

Don Donato

## In Love and War

It was a mouthful of mush. Bradford tasted the hint of something like carrots. It was carrots he told himself, ignoring the root-like earthy smell. He chewed and chewed, swallowed hard. The lump hit his stomach, a growl resounded, and his guts tried to give it back to him. He forced it back down. He looked at the other men of the American Expeditionary Forces, sitting and waiting. Some of them cleaned their rifles, Springfields, reliable they were told. Some just sat looking into the darkness of the French woods surrounding them. They were all fresh recruits from farm-towns and cities spread over the land of opportunity. A nation full of promises soiled by untold, and less understood, demands. Bradford James, took another mouthful, chewing and waiting for the order to move out.

The Germans had retreated toward the Marne River, but the fighting continued. The prize, Paris, located less than a hundred or so kilometers to the west. Bradford listened to the bursts from enemy shells in the distance. His slight Southern drawl, his subdued manner, and gentrified soul made him feel misplaced so far from home and in a war, no less. He made the best of it.

“Hey Brad,” said Ansie, sitting down on the ground next to his boot camp buddy. Ansie was only a nickname, a baptism conferred by communal agreement or annoyance, depending on whom you asked. His real name was Angelo Antonelli. He was a small man, narrow faced making his nose seem long enough to suck up anybody’s business without taking a breath. He lived in Jersey, was born there and spent most of his time at his father’s fruit stand on Market street in Newark. He talked fast, couldn’t keep still, had to know everything. Brad felt that Ansie had to control it all, everything that was going on in camp, with the guys, with the world. If he could control it, he didn’t need to fear it so much. Now the war presented a problem, no one knew anything.

“Why are we waiting? Let’s get going. Kill those Germans and get it over with,” Ansie said.

Brad didn't pay any attention. He scraped the mush out of his mess kit, letting the earthy concoction fall back to the mossy green ground next to him. Brad knew Ansie didn't want an answer. He was blowing off steam from his boiling insides.

Brad reached into his back pocket and pulled out a dogged-eared paper, folded into a square. He opened it to a flat sheet, lined paper from a pad used for stenography.

Ansie glanced down at the paper and said, "Reading Peg's letter again. It's good to read stuff from home. I got nobody, just my old man. Who the hell wants to hear about how rotten fruit is these days. All the damn farmers, he says, are in Europe." Ansie brought his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them. He began to rock himself, and mumbled, "How many more apples will die at the hands of the Kaiser?" He was silent now. He stretched his legs out and leaned back on his hands. "Yeah," he continued, his words directed to the chilly air, "when I get home, I'm going to get myself a girl, get married and open my own stand. Hoboken, yeah, Hoboken." He looked at Bradford. "So, when you getting married, soon as you get back?"

"Yep," he replied. He said no more, leaving his friend's dreams hang undisturbed in the quiet, night air. Brad continued reading:

*... It's very difficult to find a nice wedding gown. The War seems to have taken priority and nothing new has come on the market. Mother says I can use her dress. She is making some alterations to make it look more of today's fashion. Father said that everything is going well with the job he told you about. He says after the War he expects the market to do well. Wall Street is where to be.*

*As father always says, 'keep your head down.' I can't wait to see you again.*

*Love,*

*Peg*

Bradford folded the paper and put it back into his pocket. He looked straight ahead without seeing anything other than the dark seeping between the trunks of the rough-barked trees.

Ansie smiled. "No fruit stands for you, that's for sure. You're going to use that fancy college you got and land some big job. Guys like you got it all worked out." *For sure.* Brad thought how uncertain those words were now. All he had to do was survive this damn war, and then nothing was impossible. It was all there for the taking. Just reach out and pluck what you wanted from the lush tree growing larger and more bountiful each day back home. It was the promise of it all that kept Bradford alive. Honor and glory in the land of endless plenty spurred nearly everyone in his Princeton class to enlist. Those who stayed behind, to Bradford, were the hopeless, the sceptics, those without faith in the new America.

The bushes swished and the twigs snapped. Bradford and Ansie turned toward the darkness at the periphery of the small clearing. A young, pale faced private, stepped out of the trees. His pimples were evident even in the dark.

"Okay. We got the word," the private said. "We're moving out to the Marne, up to the front. Tonight, at twenty-two hundred hours." He spoke quickly and disappeared back into the woods without another word.

Bradford and Ansie, along with rest of their platoon, walked to the Marne River in single file. Each unit keeping a safe distance from the squads ahead and behind, a way of diminishing the effect of artillery attacks. The sound of the exploding shells got louder with nearly each step they took. On the second night the glow of the blasts lighted the sky. The flash first, then the ear-splitting explosion. The tired troops trudged farther ahead. The pack on Bradford's back got heavier and his rifle's strap dug deeper into his shoulder. Muscles in his legs burned. He tried not to think about them. They were not part of him anymore. They were government issue, equipment to use for the sake of the War.

Each hour they walked the war became more alive. Their orders were not to speak. Ansie, following directly behind Bradford, whispered, "Brad, did you feel that? The ground shook." Bradford turned his head a bit and spoke out the side of his mouth, "It's from the concussion."

"They never told us the ground would shake."

Bradford didn't answer. He suspected now there was a lot they hadn't told them. The courage he brought from home was giving way to a repeating flutter, which started in his stomach and ended as a pounding in his heart. Courage, honor, where had it all gone?

The ground shook almost continuously now. The night's black nearly obliterated by the constant flashes. A round landed close by. Bradford and Ansie, along with a few others, were knocked off their feet. Brad lay flat on his stomach, touching the ground with his nose. The French soil stuck to his lips. The mossy taste of the War clung to his tongue. Stones and dirt flew over him. The branches on nearby trees waved violently and debris hit the leaves, echoing what sounded like heavy rain falling. He wrapped his arms around his head, just beneath the circular brim of his helmet. A brief sense of security warmed him.

A mocking quietness descended. Bradford got up. Ansie stumbled as he attempted to stand.

"Let's start killing Germans," Ansie said. "Get this thing over with," Bradford grabbed him by the arm. Ansie got his balance and both men took their places back in line.

The platoon started to move again. *Killing*, stayed with Bradford. He recognized the word, but it sounded different. The flutter in his stomach started again, crashing through his heart and flowing down his arms. His hands stung from the surge. *Killing* now had a smell, burnt sulfur, like a million matches lite all at the same time. It had the sound of thunder from a dark cloud floating next to him. He closed his eyes. What did it look like? That scared him most.

The men made their way forward. Bright bursts flickered on their faces like the light from the screen of a fast-moving picture show. Bradford's ears had become numb to the endless blasts. It was in the brief moments of silence his ears ached and rang from a deafening siren. He needed the powerful sound to begin again to take away the unbearable discomfort. He waited for what, in so few days, had become a part of him.

The company was within a night's walk to their prescribed position near the South bank of the Marne. The shells were landing much closer and more frequently. Travel slowed to almost a crawl. The men spent much of the time lying on the ground. Their faces dug into their folded arms, listening to the frightful sound of

their pulverized surroundings hurtling over them. At times, a rock or tree limb would find some recruit and a moan or scream would resonate through the smoke and damp night.

It was daytime and the men rested and waited. The light of the sun was fading. The stealth provided by the shade of dark was setting in place. The blanket bombardments soon would commence again in earnest. The stolid-faced soldiers gathered their gear. Bradford swung his backpack up from the ground and slipped one arm then the other into the straps. He picked up his rifle and hung it on his shoulder. The pimple-faced private was making his way down the line. His head turned toward the soldiers. He was saying something, but Brad wasn't able to hear. The private was too far away yet and the din of the whine in Brad's ears caused him to stop trying to catch the words. As the private got closer, Brad saw that the men were removing their rifles from their shoulders, holding them in their hands.

Ansie walked up next to Brad, looking down the line at the men. "What do you think?" Anise asked. "How close are we? Do you think they spotted some Germans?"

Bradford took his rifle from his shoulder. Ansie quickly did the same.

"We must be close to the River. They want us to be ready. That's all, just to be ready." Brad knew Ansie needed some reassurance. It helped them both. When Ansie leaned on him, Brad felt stronger. It forced him to tamp down his fear, to push it deep inside himself. He reveled in the ephemeral relief.

The rounds fell closer. A blast sent Bradford to the ground. His body knew what to do. Like Pavlov's dog, he no longer had to think about it.

The shelling continued. Some hit as a single explosion; some fell in tandem, covering wider and wider areas. Brad kept his face in his folded arms. He pressed his body hard against the ground. The concussions blew dust and small rocks, hitting him from one side or the other. His company was in the middle of a punishing onslaught. He started to pray. He was a Christian until he became old enough to think for himself. What he had learned in Sunday school had disintegrated into fairytales and contrived, self-serving rules. Now, he mumbled words which came from a place out of his control.

A shell hit close. It raised Brad up, rocking and contorting his body. It slammed him back to the ground. His head was spinning inside. He saw another bright flash. The brightest yet. His eyes were full of light, a hundred flash bulbs. It didn't make a sound.

Barren branches, like in the cold, lonely days of winter, stood high above. The gray sky brought dim light. Bradford wondered why he was lying on his back. There was a suspicious peace surrounding him. Where was everyone? He rolled onto his side. He looked down to steady his head from the dizziness. He wanted to stand, but, at the same time, he didn't want to move. The war was gone. Only the whining in his ears remained. A fog had rolled in. Four or five men, as far as he could make out, were lying in huddled clumps.

"Ansie," he yelled out. His voice seemed to go nowhere. "Ansie," he yelled again. No one moved.

Brad slowly sat up. The soundless bright flash was the last thing he remembered. He looked around again. His head ached. One side hurt more than the other. He put his hand to the center of the pain. It was

covered with something sticky like tree sap but looked red. Blood. He was surprised how little it mattered. He pushed himself on to his knees, and put his foot in front of him, put his weight on his bended knee and tried to stand. He fell in a heap. He looked around and spotted a broken tree limb a couple of meters away. He took off his backpack, removed his helmet, lied on the ground and moved his arms and hands along with his legs. On his stomach, like a frightened lizard, he moved to the downed limb. He held it like a crutch. Slowly he straightened his back and stood upright, took a step, dizziness overcame him again. He never felt so vulnerable. What good was courage? Some simple strength in his arms and legs is all he wanted. He took a few more steps and stopped near the man lying closest and motionless. It was Ansie.

“Ansie, get up,” Brad called out. “We got to get out of here. They must have left us for dead.” Ansie didn’t move. “Come on, God damn it.” He was lying on his side, his torso bent forward, like a marionette folded to fit in some puppeteer’s suitcase.

“This is no time to crawl up into a ball. Pull it together. We’re okay,” Brad shouted. He nudged Ansie with the stick. “You want me to carry you, don’t you? Alright, alright.” Brad held tightly on to his makeshift crutch and stooped down, barely able to bend his knees and keep his balance. He grabbed Ansie’s blood-soaked and tattered sleeve, gripping it as hard as he could. Blood streamed down and ran onto Brad’s hand.

“God damn you, get up.” He threw his stick away and grabbed with both hands. Droplets of blood fell along the length of the saturated sleeve. Brad leaned back, using his weight to increase the leverage. He pulled with all his strength, managing to raise Ansie to a sitting position. He put his hands under Ansie armpits. The men held each other from collapsing. In one mighty attempt Bradford tried to lift his friend. His right hand unexpectedly slid up above Ansie’s shoulder. The dull thud, the rustle of the moss and leaves, imprinted itself forever. Ansie’s arm lay on the ground. Brad let go, took a step backward, staring at Ansie’s face, looking into his open eyes. He continued to step backward, staring. His mind fumbled. Thoughts ran into each other. How useless thinking was. Ansie was dead.

Bradford turned away from the greenish-brown heaps of motionless men. He picked up his rifle with a reflex and began walking through the woods, bracing himself against trees as he made his way to nowhere. The flutter in his stomach was gone, replaced by a tightness, extending to his chest. Each breath was a struggle. He kept moving, stumbling at times, but always moving.

He walked deeper into the woods, in some places, it was as dark as night. He pushed on. His legs in command. As he moved farther, the density of trees began to lessen, and Brad noticed the gray light of the day grew brighter. He stopped. The ache in his head forced him to sit down, leaning his back and head against a large rock. He closed his eyes. He wanted to sleep but his mind and body continued fighting the war. His muscles wouldn’t unwind. He sat ready to leap. The flashes and green-brown heaps of stillness floated in the darkness on his eye lids.

A speechless order sparked from his guts. Keep moving. He stood up, and a shot cracked the musty air. Brad jumped and landed flat on the ground. Another shot rang out and ricocheted off the rock. He crawled on his stomach to the side opposite to where the round hit. Someone wanted to kill him. He got to his knees and

peered out. He saw someone with a rifle pressed against his shoulder. What uniform was he wearing? He couldn't see clearly. All he knew was that someone wanted him dead. He was the enemy, French or German, it didn't matter anymore. To stay alive, he needed to kill this shooter.

Brad gripped his rifle lying next to him. He eased his head out to get another look. The shooter was still standing in the same position. Bradford watched him lower his firearm and begin to look around, assuming, no doubt, that his prey had changed his location, but Brad stayed put. He had good cover. The German – Brad wanted only to think of him as German – was an easy target.

Brad lay on his stomach and maneuvered himself into the tall grass just beyond the edge of his rock-hardened shield. He put the butt of his rifle to his shoulder, pressing it into its steadfast position. The human target sat on the barrel's sight. He looked with his right eye, holding the other open. The mid-torso, he had learned, was the easiest to hit. His training took over. It all fell into place like an accordion player fingering the keys of an often-requested melody. All he needed to do now was pull the trigger. The rifle started to quiver. The harder he tried to steady it, the more it shook. He rested his elbows on the ground to create a tripod with his body. It didn't help. He couldn't hold the gun still enough. Missing the shot terrified him. It would give away his open position.

The pre-ordained German began to move slowly toward him. Brad had to take the shot. It was his turn to kill. The war whispered, "for the honor and glory of America, for that for which it stands." Rotten fruit, wedding dresses, Wall Street money, and the guys chanting in the barroom in the Nassau Inn in Princeton, "we'll bring it to an end, we'll kill the Kaiser and all his men." His thoughts reverberated as a jumble of non sequiturs.

His target was closer and larger now. He had no helmet, no uniform, nothing recognizable. If Brad only felt more certain that the shooter was German, maybe that would help him steady the rifle. If he spoke out – he knew some college German – and if the guy answered with a German accent, then he would be sure, or, on the other hand, dead. None of it mattered. Killing him was the only guarantee to keep himself alive.

Brad, keeping his prone position, moved closer to the rock, holding the rifle against the hard surface. The sight at the end of the barrel steadied some. His right hand shook as he felt for the trigger. He pushed the gun tighter against the rock. The shot retorted and the man fell. He didn't remember pulling the trigger, but it was done. Brad rose from the tall grass, turned away from where the dead man lay and started moving as fast as he could. He felt alive.

The day was wearing down. He feared the dark. He hated the war's insidious taunts: its deadly flashes, sounds muted by whining ears, violent blasts throwing sticks and stones. All were a solemn message: "I can get you if I wish, but there's time, a time you least expect."

He travelled farther into the woods. All the trees were intact. The bombardments had not reached this far. More strength had returned to his arms and legs, but his head still ached. He continued to push through the wooded morass.

Brad stopped and looked around at the emptiness. He sat on the moist soil. His head fell low between his raised knees. He began to weep, slowly shaking his head. There was no place to go. It would get him. In the end, it will get everyone, even those who managed to stay alive. They were the walking dead.

His legs were stiff, his feet aching, but he felt the need to move. He got up and took a few steps. Dizziness struck. He braced his hand against the gray, split, bark of a sturdy tree. He lowered his head and aimed his eyes to the ground, focusing on a small patch of green vegetation lying on brown, moss-spotted soil. The spinning began to subside.

He lifted his head and stared into the distance. The trees appeared even fewer. The light brighter. He started walking again. He came to a large clearing. The openness threatened him. *It was just a matter of time* kept running through his mind. It didn't matter as much now. The dead, perhaps, were the lucky ones. No more struggle to stay alive, no more contorting one's thoughts to make sense of it all.

Oddly, in the confusion of the blasts and screams of the war, came one unexpected, unsought clarity. Honor, glory, and the American way, like rotting carrots on a stick, stayed at home with their fat and intoxicated purveyors. For those, here, in the soulless woods of France, they have felt only the sting of the stick.

He began crossing the open field, trudging up a slight slope. He leaned forward and used his rifle to support him, taking slow steps. When he reached the top, a small house appeared in the distance. Was it really a house, or his eyes and mind working together, producing false hope?

He started down the incline. His eyes fixed on the orange clay shingles lapping down on the side of the roof. With each step he waited for the small brownish house to evaporate. The image grew larger, the orange more vivid and bright. His stomach muscles tightened, his breathing shallow again. His ears and eyes peaked up to catch any of the threatening sounds and sights of the war.

His reasoning was silent and impotent. He wanted to reach that house, in spite of the fact, that the Germans might occupy it and already have him in their sights. There was no place for him to take cover. It was a gamble. Food, water, and safety were within his reach.

He continued walking. The details of the house became clearer. His muscles tightened and his breathing became shallow. Would he hear the shot?

A floating lightness overwhelmed him. His body lifted away from his consciousness. He hid in the contrived safety, an attempt to ease a fraction of the insufferable vulnerability.

His legs took command and carried him closer. A slight wind blew through his hair. He was close enough to see the leaves of the trees flutter in the backyard. His eyes fixed on the curtained window appearing in the back side of the structure. He continued his approach and stepped onto a small patch of grayish soil, the remnants of a garden. He crouched down and moved closer to the window. His face and scalp pulsed with a strong, slow rhythm. He hid below the sill. He poked his head up and tried to peer through the white curtain. The sheer and pleated material prevented him from seeing anything.

He moved his eyes to the brown, solid door. After a few steps, he was standing in front of it. Knocking was all that was left. It might be the last thing he would ever do. He stood there, trying to catch a breath. The

smell of beer and “kill the Kaiser...,” Peg and her wedding dress, Ansie’s arm and his father’s rotten fruit, all swirled unbidden. The knuckle of his index finger tapped twice on the brown, weathered wood.

There was the sound of movement inside, the floor creaking and the light treading of footsteps.

“Qu'est-ce?” said a soft, female voice from behind the door.

The slow thumping of his head picked up. Dizziness. He braced his palm against the door frame. Who else was inside?

“American,” was all he could say.

He gripped the warped doorframe with his other hand, dropping his head between his arms. His sandy hair fell forward. His focus loosened, and he saw nothing. The soft voice, still echoing in his head, hardened to a ruse, a taunt, a scoffing promise. The scarred face of the -war, he was sure, would greet him. He stopped fighting it. What the war wanted it would get.

“Move away from the door, so I can see you,” said the woman.

He stepped backward.

Slight, pale fingers moved the window curtain to the side for an instant. The fingers disappeared and the curtain swung back. Brad came closer to the door again, standing motionless, his head down, his hands bracing himself against the crooked frame. Three creaking footsteps, the lock snapped, the doorknob turned. The door moved and swung open. A woman looked at him. The strained, volatile instant of silence took what breath he had left. Am I shot? He felt nothing, neither life nor death.

“Monsieur, come in before someone sees you.”

Brad looked inside, his eyes moving quickly around the small space. The woman took his arm and pulled him into the warm and dull glow of the room.

She shut the door, and Bradford’s thoughts began to assemble themselves as if they were called to duty. A deep breath circulated in and out of his lungs. The young woman brushed past, and stood behind a cloth-covered table. She clutched the top of a wooden chair tucked beneath it. Brad remained still. His absent gaze locked on the woman’s tightened face and wide, frozen eyes.

“Sit, please,” the woman said, her hands wringing the top slat of the chair. “I haven’t needed to speak English in some time. I am British. My husband is French.”

Brad focused and saw her for the first time. A thin woman, a few years older than he was his guess. Her hair, a light gold mixed with strands almost white, hung to her shoulders. A weariness came from the premature creases which ran from the corners of her lips to the sides of her petite nose. He pulled out the chair closest and sat down.

How strange it was, the calm, the -war not able to find him. He struggled to speak. His thinking came sporadically, leaving orphaned words and phrases behind.

“Bradford James, First Class.”



The woman moved out of the yellow light coming from the two bulbs hanging above the table. Brad watched her nearly disappear into the shadowy, periphery of the small room. He heard the clang of dishes and liquid pouring. She reemerged from the dimness.

“Martha,” she said and put a wedge of hard, pale cheese, bread, and a glass of clear water on the table.

He picked up the glass and began drinking. The clear, cool liquid poured into his mouth and down his throat. He let it flow freely, indulging himself in the contentment. Water trickled from the corners of his mouth and ran down his chin. A tingling shot through his arms and chest. A smile nearly came to his lips.

Brad began eating. He spoke between mouthfuls, his words coming quicker and surer.

“American Expeditionary Forces, United States Army, we were shelled. I began walking.”

Martha sat in the chair at the head of the table, closer to him. She looked up at the clotted, black blood in his hair.

“Does your head hurt?”

“The ache comes and goes now.”

“I would wash the blood off for you, but I’m afraid it will reopen the wound.”

Brad gave her a quick glance. Washing off the blood? He had never even given it a thought, but such words he had never heard. They resounded with warmth of crackling logs blazing in a snow-covered cottage. Only in the cold wind of war such fires ignite.

The food was gone, and he drank the last bit of water. He put the glass down and looked at Martha. He wanted to ask where her husband was when a clunking sound burst from the shadowy margin of the room. Brad bolted to his feet, grabbing his rifle hanging from the side of the chair.

“Papa,” came from a tiny voice. Brad looked at the straight-faced, little girl, staring at him.

“It’s my daughter, Amelie.” Martha crouched down next to the small child.

Brad hung his rifle on the corner of the back of the chair. He remained standing; his prickling skin calming from the jolt.

“C’est Bradford, un soldat américain. Il est venu pour aider à mettre fin à la guerre.”

Martha turned to Brad. “I told her you have come to help end the War.”

He sat down, his mind floating away. How many times had he thought that?

“Cherie, retournez dans votre chambre. Vos poupées vous attendent,” Martha said softly to her Amelie. The girl looked up at Brad. Her eye lids sagging, her lips closed tight. Abruptly, she turned and disappeared into the dusky light and closed the door of her room.

Martha stood up and stepped toward the window. “I told her to go back to playing with her dolls.” She moved the curtain aside and looked out. “Marcel should be back by now. It will be dark soon. He’s hunting.”

Brad froze, his breathing nearly stopped, the yellow, hazy light began to blur. Beads of sweat broke out on his upper lip. He couldn’t move. The man I shot? No. The war was just teasing him, claiming him as one of its fools.

The guy shot at me. He must have been German. He saw the American uniform. That's what happened.

Brad shuffled in his chair, clasping his hands together on the table. He immediately unfolded them and stretched his arms out, leaned forward, and put his chin into his hands. His eyes bounced around the room, his mind swooned looking for something to tell him it was just a nightmare, and he would wake up soon.

Amelie appeared again from the shadow of her room. She held Clara, her doll, in her arms, pressed against her small chest.

“Maman ou est papa?”

Brad got up, pushing his chair back.

“I'm going out to look for him,” he said, avoiding Martha's eyes.

“Are you well enough?”

She didn't wait for a reply, and quickly left the room. She returned with a picture of her husband.

“This is Marcel. He's wearing a green plaid jacket.”

She handed the photo to Brad. His hand shook as he took it. He stared at the man, dressed in a dark sports jacket, looking back at him. Marcel's lips were straight and serious. His drawn face and penetrating eyes said, “Look at what you have done.” The war now had a face.

Brad swung his rifle off the chair and hung it from his shoulder. Amelie came closer, bent her head back, and looked into his eyes. She held Clara out. Brad looked at Martha.

“Take it with you. She wants you to have it.”

He turned his head back, looking at the child's soft, plump cheeks and the simple sincerity in her eyes. He extended his hand slowly toward the doll, taking it gently from her. His heart sunk into a slow, doleful rhythm. A numbness saturated him. He held the doll in one hand, turned toward the door, and left without a word.

He headed to where the body lay. He crossed the field in the light of the long French evening. Brad remembered the place where he saw the man fall. He began making his way through the woods. He came to a small clearing. It looked familiar. The rock was not far from here. He began to move faster. His feet stepped higher. He pushed bare branches aside with his free hand and Clara, in the other hand, helped to do the same.

When he saw the rock come into view, he rushed ahead, weaving around the intervening tree trunks with buckling, gray bark. He stood in the tall grass beside the rock and sighted the aim he had taken. He began walking the path his bullet had travelled. The low bushes and pale, yellow weeds hid the ground ahead of him. He moved slowly, his eyes lowered, moving them right and left.

The light had waned to gray.

I have to find him. He fell here. I saw him drop. Did he get up? Lord hear me, if You ever heard me, hear me now, please, if it's him, let me find him alive.

He couldn't be this far. Brad turned around. The gray evening was falling away to darkness, he only saw the ground immediately at his feet now. He weaved quickly through the brush.

A shoe.

He pushed some of the weeds away. There he was, lying face down. Clara moved aside the remaining waist-high brush. They stood next to the body. Brad knelt down. It was too dark to see the shirt.

The faint sound of shelling broke out in the distance. Brad reached out and put the palm of his hand on the body. He felt the shirt and snapped his hand back. How cold it was. He put Clara down and grasped the rifle hanging from his shoulder. It fumbled in his hands. He got hold of it and positioned the end of the barrel close to the shirt; the round aimed to the weeds. He put his finger on the trigger. He paused, his breathing nearly at a pant. He rivetted his eyes to where he estimated the flash would be. Bang, an echo, a glimpse of green plaid.

Brad closed his eyes. The red-yellowish flash burned in his blank vision. The frequency of the dull thuds of the bombardment increased. He put his face into his hands. Tears streamed down under them. The distant explosions became crisper and louder. He fell on his side, his knees coming up to his chest. He rocked, moaning. The war will be with me forever. He was one of the walking dead.

From this day on, the face of the war would live within him, but it was no longer the straight, stern face of Marcel. In its place, etched deeply in his soul, was his own face. Nausea struck him. He retched helplessly, trying to eject the sickening truth: *He* was the War.

He picked up his rifle, checked that a round remained loaded. He removed his shoe and positioned the barrel under his chin. He lay on the ground and felt something beneath him. He reached under his back. It was Clara. He sat up, holding her in his hand, and crying. He shouted through his sobs, "I didn't want to die. Don't you understand. I have no courage, no anything. It's all just words, just useless words."

The barrage came closer. A shell blasted loudly. A dim light reflected off Clara's face. It went dark. Another flash. She looked at him again. Amelie was waiting for them. Her trusting eyes had said she expected them to bring back her papa.

Brad grabbed his rifle by the barrel, his face strained with anger. He gritted his teeth and flung the weapon. The tall grass responded with a swish. It was over.

He stood up, Clara in one hand. With the other, he reached into his back pocket and took out Peg's letter. The paper crinkled as he crushed it into small ball, throwing it into the dark. He turned to the direction of the house with the orange shingles and brown, beaten door. They began walking, the anger of the war raging behind them.

