

An Endless Dusk

The sky was swirling with colours, spinning in glittering pirouettes made more brilliant by their flat black background. The night was cold, but I only felt Dawn's warmth propped up against mine, her head resting on my shoulder as she watched the colours, and I watched them play on her face. The show's sounds were deafening, ensuring that no noise might pull us away. Even Dawn's perfect scent of poppies woven with periwinkle, and the rising smell of gunpowder churned into earth, fell below the spectacle's presentation. I happily surrendered every sense I had to what was in front of me: I had nowhere else to be, save with her.

'Jock! Can you hear me?'

I barely heard the muffled pounding of the speech's rhythm, let alone the words it carried. Nevertheless, I turned away and scoured the gloomy field behind us for its source, but the reflected flashes of colour frolicking across the grass begged me to glance back and watch the show being done for me. Dawn looked at me as I turned around, her eyes full of love and longing as she pulled me closer. Her red shoes became rainbows as the sky revelled in their reflection.

'Jack, move!'

Their meaning was still lost on me, but the words' urgency was not. I felt cold as I turned, but Dawn righted me again and her warmth soon returned. The sky continued to blossom and spiral with countless shades that consumed every sense I had. But the longer I looked, the more it fell apart. The display was beginning to churn, lazily making way for a ball of night, like a fly trying to swim through paint. The dark shape grew steadily bigger. Dawn pulled me closer. If it wasn't for the show's cacophony, I would've sworn I heard boots slapping into mud.

It all disappeared. The colours had left only their canvas, and Dawn had taken her heat away with her. Mud and spent gunpowder filled anything the cold, black night didn't, save for the sound. The show's noise was still constant, but somehow instead had become discomfotingly violent. In front of my face, grey presented itself, scratched onto black. As my vision sharpened, I found I was looking at the most horrifically scuffed pair of boots I'd seen in my life. Interestingly, the scuffs were only on the toecaps. The boots mercifully spun away from me as I was rolled over with a wet squelch. I felt my lice scuttle around to accommodate my body's new position.

'—stop this Jock. We ain't kids no more. I won't be here to save ya sorry ass forever, okay?'

I had been turned to the sky, which had become a beautiful blur of dark blue and ash. The night was moonless, and as my vision continued to improve I noticed a man's face perched atop it. I had heard the speech, but I was more engrossed in discerning the face's identity than its words. The hair was brown, spiky, and yet limp, as if it was a hedgehog with soft spines. A scar still broke up the left cheek. His eyes were angry, but they betrayed their softness if you stared at them. The boots fell into place.

'Toes.'

A smile. ‘I didn’t hit ya that hard, ya daft bastard. Get up, Jock. We can’t stay this side.’

Toes offered his hand. I took it. Standing up, Toes looked down on me as the taller man. His eyes ran over me before he turned to move, but he stopped himself. No matter where else he looked, his gaze kept returning to my hand.

‘Writin’ that letter while ya daydream again? I hope ya remember our conversation, Jock. Ya can’t keep standin’ in the line o’ fire.’

I looked down at my hand too. It was holding my letter, but my pen was missing again. The sky, the speech and... and Dawn... they all came together as I realised what had happened. I followed every crease in the letter’s paper as I folded it. After placing it in its pocket, I put a new pen from my other pocket with it before I fastened both pockets shut. Taking my preoccupation as an answer, Toes took me off my train of thought.

‘The major’s waitin’. Jock, ya need to keep ya head down. Next door ain’t exactly friendly.’

‘I saw her again, Toes. There were fireworks.’

The tall man walked toward me. He squeezed my shoulder with his hand, and my throat with his voice.

‘I know, Jock. I know. She’s waitin’ for ya at home, you’ll see her soon.’

Toes spun on his heel, and started walking through the mud on a path only he ever seemed able to see. I made sure to follow him. Other men walked past us, but I didn’t know their names. That was always Toes’ speciality. Every step brought the stench of mulch, depression and excrement crashing over your nose and into your eyes afresh, where it beckoned snot and singed eyelashes alike. It forced you to remember that the grey-brown around you wasn’t British concrete, but French soil.

Toes slowed his pace, and matched mine beside me as we walked. He made sure to stay slightly in front so I knew where to go.

‘Hey, Jock, ya remember when we were kids?’

I looked at him. He looked back in exactly the same way he always had. I tried to return the smile.

‘You made our time together hard to forget.’

‘Ha. I hope ya mean that in a good way.’ Toes’ voice became low, and he began to concentrate on his words. My feet became lead—it meant he was serious. ‘I just want to tell you, Jock. I’m glad you remember. I’m glad to be out here—obviously not *to be out here*—but glad to be here with someone that knew me... before. It helps.’

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I just met his eyes. ‘Yes Toes, it does. It really does.’

We stood there, protected by each other from the rage screaming through the air, for a while. Soon, something shone and broke the trance. A can, left to rot in the ground like the rest of

us, caught a distant fire's light, which burned out almost as quickly as it had been born. It was in the wrong direction to where Toes was heading, but that didn't matter. My eyes found Toes', and I found a familiar glint in his eye.

'Ya remember what else we did as kids?'

The next thing I knew, the can was free and flying down the trench towards me. I stopped it with my boot's sole. The can's crunches were drowned out by the Earth groaning around us, so I wasn't scared to boot the can back. I missed completely. I smiled, but I'm not sure why. I don't remember how long we played for, nor how long it had been since I had.

I was getting close to actually kicking the can when a quiet, rhythmic cough began to sputter louder and louder. I was confused, until it spat Arnsworth out from around the corner. His rifle was raised. His eyes kept moving. I kicked the can into the soft flesh of the trench wall. When he saw me, the rifle dropped on his sling reluctantly. His eyes locked.

'The hell are you two doin' out front?'

I did not want to grace Arnsworth with attention. Toes didn't speak, nor blink. In the distance, I managed to hear a bird squawking. I'm not sure how. Almost in response, the short, fat man waddled up to Toes through the muck, and gurgled in his face.

'You's not no kid, *Toby Jameson*. Sort yourself out.'

He came to me next. A stout finger prodded my chest. Spite bubbled from his mouth.

'An' you don't deserve to be here, *Jack Williams*. You's a soldier, not no writer. Hell, you's not even no soldier. You's a disgrace, you is.'

I turned to Toes. His eyes were now pointed at the mud, and just as soft.

'You got a girl back home, Williams? Bet she's *real* proud you's doing *shit* for her here.'

I wasn't aware I had punched Arnsworth until he looked back up at me with blood on his face. The man was stronger than he looked, as he had now pushed me up above himself and into the trench wall's wet embrace. Toes' eyes were wide with fear, wider than Arnsworth should make them. I then realised which wall I was being held against. I kicked Arnsworth hard, and climbed him. I was standing on his shoulders, and checking my letter's pocket, when I noticed Toes had jumped toward me. We landed in a heap, sinking in warm, freshly churned mud. The Major's hat was just about visible, down inside the trench. I glimpsed loving, longing eyes behind it before the gunfire started. I don't remember how long it lasted. I don't think of that day anymore. It is the day my best friend died. The Major says I shouldn't say that, but it's true. Nothing will change that.

'Hey, uh, private. Good to see you.'

Frank Connell. He doesn't make eye contact. I smile as I fold my letter, though I'm not sure why.

'Likewise, Connell. Likewise.'

Frank squeezes my shoulder, provides a curt nod, and almost trips over his own feet as he leaves the doorway I'm heading toward. You'd think, as soldiers, we'd know how to handle situations like this better than most. But, it seems we all have our own problems, and our own ways of coping. My leg hits the floor with a dead thump as I bend down onto one knee and place my crutches beside me. Robert O'Neil appears in the doorway, and starts to walk toward me. His body stiffens when he sees what I have pulled from under the bed.

'Y-You, here again, private? You know what the Ma-Major said about you... coming here.'

'I won't be long.'

Robert is trying to burn a hole in the wall to my left with his eyes.

'You need help with your... with cleaning up?'

'No.' The room is just as pristine as the day he died. 'Thanks, Robert.'

'I-I see. I'll leave you, then.' Robert leaves before I can reply.

I smile. He didn't have to do that. Alone in the room, I open the box. I can smell poppies, ink and periwinkles, just like I used to. Placing the box on the floor, I lift out the letters from home and place them to one side. I take the pen from my pocket and place it in the box with the others. This way, I can't lose it. I go to put the old letters back in their box so I can post the letter waiting for Dawn in my pocket. They shouldn't stop just because he's gone. While I do so, a pair of shining red shoes catch in the corner of my eye as their owner walks past. Strange. I notice a collection of papers I don't recognise as the owner's haste blows the pile across the room. It's not from home. I've never found any letters to home from him. I wasn't sure if he'd actually written any—maybe this is one of his? Unfolding it, I see his handwriting on the first page: '*Dear Dawn,*'. The rest are blank. Why would they be blank? Had he nothing to say to her? Flicking through the pages, my finger catches on the second-to-last one. There are paperclips at either end. Sliding out the piece of paper the paperclips were hiding, I find it to be a full letter. But not from him. As I read, I can take no more than a few words at a time:

—am so sorry to write this.—

—happened so fast, dear. It was so quick.—

—saddened. It was on her own terms, though—

—Dawn couldn't take your conscription. Not after everything you—

—, and at least you have your best friend out there with you—

—be hard, but please tell him. He was Dawn's friend too,—

—The Jamesons send their love for our loss, as do the rest of the neighbourhood—

—all miss her terribly. And we all love and miss you, dear. Come home safe.

I cannot put the letter down. So this... The daydreaming... Without her at home, the poor man thought he had nothing left. There is shouting outside. That stupid kid couldn't even kick a football, let alone trust his friend! The shouting is louder. How was I meant to be there for him if he wouldn't let me? If I had known, I would have... I would have... I would have *helped*. Gunshots. I would have done something. God, he must have felt all alone. A cough lights up the doorway behind me. At least he's with her now, I guess. 'Toby! Get o—' another flash. But he didn't have to suffer like that. I could have helped.

Speech fills the quarters—a language I don't recognise. A click follows—a language I do.

I could have helped.