

Remember Them.

The first two things William Gerard noticed as he awoke was the excruciatingly numbing pain in his right arm, the second was that he was bone cold. The constant fall of arctic raindrops had made his uniform sodden and heavy. For a few seconds William deliberated whether to fall back to sleep but slumber was no refuge. The last few months William's dreams had become infested by his reality. The events of his days were slowly leaking poison into his sleep causing him no relief. Prying his slightly swollen eyes open, William was surprised at the depth of darkness that blanketed him and the almost sinister and predatory feel of his surroundings. The night had never made him feel uneasy back home but in the bowels of war he couldn't help his shaking hands and quickened breath. William roughly calculated that the rise of dawn was not for another few hours. It was odd, William thought, that the trench he had spent countless weeks in

was now beginning to feel like a semblance of a home. But the more he thought about it the less strange it became. If you had ever been in a war, heard the ear splitting explosions as bombs rained down destruction, felt the hatred radiate from the face of the enemy whose appearance wasn't unlike your own, or seen so much blood and life loss, you might understand. His trench was dirty, plagued with rodents, stifling in its stench, and eerie in silence but it was here, where William felt the safest, in this foreign land. His stomach twisted suddenly causing him to curl into himself. The extent in which William missed home was becoming physically painful. Welcome images of his family rose abruptly to mind. This was not unfamiliar to William as every time he closed his eyes his family stared back.

Family and home, this is why William had so willingly enlisted. His brother James had joined soon after for much the same

reasons. William recalled some of his neighbourhood mates enrolling for the status, the thrill of war's adventure, even for its escape, but for William it had always been his family. Everyday when gunshots penetrated the mornings silence, or when William gripped his rifle tightly he reminded himself of his cause; a better tomorrow for the people and places he loved so dearly. Although his makeshift bed did little to cushion the hard ground of the trench, with this last thought in mind William fell back into an undisturbed sleep.

Rain fell lightly over the girl causing her strawberry blond hair to cling to her face. Drops of water dripped from her eyelashes making it look as if she was crying. But

she wasn't, not yet. She stood at the outskirts of a large crowd of people all heavily clothed in an attempt to keep the frost at bay. Her family surrounded the girl, who were all engulfed in the oppressive force of their emotions. The girl's mother handed her an umbrella. It was a muted gold and yellow colour, which contrasted against the bleak grey of the sky. Shivers raked her body but the girl did little to warm herself. She always felt affected by stories of war and her ancestor's sacrifices but it was always this day that brought all those feelings to the surface.

Letters from home were scarce with the lands so ravished by battle but William had recently received news of his parent's relocation. Gone from his childhood home in Five Dock to the seaside suburb of Cronulla, William's father had written "by

standing on our back porch, your eyes can see as far as the ocean's horizon". In his responding note, William had suggested calling the house 'Bayview'. William could hardly contain his need to see Cronulla for he was always seized by the desire to travel. His fantasies growing up were of him standing, map in hand, atop an ancient castle rich in history and untold stories. His dream had always been to explore Europe, which is why William was feeling a sudden sense of morbid ironic humour as his battalion trudged through France's landscape.

William had never imagined his first true sight of the famous land would be filled with such raw desperation as he marched towards Passchendaele. The synchronised stomping of his fellow comrades was a sound unlike any other as William's boots carried him towards an attack. His exact whereabouts were unclear as William's eyes scanned his surroundings. He was

marching parallel to the outskirts of a forest. Once rich in greenery, William supposed, now an unfriendly reminder of the havoc wrecked by war as the leafless and blackened trees protruded from the earth. They were $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile north of Zennebeke Railway Station on the railway line leading to Passchendaele or so said one of the generals within range of Williams hearing. William believed him. Even through the blanket of night the railway track was visible to his left. Momentarily William wondered if the trip by train would have once been peaceful, with the forest to gaze upon as the train coursed its journey.

Williams's clothes, now crusted with grime and other darker splotches he dared not examine to closely, were stiffly restricting his movements. Something was strange about the way his comrades held themselves William thought. And with a jolt of surprise he recognized it as fear, so strong he could almost smell it. As the

battalion marched towards impending strife, everywhere William looked; the empty hollows of fear plagued his fellow soldiers. He could see it in the bow of their heads, the unbearable silence and the tremor in their hands. This caused William to tense, as he too was consumed by nerves. Nerves so unbelievably strong, they raked his body making him stumble several times and fall out of the march line. He couldn't help but feel shaken.

Rarely was he so overcome by emotions that he physically faulted. William willed himself to think of his cause. The faces of his family came warmly to mind and took the sting out of his anxiety. Although this war torn horizon seemed bleak William had an uncanny ability to become enveloped within his imagination. For a sacred moment he was at comfort. So he didn't hear the warnings. As quickly as

William escaped into his memories he was dragged back out. A soldier whose face was unrecognisable under blood knocked William off his feet and made him land heavily against the dirt.

William turned to face the culprit and again was faced with the realization of two things. One was that the soldier, who he knew as Bluey, now lay in his arms, dead. As the uncontrollable urge to be sick took hold of him, William frantically considered the cause of this mans death. As numerous scenarios flashed by Williams mind he was snapped back into the terrible present as he heard his second terror-inducing realization overhead.

A man's voice cut through the grim silence. It sounded authoritative and aged as if this man had experienced many a hardship. The girl with the yellow umbrella stood as if paralysed, as the man's voice weaved through words of wisdom, honour and solace.

He spoke to the crowd as dawn's first rays broke through the horizon causing him and the stage to become silhouetted. The man sounded so world-weary and melancholy that the girl yearned to ask why and to try to mend this man's wounds. But she refrained.

The girl understood his sadness as she would understand the calling out of her own name. The feeling of grief and humble respect was so familiar to her now, after the short fifteen years of her life, she felt it owned a portion of her. The girl had attended the dawn service every year unfailingly but this one felt different, paramount even.

She had always enjoyed history, pouring over articles and facts, trying to feel a part of it all, trying to gauge the experiences of the past. But the girl was mostly enthralled in the stories of World War One. She marvelled at the soldiers'

bravery as they faced imminent doom and death. She was in awe of the nurses' resilience and completely humbled by each and every one of their sacrifices. Whether it was their time, stamina or life, each sacrifice was so equally important. The rain continued to fall noisily upon the crowds' umbrellas but the man's voice was somehow easily heard. The male speaker spoke personally of his father's involvement and of how war changed him. The girl was suddenly reminded of the many tales she had heard about her mother's Pappy. His name was James Gerard and he was a soldier in World War One. Though James never talked of the war, the brutality and raw experiences he had suffered were evident in the things he did. His brother William and he were keen fishermen, renowned for their large hauls. Not once did James gut a fish. Not once did he even show any interest, having lost so much, including his brother William Gerard who was killed by an enemy

bombshell during an approach march near Passchendaele.

The girl with her yellow umbrella was always lost for words at his courage.

Tortured by memories, the girl's mother recalled, that pappy rarely laughed.

Thinking of her ancestor's bravery only fuelled her sadness as tears begun to trickle down the girls pale cheeks. She was proud, proud to share the same name as such inspiring men, proud of the thousands of others who fought for their morals and a better tomorrow.

“What these men and women did, nothing can alter now. The good and the bad. The greatness and the smallness of their story rises...it always rises. Above the mists of time as a monument to great hearted men and women. We owe it to those who gave their lives, the families who mourned, our generation and our nations future- to recall extraordinary service and sacrifice made

in our name during the First World War and through the century since.” The man’s speech seemed to imprint itself within the girls mind. The truth behind these words was so unfaltering and undeniable the girl wished she could write them for the entire world to read.

The sounds of the bugle floated through the air as the young girl contemplated, spurred forward by the man’s speech, she begun to realize the importance of memories. You can try so hard to understand what the soldiers went through but that will only get you so far. No one but they would know of the true experiences of war and the soldiers wouldn’t want to tell. For isn’t this why they fought so gallantly, so generations ahead would never have to go through such devastation and death?

As dawn turned to day, and raindrops caused the crowds clothes to become heavy and wet, the bugle sung its final notes. The girl begun to truly understand that the sacrifices these brave men and women made were for her, her brothers, her friends and the strangers standing next to her. The life she leads wouldn't be so, without the men and women, generations before, who so willingly fought. So much was lost, lost but not forgotten. We cannot reverse or change the past but we can preserve the stories, memories and legends, the girl thought. Enormous were the brave men and women's sacrifices, so the least we can do is remember them.

By Sydney Gerard Soames