

Nineteen Nineteen

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An extract pp 7-8; 355-361

Original title Negentien Negentien
Publisher Ambo|Anthos, 2025

Translation Dutch into English
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p 7-8

1. August 1919

I wish I had been killed in action. I would have been a hero. My parents would have become martyrs, having made the ultimate sacrifice for their country. I would have been their pride and joy. They could have placed a portrait on the mantelpiece and stared into my flawless eyes, without the shame, the frustration, the lack of understanding they felt now. They had spent three years forming a picture of their boy's return – *if* he were to return. During those three years that picture had become so idealised that it was bound to end in bitter disappointment. I was no longer the naïve teenager I had once been. I was not the glorious victor I should have become. It would have been easier had they been able to mourn me, if the picture in their heads had remained true.

I had stuffed the bare essentials – an overcoat, underwear, dry socks, lots of dry socks, a book and some money – into a suitcase and had left. Father had locked the door behind me.

'Take care, my boy,' he had said, in the same tone he used to say that it had stopped raining. Mother had not even been home. An hour earlier she had set off for choir practice without saying goodbye. The prospect of not having to face me every day appealed to them. Even Sarah had offered little resistance. This departure was not like the one four years ago. The passionate promises, the yearning kisses, the hollow feeling in our stomachs and the brave smile had all been absent. This time I was not meeting a hero's death.

p 355-361

33. August 1919

I want to see the sun rise. I want to see the sun rise without tensing my muscles, without anxiously clutching my rifle, without waiting with bated breath and heavy heart to see what the receding shadows might reveal. I want to see the sun rise the way I used to see it rise, like the promise of a new day, waking up to the chirping of birds.

When I'm standing in front of my hotel window, the sky is still dark. My watch tells me it is half past four. It won't be long now. I put on my clothes, grab my cane and my sketchbook and sneak into the corridor. The hotel is sound asleep.

Once outside, I walk in a northeasterly direction, away from the city. A faint glow dawns beyond the horizon.

A few miles outside the city, in the middle of what was once no-man's-land, I sit down in the dewy grass, facing east. I see the sun rise. I know the colours. I know the ever-evolving hues, the retreating dark. Every day we spent in the trenches, we spent this hour standing on the fire step. But I could never gaze at the horizon this freely and with my head held high. I drink in the colours, the warmth of the first few rays. A lark warbles in the air and a vole rustles in the grass. The small sounds deepen the silence that is draped over the landscape. I become part of my surroundings, tiny, insignificant, and gratitude wells up inside me and fills my chest. Gratitude I cannot express or share with anyone. For the first time in two years I'm happy to still be alive.

The slender wisps of fog that had drifted across the no-man's-land evaporate, the colours intensify. Red poppies and purple thistles rear their heads amongst tufts of grass. The field is pitted with shell holes and here and there the rusty poles of barbed wire fences stick up. Amidst the wild beauty of the flowers and the grass, they look innocent. Their power to terrify and threaten is gone. They no longer demarcate anything, no longer defend anything; abandoned irrelevance, sliding into oblivion. How can I blame people for not understanding what it was like, when this is all that remains?

In a fit of determination, I reach for my sketchbook. I want to make a sketch for Mrs Cartwright. I want to try and capture on paper what her husband has been through. So she can see it, sense it, so she can get a little closer to him.

When I slowly close my eyes, dark clouds gather over the landscape. Rain comes lashing down. The red and purple blotches disappear, the grass fades, the earth turns to mud, the shell holes fill with reddish brown rainwater. The temperature drops. The silence is filled with the roar of guns. My heart rate goes up, my breathing quickens. I gasp for breath, fling my eyes wide open and in the blink of an eye the early summer's day is back. The sky is blue, the poppies sway. I'm still here.

I try again. I keep my breathing steady and slowly summon the images. They are memories, no more. When I open my eyes, I'll be back in the here and now, I reassure myself as my lids fall shut and the images fill my head. I try to focus on a single one. The road to the front, on the eve of our attack. October eighth, nineteen seventeen. I open my eyes a crack, all the while focussing on the image that I have paused, and sketch while peering through my eyelashes. The duckboards become lines, the shell holes become outlines, the soldiers planes, the broken tree trunks in the distance shadows. I keep control over my head, over my hand, and sketch. With small, precise movements, I draw the horse sinking into the mud. The sounds, the smells, the sensations disappear, the image is conjured onto paper.

I'm so engrossed in my drawing that I don't notice the sun climbing and time passing. But when my memories are suddenly interrupted by voices, I look up. Across the road, some twenty metres away, three boys are standing on the roof of a small concrete dug-out. They are still children. I stare at them in surprise and cannot immediately pinpoint why I'm so bewildered by the sight of them. Then I realise that they are the first children I have seen here in Flanders. They are about ten, dressed in too-short trousers and grubby vests. Their legs are covered in grazes and their knees are

dirty, like the legs and knees of all ten-year-old boys. They are skinny but bursting with energy. They jump off the dug-out and run around the field. Their sticks are rifles and they make shooting noises at each other. It is several seconds before I can fully comprehend their game. One of them crashes to the ground with a lot of drama. He clutches his chest and shrieks. Another drags him by the arm, while the third keeps firing at them from the dug-out. They too flout international conventions. I keep staring at them, stunned. The fallen one has come to life again, and now they're chasing each other, from shell hole to shell hole. One of them suddenly breaks character when he spots something on the ground. He calls out to the others. And with that the war is over and the three of them kneel fraternally around the discovery.

I turn away from them and focus once more on my sketches. The day of the attack. October ninth, nineteen seventeen. I close my eyes again. The damp, the cold and the mud are back in an instant. A shell hole with three soldiers pressing themselves into the mud. A German bunker with a machine gun. Runners with their pockets full of hand grenades. Muzzle flashes.

All of a sudden there is the resounding blast of an exploding artillery shell. I throw myself belly-down onto the ground, but when I open my eyes the mud is still there. I smell the burnt gunpowder of the explosion. I hear screaming to my right. Somebody has been hit. I grab my rifle and crawl through the mud in the direction of the yelling. Across the road, sitting inside a shell hole some twenty metres away, are three soldiers. I run towards them, hunched over, and lower myself into the crater. One of them has been hit. His hand has been all but severed from his arm. I'm not counting enough fingers. The two others have been flung against the edge and stare in shock at their mate, without doing a thing. The injured one is yelling and screaming. I crawl towards him, drop my rifle, rip off his vest, tear it to shreds with my teeth and tie it as tightly as possible around his hand and wrist. The dirty white fabric is immediately soaked through with blood. We need to get him to a dressing station. Right now. Where are the stretcher-bearers? He keeps crying and screaming. I look at him. That's when the cold disappears, the mud disappears. But the crying continues. It's one of the children. His hand is blood-red inside the bandage. A few metres away, the two others are staring at their little friend in shock. Damn! Did they dig up a dud? I'm having trouble breathing. What do I do? What the hell do I do? The boy looks at me wide-eyed, as if I must do *something*. But what? I don't know. This is a child! How can I... But then I admonish myself: I bandaged him. What would I do next if he were a soldier? He cannot stay here. He has to be evacuated. To an advanced dressing station.

'Where can I find a doctor?' I bellow at the two other boys. They don't understand what I'm saying and look at me with big, fearful eyes.

'Doctor! Take me to a doctor!' I shout, as I lift their friend. He weighs next to nothing. 'Come on!'

'Doctor,' the bigger of the two echoes. They appear to be coming to their senses again, scramble from the shell hole and walk up the road. I follow them. I push through the pain in my ankle and try to run. The child in my arms has gone into shock. He has stopped crying. I'd better hurry.

The boys escort me back to Ypres, to a large field where wooden barracks form a new neighbourhood. Thankfully there are adults here. No sooner have I taken a few steps than people come rushing towards me. Panic-stricken cries when they see the deathly pale child in my arms.

'Doctor! Doctor!' the message is passed on, and it is not long before a man in a dark suit with glasses and a goatee beard squeezes through the crowd.

'A shell. They were playing, and then... a shell,' I mutter to the doctor, but I'm not sure if he is listening to me. Another man takes the child from me. I'm surrounded by voices and shouting. I don't understand any of it. The doctor issues instructions to the man. A woman approaches. As soon as she recognises the child in the man's arms, she starts wailing. The two other children just stand there looking sheepish. When the woman spots them, she shouts something and clips them round the ear. Meanwhile, the doctor and the man have taken the child into one of the barracks. Nobody talks to

me. Nobody takes any notice of me. The small group gathers in front of the barracks that the doctor entered.

The woman lingers a moment. She looks at me, letting her gaze travel from my head down to my feet and back up again. Her face is inscrutable. I don't know any words that she might understand. For four years we dragged ourselves through the same inferno, side by side, but we don't understand one another. And it is not just language that stands between us.

Then, without a word, she spins on her heels, walks to the barracks and leaves me here on my own. I'm not part of their community, of their shock, their panic. I hope I was fast enough, I think to myself, as I turn around and walk out of town. I hope the child survives.
