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A SLOW KIND OF DROWNING

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Abstract

Captain James Bates serves in the British Army during World War One. Set as an account of a fictional soldier in the Loyal North Lancaster 1/4th, the novella follows James's experience in the war. The story surrounds three key battles for James- the Somme, Passchendaele, Railway Wood- and the consequences of his service in each. The Somme is discussed in one letter written to Florence, James's fiancé. Passchendaele takes place over the course of Chapter 1 through 3rd person narrative as well as referenced in later letters. Railway Wood is remembered through a nightmare which takes place in Chapter 2. In both chapters, story-telling takes place in both 3rd person narration and 1st person letters sent between James and Florence. Each chapters weaves the 3rd narrative around the chronological letters. The 3rd person narration is headed with the date and time while the letters with the day and year in order to show the passing of time and to center the reader in their surroundings.

Over the course of the war, italics are introduced to the letters to represent what the character wants to say but is unable, showing the effect the war has on their relationship as well as their relationship with others. The letters are used to highlight the characters and their individual experiences through the war while the 3rd person narrative is used to show the board scale horror that the soldiers fighting in France experienced. At the end of the short story, James is sent back to France as his wounds have healed. It is left open-ended whether the hero survives the end of the war.

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PREFACE

The Great War is hard to picture. The statistics don't make sense. As time moves forward, our connection with the Great War becomes more and more limited. However, WW1 marks major changes in warfare from the over use of trenches, machine guns, long-gun-bombings, the extensive chemical warfare, and the rise of plastic surgery post the conflict.

For the soldiers who fought and died in the conflict, they were met with a lack of understanding. There was no understanding of the effects of shell shock, of gas, or the rampant PTSD that was viewed as cowardice that consumed the soldiers. Even if they did come home from the war, an overwhelming percentage were not fully ever home again. The men lost more than their blood fighting in France.

As was the policy at the time, The Loyal North Lancashire 1st and 4th, came from the same area. This was done out of the belief that men would fight harder to save their brothers, schoolmates, and friends. However, due to the casualties, this strategy was abandoned in later conflicts. Like other regiments, the 1st and 4th served in every major conflict on the Western Front from the Somme to Passchendaele. A battalion during World War One would have between 600-800 active soldiers. According to the war history of the 1st and 4th, by the end of the war, the battalion had suffered 4,521 casualties and roughly 1,028 deaths, as most of those marked missing are now presumed dead during the conflict. Preston lost a generation of men.

Dulce et Decorum Est
Wilfred Owen

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
 Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—
 Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

Chapter 1- Passchendaele, Ypres, August 1917

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:09

The rats were up early this morning. Their scuttling bodies created the soldier's lullabies, the gnawing teeth and quick-set claws hummed through the trenches. They always were on the morning of a battle. Waiting for the feast that would happen after the call to go over the top, they would swarm the field like a second army. At night, you could see their glowing eyes scattering over the bodies. At least they helped to keep the smell down. Rats used to live up in the hayloft when James was growing up, now they slept next to the men. Just as the rats ate the men, the men ate the rats- the life cycle was complete on the front lines.

Zero hour was growing near. 3:10 am. Captain James Bates could hear the imaginary clock ticking down the seconds before the assault would begin. Zero hour had, no doubt, been decided, at least in part, by men who had never come to France, who had never stood where he stood. Men who served their country from the homeland, safe from Hell's shells. If they did come, no doubt, they would be walked through a relief trench, the guns of battle miles away. Close enough to hear the boom but too far to dirty their nice suits with any bloody muck. He hated them more than he hated the Germans.

9 May 1915

My love,

We're finally here, Harry and I. The ship was like nothing I've ever experienced, though I didn't get the same seasickness as Harry. Tell Marnie for me, will you? He makes it too easy to

tease him. France is something else though. We marched up to Lillers after getting off the dreaded ships. Everyone seemed so happy to get a good walk in after being cramped up. I'm not sure what anyone was expecting- Harry thought the Hun would be waiting with a nice cuppa for us upon landing. I almost wish they had- we haven't had anything like a cuppa since we left our beautiful Dover.

Though, it's clearer today that the war is real compared to any other day since we lads enlisted in the village hall. The old hands told us the guns were miles off but the ground shook with each blast. It was like far away thunder, like when the storms are coming in from the coast and you can hear it bouncing off the waves. I wish it had been thunder. I have to admit to you that I was scared. But, it's what we came here to do- it's what we need to do. Us lads had to enlist, it was expected as it should be. I'm proud to be serving my country. I hope you're proud of me.

I love you Florence.

James

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:09

This wasn't Captain Bates's first time going on the ladder. He had lost track of the number of assaults he had been a part of. He was also sure, in equal proportion that this one wouldn't be his last either. Today didn't feel like the day he was going to die, not that he was sure what that would feel like. He only felt the common mix of excited fear. Today was a good

day to die was the common theme amongst his soldiers. James never said it. He refused to. He wasn't sure if it was out of fear or hope. Those things always got as tangled as limbs on barbed wire.

24 May 1915

Dearest James,

I cannot believe that you got deployed. I thought, given how long ago you enlisted, that they weren't going to need you lads out on the front line. I guess a part of me was hoping that you weren't going to be needed. I guess I was hoping that you would be home by now.

I know how important the war is to you but I can't help thinking that you didn't have to go. There are still some lads home and I wish you were one of them. Widow Mary's boy stayed home- not that it would surprise anyone. He told people that he was needed on the farm- the poor lady couldn't run that brute by herself and none of the other families have extra hands to lend her. I'm trying only to be proud of you but given everything else- I wish you had stayed home. Marnie and I talk about it all the time. She's worried sick after the pair of you. It's a sight to see, ripping at her clothes and the like.

They put out some more posters about the war now. There is this one about how the women of Britain say go. I find it hard not to laugh at it. It's so opposite to what I'm feeling and how

I wish you didn't have to leave. I understand that it is your duty. I just wish it would be someone else's.

It isn't the same without you. My life is quieter. The lambing season is going well, your parents have lots of new little ones roaming the lower fields. They are as cute as they always are. The final count was 72 but you Da thinks that it will be more like 60 when all said and done. In a couple more weeks, they will be driven to market. I think your father is hoping to get a good sum this year, what with the war on. He thinks that the government will be buying more meat to feed our boys on the front. I hope this means that you get some of the good lamb you're used to. What are they feeding you? I hope that you're eating well. Keep your strength up.

I love you.

Florence

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:10

The ladder was tense under his hand. The old wood, the scraps from making the trench, was worn from the boots and hands clambering up them. At one point, they were steadfast but now, they rattled in the wind.

Captain James Bates felt the tension of his men behind him. No matter how many times they clambered over the top together, the rush of it never left them. James told himself that this was good- that this meant that there was still a part of them that wanted to survive. The war hadn't eaten them completely yet. Some of the new lads were behind him. Eighteen seemed

younger and younger as the war continued, sixteen year old slipped through the cracks all the time, rushing in to serve their country. A waste of life. He felt them teetering more than the old hands and he knew that their fear was more than his own. Old hands understood this war. They understood the fighting and the bombs and the rattling coffin lids that covered the men more often as the war progressed.

Another commanding officer was standing further down the trench, with a whistle in his mouth, same as James. He was glad to be on the ladder rather than standing on the muck floor. That man would start the whistling, he would call the order for going over the top. James knew that he would join in the shrill order along with all the other commanding officers as he clambered over the trench, leading the men forward. But at least he wasn't the first to call it. He hated ordering his men to their death. The metal whistle tasted like blood.

3 June 1915

Beautiful Florence,

The food is good. We get a lot of vegetables to keep us healthy, trying to keep disease down in the ranks. Nothing like what we eat at home, not the sheep heavy diet of my parent's. I guess the army doesn't have their own sheep farm.

They didn't take too long before putting us lads to work. We marched up to the front line to relieve the poor bastards who had been fighting. I think we were all excited and happy to be getting to give them Hessians whatfor. I wish that feeling would have stayed. It's rotten, this war, it really is. While, I'm

happy to be here, I can't tell you how horrible this fighting is. The bombs rattle your soul, all the way through. The Old Hands say that this is the worst of it- getting used to the bombs. That's where the fear comes from, the rest of it isn't too bad. That's what they say. I can't imagine how anything could be worse. The Earth explodes around you, sending everything the shells hit up into the sky and then they come crashing back down. And the noise, Florence- it will be a miracle if I can hear anything when I get home. Though I guess that means I also won't hear your calls to do the washing up once we're married.

Some of the company didn't make it though. It so different to seeing a slaughtered cow on the farm. A cow is supposed to die- it's supposed to be slaughtered for meat and leather and you spend your whole life knowing that that cow is going to be killed. It's not the same to see a person being slaughtered. One of them was Charles Lockhart, you know. He used to sit behind me in school, copied me on every exam. Can't say that he was the smartest boy then to copy me. I think he would have liked that joke- he was always the laughing sort. He was standing at the wrong place and then the shell hit and then there was nothing. It was like he never had existed. There wasn't even enough left for a proper burial. The Germans stole even that from him. I'm sure his family will know by the time this letter gets to you. Will you bring them some of your pie? Sweet things are good in mourning.

I love you Florence.

James

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:10

It never mattered how loud the bombs were, that whistle was heard. The shelling from the Huns was heavy, just as heavy as James knew their boys was shelling the enemy. The game of chess that the two kingdoms played against each other had its rules. The shelling was the first pawn move of the attacks and then the foot soldiers, the breathing pawns that the governments played with like small children fighting over a doll. There was a sense of comfort to it- you could follow the fighting, figure out the strategy of the enemy by counting the daily shelling. It no longer made him flinch. When he first got to the front line, he used to cry out when the shells hit, so scared that they would hit him. 2 years later, he found the noise comforting. Now, he knew too well that those who didn't make it through the shelling wouldn't be the ones to hear it. It was a cruel form of irony.

The bombs were tallies for the survivors as the two governments fought for meaningless pride through France. They served to remind the soldiers that they weren't dead yet. The threat was clear but as was the hope. Somehow, it was the hope that no one truly lost. They all wanted to go home. Though that scared the captain more than anything: going home.

18 June 1915

Dearest James,

I will never forgive you if you don't come home to me. You promised me, that day in the lower field. It was when you asked me to marry you. If I have to wait much longer to see you in my white dress I'll scream. You promised me a life. You promised me a farm with crops and lambs, the best of both our family's lives. You can't break it. Please be smart and safe. Please come home to me.

Marnie is having a hard time of it. She finds it impossible to write to Harry. His letters make her sob for days. I think this is slowly killing her. She asks that you protect him. We all know that he is a bit of a simple man. Don't let him have his heroics. She needs him.

Bring both of you home. That's all I can think of these days. I have nightmares about getting the knock of the door, or on your parent's door, or on any door to tell me that you are no longer here. I won't survive it. We've known each other for so long. I've never thought about anyone else. Not anyone.

The papers are filling with war stories you know. They keep talking about how the war will be over quickly and how everything's going right to order. One story that came out was over the cowardice of some of the soldiers who disobey orders, moving out of formation and that this ends up killing them. At least I don't have to worry about this with you- you are many things James Bates- but you are no coward.

I love you.

Florence

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:10

The whistle sent feet moving, James hurried up the ladder, allowing the trail of men to follow him. They moved as a fluid force, quickly and low to the ground. The wire worked against them as they fought through into No Man's Land. It was a speck in the battlefield, this time only a couple hundred yards long. Without the barbed wire and the constant shelling, the distance would be covered quickly. The quick steps of the men never led to quick progress, crossing 10 yards took a year. Despite how quickly you wanted to run, to cross- most men walked. The dread came down to actually having to kill a soldier- to attack the Germans face-on. Maybe that slowed the feet more than anything. The German line, watching the scrambling British, opened fire. Without seeing them, James knew that they were squat in their lines, guns clicking through rounds. In the mounds by the trenches, James knew that there would be machine guns pointed towards him. Overhead the shells pounded the Earth in their angry fire.

And suddenly, the world was quiet.

26 June 1915

Light of my world,

They had us over the top for the first time, sending us to get those Hun bastards. I've never been so scared in my entire life. Running through No Man's Land is like running through your

family's lower pasture after the spring rains. Did you ever find that heel that you lost when we went for a midnight walk in that field? I doubt you would be able to find it here. The muck tries to suck you into the center of the Earth with each step.

The Germans shelled us with Minnies for the whole battle too- at least that's what the old hands said. Harry says that those shells are the worst part of this damn war. Can't say that I blame him- everything stops when one of those hits. They're slow moving like ducks compared to sparrows but gosh don't they let you know when they've landed. It's shocking the noise they make. Every time one of those buggers hit- Harry would chorus out that it was as good as any day to die. It's a comforting thing in the field- like you get a choice in any of this. And it makes the rest of the men smile- a warped humor has covered us for sure. It's good, the sense of brotherhood that us lads have developed. It makes this easier.

Harry also wants me to ask you to remind Marnie to write him more. The juvenile- it's like passing notes in school. The poor bugger is missing his girl. Can't say he's the only one.

I love you Florence.

James

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:11

The gas shell was easy to miss; it fell like any other shell, landing with an impossible

bang. But, Captain James Bates was numb. The adrenaline in his system muted the noises, allowing him to concentrate on what was in his power instead of worrying about what wasn't.

It started without any warning. James saw the green and yellow and brown rushing towards him. It roared in a way that other shells never did. The silence in which it moved was powerful. If he listened, on a day without the thunder of guns, he thought he would have been able to hear the gongs sounding at the impending attack. But the Captain knew that the gongs were a rarity on the field, so many shells contained gas, it was a constant threat. As the war progressed, the hope of keeping the lads safe, lessened. Old things that were comforting were less so. More and more the boys were on their own against the rattling Hun. The gas came with a combination, the chlorine, phosphorous, and mustard swirled together in their mass. It was a common gate to Hell. Beyond the fear of the noises and of the bullets coating the ground, the gas was the most terrifying foe. It encompassed its victims. There was no escaping its embrace.

Closer and closer like stampeding horses, it moved with a kind of grace that was wholly its own. It ate itself, over and over, nothing stopped it. The fluid beast snaked its way through the wire and the bodies like young girls playing in gardens.

It consumed.

9 July 1915

My lovely Florence,

Can't say that the war is all noble victories. We've been billeted to rebuild a trench line, we're all assuming for most of the summer. Looks like the Hun takes a summer holiday like school

children. That's Harry's joke. We both know I'm not that funny. He's in a right spirit with this building as you can imagine. The sergeant quickly realized that he's handy with a hammer and nails. I've hardly seen him in a couple days, except to be ordered by his smug mug.

I'm glad to be building though. The war pounds a couple of miles away but apart from the rogue shell- we can almost pretend that we are out for a day out on the farm, rebuilding things that fell over through the winter. I can't believe it's almost been a year since I enlisted. *I can't believe that I left you.*

I love you Florence.

James

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:12

The battlefield had a smell all its own. Something that crept into your skin and stayed there- in residence of your suffering. It was sweet- heavy with the smell of blood. There were no words for it. Captain James Bates hardly smelled it anymore. He was unaware of a time when the smell was not present. Mixing into it was the smell of the gas. It was overwhelming, the change. The gas stole the familiar. The battlefield seemed odorless in its presence, apart from the sickly smell that came from the ocean wave itself.

The gas was alive as it overcame the battlefield. The breeze in the early morning aided the feasting snake. A swirling mass that wrapped around everything- the bodies, the unexploded bombs, the masses of wire and wood, covering them from view. When James was little, he was

scared of the morning fog that would snuggle around the farmhouse, making the surroundings white. He used to be scared of the ghosts that surely roamed in the low-level clouds. Now, in the face of the monster, he didn't feel anything. He lived with the ghosts, so sure that he himself was becoming one.

25 July 1915

Dearest James,

Marnie says that in his letters to her, he closes with 'today is a good day to die.' What a horrible thing to say. I understand that it is a joke and a chorus for you lads but it doesn't settle well for us. The war is so different here in Preston. It's not so violent.

All the same, we are suffering so. We already seem to be scraping the bottom of barrels. The old men are working the fields, even though they don't have the strength for it. We are all fighting our own war. I know that's not a fair thing to say but please remind him who he is writing to. We're both worried about him. Please watch out for him. You've always been the strong one.

But, what a thing- to fight in a battle! It sounds most exciting. And scary. It sounds like one of the old stories that my Da used to tell me as a little girl- of all the heroics of his fellow men in South Africa. I hope that you have the same joy and

pride in your service as my Da does and not the sort that your Da did. Yours never even talks about it- couldn't be a good thing that he went through. I hope you are more like my Da when you get home and that the war doesn't ruin things like it did for your father. His limp is more and more pronounced as he works the longer hours on the farm without you. As is his drinking- your mother asked me not to mention it but I wanted to tell you. He drinks every night now, worried about you I'm sure but I think this war is bringing back his. It can't have been easy- being in that camp. I wish we knew more about what he went through- maybe he wouldn't be so easily labelled as a coward.

I'm glad to hear that you made it through your first battle. I hope that you won't have many more to go through.

It's rained here all through the week. The farmers are most pleased, the crop yield should be good this year with so much water. Hopefully, this means that more food will be sent to France for the winter. I hope that you get fed, my Da used to tell me such stories of hunger during the Boer Wars. I think he meant to scare me into eating my peas.

I love you.

Florence

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:12

His scalp was itchy, the background annoyance that never went away. Even in the middle of all this, Captain Bates was aware that his head was itchy. The constant itch took his thoughts. But there was something comforting in it. That even now, Captain Bates had this problem. In the face of all the other fears and worries about dying or still being forced to survive, that plagued him and the rest of his men, Bates was itchy. The lice ate into his skull as well as the moldy skin that served to protect it. The blood was dried in his hair, along with the dirt the lice created all of their own. He was always more aware of it when he wore the mask. Maybe that's why he delayed to place it over his weary skull. The lack of fear, combined with the itch made decisions in slow motion.

The lice came quickly to the front, faster than any relief trucks ever could and they stayed longer than anyone wanted. They survived the front better than the soldiers. They never got trench foot or cried or suffered. Maybe they should be the soldiers. Bates almost chuckled at his thought as he fumbled with his belt to slip the mask over his head. It was a ingrained motion. He wasn't aware if he even wanted the mask on his face.

1 November 1915

My dearest Florence,

Life's been so boring, I haven't had anything to report until today. Harry got his ugly mug stuck in a bucket. I can't imagine why he put the old rusty wooden thing over his face, he said he was acting out drinking wine by the gallon for some of the other lads. But he came over to where I was stationed, led by a couple of the younger boys looking like an absolute buffoon. We

had to bust the damn thing off his face like cracking a bad egg. It took the better part of an hour because we were laughing too much to hold the hammer.

When we finally got it off his dumb skull, he started complaining about ruining his perfect bucket. I told him he should have just used it as his helmet the next time we go over the top. Maybe he won't be so scared of the Germans if he can't see them. Not that Harry is a coward. We're all scared of the Germans.

I'm sure your days are long, especially with us lads missing out on all the fun of the autumn harvest. Please help out my family if you can, I don't know how that they will be able to manage. I know that was one of the reasons my mum wasn't completely happy about me enlisting. With my da's limp... but still, you know I had to volunteer. It means so much to me that I know my whole family supports me. *I hate the word volunteer. I can't believe that I signed up for this. How did a generation of men sign up so easily to die?*

I love you Florence.

James

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:13

The war had taken its toll. He wasn't the man he was when he enlisted. Captain James Bates wasn't sure that that man still existed. While James was sure that he was alive, he was

equally sure that the man who came to France wasn't. It was almost worth leaving the mask tied to his belt. The mask weighed on his face, like an anchor, pulling him towards the ground with each step. The mask was a tool of the beast- wanting to consume him so there wasn't anything left.

It was a sick form of poison. The sickly sweet that filled the lads to the cramming point, reducing the soldiers to half-men. The gas stole and stole- it tore away the emotions. It reduced the men into unfeeling shells. The numbness consumed. The snaking beast wanted to take them in entirety. The poison made the half-men want it more often than not. Every breath was harder than the one before, even on the relief lines. It was a futile effort to fight this want. The chances of survival were so limited and harsh- why would you want to fight it? Why not just give in? You wouldn't have to go home. You wouldn't have to work then to become a man after the end of the Forsaken. You wouldn't have to do any of it.

It would be so easy to take the mask off.

The gas spilled over the edge of the hole left in the earth from a shell like molasses out of a can. It held a weight within it. It curled in the air like Florence's perfect hair and wove around his feet like Grandma Eleanor's old cat when she wanted milk. There was a height to it- it formed a shape of its own. Like one of the gods from Ancient Greece.

The cloud moved gracefully like a fog setting in. It was like a cat toying with its mouse, and Captain James Bates was resigned to his fate. He couldn't feel anything. He didn't want to feel anything.

It was so close now.

23 November 1915

Dearest James,

I am glad that you are bored. I hope this means that they are keeping you safe and away from the guns. The papers say that you'll be home to me soon. We're winning with ease. I hope that is true.

The harvest has been good. My parents are most pleased. We are taking the cart down to market next week to sell our the extra grain. Your parents have gotten their share in return for some most excellent meats as always. The table is full for the time. It is my favorite part of the year. I cannot wait to spend our first harvest together after we have wed, eating our fill on the floor by the fire like we did when we were young.

The lads who aren't serving in the war are getting white feathers. The children are the worst about it. I'm not sure they understand why a man wouldn't enlist. It's such a black and white world that they live in- seeing things as right and wrong and not in the grey that covers most decision making. But, the longer this war goes on for the more that I agree with them. If all the lads signed up- this war would be over soon. I understand how hard it is to leave home and loved ones and I know how torturous it is to know your loved one is over fighting and you can't see them or kiss them. But, even with all the hard decisions that one would have to make in order to enlist- it shouldn't be a hard

one. It is important that we win. It is important that we beat back the Hun. It is important. Everything else is secondary to the war effort.

This fall, since I worked in the fields for the harvest, my hands are covered in calluses. They are almost as rough as your old fingers. They make me proud. I remember how much my fingers bled after the first week of hard labor. It was a worthwhile pain. It made me proud. It was important. It was just as important as the war you're fighting. I like to think that you're going to eat some of the grain that I got to harvest. I like to think that I am going to feed you, even in France.

I love you.

Florence

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:14

Ypres suffered more than most places in this war. The city was razed over the course of the engagements. Now, in 1917, the city lay as a camp to its victors, full of the weary feet of soldiers, no longer a home to a happy city. The cathedral was gone- along with the laughing children and the proud fathers. The old bakery was smoking from bomb's kiss. The captain found its predicament amusing, so similar he was to the city. His fumbling fingers were almost too slow to slip the gas mask over his head. It was becoming a game- how long he could last before his ingrained orders won out and he saved himself. He wasn't sure if it was the need to feel something that made him wait or the need to never feel anything at all. The mask slipped

over his head as the gas lapped at his feet like the beach he used to go to when he was younger.

The mask almost made dying of gas worth it. The gas slipped through the cracks, combined with the masks' own protective chemicals. The masks protected against some of the gases on the field but not all. The chlorine and the phosphorous were generally deterred by the masks that made the men look even more like monsters. The soldiers found out the masks' failings the hard way. The mask worked to protect the lungs- in most cases- it was successful. But against mustard gas- there was no hope. Captain James Bates felt the blisters forming, his skin popping and bulging under the gentle caress of the beast's wandering fingers. But, still at least the government was trying. The government was improving the masks, giving the boys that extra piece of safety. Governments provided monstrous masks- the need to look terrifying against such a terrifying enemy. They sent the boys out for slaughter but at least they were trying to save those they could. It was a comforting thought for the captain, as he stood on the end of the world.

He walked into the smoke, both the grey and the yellow, following the duckboard into the firing German side of No Man's Land. In that moment, he was fearless.

1 February 1916

Dearest James,

I can only imagine the horrors that keep you from me. However, I must write of a horror of my own. This past Christmas went without seeing you or reading your words. Not once did you wish me a Happy Christmas. I know that your life must be dreadful. I

know that I should be grateful with my war in comparison to yours. But all the same, this horror is my own.

I hope you will write me soon. I need to read your words and skim my fingers over where you skim yours. I wish to have you as a constant fixture in my life. I thought that was the promise we had made to each other. I hope we do not break this promise now. I hope that you can continue to write to me. I hope you know that you can tell me anything. I hope you think our love is stronger than some silly war. I hope you know that we will survive this.

The campaigns for enlistment have only increased in the winter as they want more boys for the summer fighting. There was a parade the other day- the new boys from Preston enlisted. I imagine they will join you soon. It feels odd to have a parade, though to be fair, it wasn't much of one. Parade is far too happy a term to use in this case but that's what my Da keeps calling it. I think it will be any day now that the war is over and you get to come home to me.

Please, if you ever loved me, tell me that you are safe.

I love you.

Florence

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:14

The gas tasted like apples. The sweet autumn flavor awoke his taste buds. Apples meant mustard gas, it was a familiar taste in the trenches. He tried not to panic and breathe normally until he could find a safer place. He couldn't turn back. The empty spot on his jacket front, the loose strings, the place where his medals would be, weighed heavy on his chest. The weight of a war hero along with the thoughts of his men forced his feet forward. The duckboard ended with the splash as the Captain finished crossing the shell-hole, the boarding turned into mud. The captain tried to think that the mud was mud and not rotting bodies. The gas surrounded him, encasing him. Green swirled around him, playful like leaves in the autumn. The helmet offered little to no visual and the gas deafened the long guns. The captain felt like he was floating, drowning.

1 April 1916

Dear Beautiful,

Today, a German deserter surrendered to us. I've never met a German before. He had a very strange accent, like he was talking through the back of his throat. It's a very weird thing to see the face of our enemy. He looked poor off, the old sod, just like the rest of us. I couldn't seem to hate him like I wanted to. I felt a sense of sameness with him- that he was as angry at the war and only wanted to go home- same as me. Though, I would never be the coward that he was. I would never run from my regiment, leave my friends like that. It doesn't matter how bad the war gets- it's our duty to serve and our job to protect each other. Maybe, I'm nothing like the wretched Hun at all. They're all a

bunch of lowly cowards anyway- invading places they had no right to and then involving everyone else in their silly little power struggle.

The spring rains are making the battles even harder, with the flooding and the extra mud. The sergeant is making all us lads rub our feet down with oil to prevent against trench foot. Not that it helps with the smell. We reek. Harry especially though. He's wallowing because Marnie isn't writing him again. *I'm sorry that I haven't written to you for a while. I haven't had anything to say. How do I write to you about daily things? What are daily things now? How do I write to you about the hell of this war when I know how much you support it now? How do I tell you that I'm not proud? Do you want to know how we laughed over eating God's Forsaken, as the food was called? Do you want to hear about how God's Forsaken was just the fleas off our own bodies? Do you want to hear about how we had to because the rats disappeared over the winter? How we laughed about eating ourselves? How do I write home about that?*

I love you Florence.

James

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:15

Captain James Bates felt the energy slipping out of his bones. The gas weighed him down, laying wreck to his body, eating from the outside and the inside, racing for the middle. His

lungs struggled out every ragged breath as he forced his body forward. Mustard gas swirled in his lungs, blackening the inner skin. Mustard was feared more than other gases. The lads used to try to out run it- to get away from the colored substance. It was an unforgiving death. The poor souls who had inhaled it flopped like dying fish on the land, drowning in the oxygen as the gas ate their lungs. The blackened skin, the stained tongues, the writhing and writhing of the masses who would not make it. And the tension of the skin as the gas expanded, locking the body in its embrace.

The mask which covered his head in cloth was soaked in a way it never had been before. The gas was heavier. James had never worn it for such a prolonged time. He wondered if he was about to discover a time limit on the mask's effectiveness. For the first time in the war, James was sure that he was going to die. There was no surviving this. Today was it. This is what it felt like, the acute knowledge of one's own mortality. The ticking clock that marked his time on the Earth slowed down. Every step was pure agony. The flirtatious substance had moved from kissing hands to corroding ankles.

His scalp burned. It erupted. His eyes wept with pain and irritation. A cough begged for release. His trench line was nowhere in sight. Everything was simply grey- the smoke and the gas merging as one. In the distance- there was pole. That was his world. Suddenly it was very hard to move forward. Suddenly, it was very hard to do anything at all.

He stood on shaking legs, praying to the God that he had long since given up on for some kind of saving. It was a funny type of hope.

25 April 1916

Dearest James,

Thank you for your letter. It was the largest relief to hear from you and to know that you are safe. It sounds of it that you have had an exciting day- a surrendering German- what a thing is that! It must be so strange to meet one, after you've been fighting them for so long. Had you really never seen one before, not in your year of fighting? I hope not- that would mean that you never got close enough to danger.

The sheep are lambing again. I love this time of year more than any. The baby calls to the mother, the suckling and graceless creatures tripping on their own feet. They play and run so much. I wish I was as young as that. I wish I had the time to play. I'm working full time on the farm now, in a way that I hadn't even before. There are so few lads in the town now- I'm proud of Preston for giving so much to the war effort. But it does make the farm work harder. But, everything is hard these days, as it should be. It's a good type of hard.

I hope that you stay safe and come home soon. Please keep writing to me.

I love you.

Florence

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:16

In front of him, lay one of his men. Captain James Bates stopped. Gas mask to gas mask the two men looked at each other. Bates looked at the man, seeing the blank space where a leg should be. The survival rate was low, they both knew that. The man knew that he wasn't going to make it to the hospital. He didn't want to die on the field, surrounded by nothing and no one. No one wanted to die alone. Captain Bates reached down and hefted the dying man over his shoulder. It was a common motion for the captain, he carried all those he could back to the safety of their own trench. He was never sure why he carried men home, no other soldier compromised their safety in this way. In that way he was unique. Being unique wasn't good in war. It had won him medals but the Captain knew that it would not be long before it would win him his death.

20 July 1916

My dearest Florence,

I received a promotion today. I am now your own Captain James Bates, no more writing to a mere Private. Now you will write to a commanding officer. *I'm not proud.* We were fighting for a German trench. It was early in the morning- the fog was like something you wouldn't believe. It was worse than the spring morning when your sister got married. *The fog was a smoke that stuck to your lungs. It was hard to tell what was a natural occurrence and was from the guns. The longer we fought, the heavier the air became. The whole field smelled of blood. It's a thick odor like a thousand butchers cutting at once. Through all the fights that I have had to serve, I've never felt so small than for this. It was*

Hell on Earth. The fires consumed us. There was nothing left. We won the German trench, those cowards legged it. They raced back to the safety of a relief trench, knowing that we wouldn't follow. The German shelling let up as the men surrendered their posts. But, we were too few to tell our boys on the back line that we won it. They kept on shelling us, didn't know that they were killing their own people. Next to me, a shell hit and killed 10 men. You couldn't tell whose hand went with which foot. There wasn't enough left for it. They were just gone. But the bombing was still coming on strong. The Battle was continuing around us. It wasn't over. I saved the lives of us boys by getting us to a safe place. We had to run back to our trench line. Almost cost us the battle. The Germans are like cockroaches- wouldn't have surprised anyone if they retook their trench in the confusion. I guess we killed too many of them. I carried the boys who couldn't walk. I brought everyone I could find to the line, to get medical treatment. I carried those we lost back so they could get a burial. I couldn't tell who was alive and who was dead. I just brought back everyone. I don't understand death anymore. It doesn't make the same sense that it used to. I'm numb to it.

Thankfully, Harry is ok. That boy would survive the world ending. He came out of that battle without a scratch. *We're all surviving the world ending. I can't tell you that I had to carry my best friend back to safety. I can't tell you that I started carrying bodies to find him. I couldn't find him. I was so scared. I've*

never been more scared. What if Harry didn't make it? What if I found his body? I can't imagine a world without him in it. He's the only thing here that matters. I can't tell you that. I can't talk to you anymore. He told me that I was gonna get a promotion for this as he helped the injured. I guess that nurse course he took to see all the pretty girls helped for something, didn't it? *I carried back the body of our captain. Who else would the bloodthirsty bandits in London put in charge of our sorry lot?* They gave me a cross for my heroics. There was a ceremony and everything. I wish you had been able to come, you would love all the lads and me in my new uniform. *I hope you never come to France for as long as you live.* I looked all pretty for sure, took a bath for it and everything. *I had to wash the blood off. I had to get the smell off me.*

I love you, Florence.

I want to die,

James

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:17

The man was an awkward weight over his right shoulder. James Bates could feel his knees shaking at the exertion. They wanted to buckle, his body wanted to join the man over his shoulder. Slowly, so slowly, the men made it back to the duckboard.

They were made of left-over material, thin pieces of wood strapped together with rope and nails. Made with the last of the building material, put in place at night by shaking fingers of the night watch. It was the worst of the watches. People never really came back on night watches, especially if he had to go over the top. The captain tried to move at a constant rate, hoping to spread their weight over the bowing planks. It didn't hold.

15 August 1916

Dearest James,

I can't believe that you are a captain now! I'm so proud of you for getting the promotion. Especially for being such a hero. You are the talk of the town! Everyone is so proud of you. It's been lovely- all the girls keep giving me flowers for you, wanting to celebrate your bravery. The old men at the pub are toasting you, that's what my Da says. You parents are pleased, people are giving them food and other gifts. Widow Doris says that when you get home, you get first pick of any of her foals. Imagine that, our own cart horse. I can't wait- me and my war hero working our own farm.

I'm glad to say that my fiancé is a war hero. It makes me proud. Stay safe. I'd rather that than any amount of heroics. I just want you to come home.

I love you.

Florence

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:17

Captain James Bates felt as though he stopped falling- floating in the air. He was falling through a fantasy realm for the barest of seconds, like one of his dreams. He was weightless, far from the war, far from everything. For the barest of moments, he was in limbo. He had peace.

Suddenly, the fall was over. It was like time sped up to take back the precious seconds spent outside of the fighting. The noise and the smoke and the gas and the battle came rushing back, ever more present. It was angry at the barest amount of peace offered to its prey- wanting to destroy any goodness left in their world.

The two men tumbled down into the liquid abyss. The water barely made a ripple as it encased their entry. It was welcoming. The shell holes were never empty, no matter the season. They stayed constant in a constantly changing world. The muck within them stayed at a stable level, despite the rain and the wind.

15 September 1916

My dearest Florence,

It was my first main battle as a captain today. We fought through Deville Woods. For the first time, I blew the whistle to send the men over the top. *So many died Flo, you have no idea.* It was an honor of my rank. I fought with my new officer's pistol, leading our boys to victory. *I fear coming home now. I'm not the*

man that you deserve. It was a fine battle, good weather for it too. Can you work out what the lies are? Or are you just believing every word because you want me to be your fabled war hero. I wish that you wouldn't say that. I wish that you weren't proud of me. I wish you could understand how much I suffered through this. I wish I felt like I could really talk to you. I wish you didn't feel so distant.

There is such a difference in this war between those who are fighting it and those who are home. Some days I hate you for being in the other group. I hate that people still at home seem to think that they understand the war and what it is like here in France and in all the other places that the war is being fought. They don't. They couldn't possibly. And it is not ending anytime soon. The government is lying to everyone. How can the home front be so stupid as to believe silly King George's words? They initially said that the boys would be home by Christmas. It's been a two year conflict so far. Who knows when it is going to end? But it won't be soon. Stop saying that it will be. Stop bringing up promises that another man made to you. I can't keep them. I don't want to keep them. I don't want you. I don't want that life. I don't want anything anymore. I just want it to be over.

Love forever,

James

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:19

The captain's head broke the surface first. He breathed in what he could through the muck and the gas, his lungs still burning. Feverishly, he brought air to the man still wrapped over his shoulder as he half-walked, half-swam to the edge of the pit of Hell. The man on his shoulder breathed. The weak, rasping air, Bates hoped the man would not be in pain soon. It would be a mercy kill at this point. But death never came quickly in someone's final hours. The wounds would fester and the blood would trickle. It was better to be blown up, gone in a flash, than having to deal with the slow entry into the afterlife.

Through the mask, the identity was a loss to Bates. He knew the uniform. The likelihood was that he knew this boy. They probably went to school together or the pub or the village football field. Most of the men, James had known his whole life. The town had volunteered together, what was left of them. Soon, James mused, there wouldn't be any of the Preston boys at all.

And maybe that was for the better, he thought, there would no longer be a need for beasts.

31 October 1916

Dearest James,

You must look so dashing in your captain's uniform. The German must be so afraid of the handsome man leading the charge. I'm so happy for you. It's an odd feeling- wanting you to stay in the back of the group so that you are safe and wanting you to

charge forward. I want both- I want a safe war hero. I'm not sure such a thing exists but why limit those dreams.

Your dad thinks that the papers are lying and that we aren't winning the war as much as they would want us to believe. He thinks that the government is trying to keep approval up for the war. I'm not sure what I believe but I hope the papers are telling the truth. That way there is a reason for this. And that you will be home soon.

The harvest is in full swing again. It feels like the days never end and the nights are too short. It's such an exhausting thing. But hopefully, the crop yield will be high enough. My Da is worried about money again. The war is a drain on everything and money is getting tighter and tighter. It always feel like we're trying to pinch the last shilling over and over. It doesn't seem to be working out well.

I love you.

Florence

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:20

The pair lay the edge of the hole for a moment. James panted into the respirator of the mask, causing an awful, eerie noise to be escape the mask. Next to him, the soldier laid very still.

He thought about leaving the man where he lay. He thought about making the trek to the

trench alone or to wait the battle out with the body in this half-safety. To just lay down, pretending to be dead until the long guns halted for the night. Soon, he knew, this wave of the battle would be over- not enough men would be left to fight it.

13 December 1916

My dearest Florence,

Harry was injured today. He was following orders and got hit with a shell. *The battle was nothing. We survived the Somme together. We survived the first year together, we're the old hands now. We're not supposed to die. Only two men in the company were injured today. Only two out of so many. Why did it have to be him? Why did the sergeant have to order him? He could have chosen one of the green boys- they barely survive the week as is.* He's been taken to the hospital in the relief lines. *Hospital is a kind word. Nothing good comes out of going to one of them. They put us down like mad dogs.* I'm not sure when I will know more. Please let Marnie know.

I can't tell you what it feels like. Nothing makes sense anymore. The war feels more real now than it ever had in the past. I don't feel as safe as I had before. I just wish that it had been someone else. I wish that it had been one of the other boys. I feel so bad for wanting that. Am I a bad person?

Love forever,

James

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:22

With a heavy sigh, he picked up the boy. James didn't think he wanted to live anymore. Maybe this was what a good day to die felt like: an over exhausted body, overburdened with the weight of another. The pair moved together, a mismatched collection of legs and hands. They searched for the trench line that would mean safety.

Slowly, too slowly, the men limped towards their hope. Bates was becoming more and more aware that the man on his shoulder didn't have long left in this world. The wound wasn't bleeding as much anymore. The blood of the other man seeped into the Captain's green jacket, bleeding into his own skin. It marred the white shell of him red with life. The blood mixed with the muck and the gas which already coated him like a second uniform.

Before the war, he would vomit at the sight or smell of a papercut. Now, it was normal. Blood is the single commodity of war. Captain Bates was covered in rubies.

20 December 1916

Dearest James,

I hope that Harry gets better soon- whatever the injury is. Marnie was told last week, some soldiers came to her door after they told Harry's parents. They are handling it a lot better than Marnie is. She hasn't come out of her room in a week, she's not eating or drinking. I'm worried that her fear that he isn't going to make it is going to kill her.

The only thing that she does is to check the newspapers everyday, scanning the names of the dead for Harry's. She just sits in the chair by the window muttering Captain Harold Jones over and over again. Her mother is beside herself. I've been going over every day after I finish my chores. I think it's helping Marnie's mum for me to come over so much. I'm not sure that it's helping anything else.

Do you understand how hard it is to watch while someone loses their mind? Does that happen much at the front? There are stories in the paper about the cowardice of some of the troops and how they get sick from it on the front. Is that true? Does the war really make some of the soldiers lose their mind? I can only imagine. I think it would be similar to watching Marnie.

She needs Harry to survive. He lives for both of them now.

I love you.

Florence

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:23

It was an odd feeling, being shot. Captain James Bates felt the coolness of the shrapnel piercing his skin. The earth, yards from where the pair stood, erupted. The ground flew around him like starlings in the summer months. It was like a big plop from throwing stones in the river with Harry like they used to do.

The black muck hit them, combined with the force of the blast, sent the pair tumbling down. Sometime in that, James gathered, a piece of something made its way into his shoulder, studding the left side of his body. The pair lay together, the weight of the body seemed heavier on James. He writhed under the dead, struggling through his own acute agony. He felt his own blood pour out of the multiple wounds.

26 December 1916

My dearest Florence,

Happy Christmas. We finally got some good food and a day of rest here in the lines. People are smiling and relaxed for the first time a long while. It's nice to get a break, be able to clean our boots and get a shave. It's makes us feel like men again. It's funny the things the war does to you.

Harry passed today, my sergeant told me before breakfast. *I can't believe that this was it. I can't believe that he came up to me and told me like it was the weather. I can't believe that someone I knew since nappies is gone. He was my brother in all but name. He is my brother.* I can't talk to you.

James

Passchendaele, Ypres, 3:23

He wasn't in the place of the living anymore. He wasn't sure where he was. In the corner, there was a blackness lapping like waves. It would be easy to relax and float away. On the other

side, far out of focus, lay a battleground.

There were bodies floating past him, into the blackness. His men and the enemy alike swirled past him into the easy release. He began to follow the forms towards the dark ocean. But every step forward was one step back. He couldn't get to the pool, no matter how hard he tried. His feet wouldn't let him. Something in him wouldn't let him. He saw the soul of the body next to him, the young man swirled to the beautiful black water with such ease. The captain was jealous of the man. He recognized the boy as the center striker on the village team. Daniel. He was nice, always up for a pint after the game.

James turned back to the front. He had no choice. Each step was agony. Each step was impossible. It felt like someone was dragging the carpet that he was walking on back, but this time he was able to push through. His soul was dragging him back to his half-dead body. He pushed through, falling to his knees, happy to crawl for his own survival. Self-preservation took charge.

3 January 1917

Dearest James,

I grieve for and with you and your loss. I think that the whole town is feeling this one. You know how much the other boys loved him when he was the tutor. All the parents saw him as a symbol for their own children I think, the average son turned army captain, from the same place as everyone else. It meant something for a child of common stock to start in the field as an

officer. It was something that the whole town could be proud of.

Marnie isn't handling it well. I will be surprised if she makes it to spring. She's been sick as well, on top of the grief or maybe because of the grief. I shudder to think about it. I can't imagine the pain that she is going through. It makes me fear losing you all the more.

I am truly sorry that Harry is no longer with us. I hope that you will stay strong through this. I need you to come home. You're living for all of us now.

I am so proud of you for fighting the good fight. I am so proud of you for doing this. As hard as I know this is and as sad as I am about losing those that we have lost, but I am so happy that you are doing this. I am happy that you are serving your country. I'm happy that you are doing the right thing.

I love you.

Florence

Passchendaele, Ypres, 11:15

Captain James Bates woke up with a start to a quiet world. The shelling had stopped for the first time in James wasn't sure how long. It was light. The peaceful sun gleamed overhead as the black of war passed over them, allowing time to patch up wounds and tell heroic tales of those who did not make it home. It was the cycle. The heavy fighting followed by the wary quiet

that was somehow all the more terrifying. The quiet reminded the soldiers of the noise that would happen again.

That was the scariest part of the war. Not the fear of death or the fear of the pain, but the fear that it was never going to end- that no one was ever going to be able to see their families again. It consumed the soldiers in equal proportion to the raging war itself.

8 April 1917

My dearest Florence,

Happy Easter. *I don't celebrate it anymore. It's impossible to come back from the dead.* Is the town getting ready for the parade and the festival? I can't believe I haven't seen the procession in two years. Remember the year that Harry and I convinced you and Marnie to watch it from the hill instead? We couldn't see a thing but I think it was the best year yet- just the four of us kissing and cuddling the warm sun. I miss days like that the most.

The commanding officer made us go to mass. It was an order, he wanted to save our souls. Us lads don't think that we have any soul left. I had to work so hard not to laugh at the pastor's words. I found his faith so stupid. I can't believe that I used to believe in it as well.

James

Passchendaele, Ypres, 11:15

In front of him, he saw the light of the trench. He hoped it was his own. It was closer than he thought it would be. In the quiet of the war, he could hear the north England voices, the slurs that were so common amongst his men. In that moment, it was the most beautiful sound.

The body on top of him was cold. The numbness was back. The fallen soldier weighed over his right side while his left was covered in a mixture of mud and his own blood. Putting weight on his left hand was impossible. Painfully slowly, he moved the body off of him.

Captain James crawled towards the trench. The comrade he had carried in such hopes, he left alone in the battlefield. Self-preservation filled him. He thought war had taken that from him but the truth remained, stronger now, that he did not want to die.

7 May 1917

Dearest James,

Marnie has survived to spring, she's doing better than I thought she ever would have. I'm glad that she has come through the grief. She and I went and picked wild flowers yesterday, England is such a beautiful thing in the springtime. I can't wait to share it with you again.

I hope your spring is going well and the fighting is calm. Maybe you could be building or planting this spring like we are here at home. We've been having a barn raising almost every weekend, the town is trying to prepare itself for the growing season again. It's so wonderful to see the town all out together.

Us girls are getting to help out a lot more. I've really been enjoying it- I love the hard patches on my hands. There are even fewer lads in the town than last year. I like that it means I'm working in the fields more. It means that I've been helping Preston survive this war.

I have to say that I am growing tired of this war. I don't want it to continue for much longer. Please just come home, now. I want to barn raise with you. I want to plow the fields and harvest the crops with you. I want our life that we've been planning for so long. I want that future to become our reality. But, I don't want you to think that this means that I am not proud of you.

I love you.

Florence

Passchendaele, Ypres, 11:17

It was a slow movement. Every twitch of muscle made him moan. He struggled into a slumped standing position, cradling his left side, limping towards the ditch of earth.

Suddenly, there were hands everywhere. His men lowered his frame into the safety of the trench. He was half-carried, half-walking, down the trench towards the relief lines. No one mentioned the limp arm hanging out of place.

The ambulance was waiting at the corner, full of men. They had bandages over their

heads and arms, coughing from the soot and muck blown into their lungs. Captain James Bates joined their ranks and the cart moved away from the trench line.

23 June 1917

My dearest Florence,

Summer in France is a beautiful thing. There are so many flowers and songbirds. *You have no idea how destroyed the Earth is. The only flowers that grow here anymore are the poppies.* After the rain, the soil feels the same as it did back home. It's comforting. *Can you tell that I'm lying?* We should be going back to the front soon, we had a couple days of rest recently. Now, we're fresh for battle again. *It never ends. Going from the front to the relief and then back again. I hate it. It's so repetitive. It's so constant. It makes the war seem bigger than it is. I'm just so tired of fighting. I want to sleep in a building with a roof in a good bed with a full belly. I want a simple life. I don't want to fight anymore. I'm not sure why I ever did. I regret volunteering that day in the town hall. I regret ever coming to France. Why did you let me go?*

James

Chapter 2- Preston, UK, 6 June 1918

Preston, UK, 22:20

Sleeping in a bed was an odd thing. Florence's warm frame next to him overheated his body, causing him to cling to the edge of the mattress, the covers flung behind him. Captain James Bates tried very hard not to be afraid. It was so easy during the war, not to be afraid. You just stopped feeling it anymore. The fear was so constant it was like it didn't exist. And then suddenly, nothing mattered anymore. James missed that. He wanted the numbness back. He was so scared of being home. He was so scared of people finding out what he had become.

The nights were the worst. They were the beginning of the silence between the battles. They were the reminder that the war wasn't over. For Captain James Bates, it didn't matter that the war was almost over in the papers. It would never be over for him.

18 July 1917

Dearest James,

This summer feels long without you. I find myself growing bored during the days. There are so few people in town now around our ages. It seems like the war is taking everyone to France. I don't want to lose anyone else. I just want this war to be over. I just want everyone to come home. I want our old lives back.

I want the simplicity of it all. I love getting to work the farm and getting to contribute to the war and to keeping you safe. I wish that I didn't have to. I wish that you would be home and able to help me with this.

I love you.

Florence

Preston, UK, 22:21

For the first weeks home, James loved everything more than he had ever loved them before. The spring flowers were more vibrant. Florence's hair was softer. The lambs were fluffier. Everything was more alive. They had married in the spring, she was covered in flowers. They smelled of youth. And she was the most beautiful thing.

He wasn't sure if he loved her anymore or if it was just what he was meant to do. Even now, James was so consumed by what he was meant to do. But on their wedding day, none of that mattered. She was peace. She had carried a bouquet of roses. It was an odor that James had forgotten. Now, he wanted flowers in the house always. He smelled them every morning. The kitchen table always had roses. It made them both happy.

But at night, the flowers couldn't help him. His brain was the Hun.

1 August 1917

My dearest Florence,

I regret to tell you that I have been injured in battle. During the final assault for the city of Ypres, which is already reported in the papers, I got hit with shrapnel. The doctors assure me that I am going to be fine. The injury isn't that bad. I was punctured going down my side but they have been able to remove most of the metal.

How do I talk to you about this?

I will try my best to keep you updated through this.

James

Preston, UK, 22:22

It always started the same way. The explosions took the place of the sound of his heartbeat. The warm bed was drowning into a shell hole. Suddenly, northern England became northern France. Whether he liked it or not, Captain James Bates was home.

The war had made him. It surrounded him in his dreams. Each night, he was taken back to the Railway Woods. The woods were spectacular at one point. The soldiers had heard the stories. In the fall, the woods glittered at sunsets. The scarlet trees combined with the sky and turned crimson. Those who had seen it, at the beginning of the war were fewer now. But the rest of the lads told their stories in whispers. They tried to picture the beauty. They failed.

Now, as James Bates looked over the remaining scattered trees, the grey was overpowering. The milky dawn felt heavy on his eyes. Across the field, the Germans squatted in their holes the same as he squatted in his. And he hated them. He hated them in his entire being. They were the reason that he had come to France. The hatred was a sickness, the black rolling through his veins.

18 October 1917

Dearest James,

I still can't truly believe that you have been injured. It

is like all the worst thoughts I've ever had are coming true. Can you tell me more about the injury? I've been thinking the worst. I can't lose you.

Marnie is getting bad again. I think that your injury has really affected her. It's brought back Harry. She has been weeping all the time, everything can set her off. The flowers, the crops, even the little lambs. It's so hard to watch. It makes me feel like my grief and worry over you are silly and out of proportion because I haven't suffered from the war like she has. I hate it. I feel so silly and childish. Like I should be strong and austere through this. I wish I could be. I wish I could be the strong woman you deserve. I feel like a schoolgirl, worried over nothing in comparison to other people's problems.

But, I cannot. I am consumed, day and night, with thoughts of you, like pictures of you dead or dying. I can't turn it off. Please just let me know that you are ok and that you will survive it, even if it is a lie. I need you to tell me that.

I love you.

Florence

Preston, UK, 22:30, *Railway Woods*, 14:40

Next to him was Harry, as always. The pair had been through everything together, grew up next door. Their families shared a plow. Harry was James's home. He was the living Preston

countryside that James so desperately wanted.

“Do you remember Marnie’s blouse?” The voice was rotten and slurred.

James chuckled. “It never seemed to do it’s job did’t?”

“Oh it did it’s job aite, just never held anything in,” Harry guffawed, impolite and reckless. James couldn’t hide the smile that graced his face. Harry had been in love with Marnie since he was six. His courting hadn’t changed at all over the years.

15 September 1917

My dearest Florence,

It looks like my time in the hospital is drawing to a close. A commanding officer came in today to say that I was to be shipped home to England for the rest of my recuperation. It’s unclear how long I will be in Britain and where. According to most of the lads, you stay close to the ports so that they can ship you back to France more conveniently. I will let you know where I am stationed once I get back to friendly soil. Maybe you’ll be able to visit me, depending. *I’m not sure I want to see you.*

They let me keep my arm and my leg. *I think that’s the only reason I survived.* They said I will probably retain full use of them eventually. *I’m scared that means I will have to go back. I don’t think I can do it again. I think I’ll be one of those ghosts who walk into a shell because their world is so*

nonsensical that it is the only course of action that makes sense. The shell-shocked fools who are looked at as cowards. How can they be cowards? They walk into death like the rest of us but they no longer fear it.

James

Preston, UK, 23:00, *Railway Woods*, 15:52

The ground shifted quickly, the air staling and then refilling with oxygen. The faces faded into nothing and then the world reappeared around him. His brain wouldn't let him relive the whole day. Now, James was standing in one area of the trench, standing watch over the German lines. Around him were the green boys who were enjoying their first time at the front. They sailed over the France days ago, never hearing a bomb explode, let alone see one. And now, the war was welcoming them into its clutches with the fall of Minnies. It was the scariest thing on the field by far, especially the first time you saw it go. James's body shook with the explosion. Next to him, a boy began to cry. James didn't have sympathy for the child. It was a lesson that all the soldiers had to learn. If he didn't allow the numbness to take hold, James was sure that the boy wouldn't live long. Living long was an oxymoron on the front no matter what. It was a game of luck, James knew that well but he always seemed to draw the winning hand. He hoped the poor bastards around him would be so fortunate.

Suddenly, a Minnie hit its mark in the trench. The Hun had gotten a lucky hit. Captain James Bates couldn't see the impact zone from where he was, but the dust and the dirt whipped through the zig-zag line with surprising speed. It was like the ripples of a lake after dropping a stone into it, the dirt flew in every direction. James knew too well what it would look like.

Where the trench should have been would now be just vanished earth. There would be nothing there. Life would have crumbled in on itself and all that would be left was the ringing noise in the soldiers' ears. Some of the boys had fallen over, whether from impact or fear or both. James stood proud amongst them, standing in the face of certain destruction.

27 September 1917

Dearest James,

I haven't stopped crying all day. I can't stop. I've never been this happy in all my life before. I cannot believe that you are coming home. I cannot believe that you are well enough to come home. The hospitals here are so good- they will put you to rights in no time and then you can come home to me. Even if you only come home for leave. Though hopefully, you'll be home for good. Maybe you could get one of those honorable discharge pins so you can wear civilian clothes without judgment. This dreaded war can't go on for much longer.

Please just be ok. That's all I can pray for. It seems that my prayers have been answered. I can't wait for our feet to touch the same soil again.

I love you.

Florence

Preston, UK, 23:20, *Railway Woods*, 15:53

“Come on boys, let’s go dig it out.” James sighed with the resentment he used to have to mucking out of the stables. He walked down the trench to where the trench was no longer. No one had to give the order, it was an obvious reaction. The trench needed to be continuous. At one point, he would have worried about getting to the survivors in time. Captain James Bates wasn’t so naive now. He walked with the swagger that all old hands developed. It was a swagger of their survival, a taunt to the enemy who hadn’t killed them yet. James never realized that he had it, but the walk of calm assurance caused the other boys to follow him like lemmings.

They turned a corner, towards where the trench had gone up in smoke. The near the party drew to it, the more and more muddy faces they found, huddled on the floor against the wail of the Minnie shell. The impact blew them over like the seeds off dandelions in the spring. The brave ones who had already stood up after the blast were stumbling around like drunk toddlers, the noise of the bomb changing their internal balance. They shouted, unable to hear past the ringing.

4 November 1917

My dearest Florence,

I’m safety back on English soil. The boat over was easy, full of other injured soldiers who want nothing more than to stay home for good. I’m not sure that we will be that lucky. I’m being sent, eventually, to a hospital in London. My best guess is St.

Mary's, I keep hearing the commanding officers here talking about it. How strange it will be to be in London after so long at war! Seeing all the people walking around normally. *I think I will hate them. I think that I will dislike their company. I don't think that they are going to understand me at all, not my emotions, not my lack of sympathy or caring for others. I don't feel emotions like a normal person. I don't think I'm suited to be in the company of civilians right now, maybe not ever again. I am a beast of war. I belong to it. What place do I have without it?*

James

Preston, UK, 23:25, *Railway Woods*, 15:55

Around one corner was Harry. He was on patrol on the parapet, searching for the enemy, same as James had been. An attack generally followed the heavy shelling. Captain James Bates had long since realized that playing war games in his youth and fighting in France were completely different things. If only the governments would understand that. It was a hard lesson to learn for the green soldiers. They came in, full of lies and hope, thinking that the war was going to be an adventure. It wasn't.

Captain Harold Jones wasn't getting up. He was staring at the wall across from him, dazed. It was clear the echoing explosion was still going on behind his eyes. For Harry, the fight was over. There was only the repeating moment for him. It was a constant. James rushed forward to help his best friend. He reached down to shake his shoulders. James wanted to bring Harry back. The slow rise of his chest was the only clue that Harry was still alive.

28 November 1917

Dearest James,

I am so happy with your progress. I am so happy with everything. I cannot stop smiling. Even Marnie is smiling these days. We are all so excited to see you, I know that you won't be in the hospital for much longer and then you will be home to me.

We shall go on such walks and you can tell me all about the birds and the flowers and we can talk about nothing for hours on end. It will be just like it was before.

Your parents are so happy with the news. Your mother came over the other day with a cake and we sat and had tea, talking about you and the old days when you were home. She can't wait to see you again. She cannot wait for our wedding either, to see her son getting married and home and safe. It is too good. There is so much good now, knowing that you are safely back on British soil.

I love you.

Florence

Preston, UK, 23:30, *Railway Woods*, 15:56

Captain James Bates couldn't shake his friend's shoulder. There wasn't a shoulder to

shake.

Harry had been too close to the explosion. When the trench exploded, wood and metal were flung through the air like bullets. They hadn't missed their chaotic mark. Harry's arm was only half there. The blood poured from the open wound, the bone exposed, the flesh of the shoulder gone.

27 December 1917

My dearest Florence,

Happy Christmas! I hope that the town is celebrating in style. Are the lights as beautiful as I remember? Christmas in London is a sight to be seen. There are so many people everywhere. Me and some of the other lads in the hospital snuck out for a walk on the Eve, me being wheeled by young George who is half blind from the gas. I was his eyes and he was my legs. It was so nice to be outside, away from the structure of the hospital. It almost felt like we were normal lads out for a walk. Like how Harry and I would before the war.

I think you would like George. He's a good sort of fellow. Very young though, I think he lied on his enlistment form. *Why would anyone want to join in so young? I regret ever joining. I hate serving my country.*

The doctors say that I am making good progress. The smaller wounds from the injury are all almost healed. The larger shrapnel are still months away from being healed. The doctors tell me that

I am very lucky, that the shrapnel hit at the exact right places, I will heal normally. That's what everyone keeps telling me. They say that in a couple more months, I will be able to use my arm and to walk normally. Today, they discussed me getting to go home on leave for a bit once I'm healed. I guess you won't have to come down and visit at all.

That's all probably for the best. I don't want you to see me here. I'm not sure that I want to see you at all.

James

Preston, UK, 23:40, *Railway Woods*, 15:57

James backed up quickly, tripping over his tongue as he issued commands to get the medic, sending others closer to find survivors. He turned back immediately to the other captain, jostling him softly.

“Harry?” his voice was low with need.

“Harry?” he was louder that time, hoping to reach through the unconscious fog that filled Harry's head.

His two fingers ripped through the uniform, placing themselves onto Harry's collar, feeling for the pulse that was only half there. Relief and joy filled him like never before. The heartbeat mirrored his own. It was stronger than he thought. It was a surviving beat.

“Harry?” the whine escaped him, like a child to its mother.

“Quit your fussing,” the voice was slurred and weak. On a different day, Harry would

have brushed the fingers away, righting himself, and carrying on. Today, he lay so still.

10 January 1918

Dearest James,

I would like to come down to London to see you. But, if it would be easier, I will try to wait for you to come home. But I don't want you to fear my reaction or anything else that would be silly. I don't care what you look like and how bad the injuries are. I don't care if you aren't the same face or hands that you used to be. I just want to be able to hold you, to touch you, to know that you are real and here and that you are mine. I just want to smell your hair and to be held in your arms.

I feel silly even writing it. I just want you. Please don't make me wait so long. It is absolute torture.

Please.

Love,

Florence

Preston, UK, 23:54, *Railway Woods*, 15:58

James tore off his own jacket and then his shirt, wrapping it around the wound as tight as he could, hoping to stop the blood flow. He had seen it done before, to others who got struck

with one of death's shells. The captain had never had to do it himself, taking care with his friend's body like a mother doting over her son.

He pressed against the wound, drawing a hiss from his semi-conscious comrade.

"It's ok. You'll be ok." James soothed, worrying fingers roaming over the body in front of him.

"Come on Jay," the body muttered, "Don't lie to me. Today is a good day..."

"No, don't even finish that thought. Today is not a good day to die. Today, you are not going to die."

"It's as good a day as any."

"No. You are going to survive so that I can survive."

"You'll be fine. You're braver than I am."

"I'm not the brave one- you are missing part of your arm."

Captain Harold Jones eyes opened at the piece of information. The shock coursing through his body hadn't let him know the pain that he in. He hadn't been aware. James wished he could bite his tongue and turn back time. He shouldn't have said that. He should have only given Harry hope.

14 February 1918

My dearest Florence,

George and I get to go out now. I'm still resigned to the chair for long distances but George's eyesight improves each day.

We're only supposed to walk and enjoy the length of the grounds. But today, we snuck out to go to the pub. I can't remember the last time that I went to a pub. It was so normal.

When we were in the pub, the other men started to talk about the war. They were so wrong- talking about the war like they knew best. They were telling George and me what strategies that we should have over there. They were talking about it like it was a football match- like they would be able to play the war games better than those who played professionally. They were older men, served their time in the Boer War, probably. They didn't understand how much war had changed. They didn't understand anything. Is this what it is like now? Do you do this with your friends? Or our families? Does my father talk about what I could do better- what the government could do better?

They've never smelled the gas or the smoke, never woke up to the explosion over the underground barracks. They've never seen their friends get destroyed, never seen a human become a pile of bloody limbs. This war is different. They can't understand. They should stop trying. It's offensive.

I've been working on walking with a cane. I can almost make it across the long room. The doctors say that this part of the recovery will take the most time. I just want to be well again.

James

Preston, UK, 00:10, *Railway Woods*, 15:59

Harry looked scared. It was worse than the green boys on their first night in the trenches. The screaming, crying faces appeared on the periphery. The faces cried out, wanting their mums, wanting their safe beds and warm houses. James tried to stay calm for his friend. He tried not to think about the likelihood of Harry not surviving this. Harry obviously was. He was obviously thinking about the fact that he was dying. It was a resignation in his eyes. It was the peace that was dimming over his pupils.

James hated it more than he had ever hated anything before. It was the gross, despicable thing. It needed to die so that Harry would live. Harry needed to live.

The blood was soaking the off-white shirt red. It hadn't slowed down. The blood was escaping the body, deserting the war. James hated blood more than he ever had in that moment. He tried to dismiss the truth that people didn't survive these kinds of wounds. Blood was such a constant of his life in the war but in that moment James felt sick at the sight like he used to as a small boy. He felt like a small boy again, so utterly helpless in the face of the horrors of life.

1 March 1918

Dearest James,

I think that the war is more terrible than any of us have ever imagined. I wish that you never had to go out and fight it for us. I wish that I had been able to come with you, fight next you to, help in some way. I wish that we were able to fight it together. When you get home, we will work together as a team for the rest of our lives, no matter what the war has cost you.

I love you. You are mine as I am yours and we were meant to be together always. I will never forgive this war if it takes you from me. Stay strong and heal so you can come to me.

Please. Please just do this for me. Even if that is all that you can manage. Heal for me so that I can also heal from this war.

Love,

Florence

Preston, UK, 00:16, *Railway Woods*, 16:00

Around the corner came the medic, the stretcher between the two men. The medics always looked the cleanest of all the soldiers, they spent the least amount of time in the trenches, hurrying between the front and the makeshift hospitals. Their uniforms gleamed in the light, compared to the dusty ones covering the soldier's coats. The men looked at Harry with a quietness that seemed out of place to James. They saw the blood and the gore but somehow didn't see it at all.

James hefted Harry's body onto the awaiting stretcher, wincing at the moans of pain coming from his friend. The cotton stretcher grew red from its occupant. The two medics turned around in their holds, walking back the way that they came. Captain James followed the men through the trench, wanting to go to the hospital.

20 March 1918

My dearest Florence,

I no longer need the chair! I'm so happy to be able to walk down the street again. I use a cane on my right side. It helps though, it would be better to be on my left. My arm is still too weak to carry my body weight like that. The doctors eventually want me to carry it on my left. My walk, therefore, is uneven and staggering. But, it is a walk and it means that George and I can walk as equals down the road.

He was told that his vision is never going to come back completely. The gas stole it from him. It is a casualty of the war, just like him. He's being so brave about- trying to use what vision that he has left. He wants so desperately to be normal. I wish that the doctors could fix him. But, his injury takes more than just time.

James

Preston, UK, 00:20, *Railway Woods*, 21:06

The world shifted again. It grew dark and cold. Next to him, the single Christmas wreath that the men cobbled together glittered lightly against the trench lights. The night was clear, only making the December air colder. James was standing watch, scanning No Man's Land for brutes cutting wires and laying duckboard, for men preparing for an assault.

His aim had improved over the years in war. No longer did he shoot over the head of the enemy, hoping to scare rather than kill. Today, James wanted to kill. The bloodthirst that he tried so hard to tame was overwhelming. The commanding officer had told him like he was telling

him the weather. That wasn't the Colonel's fault; on the front line it was the same as telling someone the weather. Harry had died. The low voice of his Colonel echoed in James's head like a record on repeat. It was all he heard, over the constant din of war and the quiet of the night.

6 April 1918

Dearest James,

Just come home. We can figure out the cane and the striding together. I wish you would tell me more. I wish I felt like you were telling me everything. I wish I could come and visit you. I wish for so much. Does that mean that I am not grateful for what we have? I hope not. I hope everyone realizes how grateful I am. I am so happy that you are alive and that you are my fiancé and that one day I will wake up to you next to me and we will spend every day with you next to me. It gives me such comfort on this long days and nights without you.

The lambs are playing in the lower field these days, and the foals up the road. There is a pretty chestnut that I like to watch in the morning when I'm walking up to the higher fields. I think that you would like him. He's your sort of horse. Come home so you can meet him. The widow says that you can still take a foal when you get home if you want one. I hope you take this little lad.

I love you.

Florence

Preston, UK, 00:23, *Railway Woods*, 21:07

Tonight, James wanted to murder a German for murdering his friend. It was different tonight than other watches. It was different tonight than in battle. James had killed before, shot at men who were shooting at him. James had relished in his safety at the expense of someone else's life. That was a normal part of being a soldier, James was sure of it. But tonight, James wanted to kill a beast, wanted to put down the mad Hun dog for harming his friend.

At the beginning of the war, James didn't understand hatred. He viewed the fighting as a means for survival, something that he had to do in order to protect his loved ones. Hatred didn't come into it. He didn't hate the Germans. The longer he fought during the war, the more he understood that the soldiers on the other side of No Man's Land were the same as him. They were just as hungry and as scared. They wanted their mothers and their wives as much as James and Harry did. There was an amount of respect between the two sides for Captain James Bates. He understood the war as only someone who lived it could. He found it comforting.

25 April 1918

My dearest Florence,

The doctors say that I will be released on leave by the end of the week, if not before. I will be coming home to Preston. The wounds are all healed and most of the movement is back in my limbs. I still cannot walk normally and my left side is covered in scars.

I don't want to scare you when you finally see me. I'm not sure you'll like the new me. I'm not sure I'm the same man that you feel in love with. I'm not sure that the person I am now is the sort of man that you should be in love with. I'm not sure if I deserve it anymore.

Your letters remind me of the person that I was. I hate that I can't be that person again. You keep saying how you want my honesty. I'm not sure that this is what you had in mind. I hope that you are...

I'm sorry.

James

Preston, UK, 00:25, *Railway Woods*, 21:09

Now, all he wanted was the German trench line to burn. He wanted there to be nothing left of the nation. Those foul cowardly bastards who let shells do what men should not deserve to wish for their mothers or their wives. They didn't deserve to wish for anything. They were no longer human. The beasts of war that James fought against were nothing in his eyes. And they needed to be put down. James stood, lethal, hoping that one of the Hessians showed their ugly head. He was happy to relieve them of it.

It slowed down. Every movement was a mile. James couldn't control anything, trying so hard to break the vicious cycle of his nightmare. At this point of the dream, he was aware that he was dreaming. But there was nothing he could do about it. It was almost worst, the first time that he lived the memory- he was in the moment and there was nothing he could do. Now, during the dream, he was aware of what was happening and what was going to happen. There was nothing he could do to stop it. He so desperately wanted to.

6 May 1918

Florence,

You looked so beautiful today. I am so glad that I finally get to call you my wife. I hope that this means that we will be together always. I hope that one day I will be able to talk about the war and about Harry and about your life in these years without me. I hope that we will be able to move past this. I hope that we will be able to be a normal couple, with a couple of kids and a well-run farm. It will be a beautiful life and I cannot wait to share it with you.

I hope for that life we always used to talk about. I want it now more than anything.

Thank you for waiting for me. I hope I didn't make you wait too long.

I love you.

James

Preston, UK, 00:32, *Railway Woods*, 21:10

Slowly, a Hessian clambered out of the trench, he shuffled close to the ground. James knew that he was going to be cutting the wires. Captain James Bates had done the job himself. The adrenaline makes your hands shake. The wire springs back with an unmistakable twang. It was such a loud sound when you were the one causing it. In the thin light covering No Man's Land, the captain could see the glitter of the breaking wires as they caught the moonlight.

The soldier wasn't wearing a helmet- the moonlight caught on his blonde locks the same it did to the wire. James wondered if the broad man was handsome, whether he had a girl waiting for him back home.

The metal felt cool under his touch. The sweat curled around his finger. The weight over his opposite hand grew. The wooden handle was warm from his body heat. The captain had been holding it against his left side for the better part of an hour. The air grew denser. The glittering light offered by stars dimmed. It was tunneling in.

He barely felt the recoil. His shoulder jerked. The motion was comforting. It was something that had become part of his new normal. The gun had hit its mark. The German beast across the short No Man's Land hit the ground. The bang echoed out, loosely, from far away. No other heads popped up from the trench, as was the general reaction. It was the chess move of war. It was commonplace. No one cared.

Captain James Bates felt a rush of joy. The elation filled his body where the disgust should have been.

27 May 1918

Florence,

Sometimes I can't get the smell of dead bodies off of me. That's why I take so many baths in the backyard. I don't want you to see the marks on me skin from where my fingernails went too hard. I want to be normal for you. I want to be sane. I don't want the war to consume me, even now when I'm with you.

The flowers are so pretty. Our house smells of innocence and love. It reminds me of you. *Some days, I hate it. Some days, I*

hate you.

I love you,

James

Preston, UK, 00:38, *Railway Woods*, 21:10

Captain James Bates wanted to kill someone. He wants to avenge his friend. Suddenly, he saw a German soldier rise out of the trench to cut the wires. The blond hair caught the moonlight- it was a beacon in the dark world. His broad shoulders moved with a certain grace- he had done this before.

The Germans were planning an attack. James felt his finger fall over the trigger. The gun was hefted more comfortably on the nook of his arm. He pulled the trigger. After all the time that he served in the trenches, he seldom missed. He no longer aimed above the head of the enemy. The German wire cutter fell to the ground, James had hit his mark. The bloodthirsty beast inside him roared with glee. He wished that the soldier had been closer. He wanted to see the blood leaving his body, like the blood waterfalled from Harry's arm. He wanted to see the German die. It made him angrier. The rage of the beast hadn't been limited. It wasn't content yet. It wanted more. And James wanted to give it to the beast. He wanted to murder every German from here to Berlin. And even then, that might not be enough, not for the beast of war.

1 June 1918

Dearest James,

Why do you write to me? You are in the other room but I never feel like you are there. Why don't you talk to me, tell me your worries and your fears. I would never judge you for them. I

want to help you, just as you have always helped me. I want to be your wife in more than just name. I wish I didn't feel your hands shake when you touch me.

I love you.

Florence

Preston, UK, 00:43, *Railway Woods*, 21:10

Captain James Bates saw the movement before he registered what it was. The blond streak of hair across the field, the broad body, the German appeared. The decision was instinct. His finger found the trigger and the bullet found the German. The soldier crumbled to the ground, not two feet from his trench. He was merely following orders. They had gotten him killed.

6 June 1918

My darling wife,

I'm sorry that I didn't tell you. I just didn't know how. I burnt it so that you wouldn't have to see. I didn't want to worry you.

I love you.

Love always and forever,

Captain James Bates

Preston, UK, 00:52, *Railway Woods*, 21:10

James saw the enemy soldier. He saw the blond hair. He saw Harry's face. He saw the explosion of the Minnie. James fired the gun.

Captain James Bates woke up with a start. Florence's warm frame next to him overheated his body, causing him to cling to the edge of the mattress, the covers flung behind him, unwanted. He was scared. It was so easy during the war, to be numb with the fear. It was constant. The fear of death, equal to the fear that the war would never end, was constant. And then suddenly, that didn't matter anymore.

Surviving was the worst. It represented the silence between the battles. It was a reminder that the war was over. It was a reminder of the names in the papers, the names of the soldiers who never made it home.

For the first few weeks home, James was happy to merely be alive. To have walked out of France and come back to Preston, to where life was easier, to where it was covered in flowers and good smelling women and Florence. She was his peace.

He was only positive that he didn't deserve it. He didn't deserve her. He didn't deserve any of it. They did. They were the real heroes. They gave their lives. It would have been better if none of them came back. Society didn't know how to deal with the survivors, expecting them to be normal, to not have been changed by war. It was a naive wish, like wanting your mother when you were in France or thinking that you could survive Hell's shells. James hadn't and he was one of the ones who had made it home. He hated himself.

He got up. He went downstairs. He wasn't getting anymore sleep tonight. Once morning broke, he would catch his train. His leave was over. It was time to go home.

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- Criminology 303, an original play produced at the 2016 Edinburgh Fringe Festival with Tangent Theatre Company.
- C. Carbone, R. T. Miller, M. Irwin, and L. Godfrey. 2015. Resource Use by Aye-Ayes in Small Forest Fragments in Eastern Madagascar. American Association of Physical Anthropology Conference.

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Work Experience

Penn State International Affairs and Debate Association | 2013-Present

- Organized and ran a high school model UN conferences as part of an eight person team. Led teams in running simulations for groups of 20 for conferences at both the high school and collegiate level.
- Head of Marketing: liaised with local businesses and college departments, gaining sponsorship and advertising for model UN conferences, bringing in over \$2,000.
- Appointed Integrity Counselor by the Association President. Responsible for developing and maintaining a positive culture within the organization.

Camp Counselor | Stone Mountain Adventures | Summer 2016

- Led groups of campers (ages 12-16) in numerous activities from rock climbing to white water rafting as well as work with team of 14 to create a fun and safe environment for teenagers.
- Worked in camp office, maintaining paper work organization, answering phones, and scheduling camper and parent arrivals and departures as well as updating parents on the well-being of their child.

Trainer | Quiet Reach Equine Therapy Center | Fall 2015

- Coached volunteers on horse training approaches used in the Center's therapy programs.

Docent/ Intern | Centre County Historical Society | Fall 2014-Spring 2017

- Rejuvenated the library by reorganizing and taking inventory of materials.