMON

Why is there blood / on your leg?

BUCK

That Hun got me good before Hmmm went off. Sharp-eyed fecking bastard.

SIMON

Let me see it.

BUCK

I'm not taking my trousers off for you pretty boy. Cheekbones or not.

SIMON

Show it to me.

BUCK

I've had worse, boy, don't you worry. Nothing takes down the Glendalough Buck Cat.

SIMON

(lifting Buck)

Stand up and pull your / trousers down.

BUCK

Get your fecking hands off me!

SIMON

If it gets infected/

BUCK

It won't.

SIMON

And no one finds us/

BUCK

They will.

SIMON

Then best case you could lose the leg or / possibly your -

BUCK

Oh for feck's sake, Simon, let it go. I don't need your help alright. I've done just fine for myself / this past year so -

SIMON

Shut up, Buck. That wound is a couple of hours old now and it's still bleeding. Now we can try to stop that or you can sit there like a child and whine until we will have no choice but to cut off your leg. And I can assure you I am not carrying your lazy backside out of here.

A moment.

BUCK

Well feck - the boy has some bite. But don't say 'backside' - you sound like a right English wanker. 'Arse' - is the word you need.

SIMON

Drop - the trousers.

BUCK

(obliging him)

I always knew it would happen like this. In a dirty trench. With an Englishman. Come on then Doc Ramsey. Cure me.

SIMON

(bending down to examine his leg)

Missed an artery. The bullet didn't come back out. The skin is tender and extremely hot which means you are close to infection if not already infected.

BUCK

Surprised you didn't sign up with the doctors.

SIMON

Tailors don't become doctors. This may hurt.

SIMON digs in the wound carefully BUCK stifles a scream.

SIMON

Christ, Buck. We need to get this out.

BUCK

(pulling his trousers back up)

Get your finger out of my fecking leg, Simon. It'll be fine.

SIMON

(going to his sack)

Bipping it should help a little but the infection may have gotten into your blood. Have you been to the toilet?

BUCK

You're a quern odd bloke aren't you?

SIMON

We need to put urine in the wound.

A moment.

BUCK

You trying to be funny?

SIMON

The urine will do a lot more than the bipp - it's a natural disinfectant. We need yours but can use mine if need be.

BUCK

You don't half get up to strange things over there don't you.

SIMON

The remedy is hundreds of years old and perfectly safe. Now have you been to the toilet?

BUCK

Yeah.

SIMON

Alright.

Almost readying himself to urinate on BUCK's leg.

BUCK

I'll squeeze out a few more drops, Jaysus! Where're you expecting me to put it?

SIMON

(offering his hand)

Here.

BUCK stares at him.

BUCK

(pulling his trousers back down)

First I've got to stare at an Englishman's pecker then he's got his hands on mine. Fine war this is, I tell you. A fine war.

SIMON

You can stay seated.

BUCK

Because that'll make it more pleasant.

SIMON bends down and cups his hands in front of BUCK's crotch. Silence.

SIMON

Problems?

BUCK

You're staring at me.

SIMON

Lord Christ.

(looking down)

BUCK

Not there.

SIMON cranes his neck to look off. Silence.

SIMON

Maybe I should / just use mine.

BUCK

Shush! You keep talking and scaring it away.

Silence. BUCK concentrates. Then pushes. A little sigh escapes him. It's a quick one.

BUCK

Tank is officially empty.

SIMON

Not a lot but it will have to do.

SIMON takes the handful of urine and pours it into and over the wound. He smooths the bipp over and wraps a bandage around the leg.

SIMON

All done.

BUCK

Well thank feck for that.

SIMON

Now we wait.

Silence.

BUCK

Yep. A fine, fine feck of a war.

Time shift.

SOMETHING DIFFERENT FROM EITHER

BUCK is alone reading from a piece of paper.

BUCK

Shanty.

SIMON (O.S.)

Shanti.

Shanty. **BUCK**

Shanti. **SIMON (O.S.)**

Shanty. **BUCK**

Shan- **SIMON (O.S.)**

I'm fecking saying that Simon! **BUCK**

SIMON emerges from around the bend doing up his trousers.

SIMON
Your emphasis is on the wrong syllable. Place it on the first.

Shanti. **BUCK**

SIMON
Good now elongate the first a - not so wide.

BUCK
(he sounds a little ridiculous)
Shanti.

SIMON
...better.

BUCK
Feck off better. Let's do this next one.

SIMON
Alright. *Bandar kya jaane adark ka swaad.*

BUCK
A bit slower if you please Raj Ramsey.

SIMON
Bandar - kya - jaane - adark - ka - swaad.

BUCK

And who does that saying bless then?

SIMON

‘What does a monkey know of the taste of ginger?’

BUCK

What the fecking shite does that. . . Oh you’re a right laugh you are Simon Ramsey.

SIMON

The medicine is not as tasty when it is in your mouth, is it?

BUCK

A right laugh.

SIMON

Alright alright - my apologies. Try this: *Jaan hai*

BUCK

Jaan hai

SIMON

to jahan hai.

BUCK

to jahan hai.

SIMON

Jaan hai to jahan hai.

BUCK

Jaan hai to jahan hai.

SIMON

Not bad.

BUCK

Translation?

SIMON

If there’s life, then there’s the world.

BUCK

Fair fair. They’ve got a right way with words those Indians. They do. Makes your tongue twist around to try and say it but worth it. Try this on then: *Ní dhéanfadh.*

<i>Ní dhéanfadh.</i>	SIMON
<i>an saol .</i>	BUCK
<i>an saol .</i>	SIMON
<i>capall rása.</i>	BUCK
<i>capall rása.</i>	SIMON
<i>d'asal .</i>	BUCK
<i>d'asal .</i>	SIMON
<i>Ní dhéanfadh an saol capall rása d'asal .</i>	BUCK
<i>Ní dhéanfadh an saol / capall rása d'asal</i>	SIMON (butchering it)
Christ, man, could you make it sound a little more poetic and less posh. Jaysus.	BUCK
Excuse me, but I AM trying.	SIMON
Fair fair. I'll give you that.	BUCK
And just what AM I trying to say?	SIMON
Nobody can make a racehorse out of a donkey.	BUCK
. . .Ah. Yes. Well.	SIMON

BUCK
(taking the piss)
'The medicine is not as tasty when / it is in your mouth, is it?'

SIMON
Buck - look!

BUCK
(going for his gun)
What - what?

SIMON
The sun is coming up.

BUCK
That don't make sense.

SIMON
Morning.

BUCK
(trying to listen for something)
Sh.

SIMON
We can finally get out / of here.

BUCK
Shut the feck up, Simon.

BUCK listens to the wind. He grabs his helmet and rifle and creeps to the wall of the trench to listen. He places the helmet on the rifle.

BUCK
(whispering)
Come here - take this - stand there and lift it up slowly.

SIMON complies. BUCK creeps up the wall in time with the helmet. He waits as it clears and is shot off then pops his head up to look and quickly jumps back down.

BUCK
Feck. Fecking arsehole bastard hun.

SIMON
Would you please tell me what the hell is happening?

BUCK

They're a right smart bunch I'll hand them that.

SIMON

And?

BUCK

That's not daylight, boy, that's piles of trash and wood set on fire to light up our side.

SIMON

What should we do?

BUCK

Nothing to be done. Stay down and silent and let the fires burn out and hope to Christ they don't decide to take a stroll over here.

SIMON thinks of what to do then opts to have a seat and fidget. BUCK paces about - somewhat tense and angry. He stops and goes to sit next to SIMON. A moment.

BUCK

Dá fhada an lá tagann an tráthnóna. [Daw aw-dah on law tog-ann an traw-no-nah.]

SIMON

Pretty.

BUCK

No matter how long the day, the evening comes.

Time shift.

BROKEN SUN-BEATEN IMAGES

SIMON is asleep. BUCK is gone.

A few gunshots go off.

SIMON

Buck? Buck? BUCK!?

SIMON goes for his helmet and rifle.

BUCK

(tumbling into the trench)

You rang milord?

The sniper yells off in the distance.

BUCK
(yelling out)

Fich dich, wichser!

Another shot rings out.

BUCK
Hope he runs out of bullets soon.

SIMON
Have you gone mad?

BUCK
Felt a bit peckish. Thought I'd scrounge around for something more than damp biscuits. Full moon bastard gave me away.

SIMON
You need to be resting and giving your body a chance to heal.

BUCK
I'm feeling great with all this magical mystical piss inside me.

SIMON
You are infuriating.

BUCK
I know. Here - see what's in there.

As SIMON roots through the sack, BUCK takes a pack of cigarettes out and a matchbox he's found.

SIMON
A blanket. More bipp. Pack of biscuits. Oh thank heaven a tin of Maconochie.

BUCK
Stuff taste's like a cow's backside.

SIMON
Protein will help get your strength up.

BUCK
I could beat you with one arm tied behind my back.

SIMON
And your leg missing.

BUCK

Both of them.

SIMON

Well, we are officially deserters and grave robbers.

BUCK

Either we enjoy them or the rats will. What else is in there?

Over the following, BUCK tries to light the cigarette, unsuccessfully two times.

SIMON

Gas mask. Looks to be in good shape. Thank Christ, morphine, perfect. Some letters and - wait!

BUCK

(poised to strike the third match)

What's happened?

SIMON

Do not strike that match.

BUCK

Don't come between a man and his fag, boy.

SIMON

You struck two already.

BUCK

Yea?

SIMON

Doing it a third time is bad luck.

BUCK

Medical expert AND Gypsy queen.

SIMON

I am serious, Buck. Do not light it.

BUCK

I'm having a smoke.

SIMON

(going over to try and snatch the match)

Stop.

BUCK
(pulling away)
You're being a right daw you are.

*A short struggle over the match. BUCK lights it.
They both freeze and wait.*

BUCK
Daw.

He lights the cigarette.

BUCK
Have one?

SIMON backs away.

BUCK
Suit yourself. So what else is in there?

SIMON just waits nervously - his back against the trench.

BUCK
Mental.

(grabbing the pack)
Knife. Compass. Water - almost full - thank feck. Well hello there lovely.

Pulls out a brown wrapped parcel. He shakes it a little - it rattles.

BUCK
Take a guess then Simon. I say cookies. Cake don't rattle around like that.

Opens the box.

BUCK
Cookies. Beautiful lovely lovely cookies. Come on then - sit here and have some.

SIMON
...

Over the following SIMON inches closer until he is sitting next to BUCK.

BUCK
(teasing and tempting Simon)
Suit yourself. Oh god - so delicious - crisp like I like them. Quern buttery and sugary - jus the right amount. And not too dry that it sucks up all the moisture in your mouth. Oh this is perfect - divine - I tell you, boy, God is a well-baked cookie.

Makes you want to cry and laugh all at the same time. Brings back childhood, they do. Brings back the happy and the sad. Think of my ma, the smell of her apron. The smell of the hearth - can almost feel the warmth. Long for my bed. I would do anything for a cookie like this - wrestle death to the ground himself if I had to. For just one of these.

*Without looking BUCK hands SIMON a cookie.
SIMON devours it.*

SIMON
(hit mouth full)

Good Lord that is heavenly.

*BUCK smiles and hands him another one.
SIMON greedily takes it as BUCK starts to
methodically eat another cookie from the outside in.*

BUCK
Make it last, boy. Don't often see these around.

SIMON
One of the lads in the regiment got a cake sent from home twice a week from his mum and cookies from his fiancé.

BUCK
Ah right.

SIMON
Made breakfast and tea time a welcome break from all this.

BUCK
Tea time. Hunh. Lucky lot you English.

SIMON
Surely your mum sent you something.

BUCK
Surely she might have.

SIMON
Might?

BUCK
As surely as it was probably 'lost in the post.'

SIMON
Alright then - the other soldiers.

BUCK

In the past year I've seen enough parcels I could count on my hand delivered to my regiment.

SIMON

Well the post is unreliable out here.

BUCK

You're a right daw sometimes.

SIMON

You have completely lost me.

BUCK

You think there's equality out here?

SIMON

You are not implying it has been done on purpose.

BUCK

A fecking naive daw.

SIMON

We're on the same side.

BUCK

The English are on their side. The rest of us are nothing more than canon fodder.

SIMON

We go over the top as well.

BUCK

Maybe. But you're not the first to be sent out. The Irish. The Australians. Your friends the Indians. They keep us all separated from your trenches. That's why you've never met me.

SIMON

We are all a part of the empire.

BUCK

With your lot at the top.

SIMON

Fighting for the good of it.

BUCK

And we're the chattel used to tire out the Huns so you come can come in and save the day. But by Jaysus Christ himself we keep fighting and surviving and it drives your lot mad.

SIMON

Well maybe if 'your lot' hadn't tried to - never mind.

BUCK

I guess news does travel then. Go on.

SIMON

It is irrelevant.

BUCK

'We'll make those bastards pay for April.' I've heard it with my own ears, Simon. They send us out, we come back, and they throw us right back out with no rest. We're allowed to fight for your freedom but Jaysus be damned when we try to get some for ourselves.

SIMON

An uprising - on Easter of all days - and in the middle of a war is not exactly well-timed.

BUCK

You think a country - a people - will watch their children be used as shields and say and do nothing? We joined this war to defend our lands - to fight with you not for you. And we'll keep doing our duty no matter what troubles happen because we won't sit and watch you defend the empire alone so you can accuse of being 'lazy Irish bastards'.

SIMON

So then go - run back home and fight for your land. Defend it.

BUCK

We'll not be called deserters. But we'll not be treated worse than animals. I have watched your captains fire bullets into the heads of young boys - boys not men - who were too scared to go back out. You think they treat your Indian friends any better? They take all the glory gained on our backs and expect us to go back home and be humble and thankful servants to your fecking grand empire. So I fight for me. I fight for my friends. I fight so my younger brothers don't have to go to war. I fight so that Irish children can have fathers who come back home to them. And I fight for a country who doesn't need anything your lot have to give us. And you - Who are you Simon? Who are you?

SIMON

I am a part of her majesty's royal / army.

BUCK

Feck off, Simon. Who have you lost? Who do you care about out here? Why were you alone on watch in the trenches tonight? You're not a part of anything. You have no roots. No obligations. You don't even have a country you call your own. Just feck off and let us do all the hard work and die for you.

BUCK takes the cookies and moves away.

SIMON

You are right. I do not have a country to call home. But you do. And you are the luckier for it. You are Irish. You belong to Ireland. You have a place where your feet can rest on the ground. I am an Englishman - but only by name. I did not come here to support some grand empire - just so you understand. I turned my back on my father and his friends to come fight. It made me sick to watch the Indians put on a uniform I made with my own hands and be sent thousands of miles away from their families to die. How could I let people who were not even English by name fight for a cause and country that were not theirs? To be used by this government and that politician for private little games. I sit in the trenches with the other soldiers and hear them talk about the huns, the boche, fritz, those fucking Germans and the irony is that the Germans are doing the same about us. And when you dare to mention that - that we are no different than our enemies - you are a traitor. You are an enemy of the empire. So we keep killing for someone else's purposes. We are all being used, Buck. You are not special in that. And let me ask you something: If you are such an Irishman how could you possibly have been separated from your regiment? A man with a country who thinks himself an army of one. Above the others. You probably have no memory left of what it means to feel or care for anyone but yourself.

BUCK

(going for Simon and pushing him up
against a wall)

Shut up! You shut the feck up you English bastard. What do you know? What could you fecking know?

SIMON

Where do you think I'll go when this war is over, Buck? Where? Assuming I even survive do you think I will be welcome back in merry old England with my tanned skin? I will be back in India, working with my father, pretending I belong somewhere that only sees me as a necessary piece to keep the empire running. So I am here for myself. I am here for Ranjit. For Rubina. And even for you, Buck. Even if you don't want me to be.

*BUCK releases SIMON. Moves away from him.
They each sit down. Away from each other. BUCK
lies down and covers himself with a blanket.
SIMON watches him.*

Time shift.

SHELTER AND RELIEF

SIMON is on watch. BUCK is shivering uncontrollably and moaning. He has a fever's chills. SIMON considers then goes over and puts his lips to BUCK's head.

SIMON takes off the blanket and starts to undo BUCK's shirt.

BUCK

What - what're you/ doing?

SIMON

Shush. Take those off.

BUCK doesn't have the energy to argue and as best as he can undresses. SIMON does the same. If he finishes before BUCK he helps BUCK take his off. SIMON gets all the blankets. He hangs up BUCK's shirts to dry. He lies BUCK down and lies next to him - his chest to BUCK's back. He covers them with the blankets.

BUCK

What Indian miracle is this then?

SIMON

Your clothes are soaked through. You need to stay warm.

A pregnant moment.

BUCK

Just couldn't wait to slip into bed with me could you?

SIMON

Sh. Get some sleep.

A moment.

BUCK

Thank you.

The lights fade out and we can hear the universe breathing. We hear crickets. We hear the moon. We hear the wind. We hear the possibilities and the improbabilities of the war. We hear the heart of two men.

NO SOUND OF WATER

*In the dark a match is struck and a cigarette is lit.
We hear SIMON before we see them. Both men are
relaxed. Each smoking. In the distance, at another
front line, we can hear shells going off.*

SIMON

*There's a long, long trail a-winding
Into the land of my dreams,
Where the nightingales are singing
And a white moon beams.
There's a long, long night of waiting
Until my dreams all come true;
Till the day when I'll be going down
That long, long trail with you.*

BUCK

That's a good enough song.

SIMON

Only good?

BUCK

Lacking soul.

SIMON

A better singer would suit it.

BUCK

It's a pleasant voice. But the song - cold words. Cold melody. Cold people.

SIMON

Well, now, I hardly think / that is a -

BUCK

Cold response. You lot lack fire. Imagination. Something to stir the soul. Yer arses are tightened up all the time. Slouch.

SIMON

Pardon?

BUCK

'Pardon?' See what I mean? Go on - fecking slouch.

SIMON

I fail to see how / that has any -

BUCK

You can't even try it. Born with brooms permanently stuck up your arses. You slouch - you relax the weight of the world on your shoulders. Who's going to be checking on your posture out here, Simon? You're in a muddy hole and you're still trying to put on airs. Now feck off and slouch you English bastard.

SIMON tries to. It's comical.

BUCK

Jaysus is that what you call relaxed?

SIMON

Give me a second. Christ.

BUCK

Go on then, boy.

He tries again. It's a little better. A little. BUCK laughs at him.

BUCK

Hopeless. Give us a tale, Simon. Maybe you're better at that.

SIMON

What - now?

BUCK

Spin some yarn before we have a little dinner. One of your Indian folk tales.

SIMON

Loses something in translation.

BUCK

At least give it a fecking try.

SIMON

Well. I can give you an Indian myth. They're essentially folk tales.

BUCK

Go on then. Love that shite. My nan used to sit me on her knee and talk my ears off with good old Celtic legends.

SIMON

The one I love the most is about a water Asura - Asuras were ancient gods and goddesses who created all the nature around us. Devi Danu's waters were purifying, they brought wisdom, and / life to all men and creatures-

BUCK
Hold on hold on. Danu, did you say?

SIMON
Devi Danu.

BUCK
Goddess Danu.

They look at one another.

BUCK
The Celtic mother goddess who poured her waters over the earth to purify it and -

BUCK & SIMON
Turn the land green.

They look at one another.

SIMON
Fascinating.

BUCK
Isn't that the dog's bollocks.

SIMON
Indeed.

BUCK
(shivers)
Ooff - chills up and down me spine like cold fingers. Talk about something else.

SIMON
Words were never my strength.

BUCK
So tell me some truths. Just make them sound like a story.

SIMON
Tell me what to talk about.

BUCK
Jaysus, want me to help you take a piss later, too? Talk some about the women there, or that big river they got, or elephants.

SIMON
Elephants.

BUCK

Sure. Read some of your man Kipling's stories and all. You been to the places he writes about. Tell me about them. Without all them talking animals and such.

SIMON

You want me tell you about elephants.

BUCK

Go on then.

SIMON

Ok. Well. Alright - elephants are pachyderms who travel in herds led / by a bull -

BUCK

Jaysus feck, man, tell me about them don't dissect them.

SIMON

I am!

BUCK

Tell me what they're like!

SIMON

Temperamentally usually calm!

BUCK

And what else!

SIMON

Large and imposing!

BUCK

But!

SIMON

(eventually losing himself in the description)

But they are rather gentle! They never move to anger, except when they try to defend their young. But what parents will not move to anger when defending their child. The courts of old used to say that power was best wielded from the back of an elephant. Kings would ride on elephants whose tusks were covered with gold and silver. They would cover their giant bodies with colorful silks and powders - in pinks, yellows, oranges, purples. 'An elephant mounted by a king is radiant; a king mounted on an elephant is resplendent,' a saying goes. I always found that gorgeous. They were used in war much like we use horses here, but elephants were feared more than men. They held a power. A sway over a man's soul. The Indians even have an elephant God. They do - a man's body and an elephant head. Ganesh, they call him. The remover of obstacles. Invoked before every new endeavor.

I have always found elephants to be more humane than humans. You need only look them in the eyes. So deep - so brown - but behind each one you can tell there is a different soul there. An understanding passes without having to speak a word. They wrap their trunks around your neck or your body and pull you in close. They press your head against theirs and you can feel the wind rushing in and out of their bodies. You can feel these giant hearts beating and for a moment you breathe and beat at the same time and the universe seems to stop. Nothing exists except for that moment and that space.

A moment passes.

BUCK

Maybe your man Kitchener should travel through the trenches on an elephant and beat down the Huns.

SIMON

That would certainly be a sight.

BUCK

Can you imagine? A load of your men, their backs all straight, on top of elephants wobbling here and there with the Huns running everywhere: *Mein gott! Mein gott!* Would end this war a damn sight quicker.

SIMON

That would be a hell of a sight. Your turn for a story.

BUCK

After dinner.

SIMON

Hardly fair.

BUCK

War is shite. So you have your choice of a few hard biscuits or a dented tin of Maconochie's.

SIMON

Well what does the chef recommend?

BUCK

Gnawing on your own limbs.

SIMON

The biscuit it is. But half of one - for each of us. Who knows how long / we have before -

BUCK

Jaysus, you're worse than me ma. Just eat the fecking biscuits and enjoy them before the rats get to them. I'll sneak over again later and see if I can find more.

SIMON

You can barely stand upright.

BUCK

Upright enough to do this.

Smacks SIMON in the back of the head.

SIMON

That's it - no meal for you.

They fight over the biscuit in BUCK's hand. They are almost happy teens again, wrestling and being silly. BUCK feigns leg pain to get the best of SIMON. Guns go off in the near distance. They pause to register what they have heard then go for their guns. SIMON goes for the front.

BUCK

(in a hoarse whisper)

Simon! Don't.

SIMON

I know how / to do this -

BUCK

Let me do it.

SIMON

I learn quickly, Buck.

BUCK

. . . Just pull your helmet down over your face so they can't tell you're not me.

SIMON takes off his helmet and puts it on his gun. He shows it off to BUCK and smiles. BUCK still looks worried. SIMON invites him to the front and hands him the helmeted rifle.

Both men raise up. The helmet clears. A shot. It misses it. SIMON pops up quickly to look about. A few short seconds. Another shot.

BUCK
(pulling him down)

Get down you fecking daw!

SIMON

His arms must be getting tired.

BUCK

Where's the fight?

SIMON

Not sure.

BUCK

Any sign of our boys?

SIMON

Nothing. Not a damn thing.

*Both men sit down deflated. SIMON hands BUCK
a biscuit. They gnaw on it for a while.*

BUCK

Rolling hills covered in soft grass. That's humanity to me. I'd spend hours as a kid roaming around. Me ma and me da had to eventually give up worrying and know I'd come back home before sundown. I'd sit under a tree and draw a single blade of grass dancing in the wind. Lie in a field by a pond and wait for the dragonflies to swarm over me. I'd be drunk on the sound of all those wings. You ever feel that pull, Simon? To the earth. We come from it so it makes sense, don't it. That we're always trying to get back to it - into it. Slip right into the folds of a hill or the ripple of a river. I feel bad for every Irishman who'll never get to see that green land again. But I feel sad that they'll end up buried in some mud puddle or some rocky grave. They'll be restless forever. They'll long to return to that land even in death. There's so many of them, Simon. So many. Every night before I go to sleep I recite all their names.

A moment.

BUCK
(singing 'Parting Glass')

*Oh all the money that e'er I spent
I spent it in good company
And all the harm that e'er I've done
Alas, it was to none but me
And all I've done for want of wit
To memory now I can't recall
So fill to me the parting glass
Good night and joy be with you all*

Moved by the song, SIMON joins in with a section from the Divya Prabandam ('Pachai mamalai pol'). It shouldn't make sense, but it does, that these two songs go together working within one another rhythmically and melodically. It's staggering.

BUCK

*Oh all the comrades that e'er I've had
Are sorry for my going away
And all the sweethearts that e'er I've had
Would wish me one more day to stay
But since it falls unto my lot
That I should rise and you should not
I'll gently rise and I'll softly call
Good night and joy be with you all*

SIMON

*Pachai mamalai pol meni
pavalvai kamala chenkan
Achuta , Amaraarere aayartham kozhunde
ennum
icchuvai thavera yan poi.... Indhira logam
alum
Achuvai perinum venden ... arangama
nagarulanea*

[The one whose form is like the green hued mountain
Whose lips are like red corals and eyes like a lotus.
O, divine Achyuta, the jewel of the Yadavas
Who else can one seek in the entire Indraloka
But one who is the greatest ruler ... of the exalted kingdom]

SIMON

Dá fhada an lá tagann an tráthnóna. [No matter how long the day, the evening comes.]
[Daw aw-dah on law tog-ann an traw-no-nah.]

BUCK

Om shantih shantih shantih. [May there be peace, peace, peace.]

Time shift.

THE RED ROCK'S SHADOW

An hour or so later. SIMON sleeps. BUCK is restless. He has fallen asleep while on watch. He wakes with a silent start, breathing heavily. He reaches out to feel that SIMON is still there and calms down. He tries to move but winces. He places his hand on the ground and stops. He wiggles his fingers around. He looks at his hand - as if for the first time. Wiggling his fingers slowly.

BUCK

Jaysus.

Examining the dirt and earth in between and on his fingers.

BUCK

Simon? Wake up. Wake up, Simon

BUCK nudges SIMON who wakes with a start going for his gun.

SIMON

What is it?

BUCK

Sh. Look. Look at this.

BUCK waves his fingers in front of SIMON who can only stare.

SIMON

Right. Your fingers.

BUCK

Everything else but my fingers.

SIMON

The dirt.

BUCK

So much more. Amazing.

SIMON

(puts his hand on his head)

Lord. You're burning.

BUCK

(still mesmerized by his hands)

I'm fine.

SIMON

We need to bip it again.

BUCK

It doesn't hurt.

SIMON

Or maybe it's time for the morphine.

BUCK

Look at this, Simon

SIMON

I can crawl around up there and see if I can find anything stronger.

BUCK

Look at this.

SIMON

If I stay low enough / to the ground then -

BUCK

Look at this!

SIMON

What am I meant to be looking at Buck!

BUCK

Sh. Shhhhhh. Listen. Jaysus - can you hear that? Like a thousand tiny legs crawling around.

SIMON

I don't hear anything.

BUCK

It's because you keep talking. Belt up and listen.

SIMON

Your fever is making you delirious.

BUCK

No. Oh Lord...

(smelling his hands.)

This smells divine. All this earth. My hand. The dirt.
(he licks his finger)

SIMON

Don't do that!

BUCK

Metal. Grass. Heat. Wood. Cinnamon? Is that actually cinnamon? My God I don't remember the last time I had cinnamon.

SIMON

I am going to wash out your wound now. Alright?

BUCK

Something else.

SIMON slowly tends to the wound.

BUCK

Anger. Can you taste anger? Is that a thing? That's what I taste. And the air - my god I can feel it touch every hair on my body. Look - look at all these goose-pimples. My body is singing. My body is -

(looking up)

Oh Lord...

SIMON

Am I hurting you?

BUCK

Look up.

SIMON

We need to clean -

BUCK

(grabbing SIMON's face and looking at him)

Leave the leg. Look up.

(maneuvering his head up)

Look at all those stars. The smoke's cleared. The sky is free. Look - all those tiny dots. Look how many there are, Simon. Look at all that light. All that life. Stars are breathing and heaving life. They keep on no matter what.

He brings SIMON's face closer to his.

BUCK

(almost prayer-like)

*Ná mealltar thú le maoin an tsaoil seo,
rachaidh clocha 'gus fóid go fóill agus cré ort,
Do chluasa 'chloiseadh gach ní dá ndéartaí
beidh dúnta bodhar gan mheabhair gan éisteach...*

(Don't let this world's wealth deceive you,
earth, sods and stone will make your mound,
Your ears that every tale we're hearing
will be closed up deaf to every sound...)

He kisses SIMON on the lips. It's not sensual. It just is. It lingers for a moment.

BUCK

Life. Blood. Warmth. Life. Heat. Feeling. Life. Touch. Soft. Life. Energy. Pulse. Life life life. We're living. You're alive. I'm alive. I can feel your skin. Can you feel mine?

Yes. **SIMON**

He kisses SIMON again in the same way.

SIMON
You really need to stop doing that.

BUCK
Sh. You're not letting go and letting be.

SIMON
Buck - I need you to listen to me. Your wound is getting worse. We need to find a way to get the bullet out.

BUCK
Stop being such a practical daw.

SIMON
You're not thinking / straight.

BUCK
I'm alive. So alive.

SIMON
Not for / long if we -

BUCK
You need to be alive.

SIMON
I will if you let me do what I / need to.

BUCK
Practical.

SIMON
We don't have / much time.

BUCK
Daw.

SIMON
Buck enough!

BUCK starts to take off his clothes.

Stop that!

SIMON

You can join me but you're not going to stop me.

BUCK

You need to stay warm.

SIMON

I'm burning up, right. What does it matter? Come on. Off with it. Bury ourselves in the earth. She'll take care of us.

BUCK

BUCK goes for SIMON's clothes and starts to take them off.

Buck! /

SIMON

You'll / see.

BUCK

Get off!

SIMON

You need to / be one.

BUCK

Stop it!

SIMON

One with / the earth.

BUCK

Enough, Buck!

SIMON

You need to / be alive.

BUCK

SIMON plunges a needle into BUCK.

You - you stuck me.

BUCK

For your own good.

SIMON

Why - why did - no, Simon. **BUCK**

Shhh. **SIMON**

Dying - earth - stars. Where stars? **BUCK**

It will be alright. Just rest. **SIMON**
(cradling Buck)

It was - so beautiful. **BUCK**

Just rest. **SIMON**

So... **BUCK**

Shhh... **SIMON**

BUCK passes out.

SIMON lays BUCK with his head on his lap. He covers him with a blanket and strokes his hair gently. He hums 'Parting Glass'.

EVENING'S MORNING SHADOW

Time shifts but he remains awake and humming. A greasy low yellow cloud starts to billow in. SIMON panics.

No no - Christ no. Not now. Buck wake up. Get up! **SIMON**

What's wrong? **BUCK**
(groggy)

Where did you put the masks? **SIMON**

BUCK
What are you going on about then?

SIMON
The masks! Look!

BUCK
Oh feck. The pack there. That one! Throw it here.

SIMON
No time - use mine - the pack next to yours.

Each man takes the mask and puts it on. BUCK has his on. SIMON stands there.

BUCK
What are you doing, Simon? Put it on now!

SIMON shows the mask - the filter is detached.

BUCK
Feck.

SIMON just smiles at him.

BUCK
Feck feck feck.

The gas is inching closer.

SIMON
It's alright, Buck.

Without warning, BUCK punches SIMON in the gut. He doubles over. He rips off his mask and puts it on SIMON.

SIMON
You can't - You can't do that.

BUCK
I know what the feck I'm doing, Simon.

BUCK quickly grabs the knife and cuts off a piece of the blanket. He rubs it in the mud, puts it over the hole where the filter was and holds the filter against it. The gas wafts through. It all seems to be fine. Then BUCK starts coughing violently. Gas is seeping into his mask.

Shit. Buck!

SIMON

I'm fine!

BUCK

It's getting worse. All SIMON can do is cradle over him like a mother protecting her child from the roof collapsing.

It's alright, Buck. I've got you. I've got you, Buck. I've got you.

SIMON

Time shift. The gas moves away slowly. SIMON lays BUCK down and starts to pace. He paces. And paces.

FEAR IN A HANDFUL OF DUST

When the smoke has cleared, SIMON slowly takes the mask off to test the air. It seems fine. He breathes in deeply.

He goes to BUCK who is wheezing through his mask. He takes it off slowly and notices the blood around his mouth and in the mask.

Jesus Lord Christ.

SIMON

It's better than it looks.

BUCK

Liar.

SIMON

Oh come now Simon. I'm the buck cat.

BUCK

BUCK starts to cough violently. SIMON goes for water.

Don't bother. Water'll make it worse. And no - you're not pissing down my throat.

BUCK

You're the expert on this one. What do I do?

SIMON

BUCK

Cigarette if you please.

SIMON

Do you really think / you should -

BUCK

Simon -

BUCK opens his arms as if to say 'Really? Come on now.'

SIMON gets him a cigarette and lights it. BUCK inhales and coughs.

SIMON

(taking the cigarette from him)

And that will be enough of that nonsense.

BUCK

Aye aye milord. Life has a quern funny way of catching up with you.

Another coughing fit. SIMON can only watch helplessly. BUCK settles. Silence.

BUCK

Michael Pierce. Eighteen-year-old lad from Belfast. Looked more like a scarecrow than a soldier. All elbows and knees. But hell of a buckcat. Voice of a lark. Jaysus he made grown men weep. Never seen such blue eyes in my life. Went over the top the first time with him. So much madness. And my ears - the bullets, the shells, the ground. . .the screams. One second I was running beside him and the next I was staring at the back of his helmet. Maybe I stumbled. Maybe he did. Then he fell - just sort of fell. Took what was meant for me. I've lasted this long looking at the back of helmets. What does that make me, Simon? What does that make me. . .Michael Pierce. Francis Whitton. William Abel. John Campbell. Alexander Pyper. Robert Linton. John Clark. George McPherson. Robert Crawford. Robert Watson. William O'Toole. John Quinn. William Young. James Ramsey. Arthur Ward. John Dyer. Thomas Emerson. David Forrest. Charlie Garrett. Jack Meek. James Meek. Thomas O'Donnell. Joshua White.

SIMON walks to BUCK during the names and puts his hand on his shoulder. BUCK stops, reaches up, and grabs SIMON's hand. A moment.

SIMON

Daylight will breaking soon. I'll go over and look for a medical kit.

BUCK

No medicine - East or West - will fix this.

SIMON

With some luck I'll run into help.

BUCK

I've seen what happens to them that's breathed in the chlorine. It's not living anymore.

SIMON

Well you don't have much / of a choice.

BUCK

I feel like it's going to be an orange sunrise today. Can hear it in my bones. Like the sky will be on fire. Come on then - walk me over. I want to take a look.

SIMON

Not with the sniper still out there.

BUCK

Oh he don't bother me. Just give me a boost so I can have a quick spy on the sunrise.

SIMON

There's absolutely no way / I'll be doing that.

BUCK

Simon - look at me, boy.

SIMON

You're in no condition / to be making any decision.

BUCK

Simon - stop your words.

SIMON

We just need to wait / for the others.

BUCK

Simon!

SIMON

...

BUCK

Look at me.

SIMON

...

Look at me.

BUCK

...

SIMON

It's alright, Simon.

BUCK

...

SIMON

Give me your shoulder then.

BUCK

SIMON goes to BUCK who tries to rise. SIMON puts his hand on his shoulder and gently sits him back down. SIMON gets the canteen then kneels before BUCK. He takes his face in both hands.

Om Namo Narayana.

SIMON

SIMON kisses BUCK's forehead. Over the following he place his finger in the dirt and marks BUCK's forehead. He tilts BUCK's head back anoints him with canteen water..

SIMON
(chanting the *Vishnu Sahasranamam* -
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gq2-EpO26Gk>)
)
Shuklam-baradharam Vishnum shashivarnam chaturbhujam
Prasanna vadanam dhyayet sarva vighnopa-shantaye
Yasya dvirada va tradhyah parishadhyah parak shatam
Vignam ninnanti sataatm vishwaksenam tamshraye
Om Namo Narayana.

(Dressed in white you are, oh, all pervading one
And glowing with the colour of the moon.
With four arms, you are, the all knowing one.
I meditate on your ever-smiling face, and pray
'Remove all obstacles in my way'.)

SIMON stands and offers his hand.

SIMON

Come on then.

He helps BUCK up and they walk to the front.

SIMON

Should I get word to -

BUCK

Check my coat pocket - after.

SIMON

Are you sure about this?

BUCK

You want to be in this pit while I stink up the place and watch the rats eat my pecker?

SIMON

Not really.

BUCK

Then I'm sure. Just stay down and be quiet - as far as that sniper bastard knows I'm the only one in here.

SIMON

No one's coming for me.

BUCK

Do me a favor Simon - find your Ranjit friend, get on back to magical India, ride an elephant for me, and bed that Rubina day and night for at least a month. Then maybe you'll relax a bit you moody fucking bastard.

SIMON

And you can kiss my fucking arse.

*They share an laugh. They look at each other.
BUCK puts one arm around SIMON's neck and
brings him in. They hug. It goes on for a while. The
two of them breathing in unison.*

BUCK

(still hugging)

I've been made better for knowing you, Simon Ramsey.

SIMON tries to speak. But just hugs him tighter.

BUCK

Alright now - give me your knee.

SIMON gets down on one knee - offers his hand.

Will you Buck Mahony -

SIMON

Ah feck off Englishman.

BUCK

BUCK rises but stumbles a bit. The sun starts to rise. SIMON rises to catch him around the waist and presses him against the wall of the trench so he can find some purchase. He starts to slowly pull himself up and stops.

My name's Patrick.

BUCK

A moment. Then he pulls himself up and over. A single shot rings out. SIMON tries to walk it off, but falls to his knees and breaks. He collects himself and goes to BUCK's jacket. Sounds of the war slowly creep in. He looks in one pocket and finds a matchbox. Opens it and pulls out three matches. He chuckles. Puts the jacket down and thinks better. Looks in the other pocket and pulls out a sheet of paper. The war is now at a deafening pitch. He finds a new sketch. It's of him. He reaches up and touches his cheekbones. The sun is in full bloom. The lights and sound cut off without warning.

END OF PLAY.