

TO DIE FOR

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The old man had been a soldier all his life; and he'd known, possibly for even longer than that, that it would be in the heat of battle and for his King and Country, that he would lay down this life and pass on into the next. What he had not been anticipating however, was that his grand finale would be taking place in the centre of one war that he wasn't entirely sure that he believed in. The year was 1916. The day was the 1st July. And as the man lay dying in a crater amidst the chaos and rotting flesh of no man's land, he couldn't help but think that all of it was for nothing. He was a just a number now, a figure that would at some point be added to a grand total of deaths and casualties. And in a hundred years time no one would even remember his name.

A pain ripped through his body, and he may have screamed out, but he couldn't hear over the machine gun fire that was making his ears bleed. Pain like this was inhuman, he thought; unnatural. Men were not designed to be torn to pieces by shells, any more than childhood was supposed to be decimated by the premature unveiling of Santa Claus. This wasn't warfare. It was massacre. And his heart broke at the realisation. To his right lay half a boy's face in the blood and dirt, the other half was a gaping hole of vomiting flesh that a rat seemed to have taken as its home. Private Williams, the boy's name had been. Fifteen. He'd sworn blind he was sixteen....but they'd all known. The man wondered if Private Williams had had similar unpatriotic thoughts, in the last precious moments of life. Had he called for his mother? Wished he'd never tried to look for the needle that was glory in the haystack of propaganda?

The man turned his head away in what he felt was respect for the dead boy. The pain was escalating now. He dug his fingers into his palms, and his back contracted slightly as he convulsively screamed out again. It was as if every fibre of his being were aflame and trying to escape. He was aware he was crying, and the metallic taste of blood was mixing with saliva in his mouth. He was going to die. It was only a matter of time; and even that seemed disrupted now; as if the cogs were trapped and couldn't quite move forward. Every so often everything faded into black, and when it returned it was disjointed – like he was looking at the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle rather than the sight of what he believed to be his bloody legs lying a good six foot away from the rest of him. He saw fire. He saw the body of man fly ten feet high above him in a noise that reverberated in the pit of his chest. He saw the skeleton of a tree clinging limply to the ground like a master-less puppet left out in the cold. He saw the clouds in the sky staring pitifully back at him, and remembered a time, a long time ago...where he'd spent the summer as a seventeen year old boy cloud busting on the soft grass beside a girl with sun-kissed hair, and eyes the colour of fireworks.....then, he closed his eyes. And it was only then that he saw *her*.....

“Oh look....Robbie! That one looks like an elephant!”

“Does not!” he'd cried, “It looks like your governess”

“Haha!” she squealed and nudged him in the ribs. He didn’t take his eyes off the sky, because he knew that if he did they wouldn’t be able to leave her face, but he grinned lopsidedly at the sun and saw in it, the shade of her smile.

“That one looks like you” she giggled to his left. His eyes traced the map of the heavens but he couldn’t see even a vague resemblance.

“Which one?” his heart stopped beating in the second he tore his gaze from above to follow her eye line, only to find she was looking straight at him, her eyes as wide and beautiful as they’d ever been.

“This one.....” she whispered, and leaned across the second between them to press her lips against his....

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