

M I C I S O W
F e e d i n g

AUNTIE'S TALKING suddenly solves a mystery. I would laugh at it all if the letter had not done such damage to me. It soured me and I lost my desire for survival. Should I tell her the mistakes Old Joseph Netmaker made with his words? That would bring nothing but more sadness. Instead, I slip back a year to when I received the news.

We herd into flatbed trucks that drive all night along bumpy roads that make me feel like I will be shaken apart. When we finally climb from them with bruised tailbones, we relieve ourselves by the side of the road. I look down at Elijah.

"Look at your piss," I say. "It is red with blood."

"Yours is too," Elijah says.

And it is. My kidneys ache from the lorry's pounding.

We move toward that place called Passchendaele, and get a view of our new home in the first light of morning. I have never seen a place so depressing. Rain without stop for weeks and now in front of us lies a stretch of mud and shell-holes filled with water and bodies of the dead. This place is one vast field. Not a tree or a bush left standing. The trenches are not so much trenches as shallow water-filled craters joined to one another by slimy, caving-in walls. The Hun, as usual, have the higher ground and are smart enough to have built pillboxes instead of trenches, machine guns poking out of slits

in the concrete. The Canadian artillery is useless here. The mud is so deep, I have heard, that every time a big gun fires, it sinks. The crew then has to pull it out and re-sight it before trying to fire again. They are not hitting much, but it is not their fault.

What are they thinking in putting us here? I wonder, walking through the deep mud with the others. I have reached the point where nothing makes sense to me any more, especially the actions of the ones who move the soldiers about and order them to their deaths. I hate them for what they make me do, but I do not speak of it, just let it fester like trenchfoot. Elijah tells me that it's my attitude that keeps me a private when I should at least be a corporal by now with my skill.

The other divisions have the unfortunate job of being the first waves sent against the pillboxes. They are to overrun the crumbled ruins of Passchendaele, are to clamber somehow through the sea of mud before them and through the machine-gun fire and take over Fritz's positions. I am sorry for those sent in, but I'm grateful that for once it is not me. The rest of us live in holes thigh deep with cold and stinking November water. In desperation, men climb out of the holes to try and find a drier patch of earth to sleep on, only to be picked off easily by the German snipers.

Incredibly, impossibly, the Canadians do what is asked of them, but at a heavy loss. I watch from the rear position as men crawl back through the mud with stretchers perched on their shoulders. Rumours are everywhere that men who are wounded but who are not picked up by the stretcher-bearers quickly enough are drowning in the mud. It must be true. I tried walking to the side of the boards that lie like little roads everywhere. I sank to my waist and was sinking further when Elijah pulled me out.

And still the rain falls and the shells pound and churn the mud. That is my nightmare, to be wounded and in my agony, sinking into the mud to be swallowed forever. Gone. Missing in action, and you, Niska, waiting for me for years to return.

And then it is my turn to pick up the fight. Elijah and I are sent as advance scouts into the crumbled city. I'm happy to be out of the mud. We pick our way through the rubble, wary of Hun snipers. By halfway through the village we've had no resistance but are suddenly pinned down by rifle fire coming from the window of a low, smashed building. It appears the only structure left standing in the whole town. Elijah and I drop down behind a shattered wagon. The shots were very close to my head.

Both of us are useless pinned down here. One will have to make a break for a broken wall twenty-five yards to the right while the other offers covering fire. Then we will be in a much better position to take out the sniper in the building.

"I'll go," Elijah says, but I tell him that I want to do it. Elijah nods. "If you've got the shot, don't hesitate. Take it."

I take some deep breaths that echo in my clogged ears, hunch there, then at the agreed time stand and run hard. Elijah immediately swings his rifle over the side of the wagon and I hear the *crack crack* as he fires into the window. I am almost there when a bullet whizzes close enough to me that I don't know how it missed. I dive behind the shattered wall, skinning my hands so they bleed. Rolling onto my back, I check my rifle, then roll to a small break in the wall from which I can sight in on the building with my scope. I search the windows through my scope and catch a glimpse of movement in the bottom left one. I can't make much out except the shadow of a crouching body. Breathing out half a breath, I squeeze the trigger. The rifle's explosion in my ear is a hollow echo. The shadow slumps and I know I've hit it. I signal to Elijah. Elijah signals back for me to cover him while he comes over.

We decide to go into the building to investigate. If it was used as a command post, we might find valuable papers. I have to read Elijah's lips to understand. The hearing will come back. It always does. We make our way along the wall and to the side entrance of

the building, leapfrogging, one covering the other as we go. We know of no more than one shooter so far, but we must be wary of others. The one that I killed was a straggler. I do not know why he stayed behind.

We let our eyes adjust to the darkness, then make our way in. Not much interior of this building is left. The walls are mostly gone. I point to where I hit the figure.

He lies face down. Elijah rolls him over with his boot. I had hit him high in the chest and there is a large pool of bright red blood on the floor beneath him. Lung blood. Elijah goes through his pockets and finds a little German money and his papers. Nothing else worthwhile. He was just a private. His Mauser is an old one, not worth keeping. A deserter, from what I can guess.

"Search the rest of the building, would you?" Elijah says in English.

"There is no one else here," I say.

"Be a good chap and do it anyway. I know that you don't like what I am about to do."

The look in Elijah's eyes is frightening. I can only believe that this war has made my friend this way. Elijah, he will get better when we are gone from it, I think.

I nod and then turn away, wandering far enough that I don't have to think of the tearing of scalp from skull.

I walk into what remains of another room. A table rests in the middle with a little food on it. My stomach rumbles. As I head toward it, I catch a movement to my left coming toward me. I turn and fire my rifle just as I see that it is a young woman. She flies backwards, her face startled. She slumps against the wall. I peer quickly around me to see who else might be in here. A small child huddles in the corner, staring at me with wide eyes. She begins to cry when I approach the mother.

"I am sorry, I am sorry," I repeat over and over, to the child, to the mother. "I am sorry." I turn toward the child to try and calm her,

come close enough that she begins to swing her fists with terror at my legs. I hear Elijah's boots as he runs into the room.

A rifle shot explodes and the child goes still, a red hole punched in her chest by the bullet.

"*Mo-na!*" I scream. I spin around to Elijah and he stands there with a blank look on his face, absorbing the scene.

"I didn't know it was a child," he says, staring at her. "All I saw in the darkness was her fighting with you."

"You couldn't tell that she was a child?" I yell at him.

"I am trained not to hesitate in situations of danger," he answers coldly. He glances to the woman as if to make his point.

She is breathing shallowly, each breath gurgling red spittle. What was she doing in such a place? I lean toward her to see if I might do anything to help. I already know. A large red bubble forms at her mouth. She stares into my eyes. Hers are dull. She's thin and brown-haired. Plain, Sergeant McCaan would comment of her. My hands tremble. I reach out to her, but stop myself.

WE ARE KEPT IN PASSCHENDAELE only until the end of November, but in that short time we have done what was needed. It is our third big victory in a year. The Canadians are proving to be the only ones who win their battles. It makes the men around me happy, but I realize that this only means we will continue to be sent in as the spearhead to the rest of the hellish places that have been created here. Nobody is sad to leave this place as winter sets in and the mud fields begin freezing in the night. Passchendaele is by far the worst place we've been.

The faces of the woman and child haunt me. Elijah did not report their killing to battalion headquarters. There would be too many questions. It would not look good. But he did report the killing of an enemy sniper, giving me credit for it. I am too numb to care.

We're sent back south to the old familiar country of Lens. My

hearing continues to leave me, but for longer stretches now. It is punishment for my crimes, I think. Many times I look over to Fat or McCaan or Grey Eyes only to find them staring back at me with a strange expression on their faces, waiting for me to answer a question that they have asked. I play it off as my not understanding their English too well, and they leave it at that. They all know my silence so well now that they do not question it.

Their big holiday approaches once more, in a week or so, the one called Christmas that celebrates the birth of their *Gitchi Manitou*. Already, I have spent two with them. This Christmas will be my third. The time is one of celebration and of drinking, but me, I don't see much of their god in it. Their god is a fighter *manitou*, I assume, although this is not how their holy men talk of him. When they talk of him, they use words like *forgiveness*, *virgins*, *children*. But I believe their god must be a warrior, for he is the one they all pray to before they go over the top. I will never understand this god, these people.

Fat and Grey Eyes and McCaan are the only originals left. All the others are dead. I don't bother getting to know the new ones who come in any more. No secret now that the one who comes in to take Sean Patrick's place is always very young and always dies within a month of arriving. Nobody bothers getting to know the new one. The rest all look, thinking that the new boy is cursed but not daring to say so.

This Christmas celebration of theirs bleeds through a week to another celebration of the beginning of the new year. I realize that all of this drinking and false celebrating just masks the sadness. They all talk about what has happened in the last year and speak of how they hope that the next year will be the last year of war. This new year that begins they call 1918. I know that this is how many years have passed since they say their god was born as a man.

This sadness and reflection rubs off on me. I do not like their way of keeping time. Their way is based loosely on the moons but is as