

The Night He Slept

I watch him again. No change. The room is bare, with nothing personal that he can call his own. How can he notice? He can't even see me; the one who loves him. He lays there, his breaths staggered. I run my fingers through his hair, picking out the flakes of mud the trenches left behind. He is peaceful in sleep. Anything is better than when he is awake and screaming. I cannot blame him for the racket. His bones are so broken they can't be put together again, like an impossible jigsaw. His shoulder blade is shattered. His collarbone is cracked. His ribs have relinquished their grasp on his heart. I will have to accept he won't be the same again.

Even sleeping, a single tear runs down his face. A tear as cold as his eyes when he doesn't know me. Sometimes he sees me and smiles as warm as he ever could. I find it easy to forget the war when he smiles at me like that. I savour it for it is never long before the screaming returns. I am surprised he is still alive but I must admit I am glad, no matter how much pain he is in. There are memories that we share and if he were to leave, I would be the only one who would remember.

I don't think I can cope with that.

There was a time, before the Great War broke out. Once, we ran up the hill on the outskirts of the village and collapsed at the top, breathing heavily. I never considered that the struggle for breath would become life-threatening to him.

The moment was ours. For all we knew it could've been just us, all alone on the planet that day. We lay for hours, the grass tickling our feet, watching the clouds turn to stars before he sat up.

"Stand up," he said. He went on one knee. He opened a box from his pocket. I thought he had plucked a star from the sky and put it in the box before presenting it to me. I smiled. We lay there until the sun came up, frozen in time.

I watch him now, twisting the ring on my finger. The star went out when he joined up. No other ring will join it. I accepted that when they came to the door.

They think they can't do anything to help him; that he would prefer death to this dreadful agony that I can see beneath his closed eyes. He is a piece of string that has been stretched so far there is only a fine thread holding it together and anything could make it...

...snap.

I can see relief behind his eyes now. I think I see him smile before his chest ceases to rise. I brush the one cold tear from his cheek and stand up to leave. Before the door closes, I take one last look at him.

He really could be asleep.