

The Boy

It was a sombre morning, crisp and cold, with a thin veil of fog encircling the mess.

Private George Taylor sat on a bench, an unforgiving seat by anyone's standards, and tried desperately to swallow the guilt for an act not yet committed.

He had been detailed yesterday to be part of a firing squad, for a condemned man at dawn the next day. The man's time of judgement was a mere twenty minutes away.

A yawning chasm of time, yet a fraction of a blink of an eye. In twenty minutes, he would shoot a man dead, a man who, until showing his 'true colours' was his ally, his comrade, and his brother in arms.

In truth, the man was likely driven insane by the relentless bombardment, the unending, unstoppable explosions, slowly creeping towards you. George was trying to steel himself, to remind himself that this man was a traitor, a coward, who hadn't fought when called upon by his country.

But deep down, he knew that this man was terrified, and couldn't possibly bring his frozen limbs to climb the ladder, up towards the buzzing, vicious projectiles.

He took a gulp of his secret hip flask and tasted the burn of brandy. It wasn't enough to dull the keen blade of shame on his soul, but it strived to deaden his nerves.

The tent was empty, the only sounds his breath and the slosh of liquid courage.

He glanced at the face of his watch, a single crack tracing its way across the grubby glass.

He had four minutes left.

The time had escaped him. He was no longer safe, hidden behind the unbreakable parapet of time, he was now here, his bloody deed all too close.

His hands already dripped with the blood of a man whose only crime was being human. He stood, legs supporting him only because they could not sense the forced intention of his mind, muddled by the sharp tang of brandy.

He walked to the courtyard, as sure-footed as a new-born, his stomach clenching tighter than a clenched fist. He retrieved a rifle, not his own. He could never see a rifle as a personal object, something to be owned. They were brutal instruments, the hand of a cruel and uncaring god, made only rain hellfire and brimstone on its enemies.

A single bullet, pressed into the yawning crevasse of the gun, pushed forward into place by his hand. The hand responsible for nothing less than a murder.

Eleven other soldiers were doing the same mundane, horrible task. There was no talking, no banter, only the deafening sound of oppressive silence. Then the man was walked into the courtyard and tied to the post.

Twelve rifles were levelled at the man, who, in truth, was little more than a boy. Most likely, he was sixteen or seventeen, and had lied about his age at the office.

The sheer stone walls leered down at George, as his sweaty palms tried to both grip the rifle and throw it down.

His breath rattled noisily in his throat, which felt constricted, like the hand of the devil itself was choking him.

His body was racked with shivers, making his rifle judder and shake, his heart struck with savage force, threatening to batter its way out of his rib cage. George blinked, hard, and then gripped the rough, wooden rifle as hard as he could, his knuckles creaking. He forced the solid stock painfully into his shoulder.

The boy, for that was what he was, hung limply from the post, the glaring white patch over his heart folded slightly. The twelve barrels screamed silently, eager to destroy the weak body before them, bullets hungry to smash their way through flesh and bone.

"Fire!"

Twelve guns roared; twelve bullets ripped the man's life apart. George released the breath he had been holding, and he knew he would never forget the sight of the wretched figure drooping downwards, his chest sprayed with gore and blood. His blindfold had slipped, his sightless eyes boring into George's own

"and he said, what hast thou done? The voice of thy brothers' blood crieth unto me from the ground"

- Genesis 4:10

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