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The Coward's Peace

Half a dozen soldiers stood stark against the blue-grey background of the autumn sky; bodies silhouetted by the rising sun that tiptoed over the horizon- hesitant as if it knew what its arrival would bring. Each held a rifle steady at his side, the metal shining dull and subdued, as orders began to be called out; each jarring syllable echoing through the still morning. One soldier stood apart from the rest. His back was against a half-rotting wooden post and a rough rope tied his hands behind it. He faced them, but his head was lifted to the sky and eyes open wide as if he was seeing something else- gazing onto some other land- and his blindfold dangled carelessly from his fingers. His shoulders were squared and his jaw was set but his face had none of the anxious lines and trembling fingers that the other men did. He seemed ... at peace. The soldiers raised their rifles and slowly his eyelids closed for the last time.

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Horns blared against the solid grey expanse of sky, drowning out the crashing of waves on the shore down below. Men scrambled over the lip of their trenches, hastily laced khaki boots kicking clumps of mud into the eyes of those waiting below. Rifles thumped against backs slick with sweat as they dashed forwards, tripping over half-charred logs and scraps of barb wire. Cries of exhilaration and terror and excitement and pain echoed across the barren landscape, melding together with gunshots and whistling grenades to create the sort of sick melody that rings in one's ears for hours, days, years afterwards. All around, men fell to the ground- a line of dominoes unaware that they were meant to be falling in some sort of order. The blood of fallen stockmen and bankers and lawyers and carpenters ran together to become one giant pool of dead and dying. The air was full of its sickly scent and soon all the soldiers were coated in a thick crimson layer from slipping and stumbling through the muck.

Despite the carnage, men ran onwards, hardly faltering as their mates fell dead besides them. Except for one. One man faltered; in fact, he stopped. He stopped in the middle of the war ground – bullets whizzing past his ears and soldiers pushing past him as they stumbled on up the slope. He couldn't move. Terror had gripped his mind like a big metal vice and held it fast so that he couldn't do anything except gaze in horror as he watched his friends and bunkmates being ploughed down. These men that he had lived with for the past months- who were like brothers to him. He watched as the man who he had been on sentry duty with only last night caught a bullet in his neck. Johnny Farrow - best shot in the company they reckoned. Some even claimed that back home he could shoot a roo from 200 yards off. Well not anymore. Not even missing a step, another man leapt over his fallen body. Lenny Wright- the best soldier anybody could hope to fight alongside. He had always reminded him of the pony from Patterson's poem – hard and tough and wiry,

just the sort that won't say die, with courage in his quick impatient tread. Often he recited that poem to himself when sleep evaded him in the dead of night and the constant drone of machine guns and roar of the wind rushing past the cliffs below was just too much. Sometimes its familiar words were the only thing that kept him going. That kept him sane.

Someone else pushed past him- smaller than the rest. Oh yes, little Jo McPhurdy. Only last week he had helped the boy write a letter to his parents and baby sister home in Adelaide. Together they had fabricated a vision of some perfect, fairytale war where everyone had enough to eat, and no-one had to sleep in a rough trench dug hastily out of the ground or get fired at by some enemy they had never even met. He watched as the boy got shot right in front of him. Watched his body fall as if in slow motion. Watched him lying there, eyes glazed open unseeingly, face smeared with dirt and blood. He hadn't ever got to send that letter.

That was it. The soldier started again, but not with the others. No; he ran, staggering over dropped guns and distorted limbs until he reached an empty bomb crater, whimpering as he slid down into its muddy depths. He pulled his knees to his chest and closed his eyes but all he could see was that boy's face staring up at him. He longed to be back home - To smell a wind that told of dry grass and greasy sheep, not salty sea water and rotting corpses. He missed the flat plains where the kangaroos picked at the new grass shoots and the rabbits were wise enough to stay hidden in their burrows and not run out seeking conflict. He missed being out mustering or checking fences and going days without seeing another person, hearing only the kookaburras singing their sweet melodies from swaying gums and the rhythmic clacking of his horse's hooves on the dry earth. He longed for the certainty that came with knowing that he had a bed waiting for him, with a warm meal and even- god forbid- a beer. He longed to laugh with his father and tease his little brothers and be held by his mum. He longed for home.

They found him there in the morning, still curled in his foetal position, and escorted him to be tried for cowardice.