

Dulce et Decorum est

His mother always said that he was born with too many ideas in that 'little noggin' of his.

The last time Chester had heard it was an early morning, a couple of autumns ago, as she came home from her night shift at the small bar downtown. Chester had looked up from the piece of paper before him and grinned up at her, a little sleepily. *Only for you Mama*, he had replied, setting his pen down.

And she had smiled her bittersweet smile, the scrunch between her eyebrows growing deeper. *I wish the world could hear your stories, Ches, I just know that everyone would love them.*

Maybe they would have, he thought to himself, reminiscing the moment from years long gone. Maybe they would not have. Either way Chester knew that the world would never hear them; no matter how many ideas he'd had in his 'noggin' he still didn't have the chance.

Back then they hadn't had much money, just him and his Mama in their little house on the outskirts of the city. No matter how smart she had told him he was, school cost money, money they didn't have.

It was why he had enlisted. His comrades talked of pride and honour, of fighting for one's country. Dying for it more like it, he thought to himself bitterly. No, Chester had enlisted at the ripe old age of sixteen and seven months because the bags under his mother's tired eyes were only getting heavier and he couldn't bear the thought of her struggling for them any longer.

He had enlisted and set off on his journey, sailing even further away from his passions and dreams. In War there was no time for him to tie sticks together with leftover string and make stories for each stick character, in War there wasn't time for his daydreams and fantasy worlds.

Instead there was something else Chester found, something he had never before. The men he lived alongside, trained with each day, stood in line with as their Sergeant barked orders at them; they became something together. There was a strange feeling among them. A unity he couldn't quite describe that ignited something in his chest. He felt like he belonged. No matter how many screams Chester would hear from the medic tent, or the almost endless crying of woes he heard from the old men at the upland camp; he could not let go of the brotherhood he and his comrades had formed.

Chester tried to ignore the wistful look he would catch on his Corporal's face when he thought they weren't looking, tried to reason that his squad was different, that they would survive. He steered away from any reminder of the horrors of war, despite the fact that they surrounded him. But he couldn't hide from the men cut short at the knee or the way the hands of the officer who handed out rations never seemed to stop shaking. He couldn't hide from the harsh truth that War was synonymous with loss of life.

A cold dread started to spread over his shoulders as the thoughts ran through his mind; a strange feeling igniting in his chest. He tried to remind himself, as an old familiar feeling crept up through him, settling in his ribs, that he was no longer a little, naive boy who spent his days in lonely fields. No longer did he clasp his hands tightly every night, kneeling in front of his bundle of blankets, praying for just one friend to keep him company. No longer did he let himself fantasize about what it would be like to be a part of something larger than himself.

But as he stood among stone-faced men, standing in trenches dug to hell's own pit, a part of the brotherhood that they'd accepted him into, he couldn't deny the dread seeping into his mind. Their crisp, clean uniforms, their blank, white faces, their sunken, empty eyes. Each feature screamed out at him, refusing to be ignored. No longer was he a little boy but in that moment he felt more alone than he had ever been. He realised, belatedly, that he was standing among dead men, among people who no longer believed in life.

And then, the terrifying truth came to him, bile rising in the back of his throat. Their minds were empty, their souls taken by War. And his was one of them.