Enfilade

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A novel, Enfilade simultaneously relates the stories of Alistair Preston, a young soldier in the Canadian army in Belgium during the First World War, and that of his 'ancee and family in the Eastern Townships of Southern Quebec. Elspeth, his fiancee, is a school teacher and the Preston family are beef farmers. Told from several different points of view, Enfilade addresses the psychological, cultural and aesthetic implications of the Canadian experience in the Ypres Salient in 1917, and, more generally, in the First World War. Primary among the novel's concerns are the psychological change brought about by the experience of industrialised warfare and the resulting difficulty in regaining a sense of normality and home, both for the combatants themselves and for those to whom they returned, and the enormous gap created between the generation that fought in the war and that of their parents.

Un roman de langue anglaise, Enfilade raconte simultanément les histoires de Alistair Preston, un jeune soldat dans l'armée canadienne en Belgique pendant la première guerre mondiale, de sa fiancée et de la famille Preston aux Cantons de l'Ouest du Québec. Elspeth, sa fiancée, est une enseignante et la famille Preston sont des éleveurs de boeuf. Enfilade adresse surtout l'enjeu culturel, psychologique et esthétique de l'expérience canadienne à Ypres en 1917. Raconté de plusieurs différents points de vue et par différents personnages, le roman s'intéresse surtout au changement psychologique résultant de l'expérience de la guerre ainsi que de l'écart que cela crée entre un soldat et la société d'où il provient et à laquelle il doit, dès son retour, se réintégrer.

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Book I

Aug 3, 1917

Dearest Elspeth,

I must open by asking you to forgive me if anything that I have written or will write is in any way shocking or upsetting or threatening—please know that the last thing I want is for you to open my letters with any kind of fear or trepidation. But please also understand that so much of what I say here needs to be said, and that so many of the memories I try to re-create make all of this mess so much more bearable.

You asked, in your last letter, for me to describe this place to you. It would be a much simpler task if there were something here that I could compare to something at home, but everything that was or must have been comparable has long since been destroyed, removed, or otherwise perverted. If you could imagine what it would look like if someone took a great metal blade and scraped the land bare—taking trees, grass, animals, everything—and left only the soil to absorb the rain and soften it into a stagnant mass, and you then took that place and filled it with zigzagging trenches and pock-marked shell holes full of muddy water and men and rats, then you would have some idea of the physical appearance of this place. I remember digging the drainage ditch at the bottom of Peterson's hay field last summer (it was the last time I can remember being so covered in mud!), and I remember the pleasure of watching the water flow quietly away from the crop. The hole from which I now write is far from a drainage ditch; all the elements are here, only the water rarely flows, and when it does it invariably gets interrupted by a collapse in the trench wall or a shell blast or some poor horse's corpse. And the water itself is mostly dirt; what would be the ditch's bed is constantly disturbed by the feet of lads trying, usually in vain, to march in order despite the burping ground beneath them.

It is in this place, my dear Elspeth, that I now live in a little hollowed-out alcove with some other boys from the regiment. For the first few days we had a Fleur-de-Lys at the entrance, but the CO made us take it down because he didn't want

us confused with the French infantry. I don't want you to think that I'm at all unhappy; we're all proud to be doing our part for the War, you know, dulce et decorum est and all that, and I got my first tin with jams and cigarettes and paper (on which I now write) from your aunt in Weymouth—it was a really welcome bit of civilisation. But I miss you terribly, I miss the walks in the clean autumn air, I miss the vivid life of the colours, the brightness, the fire reflecting off the peace in your eyes. I miss the laughter, the stories—I miss taking Georgie up to the Glen and letting him graze while we embrace. There is a great deal of pain and confusion here (after three weeks, I have yet to see a living German, although that doesn't stop them from shelling us) and, although I have yet to see it happen to anyone I know, a great deal of death. None of the training prepared us for this sort of thing. As I write to you now the sun is just coming up; this is by far the most beautiful part of the day here. Soon, the shelling will start and we will all throw ourselves back against the muddiness of the trench wall, but that metal blade of which I spoke—no matter how big and how powerful it is—can't stop the sun from rising. It's wonderfully clear today, and I can almost see you sitting up next to me and tilting your head over as you brush the knots out of your hair. I can see the copper light coming in from the woods and the curve of your neck as it becomes your ear, and I wish I could be there to kiss you good morning.

Most of the others also write in the morning, and most also write home to sweethearts or wives, although it's hard to know just how involved some of them are. I'm sure some are writing home to their mothers and making up stories for the rest of us to hear—mother stories just don't work here. To be a man you have to have a woman, preferably a pretty one who sent you a signed picture. Please know that I don't play these games because I feel no need to. I don't want to cheapen it. I have my memories and I have your words to colour in the dullness of this place. The mud is everywhere—I've long since given up trying to keep it off my tunic or my trousers or even out of my food—yet I don't feel invaded or even unclean because I have what you

have given me as protection. I know, my dear Elspeth, that no matter how much the mud and the rats and the smell of death and cordite and the thud-thud of the shelling invade me, there will always be a part of me that remains clean and clear and pure, because that is your place, and it is the place that I will continue to keep for you.

The sun's almost completely up, and the CO will be looking for me at the stand-to. Do give my love to all, and I'll try to write tomorrow.

Alistair.

27 June, 1917

Alistair

I know that it has been nearly a month since you left—for your training, I mean—but I have finally come around to writing a few thoughts. It is so rare these days that I get the opportunity to write anything—between your mother and your sister and the farm and all—much less a letter to my son, so please forgive me if this comes across as awkward or even a little dilapidated.

You realise by now, I'm sure, that your mother and I have gone out of our way to provide for you—indeed, that is the very role of parents. But it hasn't been simply a question of filling your belly and making sure you were warm enough. You see, Alistair, I am one of those parents who firmly believes that it is our responsibility to make the next generation somehow better than ours—to give them more opportunities and advantages than we ever had ourselves. The key to that, I have always believed, is discipline and respect. Your mother and I have tried our very best to give you just that, and, as you embark on this adventure, it seemed to me like a good time to remind you of it.

You have had the rather unique opportunity to grow up in a place that is neither completely ours nor completely anybody else's. I know I remind you of this as often as I can (perhaps even too often), but I must once again emphasise that we as a family are not yet completely *of* this place. Your mother and I have tried to make it our home as best we could, but home for us will always conjure images of York and Liverpool, not of a hundred acres of hard land in southern Lower Canada. Indeed, I'm quite certain that this place is much more of a home to you than it ever could be to us, and, in turn, will probably be more of a home to your son than it ever will to you. But it is a frustratingly slow process, to say the least. That whole world—which we chose to leave and to which you are going for the first time—seems so blurry to me now. But that is

the way things happened for us, and we have to make the best of what we have. There's really no sense in complaining. I have been trying to think, since the occasion of your departure for the continent, of the places I used to know so well—so that I could tell you about them if you ever got the opportunity to visit York or perhaps even London during your trip. But I am afraid that I can't. I am able to remember places and people, but the names have long since left me. Even the physical memory seems flat—there's no immediacy to the place. It is no longer real to me at all. I would venture to guess that I've been too long concerned with the cattle, the fields, your mother and your sister and yourself, and keeping us all alive during the winters to remember anything so mundane.

Your link with this place is much stronger than mine because it has, for your twenty years, been the only reality you have known. You know of the streets of London and Paris, but they must conjure in you dreamy images—not the immediate recollections of smells and shadowy details I often experience. The only details you will remember come from this place. Everything else must be vague and unreal. When you picture London you must surely hear my voice describing it to you. But so much of what I have made you comes from England—from me and your mother, and everything we have taught you. I quite honestly never thought you would get an opportunity to see England or at least to be among so many Englishmen, to share in their tradition the way you were meant to—to experience the smells and shadows and details your memory will return to you after you again settle in this place. You see, it doesn't matter who this war is against, Alistair, or even that it is a war, it matters that they are letting you go to it to fight side by side with your cousins from England and you are prepared to do so—indeed, that is what bringing you up so carefully myself was all for. There—with those sons of my brothers—you will appreciate so much more of the culture and discipline and respect your mother and I have tried so hard to give you. It

will make you understand and appreciate, I am certain, why I was often so strict with you when I wasn't with your sister. And when you bring that knowledge and that understanding back home, you will be able to integrate it with what you already know about your life here. And you will really belong to yourself for the first time. You see, this war is filling in a part of your education that I could never have filled in myself, and you need to take advantage of this. If I were young enough and free enough to go with you, I would without hesitation—to fill in the names I have already forgotten, yes—but also because it is such a wonderful opportunity. And I say that sincerely. You need to take whatever it is that you will find there, Alistair, you need to take all the traditions and the culture and the sensibility and the sense of humour and the discipline and the tradition and the honour and everything else you can find and bring it back, make it yours, and fill in this place.

I've arranged for a few locals to help fill in for your absence on the farm, although I should be able to cover it mostly myself, at least until it comes time to slaughter part of the herd in September. But that's a while yet, and chances are you'll be home by then. The Scouts have even sent over some of their Soldiers of the Soil—most of whom were understandably eager to get old enough to really get at the Hun. And your sister Virginia is finally—after a little too much protesting on her part—a full-time member of the farm. Anyway, everybody seems to have gotten into the spirit of helping out, and even your mother was reported seen helping with the haying in preparation for your departure! Remarkable how robust she still is. After the miscarriage I was certain she would never recover, but she's certainly proving me wrong now!

The young Miss Callaghan came by this afternoon to partake of some of your mother's newly finished batch of strawberry and elderberry jam. Your Elspeth is as beautiful as ever, and seems to be weathering your absence as bravely as can be expected for a girl her age. She and I had a little talk

about her work at the schoolhouse, and which of the children she thought could go to upper school in the city if their parents decided it was a good idea. I never realised that Elspeth was such an adamant advocate of girl's schooling. She even went so far as to argue that it makes sense for the girls to be getting the education while the stronger men tend the fields and the animals. She seems to think that Virginia is best suited to a life of higher education off in Montreal. I don't know where she gets such ideas (certainly not from you, I trust), but it did make for an interesting afternoon. I might not always agree with her, you understand, but she does have firm opinions, and that in itself is worthy of respect. Quite a formidable wife you've chosen.

Forgive me for returning to more philosophical pursuits, but your departure has prompted in me so much thought our place here—as a family, I mean, and insofar as we contribute to your idea of your place here. You see, I decided to come here because we could be a part of building something new—we, at such a young age, were to have a stake in a new place, in a place that none of us had seen before. It was wild and unforgiving and cold and full of all sorts of dangerous animals long since hunted out of England. It was exciting—as exciting, I imagine, as this war must be to you. But more than anything else, it was new—completely empty, and completely new. Europe will be new to you, but an established, clearly defined new—this place had never been anything before, and won't be for a while yet. It was new to us, yes, but it was also new to everyone else, and you, Alistair, need to understand and appreciate that in a way which you could only if you left. You'll see, when you return, you'll feel it. And yet I realise something now which I never knew (or perhaps never admitted to knowing) then—that we can't build a tradition in twenty-five years. We can hardly build a community in that time. Granted, we have the houses now, and the farms and the schools and two churches and a town hall and even fields that have been cleared of boulders and readied for the plows, but there's hardly any

tradition and hardly any history. Some say that we should build that tradition and that history by drawing on the countries we are from, but how can one draw on two countries as fundamentally different as England and France? Not to mention the more obscure places—even a Lithuanian (I think that's how you spell it!) has moved in up on Iron Hill. No, if we are to defeat the anonymity of this place then we must draw on our experiences as Canadians. The only thing that is really going to make us cohesive is our shared predicament. Living here, as you know, requires tremendous discipline, and it is that very discipline which we must offer ourselves. This war, I am certain, will bring that out in all of you. As a Canadian, which I have been now for more than half of my life, my most distinctive and my most defining experience and contribution is clearing a scruffy bit of land on the edge of a hill and raising two children but only one boy. That's really not much of a contribution, but we have to survive. And we couldn't have any more children. So be it. But you, you are going to fight—because England asked us to send you, yes—but as a Canadian. As are your French and Lithuanian and God-knows-what-else neighbours. You and your mates, believe it or not, are making a tremendous contribution to the Canadian experience and the Canadian name and everything that is and will be this country. You are partaking in the first real definition of this country in a way I never would have dared dream of. *That's* why I envy you.

And so it's with a proud smile that I send you off on this journey.

Forgive me, I have no desire to bore you with the ramblings of an old man. I didn't mean any of this to instruct you—you are a fully independent and worthy young man, and I am proud to say that you will do all you can with this opportunity. You will always be on the minds of your mother and I. Make what you can of it, and best of luck.

Father

ELSPETH:

I have been asked to tell you what I know about Alistair and to try to make it as interesting as possible. I don't really know where to start—there's so much to say, so many stories to tell. Oh, and do forgive me if this sounds too praising. You see, as a *fiancée* (bit of a silly word, that), I'm a little biased. Anyway, here goes.

I suppose I would start by telling you that my Alistair is beautiful. I know I'm not meant to use that word to describe a man—he's supposed to be strong and handsome, and even a little rough, right? Well, he is, but it's not as simple as that. There are many men who are both strong and handsome but who possess no beauty—or worse, who don't even know what beauty is. But Alistair is delicate and careful in a way few people are. He's one of those people nobody dislikes. I can't imagine anybody knowing him and not liking him—I've certainly never known it to happen. What makes him this way is his beauty. He likes people, and he likes hearing what they have to say. And he has all of the morals one could ever ask for, and he stands staunchly by them as he stands staunchly by me. But he loves to listen, and he loves words. He can weave them as well as his father, but unlike his father he rarely uses them to elevate himself. In the four years we have known each other, I have never seen or heard of Alistair hurting anything unless he saw no other options.

And his love is like home.

I suppose I should let you in a little on why we know each other. Alistair and I met in April of 1913—just a little over four years ago He was fifteen and I was nearly seventeen.

Oh, yes, of course: how silly of me. I myself am from Montreal. My mother died when I was born so I never had a chance to know her, although Father says that we are really very much alike. He—Father, I mean—has, bless his heart, always done everything he could to make me happy. But I decided a few years back that I didn't want to be his daughter all the time, and I couldn't be anything else in the city on account of his being so known. So I decided to come out here, and, with having met my Alistair and all, I certainly don't regret it. And Father, who was understandably upset at first, seems to have accepted it.

Anyway, Alistair and I first saw each other at a town luncheon—you see, I had just moved in to take over the schoolhouse (where I still work) from old Mrs. Tomlinson, who moved back home to care for her husband. Anyway, Alistair and I started running into each other all over the place, and we slowly became good friends. I was really shy and dubious at first—having known the city boys and how

they could be—but Alistair seemed so genuinely interested in me as a person that I just sort of went along with him. It got so I wasn't even nervous about being alone with him anymore. I wasn't thinking at all about what he might try.

I used to bring him a new book every Friday—usually one of my favourites: Flaubert, Hardy, maybe a little Emerson—and we would sit on his porch and have a cup or two of tea as we talked about last week's book. Then after about a year of that Alistair threw a birthday party for his sister Virginia—who, incidentally, is a student of mine—and that's when we became more than friends. I think that's really the only way to say it. It's funny because we had agreed that we wouldn't.

But it happened.

We were sitting by his pond in the dark, looking at the water and listening to the frogs calling to each other and talking about the cattle or the horses or Mr. Preston and his blessèd discipline, and Alistair asked if he could kiss me. Just like that. We had been affectionate before, you understand, there were times when he would put an arm around me when I was a little under the weather, and I had kissed his cheek at Christmas, but there had never been anything that wouldn't happen between a particularly close brother and sister. Until then, that is. Anyway, I guess I didn't answer quickly enough, because he went ahead and kissed me anyway.

Right here on the lips.

And I liked it because it seemed so natural, and so I kissed back.

That's not wrong, is it?

So when we were done, I said "yes." And we laughed and then went on kissing. And it got better because we got less nervous and less sloppy. The funniest thing is that when we got back to the party everybody knew, because we both had these really devilish looks on our faces. Afterwards we didn't actually tell anyone about it, we just stopped denying the rumours that had been going around about us since we first became friends.

So anyway that's my favourite Alistair story.

Aug 12, 1917

Dearest Elspeth,

I've been thinking. That's not a good thing, I know, because Father tells me that good soldiers don't think, and he's probably right, but I really can't help it. And I don't particularly want to be a good soldier. You see, if you don't think, this place will take over. I've seen it happen. Take a perfectly nice chap from Toronto and stick him in a trench with rats and mud and occasional shell bursts, make him follow orders blindly, and watch him turn into a killing machine. There's no personality left. Get up, kill, shave, kill, eat, kill, sleep, get up again and kill. That's a good soldier because that's a soldier that's disciplined and that's a soldier that gets results. You run into hundreds of them here. They all talk the same way. They have the same vague smell about them. But at the same time they are the friendliest and most forgiving and generous types one comes across here. I think it's because they want everyone to know about them. This must sound really bizarre to you. Suppose it must be, for you, I mean. It's all so unreal; if they weren't shooting at us this would be hilarious. Sometimes you hear lads laughing anyway. What's scary is these men seem to be the ones who do the best—who bring in the most prisoners, who kill the most Germans, or who get all the attention of the CO's. Not that I mind, you understand, I'd much rather them than me. I just want to make it back to you. The trick, you see, is not to be a hero or even just a regular Joe at all. The trick is to stick around without anybody actually knowing that you're there unless they go looking specifically for you. Just become part of the background, and they never pick you. I don't think the CO has ever heard me say anything other than "Here, sir" every morning at the stand-to. I even heard about this fellow in a British regiment who had served for six years before the war and now two in the trenches, and his CO apparently still doesn't know his name and has to read it off his tunic every time. Guaranteed that bloke'll make it.

I realise this is not the kind of credo that one boasts about, and I hardly think you'll be bringing out this letter as proof of my heroism anytime soon, but if I stick to it I may just make it home to make up my own hero stories. In those, I'll kill as many Germans as my audience wants me to. But for now I keep going with the anonymity trick.

It'll be really clever if it works.

Anyway, what got me onto this was a really queer thing that happened to me early a few mornings ago—it's only now that I've had the energy and the time to tell you about it. One of these kill chaps was coming back from some night-time scouting or recce mission and he had gotten lost, and damn near got picked off by a sniper in the early morning light. I didn't see him coming, but apparently he walked straight across Nomansland as if it were Windsor bloody station! All he needed was to be swinging an umbrella, Jimmy said. So he was just walking back and a Fritz sniper got the crosshairs on him just as he was about to get into our trench. You see the front line here is divided into three different trenches—there's the front line trench itself, then about a hundred yards back there's a support trench, and then behind that is a reserve trench. Perpendicular to those are a series of communication trenches which allow one to travel, theoretically that is, between the various lines. What we do is rotation—so that one night we'll be in the front, then reserves and finally support, and then back up to the front again. The night before this bloke fell on me, I was in the front trench, where I am only one day in three. You don't get much sleep there because it's the most dangerous and most of the lads daren't even take a nap because there are often German scouts all over the place. It's also the closest to the shell blasts and the barbed wire and all the other nasty things designed to make your stay at the trenches as brief as possible. Do please forgive me if I've already told you all of this.

Anyway, the bullet went clean through his left hand between the thumb and

pointing-finger and made a terrible racket, but didn't hit a single bone of tendon or anything. And just as it hit him, he dove into the trench and landed right on top of my breakfast, breaking one of your aunt's jars of marmalade and sending the rest of my bread ration into the muddy duckboards in the process. He got up, pretended to brush off, looked up and down the trench to see who else was about (just Jimmy), and just smiled at me like he was sort of half embarrassed that he'd disturbed my breakfast.

He apologised, sort of winking and smiling at the same time—the way your father does, and then he frowned and said how Fritz bloody near got him this time. He held up his wounded hand and made a fist, apparently without any pain. He even tried to look at me through the hole. Then he shrugged.

He took off his steel hat, put it on the ground to my right and sat down on top of it. Can't have been very comfortable, that, but he looked like he needed to sit down. I was still holding a piece of bread and marmalade in my hand.

"Canadian, eh?"

He had read it off my shoulder.

I nodded, slowly.

He pointed at the bread in my hand and asked me if Canadians share their breakfast.

"Alright," I said.

And I gave him my breakfast.

And he ate all of it in a matter of seconds, careful not to bloody it with his wound, which was already starting to form a scab. Here I was sitting in my trench with a wounded scout I had never met before and he was eating away my rations. It didn't bother me much, because I was more curious than hungry. When you spend the night straining to see if the enemy is advancing across Nomansland and trying to sleep in what essentially amounts to a muddy puddle, you get all tensed up and usually don't feel much like eating. Only the officers are fat here.

He was not a small man, but he was strangely dainty—I don't know how to describe it exactly, but he had a way of moving that was very fluid and graceful, not like you would imagine a soldier to be at all. There was something magical about him—as if you just knew that he could get hit fifty times and it would always be a scratch or a flesh wound or go through his hand without hitting anything important. He wore his wound like a bloody medal. "Just a scratch" you could imagine him saying when he was really in terrible pain. Not that he was now. He was cleanly shaven and he even had some Cologne on, but that didn't seem to prevent him from being a tough soldier. He was very much the sort of person you would expect to meet in one of those men's clubs on a Sunday afternoon, and he would invite you in and buy you a glass of expensive twelve-year-old Scotch and ask you about life in the colonies. Somebody who would lend you money for a shave and never expect to get it back. He would have looked perfectly suited in a coat and tails, much more so than he was in his greens. Even the bleeding wasn't much. But he could certainly kill. There was a certain roughness, anger, even, that you could just sense in him. Everything tensed, I could feel it as I sat there watching him. The sort of man who goes away on leave and doesn't know what to do with himself there, so he comes back, early. There are a few in every regiment, and they become sort of good-luck charms—I've heard of a chap called Rogers the other soldiers actually pat on the head for good luck before going into the fray. You just know these chaps'll manage somehow to survive, but you can't see them doing anything else—in the real world, I mean, after the War. As for me, I prefer to keep your picture as my charm.

There are some people here, Elspeth, who are so clumsy and so graceless that you just know that if there is a scrap of shrapnel flying around within a mile they will manage to be mortally wounded by it even if nobody was even thinking of aiming at them. This chap was the opposite of that. He walked Nomansland for Christ's sake. He didn't crawl, or run, or even crouch. He walked. Some boys spend their whole time at

the front without so much as sticking the tops of their heads out of the trench in daylight because of the snipers, and this man strolled across Nomansland like he bloody owned it. And now he was eating my breakfast like it was the most ordinary thing in the world, smiling through the food when he caught me watching him.

He looked like an officer——a Captain, at the very least, but it was impossible to tell. You see, before they go out to battle, everybody here removes their rank insignia and empties their pockets. They say if Fritz captures you and you've got some German souvenirs in your pocket, he'll shoot you right then and there——in the face. And nobody wears rank insignia into battle because they say some officers have been tortured. From what I can tell, this is a rumour too, although some people tell pretty convincing stories. It's rather difficult to tell what's true around here. But, again, I've been thinking, and I'm not supposed to do that. So if anybody asks me, I tell them that it's all true.

He asked me how long I had been at the front.

I told him five weeks and I noticed myself calling him "sir". I didn't have to, of course, because I didn't know his rank, but it seemed appropriate.

"Bit of a bang-up time, isn't it?" He winked at me.

I told him how it's been a little hairy so far and that I'm not used to being shot at, which is true.

Again he smiled.

Elspeth, his teeth were whiter than any I've ever seen, and the saliva sort of glistened off them. In the midst of all this dirt and mud, it seemed really strange to me, but then I hadn't slept and had hardly eaten.

He patted my knee. "It's good to have you lads in with us," he said.

I looked down at where he had touched me and saw a small circle of yellowy blood on my trousers.

And then he asked me which way his regiment was. (I'm sorry, they won't let

me tell you which one). He was nine miles away—somehow, in the night, he had strayed nine miles Southeast of where he was supposed to be. Nine miles in a zigzagging trench would take at least five hours to walk, I told him.

All the more reason to get moving, he said. Then, again the teeth, and he turned and started walking away. But when he saw my bread on the duckboards at his feet, he stopped, turned on his heel and walked back towards me. When he was about ten feet away, he asked me my name. And I told him.

And he said that he had eaten half of my breakfast and fed the rest of it to the rats in the bottom of the trench and that he was going to make it up to me.

I told him not to worry about it, but I stumbled a little on my words, which made him ask me if I was nervous.

And I told him I was afraid so.

And he patted my shoulder and told me it didn't matter.

"I'm certain I'll get used to it, sir." I said.

He told me that he didn't recommend that and that the day you get used to it is the day all of this will be over.

To which I said: "I wouldn't mind that one bit, sir."

"Six feet under, Preston" he said.

Again, the smile and the teeth.

"I tell you what," he said, reaching into his tunic pocket, "you ever seen an Iron Cross before?"

"Sir?"

"An Iron Cross." He pulled out this little cross which looked rather like an "X" with fat ends on it. They. y the Germans use it on all their uniforms, but this one was made of metal and seemed nicer than the others. He pressed it—using his unwounded hand so as to avoid bloodying the prize—into my hand and then pushed my fingers closed over it. Then he sat down on his steel hat again.

And he told me that he'd gotten it the last night. Probably about six hours ago. Nineteenth man he's killed, he said, not counting the ones he shot from far off and might have just wounded. He didn't believe in counting those. This one was an officer of some sort, he told me, who was yelling orders to the others in the Fritz front trench when he got him.

I've just realised, Elspeth, that that's how I thought he was an officer——he wasn't carrying a rifle, but only a pistol tied with a cord rather like a necktie around his neck and a rather nasty looking knife at his belt.

So he said that they were lying right on the edge of their trench, practically on top of them. And the one he killed stood up and began to order his men out into Nomansland to do much the same thing that he and his men were doing. So they just lay there and listened carefully until it sounded like there were only a few of them left in the trench, and then they raided it. And this man who ate all my breakfast got the officer while his lads went over the parapet. "Clipped him round the neck with my arm and pushed the knife into his throat, using his body to cushion my fall," he said. And then he told me how when the hilt of the knife hit his neck, it made a clicking noise because the handle struck his Iron Cross and that's why this scout decided to take it.

He pointed at my hand. The fist was still closed around the cross. "He also had a Vergessmichnicht, but I'm keeping that."

And I asked him what that was so he wrote it down and then he told me that it was a forget-me-not. He reached into his pocket again and produced a picture of a sweetheart, which was signed just below the face to a Heinrich. He didn't give me much of a chance to look before he put it away, but there was something about her face that was familiar.

He looked at the stain he had made on my greens. "Sorry about that," he said, looking down at my leg, "but there'll be more."

And he smiled and stood and put on his tin hat.

He said that it was good knowing me over his shoulder as he walked away.

And I felt faint and sweaty and sick and sort of all knotted-up at the same time. I wanted to vomit, or cry, or laugh, or something, but I just sat there looking at the cross that Heinrich had worn about his neck like a tie until his death. And all I kept thinking was that that girl should have it, not me. And I thought about Fritz looking at the picture I carry of you, and keeping it as proof of my demise. And I thought of them passing it around and laughing about it and saying horrible things about you and imitating you and me together to make each other laugh. What had I done? I just gave somebody my breakfast for Christ's sake. I didn't deserve the cross, and I didn't want it. It made me feel like I had been the one who had driven the knife into this girl's Heinrich's throat and then stolen her picture as proof.

So when the CO came round to tell us we were being replaced and we started going down the communication trench to the reserves, I made certain that I was at the back of the line, and, when I knew there was nobody looking I pushed the cross into the mud of the trench wall and was done with it. It won't turn up until another soldier digs it out or a shell blast sends it flying. The stain's still on my trousers, though.

I don't want them to get your picture, Elspeth. I've got you wrapped up now, in some wax paper I traded for four cigarettes which I've given up anyway, so I can keep the mud off you, but I'm starting to feel like that's not enough anymore. So I got to thinking about keeping myself alive and keeping your picture away from them, and I came up with this anonymity thing. Like I said, if it works, I'll make up all the hero stories you want me to.

I really have to get going now——we're moving back up to the front trench for the night, and we'll be leaving any minute now. But please know that I carry the picture close to me, inside my tunic, and that the wax paper is as tight as I can make it, and I love you.

Alistair.

The schoolhouse itself is a simple room with six rows of desks and a total capacity of twenty-four students, although there haven't been that many since the middle of the last century, when the French finally became the majority of the population. Most of the students come either from newly settled British families or, although this is increasingly rare, from the descendants of United Empire Loyalists who fled to the area after the American Revolution in order to remain loyal to their King.

It is a low structure, made from stones cleared from the fields and reinforced with timbers. The roof is of simple wood tiling, and has a small hole at one end for the chimney of the stove which sits in the middle of the aisle between the desks of the second-to-last row.

Most of the children who go to school here are quite young; Miss Callaghan's oldest student now is a cripple called Francis Baker—he's seventeen. He doesn't learn much anymore, but he's of no use on his family's farm, and, because he knows most of the lessons by heart, is a general help to Miss Callaghan. This, and the goodness of her heart, is why she agrees to keep him around In the winter, for instance, it is his job to keep the stove going "no matter what", a responsibility which he accepts proudly. Recently, she has been trying to get him to speak more often—her predecessor told her rather bluntly that he was a bit dim, but Elspeth isn't convinced. He spends much of his time at the southern window in the second row, watching Old Man Preston's team of Percherons—Georgie and Franco—graze, and she's sometimes almost certain that he's thinking great thoughts.

Below the schoolhouse to the south is a large open field that descends into the valley to Anchor Brook and rises two acres to the opposite hill, on top of which sits a modest barn and the rather rough stone house built a couple of decades ago by Old Man Preston and some men from the village. Virginia, the youngest, occupies an upstairs bedroom which directly faces the schoolhouse across the valley. Now almost fifteen, she attended the school until the middle of March, when she had to return home to help in the absence of her older brother, Alistair, who was finally accepted by the army (mostly thanks to his father's efforts). Now, although she daren't admit it, she prays for his safe return not especially for his sake, but because she hates the roughness of her hands from the field work, and longs to regain her rightful place in the fourth row next to her very best of all friends, Victoria McDougall.

In the Preston dining room, presiding grandly over the table, is an ornate plaster-framed portrait of a stately corseted lady dressed in a simple closed-collar

black dress. She sits, hands carefully gathered at her waist, watching silently as the family flows in and out during the day. A depiction of his great aunt, she is the only non-essential Old Man Preston brought over with him, and is one of the primary sources of his reputation as a bit of an eccentric. Most of the family complains about her, but he insists on keeping her in the most prominent place in the little house. And Miss Callaghan thinks she looks like Al'stair.

Just because they have to stay home, Old Man Preston insists rather loudly—as he does with most things—doesn't mean they have to go uneducated. His son, to whom he of course paid the most attention, was reading at the age of four under his father's tutelage and never saw the inside of the schoolhouse until he started courting Miss Callaghan shortly after she took over from Mrs. Tomlinson in the Spring of 1913, and it's testimony to Old Man Preston's methods that many say Alistair's looking to be the cleverest man in the area.

But he's in France or Belgium by now, so nobody really talks about him anymore, at least not in front of his family or Miss Callaghan. People here have learned not to talk too freely about the lads in case they don't come home.

Alistair, August 4, 1917

I wish I were somehow better at coming to terms with your absence—it doesn't seem to bother the other girls at all. Sometimes I look at them and wonder whether they really love their sweethearts and husbands the way I do you. I know that it's meant to be an exclusively male instinct, but knowing that you are over there being shot at and lying in a ditch makes me want to somehow protect you and make certain that you come back to me, so I'm sure you can understand how frustrating it is for me to have to sit here and read your letters three weeks after you've written them.

We had the rather unfortunate news that one of my student's—Bradley Young's—father was killed at Vimy just a few days after you started your training (I don't know why I haven't told you yet—I probably didn't want to come to terms with the danger you are in until now), and the family only just got the last letter he wrote yesterday. Bradley was in tears when he came around with the paper this morning, poor boy. I can't imagine what it must be like to read the last letter from a man—your husband or your lover or your father—whom you know has been dead for months. Rumour has it Mrs. Young put it away without even breaking the seal. I can understand her reasoning, but I doubt that I'd do the same. What did he say? Did he know—does a person feel these things, or does it come from nowhere? Was his dying thought of her? God, it must be driving her batty. I can't imagine having your husband die, let alone not knowing exactly how or where and not being able to bury him yourself. This war's trying on all of us, I suppose. Just do your best to come back, so that I don't have to think about these things, alright?

I know it probably won't help you much to hear this, but I miss you more than I ever thought I would. I often catch myself talking to you as if you were here next to me—this morning Bradley caught me doing it—it was really quite embarrassing. But it doesn't seem strange to me, because sometimes I could swear that you are here and you can hear me when I talk to you. I don't know where I get such notions. There's just so much that I'm used to talking to you about and sharing with you, and I suppose this is a way for me to continue doing that. And whenever I pick up a new book I always look forward to hearing what you have to say about it, and sometimes I have the conversation with you anyway; on the porch, with a cup of tea in my hand. Sometimes I even imagine what comes afterwards. I'm tricking myself into believing that you

haven't really gone anywhere. Do you ever do that, Alistair, do you ever talk to me as if I were right there with you?

I am having the most difficult time knowing how to write to you. I don't want you to think that you are not constantly in my thoughts——because you are, in one way or another——but it's so difficult to compress all of those into a letter in a way which will sound genuine and uncontrived, and words have never come as easily to me as they do to you. Sometimes I feel like I have to write a great tome championing our love as the one thing that will keep both of us going through almost anything, but I doubt that I would be convincing because too many people have done it——and badly——before. I don't want to send you one of those silly postcards professing my undying love or anything as contrived as that. And sometimes I think that you would be much better off knowing silly things about my life——like that as I write this I am wearing my blue and white flowered Sunday dress, and that I went to put it on to write to you because I know how much you like to see me in it. I ironed it this morning, and I put a little too much starch in it, but it smells clean. And either I've gained a little weight or the water was too hot, because it seems tighter on me than it used to be. Anyway, I'm sorry——enough of that.

I need you to know, Alistair, that I have never loved you because you were a heroic or even particularly masculine person. I would hate for you to think that I would respect you any less if you came home without having won any medals or killed anyone or done much of anything at all. I want you to come back so we can get moving on our lives, and that's it. The rest doesn't mean anything to me, so don't worry about it, alright?

I really wish you could be here. I went over to the Glen this afternoon and sat right at the edge of the cliff, and all I could think about was how we had made that place ours just before you left. I even lay down in the very same spot and tried to imagine you there with me, and I got everything except for the smell. I feel terrible about that, Alistair. I can re-create you whenever I need to, but for some reason I can't remember how you smell. I suppose it's silly, really, but it just makes me miss you all the more.

Your family had me over to supper again last night, and I'm pleased to report that they all seem quite well. They were full of questions about what my letters told about your time over there. Please don't worry, my love, I didn't tell them anything at all, I just repeated what I assumed you had written to them and then told them the rest was what normally was written between separated lovers (not that that's how I put it, you understand) and that was that. Your father in particular seems quite keen on your

not only being in on it but also actually going to battle. That's really all he wanted to talk about. It was "my son" this and "my son that" every chance he got to speak. He told me quite frankly that he wished he could be there with you, and I wanted to say that he ought to be there instead of you, but I managed to hold back. There's no sense in my making a fuss, especially since this man is your father and I have chosen you as my husband. Doesn't mean I have to get on with him all the time, I kept telling myself. It was as if you were there giving me a kick under the table and letting me know that there are times when it's best to just let him talk because that's really all that it is.

He went on to tell me how important it was that "we" were all getting involved—by which, I was informed quite grumpily in response to my question—he referred to Canadians as a group. I told him that Canada had been an idea put forth by a few politicians, and that we sort of went along with it because nobody really minded being grouped together like that, but he insisted that we were the first generation in what was to be a great new nation. He said that he wanted our boys to be the heroes of the war so that we could gain the necessary respect and character to continue on our path as a nation. We have the discipline, he said again and again. He seems so pleased that you lads have earned yourselves such a wonderful reputation, but as he was talking all I could think about was how much danger that reputation must be putting you in. I don't think that ever occurred to your father—or would even matter to him if it did. I don't think he sees it as real. I think he has dreams about you winning a Victoria Cross for taking a whole battalion prisoner without so much as getting your nails dirty, all because of your famous Canadian discipline. And he kept talking about Canada as a nation, which seemed rather silly to me. It's my inclination to say it seemed as if he felt a need to be contributing more than he has. So I assured him that you were well aware of your responsibilities and that you would make all of us proud, and he seemed happy enough with that. It was as if he really thought that he had convinced me that he was right. I don't agree with any of all of that, you understand, you can't just make a nation out of nowhere or anything like that, but I said it to shut him up because he was getting a little annoying. And if he really was disciplined he would have said it all so much more eloquently and not taken up so much of everybody's time.

But don't you worry about him, Alistair, when you get back we'll tell him anything he needs to hear.

Anyway, I got in fairly late because I stayed after supper and had a bit of a chat

with Virginia, who seems to be having a little trouble adjusting to the field work after so many years in school. She's trying very hard not to resent you, you understand, but she misses her time with books and of course she's lost touch with some of her school friends. She told me that she just wasn't made for farming, and that she wanted to go to the city to study some more, which after all was my idea to begin with. I'm afraid she's gone and put me in a very difficult situation. Not that she means to, of course. She has the potential to go quite far in her schooling, I think, but the longer she stays out of school the harder that will be for her, and she knows this full well. I told her that it was worth thinking about, but that until you came back she would have to help your mother and father out with the chores, and that with this war disrupting just about everything there would be thousands of people stuck in the same kind as her. It didn't seem to comfort her as much as I had hoped, but she seemed willing to be patient a little longer.

I didn't suggest it to her because I didn't want to give her any false hopes, but I thought that your advocacy of her going into Montreal would help her cause a great deal—when you come home, that is. You may not agree that this the best thing for her, of course. Anyway, we can talk about it when you get back.

So it was nearly midnight when I finally came in, and I got into bed but couldn't sleep. So I lit the lamp and read through some of your letters, and tried to imagine what it must be like for you over there. It all seems so foreign to me, and I have trouble picturing you there, although I'm pleased to report that your words still calm me, and I found myself all sleepy-eyed before too long. It's at night that I miss you the most, because I keep imagining getting into my bed with you. I know that we'll be able to do that after you get back and we are married, but I like to think about it now. So every night when I get into bed I say goodnight to you as if you were there, and I like to imagine that somewhere in Belgium you look over my way and say goodnight back. I know that it sounds a little silly, but it works for me and it helps me sleep.

Anyway, I still love you more than I ever thought I would and I still dream about marrying you in the field near Anchor Brook and about getting into my bed—our bed—with you.

Goodnight, Alistair, and sweet dreams.

Always,

Elspeth

Aug 19, 1917

Dearest Elspeth,

We've been on the move now for four days, although they won't let me tell you where we're going (not that I paid much attention anyway). The journey has allowed me quite a nice opportunity to view some of the French countryside as it slips slowly through summer. When you spend a few days at the front, you tend to forget that there is anything else, and it was a welcome reminder to see something natural again—and more especially, to smell something other than mud and cordite. The farms in this region are quite different from ours—everything is noticeably smaller—a local man who offered us some fresh milk was telling me that two hundred acres here is considered a gigantic piece of land! But, as if to compensate, their growing season is that much longer and they have fewer predators to worry about; apparently the only bears still in Europe are off in the Alps, a good five hundred miles from here. One man told me that he was getting ready for his third cut of hay, and that, if the weather held up, he might even manage a fourth. We billeted in his barn for the night, and the farmer invited Jimmy and I to help with his team to harrow the fields. They were, of all things, two young Clydesdales—a mare and a gelding, although the gelding had so much spunk he reminded me of Georgie anyway. I can't possibly describe to you what a pleasure it was to do some real physical work with horses again—without worrying too much about being shot at. We're about five miles from the front line here, and, although we can still hear the barrages of artillery, we've learned to shut the thudding sound out. I was horrified by the trouble I had handling the horses—I suppose you could blame it on my not knowing the animals and their training—but I've really noticed that I've lost quite a bit of strength—not to mention some girth! But more than anything else, it was a real pleasure to be able to stand up straight again and on dry even ground! All of the lads have been saying the

same thing.

Your aunt's jams ran out a few days ago, so since then I have been eating exclusively what we've come to call Trench Pie—it's essentially broken up Bully Beef with bits of bread and tea. It's not bad, really, it fills you up quite well, but it does get a little boring and it's difficult to be hungry for it on account of the smell. Many of us just don't too much feel like eating anyway. I myself often find that I only eat when my stomach hurts and I realise that it's because I haven't eaten in a while.

Poor Jimmy seems to be suffering more than most. When we had finished helping with the horses, the farmer gave us a sack full of potatoes and onions and a bottle of wine which we brought back to the lads in the barn. Suffice it to say that the food didn't last long. When we had sat down after the meal, Jimmy took me aside quietly and said he wanted to show me something. He undid one of his boots slowly and pulled his foot out. Poor chap, it was obvious that he was in quite a bit of pain. When he rolled back the sock much of his skin came off with it like the cream off the top of milk. His foot underneath was quite raw and pink, and smelled damp and vaguely rotten. They warned us about this in training—it comes from standing in cold water for too long. It's like a bad frostbite. I have been careful to try to keep my feet dry—even though it's impossible to do for the most part, you can still get away with sleeping barefoot, which offers enough relief—my feet are swollen and a little sore, but nothing like Jimmy's. He told me that the pain was such that it kept him from sleeping. Poor chap haa' no idea what to do. He said that he didn't mind the shelling or the mud or the lice or the rats or the Trench Pie or anything else, but he just wanted to be able to walk without feeling that he was permanently destroying his feet. I've seen lads cry when they've lost a buddy or when they're frightened about going into battle, but Jimmy just sort of came apart like that right in front of me. Told me he didn't want to stay with us for the big push that's got to be coming up, and that he'd had enough.

It's horrible, Elspeth, but I really had no idea what to say to him. I reckoned

that I was supposed to encourage him and give him the desire to come back into the fray—you know, tell him that we were on our way to join the last big push and that we would soon be celebrating in the streets of Paris and all that—but I doubt that it would have worked because I don't particularly believe it myself. Nothing's true around here—that's the first thing you learn. And I found that I wanted to agree with him and to find some reason to give up as well, and come up with some way to escape without being shot for desertion, but I couldn't muster the courage, or the stupidity, or the words, or even just the energy to do anything at all. I was so tired all I wanted was to rest a little.

So I told him I would sort it out and I went over to the other end of the barn and brought over the Lieutenant.

Poor Jimmy was terribly embarrassed, and when the Lieutenant at first asked what was the matter he said that it was nothing and sort of covered up his foot with some straw.

"Looks to me like a pretty bad case of Trench Foot, sir," I said. I made my voice deeper—because, I suppose, I thought it would make me sound cleverer. I knew this was Jimmy's big chance to get some leave.

And so the Lieutenant asked if he could have a look.

And Jimmy pulled his foot out from the straw and the Lieutenant looked at it for all of a second. You could tell he didn't really want to look, but he knew he had to.

"We can't have every new recruit complaining about a little discomfort," he said, nice and bloody loud so the others would hear also, "there wouldn't be anybody left at the front!" And then he sort of glared at Jimmy just to make certain that everyone in the barn knew who he was talking about.

And for an instant I felt like I had made the biggest mistake of my time here. Jimmy, this poor chap from God-knows-where in Manitoba, had crossed the country to visit his uncle in Sherbrooke and decided to join up and had fought very bravely and was

no better but no worse than any of the rest of us, and now I had betrayed his trust and made him a laughing stock. One of the lads yelled out that he was too "windy" to be with us at war—that's a term they use here to describe someone who shows his fear. It's silly really, because we're all scared—you hear lads praying and talking to their mothers and making silly promises like "if you just get me through this I swear I'll never..." and all that sort of thing—but you're not allowed to show it or even let it be known. The problem is that fear spreads even faster than the lice here, and if everybody were talking about being scared pretty soon the whole regiment would be paralysed by fear and this damn war would never get itself won. But this was different. Granted, we all have swollen feet, and nobody likes being eaten alive by the lice, but Jimmy had it really bad. And some mix-up had prevented his mother from getting most of his letters, but he kept getting hers and she was getting more and more worried because she wasn't hearing anything. When he had crossed the country to see his uncle, it was in the hope of being apprenticed as a lawyer—that had been the biggest adventure of his life. He's told me about the train ride a good dozen times since I've met him, for God's sake. And now he was sitting in a barn in northern France and being openly chastised by the very people who were supposed to support him. Poor chap slowly put on his boot and began to weep quite freely.

And so as the Lieutenant sat back down I stormed over to him and demanded that he do something.

And he said this was insubordination and he threatened me with a court-martial, which, as I'm sure you can imagine, shut me up pretty quickly.

So I went back to Jimmy and tried to apologise for the whole affair, but he would have nothing of it. And he sort of half thanked me for trying, but there was something almost angry in his voice and he had stopped crying.

He suggested that we go outside for a bit—you know, just to get away from the whole thing, and I agreed. As soon as we stood up, Jimmy put his arm around me; I

thought he needed help walking, but that may have been an excuse. Outside it was already quite dark, although there was a bit of a glow coming from the direction of the front. As we went slowly through the field—poor Jimmy found it quite tough going, although he was dealing with the pain admirably—one could just see the heavy outlines of the two horses, which were still grazing. We went down to a little stream—much like Anchor Brook back home—and Jimmy took off his boots and put his feet in the cold water, which prompted in him quite a deep sigh. And as we sat there he asked me about home, and about the horses there and about the water and the land and what the air smelled like and the like. He said he was going to fight as best he could so he could get back to see it exactly how I described it, and I told him we'd set up a supper for him and even told him what we'd be having.

And I couldn't help telling him about you, and about how your words and your love keep me from going too windy around here. And I told him about the time we started kissing by the pond when we first started properly courting, and about the way we take Georgie up to the Glen and indulge in ourselves while he grazes, and about how you come out onto your porch to brush the knots out of your hair in the morning. And I showed him your picture, and he told me how beautiful you are and of course I had to agree. And it made me realise how tremendously I miss you, and how badly I need to survive all of this to make it back to you so we can generate new memories.

By the time we got back to the barn, most of the lads were asleep, although a few had actually stayed up to apologise to Jimmy, which was nice to see, and one had even gone so far as to save us berths for the night.

Then, early this morning, the Lieutenant announced that he had managed to get us to stay another day because he thought we needed to rest up, and he looked at Jimmy and me as he said it. I want you to know, Elspeth, that I bear no ill will whatsoever to that man—he's just trying to do his best with what he has. Which is true for everybody here, after all. But I certainly wouldn't want to be in his place. I know

that it's not supposed to be the case, but I have no aspirations to command whatsoever.

Anyway, I'm off to go exploring with a few of the lads—we're going to follow the brook to try and find a bigger river or hole and go for a bit of a swim—it'll be great to get clean again!

I love you, and will write soon.

Alistair.

From the Glen you can see for miles, especially if it's clear. On a good day you can spot Jay Peak to the South, and Heart Lake, six hundred feet below, looks close enough to dive into. The spot itself is quite isolated, and not many people know how to get there, much less make the trek up the back side of the hill and through the trail in the woods. Some say there are bears up there, and maybe even a cougar or two, but if you go on horseback you're unlikely to be bothered by any of them. And only a very hungry—or very rabid—bear would attack a cart horse as large as Georgie And an animal used to spending nights in the fields knew full well how to use his legs to protect himself. One good kick—in the head—would be enough to break a bear's jaw, if not crush his skull.

Breaking into the clearing is always the best part because you come out onto a sort of plateau right on top of a cliff after almost an hour in the woods If you go on a sunny day, the change in light is enough to make you want to look up to find its source. Today, though, the arrival serves only to confirm the rider's suspicion of thunder by exposing her and the horse to tall black clouds. It often rains at this time of year, and because it's always so hot and so humid, it's impossible to tell where and when the storms are going to hit.

Elspeth dismounts at the edge of the clearing and retrieves a length of frayed rope from her saddlebag, attaching it first to Georgie's halter and then to a thin white birch, looking ridiculously naked against the background of pines and maples It's not enough to hold him, of course, but at least this way he knows he's not meant to go anywhere. And he's so placid that the thunder doesn't seem to bother him the way it does other horses.

It's nice to go on a little adventure, even if it is to such a familiar spot Last time, it was the same rider, although she brought the man's voice and his more defined physical inputs with her then As she walks towards the edge of the cliff, she thinks briefly of how kind it was of Old Man Preston to lend her the "beastie" for the day. After three solid weeks of work—mostly to bring in hay for his own winter consumption (although Elspeth doubted that he knew it) – Georgie was up for a bit of a ride.

Not that he had seemed in the slight bit interested on where he was going. He knew that Alistair wasn't there, and he had a sort of passive way of letting Elspeth know that he knew. She knew soon after they had left that he was not going to help her re-create her last trek up here with her young fiancé the evening before he left for the fray.

From the leather bag slung on the other side of the saddle she carefully retrieves a large flat stone she has chosen from Anchor Brook and walks it over to the cairn in the middle of the clearing. Finding a place for it right next to the stone she and Alistair had brought here just a few months ago, she lowers it carefully into place and takes three steps back to survey the pile.

Satisfied, she walks deliberately to a place underneath the lip of a boulder about three feet from the edge of the cliff, carefully folds her legs under her and sits easily down in the moist grass where she and Alistair last embraced.

"I want to tell you something," she says, "I want you to think about the last time we were here, I want you to remember how we came running under this boulder when it started to rain, and about how Georgie thought it was a game and tried to follow us. I want you to remember him trying to get his head under the lip of the rock as if getting his head out of the rain would somehow keep the whole of his body dry and how, once again, he had made us laugh."

She looks out over the valley at the approaching wall of rain and consciously pushes her head back against the rock, getting as far underneath it as she can. Weary of the thunder, she raises her voice: "And I want you to think about how the water came down under the lip of the rock, how you turned to cover me—to keep the water off, you said..."

A guilty smile.

"...and how we had left that afternoon knowing that it was going to be our last time up here together before you left. And you had become so excited when I told you on the way up that I had spent the whole morning preparing for the trip, and that yes, I was ready for you, and I really wanted to before you left...Oh, and I want you to realise that I wanted to like I've never wanted anything ever before, because I loved you then and I love you more now and I certainly don't regret what we did."

She straightens her legs and folds her right arm carefully under her head, using it as a pillow as she lies slowly down on the dark earth at the very back of the crevice. "And I want you to know," she says, brushing her thick blonde tangle over the top of her head to expose the impossibly intricate ear, inviting his mouth, "I want you to know that I was in love with you—or the idea of you—the concept that there was a *you*, and that I would find him—you, I mean—long before we ever met."

A thick dark drop splotches onto the grey rock in front of her, briefly raising a little silver flash of water before settling. The lightning's getting closer now and it wouldn't be a good idea to go out into the clearing. She closes her eyes heavily, thinking of the way she and Alistair snuck back after their final encounter, giddy as

children, their hands guilty with new smells, their mouths invaded with musky new tastes.

She whispers into the crook of her arm. "I miss you, Alistair," she says, closing her eyes to imagine his face saying "I miss you back."

The heavy air, fragrant with pollen and the smell of wet moss, flows in and out of her rhythmically, mocking the thunder with its peacefulness. At the edge of the clearing, Georgie lifts his head and looks in the direction of the thunder, enjoying the cool massage of heavy rain on his sweaty back. Seeing nothing, he sighs and lowers his head back to the sweet grass at the base of the naked birch.

Under the rock, his rider sleeps quietly, her dreams filled with trenches and exploding artillery shells—sound-effects graciously provided by the building storm.

The Sixth Canadian Mounted Rifles, like many Canadian regiments active along the Western Front, was pretty much thrown together at the beginning of the war, although it has proven itself quite valuable in combat since. Comprised essentially of young volunteers from the Eastern Townships south of the Saint Lawrence river and just North of New Hampshire, Vermont and New York States, the 6th CMR is part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force which has, to date, earned itself the reputation for being the best corps on the Allied side.

The 6th has been at it pretty much since the third army crossed the Atlantic towards the end of 1915, and was especially successful in the greatest of Canadian Victories to date, on Vimy Ridge beginning on Easter Sunday of 1916. The Canadians, as the allied press is fond of pointing out in the absence of any allowable real news about the war, are tough and highly disciplined. Incidents of desertion, parasitic disease caused by uncleanliness and generally slipshod hygiene, shell-shock and other trench-related ailments are noticeably lower among the Canadians, as is also the case for the other colonial army from Australia and New Zealand, which here are referred to simply as the ANZACs. Of the Canadians it is said is a particular hardiness and bravery, stemming, no doubt, from the harsh conditions of their homeland. They are well treated in both England and France, countries which both claim the Canadians to be brothers, or at the very most cousins, not foreigners like the Americans who may just be coerced into really joining the war and helping to fill in the gap soon to be left by the Russians and their impending revolution. Finally, the Canadian Corps is commanded by Arthur Currie, a massive pear of a man for whom Haig, the commander in chief is said to have tremendously high respect.

Also worthy of mention are the men and women of the Canadian field hospitals—the medical branch of the corps. Like the infantry, they have earned an enviable reputation for their skill and tenacity and seem wholly dedicated to saving the lives of any wounded man brought to them, be he Canadian, French or even German. Their rate of success, like the infantry's, is the highest in the Allied war effort—this despite continually being forced to operate under the most horrendous of conditions.

The sixth, like any front-line and combat-active regiment, regularly recruits, trains and puts into active service a number of new soldiers in order to counteract the attrition normally experienced during war. Recruitment is not difficult—almost everybody wants to go and fight, especially now that the true atrocities of the Hun's army have been fully exposed—the difficult part is ensuring that the lads recruited

won't be so missed on their farms that agricultural production suffers. You see, factory workers and especially soldiers need to be fed. To this, many recruiters are especially attentive, and young men have been refused not because they were unsuitable—indeed, they were assured that they would have made fine and tough soldiers—but because they were more valuable in the fields producing food for the war effort. Understandably, this is often quite a blow to an eager and patriotic young man.

In some cases, however, these young men have persisted and been accepted upon the receipt of proof that another family member or friend—often a woman—could fill their place on the farm. Often, final acceptance is due not only to the persistence of the young man involved, but also that of his father, who, like every parent in a great war such as this, imagines his hardened son coming home with a chest rightfully covered with shimmering medals.

One such case is that of Private Preston who, as we speak, is marching towards the Ypres Salient in southern Belgium with the rest of the 6th CMR. You see, because of their excellent reputation for soldiering, Haig has decided to send the Canadian Corps to try to break a stalemate which has existed in the salient since the early days of the war. He is hoping for the Canadians to repeat their performance from Vimy. Miserable and muddy in their trenches, the ANZACs are eager to be relieved.

Oh...and although they don't know it yet, the prime objective of the sixth is going to be to capture what's left of a little village called Passchendaele, the skeletal houses of which are perched on top of a hilly wasteland of mud and cordite and wire.

The attack is tentatively scheduled for the third week in October, and you didn't hear that—or any of this—from me.

a sharp, tough woman with peppered hair, a slightly too-large nose, nervous hands kneading above her apron:

Hello.

My name is Angela.

It's a bit of a funny name, I know, some say it's a commoner name, and it's not very proper. But it's mine, and I've gotten quite used to it, thank you very much, so I don't mind it so much anymore. And nobody in this God-forsaken land cares much for the difference between commoner names and proper names. You see, we have other things to worry about here.

There's the animals and the fields. My husband Peter has chosen to live out his years as a beef farmer, and we have about one hundred head of cattle. Most people round these parts here call him "Old Man Preston" although I can't accept the idea that a forty-seven year old man is really "old"—especially not since I am forty-three myself. I know I'm mean to be bashful about these things, and there was a time when I would never have dreamed of telling my age to anyone, much less a stranger such as yourself. But it's such a bother worrying about such things, and nobody around here pays them much attention anyhow.

Don't get me wrong. If His Royal Majesty the King came over to my house for supper I'd know how to feed him without getting anything wrong and without offending his much-touted sensibilities. We could give him some of our own beef. My girl Virginia would do here best to charm him to death—she'll be a woman very soon, you know—and I'm sure my husband would bore him with talk of the bloody War and try to convince him to have my son Alistair—who's over there fighting now—knighted in Buckingham Palace in front of rows of Dukes and Duchesses.

It would be quite an evening, and I could really make a success of it.

It's just not very likely that I'll ever get the chance to prove that.

I'm sorry, I tend to get distracted quite easily. You see, it's not often that I get to talk to anyone different around here.

So anyway, where was I?

That's right, I was talking about the things I worry about. Well, of course there's all the usual things to worry about around here—things having to do with staying alive, I mean. And every wife worries about her husband, and Peter can certainly be a handful, especially when he gets to talking about England, which he does quite often these days on account of Alistair being over in Europe with the army. And he's rather fond of yelling, although that's really as far as it ever gets.

You see, I think he sort of blames me for our...well, for our rather precipitous departure. It's indiscreet of me to say so, but Alistair was born in Canada, but he wasn't conceived here. When I found out that I was *with child*, Peter wanted to marry me, but on account of my being raised Catholic we couldn't find anybody to do it. And then he came up with this Canada idea. He had a mate who had come over here and made a fortune in the liquor trade in Montreal, and I suppose Peter sort of figured he could do the same, and of course the captain would marry us on the boat. What could be simpler? So I went along with the idea—what else was I to do?

But we got here and found that it wasn't easy. I can't complain, you understand, but this has all been tremendously hard work. I used to be quite a delicate woman, and the gentlemen would talk to me all the time

I had soft hands—like a princess, Mother used to tell me..

If I went into the city now they would probably think of me as an old farm wench. Which is, I suppose, what I have become. I don't know that I regret it, you understand, although if I knew then what I know now I doubt very much that I would have let myself get pregnant.

I don't even know that I loved him then.

I doubt it.

But he was so persistent, so convincing. Now that I think about it I would say that if anything he frightened me into it.

Peter, you understand, was never much of a good communicator. You see, he speaks very well, but in a way that you can't really trust him unless you understand that that's just his way. The liquor business is all about selling, and he just wasn't made for it. So after I had Alistair we moved out here and bought a dozen head of cattle with the money I received when my mother died It was lucky, that, because when I left England she said I was dooming her to die alone and that she would never forgive me for it. It was rather nice to know that she had—forgiven me, I mean—but a letter would have been best, I think. If nothing else it would have given me a chance to respond.

I was happy to be able to get Peter away from drink.

My daughter Virginia was born right here in the house when Alistair was four. I remember it well because it was just about the hottest day I can remember. After that we tried for another, but she was stillborn, the poor thing. Peter didn't even let me see her; he took her right away and buried her somewhere near the edge of the clearing. It was a difficult thing, that, and it nearly killed me. So we haven't tried since.

But with the help of some of the people around these parts, we've still been able to make a go of it, and, as Peter will eagerly tell you if you give him the chance, some of our beef is even going to feed the soldiers.

And any mother worries about her son, and there are thousands of us in this country waiting for them to come back. But it's really difficult trying to imagine Alistair out there. He's many wonderful things, but he's worlds away from his father, and I just can't imagine him being anything other than horribly out of place in the army. Of all the things Alistair is suited for, that is probably the last.

You should have seen him here on the farm. He just has a way with the animals. His father spends hours out there yelling and screaming at them, and they never do what he wants them to, but Alistair would just talk softly to them and off they'd go, ready to work for him all day. When I say that we all miss him here, I don't just mean the humans. The animals do too. Peter doesn't agree. Says the beasties are too stupid to know the difference But I swear to you they know he's missing. You can see it in their eyes.

His young lady comes around here quite frequently, and she even takes one of our work horses up to the Glen every so often. She's really quite a specimen. I sometimes look at her and wonder if that's what I would have been like had I managed to avoid getting pregnant. I'm not sure, but I think that my Virginia might just turn out like that if I can convince that husband of mine to let her go into the city to keep up her schooling.

And Elspeth is the best thing that I could have ever wished for Alistair, and those two really have something. I know that it's her letters that give him the courage to keep up the fight, and I'm more grateful to her for that than I could ever possibly express.

I just hope he makes it home so that those two can join us here on the farm.

We're not getting any younger, you know, and Alistair is so well suited to work with animals. He would be the farmer Peter always tried to convince himself he was, but has never quite managed. Not that we would ever tell him—that might be just the thing to make him carry out some of his threats, although I quite honestly doubt it. Anyway, everybody around here loves Alistair, but they look at my husband a little sideways. Anyway, with a bit of prayer and a lot of luck, I reckon this will all work itself out.

I think I've said enough.

Listen, I really need to get moving—Peter'll kill me if supper's not ready when he gets back from his chores, and I need to go up and check on Virginia, whose

come down with one of her colds, poor thing. Honestly, the thought of a child having a cold at the end of the summer!

If you do see Alistair, do give him all my best, tell him to change his socks everyday so that he doesn't get that horrible trench foot, and for God's sakes promise me that you won't tell him that he was conceived before his father and I were married. I don't want him to feel unwanted, and I certainly think he's got enough to worry about right now.

Book II

1.

"In battle all of the rules of normal human existence are perforce suspended."

"Stop talking like a lawyer." Alistair flashes a nervous smile below the parapet.

"Don't interrupt me—I'm trying to remember it all."

"Sorry."

"It's not that you become less human, or rather somewhat unhuman, but rather that you have to suppress certain tendencies innate in the human psyche in order to even have a chance of surviving. If you go in thinking you're going to be a hero, chances are you won't come out. At least not in one piece. And by far the most dangerous thing—and this is strongly and continually reinforced by the more experienced members of the 6th as you well know" he nods deeply to get Alistair to agree "-- is anger. War is as much about how you govern and control your own mind as it is about firing rifles and thrusting bayonets into the soft underbellies of unsuspecting Germans. Just about everyone knows how difficult it is to suppress anger here, but they also know how fundamental it is to survival. Those who didn't believe it are dead now."

"Or highly decorated."

"And what good is that?"

"I'll give you that, Jimmy." It's funny how drink affects different people, Alistair thinks. Before every battle, they get a rum ration to get them ready, and all it seems to do to Jimmy is make him all chatty, which doesn't seem like the ideal state for a man to be in before going over the top. If he captured anyone he'd probably talk him to death.

Alistair allows himself a shallow smile. Jimmy doesn't see it.

"Thank you. As I was saying, when you get angry you're hundreds of times more likely to do something stupid, like run out into Nomansland with your rifle blaring—and then find yourself three hundred yards from the nearest friendly trench with no ammunition and nothing but a knife or a fist to swing at Fritz."

A brief pause as the order to fix bayonets is given.

Jimmy: "in the fighting of war, anger is more dangerous than virtually everything, except for fear. "

The irony, of course, is wonderful, although Alistair finds it difficult to believe that anybody else has even thought about it because they were too excited about getting their share of the rum. If you're frightened about dying, then your best chance of preventing such an eventuality is to avoid, somehow, being frightened.

And if you're angry at the enemy and really want to kill him, your best chance at success lies in being calm and careful—and certainly not angry.

A nervous hand reaches into the tunic and fingers the wax paper over Elspeth's picture.

Jimmy: "so don't let yourself get frightened and don't get angry, no matter what you see and no matter what happens. Keep your wits about you and for God's sakes don't cry out if you get hurt, because it'll alert the enemy as well. Just sit tight and they'll get to you, alright?"

Alistair allows a brief thought about a rumour that an outfit had decided to attach small metal plates to their backs to make them more identifiable in the event that they got wounded. It, like this, was a pre-dawn attack. It wasn't a success. When the sun had come up three hours later it reflected off the moving metal plates of the wounded as they tried to drag themselves back to their own trenches. The German snipers have never had it so easy, they said. Like shooting fish in a barrel.

Who came up with that, anyway? The trick, of course, is not to keep quiet, but rather to know when to yell. Of course it's even better to just not get shot and thereby avoid the problem altogether, but then again you don't have all that much control over that.

"Jimmy?"

"Yes."

"I have a confession."

"I don't want to hear it."

"I don't think I've ever been this excited before."

"I told you I didn't want to hear it."

"It's true."

"Don't let it be."

"What?"

"If you get excited, you get dead. Don't get excited. Don't get angry. Don't get scared. When the CO gives the order, go over the top with the rest of us and do your job. Get that done and get back."

"In and out?"

"In and out."

"That's it?"

"No more, no less. You want to live, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

"So don't get excited."

"I can't help it."

"It's not rugger, for Christ's sakes. Here, the other team shoots at you."

Alistair looks down the trench to his right. Everybody looks ready enough.

"The silence is really starting to bother me," Jimmy whispers.

Alistair checks his bayonet and removes the safety on his rifle, pretending not to hear the man to his left. A quick hand darts into the tunic and touches Elspeth one more time and then settles back onto the shaft of the rifle. Behind him, the sergeant's heavy breath forces itself into the whistle. Lads all about him start to go over the top. Jimmy's the first.

Alistair would have been next to him, but he couldn't get a good enough hold on the wall of the trench. Finding footing, he pushes himself quickly into the world above. In front, about four hundred yards away, is the objective—a small German pillbox which has yet to begin flashing with machine gun fire Next to it, to the left, is the trunk of an Elm, the top of which has been reduced to splinters and spikes by a shell. "El-um", Alistair repeats, mimicking the farmers at home The attack has been planned for them to be behind the pillbox, buying valuable time before the gun can be turned to bear down on them. A small raiding party of fifteen, their whole mission is to take fewer than ten minutes. More than that, and they don't stand a chance. It's a simple objective—capture the pillbox and hold it—and, in all likelihood, use Fritz's own gun to hold back his infantry.

Something's wrong. It's too quiet.

What's striking about this is how different it all is. Alistair had just assumed that his first real foray into Nomansland would be during a heavy barrage, trying to inch forward under a canopy of lobbed shells, getting stuck in barbed wire and falling into flooded shell holes. His dreams had brought visions of falling into a cold hole only to be pulled under the water by the rotting arms of dead soldiers. But the artillery now is distant and imprecise, and the signal flares arching through the sky make it easy to avoid the flooded craters and God-knows-what inside them Nobody seems to have any clue that they're even here. Nobody has fired yet—from either side.

Instinctively, he shuffles over in the mud, running as quickly as he can without standing any more than he has to, over to Jimmy, who is crouched at the edge of one of the craters, peering down his rifle at the pillbox The footing is atrociously imprecise, muddy, wet and uneven with shell casings, rifles, knives and bodies—some whole, most not. And the smell is intolerable Dropping his gear heavily down next to Jimmy, Alistair fails to shake his concentration

"I saw one of them, Alistair, I saw him moving one of the boxes of ammunition. They know we're here."

A sharp look left, right, then straight at the objective. No movement other than that of their company. Nothing.

Alistair: "so why stop?"

A single shot, from the right, is fired by one of the other soldiers. Hunched over their rifles, grotesque Quasimodos cradling artificial erections, they advance methodically towards the pillbox in the moonlight.

There's a persistent and rather nasty rumour here that there are actually three armies fighting in the salient. There's us, of course, and Fritz, but they say that there's a third force made up of a combination of the two. According to the story, the wounded—left for dead—from both sides, and deserters and "windys" all live together in their own tunnels and trenches in the middle of Nomansland. They eat rats and the carcasses of their comrades after they've fallen, and they come out to raid the bodies of the dead and the almost dead late at night. They say they prefer to find men wounded, so that they know the meat they eat is going to be as fresh as possible. They'll crack your skull clean open and suck out your brain right there in Nomansland. It's true. And after two years of war, they're starting to be a real problem. They've forgotten how to talk, so there's no reasoning with them. That's the worst. If they get you, you're finished. That's what happens to a lot of the missing soldiers. They get eaten. Or they join up. Either way, they're considered dead. You certainly wouldn't want little Francis to come home from the war with a persistent taste for human flesh, now would you? Even the officers are worried about them, right up to the C in C. They say they're going to have to send out extermination teams when the war's over just to deal with them.

Don't forget, anything's possible here, especially if it sounds impossible.

Alistair looks over at the advancing line arching off to their right. "We've got to join them, Jimmy. We'll be shot for this if we don't."

"We'll be shot if we do."

"What?"

"Fritz knows we're coming. Must of heard the whistle. They'll wait until we're well within range and they'll open fire. We don't have a bloody chance unless we fire."

Alistair lines his rifle up on the target and puts his finger on the trigger, but Jimmy grabs his forearm before he can get the shot off.

"Not yet," he says.

"Why not?"

"We're too far. If you do that from here your chances of getting any of them are small, and all you'll do is let them know we're here..." Jimmy lowers the rifle and brings it down to his hip like the others "...which wouldn't be such a clever thing to do."

"There," Alistair grabs Jimmy's arm and points out to the left, "something moved."

They squint at the spot, trying to discern a change in the surface of the glistening mud.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

Two more shots from the advancing company They've gone about halfway to the pillbox, and are now well within range. Jimmy and Alistair perch frozen in their shell hole, forty yards ahead of their own trench, straining to see movement to their left.

"I don't think there's anything there."

"I swear I saw something."

"Of course you did. I'm not saying you're a liar, I'm just saying that whatever it was isn't there any more, alright?"

Alistair nods slowly, eyes fixed on the spot

"It was probably just a rat," Jimmy says.

"Yeah, probably just a rat."

Jimmy pats Alistair's thigh and heads out over the top lip of the hole and towards the pillbox. Alistair darts a left hand into his tunic and fingers Elspeth's picture. She's still there, and still dry, and probably still smiling He brings his hand back to the shaft of the weapon. It's cool—no shots fired yet, and the rifle's still clean. A shallow swallow. "Big fucking rat," he mutters, scrambling up the muddy edge of the shell hole after Jimmy's lead.

The wetness at the back of her neck wakes her suddenly. Not realising that it's water from the top of the rock and not some insect, she slaps instinctively, cupping her hand to mimic the curvature of her skin. If nothing else, it helps her wake up. She looks carefully out from the rock and over the valley, seeing nothing but blackness. She swallows heavily, cringing slightly at the stale taste in her mouth, closes her eyes and pops them open again, acutely aware of the sound they make.

There. At least this time she can see a few stars, and the very faint outline of what must be the edge of the cliff. Pulling herself out from under the boulder, she straightens her dress and checks it carefully. It's filthy, and a large stretch above her right hip is wet from where she was lying in the moss. Silly, really. It was perfectly clean this morning.

Now where's Georgie gotten himself to?

There, by the birch, is none of the dark mass she expected to see curiously lifting a heavy head on a muscular neck as she approached.

This could be a problem.

She calls his name, too quietly at first, her voice grown unaccustomed to use. After three tries, she sees his black mass approaching from the other side of the clearing.

He nuzzles his heavy head against her chest and she smells the pine needles on his breath.

She smells different to him, vaguely musky, and tired. She's softer now, and warm with sleep. He's going to have to find the way back for the both of them. Where was she for all that time? When she left, it was raining, but the ground isn't even wet any more, only vaguely damp. The rain wasn't enough to penetrate much below the surface. And the footing in the woods will be difficult in the dark, especially if it rained there as well.

Georgie lifts his head, snapping both ears around towards a noise in the woods. Flaring his nostrils, he smells only the damp earth and the trees.

Elspeth rubs his nose, dreamily looking out over the valley and imagining a battle scene unfolding in front of her. Her mind still full of shell blasts and glowing fires, she imagines being a general fingering an ornate waxed moustache and gravely watching the battle unfold below.

This rouses her, and she carefully mounts the horse, talking softly to him as he leads her down the trail to home.

God knows what time it is, she thinks as she ducks to clear the first branch.

That's the problem with a horse who's not used to being ridden—he judges the height of the branches he passes under without considering the rider on his back. After ducking a few times, Elspeth decides to stay down, to protect her eyes from the inky twigs which scratch at her face and because she still hasn't woken up properly.

ALISTAIR:

Don't be frightened.

Don't get excited.

Don't be frightened.

No heroism.

Sure, right.

Whatever.

Just stick to don't get shot, and you'll be just fine.

Try to think about something else, but don't *really* think about anything else.

Alright.

Elspeth.

Right: too much hair, the way she pulls it back over her ear, the warm smell at her neck when she wakes up, her skin pink and raised where she was leaning on it. Her teeth. They way the hair tickles my nose when she's on top of me.

Mmmm. That's nice.

And everything else.

There. I think it's working.

Still nothing from the pillbox, nothing at all. Jesus, I wish they would have given us some more rum. It can't have been more than a few minutes and I'm cold again. Think about Elspeth again.

Georgie, the Glen, big blue eyes full of my face.

Shit. This isn't working.

Big blue eyes full of my face.

Cold smelly mud coming right through my tunic. Have to find myself one of those new long coats. Rain's quite steady now.

Big blue eyes full of my face.

And my throat hurts.

Maybe I'm getting a cold. That would be great—really. Get a cold and get a leave warrant. At the very least it would plug up my nose so that I wouldn't smell this place. I don't care if I never see it again or never smell it again. A nice cold right now would be great.

Big blue eyes full of my face.

Remarkable how the mud sticks to you here.

Like glue. They say that it's because it's full of shit. Really. For a century they fertilised these fields with it, and now they have us roll around like damned pigs

and shoot at each other.

What was that?

Jimmy's taken cover—do the same. Just watch him and do whatever he does.

This time it's real.

Three bursts from the pillbox. Four seconds each. They must have plenty of ammunition if they're firing like that. Either that or they're very scared, which would be perfectly reasonable.

Keep your head down and wait. That's it, curl your hands over your face and get as close to the ground as you can without digging But keep the rifle dry or it'll jam. (Not that it's been used, of course, but appearances are important, especially here. And Jimmy might need it if his jams again.)

Jesus, this stuff really smells. They say you get infected real quick if you get injured out here, and to smell this crap is to believe them. Remember Private Johnston who sat down on a spot where the gas had settled and stood up with a rash all over his legs. Like you can really see where you sit in this darkness. There could be ten bodies in this hole; detached arms, floating eyeballs looking helplessly at the flares in the sky.

A hand on my shoulder. This should startle me, but it doesn't. Maybe I just don't want it to.

"Alistair?" Loud in my left ear. Mud in my right.

Open your eyes. Now take your arm away from in front of your face.

It's Jimmy. "What?"

"It's alright, they weren't shooting this way."

The others. Christ, they must have gotten the others. Fired enough bursts to cut them apart. "Do you think they..."

"I don't know."

"Were they firing that way?"

"I don't know—I wasn't looking."

"Well, maybe they weren't." Of course not.

He's not looking at me any more. He's crawled up to the edge of the hole and is looking down his gun at the pillbox.

Get up next to him.

Don't want to be alone out here...was that on the list?

Something's very wrong. It's not supposed to be like this.

Jimmy's voice, whispering: "I think they got the others."

How can he say that so calmly?

Swallow.

Ouch—sore throat, remember? Not very clever.

"How do you know?" God, I can hardly even talk.

"They've got the gun around and it's pointing at where they would have been."

"...Do you think they're all dead?"

This one's going to end up with a lot of adjutants at the front door.

"I don't know."

"So what do we do now?"

"I don't know."

Wow. This is new. Encourage him—he's bound to come up with something.

Me: "what? We can't stay here. When the sun comes up we'll be goddamn sitting ducks."

"I know."

"Why don't we just go back?"

"We can't leave the others like that. They might be alive..."

Yeah, right. I didn't see them heading over here to take care of us in too much of a hurry...

Don't think that!

Jesus, that's horrible. What the hell's the matter with me?

"...some of them, I mean."

A quick slap on the inner right thigh—lice biting again. Damn. They've been quiet all night. I almost forgot they were there. The wet must have woken them up.

Don't get too distracted. "What if they send others out to find our party?"

"They won't."

"Why not?"

"Not enough time. The sun'll be up soon."

Stupid question. I knew that.

"So what do we do then?"

Jimmy pulls his lips into his mouth, making a squeaking sound that used to be funny. This means he's thinking.

Just, whatever you come up with, don't make me go and look for the others, alright? I think I've had enough for now.

"I don't see that we have much choice."

Good, so we go back, right?

"We have to look for them." There's reservation in his voice.

Courage. *Courage*, as the French at home say, like a prayer. Or a benediction. Mother, Elspeth, Virginia, Georgie and Father. Right hand tightens around the grip of the rifle. Get it over with. Go in, go out, try to do my job. We have to look for them. It's only fair. They would have to look for us.

Don't think about the lice in your underwear. Don't think about the one crawling up between your...no, don't. Right.

No lice, no mud, no rain, no cold. Good. Now get Jimmy's attention.

Me: "alright, then, let's go."

That's it.

Safety off.

A quick glance at the pillbox: no movement.

Alright. Only about fifty yards—keep low.

Go, go, GO!

Over the top and to the right run as fast as you can without standing keep the legs apart for the best possible balance a quick hop over a horse's corpse, duck to the left behind an embankment.

I'm breathing hard too hard maybe pushing my heart into my throat I can feel the veins in my forehead pulsing up and down

Now dive onto the lip of earth and wait for Jimmy.

He can't be more than a few feet...

Here, now, right under me, some poor dead bastard groans as my weight forces the air out of what's left of his lungs.

Christ, the smell is unbelievable.

Roll off him and to the right.

Jesus, I'm sweating now, like my brain's trying to swell its way out through my eyes and ears.

Oh God, maybe he was gassed!

Is this what it feels like?

A quick image of my face swollen and bloody: poisoned.

Shit, I'm screaming.

Stop it.

Stop it!

Cover your mouth. Clamp the hand right over your mouth.

At least I've stopped rolling.

Feels like I've been kicked low in the stomach, just above the belt.

Mud in my eyes.

Close them tight and pop them open again.

I think I'm crying. It's too warm on my face to be the rain.

Just relax.

Breathe.

I can't.

I'm gagging. Bile and rum in my mouth, hurling forward through closed fingers. My stomach's forcing its way into my ribcage and up to my throat.

Cough it out.

Hunch over, guard your belly.

Right, now open your eyes.

They hurt. I can't believe this. My eyes hurt. Maybe the swelling from the gas has already started. I'll be blind in twenty minutes, maybe fifteen.

Where the hell am I?

Why is it so fucking quiet?

No Jimmy anywhere.

Maybe he was hit.

No. Don't think that. Jimmy's just fine.

Right. Big blue eyes full of my face.

Just pick up your rifle and continue looking for the others.

Damn! No rifle. Just mud and what feels like a bit of barbed wire.

There, there. Just breathe and try to relax.

Swallow.

Bile, rum, sore throat. The bile hurts more the second time around.

There, now think. Nobody's shooting at you right now and that's what you want. And if you really were gassed when you landed on him it would hurt a lot more right now.

Alright, so I was carrying the rifle by its shaft in my right hand, and I was running. Then there was the hop to clear the horse and I dove onto that poor bloated bastard. Then I rolled down the edge of this embankment but managed to stop before the puddle and God-knows-what-else at the bottom.

I must have left the rifle back up there.

Right.

Back up the hill—hands and feet. Too slippery for hands alone. This is ridiculous. I must look really batty.

It's raining harder now, which stings the eyes. And it's starting to get light.

Fuck, I've got to get out of here.

There. Something's moving, and it's much too tall to be a rat.

From the right, where the rest of the company must have been when we lost sight of them. It's too dark to tell, but he can't be from a raiding party because there'd be more of them. Fritz always travels in threes.

But what if two of them got killed? He's walking towards the German side, not the other way around. And he's walking like he's tired.

I'm sure I'd make a nice prize.

At least take out your knife.

I...I can't. It's not here—it's still on the end of the rifle.

He's getting closer. I freeze and maybe he won't see me. (This works with snakes at home.)

Big blue eyes full of my face.

Can't be more than ten feet away.

Jesus, Elspeth, I love you more than anything.

"Alistair?"

Hand on my shoulder.

If he wanted to kill me, I'd be dead by now.

Thank you.

Alright, open your eyes.

"Jimmy?"

"The others are dead."

"All of them?"

"I couldn't find Anderson. But all the others were there. .You hurt?"

"Um..." alright, quick inventory—legs, arms, body, head, "...no. I'm alright."

"Good. We've got to get back. There's only a few minutes before the sun comes up."

His hand grabs my arm, just under the elbow.

Me: "I need my rifle."

"Where is it?"

"Up there somewhere." I point. Vaguely.

Jimmy looks up. He shakes his head. "We'd be exposed to fire up there," he says.

He's right, of course.

ELSPETH:

I was never frightened of the forest because nobody ever taught me to be. I think it's one of those things you have to be taught. But that's not making all that much of a difference now. It might be because I've been dreaming and thinking so much about where my Alistair must be right now, but the forest seems so different to me. When we came back from our session up here, I hardly noticed it passing—I remember resting my head on Alistair's shoulder as I sat behind him on the way back, and all I wanted was to smell that spot on him for as long as I could. And I remember the feeling of my wetness—and his wetness as well—between me and the horse. Then, the forest couldn't last long enough, even though he had slowed Georgie a number of times. Now, all I want is my bed and a dry set of clothes.

That's terribly selfish of me to say, I know, especially in light of Alistair. They say the lads go weeks out there without getting so much as a roof over their heads, unless you count those funk holes they cut as sleeping-places out of the sides of the trenches. It must be horrible to sleep in the rain.

He's such a sweetheart.

I know it makes me sound weak, but I cried for an hour when he asked me to marry him. He said that he wanted to take care of me, and that he couldn't think of a better way of doing it.

Even if I had wanted to, how could I have said "no" to that?

All I really want is to have a chance to try with him, and all I keep thinking about is whether he's even still alive as I think these things.

And I can't help imagining the telegram or the adjutant that will come if he's been killed. And all of this dreaming will be for nothing.

Sometimes I'm such a ninny that I can't imagine ever lasting until he comes home. And I know that it's selfish but I pray that he comes home in the next few weeks because I know how much he loves to see the leaves as they flash off the trees in the wind.

I can feel it. I know it's unbelievable, and that you'll scoff at me for saying so, but I can feel it, right here, where my belly pushes against the horse's back, just below my navel. I can feel the warmth. I can feel how good a father he will be.

And sometimes I wish that I hadn't timed it the last time we were up here—that I had told him "yes" when I knew there was a chance that he could have made me pregnant. I never would have done that, you understand, because it would have to have been our decision together—but I don't know that I'll be able to forgive

myself for not having his baby when I could have if he doesn't come back.

Men like Alistair are rare, and right now I want his baby more than anything.

God.

You know, the one thing I need to do to get myself through all of this is to stop making myself cry so often.

All I want is to be at home, in my warm bed, with my new husband, and I want him to rest his head on the spot on my belly where I can already feel him.

I don't think that's wrong.

I really don't.

ALISTAIR:

"Look, Alistair, we'll get back to the trenches and send somebody out to get your rifle afterwards, alright?"

"The Lieutenant's not going to like that."

"If we don't get back soon there won't be anything left of us to like."

This makes good sense. Nod agreement.

That wasn't a good idea—my head really hurts.

The run back should be easy enough. It can't be too far.

As long as nobody shoots me.

And the shelling will start up again any minute, and God himself knows I don't want to be in the middle of that.

There goes Jimmy. Stand, but crouch...And—go.

Alright, all I have to do is keep my feet in his prints and I'll be fine. It's bright enough now to see them without straining. No shelling yet. I can feel myself smiling at the way his footprints start out big and slowly collapse as the mud settles back into place.

That's it. Now I've definitely gone mad.

I follow his left turn towards a hole in the barbed wire.

"Ginger Snap! Ginger Snap! Ginger Snap!" Jimmy yells the password at the sentry.

The first shell of the morning is fired from up ahead. Ten seconds and it will hit.

There. I can see the sentry's periscope. I can't believe nobody's shot at us yet.

Quick hop over the parapet and that's it.

Jesus, Mary, and God.

Maybe I'll land on somebody's breakfast.

This fails to make me smile.

2.

"I really don't think that's a very realistic thing to say, Peter, that's all."

"Oh, and I suppose you think it's realistic of me to agree to send her off to the city just like that? You really don't have a clue do you?"

Angela's expression is hard, unyielding. "I think I have more of an idea than you do"

"What! Since when are you an expert on these things? You never went to a day of school in your life."

"I don't have to be an expert on these things. I'm a woman and she's my daughter and that's all that really matters."

"So you would have me send off my daughter to the city before I even know if my son's coming home? Because you're a woman and that's what she's going to be so you know."

"I reckon that that way there would be room for her in the upper schools—on account of all the young men being away, I mean "

"So what happens when the lads get back?"

"Well, at least she will have gotten some education."

"This is insane. You're talking like a bloody suffragette." He sights her down an outstretched arm ending in a pointing index finger. "You've been given too much freedom as it is, and it's gotten to that feeble little head of yours You'll be wanting to go yourself next."

She moves carefully, placing herself across the table from her husband, with an easy escape on either side.

"No," she says calmly, "it's already too late for me."

"And what does that mean?"

She can see the veins bulging in his neck.

"Eh?" This he yells, loud enough for Virginia upstairs to hear.

"I'm too old, Peter."

"Right, and I suppose I took you away from a brilliant career in the academic world and we would all be so much better off and happier and there would be world peace if I'd have let you follow your bloody destiny, right?"

Angela sighs, gathering her hands at her waist, carefully meshing the fingers into each other and thinking briefly of the church game she had taught to the children. She takes a breath to speak and then stops, realising that her husband hasn't finished.

"I mean, that is the way you think, isn't it?" The yelling is beginning to

weaken his voice. "I suppose I should have left you there, pregnant and bloody alone. I should have left you without a penny and with a goddamn bastard in your belly for all the world to see what a slut you were, right?"

She begins to speak and then pauses, reminding herself to stay calm. It's only talk. "No, Peter. Not at all. We made the choices we made, and you were as gallant and as gentlemanly and as righteous as you could have been, and I was as much part of the decisions as I needed to be."

He doesn't believe her.

Him: "so what's the problem then?"

"The *problem*, if you must call it that, is that Elspeth sees real potential in that daughter of ours, and I happen to agree with her. That's the reality we have to face. And I'm not going to be one who stands in the way of my child, and I'm not going to stand here and let you tell her that she can't go to school..."

"You're not going to *let* me? Is that what I heard? There must be something wrong with my hearing because that's what I heard. I heard you say that you weren't going to let me do something. Last time I looked I was the man of this house. Last time I looked I was the one who made the decisions. Last time I looked I was the one who said what my children were going to do. There must be something wrong with my hearing because I heard you say that you weren't going to *let* me do something, but I know in my heart of hearts that you would never say such a thing to the man who has provided for you and your blessed daughter all these years."

"Please, Peter, this isn't about us."

"Oh, *au contraire*, my dear, it's all about us. It's about how you don't respect any of the sacrifices I make around here. Do you really think that all of this"—a broad sweeping of the left arm—"comes like a bloody gift from the heavens? Do you realise what Alistair's off there fighting for? Does it all mean anything to you at all?"

"If Alistair were here he'd be on my side and you know it. He's the one who taught Virginia how to read when you couldn't be bothered—because she's a girl, no doubt—and he was the one who got them to like the idea of using their minds. I bet you that if he were standing right here next to me this very minute he'd tell you that himself. And I bet you would listen, too."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not being ridiculous."

"Oh, so I suppose you think I am, right?"

"...no, but you just don't seem to want to understand."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" His voice is quieter now, tired:

frustrated.

"It's not *supposed* to mean anything, Peter...Look, let me put this another way. Virginia has decided to go to school in the city, and I for one think it's a wonderful idea, and so does your future daughter-in-law. You may not agree, and that's fine—there's nothing wrong with that at all—but Virginia, as you well know, is just as stubborn and as determined as you are, and when she gets something into her head she's going to do it—for better or worse. It's glaringly obvious that she wants this, and I know that she'll do it one way or another. And we can either stand in her way and make her resent us or we can agree to send her and give her our blessing. It's really up to us to do it that way. And if we don't we might well lose her for good."

"I've never heard such nonsense."

"Look, Peter, what do you possibly have to gain by keeping her here against her will?"

"You want to know what I have to gain?"

She nods.

"Nothing," he says, "nothing at all. But why don't you ask me what she has to gain by staying here? Eh? Did that ever occur to you? I didn't think so. But what you don't seem to want to realise is that she has so much to lose if she goes and so much to gain if she stays. You say that you know because you're a woman. Fine. But there's another thing that you need to consider, and that's that I know because I am a man. I know what men are, and I know what men are like in the city—especially a city full of returning soldiers—which is what Montreal will be any day now. Do you really think she's going to know how to deal with a city full of rowdy soldiers who have barely seen even a French whore in the last three years? Come, now. I know what we went through, and how easily your life was turned upside-down because you got pregnant at the wrong time. But you were lucky because it was my child, and *I* knew what my duty was and *I* acted accordingly - I've spent a good deal of my life doing the right thing because it was just that and because it's just what one does...But what is it that makes you think that it won't happen that our daughter will let a soldier-boy get a little too affectionate? And what happens if he disappears having left her a little forget-me-not festering in her belly? Have you thought of that? What if he infects her with something he got from a trollop on the continent—what about that?"

Her expression is empty, and he can hardly tell whether she's listening.

He lifts his arm, waving an upturned palm across the table at his wife. "You talk of how she needs to do what she wants to do," he says, "and how, if we stand in

her way, she'll only resent us an we'll lose her. Alright, fair enough. But what happens if she gets pregnant and disappears? Then haven't we lost her anyway? What if she's abandoned by this man of hers and she comes back here—having spent our money—and has a bastard child under my roof? Doesn't it make more sense to keep her here at least until Alistair gets back?"

She swallows lightly and tries a smile, tilting her head slightly towards her left shoulder. She lifts her hand to her forehead and pushes a strand of peppered hair out of her eye, taking and deep breath to gather patience.

"I don't know, Peter. I just don't know. I suppose every mother thinks she did a better job than her mother did on her, and I really wish that I could just tell you that that just won't happen to Virginia, but I don't know that I can—at least not and be completely honest about it. It might happen. But I don't see why you think it's more likely that she gets herself into trouble in Montreal than out here."

"That's simple," he says, almost sympathetically, "we can keep an eye on her here—look out for her best interests."

"I still think her best interests are to go."

"I know you do, but..."—and this is a clever tactic—"the reality is that we just don't have the money."

"And if we did?"

"We don't." That's it. Stick with it.

"And if I managed to get some?"

"There's no point in even arguing it, Angela."

"Can we at least agree not to decide now?"

"Why?"

"Well, because I think when Alistair gets back," she pauses briefly, aware that only effort and concentration had made her say *when*, "that you might want to reconsider..."

She knows he has the money, in the tack room of the barn, stuffed into the bag on the left side of the children's saddle Virginia used when she was smaller. One hundred and seventy-three dollars—she counted it earlier this morning, when he was off skidding logs out of the woods. One hundred and seventy-three dollars. It would be enough to get her there and get her settled, but after that she would find work. If the soldiers were back she could get work as a nurse's helper or something like that; she has a pretty face. One hundred and seventy-three dollars. She looks at her feet.

He frowns.

"...having spoken to him, I mean," her eyes still fixed on the feet.

"Do you really think that will make a difference?"

"Yes, I do. You listen to Alistair, and I think you'll listen to him even more when he comes back from this war."

"And will you get me my supper if I tell you that I'll talk to my son about it?"

Angela pulls her mouth into a wider, shinier smile. "I wouldn't want to deprive my man, now would I," she says, trying to tease, briefly remembering the softness of her younger hands. Shaking her head to kill the image, she moves to the base of the stairs to call the girls down to supper.

Next time, she thinks, we'll try him when his stomach's full and his guard is down.

3.

Sept 4, 1917

Dearest Elspeth,

There is so much to tell you that I hardly even know where to start. I am pleased to report that I remain more or less intact—and this despite the persistent German infantry's best efforts to have me otherwise!

It seems so funny to me—in a strange way, I mean—as I write to you now I find myself relaxing quite comfortably in a little Belgian inn, where Jimmy and I and a few other lads from the sixth have decided to stay during our three-day leave warrant, and it seems as though the front itself is a world away. It's such a pleasure to be able to stand up straight again! I think posture has to be one of the least known casualties of this war. I've had a bit of wine, as have the rest of the boys, but I decided to stop because I really felt as though I should reserve some of this time—which is really just about the most civilised of that I have spent out here in Europe—with you, my love, if only through the medium of a pen and paper. Also, I find myself, for the first time, free from the eyes of the censor (for an extra few francs, the concierge here will smuggle the letters to Paris and then through civilian mail—this she agreed to after much laughing at my silly accent!) which of course allows me to be quite a bit more candid.

I must admit that I have been thinking quite freely of you of late, although it disturbs me somewhat that you are becoming more and more—how to put it?—more and more distant and perhaps even unreal. I don't want you to think that I don't often dream about our times together, but I find myself talking to you not in the way that we used to at the farm or up on the Glen, but rather the way I would if you happened to be another one of the chaps right here in the fray with me. What's difficult about this is that I quite honestly can't decide whether it's a good thing or a bad thing. It is good, I

reckon, in the sense that I feel the need to include you in everything I do—especially when I'm so frightened and thinking of you and the way you love me helps to comfort me—but I don't like the thought of your being included in any of the mess that goes on around here. I still have your picture covered in the pocket of my tunic, but I often think that's a little, well, pointless. I'm polluting you with this war because I really can't help it—because I use your image to help me through the tight spots, because I write to you about it, and because I've seen and felt things here that I'll never stop thinking about and that I will bring home to you eventually. I really believe that if I start hiding things from you we don't even have a hope of ever getting anywhere. Maybe if I expose you to some of it now it'll be less of a shock when I get off the ship. I'm afraid I just can't protect you from that because it's too much a part of me now and so, still, are you. I don't honestly have the strength to protect you from that any more—it seems so futile and artificial to even try. I hope that doesn't upset you.

I need to tell you that they don't grant leave warrants for having a nice smile around here—they only really grant them after severe stress and combat situations or for convalescence from bad trench foot or the like. Again, I assure you, my love, that I and my feet are both fine, but how and why I survived the last week is a secret only God can tell. Some of the lads who make it through a particularly bad scrap feel lucky and even cocky, but all I feel is tired and a little guilty. I didn't even fire my rifle for Christ's sake, and I've got the CO telling me how bloody brave and skilled I am!

We're all more than a little frightened here—and being at this little inn really only accentuates that. Tonight, I will sleep in a real bed—for the first time since I left Halifax! You can't believe what a pleasure something like that can be. And I've managed to find someone in town who is, as I write, finishing the washing and ironing of my tunic—including a full de-lousing! And the bath—I could spend hours raving about the bath (in fact I think I did!) But this is really quite frightening,

because the weather's gone bad now——rainy and cold——and I know that two days from now I'll be loaded down with my pack heading up three miles of muddy roads to the front.

And there are an unusually large number of us here——on a leave warrant, I mean——which can only mean that the generals have decided to rest us up for a few days to have us fresh for...well, for something big. They just don't do this sort of thing unless they're about to ask for a lot from us in a few days. So you can see that the rest really isn't all that restful. Maybe it's the wine, but I have a really bad feeling about all of this.

Anyway, enough of that. Please just know that I'm fine and will be back as soon as we can get this job done and get out of this place.

I have taken advantage of some of the free time here to catch up on my reading——first through the Oxford collection of poetry which the Brits here get as standard issue (I traded mine for a tin of cigarettes) and, more recently, of a copy of Hardy's Tess, which your aunt graciously sent to me. Many of the lads read here, and when I've finished Tess for the sixth time I'll find somebody who's willing to trade something else for it. I must confess to you that reading these books here is really rather a strange experience——I look on the works so differently now. Most of the poetry which was uplifting to me at home I now find even somewhat upsetting——there was a time when I could read some Keats or Shelly and look up from the page to see something akin to what was being described, but reading the works here just makes me yearn for a bird or two, or even some firm ground to stand on without sinking in. If there's any real word to describe all of this war and all of this silliness I'm stuck in it's ugly. Everything is just so ugly that it dulls all the senses——to the point that you miss beauty the way I do you (indeed, the two to me are one in the same), and you long to rediscover and appreciate it just for its own sake.

Some of the lads here see things just before they die, and it's almost always

described as being beautiful. I think that it's because it's beauty that they're yearning for, and beauty that they're hoping to see.

The other thing that strikes is the romance that we're missing. I don't mean the two of us, you understand (certainly not!), but rather the situation here. The soldier in Tess is tremendous—sprightly, bright, shiny and exciting if a little dangerous. A wonderful icon indeed. But we're none of those things. These books and these stories and these poems and—worst of all—the people who sent us here—sold the idea of romance and honour to get us to come here. And they try to keep selling it to us. Why else would all the Brits have a copy of the Oxford?

There's mud here, sweetheart, a sort of yellow mud that sticks to everything you have, and lice, and shit, and people getting all sorts of things blown off, but there's none of the romance. I really hesitate to tell you this because I still feel I need to protect you, but it's so much a part of me now that I just can't not tell you. A machine-gunner who came by our section the other day stopped for a quick bit of Bully Beef and Biscuits, and he told us the most horrendous story. In the assault on Vimy, he had seen a member of his own unit literally have his stomach blown open, and he was sitting there, in the middle of Nomansland, screaming and trying desperately to shove his organs back in. He begged the gunner to finish him off, and started screaming obscenities at him when he refused. That's the only time the gunner ever abandoned his post, and he said that by the time he got to halfway down the communication trench he was screaming three times louder than the disembowelled man. And the gunner could easily have been shot for deserting his post, so he's lucky that he's still here. Where the bloody hell is the romance in that?

We were promised something, my dear Elspeth, we were promised it and we're just not getting any of it. Christ, all I want to do is survive. I don't want to shoot anybody, I don't want to kill anybody and I don't want anybody to shoot me. I just want to keep up appearances and make it out of here. It's a horrible thing to say, but I

sometimes hope that I'll get a wound just bad enough to get me home but not bad enough to kill me. A lot of the lads here talk about such a blighty. But then I would probably have a scar or a missing something or other that would remind you, every time you looked at me—and me, every time I saw the way people looked at me—of this mess, and I certainly don't want that. When I leave I want to leave as totally and as completely as I possibly can, and I want to be rid of this all.

But, you see, I am once again polluting you with this war. Now that I've told you that you will never forget it and it will never really leave you alone and every time it emerges from the very back of your memory it will cripple you as it does me and it will destroy your beauty the way the shells have destroyed this land until you manage to push it into the back of your mind once again.

And I can hardly even forgive myself for doing this to you, but I honestly don't see how else we can both survive this.

I want you to know, my love, that Jimmy has become a good friend and proven himself to be an excellent soldier, which is more than I can say about myself. I want you to know that we do virtually everything together, and I want you to know that it is my firm belief that the closer I stick to him—especially when things get really dangerous—the more likely I am to survive. I firmly believe that. He's very calm and very level-headed and seems a natural for this soldiering business. And he'll get me home even if I can't get myself home. I've even seen him fire his rifle, and when his jammed I gave him mine. The old originals here say that it's foolish to get too attached to anyone in particular because chances are they won't make it through the next shelling or aeroplane strafing run. But I really feel that Jimmy will make it—in a very dignified and unheroic way—and he's become a little like my good-luck charm.

Of course I'm probably just going mad, but I am still alive—our company lost 27 men in the last month, many of them far better soldiers than I could ever dream of being—so it is working so far. Eleven died on the raid I was on just two days ago.

Forgive me, but I was on a burial party yesterday before I left and it was a little difficult. Sometimes, my dear Elspeth, we bury just a foot or an arm because that's all we can find of the poor chap.

Enough.

Now then, I'm going to put myself into this bed and imagine you here with me and think about the excitement in your eyes. Sweet dreams, my love, and I'll write again soon.

Alistair.

ELSPETH:

I had the singular misfortune in Sherbrooke today to be faced with an old school friend of mine who has come back from the assault on Vimy without the lower portion of his left leg and with horrible burn marks on his neck and part of his face. You know what it's like, when you're walking down the street and spot somebody like that from a distance you try to look away and pass the person with as much dignity and respect—and admittedly, distance—as possible.

Well that's exactly what I've been doing thus far and exactly what I attempted to do today.

But he knew me, so just as I passed he called out my name, so I had no choice but to stop.

I certainly couldn't ignore him if he knew who I was.

His name was—or rather still is—Joseph Darby, and we knew each other pretty much right up until I moved to take that teaching post. He was a very dignified and proud young man, and a real favourite with the girls. But he's just not the same anymore. I mean, he was that way—the Joey Darby that I knew was that way—but the man I saw in the street today I didn't even recognise.

It was really rather frightening at first because I didn't know how to deal with him—in the sense of all the usual platitudes, I mean. I couldn't bear to look at him in the face for more than a few seconds because I kept seeing his features, burned, slowly melting and becoming my Alistair's. And his voice was so different—there had been real strength before, and the confidence of one of the most handsome men I have ever known—a man who knew full well how he appealed to the girls—but now he was quiet and I had a difficult time hearing him. I'm sure it was partly my fault because I didn't want to get too close. Silly, that, really, but I suppose a part of me reckoned that whatever had happened to him might be catching, so I kept my distance even though I kept telling myself over and over and over that that was the very last thing he needed. And I kept trying to get myself to move closer to him, but I couldn't.

Now I don't want you to think that he was in any way horrible or a monster or a beast or anything remotely like that—he was, as he has always been, a perfect gentleman—and all I could do was distance myself as much as possible and wish for the whole meeting to be over without upsetting him.

So I pretended to be in a hurry, but that didn't seem to deter him.

And when he saw the trouble I was having looking at him he pulled us both

into a little doorway where we could finish our conversation out of the sunlight.

I know that makes him sound like those old Jack the Ripper stories, but he meant it simply to help me because I was having so much difficulty talking to him. I supposed he's got used to people seeing him and having such problems. He was on his way to a lawyer's to see if he could possibly get a bigger pension for his disability, because nobody was willing to hire him on account of his leg and he was, of course, of no use to the military anymore.

I asked him what he was living on and he said that he had inherited some money from his uncle who was killed by a shell last year but that there wasn't much left.

He hadn't even the money to buy a proper wooden leg and was just sort of teetering on his cane the whole time we spoke; his trouser leg was folded just below his stump and was neatly pinned as if it had always been that way and it was the most perfectly normal and natural thing.

And then he asked about my Alistair and I told him—I told it all just like I've been telling you, and it just flowed right out of me without any hesitation. And as I think about it now I realise that it was—or rather that it must have been—part of my attempt to distance my Alistair from the man who was standing in front of me. All I wanted was to think that I would never see such a thing again, that such horrible things never happened and that my Alistair was going to come home a little tougher but otherwise just as strong and as beautiful and as graceful as I always saw him to be, and that he would come by the schoolhouse one evening at the end of classes and pull me up onto Georgie behind him and take me up to the Glen.

And he wouldn't even have to say a word

But that isn't going to happen. It was right there, in front of me, a broken voice speaking to me out of a shadowy alcove...and it was telling me that it wasn't going to happen.

And I hate not wanting to face that and not wanting to come to terms with it. You should see the town now—there are soldiers everywhere, and you hardly see anybody else. But it's very different from the way it was when it first began The soldiers now are quiet; almost as if they weren't there at all. When I came last year, I could hardly set three paces out of the train before I was approached by some of the boys offering me flowers or stockings or sugar in exchange for a little, well, company. And I'm certainly no beauty. But Joey was the only one who talked to me today.

And in that filthy little alcove he told me about the front and about the lice.

He told me of shells falling like rain and of men literally blown to bits in front of your eyes. He told me about those horrible Huns who they say have crucified Canadian lads with their own bayonets and left them to die there within earshot of their mates who were so pinned down that they could do nothing, and about how lucky he was to have survived his wounds. And he said that anybody who had been to the front would be a soldier for life and would never forget what he had done and what he had seen done and what he had been ordered to do. And he told me that what my Alistair needs more than anything is my love and my support and the knowledge that wherever he goes my picture and my letters are right there with him if only as a sort of talisman.

(Well, he didn't say that exactly because that's not the way he talked, but that was what he meant).

And all I could see was the outline of his face against the bright October sun and the way his breath rose slowly from where his mouth must have been as he talked.

And then he started to talk about how he got injured and how he had only just that day come back from a visit with a girlfriend in France and his mind was still on her and not on being careful so—as he put it—he copped a blighty and now he was home.

And he wished me luck, and I thanked him.

And then he leaned forward to embrace me, and he pulled me tight against him, crushing my breasts up against his chest and resting all his weight on me so that I could hardly breathe.

And I pulled my face as far up and away as far as I could, trying not to catch his horrible burns, and then he let go and I left him behind, there in that alcove.

And I've been washing ever since I got home.

4.

"Jimmy?"

Nothing. He's more than ten feet away, and it's difficult to hear with all the commotion about, so Alistair picks up his pace and approaches the other man.

"Jimmy?"

He looks up heavily, still hung over from the weekend's wine and more than a little grumpy at the prospect of having to walk at least another mile to the front.

"What is it, Alistair?"

"Well, I was rather hoping you would consider doing me a favour."

Jimmy sucks the last from his cigarette and throws it into the mud by the side of the road. Above, fragile aircraft buzz gracefully through the drizzle and towards the front. "What is it, Alistair?"

"I was thinking about all of this, you know, and about how we're about to get back into it all, and I was rather hoping that you could make me a promise "

Jimmy frowns and re-adjusts the straps on his rucksack

"It would be reciprocal, of course, and you really don't have to, it's just that it would put me a little more at ease if I knew that..."

"If you knew that somebody such as myself would talk to your family and your Elspeth in the event that I survived and that somehow you did not."

"Well, I never thought about it quite so bluntly, but yes, essentially."

"And you, Private Alistair Preston, in return would agree to do the same in the event that you survived me."

"Oh, I don't think that's very likely, Jimmy, you're much better at this soldiering business than I could ever..."

"Anything can happen here, Alistair, you know that."

Their feet drum in time on the duckboards. This is no longer deliberate

"Yes. Well, yes, in that case, yes, but you understand that it might well take me some time to get out to that part of the country after I got back."

"That's alright, just so long as you do go Doesn't matter if it takes years, really. I shan't be around to mind." A smile Shiny teeth, lips still stained from the wine.

Alistair dutifully smiles back.

"So what would you want me to say to them, Alistair?"

From ahead: "Down!"

A brief pause as the men crouch at the sight of an aircraft approaching from

the front. A British scout, it does a slow victory roll above their heads and continues on into Belgium.

From behind: "bloody fool!"

The pair stand slowly under the weight of their packs, not bothering to brush the mud out of the knees of their newly cleaned khakis.

"It's difficult to say, really. I suppose you'd have to feel out the situation—and God knows I wouldn't want you to talk to Father and Mother the same way you would talk to Elspeth. I suppose that my parents—Father especially—would want to hear all about my bravery and my heroism and oh what a soldier I was and all that kind of nonsense...In a way I suppose that I'm asking you to lie on my behalf."

"Don't worry about it, Alistair, everybody's a hero once they're dead."

True enough.

A nervous smile. "But you understand that I would want you to talk to Elspeth properly—you wouldn't have to say any of that hero rubbish. I need her to know that I love her—or that I loved her—and that I really wanted us to be together. But I also want her to know that she has to continue and that she has to find the time and the energy and the strength to continue without me because she's making such a contribution to so many people and I wouldn't want my passing to jeopardise that in any way. I can't *possibly* tell you how important it is for me for you or somebody else to make this sort of promise to me."

"Easy." Jimmy's voice, deliberately soft.

"What?"

"Relax, Alistair, just try to take it easy."

"But this is so important to me."

"I know it is. And yes, in the event that you were to die and I were to survive of course I would see your parents as soon as possible and tell them what I thought they wanted to hear. And of course I would go and see your Elspeth and tell her all about how you thought and spoke of her endlessly when we were together and how badly you wanted her to go on and not let your death affect her more than it had to. And no, I would not lay so much as a finger on her. And I would have done all of that any way, Alistair, because it's just what one does. You know that, I know you do. But for God's sake try to calm down, because the more nervous and the more tautened-up you are the more likely you are to make me keep my promise. Alright?"

Two salutes as they pass through the first check-point and past the first row of heavy guns. By midday they'll be back at the reserve trench

"Sure, Jimmy, I'll do what I can."

Up and to the left, through the mist, Elspeth appears briefly in front of him, a fleeting figure on top of a heavy, muscular horse. He sees her smile her smile briefly at him, whisk her hair from her eyes and coax the horse into a canter away and towards the line. She's wearing her blue-and-white Sunday dress. Alistair swallows and tastes the stale wine rotting at the back of his throat The soreness is gone He closes his eyes tightly and pops them open again, seeing only a Sergeant-Major directing traffic from the back of a tired looking thoroughbred

He looks back at his mate. "And thank you, Jimmy," he says, remembering his manners, "I really do appreciate it."

"I know you do, but it's nothing It's not like I'm actually doing you a favour, you know, I do expect you to do the same "

"Of course...Is there anything in particular you would like me to say?" His eyes scan the horizon for Elspeth and Georgie, but bring back only miles of yellow mud, khaki-clad infantry and a grey sky.

"No. Not especially. Just the usual, I suppose Although I would imagine that they would appreciate hearing it from somebody who actually knew me here."

"Sure they would." He squints at the horizon ahead.

"What are you looking at?"

No answer.

"What are you seeing, Alistair?"

"Hmmm?" Still nothing, although he does spot one of those ridiculous tanks stuck in the mud about a quarter-mile to the Northeast "Nothing," he says, snapping his head back to look at Jimmy's face, "just my mind playing tricks on me, that's all "

Flanders is probably the dirtiest part of the Western front, and the Ypres salient has been a real problem for the allied forces ever since the German invasion was pushed back three-and-a-half years ago. It was the site of one of the Canadian Corps' first battles at a time when they were young and green and equipped with beautiful Ross hunting rifles, which are marvellously accurate but have a nasty habit of jamming under repeated use—especially in the presence of dust or mud, of which there is no shortage in the salient. The English have a name for Ypres which the Canadians, since their return to the vicinity of Passchendaele Ridge earlier this week, have slowly begun to adopt. When you walk about the trenches and you listen to the men playing with greasy stacks of cards and gambling on the weather, you hear it all the time now. They call this place *Wipers*, and they complain about it to no end because it never stops raining and the shells have been falling non-stop here for over three years, and in their forays into No Man's Land the boys are faced with the rather grim prospect of encountering not only the usual coils of barbed wire, shell blasts, gas and machine-gun fire, but three years worth of decomposing and partially buried complete and fragmented human remains.

The Canadians are known to have a rather, well, a rather unique attitude about Wipers or just about any of their other campaigns. The first Canadians to come here three years ago were "the old originals," most having had previous experience in the South African war—and the vast majority were British-born The boys you see in the salient now are quite different. They are not professional soldiers, and their only real desire is to win and go home as quickly and as cleanly as they can. And that is exactly what they've been called in to do here.

It needs to be pointed out that Sir Arthur Currie, the C in C of the Canadian Corps in Europe, has demanded heavy artillery in order to support the advance of his troops, adding considerably to his reputation for wasting shells instead of men. For the last few weeks the corps have been resettling into the salient, laying wooden roads over the mud (by lining up *bath mats* made of slatted wood) to allow the rapid deployment of men and equipment despite the soft ground This of course exposes them much more than would the usual communication trenches, but there is no choice, the yellow ground here is so soft that a trench is impossible to keep intact without heavy reinforcement with steel plates and wooden supports, and all of these are reserved for the front line. For the first time since the beginning of the war, communication trenches have virtually ceased to exist

Logistics officers from the corps insist that this is by far the worst situation

they have ever faced, and one officer in particular related to me of having to shoot a donkey that had become so trapped in the mud that he could not be freed.

Men routinely weep quite openly here, and nobody bothers to do anything about it any more.

The last weeks have involved primarily little scraps with the enemy—raiding parties and the like, but we're betting on this side that Fritz has no idea how many troops there are across him from No Man's Land That way we'll have surprise on our side when the first big wave goes over the top.

Oh, and that, my friend, is meant to happen this coming week.

"I was thinking, Alistair, about what you brought up earlier today, and I thought that it might help you feel a little better if you filled in the will printed on the back of your paybook."

Alistair looks up from among the various pieces of his dismembered rifle, a dirty cloth in his left hand. "Come on, Jimmy, everybody knows that those wills don't ever stand up in court."

"I know, I've heard that too. But if I witnessed yours and you witnessed mine, it would make them more acceptable—in the eyes of the law, I mean."

"I saw something today, Jimmy."

"What?"

"You know how the old originals say that a man always knows when he's going to buy it because something very strange happens to him and that there's nothing anybody can do about it?"

"You don't really believe in that do you?"

"I'm trying not to. But I did see something "

"What did you see?"

"I saw Elspeth on the back of Georgie. I saw her right there in front of me as plain as day." He looks down the barrel of his rifle and, satisfied, begins to put it back together.

"I wouldn't worry about that, Alistair, you're just seeing what you want to see. What happens is that your eyes get tired and your mind starts to picture what it really wants to, so what you imagine and what you really see are one in the same."

"And don't you think that's a bad sign?"

"No, not particularly," he says, "but I do think it's a bad sign that we're sitting here along with the whole rest of the Canadian Corps waiting for God-knows-what."

"We're not here for a picnic, and you can bank on that, Jimmy. You remember the posters at home—the ones with the little boys asking his Daddy what he did in the war?"

Jimmy nods a shallow nod Another aeroplane buzzes by.

"Well, you can tell them that you were sitting in a shit-filled hole with the rest of the Canadian Corps in October of 1917, wondering, like everybody else, what the bloody hell was going on. And you can tell them that you honestly had no clue whether you would survive, and that, as you looked up and down this bloody hole," an arm, its hand holding a newly-filled cartridge, sweeps towards a small gathering of soldiers over an improvised stove, "you knew bloody well that a good number of the

lads were never going to leave this place..."

"Which is a damn good reason to do our wills, don't you think?"

"I don't own anything, Jimmy, you know that."

"Neither do I."

"So what's the point?"

"Look, Alistair, this morning you seemed desperate for me to guarantee you that I would talk to your family and Elspeth. If neither one of us survives, these wills just might. And they'll make the gestures that we want each other to make."

"And I just sign it and witness it and that's all?"

"That's all."

Alistair perches his rifle against the corrugated-steel wall of the trench and slides over to make a spot on his canvas ground sheet for Jimmy He reaches into his tunic, fingers past the covered Elspeth and pulls out his paybook

Book III

1.

ALISTAIR:

Christ, just what I need.

Is it really too much to ask to try to get a little sleep out here?

I'm in a bunker. Or at least a rather poor excuse for one. It' tough to build a real bunker around here—the ground's too soft.

Trying to sleep.

We had a false alarm for gas about twenty minutes ago, and Jimmy's doing his sentry duty with his mask on. Scared the hell out of me and now it's difficult to settle down again. I think I got too used to that bed.

The ground is so saturated here that a lot of the shells don't even explode They just sink clean into the mud. It's a little silly, really, because you send yourself flying to the ground, make a big splash and cover your head, but when you expect a big boom your hear nothing. Or if you're really close you hear a sort of sloppy splash. Either way, it's not what you've come to expect

But if I got lazy and stopped taking cover, I know that the very first shell would explode and that would be it

What's difficult, of course, is trying to convince the new lads that there really is danger from these shells.

And on top of it all this land is now filled with hundreds of unexploded shells Planted like tulip bulbs, waiting for someone to make them explode They could be here for years.

Then again, so could I.

Turn over.

Ouch!

Why is it that I always forget about the bayonet at my waist?

Turn the belt and shift the knife to the other hip.

There.

Now my neck hurts.

Of course.

I bet I'm picking up new lice here You spend ten bloody francs to get your uniform de-loused and it lasts until you have to try to sleep in a trench

If I concentrate I can probably feel one crawling on me.

There. Coming up my leg. I knew it Soon they'll be all over, sucking blood out of me. Do you think they could actually kill you- if they sucked out enough, I mean? They must be doing better than anything else with this war Except maybe

for the rats.

Ignore them. If you don't you'll become frantic in about three hours. This has been proven by experience.

Right.

Don't think about them sucking out your blood.

So sleep.

What if I can't? I'll be going out, probably tomorrow or early the next morning and I'll be so cross-eyed that I won't even know which way to run.

Not that I do now anyway.

But this is serious. If I'm to have a chance to survive, I have to sleep.

Alright.

Nice and comfy?

Well, good enough.

Right, now think about nothing...

It's not working How can I think about nothing?

Another shell, about fifty yards away. This one explodes on cue, but of course I'm already lying down. And I'm already underground. The vibration brings a little dirt down from the ceiling and into my hair. But there's really no point in brushing it out. Not now, at least.

Turn over again.

No, that won't work. I'm too tired to turn over and not comfortable enough to sleep. And my hair's full of dirt

A sigh. Not deep enough.

So just sleep then.

Right.

A quick check that the gas mask is still there.

Of course it is.

This is the fourth time I've checked since. .well, since I got here.

The sun will be up soon, and the morning stand-to

Then I'll be able to see who else has bought it since we went on leave.

Some new ones, naturally, because they don't have a clue what they're doing. This is true for everyone, of course, but we have to have some sense of something or other for having lived out here for all this time

Then again I've only been here a few months.

Enough.

Sleep--remember sleep?

Right, I need to sleep.

That's established.

Relax.

How?

Think about Elspeth.

What, just like that?

Why not?

...Mmmm. Pretty girl.

I wonder which of my letters she has gotten so far. It's ridiculous to even try to think about it. Even if they make it past the censors they might not make the trip back home. They say that one in three ships is sunk by a submarine on its way across the Atlantic. (I wonder what a submarine looks like.) Even if they did get through she's probably running a good month behind That would mean that, assuming all the letters got through, the last one she would have seen was the one that I wrote from the barn when Jimmy's feet were in such bad shape

Jesus, a quarter of our section has been killed or injured since then

And I was damn near one of them.

Not that she would know this, of course.

For all she knows I might not even be alive any more

And what about when she sees me again? Have I changed at all? I can't imagine that I haven't—I've been letting this war get to me far too much to not be changed by it—but will she like it? Will she still like me?

I bet she'll make me start shaving every day again.

And she'll think I'm too thin, but that can be cured

Especially by her.

And then of course she'll be different somehow, I'm sure I can still see her, just, and the way her neck becomes her ear But sometimes I have to look at her picture just to remember what she looks like I know where the bits are and everything, and I can remember some lovely details, but I just quite honestly can't quite figure how they come together

Sit up and take out the picture.

There, now unwrap it.

The wax paper's fraying. I'll have to find some more soon

There's a real limit to what I'll see in this light, but at least it might help.

There.

That's a little more like it.

God, she doesn't even look like what I pictured.

Flat and static. In this light she looks grey, and there's no hint of the size or colour of her eyes.

And the damn picture is three years old. She didn't look like this when I left.

She came to Sherbrooke to see me off, I remember, it was just starting to get warm and she was wearing her blue Sunday dress and...

All I can remember is the dress. It *was* almost seven months ago.

I wonder how much longer her hair's gotten itself. Maybe she had it trimmed. Maybe not.

And I can't honestly remember what she smells like.

I remember liking it—or loving it—and I remember revelling in that. I used to be able to smell her moods on her. This means that I'm more than a little eccentric, I know, because she told me, but it meant everything to me to be able to smell her, and right now I can't honestly remember what it was like.

I should have tried to remember her smell when I was at the hotel, but it just didn't occur to me then because I was so excited about the bed.

Maybe it's all this shitty earth I'm lying in. I probably wouldn't be able to smell her if she was right here sitting in front of me

Of course if she were in front of me now I could touch her, which would more than make up for it.

And I could draw my hand slowly forward under her ear and we could lie down and...

No. There's really no point in thinking about that now. It isn't going to help any and it certainly won't make it any easier to sleep Which is meant to be what I'm in here for in the first place, remember?

I look down and my thumb's rubbing back and forth across her face.

This is a poor substitute for the real thing. I wonder whether, about three hundred yards that way, there's some other lad doing exactly the same thing in his hole. I'm certain there is.

My thumb stops moving and then it starts again.

Over there, to the left, to the right, behind the lines, all along the trenches. They say you can walk from the channel to the Swiss border without ever leaving your trench, and I bet there's someone doing this right now all along that line. Thousands of us, rubbing our thumbs back and forth against the hard surfaces of photographs. And on both sides of Nomansland.

I bet Heinrich was doing this to his sweetheart before he had his throat cut.

We'll probably all be doing it when the sun comes up. It's easier than sleep, and it calms the nerves better. Some of the lads who don't have sweethearts do it with pictures of their mothers or sisters—or even ones they've clipped from somewhere or other. You can buy pictures like these in some of the villages.

It's impossible to sleep around here tonight anyway because of the amount of activity. Something's about to happen.

And those aeroplanes are starting to be a real nuisance As if we don't already have enough to worry about, we have to keep an eye on the sky in case they swoop down to strafe us.

Mines below, planes and shells above, barbed wire and machine guns all around.

I don't want her to know this.

A swallow. Stale wine in the back of my throat, remnants of bread that tastes of sawdust forming a paste on my palate.

Put her away.

Carefully.

There, now lie down again and try to sleep.

My lips are sore.

Quick check for the gas mask. Still there.

The other lads are all asleep.

There's a trick for this which I'll try. Just listen to one of the other chaps carefully and try to match his breathing Mum taught me that. If you can make a game of it, you just sort of trick yourself into breathing like your asleep and then, if all goes well, you're asleep before you know it

Alright...

Of course this only works when you can actually hear the other person's breathing.

Another swallow.

Concentrate on keeping your eyes closed

We live like animals here. Digging holes like this to get away from our enemies, sleeping with rats and worms and lice Lying in the shit because it's the only option to standing in it. And if I'm lucky this bunker won't collapse on me and bury me under ten feet of mud. That's by far the worst way to die here, because you know exactly what's happening to you and you have plenty of time to realise it before you go unconscious. It can take as many as ten minutes, and if there are any air-pockets you might actually survive. Assuming somebody sees what happens and

actually risks trying to dig you out, that is. Sometimes when lads get buried alive they shoot themselves instead of having to die like that, and all the digging parties find is a bunch of suicides. Then they don't even get a decent burial.

Then again, they are buried in a sort of pre-made grave.

Right here, where I'm lying, I might well lie for the rest of time. If one of those shells strikes a direct hit, that is. And if I sleep through the rest of tonight somebody else will take my place in the day, and this will become his grave instead. Sooner or later this hole will be a crypt.

And after all this is over the fields will be cleared and it will all go back to normal. And farmers will walk past this spot every day with their horses. And somewhere, under that, the ground will be fertilised with...us. And it will be booby-trapped all over with the shells, and for hundreds of years the ploughs will turn up barbed wire and rifles and bayonets and iron crosses and razors and combs, and people will come from miles away in the hopes of finding a little piece of this bloody mess to bring home and put on the mantelpiece next to the photograph of uncle Thomas who died in the trenches.

And Elspeth will come, if I die here in this hole, she'll come and ride up the side of the ridge to look down on where I died. She won't know exactly, of course, but she'll ride up to the German side where you can see much better than from here. And she'll come and she'll say something- or maybe she'll just think it--and then she'll be able to leave me here And she'll go to the military cemetery wherever they decide to put it and she'll lay a wreath at one of the hundreds of thousands of anonymous graves in the hope that it just might be me. And all the while I'll be here, under the mud, covered with worms and not lice like I am now. And the rest of me will have grown up into the grass.

And she'll ride the horse right up to here and she'll smile because she'll feel something of me again. And the fields will be green and there'll be birds and nobody shooting at anyone, just a couple horses pulling a plough like Georgie and Franco at home. And underneath them thousands of arms and legs and skulls and nobody will care what uniforms they were wearing because they'll all be rotted away

And she'll get off the horse here and she'll lie down on top of this bunker. But it won't be mud any more, it'll be warm grass, and she'll close her eyes and let the sun fill her And she'll think about how we were at the Glen before I came here, and what we said and did to each other and how it all meant the world

But it won't upset her After the telegram and the adjutant at the door and the trip across the Atlantic she will have done her crying, and it won't upset her to 'ie

here on top of me.

She'll smile her smile for me because this place will again be beautiful, and she'll smile because I'll be in a beautiful place again.

And then, when the sun starts to go down and it gets cold, a man will come and rouse her, and they'll get on the horse together and go back to Canada. And my grass under her will slowly unfold and become straight again.

And then I'll be able to sleep.

2.

"Do you ever think about what would happen if my brother died over there or if he came back without an arm or something?"

"I try not to think about those things, Virginia. It's not very productive."

"But how can you not?"

"I can't, really, I just try not to. It's not going to help any."

"Do you ever get approached by anybody else? Do they ever come up to you hoping that Alistair's died or lost an arm or something and that you'll take them instead?"

"No!...Honestly, where do you get such ideas?"

"I don't know, I just thought well, because all the men have always looked at you, and the way that Paul Miller sometimes used to come by school just to chat, that's all."

"It doesn't work that way, Virginia. When you find yourself a man you decide to stay with like I did, all of that will seem as silly to you as it does to me now."

"Well, I *am* almost fifteen."

"It's not how old you are."

"What is it then?"

Elspeth sighs and puts her hand on top of Virginia's. These conversations aren't supposed to happen, she reminds herself. This is what happens when you give a fifteen-year-old a glass of wine, which just doesn't seem like all that clever an idea any more. "It's more what you've lived through in those years. And I had no idea when I was fifteen. I had never even kissed a boy."

Virginia pulls her hand away and sits up in the chair "I have," she says.

"That may well be, but it doesn't remove from the fact that you don't really understand.. "

"It was Francis Baker, and it happened behind the schoolhouse during a recess Some of the girls say it doesn't count on account of his being a cripple and all, but I say it counts Felt rather funny, really. Does it feel funny to you?"

"Well, I've never really thought about it now have I? I suppose it felt funny my first time as well, but you get used to it and you get to like it."

"Like with drinking coffee?"

"I suppose so."

"Molly says some boys are better at it than others."

"And Molly would know, would she?"

"To have her tell it."

"Well, Molly's right."

"So what makes a good kisser?"

"You really want to know this?"

"Of course I do. I wouldn't ask if I didn't want to know."

"It's not really a technical thing. You have to remember that the same way different boys are different with these things so are different girls different."

"Right. So what makes a good kisser?"

"If you must know, what makes a good kisser is how you feel and how he feels."

She smiles into a laugh. "And good teeth don't hurt either."

"So if I get to go to the city I should look for a nice boy with good teeth."

"And a job."

"How does that affect whether he's good at it or not?"

Elspeth: "it doesn't."

"Oh, right. But it does affect how he'll be able to treat me. Do you think I'd like it there?"

"I wouldn't have suggested it in the first place if I didn't think you'd like it."

"So what's it like?"

"Well, we would probably try to send you to a boarding school where you would live full time, if we can find the money initially, that is. They're usually run by nuns and..."

"Nuns?" Fear.

"Yes, nuns. But they shouldn't give you much trouble because your mother told me that she was Catholic herself."

"Yes, but I'm not."

"It might well mean the difference between going on with your schooling and stopping now, Virginia, so if I were you I'd do my best to be Catholic."

"Alright, I'll be Catholic then. It just means I'll have to work on my Latin a little before I go, right?"

"It's a little more complicated than that, but it wouldn't hurt. And it's not that they don't take girls who aren't Catholic, it's just that they prefer not to. So if they had to choose between a Catholic and a non-Catholic they'd go with the Catholic. We'll just have to tell them that you were meant to be Catholic and that it's up to them to make sure that that's what you become. That way we'll turn it to your advantage. You'll have to learn how to humour them, but I'm certain that you of all

people can manage that."

"Will I have to get a job?"

"Well, yes and no."

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, in all likelihood you will have a job after a few days there, but no, you won't have to go out and get it. The nuns do a lot of work, especially with this war on, and they'll give you a job to do I'm sure. You might even end up taking care of soldiers."

"Maybe I could find a good one that way One who's a good kisser, I mean"

"Maybe."

"Will they pay me?"

She catches Elspeth's expression, "the nuns, I mean."

"Oh...No, I doubt it. But they'll put you up and educate you and depending on how good you are at the job you do you might well be able to get all that for nothing."

"Right, so let's say I do that for a few years Then what?"

"Well, if you like you can go on with your studies."

"Where?"

"It doesn't really matter."

"But a lot of places don't take girls"

"Yes, I know, but it's not as simple as that. You don't have to go to another school."

"So then what do I do?"

"Anything you want...There's something you really need to understand about learning, Virginia, and that's that it doesn't have to be something you do in a schoolhouse or an upper school or even a university Just because you're learning doesn't mean you have to have somebody teaching you If you learn how to teach yourself, you'll continue your studies until the day you die because you'll love to learn about all sorts of things you've only just begun to think about and countless things you have yet to find...Look at your brother—he's taught himself most of what he knows just by reading. And you can't honestly tell me your father taught him everything. Learning starts in the school, Virginia, but it doesn't stop there by any means."

"So then you're still learning even though you're not in school?"

"Absolutely. I learn just as much today as I did when I was in school Maybe even more. But the sort of thing I learn now is very different"

"Like?"

"Well, when I was in upper school in Montreal we had very strict rules on account of our being girls and it was difficult to get a taste for what was really going on around us."

"Which is why you hadn't kissed a boy yet."

"Among other things, yes. But when I came out here to teach I started to learn about all sorts of things like fields and crops and how to take proper care of horses and all of that sort of thing."

"I already know those things."

"I know you do, Virginia, and I suppose that puts you ahead of me at your age, not that it's a competition, you understand. But it's not the only thing I learned when I came here, and it's certainly not the most important I started to learn about myself more, and I started to understand what it is that I want and what it is that I need, and I started to see a whole great mass of new ideas and new possibilities "

"That's my brother's fault isn't it?"

"Well, I don't know that I would say that it was his *fault*, exactly, but a good deal of it is thanks to him, yes."

"Is that what makes it different from the others?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. When you love somebody, Virginia, it makes it very different from having a boyfriend for the sake of having one. And it's very easy to love someone who teaches you so much about so many things."

"So then does that make him a good kisser?"

A smile. Big, white teeth. "You don't really want to know that about your brother, now do you?"

"Not really .What I mean is: is that the sort of thing that makes one boy a better kisser—for you, and I suppose for me, one day, I mean—than another?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"So that's why you've decided to wait until he comes back before you make up your mind about anything?"

"There's nothing left to make up my mind about, I've decided and I'm very happy with my decision."

"What if he comes home different?"

"Well, he's bound to, now isn't he? Nobody goes to Europe without coming back different, and I doubt very much that Alistair will."

"Won't that change things?"

"Certainly it will change things But I'll be different as well. Maybe I won't

have changed as much, but I'll certainly be different. People aren't static, Virginia In all the time you've been sitting in the fourth row of my schoolhouse I sincerely hope you've come to understand at least that. I was telling you how important it is to me that I keep learning from everything around me, you remember?"

An impatient nod.

"Well, just as I learned from Alistair being here, I've also learned from his being away, and that has changed me. You're very interested in boys and men and love and all that sort of thing right now, and that's perfectly normal, but when you're with someone you love then nothing else appeals to you. You were talking about trying to choose a boy who was a good kisser. That doesn't matter. *Choosing* a boy is a bit of a silly idea, really, because that's just not the way it works When he comes along it just feels like the right thing. It's not a logical thing at all And when it feels right it'll feel right when you kiss him, and that will make him a good kisser. But what makes you stay with him is that you talk to each other and you learn from each other and you want to be with each other not because it makes sense or isn't he clever or what a kisser or anything like that, but because you can feel inside that it's the right thing to do and you can't imagine yourself doing otherwise "

"And that's what my older brother is?"

"Yes. That's what Alistair is to me "

"What if he comes back and he's not any more?"

"Then I'll—no, then *we'll*—deal with it when the time comes But I certainly can't go on the assumption that that's going to happen and start frequenting all the bachelors in the county, now can I?"

"Because you won't find one that's as good a kisser as my brother "

"Well, in a manner of speaking, yes."

Virginia sits forward in her chair, leaning across the table towards Elspeth. "Do you really think I'm meant to go off to school?" she asks

"Yes, Virginia, I do. We've been through this hundreds of times, and you know what I think.'

"Yes, but Father says girls aren't meant to go to school because they're just not made for it."

"You don't really think that he's right, now do you?"

"Well, no, it's not necessarily that But when you get told something over and over every time it's brought up then it's hard to keep believing in something else. And there are other things to consider."

"Like?"

"Like that it's making things more than a little difficult at home. Mother and Father fight over it every time it's brought up, and I think Father's starting to see it as man-versus-woman. But what he doesn't know is that it really doesn't have to be that way at all. Why does he have such a problem with the idea?"

"That's not for me to say, Virginia, I hardly know the man."

"But what do you *think* it is—you must have some idea "

"It's not my place to meddle, and I'm only a distant observer but...but I think that he wants to keep you around so that he can use you to his advantage."

"How?"

"Well, if he keeps you at home then he can control exactly what you do and who you see, and he thinks that he'll be able to control who you end up marrying and all that sort of thing...But you see maybe that's not quite fair of me .I don't mean to make him sound like a bad person—it's not that, really—I just don't think he's prepared to let you go somewhere where you'll be completely away from his control. He's just being a parent, and I think he genuinely wants to take care of you and he genuinely thinks you'll get into some sort of trouble if you leave—or at the very least you won't come back. But what he doesn't seem to be able to understand is the implications if you don't leave and if he wins. ."

"He won't. I'll go by myself if I have to."

"What are you going to do, sneak away in the night?"

"Maybe. If it comes to that, I mean "

"And have you thought about what that would mean for those of us who stay behind? What will it be like for your mother after you've left? Even if you don't tell her about it before and don't tell her where you're going, there's no way your father's going to believe that she knew nothing about it. And God knows what he's going to think about me if you do that."

"Don't you want me to go to school?"

"Yes, of course I do, but I also want you to understand that you don't have to do it that way Look, I know you feel stuck and angry and frustrated, but that's no way to leave. If you do that you can't ever come back, and I don't think that's what you want. We've been trying, Virginia, your mother and I, to find you a way to get to school and make it acceptable to everybody including that father of yours, and I still think we'll be able to succeed. But you have to be patient. These things don't just happen over night "

"Will I have to wait until Alistair gets back?"

"Perhaps."

"Do you think that he would help at all?"

"Well, if you mean do I think that he would want you to go to school in the city, then the answer is yes. And I think he'd talk to your father about it, and I know for a fact that your father will listen to him, especially after he's done his bit in this war. In fact, if all goes really well Alistair may help you before he even gets back."

"How would he do that?"

"With a letter. I told him, a few weeks ago, about all this, and I have a feeling he might well decide to talk to your father about it."

"Then maybe I could get to school in the city for January?"

"Well, I suppose it's possible, but I certainly wouldn't rely on it."

"Maybe Mum will be able to convince him if Alistair's letter doesn't come."

"Maybe."

"He doesn't listen to her, you know. I don't think he ever did. And he certainly doesn't listen to me. I think you're the only girl he listens to, and I think he only does that on account of your being engaged to my brother. I think he listens to you as a favour to Alistair, and I guess he just doesn't feel he owes any of the rest of our sex any favours at all."

"You're probably right, but..."

Virginia's voice, straining to sound like Elspeth's: "but it's not my place to say."

A smile.

Virginia: "you know what?"

"What?"

"I bet he's not even a good kisser."

"I don't even want to think about it."

3.

October 29, 1917, 23:40
ACTING MAJOR GEORGE WINSTON PERCY:

Gentlemen, I have brought you together to brief you on our objectives for tomorrow morning's attack and to answer any such questions as you may have regarding tomorrow morning's offensive

We will assemble here for our morning stand-to at 05:30 hours. At that time you will be given your rum ration and reminded of the objectives and further separated into raiding parties and given more specific objectives

At precisely 06 30 hours we are to proceed thirty-five degrees East North East and take this emplacement which has been named Vapour Farm for the purposes of our offensive. The artillery barrage will begin ten minutes before our attack and will advance of the rate of three hundred yards per hour unless changed during the attack. The first shells will land two hundred yards from our current position. At 12:00 hours you are to report to the commanding officer on the morning's progress. Should you reach the objective before that time you are to hold your position and not advance so as to ward off any counter-attack which the enemy may be inclined to launch.

You are reminded that full equipment must be carried. I know that the conditions here have often led some of you to discard certain items which you consider unnecessary. In view of said conditions I have, except in the gravest of these oversights, endeavoured to look the other way. That will not be the case for tomorrow's advance.

In addition to standard equipment you are each being issued additional ammunition. Please see the quartermaster after this briefing to pick up your share. You are reminded to fire only on a visible position and only when within range.

Gentlemen, very few of you here have fought in conditions such as these before, but I am grateful that you all have some experience of the Western Front. I have no desire to dictate the nature of your advance Be reminded that the gunners will advance the barrage by three hundred yards per hour and that your objective is Vapour Farm. We all know how difficult it is to move over this ground, and, short of a miracle, tomorrow morning will be no different. Do your best to keep up the pace, and try to stay out of the shell holes

I am reminded to stress that in the event that a comrade is wounded, you are to

plant his rifle barrel-down in the ground as close as possible to the casualty so as to alert the medicals and then continue with the attack. Staying with the wounded will not be tolerated and will be considered insubordination Should you consider the chances of the downed soldier's survival minimal to nil, do not stand his rifle next to him. This will enable the casualty parties to get to men more likely to survive their wounds more quickly and more efficiently

I have been assured by the flying corps that we will be protected from strafing runs from German aircraft such as we have been subjected to over the last few days, so that may well no longer be a concern.

The weather is not expected to change, which means we will advance in all likelihood in a light fog, which will help keep the aeroplanes away When obtaining your ammunition from the quartermaster you will be handed a brief list of passwords for the attack. Read it, commit it to memory and destroy it before morning stand-to

If there are no questions I would advise you to rest as best you can and prepare your weapons for the advance We were brought in here, gentlemen, to relieve our friends the ANZACs, who were unable to capture the objective Let's show them what we can do.

Dismissed.

October 30, 1917, 06:00;
ALISTAIR:

Jimmy: "You ready?"

"No." This is true, I'm not.

"What do you mean you're not ready—I've personally checked your pack and we've been through all the passwords and you must have cleaned your damn rifle twenty times in the last six hours, you have your mask and your emergency dressing's still sewed into your tunic, the bloody wills are signed and ready to go and we've had our rum .what have we forgotten?"

"Nothing that I am aware of."

"So what's the problem then?"

"There's no problem I'm just not ready, that's all." It's too cold to go anywhere, and it doesn't look like the fog's going to get any thinner. And the sun just doesn't feel like it wants to be up. This means most people will be inclined to shoot anyone on sight. My chances of being shot are as high as ever, only now there's a good chance that I'll get shot by one of our own as well. Rather like a suicide only with the help of an unwitting private of some sort. It'll make him feel like a right twit, I'm sure.

Jimmy looks upset. I say: "you can't honestly tell me that anyone with half a fucking brain expects that we're going to do anything other than make this mess worse in weather like this We'll just be adding more body bits to the soup." (We swear a lot in the trenches, which is another habit of which I'll have to rid myself before going home.)

This does not seem to have done much to make him feel better.

Jimmy: "look, Alistair, nobody put you in charge of this "

"I noticed."

"Well, did it ever occur to you that there was a reason for that?"

"Yes."

"And what do you think that is?"

"Simple: I'd get us all out of here. And intact, too."

"You'd just up and leave. Stroll away, if you will."

"Yup."

"Why?"

"Why not? You can't honestly tell me we're actually getting anywhere." But

Christ they're going to make me go out into that mess anyway aren't they? Because that's what they do and that's the way it is and there isn't a damn thing I or anybody else can do about it.

Last night, no sleep, really, just constant thoughts of heads and arms bobbing out of shell holes like apples in a barrel at a child's party And Elspeth riding Georgie around. No success, no objectives, no enemy, even Legs and arms and heads trying to pull me into their mess, but nothing else And this air is thick, as if the fog is made of little grey solids and breathing them is like breathing water, forcing it heavily into and out of the lungs.

A heavy, industrial mist that smells vaguely of oil and cordite

Dead.

Perfect day to be gassed, this.

"Look, Alistair, I'm tired of going through this every time we go out into the fray."

"Well, maybe I'm tired of doing it, too."

"You can complain to me all you want, you know, it's not going to do either one of us any good."

This is true. "So what then?"

"Nothing."

"We just sit here while everybody else goes over the top?" That would be ideal. Maybe I could crouch and nobody would notice me I could get out my spade, dig a hole and have Jimmy fill in the top of it and I could breathe through a pipe

"No, we do exactly what we're supposed to Nothing more, nothing less It's just a question of doing our jobs "

This is ridiculous. If this were really a job I could quit without being shot "How can you see it as a job? Nobody in his right mind would do this for a living—nobody in his right mind would do this unless he absolutely had no choice "

"Which brings us back to our predicament We have no choice "

"So we just do it and hope to get it over with as quickly as we can?"

"Don't see how else it could be done "

The problem, of course, is that neither do I

The best thing would be to find another solution, to put down this silly unused rifle and just stroll back away from all this, but we'd be court-martialled in a minute Or we could fight our way out, but that would get us into even more trouble We could have gotten ourselves VD and gone to one of the hospitals to be treated, but it's a little late to be thinking about that and it gets home that you've been with a

prostitute, which would not go down too well. Elspeth's awfully understanding, but I think she may have trouble with that one. Then there's the self-inflicted wounds, but I've never had the courage to do anything like that. This is a little strange of me, I know, but I've always had an admiration for people who are able to seriously hurt themselves in order to get away from all of this. If nothing else it betrays an intensity of desire. But I just can't. I don't know that I have any intensity at all any more, and I don't know that I want anything that badly If I did they might send me home, but I'd be discharged and I'd have some sort of deformity or scar or other mark to remind me constantly of what I had done, and I doubt that I could cope with that.

Then, of course, there's suicide, but that really wouldn't solve much and I haven't the courage anyway. I suppose I'm still holding on to the idea that I can get away from here without anything at all.

Clean in, clean out. Jimmy's right, there really is no other way.

Father always said to do things that way. *He* wouldn't have any trouble with this.

Overhead, the first shell of the morning arcs towards the German lines, right on schedule. In four minutes we'll be going over the top behind Percy.

Jimmy's back to checking his rifle and pack I push a hand into the tunic and feel Elspeth's picture again. This fails to comfort me It doesn't even look like her, and it certainly doesn't feel like her

Superimposed images of bloated bodies exhaling heavily on my face, frothy blood bubbling out of open mouths.

Jimmy. "you want to go through this one more time?"

"Sure, why not?" Maybe it will distract me a little.

"Alright. Our objective is..."

"Vapour Farm "

"Which is?"

"A hole in the mud by now, no doubt."

"No, I mean where is it?"

"East North East Thirty degrees. About a quarter mile " I point. In the right direction, too, which I think surprises Jimmy a little "Funny name, that, isn't it? I mean—Vapour Farm—what do you suppose they farmed there?"

Gas? Maybe that's where Fritz makes it all.

Souls? Dante would love that.

Some of the wonderful ghostly mists from the Greeks?

"I don't honestly see how that makes any sort of difference to us now."

"No, no, granted. But what was there before?"

Doric columns, men in bronze armour, gods changing shape and seducing one another.

"Look, Alistair, I'd suggest you find something else to think about because you're about to go into something very dangerous. If I were you I'd be thinking about being in the right place and being fully equipped and not getting stuck in Nomansland the way you were last week. Now tell me how quickly the artillery barrage will advance."

"Three hundred yards per hour, starting two hundred yards from here." A quick image of us advancing under a mechanised parasol of lobbed shells

They take the iron from the ground, melt it into shells and then force it back into the earth. Around and around

"Right, so to be safe you don't want to advance at more than "

"Two hundred yards per hour." That sounds too slow But the ground is very difficult. Jesus, if they're making us advance at that pace it means that's how quickly they expect us to be able to advance And if the past is any indication they tend, if anything, to over-estimate

"Unless?"

"Unless we hear otherwise through the channels." This is what school must be like. "Look, Jimmy, I know this."

"And you're going to keep knowing it until we're done and you're not going to know anything else. Because if you know anything else in the next six hours you'll be thinking about that something else and while you're thinking about it a bullet'll get you. But if you know only the bullets and the gas and the shells then you'll be able to know everything else you could possibly want to know after we get to Vapour Farm and have secured it, but not before, alright?"

"Alright." That's a comforting thought

Two more minutes

Elspeth in front of me in a cream blouse hanging gracefully over her breasts, and a big smile Last Christmas, when she gave me this picture and some mother-of-pearl buttons which I've had put on the shirt I'm to wear when we marry And the fire playing off the light in her eyes, and the shiny teeth

And later her warm, soft hands on my chest And her joking about how I smelled of maple because I'd split almost three chords that day alone And how she said I was tight because of the strain on my arms and shoulders

And how I told her that I was tight because I was excited and that I was happy,

and that I would have been just as tight if I had spent the whole day in bed.

And the smile above me, the toss of the hair brushing my neck and the face snapping around and the impossibly blue eyes

Jimmy: "Alright, Alistair, are we all set?"

Big blue eyes full of my face.

"Yes, Jimmy, we're all set We'll be alright."

He pats me on the back of the neck, just below the helmet and above the collar. This part of me feels warm and alive.

"Thirty seconds, pass it down."

Jimmy: "twenty-five seconds, pass it down." A wink.

Me, to a soldier to my right who's trying to clean his spectacles: "Twenty seconds, pass it down."

I can hear my heart, right between my ears.

Bayonet's on

My socks are falling down Not much, but just enough for the mud to get to the skin. If I'm not careful I'll get frostbite there At least it would kill the lice.

Percy scurries in behind me and perches on the parapet just to Jimmy's left. Christ, the last thing I need is to be next to goddamn the CO for this

"On boys!" he yells, his fist above his head.

That's it, we're over.

Can't see anything from up here, no more than from the trench. But they're firing at us from a few hundred feet ahead and to the left. I'm running quite hard now.

Quick look left. Stay low and out of the field of fire. Christ, I can't see more than three or four men down each side.

Jimmy's stopped, he's crouched over something.

"Jimmy?"

Nothing.

Yell.

"Jimmy?"

He turns his head and looks my way.

I've stopped on my stomach, perching up on my elbows.

He looks down again and plants a rifle in the ground. He looks back at me and then down one more time, picks up his rifle and runs towards me, holding his helmet hard on his head because his strap's broken.

"CO's dead," he says, landing heavily next to me.

There, on his tunic just above the right-hand pocket, a shining clump of yellow and red.

"Sniper shot him clean through the forehead. Didn't have a bloody chance."

My belly feels heavy, alive. Somewhere in front of us is a sniper who can see through this mess well enough to get one shot into the CO's brain.

Rifle fire raises little craters in the mud to the right like a really hard rain. Shadows of the lads lurching slowly forward, straining to find something to shoot at. Putrid mist rising from recent shell holes.

"Guess that means Johnson's in charge. Somebody ought to tell him."

Jimmy squints: "where's the rifle fire coming from?"

As if I have any idea.

The Germans, it's coming from the Germans, you fool. They're the ones over that way and they're rather upset now because we've been pounding them with artillery for months now. And those who are still alive have been driven mad by it, because their ears are bleeding and for months all they've wanted to do is get a clean shot at us and now they've got it so they're shooting as much as they can because they know that they're bound to hit some of us and they know we're coming across this fucking shithole of a field. That's where the rifle fire's coming from, and no, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense for us to fire back. But if it makes you feel any better go right ahead.

I beat him to it. I'm so tight and so bloody windy that I fire my rifle. At nothing in particular, but in the right direction.

"What are you shooting at?"

He's straining his eyes, squinting like a Chinaman.

"I don't know. It just went off."

Percy had six children. Six of the ugliest, pastiest-looking little brats you could ever possibly imagine at one of those pompous Christmas things in a big club room with old trophies in a case, everybody knows this because all he would do is show the damn picture over and over again. And now there father is lying back there in the mud with half his brains blown onto Jimmy's tunic.

"Well, don't fire until you see someone to fire at." He says this as if I were going to pass this someone the ball.

Right. I nod a shallow nod.

He crawls forward on his elbows, shaking his legs like a snake trying to get out of its skin. Looks like he's trying to wipe off what's left of Percy. He's off slightly to the left and right around a body, too far gone to tell whether it was a

German or one of ours.

Wait for his feet to come in front and then follow.

Elspeth, on Georgie, smiling down on me, as if nothing were wrong at all. And the heavy smell of wool and horse on her breasts above me. Under a stone at the Glen dreaming about going back every day. Grass again, and the sun of June.

Elbows wet with mud, little craters rising all around from bullet fire. We've been out not even five minutes now and there's at least one-fifth of us down.

Screams to the right. We both stop and look down the line.

Nothing. For once, thank God I can't see anything.

We have to be really careful now because the Germans have had so long to dig in here that they've set up these cones of focused fire. The pillboxes and barbed wire are set up so as to concentrate us into these spots where they have several guns ready to cut us up. Like a lobster trap—you can swim in, but you're unlikely to swim out. Then again we have our objective, and nobody's going to tolerate our stopping.

"There! Three—in front and to the left." I shout this at Jimmy, who sights down his rifle at the last of them and fires.

The man drops, but it's impossible to tell whether he was taking cover or whether the bullet got him.

Jimmy pulls himself up and runs towards where the man fell. He's slipping all over the place yelling something, but I can't make it out

They can't be more than a hundred feet from where the shells are landing.

Christ, I wish I could just up and go right after him.

He hops over the edge of a shell hole and the drops from sight. I pull forward on my elbows, trying to balance the weight of the gear on my back.

Three sharp shots from ahead

Crouch and run towards Jimmy's hole

As I pull up a bit of barbed wire snags my leg and tears the cloth. Underneath, my skin pink and raised, but not broken I pull carefully at the wire so as to avoid cutting my finger and throw it off to the right.

Still nothing from the shell hole.

Big blue eyes full of my face.

There were three of them in that hole, so I set the gun on my hip with the bayonet well forward and charge as best I can. Left foot over right, knees bent, like trying to run quickly through the woods at home only with seventy pounds of equipment on the back. A quick hop to avoid a corpse lying on its back only without its legs, a thinning hand still wrapped around a rifle.

Lungs filling too quickly, heavy with grey air Sometimes I could swear that I hear the dead moaning out here.

Here, try to shift left so as to have the knife pointing down when I clear the edge.

Safety's off, my finger resting on the trigger guard.

But the right foot slips and the left side of my face falls hard onto the edge of the hole. Cold mud in my ear, and what looks like the handle of a bayonet buried just in front of me.

From the hole: "Alistair?"

Jimmy's voice. He must have seen the end of my gun hanging over the edge I shift forward in the mud, my left side cold and slick

"Yeah." My face over the edge of the hole

He's looking down at the German he shot There's no sign of the others.

I roll off the lip and down into the hole next to Jimmy "Is he dead?"

"No. I got him in the leg I think he's just fainted "

"What?" Yelling over the roar of the shells. I hook my fingers and try to dig the mud out of my ear.

"He's only wounded." Jimmy seems satisfied with this

"You'll get a week's leave for taking him prisoner " I nod to get him to acknowledge this.

Jimmy looks heavily at me. "I hope he'll be alright," he shouts

He reaches down and takes the German's rifle, climbing to the edge of the hole to stick it into the ground. Rifle fire blows bits of mud up around the lip of the hole, missing Jimmy by a few feet. I help him pull the lad so that his feet are out of the water at the bottom of the hole, and we both put a few cigarettes in his pocket. As long as he doesn't roll over he won't slip back into the water and drown

His uniform is old and faded, with a few stains here and there and one of the pockets torn off. But the face is young and fresh with big red circles on each of the cheeks. There's no Iron Cross, but I'll bet anything there's a picture of a sweetheart in the pocket that's still there.

This could be the man who shot Percy.

I should say this, but Jimmy already knows and it's not going to do anything to remind him. That's probably what he was yelling about when he came running out here.

Jimmy tears the field dressing from his uniform and presses it down on the lad's wound. There's hardly any blood, although that can be a bad sign as well.

He shuffles back up to my side of the hole and we look towards our objective. It still can't be seen.

Jimmy checks his compass calmly and points in the mist.

Looking around, we can't see any of the others. This means that we're either well ahead of them or they've all given up the charge for the cover of a hole like this one while they try to assess the situation.

It could also mean that...

No, don't think about that.

Right.

Clean in clean out.

A quick flash of pipe smoke rising through Father's disciplined moustache.

The sound of the artillery is almost unbearable now, and every time a shell comes overhead we crouch down to the bottom of the hole and cover our ears. There's a shell every two to three seconds, but most of them are quite far. Sometimes three or four land at the same time.

When a shell hits it sends mud up into the air which showers us a few seconds later. You have to be careful of this because sometimes hot bits of metal come down with it, and they can kill you.

When the blast is far enough away all you hear is a bang and the water at the bottom of the hole changes into a series of circles like a pond when you throw a stone into it.

Really kissing Elspeth after we throw stones into a pond and watching the circles. The water is clear now, and the only sound is the frogs calling to each other across the pond and our own breathing. We're both a little drunk and very guilty, but all we said to the others was that we were going to listen to the frogs. But when we go back everybody will know, and that's when we start being more than friends. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Next to a hole with water, watching the circles.

Another blast, really close. The German slips back into the water from the force of the explosion, leaving a shiny track. Jimmy and I scramble to pull him out.

There's a new wound on him: a bit of shrapnel has torn through the flesh of his right shoulder.

Good thing the bugger's not awake.

"Alistair?"

Jimmy's hunched over the top of me, yelling into my right ear.

"What?"

"We can't stay here."

"Why not?"

"It's too dangerous. If we stay here the attack will break up and we won't get anywhere."

Yes, that may well be true, but how many of the others are thinking that way?

Me: "alright, so what then? We can't really advance until the artillery moves a little further away or we'll be killed by our own shells."

"Right, so we should use the time to organise the lads and see how we stand for the rest of the advance."

Oh, Christ, you're going to make me go back out there just to try to find the other lads, aren't you? Regardless of whether they shoot at me or not, right? I thought you said this would be clean.

"You stay here," he says, gathering his rifle and pack, "and keep an eye on our friend here. I'll be able to find you again because of his rifle I'm going to try to find what's going on. And I should tell the lads that the CO's dead."

And he pulls off his pack so he can run faster, taking only his rifle and the knife. Then another wink, and he's gone, back towards our front trench, before I have a chance to answer.

"Well, Fritz, I sincerely hope you're not too uncomfortable, because it looks like the two of us will be sharing this hole for at least a little while."

No response. His mouth open, saliva glistening down the side of his face. Guaranteed this one doesn't shave more than once a month

Christ, this place smells.

I arrange Jimmy's pack to my side and make an arm rest. This helps me forget about the mud seeping through my underwear, waking the lice into action.

"You should be alright, friend, that leg wound's not really much at all because it's already stopped bleeding, and the bit of metal in your shoulder's only just managed to cut through the flesh. You'll be swigging beer and singing with your buddies in no time."

This makes me laugh.

"Maybe we can get together again after all this is done and you could teach me some of the drinking songs—especially the dirty ones! What do you say to that?" I pat his intact shoulder.

Another shell. I collapse on top of Fritz to take cover, but it lands quite far off. He's frail under me, a frame without substance. If I'd have fallen any harder I would have collapsed his ribcage.

"Don't they feed you on your side?"

Of course they don't. That's how they keep them fighting. Like with a dog—if you never quite feed him enough he gets this anger that you can never really rid him of, which makes for a great fighter. They know about this, I'm sure, and that's why they don't feed these lads properly. But this one's much too thin. They went too far. He could have fainted because of exhaustion and not because of the bullet. Maybe his heart's given up.

If they're all like this then they don't have a chance. All we have to do is make them run and we'll just march in when they're all passed out.

"If you don't smoke you should give back the cigarettes—they're quite valuable for trading on our side, you know I gave them up months ago but still carry them for trading."

I slide my hand into his tunic pocket and grab two of the cigarettes we gave him. On the way back up my finger brushes a rectangle of wax paper.

Hi sweetheart.

Or Mother. He's a little on the young side for a sweetheart.

I pull it slowly out and begin to pull at the paper to get at the photograph

No. If I have the picture in my mind and this bugger dies then I'll carry that face with me for as long as I can, just so that I don't forget.

Back into the tunic with the photo of God-knows-who.

I light a cigarette and inhale because it's something to do. This hits me hard, like a kick in the stomach. Must be a German fag

"You got a will, Fritz?...You see Jimmy—that's the man who shot your leg—and I decided to do our wills in case we ended up dead. They don't really hold up in court, but we witnessed each other's and Jimmy is training to be an advocate and says that might help. So if one of us dies the other one's going to go over to see his folks and try to talk them out of their grief. Good idea, don't you think?"

Of course, there could be one right now out there who's already on his way back to some German village to talk to this boy's parents and the person in that picture. But he's not dead—at least not yet—and our medicals will take care of him as well as they would one of ours.

Another shell, still further away

I climb up on the enemy side of the hole and poke my head out. It's a bit clearer now, but I still can't see the objective There's at least another hundred yards to where the shells are falling now, which means we should move soon before Fritz comes out of his hole.

I snap my head around and see Jimmy and two others flying through the air into the hole, landing with a muddy splash at the bottom

Jimmy stands without trying to clean off "I brought Jenkins and Richardson with us because they were too concentrated at their end" He thumbs to the left.

Over his shoulders, Richardson's looking at the lad Jimmy injured. He starts going through the pocket.

"Leave him alone!" I yell.

Richardson pulls his hands out of the man's tunic and puts them up in the air He's holding two cigarettes. "He won't miss them," he says, and then smiles, bringing one to his mouth and lighting it.

Jimmy: "Listen, there are men to the left and to the right, and most of them are within twenty yards of our position relative to the enemy So we're going to keep advancing fifty yards behind the barrage so as to surprise them when they come out of their bunkers. How far are the shells landing from here?"

Twenty yards. No, he won't believe that So fifty No "A hundred yards," I say, "at least."

Never was much of a liar.

We crawl up to the edge together and I show him where the shells are landing In between is what looks like it used to be a trench, with a battered pillbox to the left.

Jimmy points: "you seen any fire out of there?"

"No. Then again I haven't really tried to provoke it"

"Right, well we'll move on the trench" Jimmy rolls onto his back on top of his pack and slides his arms through the straps

Fighting the enemy in the trench Hand-to-hand and with no room Enfilade fire coming down the line, probably from the pillbox And us with seventy-pound packs to slow us down. Jesus, he can't be serious.

He drops down into the hole to tell the others. It looks quiet out there, almost calm. I feel the emptiness of my stomach and my tongue sweats and thickens in my mouth. There could be three hundred Germans hidden in front of us

Jimmy to the left, Jenkins and Richardson to the right

Big blue eyes full of my face

Lice teeming down my belly.

"Alright," says Jenkins, "let's get this over with"

And that's it, he's over and on his way Jimmy's next, he hops right out as soon as he sees Jenkins go, and then me and Richardson at about the same time.

Nothing.

A barrage of shells landing ahead, two or three every second, but they're quite far now, and I feel like my flanks are safe because there's lads on either side of me. The ground's pretty busted up here, but it's easier to advance when you know what you're shooting for.

Quick flash of a knife buried in Heinrich's throat, the click of metal-on-metal as the hilt strikes the Iron Cross.

Vergessmichnicht.

Thirty yards to the trench now.

Sounds of gunfire, but it's not aimed at us.

Twenty. Jimmy, by far the fastest of us, is almost there. He hooks his rifle up above his head and arches the knife down towards the trench

Ten. Five or six more steps ..

Elspeth smiling as she brings Georgie up to a canter.

Something hits me, hard, from the left, in the mouth.

The muddy edge of the trench lifts slowly towards my face, spiralling into me like water into a whirlpool. Then it fades and finally goes black.

Falling out of McGuire's willow tree and down into the creek, opening a wound on the side of my head Good thing the bone was soft, they said, and I never even felt it.

So this is what it's like to fly.

Watching the pink of the blood go down the fresh creek and over the stones as it slowly dissipates, feeding the fish.

Rising slowly out of the rusty complexion of this land, away from the mud, through a canopy of lobbed shells and towards the sun. A quick swoop over Dover, and the striped canvas lawn chairs arranged to hear the shelling across the channel. Then around, rolling back towards the coast and then back along the road lined with bloated horses. Lying in a makeshift grave and touching a damp photograph. Following me and Elspeth coming through the woods on the horse, trying hard to take as long as possible. Watching Father swear as he chips away some skin cutting wood. The cramped hold of the troop ship, endless discussions about breast size (a devilish smile - "more than a handful is a waste, but look at the size of these hands!") and the best way to get at them

"Preston's down!" The voice close, unfamiliar.

Something pulls my rifle from my hand and reaches into my tunic and quickly takes my watch.

Me, heavy and limp, sinking into the mud The warmth of my own shit

against my thigh.

Hands of the dead pulling me to them, rats fighting over my eyes under a rusty arch of barbed wire, their play lit by a signal flare

Elspeth's face hanging playfully over me, a veil flowing over her big blue eyes. My hands made small by her warm breasts, her hips pushing heavily against me, the flash of crimson at her neck. Her schoolhouse with her in front of it, wearing a yellowing dress with lace around the neck and a stain at the hem, walking towards me and cradling new books.

"You're going to love this one." Her smile, a hand soft and warm on top of mine.

"How bad is it?" Panic. Jimmy's voice, getting closer.

A heavy tug at my left side A pause, and a pull at my right arm which turns me over like the blades of a windmill

The stranger's voice: "Jesus "

This is where it stops, and this is where I feed the land and what will one day grow up into the grass.

Dearest Elspeth, if only I could make you know how I think of you during these times.

Pushing into you under the boulder at the Glen, shooting through and out your eyes, up past the roughness of the stone and over the valley, giddy with new feeling. You hair and pollen and crushed Cedar needles and your wetness combining in my nose. A contented smile, and you in front of the schoolhouse again with a child cradled in front of you.

"You're going to love this one." And a wide smile.

Home.

Jimmy: "We can't just leave him here!"

"There's nothing you can do for him now Let's just get on with the attack."

"I'm planting his rifle in the ground."

"You can't do that! He won't last ten minutes and you know it. Half his Goddamn face is gone."

Hope you enjoy the watch, my friend

Mother's screams as she squeezes a dead child out of her, the pool of blood on the kitchen floor, Father heavy with drink.

Virginia, soft and bright, pointing at pictures in a book and gurgling with smells. Her dough finger darting at the page and the impossible voice blurting "apple" as loudly as possible.

Father's hand digging into my shoulder, fingering the patch on my tunic. His breath on my neck. "I never thought I'd say this, Alistair, but I'm proud." A calloused hand producing a box with the watch in it. Six months' worth, at least.

Elspeth running after the train, trying not to cry. We will be together.

A weight on top of me, breath heavy on my left ear. "Hang in there, Alistair. Elspeth needs you alive."

A hand pulls my tin hat off and perches it over the void on the side of my head. A quick pat on the chest, and the sound of feet in the mud fading. The cloth unfolding under where the hand touched me, the skin hot and alive underneath.

So this is what it feels like.

Big blue eyes...

Book IV

1.

November 1, 1917;
Major Edward Selkirk, Number 8 Canadian Field Ambulance:

I've been asked to say a few words to update you on the condition of Pvt. Alistair Preston of the 6th CMR.

Preston was brought into the inner circle of our hospital in the early morning hours of October 31, when I had just begun my shift. He had extremely low blood pressure and an irregular pulse, and was brought into the inner circle by my colleague Doctor Myers who felt that the time had come to give the soldier the medical attention he had been waiting for Preston had been unconscious since the time of his injury or very near it. Doctor Myers indicated to me that Preston had been lying on his stretcher in the outer circle for close to ten hours, having been brought in by a stretcher-party at approximately 16:30 that afternoon. The patient was unconscious and covered from head to toe with mud, indicating either that he was injured after some time in battle or that he was dropped by the stretcher-bearers, which, considering that it takes six men to carry one stretcher over the ground here, is not altogether unusual.

Preston's wound was such that it initially seemed to be irreparable—the degree of laceration to the facial area was quite severe, and it appeared as though the facial bone and part of the skull itself was shattered, in all likelihood by a machine-gun round. Head wounds of that sort have a very low survival rate, and are therefore usually given attention only when another soldier with more survivable wounds is not also waiting for surgery, which has certainly not been the case of late. But after I had the wound washed, it became obvious that the bone damage to the facial plate was minimal and that only the jaw appeared to be damaged beyond reasonable repair. Preston's wound was caused by a single round which entered his mouth through a small hole on his left cheek, travelling through the mouth and rising to the upper jaw area on the right side, where it shattered the bone, sending fragments thereof as well as teeth upwards and outwards both up into the facial area and out through the right cheek. The area below the right eye was bloody and bruised, and there was a large laceration running from the right nostril to within half an inch of the right temple. A good portion of the upper-right jaw was missing.

Surgery in such cases is reasonably straightforward but must be done within thirty-six hours of the wound having been inflicted in order to minimise the chances of gas-gangrene, which is a condition caused by the entrance of various bacteria into

the wound from the mud in this area and from cloth or other such pollutants which may also enter the wound When we began to treat casualties in this war, we operated under the assumption that these were standard wounds but soon discovered that many lads died of this new condition--which rots the flesh and eventually leads to a massive infection, usually of the blood, and finally, death Many soldiers made what seemed to be a full recovery and died soon after having left the hospital What we do now is remove approximately half an inch of healthy flesh to either side of the wound, which appears to have at least slowed the problem

I operated on Private Preston for approximately two hours The operation initially consisted of wiring the jaw shut so as to preserve as much of it as possible and to allow what bone is left to heal properly This done, the second stage was to cut away the wounded flesh on the facial plate as well as the customary additional half-inch to prevent gas gangrene Having done this, a hole was left on the facial plate—which I have closed by stretching the two ends of the skin to meet each other and closing with stitches. This is perhaps a bit large of a gap to be filling with stretching alone, and will cause substantial bruising, perhaps some offsetting of the right eyelid and of course a rather large facial scar I also anticipate that the patient will never again be able to chew on the right side of his mouth, and speech skills may have to be re-learned in light of the damage Shaving will of course be difficult, and there are likely to be problems with in-growing hairs and, more immediately, with hairs growing into the wound itself The tongue appeared unaffected, but the senses of taste and smell may well be dulled when the patient fully recovers consciousness Also, a head wound of this sort usually affects the ears, often making it difficult for the lad to recover his sense of balance Finally, there was a chance that the right eye may be blind, depending on the trajectory of the bone fragments from the upper jaw; it is possible that a fragment could have lodged either in the eye itself or within the optic nerve.

Upon checking on the patient earlier this morning, I was pleased to find him conscious, if a little disoriented His vision seems unaffected, but his eye was swollen and tearing during the time I was with him, which may be indicative of some latent damage but could also just be from the bruising in the area The patient seemed uninterested in communicating much with me, although he did listen quite intently to what I had to say about his injuries and how they were treated

He was back asleep before I left

As we are a forward medical station, I have decided to transfer Preston to a more substantial hospital near the coast, where they can monitor his recovery and

remove his stitches in about two to three weeks He will leave by ambulance in the morning, by which time, I believe, he will be strong enough to make the trip safely. I have recommended to my colleagues that Preston be honourably discharged and shipped back to Canada, as it is my opinion that his injuries will at the very least make it extremely difficult for him to communicate orally and to survive on normal, hard food. Furthermore, his eye may well be damaged to the point that depth perception is affected All of these factors combine to now make him unsuitable, in my mind, for life at the trenches.

Private Preston has had two visitors since he arrived here, both of whom were in the battle with him He was, I believe, unconscious during both of those visits.

Dear Miss Callaghan, *November 12, 1917*

You have no doubt by now received official word that your fiance — my friend Private Alistair Preston—was wounded in battle in the early morning hours of October 31st of this year. While I regret not having had the occasion to make your acquaintance in person, I feel that, through my numerous conversations with Alistair, I know you well enough to ask you to afford me the liberty of being candid.

I will send this letter with a nurse on a hospital ship which is leaving in a few hours, so you should receive it without the usual delay. It seemed to me a good idea that you have this information as soon as possible.

I write this note to you because it is what Alistair requested I do and because I am more than happy to do so, if only to try to put you a little more up-to-date as to your young man's condition. There is, of course, always good news and bad news in these situations, but I'm pleased to report that Alistair seems to be in remarkable spirits and looks to be on his way to making a good recovery.

It is only in the last two or three days that I have noticed him conscious for more than a few minutes at a time, and he is able to recognise me and still seems very much concerned with your well being. To that end, I have managed to salvage the picture of you that he carried in his tunic since before we met—I purchased a small frame at the beginning of my leave period and you'll be pleased, I am sure, to know that your image now looks over him night and day. I confess that I was more than a little uneasy about going to see Alistair because I haven't much of a stomach for hospitals, but I feel comfortable in reporting that Alistair is one of the healthiest-looking casualties anyone could imagine. I was afraid, when I saw him just after the operation, that he wasn't going to make it, he looked three-quarters gone already. But now, rest assured, I have no doubts.

I have been goading him, along with the doctor and some nurses, to try to get out of bed; this he finally did today, although he of course remains quite disoriented. His wound was such that his balance was affected, and he had a good deal of difficulty standing by himself. This said, the doctor did inform me that it was remarkable that Alistair even got that far this soon after his injury, so that is encouraging news.

His jaw is wired shut so as to enable it to heal as well and as quickly as possible, so he eats—or rather drinks—a high-protein concoction which actually tastes much better than anything in the trenches, and he seems to have lost only a few pounds, which again is excellent news.

The doctor tells me that his hard palate was also damaged by the bullet, and I must inform you that his upper right jaw is virtually gone. These, combined with the fact that his jaw is wired shut, make it extremely difficult for him to communicate. I brought him a pad and pencil, which he uses a great deal, but I think that he's becoming quite frustrated. I tried joking with him about having to finally shut up for a while, and he did have the sense of humour to smile, but I do think that it's quite trying on him.

You know, I am certain, that his discharge has been approved and that he should be home in time for Christmas, which is certainly wonderful news for everyone, although I will miss him here. It's a bit tricky to say, but many of the lads at the front dream of going home with an injury like Alistair's, and many are likely to look on his situation with more than a little bit of envy. In many ways he has been very fortunate; had the bullet hit him a half-second later, he would have been killed instantly. He's a little beat up right now and he will have a rather nasty scar, but his life is certainly not in danger, and he is lucky enough to be going home, which is all any of us really want.

I'm afraid that the time has now come to be a little more direct and perhaps a little more blunt. Again, please do forgive me, but I feel that the circumstances dictate such a travesty.

In the time, Miss Callaghan, that I have known Alistair, I feel that I have been closer to him in many ways than has anyone else, yourself included. I do not wish to in any way mitigate the strength of the love the two of you so obviously share, but when a man is put into a trench and shot at for months on end you begin to see in him things which others—who have rightfully been absent from this messy world—may not have been aware of. I say this not to warn you, but rather to congratulate you. Alistair has shown himself to be one the most exceptional human beings I have had the honour of knowing, and has proven himself a worthy and prized comrade. The pressures of this life are enormous, and Alistair has handled them with remarkable grace and poise. You are truly fortunate, Miss Callaghan, to be engaged to such a man, and, from what I have heard from him of you, he is truly fortunate to have gotten

his hands on a woman such as yourself.

I am certain that you know this, but Alistair speaks and thinks constantly of you, but he does so in a way which is very different from that of the other lads here. Many of them talk of women rather as if they were talking of things to go home to—nice things, to be certain, but things nonetheless. These boys speak of looks and smells, and do so with a candour which is not appropriate for me to repeat here. But Alistair never spoke of you in such a way, and indeed refused to be coerced into doing so by the other lads. He has for you, Miss Callaghan, a singular love and admiration, and he refuses to let its integrity be compromised by the rigours of life at war. He may not be the best soldier our country has ever produced, but he certainly is a more honourable and more brave man than most of us here. I do not mean to suggest that you do not already know and no doubt appreciate these facts, but rather wanted to reinforce them with my views.

That said, there remains one thing for me to address, and that, quite simply, is the extent of Alistair's injuries. As I trust I have made clear, it is my belief that he will fully recover and should be able to resume his usual life within a few months. But I must warn you that the Alistair you will see come off the boat or the train or what have you will be significantly different from the one you last saw several months ago. The right-hand side of his face will be home to a scar that runs the length of his cheek to his ear, and will be for the rest of his life. The bone below his right eye is collapsed, which means that the eye itself does not sit as high as does the left, although, mercifully, it does function perfectly well. Because of his jaw injury, he is prone to drooling on himself, and his speech—when it returns—is likely to be slurred. I say these things because I feel that you must know, in case you were the sort of person who needed to prepare for dealing with such realities. Alistair is, in the context of the hospital, taking his scar and drooling quite well, but he may have some trouble facing both you and the world at large. Again, I do not wish to suggest that you will necessarily wish to consider this at all, but I do feel it prudent to warn you.

The final issue, of course, is that of the state of Alistair's spirits. I can tell you that nobody who was in that battle will ever forget it, and I can tell you that Alistair of all people will remember every detail as clearly as if he were there. In that sense, none of us will ever leave that place. In some of our

conversations he mentioned to me that he was concerned about telling you too much about this place and thereby ruining you in some way, and he always expressed a need to escape the war without taking any of it home with him to you. He doubtless realises by now that that is impossible, it's literally right there on his face, and, whether he knows it or not, he must come to terms with it—as must you—if he is to make his life with you successful. I tell you this because I know that you are an intelligent and motivated person, and I know that you will help Alistair in any way you can. But please allow him the dignity he deserves to find with regards to this war, and allow him to continue with whatever memories he feels he must keep. If you in any way make him feel unwelcome because of his wounds or because of his memories, I fear that he may not find the courage he needs to continue with his life. I say this to you with all confidence and pride, and I ask you, in your capacity as the one person Alistair prizes the most in this world, to do everything you can for him. He is a wonderful man, Miss Callaghan, and he deserves everything he can possibly get.

Again, please forgive me if any of this was in any way too forward, but I firmly believe that it needed to be communicated.

Rest assured that as soon as I am done with my tour here I will come and visit you both. I look forward to seeing for myself everything that Alistair described so vividly, and, in the meantime, wish you the best of all possible luck.

Yours very truly,
James Michael Fletcher

December 12, 1917;
ALISTAIR:

My eyes heavy, sinking into a headache like stones to the bottom of the pond.

I can't move my hands because the doctor tied them down to the edges of the bed. It's written in my file that I like to scratch my wound, or rather that I was found trying to scratch it, which I'm not allowed to do because I might pull at the stitches I was told this, of course, and that an itchy wound is one that is healing, so I promised I'd leave it alone.

But I couldn't.

It felt like it was alive for Christ's sake.

Dreams of maggots eating away my face

So they've gone and tied me to the bed as if I were a psychotic

I opened my eyes only twice on the way here—or at least only twice that I remember. First, I was in a large room—much larger than any I have been in, and all I could see above me was a high steel roof with suspended lights There was much noise about me, but it was busy noise, a sort of noise that makes you feel like you're in the way if you're not moving or if you don't at least know that you're going to be moving in a bit. Pigeons flew back and forth between the crosspieces of the roof, and I heard the whistles of the trains. My right eye was so swollen then that I could hardly see out of it, but the doctor said I'd be able to again, in time

The next time I was outside, or rather I think it must have been outside because it felt like I was being rained on, but you see it's rather difficult for me to tell. I get some really strange sensations sometimes--mostly on my face where I got hit—so that it's difficult to know what's really happening and what's only just a product of my wounds. Or, for that matter, of my imagination.

Maggots again.

I wish I could get that out of my head.

This makes me want to smile, but I stop because of the pain

Still, compared to the other lads I was lucky

So I opened my eyes because I felt the rain, and what I saw above was a rather heavy industrial sky, so much so that I thought I was back in Wipers, but that didn't make sense because I couldn't hear much of anything that sounded like war. There were no explosions or shell blasts or rifle fire or anything like that, and that's when I realised that the smell was wrong. What I could smell was the sea, something I got used to because of this war, a sort of sickly and vaguely sweet smell of living salt

water. It still seems completely artificial to me, especially from inside this steel box.

Doctor Thompson told me that he had arranged for me to leave and that it would be better if he stopped the morphine—he didn't think the pain would be too bad but said that I'd probably be a bit groggy and have trouble keeping my wits about me. I had just assumed that he had meant in a few days' time, but that was the last time I saw him and, well, here I am in the hold of some sort of hospital ship. I really wish I'd have been given a chance to thank him.

I've only tried to talk once, and it really didn't work too well I'm afraid all I managed was a rather barbaric noise and a bit more drool than usual oozing down my chin, although the nurse was kind enough to dab that away, something that I would have done myself had I been able to move my hands. I mean, I am at least capable of doing that. They tell me it may take a few months for me to re-learn how to talk, but that isn't going to really start happening until they take the stitches out of my cheek, which is not meant to happen until I get back to Halifax around Christmas time.

This thing's creaking all about me, and you can feel it flex, which must mean that the sea's quite rough. I still haven't the balance, so it could be perfectly calm out there and I'd still feel as nauseous

It's like this in submarines, they say, only tighter and darker. And because you're below the water you hear things amplified. Virginia used to like playing with that in the pond—when she was younger she'd try to tell me something under water and I'd have to decipher what she had said I never got any of it right, but it did sound awfully strange, and she thought it was the best game she'd ever come up with. Until she discovered cards, anyway.

Only difference being, of course, that the submarines are trying to kill us. Still, it's so bloody rough today that nothing as small as a submarine would try to come to the surface.

Christ, I wish I could turn over properly.

They won't let me because I'm not to lie on the wound, and my hands are still tied. The folds in this blanket are starting to harden under me, and my skin sweats into them on command. They'll make little pink dents in me. I'll end up getting to Halifax with my face looking just fine and a back that's so crooked I won't be able to stand even when I get my balance back.

Open the eyes again.

The lights are swinging quite violently now, although not in any apparent pattern with the creaking.

If I wasn't tied down I would have fallen out of my bed by now.

I flex my jaw as best I can, which is the only way to clear my right ear. It makes a scrunching sound, like paper gathered into a ball, and then the rushing of air into the ear itself, violent and loud. I try to do this every time I think of it, to keep the air in there fresh. I keep thinking that otherwise a rather nasty little bug will take up residence. Maybe a maggot from my face—I don't know So I keep flexing my jaw to keep my ears clear.

I don't know that it's a good idea, but it does give me something to do. And something else to think about.

And I haven't had a shave since before the injury, which I think is going to be a bit of a problem, because they're going to have to shave me before the stitches come out, they said. It's going to hurt like hell And I'm likely to have ingrown hairs because of the way they pulled my face back together And now, Jimmy has told me, my beard stops abruptly half way down my right cheek, which, if nothing else, is likely to make me look like a real idiot unless I shave twice a day for the rest of my days.

Still, these are not real problems. But I like to think about them because it keeps me sharp and it keeps me awake.

And it takes my mind off the blood.

I tried to tell the nurse here about it, but it's quite difficult and she's obviously got better things—or worse things, rather—to worry about, but I'm afraid it's making me quite sick. Doctor Thompson told me that the bleeding would continue for quite some time because of the hole in my palate, so he used to put some new gauze in my mouth every few hours. You see, it can't form a proper scab because it never really dries out. But nobody's changed it since I got on this ship, and it's so saturated now that I can't help but taste it and swallow it And my belly's heavy with the blood it's trying to digest. I haven't been able to taste anything else since the injury, although the paste that they've been making me swallow probably wouldn't taste of much anyway.

At least blood is nutritious. Again, the painful smile

I suppose that makes me a bit of a cannibal, in a way.

2.

December 17, 1917:

"Well, it's a bit of a relief, really, wouldn't you say, Peter?"

"No, Angela, I don't really know that I would."

"Still, it's not the worst news we could have gotten, by any means." She nods to get her husband to agree.

It doesn't work.

"Oh?"

"Well, for months now all I've been praying for is for our Alistair to come home, and now that's exactly what he's doing We certainly have to be thankful for that, at least."

He picks up the telegram between rough fingers. "That's what this says. But it also says that he's hurt. They don't send them back for no apparent reason, you know." He lets the card fall back to the table.

"But Jimmy's letter said it wasn't so bad."

"He hasn't lost an arm or anything, no But the letter, if you'll recall, dear, also said that he might not be able to regain his balance properly" He lifts his hand to smooth the edges of his waxed moustache

"I don't see why we should make such a fuss about something like that."

"It's not that I'm saying that I'm not thankful, Angela, it's just that I'm more, well, *relieved* than anything else. But the reality is that Alistair is not coming home to us here in our dining room; the reality is that he's coming home to a hospital in Sherbrooke where he'll be for some time before he can even think of coming back here." He inhales deeply through his nostrils, closing his eyes to gather patience. Popping them open, he fixes on the woman across the table. "I know you, Angela, and I know that the first thing that you wanted to do when you got that telegram was walk over to the stove and start preparing food for his coming-home party. And you would have gone out and invited everyone you could think of. But he's not coming back here and he's not even going to be able to eat. That Jimmy says he can't even talk, for Christ's sake. If you came back like that would you *really* want a party? Would you really feel like having your mother making a fuss over you?"

"You're not going to like this, but: yes, I would."

"Don't you think he's a little old for that?"

"No, Peter, certainly not."

"Come, now."

"Well, Peter, what option do we have? Do we just go to the hospital when he gets here and give him a little peck on the intact cheek and tell him that we're really proud before we get ushered out by some doctor? We're his family, and we need to show him that we're happy that he's home and that he's going to be alright. And we should make him special Christmas presents and bake him soft things that he can swallow and we should all make him feel welcome and make him feel that he's our hero, regardless of whether he really is or not I don't care if he did nothing of use over there, we're going to give him our own family VC. I'm going to go down to the market and buy as much marzipan as I can find...We have to let him know that he's come *home*, for goodness sake. And we have to accept whatever this injury is going to mean to his life and to our lives, and we have a duty to make him feel that."

"Yes, that may well be, but we don't have to celebrate it, Angela. What if the poor bugger just wants to be left alone? What if he just wants to be with his girlfriend?"

"Then he'll let us know that He'll certainly find some way to communicate if he feels that strongly about it. But we can't honestly work from that assumption. What if he wants us to make a big hullabaloo about it and we only greet him as if he were gone to the city for just a few days? What do you think that would do? That's just about the worst thing that could happen, Peter We have to make a fuss, and I refuse not to."

"Right. Well, I suppose there's not much left to discuss, then is there?"

"I also want to make sure that you won't be a bother to him, Peter "

He frowns, wrapping heavy hands around his tea. "Seems to me that you'll be bothering him much more than I will," he says.

"You have a..." she exhales into a sigh, looking up to the ceiling and then snapping her attention back to the man across the table, "well, a *tendency* to turn these things into something that they're not, and I'm afraid that you're going to maybe bother Alistair about that at a time when he might not exactly be the best equipped to deal with it cordially."

"And just what do you mean by that? I'm certainly not going to be baking for him and making feel like he has to eat, drawing attention to his injury, which is more than can be said for some of the people in this room " As he says this, she watches the heavy bristles of his moustache curling up towards his nostrils

"I just think he might be best left alone for a bit about some of the things that you're going to want to know "

He opens his eyes widely and lifts his eyebrows as high as he can· "like?"

"Well, like what the war was really like for him, and what he thought of the trenches and the life there and all that sort of thing."

"And you don't think that I have any sort of right to know about these things."

"I certainly don't think of it as a right, no."

"What, then? A privilege? Look, Angela, this may come as a bit of a surprise to you but my life here is not highly charged with intrigue and excitement, and I'm really quite happy, thank you very much, to have been able to do my bit by sending a boy over there, and I intend to fully find out exactly what it was like and what he thought of it and who the lads were and everything else that he's willing to tell me. I don't even know which battle he was in, for God's sake. And now you're trying to tell me that I'm not to ask him?"

She stands to get the teapot, talking away from her husband. "No," she says, "all that I'm trying to say is try not to be too surprised or upset if he doesn't want to talk about it, that's all."

December 18, 1917, 7:48pm;
ELSPETH:

Virginia's told me that it's really the best thing that we could ever have hoped for, for the two of us, she means—Alistair and me, that is—but I think she must have said it more because she saw that it was bothering me than because she really believes it.

And whether she does or not it's definitely the best thing for her that Alistair's come home this early, injury or not, so it's normal that she'd say such a thing. And she's young and a little stupid, so she couldn't possibly know what this is really all about.

But I really need to believe her, and to believe that she's right and that Alistair will be the same—or at least enough the same for us to be able to keep going and to keep on with our plans.

I just don't know that I can.

Looking around here it's difficult not to be affected by it. I know it will be a good three days now until he comes off his boat, and even this train won't get to Halifax before nine tomorrow morning—at the earliest, they tell me—but I'm already dreading it. I must be one of the only three or four women on this thing It's only because I was lucky enough to know one of the officers who happens to be travelling today—he's an old drinking buddy of my father's and about as ready for war as he is for life as a maid—that they even let me on.

But here I am, staring out at grey winter shooting by the window trying to imagine an Alistair doing the same on his boat.

And is he thinking that he'll get off the boat and I'll be there? I've heard that boats at this time of year are covered with ice—even on the decks. Which must make them quite pretty, I'd imagine. But is he in any way to be able to appreciate that?

Does he know the lengths that I've been to for him in the last few days? Does he even care? Why should he—he's probably in so much pain that he doesn't even realise where he is or maybe even who he is, but what if he does? That friend—James, he called himself, but I call him Jimmy (this is one of the tricks I used to feel closer to Alistair while he was away)—seems to think that he should be recovered at least well enough by now to know what's happened to him and where he is, but is he thinking about it? I'd imagine that it's more than a little difficult to concentrate on much of anything when you're stuck in that sort of predicament, but

I'd like to think that I'm worth his attention, when he is awake, at the very least.

And I'm riding this thing towards him, and he's steaming towards me, and we're going to meet in a place I've never been and he's only been once before, no doubt in a decidedly different mood than he'll be in in three day's time.

That's if he's in a mood at all; if he's conscious

If he's even alive, for God's sake. There's no way to know if the ship managed to keep out of the way of the U-boats, and if it did, what's to say that Alistair made it through the journey? What if he died of some infection on the boat? A lot of the lads get blood infections weeks after they've been wounded, they say.

Christ, I might be sitting here in a train full of troops, two month's wages in my pocket and a bag full of his mother's bloody baking just to meet a corpse.

Maybe I'm just being a bitch.

I think there's something terribly the matter with me. Not anything like an injury or a disease or something wrong inside, but rather something the matter with what I've become. I used to sit and dream about even being able to come and be with Alistair and about how it would mean so much to just be able to stop worrying—or at the very least worry just a little less, but it hasn't been that at all. I'm supposed to be excited about this, for God's sake, I'm supposed to be thankful and happy and looking forward to the way he smells and how he used to hook his arm under the arch in my back.

But he won't smell the same. He'll smell of old wool uniform and all things medical.

He'll smell sick, and old, like Grandpa before he died.

And he probably won't want to hook his arm under me, and he may not even be able to. And if he does want to I don't honestly know if I'll be in any way to let him.

You see what sort of horrible things I've been thinking?

I do my best, you understand, but it has just plain stopped working. I try to run back through the old favourites and think about us at the Glen and last Christmas and even his sister's birthday, but I keep seeing that horrid, broken man in that alcove, teetering forward to crush my breasts, his face blotchy pink and swollen, his eyes almost gone behind folds of skin.

Is that what Alistair will look like? Is that what he'll be like? Is he just waiting to crush my breasts?

Open, tense hands, outstretched and waiting to sink into me with hard tendons and dirty nails. Squeezing at my breasts like they were teenage pimples.

Is that what I'm steaming to?

Alistair's face in the window next to mine, only half is the dark red of dried blood. He tries to smile, but it's crooked and obscene.

A shake goes through me, rising to the base of my neck. I close my eyes and open them again. This makes his face disappear, although mine, paler than I remember, still hovers.

I never should have gotten on this damn train

"Excuse me, Miss Callaghan?" A big man, a lieutenant, judging from the stripes.

"Yes?"

"Forgive me ma'am, we do not know each other. Only the colonel told me you were the daughter of a friend of his and I got to thinking you might want to share some of my tea?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't."

"It's no bother, really." He's got a lovely smile

"No, thank you, I don't think that would be appropriate."

He stares down at me.

"Oh, well, all right. But only so long as you share some of the scones I've got in my bag."

"Love to." And he sits next to me as I lower my arm into the bag to pull out some food. My hand brushes the edge of his trouser on the way down.

"Bit of a silly idea," I say, more to myself than to the soldier

"What's that?"

"Well, my mother-in-law made these for her son, whom I'm on my way to meet now, only he probably can't eat anything solid, and even if he could, they'd be as hard as stones by the time they got to him."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he says, scone crumbs fumbling out of his mouth and onto the tunic, "had a bit of a rough time over there, has he?"

"Yes, I suppose you could say that" The tea's horribly cold, and not very good, but at least it's something.

"Still, he's awfully lucky to have a girl like you coming to meet him. Most of the wives have to wait at home like everyone else. He won't be expecting to see you when he gets off that boat—I'm sure it'll be a wonderful surprise."

My stomach's not happy with the tea, and the swaying of the train certainly doesn't help.

"Forgive me if this is too forward, but you look like you'd make a fine wife,"

he says, accepting another scone from the bag.

"Thank you, that's very kind..."

"John, Johnny, I mean—call me Johnny, everybody does."

"Well, thank you, Johnny I certainly hope that you're right. Still, I suppose I'll soon find out." I smile as I say his name.

"Been away for long, then has he?"

"A little over six months."

"That's not so bad. Some of us stay over for years, you know. I suppose that some of us stay forever, if you know what I...well, still at least he's coming home. Look, Miss Callaghan, if you don't mind my asking, what might his name be?"

"His name's Preston, Alistair Preston" The window's almost completely fogged up now, and only the vague glows of distant lights move across the pane.

"Well, I'm sure he's a fine lad, this Preston of yours. And he's very lucky to have you waiting for him"

Yes, I think he is. I smile my polite smile and nod.

"If you don't mind my asking, Miss Callaghan, his injury, it's not, ah..."

"Well, of course it's difficult to know from what the army tells one--I mean all that they say is that he's alive but that he's sustained injuries severe enough to have him sent back here, but beyond that there's not much official information. But I'm fortunate in that one of his mates was kind enough to send a letter describing a little more about what Alistair's wounds were like, and they don't sound too bad."

"Hit by shrapnel, was he?"

"No, they said it was gunfire." Johnny tightens next to me. "Blew off part of his jaw and damaged his ear."

"I *am* sorry to hear that, Miss Callaghan, I was only trying to make conversation."

"No, no, Johnny, don't be silly, that's. .well, that's just fine I've been thinking about it ever since I found out, and it certainly doesn't hurt any to talk to you about it. It's something I'm going to have to come to terms with, so I might as well get on with it."

He pats my lap lightly and I let him. "I'm certain that things will work out all right, Miss Callaghan. I know that if I were coming back injured like that it would do me a world of good to know that I had a girl like you waiting for me."

"Thank you, Johnny, that's very kind of you."

"Well, Miss Callaghan, I think I best be leaving you to your thoughts now. I hope you don't think me too forward for having sat down here. ."

"No, of course not."

He smiles again, and nods deeply.

"Well," he says, brushing the crumbs off his trousers as he stands, "thank you, again, Miss Callaghan, and the very best of luck."

"Thank you, Johnny, you too." He turns towards the back of the car. "Oh, and Johnny?"

"Yes, Miss Callaghan?" His face ruddy, smiling widely

"I'd like you to share these with your mates: it's likely to be the last time in a while that you'll have anything home-baked." I lift the bag to his hand, which brushes mine. It's too soft for a soldier's.

"Are you certain you won't be needing them, Miss Callaghan?"

"Of course I am, Johnny, what am I going to do with a bag full of scones?"

"Well then, thank you, again—from all of us--and good night."

"Good night, Johnny."

And I close my eyes and try to focus on the click-click of the rails under me and on the Glen and riding through the woods with Alistair in front of me on the horse. But I see his scarred face—three times as bad as it's bound to be, I'm sure—and can't help but feel that I'm the last girl poor Johnny will ever see

Hope they like the scones.

3.

December 21, 1917:

Halifax is a mess, and that's really the only way to describe it. It's clear to anyone who looks out over this bay. And it's a bit embarrassing to try to explain why, and, believe it or not, it has very little to do with the war. The Kaiser himself could scarcely have hoped for better results.

Two weeks ago a French munitions vessel exploded in the harbour, lighting fires over the entire North end of the city and killing an estimated 1,000 civilians and military personnel

Despite this, the harbour remains open, although many of the casualties now being unloaded are finding themselves in a wasteland at least somewhat comparable to that they thought they had left in the fields of France and Belgium, which makes for a bit of a difficult homecoming, to say the least. Many of the troops scheduled to be shipped out to the continent or to England herself this week have been given official orders to remain in Halifax until such time as the fires are finally put out and housing and logistics problems are at least minimally solved and the full infrastructure put back into place. After all, there is a war on.

The delay is unlikely to last more than a few more days

And the ships continue to enter and exit the port at a brisk pace.

Because of the damage caused by the explosion, space is at a premium in the harbour, and many ships arrive and leave again within twenty-four hours, far less than the usual stop-over time.

Which, in turn, has led to a greater chaos among the young and sometimes not-so-young ladies who line the piers and the quays waiting to see when their husband/fiancee/boyfriend/brother/son emerges from the hold of one of these ships after months or years in Europe. Since they don't know when the applicable ship will dock—many don't even know which ship it is, and more than a few eventually return home without their much hoped-for prize—they often spend entire weeks milling about the port and the sorting station and watching the streams of wounded coming out of any given ship on any given day

And because there's very little housing about now, some are rumoured to sleep there as well. I never used to believe it, you understand, but now that so many of our houses have burned down, I really don't see where they could all be staying.

This is a wonderful place to watch from, I'd be exaggerating only a little if I

told you that the entire Canadian effort in this war—and a not insubstantial percentage of the American and British efforts as well—have passed, or will at some time or another pass below us and through this port It's full almost every day now, and has been for the better part of two years, and when you realise that each day those are *different* people milling about, you start to get an idea of the scope of this whole undertaking. Even the explosion hasn't affected it all that much

If you come forward with me now and look down to the port and towards the grey water, to the left of the fires, you'll see that one such ship is just pulling into the harbour; this particular vessel has come directly from the continent and brings the first wave of wounded from the battle in Passchendaele which took place towards the end of October. Within its holds, over eight hundred casualties are as we speak being prepared for their brief exit into the cold air before being sent, in the worst of all cases, directly to the hospitals here in the city or, as is more often the case, to the sorting station and then to the various trains which are waiting to bring them closer to their points of origin wherever they may be here in the Dominion

Some, of course, will have died on the ship Some others will die very soon, perhaps before they even get a chance to meet the ladies who sit waiting for them Still others never even made it to the ship in the first place

But if you look at the women at the base of the gangplank now you won't see any of that. For them only excitement, nervous, to be sure, but excitement nonetheless, occupies their minds Most will meet whomever it is, but most will also be confronted with a reality for which very few are prepared that the men they greet are casualties of war, and as such often crippled, disfigured or otherwise incapacitated. And certainly changed for life

And see here, friend, the eleventh off the ship, wrapped tightly in a heavy green blanket and carried carefully by two dock hands: he is one of the fortunate few for whom a woman awaits below

And despite his wounds—in this case betrayed to all by a heavy stained bandage across more than half his face—she recognises him the minute he emerges from the hold of the ship, memories of fecund summer nights flooding her

He's thin, of course, much more so than she has ever known him to be, and horribly pale. But it is him, and she knows this.

She pulls her hands from a heavy coat and gathers them in front of her, blowing into them as she pushes to the front of the crowd, the envy of the women who let her quietly through

He's carried slowly over the icy water between the ship and the pilings and

down to the dock, small puffs of heavy breath rising white from his nostrils.

As they regain land the dock hands carry him a short distance towards the sorting station before she catches up to them.

Happy for the tip, they stop their walk and hold the stretcher steady between them as if waiting for her approval of the prize.

He opens his eyes slowly, wondering why the scrunching of the snow under their feet has stopped, but sees only his own breath rising into an impossibly bright winter sun.

"Hello," the girl says, smiling as she stoops to the intact half of his face, "welcome home. I've missed you, sweetheart, more than you could know."

Her hand, ignoring the cold, settles on the blanket above his chest, reviving the now tender flesh underneath. A simple ring shines prominent on the requisite finger.

He smiles a crooked, painful smile, inhaling deeply as she lowers to kiss his swollen mouth, straining to draw her scent into his lungs.

And her pink hand tightens, drawing the heavy blanket together, and she slowly straightens again, looking past the stretcher and out over the water.

And seeing this, the dock hands begin walking slowly once again, with the woman keeping pace next to the stretcher as they disappear together into the sorting station.

And this, friend, in one way or another, happened here fifty times yesterday, and will happen another fifty tomorrow.

December 23, 1917;
Dr. Alfred Franklin, Halifax sorting station:

I have just come from my time with the patient, and am extremely pleased with his state. I spent close to two hours removing the stitches and wiring from the jaw, and the healing evident is quite remarkable considering the extent of the wounds.

Preston's jaw appears to have healed well enough for me to recommend that he once again try a few solid foods—although, of course, only on the left side of the mouth. The palate has healed to the point that bleeding is minimal to nil, and the patient is able to open and close his mouth normally. This said, drooling is still somewhat of a problem, although he seems to have learned to contain it quite well and there is no reason to assume that he will not contain it completely within a few weeks' time. As for the facial wound, it is significant and has affected his appearance quite a bit. While there is still much bruising and yellowing of the area around the scar—making it appear worse, really, than it is--it is safe to say that it will remain prominent on the face. The right eye droops somewhat because of the damage to the facial plate, although this area is notoriously slow to heal. I predict that the problem will, if anything, get better with time.

All of which brings me to the final point—that of the damage to the young man's ear. While nothing immediately comes to view upon inspection, it is obvious that this area is significantly damaged. I have been encouraging the patient—with the gracious help of his young lady—to stand and to walk. This, I think, is the most difficult part of his recovery; he stands only with much difficulty and has taken no more than one step since his injury occurred. This ought to improve, like the rest, with time and as the patient gathers strength from solid food. I have recommended that he be returned to Sherbrooke, where he is likely to remain in hospital for a good month or so before being able to regain his home. It may also be a good idea for him to get a wheelchair or perhaps even crutches, to serve as a stop-gap between his condition now and that of a fully mobile, fully recovered soldier. I have included a statement to this effect in my report.

Finally, Preston has begun to speak again, albeit with much difficulty and an understandable amount of embarrassment. He speaks not in sentences—communicating with the minimum of words—and seems more comfortable whispering them into the ear of his young lady. He was, I am pleased to

say, gracious enough to thank me and wish me a Merry Christmas.

I wish all my patients were able to do that.

ALISTAIR:

"Alistair?" Elspeth's soft voice in my ear.

I open my eyes slowly, aware of the rhythmic movement of the train and the dark shadows of bare trees filing past the window. She spent a fortune in bribes to get on this thing, I'm certain.

"It's Christmas now," she says, "it's just after midnight. I didn't know whether to wake you because you seemed so peaceful and so relaxed, but I wanted to be the first to wish you a Merry Christmas."

I smile for her, and she erases this with an open kiss.

"I prayed," she says, "for you to be here for me to be able to kiss you on Christmas, every day. Not in church, you understand, and not even really to God--I don't know who to, but I did pray. I'm very fortunate, you know, Alistair For a long time I really didn't think you'd ever come back."

Neither did I. I make an expression and gesture to myself, and she understands this. There's a flash of pink on her face where she was leaning against the window frame before she came to my berth.

"Alistair?"

I make a yes noise and open my eyes again. She looks carefully at the left side of my face. My right is to the edge of the train, so from her point of view I must look almost like I used to. I try to keep her on that side. She's been terribly good about the way I look—much more brave than me, I must confess--but I know that it bothers her nonetheless. And there's no point upsetting her more than I have to.

"You know what I dream about now, Alistair?"

I blink, consciously; slowly.

"I dream about you being able to ride again I know it will take time, and I don't want you to feel like you're under any sort of pressure or anything like that, but I'd love to do it." She inhales heavily through her nostrils, lowering her head onto my chest. Her hair feels warm and female. "I'd love to go back up there with you, Alistair. When I think about it I realise that that's really all I've been thinking about all this time that you've been away. .I mean, I did think about other things like when we get married and all the problems with your sister and that father of yours and his bloody discipline and I did of course think about my students because it *is* my job, but none of that matters. Even thinking about meeting you again in a burning city, of all things, seems peripheral now. It all somehow had something to do with getting back on that horse with you." She says this last part with her face up above mine,

looking quickly at my wound and then back at my left eye, a smile widening above shiny teeth: "sometimes I even think Georgie thought about it."

This makes me smile, which hurts. I pull a hand out from under the blanket and onto her cheek, and she leans her face into my fingers.

She pulls her arm forward to do the same to me, but it's the right side and her hand stops short. She looks down to where my chin is and then back up to my eye, her hand in the air above my face.

"Can I touch?"

I nod a shallow nod

Her hand lowers slowly onto the raised scar.

Jesus, Alistair, whatever you do don't flinch.

I tense my face and wait for the pain, but it doesn't come. I can hardly even feel it at all.

"Alistair, could you..." she pushes lightly with her hand and I let my head roll to the left and towards the centre of the train.

I feel like a dog.

And then it comes. A sharp sensation tingling down from my face and into my neck and down to the base of my spine as she kisses the scar. It's not pain, exactly, but it's not pleasure either.

And she takes her right hand and pushes my head back so that I'm facing up into her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she says, a shiny streak down her left cheek.

"No," I manage, "i-it didn't hurt."

"No, Alistair, that's not what I mean. I'm not sorry that I kissed you there. I wanted to and I did and I'm happy that I did."

So then what's the matter? This is a frown.

Her lower lip tightens and pulls into her mouth.

"I'm sorry," she says, "because I don't know that I did enough. I spent the longest times, Alistair, trying to imagine you there and what it must have been like and how they were going to ruin you and make you something less to come home to me—*for* me--and all I can think now is that I was being the most selfish bitch I possibly could have been. And I tried not to think it, but it kept following me around and everybody kept bringing it up until it was all I could possibly think about...Christ, I thought you'd be some sort of beast by the time you finally came off that boat. I got myself into such a state that I was almost afraid of you and of what you might have become. When I got into Halifax to meet you the place was *on fire*, for God's sake."

She inhales deeply and looks out the window at the shadows of the trees.

"It's just that...it's just that none of this seemed real to me any more, and I was so sure that I'd never be able to feel anything again. It was as if I had cast myself as this girl and that's what I was stuck being, whether I wanted to or not—whether I even could or not. And I'm sorry because I could have written so much more, and sent you things and kept thinking about you only in the best possible way and then you would have had a better time of it. I'm sorry, Alistair, because I let it all get to us and I had no right to, especially since you were the one who was in so much danger all the time. I'm sorry because I feel somehow that I failed..."

"No." As I say this saliva runs down my chin and she dabs this off with the corner of the blanket.

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

"Don't," I say.

"Didn't you think that you could have gotten more—from me, I mean—when you were there?"

"No."

"My letters were enough?"

"Of course."

"But, Alistair, I could have done so much more..."

"No." I pull her down to me, her face pushing into the pillow between my head and the edge of the car, her breasts warm and tight on my abdomen.

It wasn't the letters, for God's sake. They helped, yes, but only in so much as I knew you were still about and still dreaming our dream with me. They helped because they allowed me to see that there was a sense somewhere that some things were going to return to a semblance of normal some day and for some one. They helped me know there *was* a sanity.

"It was the idea," I whisper into an impossibly intricate ear.

And with this she lifts her head and looks into my eye again, making sure that I mean it.

Satisfied, she smiles and says, "merry Christmas," bringing her mouth back down onto mine.

You too, sweetheart, you too.

4.
December 27, 1917;
ALISTAIR:

Just so you know, I'm being taken off to my parents'—or *my* place, really—for what is surely going to amount to a belated welcome-home-merry-happy-oh-God-aren't-we-fortunate session, no doubt in front of a pot-bellied stove with Father's pipe smoke filling an already crowded room. Elspeth managed to get some of the lads at the hospital to help load me onto the train, and Father's going to meet us in town to unload me and put me in the back of a carriage and then plonk me in the big arm chair at the foot of the table, which, for once, will be mine, at least for tonight. It's the only thing in the house I'll be able to sit up in for any length of time, on account of my balance.

If nothing else, it gives me a wonderful excuse to drink

And, although Elspeth's being far too non-committal about it, we're going to head back to town for the seven o'clock train to Sherbrooke in the morning. And, no, I don't plan to sleep, although I do plan to enjoy the pleasures of wine and whisky and the wonderful potential awaiting impatiently in each bottle.

And, as much as I hate to admit it, I am looking forward to seeing it all again. Especially Virginia, and Mother, and Georgie and Father.

Of course it won't be anything like I imagined it before I ended up getting myself shot. For one thing, I'm not even in uniform, and even if I was I don't have any medals to stick on my chest (although I've heard rumblings at the hospital that they're going to try to get me one for some brave deed they all assume that I did at some time or another). But I'll certainly still be the centre of attention. And even without the medal Father will listen to whatever I decide to say. Or—and this makes me smile—be disappointed at whatever I decide not to say.

And Mother, bless her, is fretting all over the house getting it all ready for me and briefing Virginia on how to behave.

And Elspeth has been wonderful about all of this. She's put the whole visit together, with more than a little help from my mother, she assures me, but it remains her effort. I told her that the last thing I wanted was to see them all again in some hospital, and if nothing else it would have been difficult for Father to get away from the animals for anything more than a few hours, even if those soldiers of the soil are as good as they say they are. Nobody knows the animals like the man whose raised

them, no matter how hard they try. Christ, they're just boys trying to do something useful before they get to go to the trenches and get their pink little limbs eaten by lice and their goddamn faces blown off.

No, I told her that when I went home it was going to be exactly that and not me going almost home but having to stop in the hospital If it were up to me I'd try to just walk in some afternoon when they didn't even know I was in the country and just emerge from the woods as if that were where I had been hiding all this time But that's just not possible any more. And Mum, to her credit, will have cooked so much food as to be ridiculous, and all I'll be able to eat will be mashed potatoes and carrots with juice from the turkey over the top. She makes it with bacon, right there on the skin, and it gives the bird a wonderful taste. And that way, when I start drooling down my chin I'll be able to tell her that it's because of the smell of the food and not my injury.

And I will be able to tell her, if only in short sentences I can talk now, although not very well. They tell me it's a combination of two things a mangled hard palate and muscular fatigue in the jaw. The doc says the muscular fatigue will keep getting better but the palate is unlikely to reform, so I have to learn to compensate for that. All of which means that I have to concentrate and think of the mechanics of it when I want to talk. And the scar still hurts whenever I move my mouth, which is not good incentive to babble on endlessly It takes a lot of effort, but I can talk, even though I sound like a drunk. And it's still easier to whisper.

"Els?"

"Yes, Alistair?"

"No presents?"

"No, we didn't bring any presents. But don't worry about that .Oh, but your mother sent me to Halifax with a bag full of scones but I gave them away because I knew they'd be like stones by the time you got them, but if she seems interested, don't forget to thank her, alright?"

I nod. Right, scones. I can do that.

Train's slowing down.

"They'll certainly have some presents for us," she continues, "and especially for you, but I'd be very surprised if they're expecting something I think that they'll understand that we haven't really had the time and that we've had other things on our mind." And she looks quickly out and back at me: "right, Alistair," she says, "this is us." And she starts checking my clothes to make sure all the scarves are on and all the buttons are buttoned. Satisfied, she kisses me quickly, smiles, and says "all set?"

I shrug.

"Come on then."

And I stand by bracing myself against the edge of the seat, and a steward holds my arm solid around his neck and walks me out of the train behind Elspeth's lead. I can't be sure, but I think that he's looking at her behind as she struggles to pull her coat on. And I really can't say anything because he's already refused the tip. And he's right, it is nice to look at.

And there, about two hundred feet closer to where the front of the train stopped, is Father. He's the sort of man you'd know anywhere, although it's hard to say what it is that makes him that way. Probably the way he stands. He hasn't seen us yet: he's just looking around at all the people, trying to look bored, smoothing the waxy edges of his moustache. But Elspeth's seen him, and in a few moments now she will have caught up to him.

The train's whistle goes off and the steward quickly plonks me down on one of the waiting benches—made ridiculously low by the depth of the hardened snow—and then steps back to salute me. "Merry Christmas, sir," he says, running to the train which has already started moving And I look up and to my left and there Elspeth and Father walk quickly towards me as the train thump-thumps its way out of the station. He comes right up in front of me and puts his gloved hands on my shoulders, surveying me like he did after I flew from McGuire's old willow.

"Good to have you back, son." He smiles, taking his hands off me and moving to sit next to me and to the right He looks over towards me. "Doesn't look so bad to me," he says, "they should have kept you over there a little longer." And with this he pushes my shoulder, harder than I remember him doing, but remembers about my balance in time to grab at the sleeve of my coat and stop me from lying down on the bench.

Elspeth looks at me like I should do something, so I turn to him and smile. "I don't think so."

"You can talk! I didn't think you were going to be able to yet."

He looks up to Elspeth, who's got her hands cradled in front of her. Looking down to Father, she smiles a smile which looks as contrived as mine must have been, and says, "yes, Mr. Preston, isn't it wonderful?"

"Certainly, we *are* fortunate for this." He hits my knee and starts to rub the tops of his thighs. This means we're to get moving.

He looks quickly up at Elspeth and catches her without her smile and then turns back to face me. "Shall we get moving—your mother and sister are dying to

see you—it's all we've been talking about for weeks now."

And I nod and Elspeth says, "yes, I think that would be a good idea."

God, she's well brought up.

And Father lifts my right arm and hooks it over his neck, pulling us both up from the bench. Under the coat, he feels stern and taut Disciplined, he would want me to say.

"He's got quite a bit of strength now, sir," Elspeth says, walking next to him, "it's just the balance which hasn't come back yet There's no sense in straining yourself."

He turns quickly to her, pulling even more of my weight off the snow, "don't be silly," he says.

Close to my face, he smells of furs and winter and the pipe he likes to smoke whenever he takes the carriage out And vaguely, I think, of whisky.

And I look up and forward and see it There, looking thoroughly bored and vaguely tired is Georgie, his sides flanked by the wooden leaders and leather reins which run back to the open front seat of sleigh. He's not even tied to anything

Behind him, the seat only has room for two of us A quick flash of me being thrown in the back, lying on the bare slatted wood like a log for the fire or a newly dead deer. That's how I was in the ambulance, Jimmy told me And we get closer and Elspeth calls the horse's name and he lifts his head, turning tufty ears towards us "That's it," she says, "come on!" and she squats to clap her thighs with the leather of the mittens. Georgie comes slowly towards us, the carriage sleigh swinging clumsily behind, and we all stop walking.

"Father?"

"Hmmm?"

"Where's Franco?"

"Oh, I left him at the house in case your mother needed anything, and your sister's been trying to train him. She's doing a remarkable job."

Georgie slows carefully and walks right to Elspeth, who takes his head onto her shoulder and steers it towards me. I smile a shallow smile at Georgie as she tells him that I've come back.

And he pulls his head up from Elspeth and walks carefully over to me, bringing his big brown eye level with mine and sniffing deeply at my clothes.

"Hi," I say, rubbing the soft flab of his nose between the nostrils.

And with this Father helps me into the front of the carriage with him and Elspeth hops into the back. I try to say something, but she tells me not to be silly and

to ride up with my father.

"Don't argue with the girl," he says, pulling heavily on the reins as if Georgie didn't know the way, "she's right."

And we glide over the land and past the farms where I played when I was young—Fichault's, McGuire's, Richards'. The old willow is still there, its branches bending over the frozen crystal of the stream. And then down in front of the schoolhouse with a thin cap of snow on its roof, down the hill towards the little bridge over Anchor Brook and then up the other side towards the house. It looks exactly the same, only maybe a little rougher and a little more wild than it did when I left. And as we come up to it Father starts gesturing to the woods and to the barn, explaining where he skidded out the dead trees for this winter's wood and how he changed over the stalls so as to connect Franco's directly with the paddock, making Virginia's efforts at training him easier And as he talks the runners of the sleigh melt parallel tracks in the hard snow up the side of the hill and towards the house. The sun's almost gone now, and the snow's glowing an eerie blue. Everything looks so clean it's almost shining and the air passes sharply in and out of my chest.

And all I can think is how nice it would be to be in back with Elspeth, watching all of this emerge magic from the back of the sled like a wake, sharing her warmth under the heavy blanket.

In front of the house, arranged carefully side-by-side on the porch are Mother and Virginia, plump and ruddy in their best dresses, not having bothered to cover up for the cold. And as they wave Father whips Georgie to urge him faster up the hill, and I hear Elspeth squeak as she braces against the sled's acceleration

As Mother and Virginia wave they both lift onto their toes and back down again repeatedly Then as the carriage passes the open end of the barn they run out onto the hard snow in front of the house, dresses billowing behind them.

"You had better let your mother greet you first," Father says, pulling lazily on the reins, "I don't think she can bear the cold as well as that sister of yours "

I turn to him and he winks.

"Alistair!" My mother's stained smile as she shuffles up to the iron step to the side of the seat, bringing her face level with mine. I turn quickly to face her, more to show the part that looks like it used to than to see her

"Hi," I say. The pain on my cheek tells me that I'm smiling. And she looks down at me and brings her arms around my head, pulling my wound to the folded cloth above her abdomen.

"It's lovely to see you, again, Alistair," she says. As she releases me she steps

back down onto the ground, and I see Virginia standing patiently by the front steps, a small arc in the snow where she's been swinging her foot across the surface I wave with my left hand, trying to wink with my right eye

"Hello, big brother," she says, "welcome home" I nod to acknowledge this and she smiles briefly, looking down at the pattern her foot made and then back up, this time at Father.

I'm certain she's been told not to stare at my scar

"Why don't you let me put Georgie away," she says, still looking down, "so the rest of you can get inside and get settled?"

Mother: "yes, Virginia, I think that would be a good idea" And without knowing it, Father agrees, turning towards me and pulling my arm over his head

Elspeth goes into the barn with Virginia, saying something about helping her, and Mother holds the door open, moving the boots out of the way so we can both get in the door together.

"My," she says, her hand unwrapping one of my scarves, "that Elspeth certainly did wrap you up well."

While she does this, Father props me up from behind so that I don't topple, and then, on Mother's suggestion, starts to help with my boots

"Never thought I'd see you do that again, Peter," she smiles

"No, Angela, neither did I."

And I see my bony feet exposed, ridiculous and translucent, softer than my hands have ever been.

"Well, you certainly took good enough care of *them*," Mother says

I nod sharply. Yes, Mummy, I changed my socks almost every day, just like you said, and after I got hurt and they de-loused me they started getting thoroughly pampered. And of course I still haven't used the damn things yet

I imagine them in her eyes, soft and doughy like a child's, hanging out ridiculous and pink from a an indeterminate bundle of winter clothes, a melting snowball forming a patch of wet in the small of my young back

She reaches into the cupboard next to the door and pulls out a bundle of royal purple wool, made brighter by too much washing, unrolling what turns out to be a pair of heavy knit socks. "These ought to keep you warm," she says, handing them down to my father as I point my toes

"Thank you," I say.

"Don't be silly, Alistair, I'm not going to have your feet catching cold in my house, not now. And don't you worry, there's plenty of other presents coming" She

smiles a mother smile and Father stands heavily next to me, catching my arm around his neck on the way up. We look down and together consider my purple feet as they stick out from the gathered bottoms of my grey trousers.

"Right," Father says, "shall we get you installed at the table?"

"No, Peter, I thought in the sitting room with the Christmas tree would be best. The bird won't be ready for at least another hour."

"We've been through this, Angela. He won't be able to sit in the sitting room because he needs something solid. I'm going to put him in the armchair at the end of the table."

"No you're not. I put that chair in the sitting room, by the tree, and the fire's already well under way. You'll just have to move him when it comes time for supper," she says.

Father exhales heavily and turns me towards the sitting room, grunting quickly as he lifts me completely off my weight I think of telling him not to, but don't bother.

And there's the chair, just where Mother said, looking big and stupid in the middle of the floor. And the other seats circle it carefully, although it's pointed at none of them but rather straight at the tree. It's a small one this year, but more dense than usual. And she's really made an effort—there must be fifty candles on that thing, and we haven't had candles on the Christmas tree since just after the miscarriage And underneath, she's set up the porcelain village and lit all the candles in the little houses, clumps of raw cotton providing the town's snow. And there's a sleigh there which I see as Father plonks me into the chair, and two black streaks in the cotton behind its runners. The presents, or what I can see of them, are lining the walls of the room behind the Christmas tree and closer to the fire. The wood's maple, and it's very dry—you can tell from the smell and the colour of the flame.

"There," Father says, "I hope you'll be alright there for a bit."

"Fine," I say, curling my purple toes up and closer to the fire.

"Well," he says, standing, "I think we could both do with a bit of a drink, don't you?" And he turns and walks slowly towards the kitchen, slouching to avoid the wooden beam in the middle of the ceiling

Mother's voice, vague and to my right: "It really doesn't look like much at all, you know. I'm quite certain you'll be looking just fine and walking about in no time."

I imagine my scar looking brave for her in the flashing orange light of the fire.

That's not what the doctors say, Mum. They don't even know if I'll get my

balance back or whether I'm just going to have to re-learn it all from scratch. But either way it doesn't look like I'll be walking about for a while. And God knows the scar's not going anywhere.

"From what that friend of yours told us I thought it would be much worse than it looks to me, Alistair." Her voice is closer now, her smell like none other next to me in the little room.

I feel the wound heating slowly on my face

Lying heavy on the couch on a warm July night, my bandaged head sinking into your lap. Mummy told you not to climb that tree, and we have to listen to our Mummies otherwise things like this are going to just keep happening

"You'll see, Alistair, everything will start falling back into place for you" And she turns in front of me, hooking her face around to make sure that I see her smile. I look quickly to the tree and then back at her. She's still smiling

"Thanks for the scones," I say, acutely aware of the brightness of my feet.

"You're quite welcome," she says, smiling wider

Elspeth's voice getting louder as she walks into the room· "I'm certain he'll remember to mention it, but if he doesn't, you remind him. He does know because we talked about it and he does agree that you should go."

And Father and Elspeth and Virginia all arrive in the room, and Father hands me a crystal glass, which I've never seen before Full of scotch And I sip but I can't taste anything because it burns at the cut in my mouth, which makes my saliva flow twice as much as usual.

"Good for you," he says, catching the look on my face, "put some life back into that frame of yours "

I hold up my glass and tilt it slightly towards him. "To having you back, son," he says before downing his glass easily. And I bring mine to my lips and try to swallow some more, but the drool's already on its way out and even though I try to keep the liquor on the side that doesn't hurt I can't, and this time the pain's too much. So I just open my mouth and let as much of the yellow liquid flow out as I can.

Elspeth sees this before Father, and manages to get to me and wipe it off my cheek while he's still feeling his last sip mapping its way through and down to his belly. Satisfied with her work, she winks at me, tightens her hand briefly on my shoulder and retreats back to her place near the fire

"So, Angela," she says, clapping her hands together and turning to my mother, "are we going to be doing presents after supper like we did last year, or do you think it should be before?"

"I think whatever Alistair thinks is fine." She says this like I deserve to decide because I've done something good.

I shrug at her.

"Come, now, Alistair, you always got very excited about presents."

Father, sucking noisily on a newly lit pipe: "indeed. Was a time when we couldn't keep you away."

I stare at the fire, my socks glowing bright.

Virginia, behind and to my right, her eyes trying to stay off my scar: "well, I vote for the presents first."

Father: "this isn't a democracy." He says this mostly to annoy Mum, but she exhales quickly to show him that it doesn't work.

"I'm sure you'll enjoy your presents as well, Mr. Preston," Elspeth says, "although I must confess that Alistair and I just haven't had the time to.. "

Mother: "don't be silly, sweetheart, nobody expected you two to bring anything. We're very fortunate just to have you here." She looks to her right, nodding at Father, "aren't we Peter?"

"Mmmm?...Yes, of course, very fortunate indeed," he says.

Mum: "right, then, don't the two of you go worrying about that, now, alright?"

I nod. This makes me feel useful.

And Mother bends her head down, which means she's going to say a prayer.

"Our Father who art in heaven, we offer thee our thanks for answering our prayers and returning our son for this, the greatest of holidays." She stops long enough for everyone to know that she's finished.

Everyone but me: "amen".

And with this Mother lifts herself up and disappears behind the tree, emerging with a large package wrapped in heavy blue cloth and closed with a red ribbon which she'll want to keep and places it lightly on my lap. As she does this, she looks down and sees that I've hidden the glass of scotch between my legs, and places the present directly over it. "That's from me and your sister," she says, "but mostly your sister. I hope you like it."

"So do I," Virginia says, kneeling on the floor next to me. And not looking at my scar.

I turn quickly and see Elspeth watching me carefully, waiting poised for the next dribble to come down. She smiles.

I unwrap carefully and pull out a heavy wool pullover with a rolled collar and a rope design on the front. It's a sort of cream colour, and bound to be warm.

"Took me forever to teach that girl to knit," Mother says, unfolding the garment and standing to size it against my chest.

I suppose I must have once been that big.

Virginia, to my right: "I think I did alright, Mother."

Elspeth makes a sound that she agrees, and, hearing this, I try to do the same. But it's muffled by Mother pulling the thing over my neck. "There," she says.

I smile too widely, which hurts. I'm starting to sweat already.

Virginia walks over to Father and gives him a light leather-bound book, which he looks at, smiling graciously, and places on the floor next to his chair. And then everybody's getting things at the same time. Virginia gets books mostly from Mother, but Father gives her only practical clothing and a rather simple hairbrush, which she, in turn, places neatly next to her chair. Elspeth gets a pair of socks like mine but manages to talk her way out of putting them on, and a book with blank pages to keep a diary in. This last gift seems to have special meaning for Mother, who gives it, and Elspeth sees this and is of course more gracious than with the others. And now the floor's starting to disappear under coloured cloth and bright ribbons, and I'm sweating so much that my mouth's gone and dried out. So I sneak another sip at the scotch, which doesn't hurt as much as I had remembered

And Mother comes over and tells me to close my eyes, placing a hard object on my lap after a few seconds She tells me I can open them but I wait, making a game of guessing what it is by touch. But she's too impatient, so I open my eyes and see a sturdy cane, its handle carved into the shape of a horse's head, although one of the ears—the left—is missing.

I look up and she's smiling at me with wet eyes. "To help over the next few months," she says. And with this she pulls me to her abdomen again, releasing only when it's time to let me breathe. And as I pull back I'm looking down towards the floor and then slowly up, past my purple feet and then into the orange of the fire.

And Father, rising slowly from his place to my left, walks over and puts his hand on the back post of my chair, looking with me into the fire. "Time for my present," he says, moving his hand to my shoulder, "and I'm going to make you close your eyes as well."

This I do, and I hear him walk quickly out of the room and up the stairs. He comes back down almost right away and starts the walk towards me, and I can hear Elspeth holding her breath. Must be expensive, I decide, like the watch before I left. And I think if I got the watch before I went out there, I must surely be getting something bigger now. Like some sort of payment for sleeping in a muddy fucking

puddle for six months. And it'll be something to get myself better, something to get me somewhere. And I dare let myself think that it's a horse or maybe even Georgie himself and that he's going to put a bridle on my lap, but when the object finally does land it's much too heavy. And cold, and long like the cane

And Elspeth says: "I sincerely hope that's your idea of a joke, sir," and I open my eyes and look down to my lap and see it.

A Ross rifle with what looks like a custom stock.

"No," he says, his eyes fixed on the weapon, "it most certainly is not a joke." He says this so that it's obvious that it cost him a fortune.

Elspeth, louder: "you can't be serious."

"Oh, yes I can That man sitting over here is my son and I can damn well give him anything I want to. And I certainly don't need your permission."

With this he looks back down and I see his face hanging large over me. I look down again and it's still there and it's still a gun Like the ones our boys went over there with in the first place, which he knows because he knows more about the army and the expeditionary force than I ever did, even after three months of training. A Ross rifle that jams in the mud and rapidly becomes about as dangerous as a pointed stick, only heavier. A Ross rifle like the ones all those corpses are still holding onto as they slowly rot into the ground.

I run my finger down the stock and to the trigger.

My hand steady at the trigger, pointing vaguely forward at where the shots are coming from as I try to move forward over a rotting obstacle course. Just like running in the woods at home, only this time there's seventy pounds on my back and bits of iron and steel flying through the air trying to tear at me. And if I fall they'll pull me down to them and fillets of my muscles will be torn away to feed their army.

Elspeth: "Jesus." She says this right into Father's face as she passes him on her way to me, her walk quick and deliberate.

He inflates like he's ready to hit, but stays put

And I'm still looking down at the gun across my lap when I see Elspeth's hand coming down onto the iron of the barrel, her fingers made small by the black of the gun. "Do you want this? Because I can take it away now, Alistair, I can take it away and you won't have to believe that anybody ever actually gave you something like this."

"Yes, Alistair," Father's voice, "do you want it? Because I'm certain that if you don't I *will* be able to give it to somebody who will appreciate it for what it is. I just thought that it was time for us to go shooting together. I was under the

impression that you would now finally have the discipline to own a gun of your own." He points at my lap: "piece of our history, that. And since you are now too, I thought you might want to own it for yourself."

"Right, and I suppose that whatever you shoot at all Alistair's got to do is pretend it's a German," Elspeth snaps, her hand tightening on the gun.

Father closes his eyes and inhales deeply through his nose. He opens them again, and takes a breath to speak.

Mother, coming closer: "Come, now, Peter, that's enough!"

"No, Angela, I don't know that it is." He says this facing me, looking directly down at the gun.

And I close my eyes, trying to differentiate between the voices and the popping of the wood on the fire. I open them again and look back at my lap, but I know before I see it that the gun's still there because I can feel its weight sinking into my legs.

And all I can think is that I know this, and I understand what it is and exactly what it's meant for. And I know it because of what I have been and where, and I know this because I was sent there to find out because that's all that I could have been doing there. And every time I try to stand and every time somebody looks at me in a train or on the street they know that I know, because it's obvious And when they see Elspeth with me they wonder whether it's real or whether it's some warped sense of duty and pity, or even whether I've just come into some money and managed to hire her for the day. The steward salutes, proud of my bravery while he carefully watches her move in front of him. And they'll keep on knowing this, and they'll keep on seeing it, even after I start walking and talking again because this thing is a part of me now, and it will never go away. I know it now, like a sickness It's carved in my face. And all over Europe thousands of us are learning it, and thousands more are killed as a sacrifice to this learning

Father sucks in heavily on his pipe and blows into the ceiling, watching the smoke dissipate between the heavy beams that hold up the master bedroom "Well," he says, "I'm offering a gift to my son, and I say we let the boy decide "

Elspeth shakes her head like a teacher, her hand still on the shaft of the gun.

Father: "I don't want to hear it. I get enough of that from my wife," he says, pointing a bony finger directly between her eyes, "I most certainly don't have to take it from the likes of you!"

And as he says this she pulls at the gun so that it's almost completely off my lap, but Virginia reaches over my right shoulder, her arm brushing the scar, and

pushes its weight back down into my thighs. The two look at each other, and Elspeth understands that for Virginia's sake she's not to push the fight.

"Well?" Father, looking down on me.

I take a deep breath, sweat stinging my eyes, my head swollen with drink. Elspeth's hand's still clutching at the gun.

"No," I say. Only it's too quiet for anyone to hear.

"What?" This is Elspeth and Father together, with Virginia repeating a half-second later.

And in front of me and above my purple socks, the hand that I imagined for so long spreading the hairs of my chest darkens and rots, the nails growing long and curling into the steel of the gun like claws.

"No!" This I yell, louder than I thought I could, trying to push myself up and out of the chair. And I come up and start moving forward through the air towards the fire, the gun hitting the rough wooden floor an instant before I do. And Elspeth and Virginia drop quickly to where I'm lying and turn me over to see that I'm alright. I open my eyes and see them standing over me, with Mother's face slightly further behind. Father must still be standing where he was

I close my eyes and try to think myself somewhere else. Somebody starts to shake at my shoulders and I open them again, trying to convince us all that I'm alright.

Father's voice, from where he was next to the chair: "don't be silly, he's fine. Just fell over, that's all," followed by the sound of him sucking on the pipe.

Mother snaps her head back over her shoulder: "you shut your mouth," she says, "you've done plenty already."

And a bead of sweat runs down onto my lip and I pop out my tongue to lick it away, but instead of tasting saltiness it's the warm paste of blood filling my mouth from the hole in my palate, made fresh by the fall or the yell, I don't know which.

"I th..." I try to tell them that I'll be alright, only all that comes out is a bubbling sound.

Mother pulls back, inhaling quickly and covering her mouth. This means there's quite a bit of blood, and it's bound to be on the pullover by now.

Father's heavy steps fading as he moves out of the room and towards the kitchen. He's mumbling something, no doubt about trying to check on the bird.

Elspeth comes forward and dabs at my cheek with a handkerchief which quickly grows wet and heavy. She looks alternately down at what she's doing and up at my eyes, trying to see that I'm alright.

"Alistair?"

I fix on her and she's right there in front of me, no more than a few inches away.

"Do you want to get back to the doctor now?"

I'm crying now.

I look over to Mother, who nods a sad, determined nod.

From the kitchen, the sharp sound of Father banging the used tobacco out of his pipe.

"Yeth," I say, pulling myself up to perch on my elbows.

Elspeth, to Mother: "I hope you understand, Angela, I just don't know that it's time yet..."

"Don't be silly," she says, "you get my son back to that hospital and you have him looked at. They'll probably have to stitch him up again "

Father comes back into the room, his hands gathered in front of his face trying to light the pipe again.

"There's a train leaving at nine," Virginia volunteers, "I can get you both there with plenty of time to spare."

Elspeth: "I think that would be best, don't you Alistair?"

I nod.

Father: "I don't see that he has to go just because of a little blood."

Mother: "its not just a little blood, Peter, his wound's opened again and it's going to need stitches. We can't keep him here like this."

Father shrugs, his pipe finally lit. "I'll keep your present for you here, Alistair, it'll be waiting for when you come back." He says this loudly, as if my bleeding has made me deaf. And he pats my shoulder and reaches down to pick the weapon up off the floor next to me. He leans it against the wall near the tree and goes to sit in his chair.

And with that the three girls pull me to my feet and Mother hands me the cane. Satisfied that I can make it with Elspeth and Mum and the cane, Virginia pulls on her coat and runs out to the barn to hitch up the horse Father's staring at the fire. And they dress me quietly, trying to stop the flow of blood onto my new pullover. And Mother pulls on my boots quickly over the new socks, but there's still a flash of colour sticking out above the leather.

And satisfied that I'm ready, Elspeth dresses quickly. Mother comes forward to embrace me, careful not to knock the new cane that now holds my weight.

"I'm sorry about this, Alistair, truly sorry " She's crying quite freely now, I

can hear it in the way she breathes. And she pulls back enough to kiss my forehead and I feel Elspeth's hand on my back, telling me that she's ready.

"You're more than welcome to come to the station with us, Angela."

"No, I can't. I have to take care of that husband of mine...But thank you both so much for coming, and please accept my apologies."

And with this Elspeth smiles a friendly smile at Mother and clutches both of her hands. Outside, the shadow of the horse with his carriage move across the hardened snow, so Elspeth opens the door and helps me into the back of the carriage with my sister. And she pulls the blanket onto me and checks that I'm sturdy before crawling under with me.

And as we pull away from the house Mother cries openly on the porch, her arm waving vigorously above her, Elspeth and I looking back.

And we go like this, her body still tight with anger and mine weakened by the digesting of its own blood, down the hill and away from the house, across Anchor Brook and towards the school house. And the blood hardens on my face in the cold dry air. The light of the moon comes sharply down, bathing us in an eerily clean blue. And I can't help but think, looking around at all of this, that we are the only thing moving.

I wish Jimmy could see it.

And we pull in front of the train station and I shuffle out of the carriage, bracing myself on Elspeth's shoulder as I lower onto the snow, cane in hand. As I look up from my landing Virginia's standing in front of us, close enough to help catch me if I slip.

"Elspeth?" she asks.

"Yes?"

"Did you talk about?..."

"Yes, Virginia, I told you we would and we did. And it's exactly how I said it would be."

"So I'll be going to school?"

"I don't know how we're going to do it, Virginia, but your brother and I will get you there."

This has been agreed, and I believe it even more now. I nod.

"Thank you," she says, stealing a look at my wound before hugging us both.

"What you do is you let all this settle for a week, and you tell your mother that I told you to come to Sherbrooke. We'll have something ready by then and we'll be

able to work out how we'll do it. You just make sure you do that, and you make sure you don't let your father's ideas get to you."

"I'll be alright," she says, "but I'm definitely taking the long way back tonight."

And with this she kisses us both, thanking us again and wishing us a Merry Christmas.

"I know you'll be fine," she says to me as she climbs onto the carriage and urges the horse back into motion.

And Elspeth walks close by me towards the train, her warmth fragrant and female under our blanket.

Epilogue

July 11, 1946;
Sgt. James Preston:

This place is quite remarkable: grand and peaceful in a way that it's difficult to imagine if you haven't been here. I brought a stone for the cairn—mostly because Mum insisted on it if I ever made it up here—and I'm certain that it's quite a bit higher than it must have been when they used to come up here And there to the left and slightly above me is the stone under which Mother used to come and lie, and here behind me is the now large birch to which Georgie used to be tied. And Heart lake below, and a heavy mist hanging over the green valley waiting to get damp enough to turn itself into a thunder storm to help conjure images of shelling. In many ways I wish I could have seen this place before

I myself was born in Manitoba in February of 1919 Mum and Dad went out there in the summer of 1918, just after they found out that his friend James -whose name they gave me—had been killed in an assault in April of that year. From what I know he had made it to Corporal by the time he died. Mum and Dad went out there to talk to Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher about their son, as promised And when they got there Mr. Fletcher asked them to stay for the summer to help with the wheat And, so far as I know, they've never been back

My aunt Virginia did come to visit every few years; I don't exactly know what it is she does—not because I never wanted to find out but because she doesn't really seem to know about it too well herself—but it has something to do with buying and selling land for immigrants. And she was involved in soldier placement and education from 1920 to about 1925, and I'm certain that she is this time around as well. She keeps a singular affection for my mother, and when they get together the two disappear for hours on end And yes, she did end up going to school, and no, I don't know that she's ever been back here either

And as for all of this it's a bit difficult to comment I don't know that many of us learn our parents' stories in such ways, and I don't know that I liked the experience. But coming up here—albeit in a thoroughly inappropriate Jeep- makes all of that seem peripheral. If you strain your eyes upwards you can probably catch a glance of an eagle, and for a boy used to nothing but flatness, that makes this place magical.

But it's only a clearing on the side of a hill

You understand that it is not my story and it never will be. I've had a war of my own now, and I have stories of my own to relate. But I'm pleased to be up here to see this place, and my war has given me the chance to do that.

I don't know and it's something that I'd never ask in case I found out that I'm wrong, but I'd like to think that this is where I was conceived, on a warm spring night, right there under that rock.

Afterword

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For any piece of fiction to be successful, the author must convey to the reader a sense that something important, or, ideally—vital—is at stake, that the story he or she is telling is of some significance and has some bearing on the life of the reader. If this does not occur, the piece cannot appeal directly to the reader, at least not on an emotional level Yet in writing about war and more specifically about an individual involved directly in the fighting of that war, this concern becomes peripheral. The majority of readers understand immediately what is at stake if a character is being shot at and shelled—our common exposure to war narratives is such that we recognise these stories almost immediately, and, unfortunately, tend to categorise and dismiss them almost as quickly. Indeed, one cannot mention the First World War without images of trench warfare and spitting machine guns instantly filling the mind of the reader The task of the writer trying to recount such events this late in the century is therefore to make these events new or present them in a new way, thereby surprising the reader and forcing him or her to abandon the standard reaction to war literature and approach the text as a novel or a poem in its own right and not one in a long line of now-standard treatises of the war. This may prove to be a difficult and daunting task, and success is, when present, at best only partial.

What, then, is the attraction of writing about the First World War? Briefly put, it is a monumental event whose implications are still very much a part of the modern world: it offers the opportunity to address what many consider to be the defining event of the twentieth century, one which led to the popular acceptance of the aesthetics of modernism, dadaism, surrealism and their offshoots and which marked Canada's transition from a primarily agricultural appendage of England to a fully independent economic force in the modern world. Canadian literature and Canadian art, like that of the rest of the world, experienced a change and an explosion of the sort never before seen. Finally, the war created what was potentially the largest-ever generation gap between the combatants and the preceding generation which was, in many ways, responsible for sending them to the front. Were it not for the war, the world we know today would not be the same.

My purpose here is neither to describe nor defend the decisions that I made about the writing of Enfilade; that text must stand alone. Rather, I wish to elucidate the issues and concerns that led to those various decisions, concerning both the social, cultural and historical context and the modernist movement and its innovations in narrative style, fatalism, and tone. To that end, this paper is divided into two sections: the first deals directly with the war itself, the second, with the literary and artistic movements which it perforce engendered.

1. The Great War

While this is not the place to go into the origins of the war (entire careers have been spent addressing that very question), it is worthwhile to point out that such a war had been anticipated in Europe for at least a decade "to sort out the simmering quarrels and rivalries that were bubbling to the boil" (Macdonald, 1). Canada, being geographically removed from Europe, did not anticipate a war, yet upon hearing of the outbreak of hostilities in August of 1914, immediately offered to raise a force to send to Europe (Meek, 2). While it is easy to frown on such an apparently quick and rash decision from our modern points of view, Canada at the time was a very different place, and the decision to send troops was made largely out of a strong sense of filial responsibility to the mother country, England, many Canadians considered themselves British. While it would be inaccurate to say that there was no resistance to this decision (the opposition being especially strong among French-Canadians who did not see this as their war), support for the allies and for a Canadian army was extremely high, with enormous demonstrations taking place all over the country within a few weeks (Filteau, 15). Furthermore, the army was extremely well perceived by the Canadian population; for a young man looking for an occupation, it offered a steady pay cheque and an almost instant status. "in many communities across Canada, a militia commission demonstrated social respectability, not military knowledge" (Morton, 5). Unfortunately, the realities of the Western Front were soon to prove this lack of military knowledge costly.

On October 3, 1914, 30,621 men forming the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) embarked at Québec for England; they trained on Salisbury Plain until going to France early in 1915, and on April 17 of that year they experienced their first combat on the Ypres salient in south-western Belgium (Meek, 3) In addition to their scant military knowledge, they went to the front with inadequate clothing and equipment, and carrying the Ross rifle, which quickly earned itself a reputation for jamming under fire and cost many Canadians their lives (Morton 42)

The next two years for the CEF were as horrible as for the rest of the allied effort. Constant reinforcement and shelling had led only to a stalemate, and enormous numbers of men were routinely being killed in what had become a war of attrition. Canadians earned a solid reputation for their soldiering and were being included in most of the battles on the Western Front Ypres, Festaubert, Givenchy, St. Eloi, Sanctuary Wood, Hooge, Courcelette, Thiepval, Ancre Heights, and one of the most infamous of all Canadian battles, Vimy Ridge (Meek, 6-9) Attacking with

the full strength of four divisions in the early morning hours of April 9, 1917, the Canadians took a ridge which had been considered by the enemy to be impregnable at the staggering cost of 10,602 casualties and 3,598 deaths (Morton, 168). For a country as small as Canada fighting in a war half a world away, the sacrifice was great.

The human costs of fighting such a war were of a scale never before seen. Certainly, the rates of death and injury were extremely high, but the effects of the war even on soldiers who survived uninjured were profound. Life at the front was like none other before, and in many ways was almost unreal.

Nobody actually expected the war to last any time at all; in 1914, just about everybody on the allied side seemed to think that the whole thing would be over by Christmas (Fussell, 3). England was still very much an empire and, by extension, conjuring the idea of empire went into the popularisation of the war—early treatises of the conflict champion the gallantry and adventure inherent in the fight, and these were used a great deal by propagandists: in an early poster, set in a presumably victorious future, a young boy looks up at his father and asks "Daddy, what did *you* do in the Great war?" (Fussell, 21) Indeed, this attitude is perhaps best exemplified by the words of Horace, widely quoted by British recruiters and the public at large: *Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori*, literally, "it is fine and proper to die for one's country" (Fussell, 158).[1] Rupert Brooke, in his poem "The Soldier", gave this idea a popular voice: "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England" (lines 1-3, ix) Desmond Morton refers to this phenomenon as the "cult of manliness" (52). The idea, clearly, was that dying in such a war was a privilege, and was a noble and proper thing to do for the good of Great Britain as a whole (including, by extension, Canada). As if this were not strong enough impetus to join the army, it represented, for many Canadians, the highest paying job they could find and, in a country less than fifty years old, a chance to do something for England in return for her efforts in Canada (Morton, 51-2).

It would seem that the war was a grand adventure to be entered into with a sort of sporting zeal—it was a Great War in the sense that it was a tremendous event, and as such the opportunity to participate was to be cherished as a privilege: as Paul Fussell points out, war was initially viewed as "strenuous but entertaining" (25). Perhaps surprisingly, this attitude held up remarkably well in the face of trench

1. Wilfred Owen would of course go on to use this phrase in one of his most famous poems, referring to it as "the old Lie" (Owen, 55)

warfare, at least initially. In fact, in one famous incident which took place in 1915, Captain W. P. Nevill went over the top of his trench to lead an attack by kicking a football into No Man's Land and beckoning his boys to follow as if charging the net: he was killed instantly (Fussell, 27).

But the most striking manifestation of this sporting nature had to be the Christmas truce of 1914, an incredible event in which the fighting stopped long enough for allied and German soldiers to cross No Man's Land and exchange gifts and Christmas greetings much like two teams sharing drinks after a football match; not surprisingly, it led to extensive courts martial on both sides it is difficult to share tea with a man one day and be motivated to kill him the next (Morton, 242) While much has been written about the possible motivation and origins of the Christmas truce, it remains a striking event in that it represented a complete break-down of the traditional war-waging machine; for a few hours, the discipline and the sense of purpose which are so vital to a war effort were themselves completely defeated. although the resulting crack-down and increasing demonization of the enemy prevented such a striking show of friendship from ever emerging again, that strong sense of purpose and perception of the enemy as evil would never really return to the soldiers fighting at the front.

The reason for this is simple: the soldier led an increasingly dichotomous lifestyle; at home and on leave he was a hero of sorts—the ultimate modern civilised man—a lad to be encouraged by good food, good rest, and often, good company, at the front, he lived in conditions which had never been conceived before in a hellish world of mud and excrement and rotting flesh (Ecksteins, 211 and Fussell, 87). A soldier, if fortunate, could expect to make the transition between these worlds several times during his tour of duty. If he found the transition difficult, he became an outcast: shell-shocked and shut up in a Scottish hospital or shot at the front for cowardice (Macdonald, 184-5). As if this were not enough, everybody – whether they had known the horrors of front-line existence or not – was talking about the war and interested, at least on a surface level, in knowing what was going on at the front There was an attempt by those left at home to feel some sort of link with their soldier husbands and sons. To this end, for instance, packages from across the channel would arrive daily, and often contained home-baked cakes, books, tinned oysters and other such treats (Fussell, 65-6). London itself was just seventy miles from the front, the guns clearly audible on a still day, inviting the home front to become a direct spectator in the war, a chilling mix of cultured normality and the hellishness of life at the front (Fussell, 64 and Ecksteins, 139). The proximity was remarkable, but so was

the real gap developing between the soldier and the civilian. Perhaps the greatest example of this is the famous trench network which was dug in Kensington Gardens; the trenches were clean and neat, nicely furnished and dry, contrasting sharply with the muddy holes from which the soldiers were actually waging the war; not surprisingly, the Kensington trenches soon became one of the army's standing jokes (Fussell, 43).

The realities of trench warfare were, of course, farther from the Kensington trenches than any of their Sunday visitors could have imagined. The daily reality of life at the front was inconceivably horrific; in addition to incredible rates of shelling, machine-gun fire and gas which reduced the front area to a lifeless and grey mass, the human horror was tremendous:

> The odor of decomposition—masked only by the almost equally intolerable reek of chloride and lime—and clouds of flies attracted by the carrion were other inescapable curses. Limbs and torsos were churned up again and again by the shelling. Working parties digging or repairing trenches repeatedly uncovered corpses in all stages of decay and mutilation.
>
> (Ecksteins, 151)

In this environment soldiers would sleep, shave, play cards, write letters, and eat. Food supplies were sporadic, and, when present, consisted mainly of bully beef (*i.e.*, corned beef) and biscuits, often mixed together to form what came to be known as "trench pie" (Fuller, 59). The monotony of rations was broken only by packets of various foods from Britain—a luxury few Canadians could enjoy—and by rum rations which were given before going into battle (Fussell, 47). Often, the food provided was inedible; Desmond Morton relates the story of soldiers using their rations, still in their cans, to pave the floor of a dugout (142). In any case, it was difficult for any front-line soldier to keep an appetite with the smell of rotting corpses just a few yards away.

Heavy artillery, used for the first time in massive numbers in this war, also had a profound effect on the combatants, as did the disorientation created by a visual field from which all markers of depth had been removed; indeed, trench life tended to "disorder sequential thought processes and to disorient the participant" (Leed, 130). In such an environment, traditional vehicles for communication, including music and words, became wholly inadequate (Ecksteins, 215). As if this were not enough, soldiers were continuously bothered by parasites whose population exploded because of the war: both rats and lice were a persistent problem. The former exploded in

population and size as they fed on corpses, and some soldiers made a sport of killing as many as possible, often in fits of rage (Fussell, 49). The latter had everyone on both sides of the line scratching nearly constantly and occasionally drove soldiers into frenzies (Fussell, 48). Finally, the trenches themselves were little more than muddy holes. To help them deal with the dangers of this life and to strengthen them for the attack, soldiers were given a rum ration before the attack (Morton, 157). Once over the top, they were most often mowed down by machine-gun fire. Those who had survived previous attacks knew exactly what they were going to face at the next attack. The anxiety was incredible. Finally, soldiers and civilians alike were being fed information at an unbelievable rate, and only a small proportion of it was true; the prevailing attitude among soldiers was that anything could be true, but nothing they heard was necessarily true. In this way, shocking rumours of the Germans crucifying a Canadian near Sanctuary Wood in 1915 quickly gained respectability (Fussell, 115).

Not surprisingly, mutinies began appearing in 1917 in both the French and Australian armies (Fuller, 22-31). While these were dealt with swiftly and effectively, their very occurrence is testimony to the soldiers' sense of being trapped in the war. Yet the reality is that what was trapping them there was not only their superiors, but the prevailing attitude on the home front—the attitude which, after all, was responsible for sending them there in the first place. Soldiers were reminded of this every time they opened their packets from across the channel and read their letters from home. The pressures of the dichotomy between the culture which they would experience on leave in Paris and London and their existence at the front were remarkable, leading many soldiers to take on a sort of glazed air "after several weeks of front line experiences there was little that could shock" (Ecksteins, 154) Many soldiers looked forward to their leave periods, but it was precisely the culture that the soldiers could enjoy in these cities when on leave that was responsible for sending them to war in the first place. The civilians they saw when on leave were so far removed from the war as to seem virtually oblivious to life at the front -even those who wanted to know what it was like could not, because to them, the details of the Western Front were simply too far from their experience to be believable (Fussell, 87). A return home for a British soldier or a long leave period to England for a Canadian soldier therefore became a difficult and often bitter experience which hardly ever lived up to expectations.

Indeed, there was soon a very strong sense that there was no real home to which to return; once having been to the front, the soldier felt that instead of having

gained status in his home society, he had actually become estranged from it, and the longer he spent at the front the further he became from his home. The community of soldiers—the only one with which he had anything in common now—replaced the community he had known at home. In this way, going to war, which "was initially...a liberation from domesticity began to be experienced as a loss of the home" (Leed, 215). And within too short a time, he would be back at the front and his new community. A mutiny wouldn't work unless it was against all of the culture that had sent him to war.

For the vast majority of soldiers, there was no way out of this dichotomy: being at war for each person became a sort of "grossly distorted version of the 'mechanical day-to-day' of an industrialised life" (Leed, 91). In that way, waging war became part of the modern industrial work ethic; having gone to war, a young man could, if he survived, presumably reap the rewards of his service. The survival of the expression "you have to put in your time in the trenches" is testimony to this attitude.

Yet putting one's time in in the trenches proved to be more horrific than anybody at home could ever possibly have imagined. By 1917, there was a very strong sense among the combatants that the war would never end, that it was a necessary part of the modern industrial predicament much like machines and factories and smoke-filled streets (Ecksteins, 189). Stuck in their trenches, with no apparent way of getting out alive, many front-line soldiers dreamed of getting a "blighty"—a wound severe enough to have them sent home to be greeted as heroes having sacrificed much for their country (and therefore secure their return into the society which they had left behind), but one which would not be life-threatening (Morton, 181). Others took it upon themselves, shooting feet and inflicting their own wounds; others still deliberately infected themselves with venereal disease in order to get away from the front, eventually leading to a crisis in cases of VD by 1917 (Morton 202).

Not surprisingly, the man forced to live in this world and deal with such a predicament found himself increasingly removed from the world around him; after some time at the front, it became difficult to care about much at all, so overwhelming was the effect of warfare. Added to this was the sense that there was no longer a home to which to return. In some cases, the magnitude of this stress led to psychoses of various sorts—usually dismissed as "shell-shock"—and severe discipline problems like the Christmas truce and the mutinies mentioned above. But the vast majority did not mutiny and followed their orders without complaint.

In order to deal with this predicament, many men began to turn into

themselves for solace, and imagination and memory became increasingly important: "for sustenance the soldier was thrown upon his own imagination The war became increasingly a matter of individual interpretive power" (Ecksteins, 212). Since it was essentially mounting an assault on the sanity of each soldier, the real physical world became less and less important—for example, the term "surrealism" was coined by French poet Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917 while crouching in the bottom of a trench during an artillery barrage (Ecksteins, 146). In the face of the failure of the rational and the scientific, therefore, soldiers turned increasingly to the irrational, the magical, and the mythic (Leed, 228). Ghost stories became quite prevalent, as did talismans, souvenirs, lucky charms and various other sorts of superstitions, front-line soldiers often turned to Christianity (which may help to explain the popularity of the crucified Canadian story), but often also created a sort of personal religion based on a series of rituals designed to keep the soldier alive (Fussell, 115) Personal incantations became extremely important, and many stories tell of soldiers feeling doomed at the discovery of the loss of a lucky trinket or charm. In many cases, this turning inwards became the source of incredible rumours, for example, angels were widely believed by combatants and civilians alike to have appeared to guide the British soldiers during the battle of Mons in 1914; indeed, it was considered unpatriotic not to believe it (Fussell, 115-6). In others, this turning inwards led to profound and penetrating thought—the very thinking that, by the end of the war, would give rise to new literary and artistic movements.

Yet perhaps the most remarkable—and the farthest-reaching—result of this turn towards the inward landscape is

> a reality of extraordinary implications the soldier represented a creative force. As an agent of both destruction and regeneration, the soldier inclined to see himself as a "frontier" personality, as a paladin of change and new life. He was a traveller who had journeyed, on order, to the limits of existence, and there on the periphery he "lived" in a unique way, on the edge of no man's land, on the margin of normal categories.
>
> (Ecksteins, 211)

Like Orc in Blake's America, the soldier in many ways came to represent the force that must destroy in order to lay the land bare for the re-building of the post-revolutionary world. By the end of the war this had already begun—through the efforts of Wilfred Owen and the war poets who did more to "bring the war home" than any other source, and "The Great War" rapidly became "The War to End All

Wars."

From the trenches, then, emerged a completely new and completely changed generation; one that would return to the late Victorian world which they had left and flood it with new ideas, new aesthetics and new systems of communication. The Great War is great in the sense that it was horrific on a scale never seen before, but it is also great in that it engendered artistic creation which forced us to face the issues brought about by the realities—in this case supremely dehumanising—of the modern industrial world. What draws one to study this explosion is that we are to this day struggling to come to terms with its implications.

2. War Narratives and the Modernist Aesthetic

When the war officially ended at 11 a.m. on November 11, 1918, virtually no literature generated by combatants had been printed: the vast majority of information available on the war was officially generated or at least written by people removed from the action itself—censors made sure of this. That said, one can categorise war literature fairly easily by separating that which was generated in the trenches themselves—for the most part taking the form of poetry or somewhat loose journal entries—from that which was generated primarily by surviving combatants in the years immediately following the war. These post-war works tend to take more complex forms, especially that of the novel, which is understandable given that a man crouching in a trench scarcely has the time to generate as complex a form as the novel. For the most part, both the post-war and "eye-witness" forms tend primarily to communicate the desperation and the sense of disillusionment of the front-line soldier, this being especially the case for the work generated through the immediate post-war years up until the early 1930s (Ecksteins, 125).

By far the most immediately recognisable of war literature generated in the trenches themselves is the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, John McCrae, Ivor Gurney, Isaac Rosenberg and others. In some cases, these were poets of necessity—men who wrote poetry not because they were poets in the traditional sense, but rather because their circumstances were so terrible and the lack of knowledge on the home front so striking that they felt the need to communicate through the medium of the poem. Like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, they felt a compelling need to tell their stories, but in this case with little apparent artistry because that artistry would misrepresent the realities of trench warfare. Not surprisingly, their poetry tends to be quite brutal in its imagery and language, mirroring the realities of trench life:

He pushed another bag along the top,
Craning his body outward; then a flare
Gave one white glimpse of No Man's Land and wire;
And as he dropped his head the instant split
His startled life with lead, and all went out.

(Sassoon, "A Working Party", lines 45-9)

While this is interesting as a testimony to the brutality of trench life, it has questionable merit as a poem in its own right. This passage, like the life it is describing, is brutal and violent, but it is also devoid of any sense of emotion. However, this is far from being the case with the work of Wilfred Owen, who is considered by many to be the best of the war poets. His poem "Futility" describes the moving of corpses into the sun, as if to try to rouse them:

Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved--still warm--too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
--O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

(lines 10-14, 58)

In this case, the forces of the modern world—namely, the guns responsible for the demise of these boys—have overwhelmed the forces of the natural world, here represented as the sun which we know will not rouse them. In this way, the industrial world has unquestionably killed whatever may be left of the Romantic aesthetic, the mechanical world has overwhelmed the natural world.

Fussell talks at length about Owen's latent homosexuality and his need to give a voice to the men he knew in the army (290). It is interesting to note that Owen did not consider himself a poet, but rather the voice of a dispossessed youth which would otherwise be silent. He is blatantly clear about this in the preface to his collected poems:

> This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.
>
> Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.
>
> Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
>
> My subject is War, and the pity of War.
>
> The poetry is in the pity
>
> (31)

By placing War and Poetry in opposition in this passage, Owen is suggesting that

they cannot coexist: the Poetry that he was taught in his private-school youth (we know, for instance, that he studied Horace and other traditional "Poets"—Owen's capitalisation here being significant) could simply not be applied to the personified evil "War." The sun cannot, in the modern industrial world, rouse the dead soldiers. Essentially, Owen is pointing out that the old conventions—which he lists himself in the second and third lines of this passage—cannot be used to describe the war. In much the same way that the traditional forms of music and words and other communication became inadequate in the trenches (Ecksteins, 215), then, traditional forms of poetry—what Owen describes as "Poetry"—were no longer adequate to the task of conveying the realities of the modern world. In this way, Owen is not denying himself as a poet at all, but rather asserting and insisting that his poetry is necessarily removed from that which he learned as a child. It is in this light that he can be said to be among the first modernists. The old system was no longer adequate, so he began to use one of his own creation, and with stunning and lasting effect.

In much the same way as the poetry of the war, war fiction tends either to be rather brutal and artless *rapportage* or to take on increasingly innovative and thoroughly modern forms. In the late 1920s, war narratives suddenly gained surprising popularity—spearheaded by Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front, probably the only traditional book from this period that remains popular to this day. Its release in January 1929 touched off a long series of war narratives which were traditional in structure and often poorly written (Ecksteins, 276). They were produced, it would appear, to satisfy the growing appetites for war narratives of a generation struggling to come to terms with the war and therefore now apparently ready for them. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is Charles Yale Harrison's Generals Die in Bed, touted on the cover as "the great Canadian war novel":

> We march all night. Ten minutes' rest every hour. The road is jammed with clanging artillery. There is a steady stream going our way.
>
> Yes, we are going into action; of that there can be no doubt. The rumours of an offensive these past months have not been idle ones.
>
> (178)

While the staccato style does convey the fragmentary state of the mind of a soldier at war, the narrative structure is very traditional and the book itself riddled with a late

Victorian sense of popular drama. Indeed, it reads much more like a poorly written and extensive piece of journalism than a true novel, and in many places seems almost childish. The story is about the war and it is true to trench life; in that sense, the book is compelling because the war itself is compelling, but the narrative follows very much the conventions of fiction writing as they existed before the war.

Yet this tendency to apply old techniques to new, modern, themes and subjects was waning. All Quiet on the Western Front was a popular novel and was substantially traditional in narrative structure (told, like Generals Die in Bed, entirely in the first person), but it did compellingly convey a strong sense of futility--a sense which ushered in the mainstream acceptance of modernism and paved the way for experimentation in narrative form to better reflect content. Erich Remarque's book remains a compelling testimony to the sense of alienation and loneliness felt by a soldier at the front, told with remarkable artistry.

> The storm lashes us, out of the confusion of grey and yellow and the hail of splinters whips forth like the childlike cries of the wounded, and in the night shattered life groans wearily in the silence.
>
> Our hands are earth, our bodies clay and our eyes pools of rain. We do not know whether we still live.
>
> (171)

Furthermore, Erich Remarque's approach to his creation is very similar to Wilfred Owen's; in the preface to the original edition of his work, he was careful to point out that what he had written was not the story of an adventure, but rather the story of how a generation was destroyed by life on the Western Front (Remarque, quoted by Ecksteins, 281).

Remarque carefully tells the story of Paul, the main character, through all of his time at the front and during his leave periods at home. Primary in this thematic approach is Remarque's insistence that Paul was unable to completely regain his sense of home; that home itself was no longer a place which offered any sort of solace. In fact, it was a source of even greater torment than the front, leaving Paul pining not for the return to normality but for the return to the only life he knows how to live:

> I bite my pillow. I grasp the iron rods of my bed with my fists. I ought never to have come here. Out there I was indifferent and often hopeless;--I will never be able to be so again. I was a soldier, and now I am nothing but an agony for myself, for my mother, for everything that is so comfortless without end.

I ought never to have come on leave.

(115)

This alienation and desperation soon becomes so strong that Paul cannot see any possible way out, although he does finally find his peace. Without a home to return to, Paul's only peace comes with the bullet which kills him. The irony of this theme—of freedom and escape only through death—is a powerful part of most war literature, and the end of Remarque's novel is perhaps one of its best known examples.

Yet in many ways, All Quiet on the Western Front is not strictly a genuine representation of trench life; it is much more a long lament for the ruining of a generation. This effect is perhaps amplified by the fact that the book was written several years after the war and that Remarque turned to writing it in desperation—after the disillusionment he experienced when returning to Germany after the war. Unable to put the war behind him and exist comfortably in a post-war world, he set about writing a long lamentation about what he perceived as the event that ruined him and his generation. In this sense, then, writing about the war became a way of escaping and a way of explaining his post-war unhappiness (Ecksteins, 283). As such, it is also a condemnation of an industrialised society for "destroying humane values" (Ecksteins, 283). One could even suggest that Remarque in many ways wishes to find his peace in much the same way as Paul, longing, as does his protagonist, to rejoin the community of soldiers. In this sense, then, there is little artistry in the book, and, unlike the works of Wilfred Owen, there is little poetry in the pity, unless it is the reader's pity for the author himself.

The pervading sense of not belonging which is continually reinforced in Remarque's work became a central theme for the literature that followed the war, and in many ways remains so today. Added to this was a deep sense that after the war, it is difficult to think of anything else as significant—indeed, for many who experienced the war virtually nothing else mattered.

Yet even a careful reading of All Quiet on the Western Front reveals that, while a strong and very compelling work, it is not a novel which reflects the modernist form in the strictest sense. Modernism as a movement began well before the outbreak of the war—it is the result not primarily of the war (although the war did help Modernism to become the dominant and prevalent form) but rather of industrialised society's alienation of the individual A modernist novel, therefore, tends to concentrate on psychology—the internal narrative being as important as the

external narrative and often superseding it—and on the sense of otherness felt by the primary narrator of the book. This *mal de siècle* was amplified and brought into the mainstream by the war, but it did exist as an aesthetic movement for almost as long as machines had been a part of the landscape. André Gide's ground-breaking L'Immoraliste, for instance, was first published in 1902 David Daiches sees the rift between the traditional novel and the modern novel as clearly defined, where the preceding works—of Dickens, for instance—had very clear and explicit plot lines, trustworthy narrators and above all a sense that the gaps in the narrative could be filled in with what was generally accepted by society at large, the modern novel rejects these ideas wholeheartedly and is often openly hostile to them (1). Daiches goes on to elucidate what he considers the three primary tenets of modern fiction. the "breakdown of a public sense of significance", "the concept of time as a continuous flow rather than a series of separate points," and "the new view of consciousness...[that] the individual personality is the sum of the individual's memories" (7). In this sense, modernist fiction can be said to be much more focused on the internal processes of a few characters than was the novel prior to the modernist movement; it can also be said to be less direct, less comforting and ultimately, less entertaining and more demanding of the reader Finally, it often relays stories of the systematic alienation of the individual from the society of which he must be a part—Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, Gide's Michel in L'Immoraliste and Ford Madox Ford's Narrator in The Good Soldier all experience what Daiches calls "a constant state of unstable equilibrium" (19) This is the very state experienced by soldiers at war.

Ford's The Good Soldier is an interesting book in that it greatly elucidates the attitude that sent men to the trenches in the first place without serving as an example of that attitude. Essentially the story of a group of friends who come together every year, The Good Soldier can in many ways be considered to be the first truly modern novel, and is one which managed to alienate many readers used to traditional forms of narrative. As such, it is a series of apparently loosely linked scenes, often leading the reader to great frustration because of what he or she is not told - instead of assuming that all the necessary information will be provided, the reader is often forced to make that deduction In this way, not only is there thematic alienation, *ennui* and *mal de siècle*, but that sense is conveyed to the reader because it is forced on him or her by the disjunctive narrative The effect is to force the reader not to sit passively and watch the story unfold in front of him or her, but rather to become actively inculpated in the narrative

> Ford's whole view of the truth called for obliquity, for the conduct of microcosmic 'affairs' which reflected, in the eye of a good reader, not the mere sequence of history as represented by theories of conflict and survival, but the great historical crises which transcend the temporal sequence.
>
> (Kermode, 16)

With the use of innovative narration, then, the form begins to reinforce the themes. "The good soldier" is not the narrator himself, but rather a friend who was a hero in the Boer war. The narrator, unable to care enough to be "a good soldier" himself, is symbolic of Yeats's rough beast which must, because of historical forces and the failure of the social system, emerge as a force in the modern world. He is indifferent and uncaring about anything at all, and the book describes his increasing alienation and frustration. After the war—five years after Ford's book was published—this sense of being outside ceased to be an aberration which would shock the reader; because of the experience of the trenches, it was the good soldier, not the disillusioned youth, who became increasingly rare.

Perhaps the best fictional treatment of this transition—presenting both the good soldier and the disillusioned youth and doing so through the form of the modern novel—is Ernest Hemingway's In Our Time, first published in 1925. The book is composed of series of loosely collected short stories and vignettes held together by small narratives at the chapter headings (printed in italics) and by the consistent use of characters in various stages of their lives. It can be argued that, when viewed as a whole, In Our Time is a novel and not simply a series of short stories—the movement from the beginning to the end of the book would suggest this, as would the characterisation which occurs seemingly by accident (the episodes are fragmentary, but usually deal with the same characters)—and Hemingway, by organising these stories as chapters, clearly saw the work as a novel himself.

The book opens with "On the Quai at Smyrna," a two-page description of Armenians arriving at Smyrna after having been marched across Turkey in what later became known as the Armenian Genocide. The style is highly journalistic, and the tone remarkably flat. Indeed, the person doing the reporting—set up here as a friend of the narrator—seems angry at the Armenians for ruining what would otherwise be a beautiful day: "you didn't mind the women who were having babies as you did those with the dead ones" (12). Surely, this is the indifference of a soldier described by Ecksteins: after a certain time at the front, nothing was shocking, and the horrific became the mundane (154).

From this preface—clearly from the point of view of someone who is indifferent when faced with an experience which would horrify most—Hemingway moves the reader into the first chapter, which treats the sense of indestructibility felt by a young man, presumably bringing us back to a simpler and more innocent time than that of the preface. "Indian Camp" is a story about a young man – probably about ten years old—accompanying his uncle across a lake to watch him perform a caesarean on an indian woman. The birth is incredibly painful, and the baby's father, unable to support the mental anguish of his wife's screams, cuts his own throat during the operation. We, like the young Nick and his uncle themselves, don't become aware of this until after the child is born Yet the young Nick sees this as so outside of his experience that he doesn't feel at all implicated Indeed, his uncle's and his father's words are so comforting and the warmth of the lake in the early morning so beautiful that by the end of the story, Nick, in his youthful innocence, feels certain that he will never die (19) This comfortable world - in which even a suicide cannot overcome the reassuring words of a father and the pleasant early-morning warmth of the lake water—is clearly representative of the innocence of the 'good soldier' approach, in this world, Owen's soldiers would have been roused by the sun. Yet by placing this passage immediately after the chilling preface, Hemingway is forcing an impending sense of doom on the reader we have been shown what is going to happen, and are now being taken back to a more innocent time. By structuring the beginning of the book this way, Hemingway forces us to continue reading not because we want to know what is going to happen, but rather because we want to understand that transition and that movement

When Hemingway moves into treatments of the war and soldiers towards the middle of the book, the sense of indifference which characterised the preface once again emerges. While we see Nick himself in combat in one of the brief italicised chapter introductions, it is the story "Soldier's Home" which most explicitly treats the soldier's sense of alienation The story of Krebs, a young American, "Soldier's Home" opens with a description of his departure for the front, and everything is perfect and ordered "all of them wearing exactly the same height and style collar" (69). The second paragraph contrasts this passage sharply, describing a picture which Krebs brought back with him from the war "Krebs and the corporal look too big for their uniforms The German girls are not beautiful The Rhine does not show in the picture" (69) Clearly, this is not Rupert Brooke's world in which a soldier's presence will serve to bless a foreign land What follows is a treatment of Krebs at home after the war and his increasing sense that he doesn't belong encouraged by his

father to get a job, he spends his days sitting on the porch watching girls. Yet even here he is unable to act, convincing himself that he doesn't need a girl and that one will soon come to him anyway (72).

Yet the most striking treatment of Krebs' lack of belonging comes when he discusses his indifference with his mother:

> "I don't love anybody," Krebs said.
>
> It wasn't any good. He couldn't tell her, he couldn't make her see it. It was silly to have said it He had only hurt her. He went over and took hold of her arm. She was crying with her head in her hands.
>
> (76)

He couldn't tell her why he didn't love anybody because she wouldn't understand; she was still holding onto the ideas and values they shared before Krebs went to war, and he had been profoundly changed. Indeed, Krebs is no longer a part of her community, but rather a part of the community of soldiers (Leed, 215)—his only social skill is to take on "the easy pose of the old soldier among other soldiers" (70). The distance between Krebs's post-war world and that of his mother becomes obvious when she tries to impose a solution on Krebs' inability to love anyone by getting him to pray with her, but he cannot (77). The pre-war solution of praying simply cannot solve Krebs' indifference—this is the embodiment of the breakdown of traditional forms of which Ecksteins speaks (215). She ends up praying for him, but the rift between the two is exposed--his mother wants to repair things by using the same old conventions, Krebs knows that these conventions will not succeed and doesn't really seem to care anyway

Hemingway has moved us from the reassuring words of a father which make a child feel that he will never die, through the horrors of war, to a world in which the words and rituals of a parent succeed only in elucidating the difference between parent and child. Krebs' mother does not reassure him, she makes him lie and infuses him with anxiety and a sense of not belonging in much the same way as Paul's mother did when he returned from the Western Front As such, she elucidates the gap between the pre-war world--in which prayer, for instance, would solve a problem, and the post-war world in which it means nothing Krebs cannot pray because he is no longer part of the community of those who see it as any sort of solution

The end of In Our Time brings us back to the character of Nick, who leaves civilisation to go fishing. The departure here is significant: like Krebs, presumably unable to feel any sense of belonging or normality in the world to which he returns

after the war, he goes back to the natural world to seek solace. It can be said that this return to the river represents a return to romanticism and a renewal of faith in the power of the natural world; at the very least, it reminds us of the young Nick dragging his hand in the water next to the canoe and the feeling he had at the time that he would never die. Whether parts one and two of "Big Two-hearted River" actually offer Nick any sense of renewal is unclear, but the last line at least offers the suggestion that this renewal might be possible: "there were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp" (156).

In Our Time, then, is a unique and powerful novel which uses many of the innovations of modernism—in particular a disjunctive narrative presenting representative events instead of a linear description of everything -- and does so in a way that engages the reader without alienating and confusing him or her. In Our Time is not a novel in the traditional sense, but rather a collage of events which together form a narrative, be it in first or third person, about Nick or Krebs or any of the other characters who emerge and disappear. This structure is ideal for conveying the emotional, physical and cultural transition from pre-war invincibility (shown by Nick in "Indian Camp") through the alienation caused by the horror of war (in the preface and "Soldier's Home") and finally towards the attempt to repair the damage and the sense of futility caused by the war through a return to the natural world (in parts 1 & 2 of "Big Two-hearted river"). In the space of 160 pages, then, Hemingway presents all facets of life in the modern world, elucidating the human implications of modern industrial life and war. Yet because he is unrestrained by the requirements of a linear narrative, all of the episodes become crucial and serve to indicate a greater truth. Whereas Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front serves as a traditional yet compelling damnation of war, In Our Time is altogether more subtle, steering the reader towards damning the war for himself and offering not only a vision of the destructiveness of that war but, in the last two chapters, some hope that something new can emerge. If nothing else, Hemingway's representation is more complete and more honest, telling a story in much the same way that people perceive their lives—through a series of extremely important episodes, without having to fill in any of the details in between, a process which would necessarily mitigate the strength of the episodes themselves.

Conclusion

The First World War, therefore, was a monumental event not only in and of itself, but in that it served as a cultural catalyst which forced the death of pre-war

attitudes and aesthetics. It gave Modernism—which had existed since at least the turn of the century—a popular audience in the surviving combatants and forced the posing of a number of questions regarding man's place in an increasingly industrial—and therefore *un*human—world. These are questions which face us to this day. Finally, it served as a coming of age for Canada itself, leading to a cultural and national renaissance of great proportions.

The attraction of writing about the war therefore is self-evident; it is the defining event of modern life. Yet it is one that demands to be treated carefully if that treatment is to successfully convey the transition from pre-war neo-Victorian culture to the modern world and from traditional, linear narrative style and aesthetics to the modernist techniques described above. Yet perhaps more importantly, writing about the First World War remains important and applicable to today's world: we are still dealing with man's struggle against the dehumanising effects of the machine (to say nothing of the effects of continuing wars the world over), and we all feel alienated by our society at times. Although the war is temporally removed from us, it is still aesthetically and culturally relevant Many of the modernist techniques which gained popular voice through the war still apply because they adhere to the rules of human thought—in the same way that one thinks in a series of disjunctive episodes, so does a modernist text often unfold. The effect is, if successful, a psychological involvement of the reader; the thought processes of the book become the thought processes of the reader. In this way, an author is not so much telling a story as he or she is communicating it. The result is a much more active reader with a much more personal involvement in the text. Ultimately, this leads to a more intense and gratifying experience for the reader.

My desire in writing Enfilade was not to re-write In Our Time in my words, although I trust my respect for that text is self-evident My desire, rather, was to treat the subject of war—and its implications for the home front—in a way which would communicate the emotions involved to the reader without explicitly stating them To that end, I have endeavoured to employ many modernist techniques, primary among those being a disjunctive and episodic narrative, while rejecting the more radical techniques of linguistic and narrative breakdown except in the few places where they seemed appropriate namely, the battle scenes Simply put, there is no better way to convey the intensity of emotion involved in such powerful experiences. Furthermore, since the mind tends to perceive events as episodic and representative and not linear, I made the decision to have the story told from a number of different points of view. A result of this is a series of different voices—idiosyncratic spelling and grammar

included—which combine to offer the reader a greater picture of the events unfolding. Also, this allows one to superimpose images of the home life with that at the trenches, adding a further dimension to the story. In this way, a very traditional plot is conveyed as a collage instead of a simple picture. It is my belief that the character Elspeth is in many ways as much a combatant as is her fiancée Alistair, using this technique offered me the opportunity to represent that without stating it explicitly and without complicating the narrative and thereby distancing the reader with "he felt / she felt" constructions.

Yet there are aspects to Enfilade which are decidedly removed from the modernist tradition, primary among these being the epistolary form employed at length in the first half of the work. My attraction to this form - which is one of the oldest in the writing of the novel, examples such as Richardson's Clarissa coming quickly to mind—is simple: a person tends to express himself or herself very differently in a written form, especially when his or her audience is clearly defined. Letters can be a wonderful vehicle for conveying doubts and frustrations and can serve as a means to develop a character's relationship with the addressee without imposing the structure and distance of a third-person narrative. In that way, my attraction to the epistolary form is the same as my attraction to the disjunctive and minimalist modernist form: both allow the telling of a story without the artificial structure usually involved in such an undertaking. This allows the characters to speak for themselves, and the reader to become more of an observer than somebody who is being told a story.

My attempt here, then, has been to combine two of the forms which offer the most direct voice for the characters involved in the story: the modern and the epistolary—while simultaneously combining two convergent plots: that of Alistair in Europe and that of Elspeth and the Prestons in Southern Québec. Held together when necessary by a third person narrative (when historical information is needed, for example), the superimposition of these forms and these plot lines offers the opportunity to create a memorable and compelling work while telling what is essentially a very traditional story. Enfilade, then, is an attempt to tell an old story in a new way.

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