

The Saddest Missile

By Andrew Najberg

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WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

Andrew Najberg's, "The Saddest Missile," is what you get when you cross Kurt Vonnegut, Roald Dahl, and an intercontinental ballistic missile.

And, continuing with a string of words I didn't think I'd ever string together, I never thought I would empathize with a nuclear weapon. Fear, revile, curse, expect the causation of the end of the world, ride down from an airplane waving a perfectly worn-in cowboy hat, all are feelings, or wishes, I would've guessed before I begrudgingly admitted empathy. Where all of those emotions and actions, thankfully, fail, enters SAM – the only missile I've ever felt bad for.

SAM is a sleek, sexy, well-engorged-with-nationalism missile. Proud of his flag, proud of his shininess, proud to protect those technicians that take care of him, SAM is ready and willing to die for his country – more than ready and willing, he wants to light up the summer sky right above a city full of people.

More than anything, SAM wants to become what he is meant for. He wants to fulfill his purpose, and, through self-transcendence, he rises as a higher power.

Humorously making myself laugh with silly puns aside, Najberg's story taps into the longing that all humans have to find themselves in the world. As SAM watches the other missiles in the silos go off, he wonders when his time to shine will be next, as SAM watches his friend Fred slowly, sadly, drift away from his job and be forced to either be replaced or learn a new skill (a perfectly framed metaphor, by the way), he realizes that his only connection in the world is going to leave him. These are obviously all personified emotions felt by a missile, but I, as a reader, really wanted that missile to be happy and destroy a city – I wanted to see the little missile that could.

I think that this endearing quality of Najberg's story is its strongest point. It takes great skill from a writer to make a reader care about their characters, and I think that what Najberg's done has gone above and beyond to make his reader care about a hunk of killing machine.

When all roads would normally point to a protest around authoritarianism, nationalism, any other -isms, or a good old-fashioned arms race, "The Saddest Missile" manages to protest the violence inherent in the system and manage to make the reader be empathetic to its needs and wants at the same time.

I think that this story truly reflects the power of satire, and, I think, when you read it, you will fall under the spell of SAM.

Enjoy.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (*for the love of language*)...

Sam thought about launching every day, about the blue sky he'd seen when he was transported from the missile factory to the base and the silo, about the trees growing smaller and how a city or town would rush towards him before he blew up. He heard one by one the other missiles in their distant silos giving birth to columns of flame as they flew away to their beautiful, fiery detonations. When the base fell quiet between skirmishes, and the guards' footsteps faded down the metal halls, Sam would let his booster warm just a little until he slipped into dreams of what his silo looked like from the sky.

The Saddest Missile

Andrew Najberg

Sam was a missile, the saddest intercontinental ballistic missile in all the world. Sam sat at the bottom of the silo, his black nose cone half hidden in the high shadows near the launch hatch, his housing luminescent with the greenish-white glow of the fluorescent lights mounted at regular intervals around the walls. The floors never stopped humming with a single note vibration, and a single computer console on a wheeled cart read the 0s and 1s that transmitted wirelessly from numerous diagnostic sensors but did not receive.

A multi-colored flag was stamped on Sam's side just above his guidance panel. He didn't know why, but he felt he should be extraordinarily proud of that flag- that he should be willing to do anything in his power for it. He didn't understand what the flag represented, but it was important to his makers, and if he didn't honor what was important to them, how could he find anything of value?

So it was that he waited day in and day out for his turn to launch, spreading his fins aerodynamically, pulsing with the life of his targeting chip. The other missiles in the neighboring silos couldn't see how precisely his rivets had been set, how the seams of the sheets of curved, cool metal met so perfectly that even air couldn't slip through. The maintenance crews didn't seem to notice with their rags and oils and polishes. They treated him like any other missile. If only someone would give him a second glance, they'd see his sleekness, his lethality, the glorious shine of his housing.

After all, he aspired to one day launch, to rise up on a bed of flames and ascend into the clouds on heat and light. To detonate in the sky over the city into a new, fleeting sun; the thought alone made SAM's payload rumble with energy. So glorious, Sam thought, to launch from the earth on a bed of fire and detonate in the sky in an even bigger and more destructive fireball than the one that launched me. It was all any of the missiles in the surrounding silos ever talked about, so how could Sam not get swept up in their shared dream? How could he not ache to be noticed, armed, and launched?

Then came the first time Airman Fred ambled through the silo in his blue jumpsuit with the insignias on the sleeves, the beady-lensed glasses, and the white rag in his hand that polished Sam's casing so that it gleamed white as a smile. Airman Fred was fresh out of training, Sam gathered from the ribbing his fella crewmen gave him. They shared a lot of laughs at Fred's expense, but Fred just chuckled and shook his head, and went about his work.

When he was done, Fred patted Sam on the fin and said, "You're a fine missile, the finest there ever was. One day, you'll make me proud – you'll make the whole nation proud."

If Sam could cry, tears would have run down Sam's fins from his nose casing, and he just knew Fred would have wiped them off with arcing sweeps of his rag.

The next day, Fred came in carrying a cucumber sandwich in his left hand and before he got to work, he shook his head and said, "they'll launch you little buddy. You're a fine missile, and no way could they let a fine missile like you sit too long without a launching."

Sam thought about launching every day, about the blue sky he'd seen when he was transported from the missile factory to the base and the silo, about the trees growing smaller and how a city or town would rush towards him before he blew up. He heard one by one the other missiles in their distant silos giving birth to columns of flame as they flew away to their beautiful, fiery detonations. When the base fell quiet between skirmishes, and the guards' footsteps faded down the metal halls, Sam would let his booster warm just a little until he slipped into dreams of what his silo looked like from the sky.

One afternoon, Airman Fred didn't polish Sam. Sam waited as the night guards relieved the afternoon guards, and the morning guards relieved the night guards. Finally, Fred's door opened, and Fred waddled in backward, pulling a metal cart with another missile strapped to its top. SAM grew excited until he realized Fred wasn't going to stop and polish his casing. Fred backed towards the door on the other side, a loose wheel on the cart wobbling and squeaking. A dark cloud hung on his brow, and he bit his lip and ground his jaw.

Fred glanced to Sam, wiped tears off his cheek, and sighed, "No time to polish you today, little buddy. Got to take care of a dud."

Sam watched the missile until it vanished down the hallway. He'd never seen a dud before. Did the housing look as white as Sam's? Were the fins the same sleek gray? It looked every bit like a missile, but somehow, knowing that it was incapable of detonating over the enemy made it look like something else entirely too.

A couple hours later, Fred came back through without the missile, without the cart, and without his rag. He came on through and passed out the far door, unwilling to even look at Sam. It was moving to Sam to see just how much the missiles mattered to Fred. He was different than the other maintenance folk and the technicians. An unease passed through his circuits as he realized that if he fired, he'd never see Airman Fred again. Never be polished by him, wouldn't hear his gruff voice. Would it be so bad if he never launched? Would he always have Fred, or would Fred be one day be reassigned? What would be the point of being a missile if not to be launched? What if they ran out of targets? Could there be a God if there was nothing to blow up?

It was all too confusing for something so simple as a missile to process.

As night set on the silo shortly before the end of the summer and the last rays from the sun backed out of the hole like a dying flame, Sam wondered if he could just launch himself. Fire without purpose to detonate in the sky. Would his explosion be just as glorious if he did not strike an object? Could a launch without a target be meaningful?

Sam didn't have the answers, and it started to seem like Fred came less and less. When he did, sometimes, he didn't even polish. He'd just walk in a circle around Sam, shaking his head, muttering, and then walk on out the other hall.

Finally, Fred did linger. He draped his rag over one of SAM's fins and settled his hands on his hips as if all the weight of the war rested on his shoulders.

"Gotta go away a while, little buddy," Fred said. "Been transferred. Not much need for a missile polisher these days – it's all lasers now. They're gonna send me to space to polish satellites. I'm gonna ride on up into the skies in a rocket ship."

Jealousy consumed Sam, imagining Fred riding up into space on a bed of flame, and a different fire burned in Sam's housing as he waited and waited. The next month, one of his grey guiding fins fell away from the side of his propulsion housing. Eventually, one of his internal sensors shut down, and another indicated that his fuel had been contaminated. His internal guidance chip broke. More months passed, and then years.

Eventually, some technicians opened a door at the base of Sam's silo dressed in white coats smudged with grease. They carried clipboards and had noses like birds.

"Looks like this one's got to be junked too," the first technician said.
"Yeah, too bad they didn't launch this one when the wars were still hot," the second technician said. "I bet this was one damn fine missile."

"You got that right," the first technician said. "He would have blow'd up good. They don't make them like this no more."

"They don't fight wars like this anymore," the second technician said, shaking his head.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

AUTHOR BIO: Andrew Najberg is the author of *The Goats Have Taken Over the Barracks* (Finishing Line Press, 2021) and *Easy to Lose* (Finishing Line Press, 2008). His poems have appeared in *North American Review*, *Louisville Review*, *Mockingheart*

Review, Faultline Journal, Bangalore Review, Another Chicago Magazine, and many other journals and anthologies. Currently, he teaches creative writing for the University of Tennessee Chattanooga where he assists with the Meacham Writers Workshop, and he graduated with his MFA from Spalding University. @AndrewNajberg
