

Yi Xuan, 9 Grey

The Forgotten Hero

A man's feet crunched over the layer of coppery, desiccated, dead leaves that carpeted the ground, as they tentatively stepped into the graveyard. For a moment, he merely stood, looking almost like a lost boy despite the wrinkles on his face, before he made himself move again. His fingers subconsciously tightened around the limp bouquet of white lilies, wet after a hurried dash through the rain, as he weaved in and out through the various graves. He soon came to a stop in front of one.

It read:

In loving memory of
Private Samuel Ryans

Born...

He couldn't read. He couldn't go on. He had mustered up all his courage to come all the way here, to... what? To pay his respects? To talk to his old friend? To cry and complain to him? He had told himself that he wouldn't break, wouldn't shatter

like a fragile household vase, remembering the words his old commander had once told him, “Men will be men. You do not cry like a woman in the face of difficult situations. You stand strong.”

Yet looking at his late best friend’s picture on the grave smiling obliviously, unknown and ridiculously naive to how doom would befall him, it made emotions resurface in him, so strong, that he couldn’t quell them. He could remember how Samuel’s laugh was booming, how he’d slap his thigh out of mirth over a joke, how he’d tell him he wished he could visit Australia some day with him.

His knees hit the ground, as his sobs overtook him, shaking his entire body, the flowers loosening from his grip, because Samuel never got to go to Australia with him. Like a flash, the memory of the day on which it happened occurred to him.

They were in the trenches, polishing their guns as they chatted to each other as usual. The insufferable, pungent stench of the trenches disgusted them, both shaking their heads at the smell.

“They never said war included us stinking like cows,” Samuel had muttered, eliciting a loud bark of laughter from his friend.

“I suppose not, but it’s smashing fun to hold these guns,” he gestured to the weapon he had in his hands.

“Well, you are right, John,” Samuel agreed.

Just then, a piercing whistle blew, making both men jump.

“Attention! German troops advancing! To your stations, everyone, and charge when I say so!” came the commander’s orders.

John remembered how boyish thrill had seemed to fill his body and infiltrate his senses, as he grinned at Samuel. Hot adrenaline coursed through his blood as he ran to his station, preparing to attack with his friend by his side. Suddenly, he

wasn't John Green, the milkman from Baker Street. He was Private John Green, ready to fight for Britain, his beloved homeland.

"Now!" The commander had shouted, and they were off.

John felt as though he was outside of himself, a completely new soul in a new body who was so excited for a real fight, as he ran into the battlefield, screaming obscenities at the enemy. He fired at any of the enemy nearby, coughing from all the dust and dirt kicked up by their feet. Bullets whizzed past his ears and gunfire lit up the night sky: deadly fireworks.

He was so thrilled at this euphoric sense of pleasure, that he was nearly dancing before he tripped over something and fell to the ground.

"What the-" he spluttered, but his breath caught when he saw Samuel lying on the ground, nearly lifeless, blood spurting out from a gunshot wound in his abdomen. John's eyes widened.

"No," he breathed out, clambering over to press his hands to his friend's wound to apply pressure, a futile effort to save and preserve his life, "No, no, no! Sam!"

Samuel merely smiled at him weakly, face turning pale from the loss of blood, "Hey, buddy, it's gonna be alright, yeah? Make sure you get to go to Australia for me one day. And make sure people actually remember me."

"No, no, no!" The words were torn out of John's larynx forcefully as he sobbed, watching as his best friend took his last breaths, and as the light in his eyes went out, his body falling limp to the ground.

John was back at the graveyard. Salty rivers of tears spilled down his rough cheeks, unable to stop his gush of raw emotion, upset and longing. His fingers reached out to touch the cracked edges of the stone grave, having not been maintained well over the years.

John would know because he was the one who planted the grave.

There was no fanfare or mournful poetry to commemorate his late friend, no acknowledgement to the name Samuel Ryans. There was only him, John Green, a broken shell of a man who once believed in forever, in remembering those who were lost, and in a nice trip to Australia with his best friend.

“I’m sorry no one remembers you,” John choked out to the grave now, “But at least you have me, forgotten hero.”