

19th November, 1916.

John was transferred back home today.

We've tried all the doctors around, none of them will help us. None of them *can* help us. They won't take gold, or jewels, or land.

Nothing.

They can't help us.

He didn't used to be like this. He was happier before; stronger, more self-assured. There always used to be girls on our doorstep, at our gates. They hung over the fence, giggling and calling flirtatiously. "Jack, Jack", they always cried, and John would only glance out of the window with a smirk on his face.

There are no girls at our gates anymore, they don't walk past either.

We've always been close, John and I. After all, we shared the same womb, and we had no siblings besides each other. We laughed together, ran together, made mistakes together, and learned from them too. But we had always had our differences.

John was the heartthrob of the family. Even our parents' friends loved him. John bathed in the attention, and soaked it all up. At school, everybody gravitated towards him, it was as if he were the sun and everyone else orbited him, they couldn't help it.

But he never once forgot about me. It was because of him that I was not bullied for my glasses. I have always been shortsighted, you see. I had never even thought there would be a day we would be separated.

Then I went to Germany.

There was a university there, a certain Technical University of Munich. My dream had been to become an engineer. So I set off there in late summer of 1913, a fresh, timid, 19-year-old, aspiring young man. I commenced the summer semester with high spirits, tainted only by the distance between John and I.

During my absence, John would send me letters. Sometimes, he would recount tales of our father, teaching him the ways of the booming bijoux business. Other times, John would write about his late night adventures with beautiful women.

Then, in early 1914, he started relating some rumours and gossip that were circulating the town. Murmurs of tension, then war.

Summer semester in 1914 had just started, when our parents ordered me to come back home.

They said it wasn't safe anymore, and never would I have guessed how right they were.

I left the university behind, starting the long journey home. By the time I reached England, Austria had declared war on Serbia.

It was midday when I entered town, and, placarded on every wall were posters. There were pictures of men in khaki suits, with various guns slung just right on their backs, asking 'Will you, my laddie?'. Other billboards advertised honour, pride, duty, the words dancing off the sign before the ogling eyes of men. Amongst them was Jack. He was standing tall, Father had a hand on his shoulder, laughing uproariously at a comment made by a passer-by. "Hero" was whispered from ear to ear, rippling like a shiver of pleasure through the admiring crowd. Jack was dressed like the men on the posters, from the corduroy felt cap to the shining tip of the rifle, down to big solid leather boots.

Twice I saw him dressed in uniform, only once was he proud.

Men congratulated Jack, and women rained praises on him, giggling. I will never forget the way he smiled that day. I had never seen this smile before, nor have I ever seen it since. Words could not possibly describe it, though

I will try to. There was pride, and honour in that smile, but also a hint of hesitation, so small and trivial I knew only I alone could have glimpsed it.

Father tried to push me to enlist as well. "It taints the family's name". He would say, and he wasn't alone. Once Jack had left to join the fight with the French, I could not walk down the street without having a neighbour look down their nose at me. Sometimes, the odd girl would strut up to me and ask why I wasn't fighting, like all the other men. But I would ignore them. The hardest to endure was the white feather. At least, that's what Father said. It came one day in a sealed white envelope addressed to me, and Father snatched it right out of my hands. He glanced once at the sender and threw it into the raging fire. I found out what it was from the first person I came across later that day.

Even back then, news went around fast.

Often, Jack would send me a letter. His first letters recounted the fraternity in his battalion. I recall feeling jealous of the bonds my twin was forming ... without me. He wrote of the welcome hardships of training and the surreal feeling of being on the move, travelling, seeing the world with his own two eyes, not through the white pages of a book. Jack said he had started a travel journal, but he would never tell me what it contained, he never mentioned it after the 4th letter though. This was right after he was deployed, or so he said.

He related the rush of adrenaline after victories and the fulfilling of the hearty meal at the end of each day. He would tell me about his food in most letters. Roast beef, steaming vegetables, strangely sweet exotic fruit. He would describe great wooden tables of jovial soldiers, coming in from their day's work. Reading Jack's exploits made me feel like a hero. Made me feel celebrated and accepted like I had never been in my life.

In fact, those letters almost convinced me to join the army, to form alliances and friends of my own ... almost. I was about to enlist when his letters stopped coming.

Jack was transferred back home today. Blind. And nobody can help.

Not for mountains of gold.

Not for teeming chests of jewels.

Not for countless acres of land.

Nobody will help.