

The Sea

Carrie Nelson

A low rumble echoed in my ears. I grew goose skin as vibrations along the cold earth pulsed through my body. Other noises increased about me, the sound of feet and shouts of men. I did not want to be here anymore. I grew weary of the wet and the stink, the cold, the lice, and the rats. The artillery continued to shake the ground. No doubt, it was ours. I could hear the first bang, the whistle overhead, and the final explosion on the enemy side. I opened my eyes. I yearned for it to stop. It would never stop.

Private Edmund Fuller sat calmly beside me. He was a good lad, just arrived a fortnight ago, young, and oddly brave for a tommy. He had told me of the sweetheart he had left behind. Delores. I had a sweetheart, too. Katharine. I lost her photograph a few weeks before Eddy and I met. When I had told Eddy of this, afraid he'd lose his too, he put it safely in the small Bible in his left breast pocket. I had hoped the memory of her would keep him alive and moving forward. The bullet that got him did not take him cleanly. He hung on for days, I heard, bleeding and grotesquely sick, falling further into sepsis and delirium. They say his desire to live kept him alive as long as it did. But death came for him regardless.

I prayed for a bullet in the brain. That's how Private Carlisle Byrd died. And Corporal John Princeton. Private Lionel Farrow's dehumanizing fate—stepping on a land mine—left behind torn flesh and bone, scattered across No Man's Land. Private Jon Nichols fell during that push. I saw Farrow's demise distantly but when I went to Nichols, one of Farrow's bones had skewered his chest. Hot blood streamed from him, melting the snow.

It was fall again, almost October. The snow hadn't fallen yet, but I doubted my toes could last another hellish winter. That is to say, if I survived the day. Field Marshall Haig gave us new orders: we were to go *over the top*.

Eddy stared at me. He asked me for a cigarette and a light. Saying no, I sat up at once, but I must have blinked because he was gone. I remained in my seat bewildered at the fading memory of Eddy's strangely cool face. No doubt, Eddy was a remnant of my very odd dream.

I dreamed of a sea and gentle waves running along a white shore. I wished I had my hat. It was so bright. At my feet, I felt the warm water rise to my ankles. In the foam, I saw the war. The bursting blood. The thunderous noise of gun blasts and artillery. The screams of frightened men. My anxiety filled my chest. The memory of the last two bloody years ran terror through me. I knew the feeling well. Every moment before an attempted advance, the sick quickened in my stomach and my heart raced. These feelings would exacerbate until long after the skirmish ended.

In that moment of remembrance, I forgot everything and ran farther into the sea, just to my knees. My tension released as I escaped and my breath relaxed. Another wave flowed past my skin, bringing the day when I first heard it, my ecstatic praise and jubilant exclaim. *It's happened. We're at war!* I saw the day I signed my volunteered name. Regret overcame what remained of my fading panic. I shouldn't have volunteered. They would have drafted me regardless. However, the delay would have given me a few more weeks, a month, maybe a year.

I stepped back a little to see the day I arrived at the front. I was in one of five British battalions in Ypres. It was late fall 1914. We lost good men those horrible days against thirteen German battalions. There were only a thousand able men left to defend the city and we still sent the Huns running. To think, we lost 325,000 to advance five miles by November.

I shot my first Hun during the Battle at Ypres. I felt surprised by my heart pounding in my ears as my morality waged against duty, orders, and my desire to live. I remembered my thoughts from the day I volunteered. *It was him or me, my country or theirs.* I raised my loaded and cocked Lee Enfield .303 rifle, feeling the energy burst within the clever invention as I squeezed the trigger. He didn't see me. But I saw the blood spurt from his abdomen, his body collapsing to the ground. I swear I saw a look of shock on his face despite the distance.

The sick nearly came up and I had to step away into the past to keep it down. I longed for one face more than any other. It took me a moment to find her. I saw a luncheon with schoolmates. I saw my professors looming

over me during exams. My little brother threw a tart at me at Christmas dinner a year before the war. I saw the glee of excitement from my smallest sister as I wiped the tart from my face, throwing bits of it back. That was one of the better Christmases.

Another step took me elsewhere. An odd place I didn't recall. An ugly room with orange shag carpet and flower wallpaper. A large box on a table in the corner. The front of the box was made of glass. I sat in a leather chair with a glass of water in my hand. Returning my mind to the sea, I moved my feet to another spot where the water came up to my middle.

Katharine sat at a café. She sipped from a small glass, and she wore an auburn dress with a matching jacket and hat. White gloves adorned her dainty hands. Her green eyes turned toward me. A small smile began to curve at the corners of her mouth, an unhappy smile. She walked with me to the train and we said goodbye. I was too shy to peck her cheek. If I really could go back and relive that moment, I would have given her a snog.

Her letters have said that I was lucky to have survived this long. And she was right. However, it was only a matter of time. Everyone I knew is dead. But in this dream, I felt as if I were already dead, swimming in a sea of memories.

I left the dream behind and brought myself back to the war. The rumbling of artillery still hadn't stopped. I took a biscuit from my biscuit tin and asked Lieutenant Maxwell Delaney for a cigarette and light. He always had extra, sent from his mum who lived in Sussex. She also sent chocolates. I smoked fags too quickly and eagerly and always ended up wanting before long. I never smoked before the war. I always viewed smoking as a disgusting, dirty habit. The smell lingers. Above all, the trenches were disgusting and dirty and I felt it helped me fit in. Regardless, I would rather be shaky from worry over when I'd get my next smoke than going over the top or on a recon.

I offered Delaney a biscuit in trade. He declined. "I'm going to die more likely than not. Have one, Desmond. Keep the biscuit."

"God bless you," I replied, then absorbed the smoke of my newly lit fag. I thought I should stay and chat, but I didn't want to. Instead, I walked the trenches, ignoring the others, immersing my lungs with smoke and its relief. It was cold this morning. I could see the chill of my evanescent

breath forming out of my mouth even after I had stopped smoking. I thought about the dead Germans. I thought about the war. You don't realize that war is hell until you're in it. We're so naïve to ignore the voices of the fallen, crying from the dust with the echoing reminder of the truth of war. I hope this is the war to end all wars.

I want it to end. I want this war to end. I want to end. I don't know how many I've killed. But with every one, a part of me tears away with them, lost forever. There is very little of me left. Just a shell without a soul.

I snuck to a quiet corner of the trenches alone. I put my Webley revolver in my mouth and considered the trigger. But I couldn't. I'd thought about it all the time since Farrow and Nichols went home. Oh, how I wanted to join them. But I was too afraid of that damned trigger, the taste of cold, dirty metal in my mouth, the thought of whether I'd live long enough to recognize the squish sound of a bullet in the brain and the splatter of it all on the mud and muck behind me.

I put the gun down, holding back the urge to cry. I want a bullet that kills me cleanly. This is not a death that my family would respect any more than an execution for desertion. With no other option, I returned to the threshold of No Man's Land, assembled with the other doomed men. The call had come. The artillery stopped. With my revolver in my belt, new steel helmet on, rifle in hand, and enough ammunition to get me to the German trench, I was ready.



The shaking of my heart and the panting of my breath caused me to jump. The crashing sound of breaking glass surprised me so that I screamed. As my mind still hung on to the last moments of the push, I desperately sought escape. I tried opening my eyes, but they wouldn't listen. I thought, *Oh, mustard gas. I've gone blind.* My hands reached for the expected bandages on my face only to find none. As I calmed, I found I was not blind, but I wiped the tears from my foggy eyes and opened them. I saw orange shag carpet and ugly wallpaper with picture frames and a box on a table in the corner with a front made of glass. I sat on a leather chair and a broken glass lay on the floor beside me.

“Desmond?” a woman’s voice called from the hall. She sounded like Katharine, but as she came into the room, I saw a woman in her seventies, wrinkled skin and gray hair.

“Where am I?”

“Home.”

Home? I thought. *This was not my home in London.* “Who are you?” I asked.

“Katharine,” she came to me nearly kneeling down when she suddenly recoiled. “You broke a glass?”

What glass? I had no glass. The glass was not important. “Katharine?” I trailed off, so confused. This old woman before me. She looked enough like Katharine that it must have been true. Seeing her this way sparked an idea. I looked at my hands. They were not the hands of a young man, but of an old one, wrinkled and dry. “We’ve grown old.”

A middle-aged man with glasses rushed in. “What’s the matter?” the man asked.

“It’s all right,” Katharine said.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Your son, Rupert.”

“We have a son?” I didn’t understand how I could not know. But I suppose I had better get acquainted with him. I have always enjoyed the stories of new people. “Where do you live?”

“Oxfordshire,” he replied.

“I went to Oxford. I know the place well. I schooled there after the war was over, of course. I was eager to find something to keep my busy mind at ease. What are you studying?”

“Rupert teaches at Oxford.”

Wait a moment. What’s going on? Who’s this man in the room? “Who is Rupert?”

“I am, Dad,” said the middle-aged man with glasses in the doorway. “I live in Oxfordshire. I have just stopped by to help Mum with the garden, shopping, and washing up.”

“Did you say, Oxfordshire? I went to school in Oxford! It was after the war, of course!”

“We know, dear,” said Katharine.

“How? How do you know?” I filled with consummate confusion.

The middle-aged man with glasses in the doorway answered. "There are signs on the front lawn saying so."

Katharine giggled.

"Who's this?" I asked.

The man stared at me. I caught a hint of pained sadness in his eyes. I wondered why. "It'll be better if I get back to the gardens," said the man. "It was good to see you, Dad." He left.

My eyes fell on Katharine's charming face. We must have been married. When were we married? My mind strained to recall. My gaze passed to the picture frames. To my relief, I saw a photograph of us outside of a little white church. Or I assumed it was white. Time had worn the print to yellow-brown. But as I studied the photograph, my recollection sparked. My niece was the flower girl, in her white and pastel purple dress, and Katharine's nephew brought the rings. How small and cute they were, both aged six. Katharine came slowly behind them with her father at her side. He was a stern man, tall, and a bit stout with a bushy mustache. Nervously, I glanced to my best man. Lieutenant Max Delaney? He wasn't the Max I remembered exactly. The man who stood beside me was clean cut and showered. He smelled like cologne and not cigarettes.

Without my wanting, I had accidentally taken a step into another part of my life. The part that tore at my heart from within, extinguishing my dignity. That conflict had been a diabolically systematic method of torture to all involved. I turned away from Max, hoping to push away the sounds and smells, and send my mind into the last moment of my sure recollection. I returned from the war. I graduated Oxford and got a decent job in accounting before Katharine and I married. I finally saw a moving picture, *Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*. Katharine and I travelled and found a prospering Europe. Whatever I may have missed since then, I can be assured that the Great War was indeed the war to end all wars.

My eyes returned to the woman at my side. My gaze followed the contours of her chin, the curved wrinkles on her cheeks and soft green eyes. "Who are you?" I asked her.