

## Hope Is Important

He Dared. He Dared to dream. Dared to let these wooden ideas pound at the walls of dark jagged imagination. To let the flower of hope blossom, pungently attractive, delicate, poisonous, and to see it wither and die. He dared to wake. To slip gently from warm fantasy into the icy embrace of this chill winter existence.

Colour stood to salute the aurora. Red, Orange, Yellow, Purple and Pinks, dancing across a canvas of light. John was almost tempted to drink in the morning air, ignoring that it was laced with the noxious taste of bitter blood, and that the stench of the rotting dead still hung heavy in the atmosphere. But, alas, he resisted once more, knowing it not to be worth the inevitable repercussions. His eyes were still heavy, sticky with exhaustion and cold clammy sweat. His mouth, dry and tacky, frantically pursued soothing moisture to drip delicately down his aching throat. Freezing and limp, John rose steadily, his muscles following a practised pattern, variety crippled by years of regimentation. He reached into the khaki sack lying in the hollowed out side of the trench. The paper which fluttered in the pestilent breeze read:

November 13th 1916.

Darling Jessica,

I hope this letter is finding you and Robert in fine health. Since my last letter a lot has happened, as I am sure you are aware. We made sure to give Jake a proper burial. Tell Nancy not to worry, he's in a better place now. War has treated me kindly and I am most glad. I am told that the war is coming to a close, anytime soon they say, and then ill be home where I belong. I love you and I hope you never lose sight of this. Tell Robert I love him too and don't let him forget me.

Yours Constantly,  
John.

Looking back over the letter a wry smile cracked on his wizened visage. Not Joy any more, not even the irony of these evident protective lies as he nursed a bloody infected shoulder which destructively gnawed away at his resolve. He smiled because it was the only thing which held him together. The crumbling walls of entrenched hope refused to fold.

He cast his tired eyes along the line of shadow clinging to the trench walls. The thick buttery caramel mud slopped over the sides and ran tantalizingly to the trench floor, covering the sandbags. Encrusted in the wall, it was still possible to see the floating hand of a body, banked and encrusted in the side. For a second John thought he saw it flinch as the vermin scuttled over the top of it, feeding off of the death and decay. The hand was fine, an artists hand, a piano player's hand, a hand now green with fermentation and heavy with infestation, never to be touched again.

The morning hate called and the shuddering silence was broken. A dreamy-eyed vacancy rooted itself in the cold dead eyes of those around him, those eyes that betrayed the **joviality** and the faux humour now engulfing the eastern trench. The heavy earthenware jar marked **SDR** dispensed rum, a strong, black sticky liquid, two or three **teaspoonfuls** to each soldier as they lined up. The warmth seeped into their bones and tendrils of mild **pleasance** soothed the wounds for a heartbeat. The blur of routine, the days melted **indistinguishably** into one another for John, each day as unbearable as the next. In his diary he had written "Today was just a day fading into another. This isn't what life is for."

The crippling tedium of **sentry** duty seeped in and chronic habits snapped into focus once again. Rifle inspection. Watching the stretch of waste-land creep away into the foggy distance and feel sanity and hope slipping with it. Watching the sun stand down from duty, and the moon frowning nether-wards over the scarred and blistered land pained by the **endeavors** of man.

Day after day. Life after Life, the echoes of yesterday haunted John as he closed his eyes and prayed. He prayed for something, anything. He saw himself in his mind's eye, walking across the surface of the moon and looking down on the **chaos** and confusion and understanding. Understanding the eternal questions, repeated so many times in his private diary and understanding himself.

Standing in his sentry position, the cruel winter sun smirked over the trench and John's silent shuffles were the only focus of his attention. He cocked his head towards the sun and closed his eyes, soaking in the truculent rays. A sharp penetrating voice was singing high in the atmosphere, higher than the sun. Its omnipresent shrill declaration rung in his ears, John's eyes still closed he turned.

He was suddenly very aware of a stinging all around his head, and the noise was coming closer, **focusing** towards him. He opened his eyes and caught a glimpse out of the tail of his eye, and at that moment he slipped. Scrambling at the crumbling soil under his hands and weak knees, John picked himself up, but before he could reach his full height, the sensory world around him exploded, light, sound, fingers of the explosion curled out to caress his broken face. A furious hot **whirlwind** rushed down, seized him and flung his **lumber some** body violently back against the earth. He lay stunned while a rain of damp earth and offal pattered down on him, followed by something which whizzed viciously and stuck quivering in the trench wall; it was a piece of jagged steel eighteen inches long.

Breathing heavily, his chest felt crushed by an invisible **weight** and as he lifted his hand he could not help but notice that it felt apart from his body and numb. After what seemed like an eternity, John rose. He lumbered forward, further into the maze of confusion ahead of him. He was not the first to arrive, Private **Simmons** lurched in the corner, the sound and smell of his violent sickness was ignored by John's head and heart. A face pushed a shovel into his cold hands and barked something in his face. It didn't matter anymore, nothing did. Stained with blood and lime, his boots marched the body of John Chapman away.

"In the face of such desperate times", the pencil clutched in between his fingers began to scrawl on a fresh page in his diary, "one's only hope of salvation is to resort to desperate measures." He sighed, the breath hanging in the air for a few seconds before being engulfed by a strong odour of death. The diary flicked open at the page titled "August 23<sup>rd</sup> 1916" and the excerpt read:

"Today I was in the trench and two of the men with me shot themselves on purpose to try and get sent home and out of the war. One man put a tin of bully beef on a ledge in the trench, then placed his hand behind it and fired his rifle through the tin, thinking, I suppose, that the tin would take the full force of the bullet and he would only get a flesh wound. But he misjudged the power of a shot at such close range and blew three of his fingers off.

The other one said to me "John, I am going home to my wife and kids. I'll be some use to them as a cripple, but none at all dead! I am starving here, and so are they at home, we may as well starve together." With that he fired a shot through his boot. When the

medics got his boot off, two of his toes and a lot of his foot had gone. I cannot get my head around this, well I suppose it is cowardice. The horrors of war are a test of resolve, nothing more.

A sergeant-major came to see what was happening. I told him that a sniper had just caught a couple of our men who had to get on top of the trench for a minute to move a sandbag. He looked at me a bit sideways, but yelled out for stretcher bearers, and they were carried off."

That was then and this is now, the brain of John Chapman processed. The logic didn't need to be right; the morals didn't need to be correct. The means were there and there was good enough cause he was sure of it. He had heard about it before of course, seen it once as well. "Those poor SIW" he would lament, secretly despising their stupidity and worst of all their lack of patriotism. F\*ck patriotism. The Lee Enfield rifle had been smooth if he remembered correctly, as he always did. Now it was scarred, notched with the faces of the dead and the wounded. The muzzle felt cold and tasted of lead in the relative warmth of his mouth, his steadying hand shaking to clink against his teeth. He slipped his bare toe over the trigger and mentally readied himself. The hot lead burst spectacularly into the brain, tearing the membranes of thinking flesh to ribbons of pink nothingness and the blood drenched the sky, the bitter darkness of the red contrasting deeply with the bright blue of the barbarous winter sky.