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# Par Avion

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## The Same-Bent Knees

15 March 1918

It was at the bottom of page 37 of *The Manchester Guardian* that Solon Baäth came across a name that startled him. There, among a listing of the 1700 British soldiers who had died in the battle of Marne, some three years before in the autumn of 1914, he found that one of the fallen was a certain Arthur Baäth. Could this man whose uncommon last name he shared have been a relation? Or, as it so tormented his foundling's heart, the father he had never known? Sitting inside the shop where he worked as an assistant cooper, Solon read on, aching over the mystery; then, as lathes shot clouds of sawdust up around him, he came upon this notice:

*Personal Effects and Belongings of Soldiers Who Lost Their Lives At Said Battle May Be Claimed at Quay #4 of the Tillbury Docks from Today, October 8<sup>th</sup>, Through the Last Friday of December.*

\*

Though he tried to put that notion from his mind, the very possibility that he and the dead man could have been in some way related consumed him to the point that he could think of nothing else. He'd never had any family, after all. As the weeks passed, with his curiosity overwhelming him, he finally decided to make his way to the docks: perhaps, he thought, he might find someone who knew of this man, or, at the very least, discover, among his effects, some clue as to whom this Arthur Baäth had been.

When he arrived at Tillbury, on a drizzling Sunday afternoon, there had been no one about to check for familial identification and the chain-link gate that guarded the dock swung listlessly in the wind. There he encountered a bleak scene; the dead soldiers' belongings had been scattered along the length of the walkway, as if no one had shown them a care in the world. There were old leather valises with war medals pinned above their broken handles and rosaries that had rotted on the planking, their rusted crucifixes

staining the wood beneath pale amber, the remaining beads twisting in the wind. Tattered capes and musty blankets were haphazardly draped over wooden crates, mold blossoming around their seams. And yet someone had taken the trouble to give them some order, for these melancholy lots had been laid out alphabetically, according to their previous owner's name, with large letters scrawled in chalk on the planking/stone beside each one. At the foot of the dock, to his left, Solon saw an immense letter "M" covering twelve planks and to his right a similarly fashioned "N." Then towards the far end, past "L" and "O," then "K" and "P", Solon came to the grid where he found a solitary beige leather satchel from whose handle hung a frayed piece of olive fabric—a tag on which had been written the name of "Baäth."

Dangling from a cord was a brass key, and inside the satchel itself, which he opened right there and then, a canvas wallet. These he carried off with him.

\*

On the trolley back to Bromley, as Solon rubbed the key between his thumb and forefinger in an idle attempt to polish it, he noticed that a timid seeming but pretty girl had been staring at him. No doubt, she had been wondering about the oddly mannered fellow sitting across from her in the trolley interior. She had smiled at him; then turned away as he caught her looking his way, for she found his dark eyes and surly appearance intimidating.

He'd taken the wallet out to look it over—all the other papers and belongings inside that satchel had been rotting, but it had seemed intact. It had two main compartments with a small pouch in between. In the first, along with a few schillings, he found a military identification card with Arthur Baath's name, rank (corporal), blood type (O-) along with an address out in the district of Redbridge. There was also a photograph, of "Arthur Baäth, July 1901," as it said on the back, taken somewhere on a park green: and that threw him—he looked up suddenly, for the man in that picture, tall and ravenous looking, as though he and the photographer were about to duel. The man's eyes, oval and pearlescent, seemed wedded to the moment. Though they were not pictured, he must have possessed slender fingers, spindly and dexterous. He might have been a carpenter, a

workman, but the tilt of his head, slightly left, gave the impression of an artist scrutinizing his subject. Examining the picture, Solon had the unnerving sensation of looking at a distorted mirror.

Next to it, a folded piece of paper, which he carefully unfurled upon his lap. It read:

*Congratulations, I hope to meet him some day- W. Aristedes,*

*Tanger 7 August 1900*

Finally, inside the pouch, Solon came upon another photograph. Precisely the same size as the one of Arthur, but, curiously, it had been folded into quarters so that it was roughly the size of a watch face. The back had yellowed with age, or perhaps dirt, for there was also a distinct and decipherable thumbprint with a pattern that resembled a halo above a mountain. It was of a beautiful woman: Her lips full, but pale, her cheeks darker than her prominent roman nose. The hair framing her face resembled liquid obsidian. Upon closer inspection, Solon realized that it was not a photograph but a daguerreotype; the blacks were not so true, the whites somewhat indistinct and every tone in between appeared in shades of an elusive silver rather than gray.

\*

Later, in the pub down the street from his boarding house in Bromley, Solon drank with his friend Digby, an apprentice watchmaker from West Bromwich.

“So you think it’s possible that this man, whose wallet you found, could be your father?” Digby asked, twisting a piece of cord between his fingers. “By that I mean to ask,” he hesitated, sipping his beer, “how the hell would you even know?”

“Look here,” Solon said, pointing out his own features. “Do you see these eyes? These hands? This dark hair? These absurdly large ears?”

“So?”

“Now look at this,” and going through his pockets, he showed Digby, that photograph of Arthur Baath.

“I’ll be damned,” said Digby, looking it over. “So, now that you know, what will you do?”

“Well, for one thing,” Solon told him. “I have a key that I found with that photograph. I’d like to know what it’s for.”

\*

That next morning, Solon found himself standing by the door of a crumbling shack, situated at the corner of an empty lot, long overgrown by massive thistle bushes and ragwort. The shed itself was beyond dilapidated; the varnish had worn through on all of the wooden fixtures used to raise the segmented metal doors and the sheet-metal roof sagged on one side as if a massive animal had slept on it nightly.

Once inside, after Solon had pried its door loose from its rusted latch, he peered through the darkness to the far side of the shed and saw through a wall of rising dust the narrow fender of a motorcycle sticking out from a corner. Intrigued, he dragged it into the light. The cycle was painted in a handsome deep forest green with pale yellow pinstripes accentuating the curves of its pipes and tank. Emblazoned in scarlet lettering with pale gold framing was the script, “Royal field,” the “En” preceding “field” had been worn off in a patch that was now the gunmetal gray of the exposed surface beneath the paint. The gas tank had acquired a stately patina. Dust dulled the chrome of the handlebars and fenders, but it glowed beautifully when Solon gently rubbed it with the back of his hand. The leather on the saddle was supple, but also cracked along its grooves and rises so that it vaguely resembled a topographical map.

Solon reached into his pocket for the key. After a succession of minute contacts between the ridges on the key and the tumblers of the lock, the engine sputtered and then slowly came to life, expelling a substantial cloud of dark smoke that enveloped Solon completely. Rocking his weight forward, he eased the bike off its stand and then gave it a slight push. His feet came naturally to the pegs, his left toe ticking at the shifter to put the motorcycle into first gear. Soon, the motorcycle and rider emerged as one from that shed,

and went tearing through the weeds and grass of the abandoned lot and into the cobbled streets of Redbridge.

With the wind blowing through his hair, he felt as if he'd slipped into his father's body. Solon wondered how Arthur might have walked and whether he walked the same; whether the smallest of habits was learned or inherited. He knew he'd never know.

In the midst of that short bliss, the motorcycle, short of petrol, came to a stop, and Solon found himself wheeling it the last mile and a half on foot back home.

As he walked the bike back to his boarding house through an alley, mud covered his boots. On the inside edge of his brown carpenters pants, below the thigh on the inner side of his knees, were the intimations of a faded green blush, paint that had worn off the oil tank. Sinking down to the ground there, against the brick wall of the boarding house, Solon extended his legs out in front of him, letting them plow through the thick and congealed mud. Just beyond his feet, his bike rested on its kickstand. The harsh light from the gas lamps refracted off the faded paint of the motorcycle with a warm glow, except where the paint had been worn off, where the "En" should have been. There, in that small spot exposed by the fatigue of wear, came a faint but definite glimmer, a stark eye from a faraway and dark place. Solon held it transfixed in his own gaze until the mud and the rain had soaked him through and the fog had closed upon the alley like a funeral shroud drawn over a body.

Why he did so, he really couldn't say, but, in any case, Solon didn't wait to be conscripted after his birthday on June 1. Getting up from mud, he walked straight down to the recruiter's office on Pace Street. A bell jingled above the door as he shoved it ajar briskly. The officer who sat at the desk didn't even have time to ask why he was there. "My name is Solon Baäth," he said, "I want to fight for the King."

"That's good," the recruiter said, "because we're in some need of sailors."



## The White Cliffs of Dover

21 June 1918

In Dover, the streets were lined with soldiers who looked like schoolboys. Few, if any, could grow an honest beard and they shook nervously on the trains as if someone was needling them. They gather in certain places, at the last beacon, the first departure. Dover.

Solon looked in on a city that he had only ever heard of; new recruits swarmed the docks like termites. There was a general sense of aimlessness; orderly ranks would appear later, by necessity, but any sense of urgency was lost amidst a larger malaise.

There were bunks in barracks, boots with heels of thick leather that provoked blisters after only a few steps, olive uniforms unadorned but for ordered black buttons. Everything pressed and pristine, waiting to be donned and worn in, shaped to their body amidst fatigue, or because of it. Everyone else had left their belongings at home; Solon hadn't any to take with him.

"Oh, you're different," a piqued voice rang out from behind him.

"Uh huh?"

"And not just on the outside, I bet you think that you're the one that's gonna come out of this muddle alive, you sod."

Solon turned around to find a bright-faced but olive-skinned man of about his age, with shocks of dark hair falling over his somewhat distant hazel eyes.

"What are you talking about?" Solon's shoulders' tensed up, pinching his uniform in at his armpits.

"Well, you're nothing in particular, special or otherwise; you're gonna die like the rest of us," the soldier extended a hand in greeting, "I'm Fielding, Fielding Harlow and now our acquaintance has been made."

"I haven't introduced myself"

"Well, isn't that rude of you."

"Forgive me," Solon extended his hand, which Fielding only took after a moment's hesitation, "Solon Baäth, at your disposal."

“Drop the pretense, neither of us is an officer and, so long as we’re in the company of almost equals, let’s say we just stamp out all this ‘officiation’ . How’d you wind up here, I mean, in the service?”

“My father was one, thought I’d get into the family business.”

“Well, business is booming.”

They became friends, these two soldiers. In their barracks, they met a third, Henry Ferguson, a crack-shot who’d been recruited because of his extensive hunting experience. He would regularly show-up his peers in shooting drills on the docks: “Ha, bet you didn’t even see that clay I hit it so quick,” he’d say, then blow some imaginary smoke off the end of his rifle. On their first day of firing, Solon made the inexperienced mistake of not pausing between squeezing off rounds, thereby causing his aim to shift upward with each successive round.

“Baäth, stop it, you’re god-awful I must say,” his CO called from behind their rank where he’d been pacing. While lowering his gun, Solon accidentally gripped the rifle by its fore-stock, which had heated up to an incredible temperature because the barrel had not been bored out correctly. He screamed as the burning metal seared into the skin of his palm. It smoldered, the nauseating smell of burnt flesh emanated from within the line of soldiers.

“Baäth, go to hospital.”

“Yes sir,” he cringed as he tried to separate his hand from the barrel. The metal had branded his right hand with the words displayed on the stock in reverse. When he looked at it in the mirror at the hospital, the inscription became legible:

SOLON BAÄTH  
PRIVATE SECOND CLASS  
EIGHTH INFANTRY DIVISION, THIRD ARMY  
FOR THE KING

The following afternoon, Solon was discharged from the hospital with a heavily bandaged hand into the auspices of his two compatriots. Self-consciously, he would hide the injury by tucking it under his opposing arm. They had leave for the afternoon; it was decided they would explore the town.

As they walked the streets of Dover, shadows courted with the three soldiers. Dirigibles floating high above the city listed noiselessly, silent spectres holding dominion over the earth, guardians of the innocent below. They rocked as buoys do, each breeze manifested in the faint ripples of their skin. Fielding walked on, Henry and Solon followed.

Off the main thoroughfare, Fielding spotted a small pub with the faded moniker “The Plough and Stars,” painted in antiquated gold lettering above the green door. They settled at a table with four wicker chairs situated around a precarious wire table that had two of its opposing legs propped up with coasters from the “Blue Beard”, the name of a pub further down the street.

“Seat yourselves, please gentlemen,” an attendant came with beer-stained menus. “My name is Florence, what may I get for you this afternoon?”

“For starters,” the formerly mute Henry chimed in, “how about the address where I can call on you tonight?”

She possessed a small but distinct mole just left-of-center on her forehead and her auburn hair was feathered such that the individual shocks just overlapped to present a not-quite-uniform sheen. Rough hewn and resilient, Florence’s hands were those of a person whose life had been a process of tying and deconstructing knots.

“You’re fresh,” she replied with faint grin, “but it just so happens that I am already married to a superb young man, one of your compatriots, who is just now in Brittany, proving himself in a way that you have yet to match. In the meantime, instead of talking of love and life and war, what would you like to drink?”

“I hadn’t seen the ring...”

“It’s bad for business.”

“No, how about we talk about ‘love and life and war’? Humor us; we might not have much time,” Henry persisted, to Solon and Fielding’s mutual discomfort.

“Let me get you some tea, it’s about that time isn’t it? Then we can tackle that better part of human existence.”

Within a few minutes, she had returned with pewter cups and accompanying saucers.

“Metal? We’re not in the thick of it just yet are we?” Fielding half-heartedly tried to diffuse the tension that remained from the first exchange. “Couldn’t we drink from porcelain just one last time?”

“You poor fools. You think it terribly romantic, don’t you?” Florence removed a kerchief from a pocket of her vest, “leaving some girl behind, writing letters back and forth as if the objects can replace the person. What if Pierce should die over there and I never see him again? Can I build a new him out of those letters? Can those letters hold our daughter in their arms? You boys think it’s alright because you think you’ve lost everything as soon as you’ve left and that anything more would be a gift from God. Us, we’re losing something all the time.”

The soldiers sourly contemplated the dregs that had begun to gather at the bottom of their cups.

“I’m sorry, I’ve gotten terribly worked up, your tea is getting cold and the afternoon is fleeting, I’m sorry to have become so upset, please excuse my rude behavior.”

Across the boulevard, the bluffs running towards the cliffs were sparsely vegetated; wind eddies had torn up all of the trees before they had chance to root. Undulations of the heath were the only visible evidence of the persistent wind that raked the landscape. An unsteady train of silhouettes lined the ridge where the cliffs began and Solon painted them with his mind’s eye. Florence seemed to be sharing the same vision in her head and Solon harbored the momentary illusion that they were the sole inhabitants of some distant world.

“My sadness knows no bounds,” she said, immediately regretting this revelation, like a patient who awakes to see their scars exposed to hospital clinicians. “I don’t know how I will ever get around it.” She coughed a little, raised her hand to cover her mouth in the most endearing gesture any of the three men could have remembered, then attempted to change the conversation.

“Do you see that house over there?” a motioning finger picked out one otherwise unremarkable shanty slumping across the street.

“I see it.”

“A bit drab, isn’t it?”

“I suppose”

“It’s been rebuilt eleven times, that’s why it’s so simple looking, because it’s bound to be blown over by another gale before too long. But the family that owns it, Ralph and Judy and Constance, they will rebuild it when that happens again, I know it, because the part they’ve built it in on, the foundation, has always held and that’s the most difficult part to build.”

“I think I see what you’re driving at and isn’t it a bit tired, all this talk of blown-over homes?”

“Don’t be so callous.” It was another statement Florence had naturally fired off without consequence and the server-customer relationship had completely dissolved. “My point is that the ground beneath it, that’s held that foundation, the earth itself, is crumbling now. That one part of the house that they can count on won’t be there anymore; the next time that building gets blown over, there’ll be nothing to start over from. They won’t even be able to go from the ground up. Such a sight.”

Her body shook a little.

Solon felt the sublime discomfort of someone studying a statue for hours, only to realize its nakedness. He had been absent-mindedly writing on his napkin, embarrassing as it was linen. When Florence began collecting the scattered hulls of their food, Solon tried to fold the napkin over itself so as to obscure what he had scrawled. The writing

covered it front, back, center and sidewise and he could only grimace when she finally fetched and pretended not to notice: *YOU COULD HAVE IT SO MUCH BETTER*

The scouring wind might have chilled the three of them had they not been wearing their heavy fatigues. Instead, each crease in the heavy linen blossomed with perspiration. Henry got up first, leaving a tip, “what use is money now anyway?”

“A stroll, whattaya say?” Fielding beckoned from his privileged spot at the table.

At the terminus of nearly every side street one got a sense of the wilderness beyond; ranges of overgrown heath scarred with chalk-white stone outcroppings where more roads, churches, and outposts had yet to be built. The winds that twirled the weathervanes in the town also kept trees from growing along the cliffs and the locals would wake in the middle of the night to the sound of earth shearing off from cliff faces and into the ocean below.

The soldiers made their way out from the last house on Old Folkstone Road, with Fielding flanked by Henry and Solon.

“My mum used to tell me stories of when she and my dad were living in Burma,” Fielding mused, kicking pebbles across the wounded turf. “When they’d go off to war, the Burmese soldiers would ask their wives for a ruby, Lord it sounds strange to say this, but they’d ask their wife to sew the gem into their chest.”

“Sounds like self-mutilation to me, aren’t those the same men who light themselves on fire when they’re upset?”

“Not mutilation, that’s immolation.”

“Fancy that, an educated man from the slums of Bromley, get off your high horse, you’re no better than the rest of us.”

“No, those are monks. In Burma, the ruby is their symbol of strength,” Fielding cut them off by pointing to his chest to accent every fourth syllable, as if scanning the meter of a heart-known poem. “My father, he was Burmese, but they insisted I take my mother’s name so that no one here would know.”

“Well, wouldn’t people know as soon as they met your father that you were mixed?”

“No, on account that my father’s dead and has been for a long time. That’s how I knew you....”

“These stones, what were they for again? Virility?” Henry, in a rare show of tact, steered the conversation back round.

“I’d characterize it more as taking the strength of your land, your people, and tying yourself to it. As if you’re carrying it with you even as you enter somewhere foreign.”

The three of them witnesses a large portion of the cliff slough off into the ocean.

“Let’s make a pact”

“Of what sort, a friendship pact? A death pact? Pacts never sit well with me. Do you ever make a pact in anticipation of something *good*?”

“Well, let’s just take a second to acknowledge the white elephant in the room. These are the facts: We’re leaving here Wednesday, for God knows where and there’s a good chance, statistically, that at least one of us isn’t coming back.”

“I appreciate you’re candor.”

“Put a fucking sock in it Bath. We’re not making a pact just for us; a pact for England. We’ll do what the Burmese do, they’re British after all, just in our own way.” It was becoming rapidly evident that Fielding had a scheme all along and had been leading Solon and Henry along it with only minor, furtive steps of faith. Here was the coup:

“We’ll sew a piece of the cliffs into ourselves, carry England with us...”

It had been looming above them since tea two hours before, that omnipresent prospect, not here but in the clouds drifting across the channel, alluding to the smoke pouring off heavy artillery within the continent.

“We might not come back, after all.”

Henry pulled his pen knife from his pocket and carefully worked it beneath the surface of a nearby cliff face, along the upper side of preexisting divot. The chalky

surface came away cleanly, leaving powdery residue along the leading edge of the blade and a neat flake of the white earth in Henry's palm. He calmly distributed it to Fielding and then repeated the procedure twice more for Solon and himself.

"I took the medics course, maybe I should be making the incisions."

"Alright, I trust you, but first" and Fielding reached into the buckles that bound the calves of his combat boots to withdraw a small pewter flask, "for courage."

The cuts were neat. Solon made his first, a simple cross-hatch pattern of two thin incisions oblique to each other. His skin, like the beveled edges of a thick stamp, naturally seemed to lift itself and peel out. At the intersection of the two cuts, Solon placed the small fragment of the cliff, no larger than a shirt button. He fished in his emergency kit to retrieve one of the semi-circular, reinforced steel needles and a length of thread.

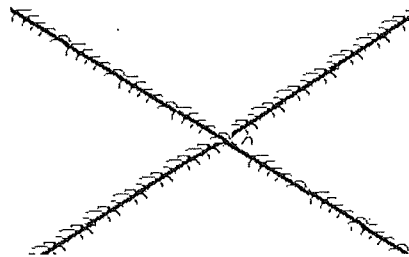
The ritual of suturing was methodical:

*Join the skin*

*Push the needle in- be sure to curve as you push*

*Pull it through the opposing side, bringing the point through the previous stitch*

It was a simple and precise affair and Solon, despite the pain, relished its clinical exactitude. In a matter of minutes, the pattern emerged:



Fielding and Henry unbuttoned their shirts, their own resolve fortified by Solon's precedent.

Their wounds stinging; each of the soldiers took another swig from the flask of whiskey.

Something flew out in the air before them, caught in the updrafts that scraped the face of the cliffs. The winds were wreaking havoc on the pitiful form, buffeting it near the crags of the splintered cliff.



It was a bird, a great blue heron, soaring, wings splayed out and feathers trailing like streamers in the wind. Banking before the sun, it revealed a defined silhouette, plumes projecting from its breast; a faded saint, crossing the lines of ash all drifting the same direction from the smokestacks of departing ships. Calais shone as a thin, gray strip on the edge of the horizon.

“Such a sight, she said,” Fielding bit his lip.

## In the Pitch of the Night

**8 June 1918**

It was only a week out of training that Solon became acquainted with death.

“Sub!” An alarm cry rang out over the decks and through the cabins of the *HMS Albion*, pulling backs from their beds and putting feet in their shoes. Solon was already at the stern, unbolting the cargo straps that held the depth charges fixed to their racks.

“Where is it?” he asked the sailor across the rack, whose name Solon did not know.

“Four o’clock, we’re swinging round then we have to set the pattern. The lookout up top said the conning tower is already down, they’ll be diving fast, better skip 50 and set the first charge to 100 feet”

“Done.”

“How did that guy in the nest see the tower in this much dark? There’s no light at all, except the moon.”

“Eyes of an eagle kid, that’s his job.”

They yanked their respective cords off the rack and stowed them beneath it. The other sailor then positioned himself at the base of it so that he could trigger the mechanism that would set their charge pattern and release the barrels. Solon’s commanding officer, Ambler, gestured for him to hug the stern rail and watch for the sub along with three other enlisted men. The other sixty sailors on deck had little to do but post themselves at various places on the tiered decks, trying to get a glimpse of the dark outline of the u-boat beneath them and keeping quiet. Soon, the only sound on deck was the wind whistling across their ears and the long groan of the hull of their ship as it cut a wide arc through the water to come above the sub.

At the stern, Solon looked out across the water behind them. His eyes trained first on the last tip of their own hull, where the metal met the water, they then followed out through the wake, where twin jets of water sluiced across themselves and cut a messy “V” pattern that dissipated slowly as it extended out. With its turn, the ship brought the moon abreast and Solon saw its faint light catch the air bubbles fed underwater by the

wake, making the water look silver and bringing the shape of the submarine into definition.

“CHARGES AWAY” Ambler screamed out and the first two barrels, one from each rack, slid down their metal guides and into the water. They sounded like snakes uncoiling. It would take almost fifteen seconds for them to reach their prescribed depth and in that time four more were launched. They cut up the pattern of the wake as they entered the water, a dull splash that cast water up into the night air and brought the smell of salt into Solon’s nose.

“There was a report of a sub off Blyth three days ago, do you think this is it?” Solon asked one of the men next to him by the rail.

“Suppose so, heard there weren’t too many of ‘em left since we started using these” the man thumbed over to one of the racks, a new charge rolled off into the sea.

“Who’s more scared, us or them?”

“I’ve been at this for most of the war now and the only thing I figured is that we both stand to lose the same way, floating in this dark and cold ocean, without seeing our women or kids again. We’re all in the same boat there.”

Solon recalled a story that he had heard in a pub in Dover the week before the *Albion* had set sail. There had been an older sailor who had obviously had too much to drink, downing flagons of ale at a furious pace because he had no one to talk to. Though Solon had little desire to get drunk. He sidled up closer to the man from along the bar, figuring that a conversation might slow his imbibing. He placed a tentative hand on the man’s back, between his shoulder blades, as he sat down on the stool next to him. The man responded in kind, like an old friend thought lost, clapping his rough paw on Solon’s far shoulder.

“What was your rank,” Solon asked, setting his still full pint of beer down on the worn wooden sideboard before them.

“I was a midshipman, but that was before the war, by the time we put to sea for this one I was too old not to be higher up and they didn’t want me on deck neither. I just

watch from the side now, you young lads itching to go out and get wet and leave all this trash and kill some Germans.”

“I suppose, I’m not sure how to feel about going out and killing someone.”

“You’re gonna be in the Navy right, by the looks of your blues at least,” he motioned to Solon’s navy trousers.

“Yes.”

“Well, you’re not really gonna kill anyone, even when you kill ‘em.”

“What do you mean?”

“You see that boy over there,” he thumbed down the bar to a man roughly Solon’s age, but shorter, in olive green army fatigues, “he’s gonna go out there and kill someone, a man, with eyes and skin and breath and sweat coming out of his pores. He’s gonna shoot him and see him fall and stop moving, or push his bayonet into that man’s chest and feel the blade break his bones and tear his flesh. You, on the other hand, are gonna aim some huge gun at some other ship a mile-and-a-half away and see it disappear into some cloud of smoke. Or maybe that will happen to you. Either way, you kill someone and that guy,” he nodded at the army man at the end of the bar again, “killing someone are not the same.”

“I see.”

“Let me tell you a story. Once there was this submariner who had to put to sea and leave the lass he loved so much. She was with child, they had only just discovered it, and though it pained him greatly, he knew he must go forth and serve his country.”

“The night before he was to leave, they made love in the dark and he kissed her belly in the place where his child was and she slept in her husband’s arms. In the morning, he left, but not before she drew a length of chord around her stomach and snipped it at the widest point, her navel. The chord was no longer than his arm and he wrapped it around his hand, weaving it between his thumb and forefinger and then across the palm, like a bandage.”

“How long did he keep it for?”

“When he put to sea, he kept it there on his hand for the first few days. When he turned the clamps to the doors, wound the batteries or moped the floor, the string was there in his palm and he felt as if his woman was there with him. Then, one night when he was lying in his bunk, he noticed that the rivets running up the hull next to him poked out far enough for him to wind the chord between them, so he did,” the old man continued.

“Each week when they put into port there would be a letter waiting for him with a new length of string, each longer than the last. He would wind them up next to the one before, until they looked like a harp beside him. At night, he would strum his fingers across them and pretend that he was touching his wife and their child inside her. When the waves would wash over their vessel and make the steel ring, the strings would sing to him and he believed his unborn child was speaking.”

“His life was in those strings, they were his refuge and salvation...” he concluded.

“Did he ever return home to her?”

“No, he never did, their ship was lost to depth charges out off Brittany.”

“It’s a shame that men like that, of the king, should die out there underwater without seeing their home soil again. I hope when I go out, I can sail home like he would’ve wanted, to Dover”

“He never wanted to come home to here.”

“Why not?”

“He was a Hun.”

Solon looked back out across the water, gripping the rail with both his hands and wrenching them back and forth over the metal to warm them up. The first two explosions came up in quick succession, very close to the boat itself. Sea around them seemed to bulge with the force below it, as if the water were arching its back and pushing into the sky. A geyser, bursting with fire and water and air, expanding up and then outward and the accompanying dull roar. The engines of the *Albion*, caught with water in their pistons,

hiccupped and then stalled. The ship listed as a wounded animal might and the succeeding explosions drew closer.

All the sailors at the stern, save the older one Solon had been talking to, hit the deck out of surprise. Solon stayed down for the next twenty seconds trying to compose himself. He placed his head to the wooden flooring and heard the noise of the explosions conducted up through the vessel, the even tattoo of the fire under water beneath the cold air of the night sky.

Once recovered, Solon rose back up to the rail where the other sailors had already repositioned themselves. His cheeks burned red from shame, but they were all too busy scanning the water to notice. Plumes of water and air erupted from the ocean, accompanied by a low and disembodied thump. Columns of water, towering and furious rose up from the ocean, preceding the noise of each explosion. A percussion of air accompanied each blast of sound, rattling the organs of the soldiers on the decks of the *Albion*, admitting the presence of death into their bodies. The salty mist the explosions threw up into the night air was dragged to the left by the wind cutting across their path, clearing a view of the water but also slicing the sailors' ears with a vein of cold air.

The outline of the sub was no longer distinguishable beneath the boiling surface of the water, so the men focused on the colour and noise of each successive explosion, comparing it to each previous one and trying to register differences in tone. On the seventh explosion there was a metallic clang. The shock wave that reverberated through the water and onto their boat was markedly different. The timbre and the scheme of the gas pocket that rose to the surface to form the explosion into the air were darker than the others. Solon became overwhelmed by it, by the notion that beneath them, men had just died. Noxious fumes thrust out from the explosion, a dark cloud spread out through the air and obscured the little moonlight left. Solon grew sick and visions filled his head.

The air was awash with embers. With his hands on his ears, Solon could hear his own breath and felt his tongue become thick with ash and soot as he inhaled. A hurricane of debris, metal ingots and fire pelted the *Albion*. Vague yelling punctuated by a scream

issued from across the deck. Fielding had disappeared. Solon could only hope Henry had found cover.

It grew hot and Solon was afraid to open his eyes as the yells only grew louder and shadows began to assume shapes in his mind. He curled tight on the deck. Memories began to erupt: a name etched on his wrist as a child, the street where he brought food back to after a night of begging, the hiss of scorching steel dropped into cool water in Martin's shop. *Who will miss me if?* The night rained down like a chain-mail meteor shower. Low thuds announced fragments of metal imbedding in wood. A round, chrome object no larger than two pence coin glanced off Solon's shoulder and lodged in the deck beside him.

The cloud continued to expand and unfurl like curtains come undone. A swell rose in the water around the base of it. The *Albion* was slowing down and began to surf on its own wake. Suffocating, Solon used his hands to try to fan away the smoke that had enveloped the deck. It continued to grow darker as debris continued to rain down. Sailors were taking cover beneath deck guns and fixtures as searing hot fragments of metal, rods and screws pummeled the deck. Clangs rang out like an un-choreographed orchestra and the individual pings felt like gunshots as they drew tremors across the ship. Bodies were scrambling, looking for cover. There were perfect black silhouettes dancing before the brilliant flames rising from the water. When someone passed between him and the explosion, Solon felt the heat disappear momentarily.

Solon wedged himself beneath an overhang at the forward end of the stern area. When he looked into the night sky, burning pieces of debris were streaking like comets across the darkness, an obscene fireworks display. A bolt, weighing maybe forty grams and no longer than an inch-and-a-half, fell with a dull thud onto the deck immediately beside his right hand, partially imbedding itself in a wooden grate. He cautiously moved his hand over to it, feeling its warmth through its threading. Solon clasped it between his first two fingers and worked it around, widening the circle in the wood until the bolt came free in his hand. Yells of confusion and pain were erupting around the deck as the noise of the explosion, the heat and the rank fumes began to dissipate. Solon jammed the

bolt into the breast pocket of his uniform and then rose back to his feet to assist the wounded.

Wind swept embers across the deck like glowing snowdrifts. Sailor's uniforms were pockmarked with burn holes. Muted explosions of depth charges continuing to roll off the stern added to the din on deck. It looked like they were trawling a luminescent string of pearls. Solon rose to his feet, bumping his head on an overhang. Injured men were being cleared below decks to the infirmary while every able-bodied sailor was directed to clear the decks of debris. The ship had swung towards the moon, towards land, and less light fell onto the deck than before. Solon moved towards the railing, feeling his way like a blind man, and kicking every loose piece of wreckage over the side and into the water. Thuds and clangs registered whenever his foot struck another piece of debris. He never looked, relying solely on feel. Eventually, the boot he used to push struck something with more give than metal, something wedged under a cleat. Solon squatted down, stretching his sore thighs in the process, and felt with his hands along the deck. His thumb struck the cleat and then he worked his way down the metal until he felt something pliable and wet and warm to the touch. Solon knew what it was immediately and was glad he couldn't see it. Working with both of his hands, back and forth, he finally managed to get the object un-wedged. It did not come loose all at once, but in the gradual withdrawal of something malleable forced into something that was not. He felt how the liquid covering it had thickened and stuck to the hand as he clasped it. It was a hand that felt familiar, one he had shook many times, now an orphan, body-less. Rising up and looking out over the sea, he flung it out as far as he could. Though he wished he hadn't, he saw a ring catch the moonlight as the hand cut through the air and disappeared into the darkness.

Within twenty minutes the deck had been clear and the wounded attended to. Ambler posted three enlisted men to the crow's nest and the rest were order to get some sleep.

In his bunk that night, Solon rested with his back against the hull and his legs dangling into the space between the beds. The air was warm on his chest, the metal cold



on his back and Solon thought of all the distances parsed out that night with the explosion.

The ocean calm, the ship rocked gently as it made for home. Solon removed his clothes to fold them at the foot of his bed. He felt in the pocket of his pants and retrieved the bolt he had place there earlier, no longer hot. The ridges that encircled it streaked black and the blast had slightly disfigured the bolt's head. In his pack that hung from a pipe above the bed rested a length of chord. Solon plucked it from a pocket, biting it to cut the length down. He threw in a sheet bend to complete a loop, and then wrapped a circle of it around the head. His fingers wove a clove hitch around the metal, pulling it tight until the chord settled into the grooves of the bolt. Everyone else in the cabin slept and only a faint shuffling of feet sounded from the deck above. Solon felt incredibly alone as he draped the chord on the string over his head and around his neck, allowing the cool metal to settle into the divot of his chest.

## A Story Told A Thousand Times, Before and Since

16 June 1918

Le Havre had fallen in shambles long before the *HMS Astute* made port. Buildings had been eviscerated; pipes projected from distended walls, rooms previously sealed behind many layers of brick were exposed to the caustic fumes of artillery. The air was saturated with the smell of gasoline and burnt hair. It was a prospect-less town, ashen and discrete from the surrounding countryside like a pockmark on otherwise unblemished skin. The streets were filled with the abandoned corpses of soot mired soldiers, dust condensed on their faces, streaked beneath their noses like exhaust on old cars. The convoy passed by remorseless, unwilling to hesitate, pay penitence to this city, mortgaged with the corpses of their own youth. The gangplank lowered from the vessel nearly shattered the rotted wood of the quay with its weighty, steel mass.

Before them, the party received a welcoming, of sorts. A caravan of military vehicles, lorries loaded down with soldiers, tinctures of soot and dried blood tattooed beneath their eyes and noses. At the front, what could best be described as a dignitary's saloon car, twin Union Jacks affixed to the bonnet, weighed down with fabric as heavy as shell wadding. In the center of those disembarking from the ship, a man with a coat sporting prominent epaulets guided a woman before him. She was no older than nineteen.

Solon was waiting beside the saloon car, having accepted a temporary post as an escort for brigadier Julian Sommersby as he traveled to Versailles for the treaty negotiations. The *Albion* was due to remain in Le Havre indefinitely while the talks in Versailles proceeded; other enlisted men, including Henry, had elected to join the post in Évreux, which Solon's caravan was due to pass through that evening.

On approaching the car, brigadier Sommersby paused to receive a salute from Solon, who only just remembered to administer as he passed. Solon opened the car door, holding it as first Sommersby, then his daughter ascended into the cabin. Solon held his right hand to guide her as she climbed in. Solon sat down beside her, wordlessly, shutting the door briskly. The driver and the soldier seated in front briefly turned,

offering curt nods. A brief rumble, the engine ignited in unison with those of the lorries and cars before and after their own. The motorcade set out through the city and towards Versailles.

Jocelyn huddled in the back seat of the car between her father Julian and Solon, who cringed at the sight of each dismembered corpse. She had a habit, Solon found it endearing, of grasping his elbow tightly at each one. Her face attempted a half-hazard courage, as if all of her mental capacity was being employed to suspend her physical reaction.

Cadres of soldiers lined the road in places, playing dice, attempting jilted conversations or dissecting buildings with thousand-yard-stares. This was a generation arrested, their clothes soaked in cordite fumes and abraded skin. Fatigues stiff, fabric grown hard with its aggregation of sweat caked in dirt and oil. Trench rot oxidizing their feet.

“Someone’s going to have to take care of these men when they make it home. Their bodies have been held to a flame and everything but the wick of them has been removed.” Jocelyn had finally grounded herself, come to terms with the horror waving its hand with amputated fingers in their window.

“I don’t know where you get all of these naïve ideas, darling, yours is a generation of boys who became men too soon and won’t know what it means to really be a man because of it. You’ve only got one shot at the thing and, unfortunately, I think it’s already gone.”

“You fought as well, you’re not exactly unscathed.”

“Make no mistake, I’m hardly unscathed,” Julian rebuked, “It’s just that I came into this war with everything else sorted out, it didn’t need to make a man out of me. It’s hardly fair to ask these boys to come out here and learn to shave their faces with a razor and a tin cup in a trench.” Solon averted his gaze to the artillery tilled fields lining the road. “I’m not sure, as smart as you and Celeste are, that you girls will ever understand.”

“That’s because we have the capacity to, I don’t doubt it, but men have a way of keeping everything they think horrible away from us and consider it a favor. They have this misguided idea that there’s some nobility in sequestering it inside themselves.” The cabin inside the car was beginning to grow warm, the windows were fogging with the humidity of perspiration. Solon recognized the rising tension of a domestic dispute.

“You know, someday a woman will lead our country to war, and you men are going to wish she knew the horror you claim to. The only way this won’t happen again is if the people in charge were once on the ground.” The cadence of her speech had been quietly accelerating, but finally broke “I’m glad you’re going to be there for the treaty.”

Brigadier Sommersby clasped his daughter’s hand and gave it a single squeeze. A moment of quiet. Emotions composed themselves in the silence, they smoothed out their shirts, dusted of their shoulders. A change of tact.

“Celeste will always be your favorite, won’t she?”

“Don’t be so juvenile Josie, I’ve known you two years longer,” Julian tickled her hair, “you were already dashing around the parlor when she was only a twinkle in your mother’s eye...” He hesitated at the thought of Charlotte, like a climber reassessing how he might attack an unanticipated section of cliff face. Jocelyn pressed on, pretending to avoid the reference.

“But she’s so precious, I guess I couldn’t help it myself if I was in your position. You should know I love you nonetheless. Her as well.”

“I’m glad, at least in the middle of this mess we have that.”

“May we stop? I could really use some air,” she was almost ashamed of the request, but her face had slowly turned the colour of shale.

“Of course, darling,” Julian tapped the driver on the shoulder, who in turn extended his right arm out the window and motioned the caravan to halt. The truck slowed, shifting into neutral and the engine idled at five hundred rpm, the tachometer feathering lightly. Solon opened his door, stepped clear and unholstered his gun as an extra precaution. Jocelyn rose as well, but brigadier Sommersby remained seated. He

withdrew a silver Dunhill Rollagas lighter from the waist-pocket of his peacoat. The sheen of it had caught Solon's eye, even from outside, and Sommersby preceded to hold it between his thumb and middle finger, rotating it with the index one to pass time. Jocelyn had begun to walk towards a series of houses adjoining the road, moving off the pavement to the dirt so as to walk more directly.

"Excuse me, " Solon's hand caught Jocelyn arm at the elbow, arresting her stride on the shoulder of the dirt road. "I believe mines have been planted on either side of the road, it would be safest to stay along the paved areas."

Jocelyn proceed to pick her way along a cobblestone path to the edge of an adjacent building. Her shoes, little more than slippers, but much more utilitarian than the heels Solon expected of a diplomat's daughter, found purchase on each stone. He watched as her calves flexed with each motion, how the light played off the smooth of her skin. In the shadows of the low, overhanging terracotta roof, she caught her breath and wiped perspiration from her forehead with a kerchief.

It was uncomfortable to stand near her in this moment of vulnerability, but Solon was obliged by duty. He fumbled in his breast pocket for a cigarette.

"What does you father do?" Jocelyn attempted awkward banter. Her hand fluttered from her chin to her opposite forearm, unsure of where to settle.

"He's a lighthouse keeper, I don't see much of him," Solon focused on igniting a cigarette so as to avoid eye contact.

She laughed a little. Nothing came of it, then, a pause. "Oh, you were serious. Well, where?"

"The Outer Hebrides." He offered her a cigarette; she waved it off with a small twist of her wrist. "I'm not one much for mothers," he continued. It was her turn to be silent. On the ground between them, a bracelet of woven dandelions, dried and blackened. The hands that twisted the stems, fitting within her own palms, wove in Jocelyn's head. Motion, twisting, tucking, the pull of securing each knot, of bringing the things together, of keeping them all from falling apart. A cough.

"We'd best be getting back now, your father seems impatient."

“As always.”

Against his better judgment, he extended his elbow from his hip. She took it without hesitation, picking out stones for each step, like a child trying to avoid cracks in the sidewalk.

In Évreux, the car dropped Solon off at the enlisted men’s barracks.

“Solon”

“Yes sir”

“Would you care to join us for dinner tonight in an unofficial capacity?”

“I’m sorry sir, I’m not sure if I follow”

“I believe that your presence might be illuminating, your perspective on things would be useful for me, especially once I reach Versailles.”

“I’m not sure as to how helpful I might be, but I would be honored”

“Excellent, we’ll see you at restaurant Ô Saveurs at eight-thirty.”

“Yes sir”

“Cozying up nicely with the lieutenant’s daughter, eh Baath?” Henry gave Solon what he genuinely believed to be an amicable nudge with his elbow. The doorway leading from the barracks into the street was not wide enough for both of them. Solon winced a little and massaged the rib Henry had bruised, “I’m not sure if you would call it that, by why do you remark?”

“It’s only that I detect a distinct cruel streak in her,” Henry averted eye contact with this comment but a sneer nevertheless crept across his face, “I mean, a woman of her stature fraternizing with the likes of us.”

“Well,” Solon now dropped his cigarette to the pavement and mechanically ground it out with the toe of his boot, “her father does far outrank us, but I hardly believes that qualifies her as being ‘too good’ for men the likes of us.”

“It’s not her *father* I’m talking about, that’s irrelevant, it’s her mother, I mean *was* her mother, or, more properly, her mother’s family.”

“And her mother was?”

“Charlotte Bliss, of the very dark blue-blooded Bliss family. Practically the Rothschild’s of the Britain.”

“And you emphasized ‘was’ because?”

“Her mother’s dead, happened at the beginning of the war.”

“Duly noted,” Solon turned, extended a hand with an odd thrust into the air and a passing jeep halted at the curb. Henry notched his hands beneath the shoulder straps of his pack. The door flung open; other men were waiting inside.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Henry doffed his cap in an absurd, deferential gesture. “God speed.”

“Oh alright.” Solon flashed a grin, shoved Henry inside the car, slammed the door shut and pound on the boot, all in short order.

In the aristocratic quarter of the Évreux, many of the apartments had been looted already. Solon had spotted a few that had been left intact from the caravan that morning and, at the suggestion that he find a suit, immediately thought of returning to borrow one from some, hopefully grateful, resident. He was turned away at every door.

Finally, in the Rue des Authieux he noticed a vermillion door with a knocker that resembled a closed fist. On rapping it he inadvertently pushed the door ajar. The distinct smell of rotten food, masked by gunpowder, filled his nose and he could taste it as well. Paintings in the wood paneled vestibule had been slashed and a coat rack upended in the corner. Beyond, in a long foyer, mirrors lining the walls appeared to be draped in spider webs but, upon closer inspection, were cracked from blunt strikes. The fabric wallpaper, a pale blue, was streaked with ash and dirt.

Solon passed through the hallway to a carpeted, oak-railed staircase at the back of the apartment, presumably leading to a bedroom above. The rest of the apartment, uniform in its dishevelment, was juxtaposed by the serenity above the first landing on the staircase, as if the top floor had been cast under some sacred spell of preservation. The single door held firm when he tried to turn its handle. Solon fished inside his pack to

retrieve a military issue hemostat, which he used with a needle like device that Martin had originally given him to twist wood beneath metal barrel rings. With only a modicum of effort, the soldier was able to manipulate the tumblers within the lock. The door came free.

The rank stench of decay met him as pent-up air flooded out of the room. Inside, despite his war weariness, Solon was nauseated by the sight before him, nearly becoming sick on the floor of the room. A man and a woman lay side by side in a canopied bed, the sheets had been drawn back and both were dressed elaborately: the woman was in formal dress, her bodice was still bound tight as if she might wince for air. The man, whose name Solon envisioned as "Harris," was dressed in a three-piece suit and grey spats. His hair was covered with just enough grease to deter the bacteria that had already set to work on their bodies. Their adjacent arms were intertwined at the elbow and their hands firmly grasped. *Matching rings.* Without wanting to, Solon was drawn to examine their faces. Skin had become bloated; their features became indefinite with the unfamiliar bulge of their skin. Thankfully, their eyes were closed. Solon sank to his feet. The man's opposite arm dangled off the bed; in the hand, two ampoules with their necks broken. Poison.

Solon reached into the breast pocket of his fatigues and withdrew a cigarette. The canopy of the bed was dead weight, soaked with a thousand smells. The tip of the cigarette alternately glowed and dimmed with the slowing rhythm of his breath. His nerves ceased to vibrate and the carpet drank in the smoke.

Across the room, two mahogany wardrobes stood next to each other. *What would it have been to grow up in a house like this?* What good was it anyway? Two more dead bodies amidst millions. In peacetime, this might constitute a tragedy, now, only a small travesty.

Solon rose slowly, averting his eyes in newfound respect of their presence. Mothballs had never smelled as welcoming as when he opened the heavy doors of the wardrobes

Leafing through the various coats, Solon found a dinner jacket of the old kind with a shawl collar and lapels with a subtle sheen. Shirts, all French-cuffed, lined the rest



of the wardrobe, a few ties draped over a silver hook on the inside of the door. He took just enough for an outfit; the smell in the room was made him gag. Standing at the foot of the bed, he withdrew a pad of paper from his hip pocket and quickly scrawled, "For your funeral" and placed a substantial pile of Francs above it. He bowed at the door, locked it behind him, wished he knew the order of tracing the cross.

Hours later, beside his cot, in the dim light of the barracks without a mirror before him, Solon felt sheepish in the clothes. The jacket was particularly ill-fitting, the sleeves barely reaching his wrist and the shoulder, when buttoned, hemming him in like an infant swaddled. With no other soldiers around and only an hour before his scheduled dinner, the lightlessness of despair slowly crept over him. *I've seen boys with nothing left but their torsos, men who can't write or think from mustard gas. I've got no right to be so upset at such a moment.* He calmed himself, placing his hands on the metal bar framing his bunk, letting the coolness of the metal soothe his warm palms. A knock sounded from the door at the far end, a silhouette appeared in the doorway, backlit by the hallway light. It was Jocelyn.

"I figured you might be unsure about dinner, so I decided to check up on you beforehand" She came toward him through the dim room, barely suppressing a laugh at the state of his outfit.

"Let me get that for you." Jocelyn unraveled the tie from his shoulders.

Solon coughed and kept his chin up in a vain attempt to hide his blush from the shorter woman before him.

"Your jacket, it's supposed to have a bowtie, but I guess we'll just make the most of what we have. This is the Shelby-Pratt," she flipped the tie so that the seem was exposed and the narrow end draped over Solon's left shoulder. It was like learning to tie his shoes all over again. She focused on the two lengths of fabric before her, turning them over in her mind, contemplating each execution before she made it. Without his gun, with his neck in the arms of a veritable stranger, Solon felt distinctly helpless. The smell of her hair, a simple but decent cleanliness, unadorned with the pretension of perfume, conjured

a vision: a home, with ceramic tiles warm upon the bare foot, the faint issue of laughter from an adjacent parlor, the intimation of a warm, perfect body couched next to his own beneath pristine white sheets.

Something inside of him gave. She drew herself closer to him as the knot grew a completely natural intimacy. He leaned down to see it closer. She followed it up as she tightened it beneath his collar.

*Knots to separate people, knots to bring them together.*

Her eyes rose up, following from the knot to the neck, the cleft of his chin, a curve indicating the faint hollow beneath his lips. They kissed, without hesitation, and he drew his arms below her own, his hands traveling the territory, the topography of her back. The small of it above her waist, no longer obscured as he lifted her blouse, with the coolness of glass.

“But it took so long to get dressed” he laughed softly, barely able to speak for wanting to keep his lips pressed to her own.

“We’ll just have to try again”

Her lips were an affront to every statue carved in lust; they parted like wind-blown leaves and alluded to some far off grace. Jocelyn’s breasts, incandescent, shuddered with her quickened breath. Solon pressed himself closer to her, lowering them both to the bunk next to them. She unbuttoned the blouse; he unbuckled his belt, bringing his own shirt ungainly over his shoulders. The contraption that locked her brassiere was as complicated as a watch.

“Fuck.” He ripped it off her. Jocelyn giggled. He kissed her to quiet her. Hands, with slender fingers thin as reeds, pulled his trousers below his knees. Perspiration bloomed over her body; her camisole underwear clung to her body as a thin film. Solon worked his fingers under the edge of it, felt how its dampness drew her skin along with it.

“Could we....go under the covers?” she paused, the sheen of a blush blossoming on her cheeks.

“I see no reason why not.” The blanket was as rough as horse hair, Solon placed himself on top of her to spare her the sensation of it scraping at his back. Her chest, pale

as the stones at the bottom of a river, featured a constellation of freckles. He kissed each of them, following from her collar bone to her navel. He swallowed the scent of her, storing it up and compounding it, stoking the fire erupting inside of him. Jocelyn giggled, teasing his hair.

Her fingers suddenly gripped his scalp, he pushed himself up her body, kissing her lips, pushing one hand beneath her shoulder blades to support her, the other, between her legs. Their nakedness was a union of sweat, viscous and pungent, but pure in that they had made it together. They began to rock in unison, she gripped her hands on his lower back; it was incredibly hard to find some footing, something to brace against. She scratched at his back, he grimaced, his lip curling back. Jocelyn clutched him, like running down the shore and lunging for the receding tide that only struck farther and farther away. Desperate, gasping, pushing to reach the very edge of the shore. A thousand sensations teetered on the brink of some bottomless chasm within them, ready to fall and plummet with the slightest provocation, to ignite, to catch fire from friction and burn up everything that existed beyond their bodies.

To be sated, to be subdued. In the darkness, a building heat, overwhelming, melting at the core, taking every solid structure: their bones, their blood and nerves, breaking them down, tying them all together. They bowed into the act to defer loneliness; why is it never light that we run to but darkness we seek to avoid? The prospect of sleeping alone for eternity; It is this fear that exposes us, our barely-formed skin naked to the touch, the touch that will gather us bodily and carry us out of our sadness and into this light that we could never see before. They say that every love is in, at its very center, an act of prolonged redemption, recovering the “whole” we all believe we once possessed. In that cold space, darkness sought light and warmth, so much more than heat, escaped their bodies, flooded from their small bunk, lit up the room. Small deaths, greater deaths.

They ate at the only restaurant in Évreux that still had salad forks, much to Solon’s chagrin. He would have felt more comfortable guarding the door of the

restaurant, in the cold. But brigadier Sommersby was very much of the old guard. Names with ordinals after them, pomp, glad-handing at soirées with crystal decanters on every table. Nothing in Bromley had prepared Solon for such occasions; he thought it safer to defer to his hosts at every moment that brought trepidation.

Their restaurant, with drab silken walls, jauntily hanging chandeliers and a wine cellar with a mortar crater leaving one side exposed to the street, still managed airs of pretension.

“Garçon,” brigadier Sommersby was unaware of his own impropriety, “une table pour trios, merci.” The maître-de sneered down his incredibly long nose at them, but nevertheless waved them into the dining room with an arm swinging out gracefully like a swan.

At the table, three sets of glasses, two menus for each of them (one had been lightly scorched in an air raid, one can forgive such savagery), a prix fix seven-course affair. Each dish, for Solon, was another in a culinary funeral procession. Escargot? Foie Gras? Then, the worst of them all.

Solon looked down at his artichoke, completely perplexed.

*What the hell is this? A flower? Some devil fruit?*

There were no implements or accoutrements with which to dissect it, this pastoral of a dish laying in front of him, a patient waiting to be operated upon with unsure hands. He looked to Jocelyn, who approached it without pause. She was unaware of the sensuality of her gestures; plucking the petal from the whole of the flower, placing it between her lips and then drawing it out from between her teeth.

Solon imitated as best he could, the pulp of the leaf came clean as he grated it with his teeth: a bitterness coated his tongue, but revealed the complexities of the ground it grew from. He picked it apart like an apprehensive fox approached a hedgehog, afraid of pricking his fingers on the numerous barbs. Then, at the very center of it, beneath a crown of undeveloped thorns, was the cup of it. A dish, the heart, a reservation, a protectorate, hidden by the fortress of burrs lining it. The meat of it had the texture of

Port-Salut, with a lingering flavor vaguely like the smell of the forests Solon had walked through while waiting for deployment near Dover.

“What did you mention your surname was?” brigadier Sommersby skewered the center of his artichoke and cleanly halved it with his butter knife. He plucked the heart out deftly. Solon felt all of his efforts to get to that same place vain.

“I hadn’t sir, it’s Baäth, with two a’s and the second has the dots above it.”

“You didn’t happen to fight in Marne in 1914 under French by any chance, did you?”

“Oh no sir, I would have been far too young, I’m only just nineteen now”

“Listen, Baäth, we’re in a civilian setting, you can dispense with the formalities.”

Jocelyn giggled, but caught herself. A waiter, who seemed to emerge from the wallpaper itself, came forward to refill their carafe of wine. Nervously, Solon pretended to readjust his cuff links as the candles in the center of the table, holding their own silent conversation.

“And what are your plans, now that this thing’s over?”

“Oh come off it papa, he’s only just as old as I am, how can you expect him to know that already?”

“Only because of everything we’ve, *you’ve*, seen these past two years. It’s as if everything we ever built has been completely leveled, someone has to take it up again.”

“He’s right you know,” Solon blushed at his own impertinence. She held his gaze as if she could transfix him with some invisible needle and place him on display. “I mean, there’s very little for me left at home and I thought that maybe sticking with the navy, for the time being, I could see a bit more of the world”

“That’s fine, that’s well,” a gruff platitude escaped the displeased Sommersby, “you might look into a more, *productive* career at some point, such as...politics.”

“Papa, not every soldier must do what you did. I know that you’re ashamed of where you came from before.” Solon was trying to physically distance himself from the exchange, but sensed it was already too late. “There’s nothing wrong with spending a little while to find yourself is all.”

“Well, that’s all well and good, but we all have to come back down to earth sometime,” with that brigadier Sommersby seemed to have led the conversation outside into a dark shed and shot it. Jocelyn intended to kick him under the table but inadvertently struck Solon instead. He winced lightly; his shoulders also had begun to ache from the overly snug dinner jacket and, to avoid embarrassment, he had actually eaten very little.

There was no dessert to be had in all of France. The waiters leisurely cleared their dishes and hovered obsequiously in the event that a second helping of artichoke might be requested. It was not. Jocelyn rose before Solon had a chance to first. Julian cocked his elbow out from his hip that his daughter might take it, but she resisted.

“Father, I was hoping I might take a stroll before bed; would you mind?”

“Darling, I’m rather tired and I must be rested for the meetings tomorrow. If you must, please take an escort,” he needled Solon with his eyes. She smiled and stepped across the room to take Solon by the elbow.

As they walked the streets, neither felt inclined to speak. When a gaslight across from them burst into a nebulous flame, shattering its glass casing and illuminating the entire street as if in day, Solon could not resist looking at her. It was welling up within him at the sight of this woman, a walking vision, the source of a heat that warmed him with her presence and conveyed a safety he had lost many, many years ago, which he had never hoped to recover. He couldn’t speak even if he’d wanted to.

In his bunk back in the enlisted men’s camp that night, Solon curbed his appetite with cigarettes. He pressed his nose to the pillow, brought his government-issue woolen blanket to his face as well; the faint impression of her remained and the horror of everything he’d seen since enlisting only became sharper with this contrast. Orders were to return to Le Havre immediately, rejoin the *Albion* and remain onboard for the week until it left for Gibraltar. The conferences in Versailles were only just commencing. In his pack, beside a bottle of crimson mercurochrome and a swath of bandages a medic had given him in Dover, an envelope with airmail etiquettes on it. Inside, preserved from the

dirt on the other items in the pack, the daguerreotype of his mother and Arthur's picture. Solon examined each independently, searching for some recognition of the other in their eyes. If something binds us together, if only for a moment, must it persist? Are there echoes of every human action or impulse, ever receding with time? We must salvage the artifacts of such foreign love, resurrect them from the depths of, hold them before the light, protect ourselves in the warmth of their alluded grace.

Solon lay on his back. He contemplated the springs beneath the mattress bolstered above him. The twine with the bolt in it had initially scored his neck, tracing a red line of irritation from one shoulder to the other. Now, Solon was vaguely aware of its presence, removing it only to sleep. Within his hands, he rotated the two images of his parents, so that they faced one another. One in each open palm, he brought them together, centered over his chest, where the stone rose and fell with each slow breath he took. He held his hands there until he fell asleep.

In Le Havre, the *Astute* remained moored next to the *Albion*. Some of the enlisted men had grown patient, attempting to fish in the harbor from the stern of the *Albion*. They would arrange deck chairs (stolen from the few portside hotels still standing) just before the aft railing, resting their boots on the second rung, passing around a jug of cheap wine. The sun sunk in the horizon, their tongues and mouths grew dark. There were no fish to be had. In the span of only ten days, the heat had dropped completely out of the air.

Solon would walk the town, musing over the clever puns of restaurant names. L'ABRI COTIER. **Bise'trop**. People had forgotten how to laugh. *Should I be looking for something else? I'm I good for anything?* He didn't want to think about, didn't want to think about anything, but didn't want to drink either. The streets running north to south received very little light and grew cold early in the day. At four he would return to the ship, lay about the mess waiting for supper; mince-meat, black pudding unfortunate smelling chardonnay. He could not care less; it all tasted the same.

On the night of June 24<sup>h</sup>, it inexplicably began to snow. Small drifts of it, downy and mass-less, swirled in the clouds above the city. The-pavement, still warm from the

sun, melted each flake upon contact. Soldiers, stone-bored from the waiting, began to slide across the deck in the slush. Henry piled up a handful, hit Solon in the face with it and it stung his skin, but was invigorating, almost life affirming at the same time. “If only Fielding was here,” Henry tried to sound cheerful at the sound of their friend’s name “If only” Solon agreed.

Two torch beams, the lights from a car, cut across the quayside and shifted towards the *Astute*. The snow defined the shape of the lights, their path cut through air with resolve. Behind them, on the bonnet, the faint flutter of pendants. Solon scrambled for the *Albion*’s gangplank, leaving Henry dumbfounded. On the dock, he could see four figures emerge from the car; three walked intently towards the *Astute*, the fourth seemed preoccupied by the falling snow, looking up into the night sky, letting her hair shake behind her. He rushed to Jocelyn, bound her up in his arms.

“I thought I’d” she smiled at him and buried her face in his neck. Her nose was incredibly cold; Solon couldn’t help flinching at it’s touch.

“Oh, I knew we would, we were always going to head back this way to get home”

“But how did you know I would be here?”

“Papa knows all the troop movements, he said the *Albion* wouldn’t be leaving before Thursday”

“And you? When do you leave?”

“Oh, now, your ship is about to cast-off. I wish we had more time, we’ve only just met and I wished I’d known you so much longer.”

“Josie, come on, the ship won’t wait,” brigadier Sommersby asserted his presence from the gangplank of the *Astute*.

Solon readjusted his pack. Josie thought how he looked like a lost dog.

“I’ll write, you know”

“Well, they move me around a lot”

“Where’s your next post?”

“Gibraltar, we’re doing reconstruction and recovery work there. Should be leaving the first of the month.”



“Would you write me? Let me know where I can reach you?”

“I already have,” he unhooked a strap of his pack off his shoulder and swung the whole bag in front to hang on his chest. Several buckles came loose off the cloth cover, leaving rust on Solon’s hands. He withdrew the small airmail envelope, marked “per aereo” and placed it in her hand.

“Read it on the way home, you can telegram me in Gibraltar.”

“I will...”

“JOCELYN, GET ON THE SHIP. MY COLLEAGUES ARE WAITING.”

“I have to go, I’ll...”

See you soon

He kissed her on the forehead, his lips smarted from the cold, but they felt warm on her even colder skin. Eddies of snow drifted around the docks and the lights lining the quay glowed softly with their obscured light.

There were so many things they must have wanted, but kept inside themselves for fear. There are homes for everything. Images of coats opened and bodies drawn together within; love’s own instances of self-preservation, of withdrawing within its own warm folds when confronted with the challenge of distance, of ever increasing space and time.

Three horns sounded, the screws began to turn in the water. One ship moved, the other stayed, to cut across the ocean to the ends of the empire.

## The Ark

This is as good a time as any to mention the Ark. Not because it has much of a physical presence in this story, not yet at least, but it would be hard to ignore an object that is so closely entwined with the trajectory of this family and with the fate of England herself.

Julian's father, Telford, was the Royal Historian appointed by Edward the seventh. As per his duties as such, he compiled a running narration of England and her place in the world. Though the true origins of the ark remain obscure, Telford had purchased it from a merchant in Covent Garden who had in turn inherited it from his dead mentor.

It's colour, an aged yellow paint that had clearly dulled with age, Telford took as an indication of East-Indian origins. No larger than a cubit deep or two wide, the chest was eminently portable. The rounded lid was secured via two leather straps the shade of pipe tobacco. Inside, the wood had been lined with a sort of rouge Crêpe paper and a bevel the original craftsman had included provided a lip to rest a horizontal dividing tray on. The workmanship was so fine that, when the latches were closed and the lid secured, the entire chest proved virtually airtight. Despite its great beauty, Telford considered it functional and stored all of his documents pertaining to his profession within it.

The ark remained in Telford's office for the duration of his appointment until Julian inherited it at Telford's death in Autumn of 1917, at which time Josie had graduated primary school and, as Julian would later learn, Solon had migrated with his mentor to Bromley. Through all of this, the Ark was very much on the periphery, out of sight, accumulating dust and had yet to reveal its contents. A time would come, however, when each of Telford's descendants would encounter the ark, place their fingers upon its lid, pry it open and seek the knowledge it guarded. It would change each of them: some for the better, a few for the much, much worse.

But, more on that later.

## The Rock of Gibraltar

Since the depth-charge incident in the North Sea, the *Albion* had been listing lamely as it cut through the water, an uneven wake furrowing from its damaged stern. After Le Havre, Gibraltar would be an intermediate stop, only to offload non-essential crew, before the ship continued back to Dover and dry-docked or mothballed. Soldiers released in Gibraltar were given vague instructions: don't go too far, help "clean up."

The entire colony had risen around the monolithic rock cast its shadow across the Mediterranean to the east, Africa to the south, the bay to the west and Spain to the north. A village had been built and destroyed countless times along the recesses to the west side of the rock and included a substantial parapet several meters thick. Makeshift garrisons had been constructed in side avenues off Main Street, which ran the entire length of the colony.

A loose conglomerate of eroded mortar outbuildings, sand-lined streets and the looming presence of the rock itself constituted the colony proper. Wounded bastions were imbedded in the cliff faces above the town, looking out over the warm Mediterranean to the continent across the strait.

Near the wharf, a large mosaic had been constructed. The world, composed in tile, had been lain out across the ground, with Gibraltar at its center. British colonies, stretching through the tropics and to either end of the Mercator projection, had been denoted in red. The rest of the world had been relegated a bellicose grey. Solon walked across the map, tracing the path to Aden. He stood with his feet on the Pillars of Hercules, waded through the Mediterranean and skirted the coast of Africa. The Suez Canal crumbled beneath his feet and the water level of the Red Sea rose as he entered it. At Aden, he stood, peering over the far horizon. On the very border of his vision, nearly obscured by the curvature of the earth itself, lay a single red star in a blanket of darkness. "HK, 1897-1997."

"Someday, they will call this moment the 'Great Peace'." Solon swilled his coffee on the breakfast patio of the Bristol Inn later that morning.

"Ah, maybe you're right," Henry allowed.

“You’ll be operating the *Albatross*,” a corporal informed Solon and Henry when they checked in at the command post on Europa Point, “we’re clearing any mines the krauts may have left floating around. You’ll be on patrol from eleven in the morning until approximately four. Another private will be joining you.” The corporal motioned to a freckled boy of no more than nineteen with curled hair that looked as if it carried an electric current. “Terrence,” the boy smiled and extended each of his hands to Solon and Henry in a hopelessly awkward gesture. “I’ll show you the BOR barracks.”

After they’d settled, the officers turned the newly stationed privates out on the “town.” Solon immediately sought out the post office. The GPO in Gibraltar was a ramshackle affair: a single postmaster manned five kiosks behind the clerks desk and half of the individual mailboxes had overflowed with letters addressed to people who, presumably, no longer existed. The lacquer had worn off the counter that separated the customers from the clerks.

As promised, Jocelyn’s telegram was waiting for Solon:

Charges to pay  
s. d.  
RECEIVED

POST OFFICE  
TELEGRAM

No. 215  
OFFICE STAMP

Prefix Time handed in Office of Origin and Service Instructions Words  
88 11 July 1919

From GPO Gibraltar  
SOLON BAATH

To LC

father received posting in HK. leaving GB in one week.  
forward correspondence via gvt post. please come.  
miss you so  
= Jocelyn + + +

For free repetition of doubtful words telegrams - TELEGRAMS - TELEGRAMS - TELEGRAMS - TELEGRAMS - TELEGRAMS  
as office of delivery. Other enquiries should be sent to

SUTTON COLDFIELD T240

It was devastating; not so much because he had expected to see her in the foreseeable future, but that in the absence of specific information it became easy for him to spin out all of their future possibilities, only slightly realistic, to occupy his imagination.

The prospect of a prolonged separation from Josie lingered over him like the knowledge of an impending scar.

Yet, Solon remained distracted by his newfound, domestic life in Gibraltar. The soldiers embraced the comfort of routine, of steady work and familiar faces. Moreover, despite its miniscule size, Gibraltar was full of characters, not least of all the famous apes.

The Barbary Macaques that populated the Rock of Gibraltar were little bastards. Flea-riddled and obscene, they were endearing only when they wanted something; if dissatisfied, they had a tendency to heave their feces at the offending person. However, superstition dictated that the Empire would fall if the apes should ever disappear from the rock, so, contrary to reason, their presence had been actively fostered in the colony. A few people even kept them for pets: one local had trained his to pick up women's skirts; the ape, coincidentally, had a tuft of hair on his chin that very closely resembled a beard. He was called the "Dirty Old Man of Gibraltar" and was known to frequent the few bordellos on the peninsula, where the proprietors would pay for the good fortune boded by his visit by getting him drunk on whatever cheap Sambuca they had.

It was these small wonders that slowly lifted away the lingering sorrows of war. The world basked in its own refractory period, an extended afterglow, its efforts and passions spent, thrust into the air only to dissipate along with so many dead bodies on battlefields. A pervasive weariness flooded the streets of Gibraltar, Antibes, Cologne. Sundays were spent at the racetrack in the North Front, where great, dark Gibraltarian mares raced alongside the Andalusians and the Maltese. It was there that Henry met Delina, a raven haired Gibraltarian who had refused the many advances of British soldiers stationed in Gib over the years.

"Fancy a swig?" Henry offered her his bottle of Pimm's.

"I don't drink on Sunday, it is the Lord's day," she replied and followed the path of a large roan horse around the first bend.

"Well, it was God who gave us wine," Henry gave the bottle a pat.

“Venga!” she called.

“That won’t make the horse go any faster,” Henry demurred. Solon rolled his eyes.

“That wasn’t for the horse, that was for you,” and with that she sauntered off and Henry couldn’t draw his eyes away from her.

On most afternoons their ship swept the harbor for landmines. A map was posted in the wheelhouse of their boat, the *Albatross*, with bold lines depicting the swaths they had already cut across their allotted territory.

When they did find a mine, most often by nearly running into it, they would begin detonation procedures they had never been trained for. While protocol dictated that they fix a detonation charge to the mine itself, attached to a length of wire leader so that the mine could be induced to explode from afar, the men of the *Albatross*, in their boredom, had come up with a novel game. They called it “beer bocci.” In turns, each crew member would attempt to drink a bottle of ale and then lob a live grenade at the mine, from a safe distance of course. Whoever detonated the mine in such a manner was owed a drink by everyone else on the boat when they reached port; there was a running tally denoted by notches on doorjam to the *Albatross*’ cabin.

But a general dissatisfaction hung over their every motion. The urgency of the war, the imposed purpose and significance of individual actions within that atmosphere had since slipped away. Death, a prospect once constantly looming, had receded into the background. Yet violence had left its mark on the young and old alike.

Solon collected his mail twice a week. The walk through Casemate’s square south along Main Street provided for warming sun in the afternoon, so Solon made it a ritual to retrieve his mail and telegrams after maneuvers. Henry usually accompanied him as an excuse to check up on Delina, who worked in the Gibraltar Philatic Society beside the General P.O. and was always combative, but especially when Henry was around.

“She’s a beauty,” he would croon as they walked Main Street, “I could settle down in Gib if it was with her.”

“Well, no one’s perfect and infatuation tends to make you gloss the little things over,” Solon murmured, perhaps a little jealous.

“So says the man with the girl across the globe. What about the little things with her?”

“I love the little things, give me a trunk full of the little things,” Solon was occupied by the plight of a wandering bird across the sky.

“Well, now there’s time for the little things.”

“Yes, there is. That reminds me, one of us should write Fielding’s widow that letter.” The remark had its intended effect, though Solon had felt cruel mentioning their friend just to shut Henry up.

Then, in late August, a packet awaited Solon at the GPO.

“Looks important,” Delina called from next door in the Philatic Society.

“Won’t know till I open it,” Solon replied and began walking over to the King George Café for breakfast. “Henry loves you llanito, by the way.”

“You giri are all the same.” “That’s precisely what I was talking about.”

It was a short jaunt over through McKintosh Square and gave Solon just enough time to edge his finger under the flap of the envelope as he approached the counter for a crumpet and coffee.

“Another love letter?” Dan Greene, the owner of the King George Café, asked Solon.

“But of course Dan.”

“Women are easier to love when they’re far away,” Dan winked. His wife, Celia, came out of the pantry beside the counter and slapped him across the face.

“I completely deserved that, my sweet,” he called to her, but Celia had already tossed her apron to the pavement and began wading to Casemates Square. “Bloody Hell.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, mine patrol now,” Solon couldn’t help smiling although Dan looked crestfallen. As he walked to the docks, Solon heard bells peel from a service

at the Cathedral of St. Mary the Crowned; the tangerine trees beside it were laden with fruit fit to burst.

Once on the deck of the *Albatross*, Solon was finally able to peruse Josie's letter. It was dated as having been sent in early August and read thus:



How I can convince myself that you are around even when I know you're not

I hadn't time until just now to write you. I'm sorry for all of the telegrams because I don't ever feel like I'm saying what I want to say how I want to say it with them. I'm not terrible concise, but I do appreciate the opportunity to explain myself. And now, it seems all we have is time as my father and I are floating across the Atlantic in this massive balloon. He has a plan, Julian, it seems. Or at least he tries to convince me of it because he is very much of the "old guard" as he likes to say and they are very much a fraternity of the "stiff upper lip" sort. I don't want to talk about my mother, but when we lost her I don't think that he could ever maintain the image of himself that he had constructed around her. It was like the scaffolding had all been torn down with him clinging to the statue of her, feet hanging high in the air with nowhere to land.

Why is it that men compulsively feel that they must protect themselves and those around them? You did it, when you grabbed my arm to keep me away from that mine and Julian does it all the time, whenever we talk, trying to steer me away from talking about Charlotte. But I let him, what's the use, sometimes I feel like I'm protecting him by letting him believe he's protecting me.

But now I need someone and it can't be him. I haven't started to show yet, but the child is coming. He's making himself known, I get sick every few hours and I have to get sick out the window and watch it fall down to the ocean below us because when you have this sickness, you have to face it alone. I wish you were here. Maybe it will be easier if I talk about something else.

I heard my father talking with a colleague about some physics papers published in Austria, nearly a decade ago, by some patent clerk about the nature of space and time. I'm sure I could never understand the mathematics he used for his

postulation. Yet, is relating space and time such a strange concept?

There once was a king whose foot happened to be twelve inches.....is that our explanation for making distance a human concept? When I write to you, putting this pen to paper feels like some hopeless, withered substitute for hearing your voice. We are apart. That is a fact no amount of wishing will change, not for what seems like a long time.

So I've been thinking of you and thinking of distance and how the architecture of our lives and our bodies could be translated and rerecorded. What if instead of the foot, there had been a hand, or a heart, or a knee? And what if there had been no means of standardization? What if my father could come to work late because, "I was told that it was only 12,000 knees between my house and the office, I guess whoever told me that had bigger knees than I did?" That would never fly, would it?

My hands are two days wide. My legs are nineteen fifteen orbits of the earth around the sun long. My belly is five months around.

There was the morning after a night we'd slept together. While you slept, I sat up in the morning light and navigated the empire of your body. I feel a fool saying it, but I matched up my parts against your parts, traced your topography, building a map of you in my mind to keep.

I tried measuring you against me; how I could hold your ankle between my two clasped hands, or how your chest might fill the hoop of my arms were I to embrace you. I could stand up here, on this train, not caring if people are watching, and place the side of my head against the air and know "this is where Solon's third rib would be if he was standing next to me". I could pretend to hear you breathe like I know you would, I could place my hand on the small of your back where it's always warm. I could conjure you out of the air.

You're not here, though, and I wish there was a way to build you out of me.

Is there some golden number or ratio I could use to translate myself into you or you into me? Maybe I could use your "present tense" mark to represent that operation, as in

### My Wrist Your Wrist

We're supposed to be in Hong Kong within the next three months, before the child's due. If that's correct, it will be born on British soil, as good as any other. What if it's not? What if it's born here, or in America, or on a boat or a train? Since I know no one but you will ever read this, I will say that I could care less if it's a born citizen of the empire. But if it is born before we reach Hong Kong, it will be a baby without a country, but it will also be a baby without a home. Do I miss London? I tell myself no, but I can feel this thing inside me which will not allow me to stay away forever. I want to build a home with you.

Solon, we as people are landed, we are of the earth. All we have is soil, everything else is a consequence. Hong Kong may be Britain, but it is not home. I miss you so much. Wherever you are, I hope this letter finds you away from the place, the time, the person (I hope) you know as home.

You would think it's almost impossible to feel alone when there's another heart beating inside of you, but I feel lonely all the time. When I feel that pulse or pushing from my chest, it only makes me think of how our hearts have to be stronger than just for ourselves.

I'm only writing so much because I can't hear what you would say to everything I say, but I imagine it anyway and I could never leave you high and dry.

Love,

Joxie

Upon reading it, Solon felt a presence behind on the deck of the ship, as if Josie's words had transported her bodily across the earth to be beside him. It was only Henry.

"Sol, what do you say about a fish?"

"Fine, suits me," Solon hastily pocketed the letter as Henry ducked into the wheelhouse to retrieve a few fishing rods.

On that otherwise uneventful afternoon, Terrence landed a tuna on the deck after a long battle from the side gunwhale. It must have weighed in the vicinity of forty kilo, flopping desperately on the deck of the boat. Splinters of wood lodged in its iridescent sides as the tail slapping the firm timber beneath it. Its eyes, wider than silver dollars, unblinking, reflected the afternoon sun streaking like a shard of brilliant glass over the monolith of the Rock behind them.

"Finish him off," Henry cried from atop the wheelhouse, "don't let him suffer."

Terrence removed his batallion knife from his utility belt and approached the fish as one does a wounded enemy. In the sanctity of close combat, there was a tacit accord that breached the political barriers of engagement: death, should it come, should be a swift release. Among the men there was a common sense that you "earned" your end and that an enemy, if honorable, would allow it some dignity.

The knife tore at the deep amber flesh, blood rose and dried on the rapidly warming surface of the fish's body accumulating in knots like carbuncle. Terrence persisted, fluting its prominent jaw and splaying the pink feathers of its gills across the deck. He stomped on them; their floods burst forth as each swollen cell erupted under his heavy boots. The others looked on in horror. Solon turned and walked to the bow of the boat. Terrence abraded the once regal tail, cutting it to ribbons that blew softly in the breeze washing over the stern.

The fish had continued to shiver on the deck, even in death, as the last impulses of its nerves seeped out to its muscles. Terrence straddled the corpse to restrict its movements. His breaths shallowed, he scooped air into his lungs with gasps that

punctuated each drive of his hand, the knife. The soldier lowered his face to the fish, perceived the sting of salt in his nose veiled by the coppery scent of blood. The body was still; every other man had returned to the wheelhouse.

When they returned to port, Solon noticed a posting on the company bulletin board announcing that the *HMS Impervious* would be leaving in early September for the naval base in Aden via Tunisia.

“Is Aden on the way to Hong Kong?” he asked Henry.

“More or less, going through the Suez would save you some time. You thinking of leaving on that boat?” Henry thumbed toward the post.

“I know so.”

All Solon could think about was Jocelyn. Cheques built up, he cashed them at the GPO, waited for more telegrams there. The soldiers habituated the Beachplum, a popular pub in town drawing a variety of local characters and travellers like. Far from their wartime popularity, soldiers were viewed as a nuisance; walking reminders of the relevance of the recent horror. But it was at the Beachplum that Henry first convinced Delina that he would be worth her time; she accepted his invitation out for a drink when she heard him recount the story of Terrence and the fish. His retelling was revelatory; it was obvious to her that he was not sensationalizing it or capitalizing on its horror add intrigue, but instead that the story had touched on some locus of hurt that had long before, perhaps on the night that Fielding had died, been imbedded within him. It was as if in retelling this story of the fish’s plight that fragment of pain had been agitated like a splinter which only an outside hand might remove. There was a kindness at the centre of her, an element so essential and evident that it was the very food, the air which a soul such as Henry’s longed for sustenance. It extended beyond her, through her words and touch into the turbulent waters of a damaged mind and reined him in. It was the beginning of something, out of nothing.

Around this same time, Julian was back in London and Jocelyn was in a fit.

“Can’t I stay?” she would implore him, in the dining room, the parlor, even the washroom. “No,” he would retort and chomp on his cigar in a gesture he will believed conveyed an air of finality. “But Celeste has to stay anyway, couldn’t I take care of her until she finishes school and then we could meet you in Hong Kong?” “No.” “But with mother gone...” She immediately regretted it because it was a gulf that she had long since crossed, a chasm in fact, that now stood between them because whatever bridge she had used to cross it had disintegrated behind her. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I am as well,” and he spit the cigar in a rubbish bin by the door and made for the officers club of in Chelsea.

They were to take an airship from London across the Atlantic and he was sure the novelty of air travel would take her mind off the boy she was clearly thinking of.

The “Esperia” it was called; a big luminous dream, the underbelly of some immense fish that undulated softly in the night air as they left for New York. Inside, the cabin was all the right angles, chrome handrails and such, which had been burnished and softened, yet possessed the subdued ferocity of muzzled dogs. Gunmetal grey, which adorned nearly every surface of the ship, had been restrained with an artificial gloss. There was the chilling effect that something dangerous lurked beneath an all-too-ready-to-please surface. Later, we would call it “appeasement”, but that political bandying had an aesthetic precedent in how the Germans presented themselves to us. We had defeated them; they would supplicate at our knees. But when the father and daughter boarded the *Esperia*, formerly the *Bodensee*, both Josie and Julian shuddered at the possibility that this machine was built by hands that had, that would build, the deadly machines of war. This would not be a lasting peace.

On the *Esperia*, Julian brought forth the object that would so closely become entwined in our story from here forward: the ark. He bequeathed it to Josie. “Whenever I see it, I remember your mother,” he told her, near tears, “for she always used to keep her diaries in it. I haven’t the heart to open it, but it is yours now.” Julian gave her the pitted iron key which opened the substantial lock on the vaulted lid. “Father, thank you, I will treasure it always,” and she wrapped her arms up underneath his and he felt like he could

fall to pieces but she would be there to hold him together. He did not know that she would keep letters in the ark nor the disastrous affect their presence would have on the family. But that is yet to come, let us return to Solon at Gibraltar....

“Ferguson, Baäth, Rock duty tomorrow.”

“Merde”

“I speak French Ferguson.”

“Well shit then.”

Rock duty was the bane of every soldier posted in Gib. To adequately protect the colony, even in peace, a protocol had been established that maintained a rotating surveillance post on Douglas Lookout, the summit. The ascent, up Europa Road to Engineer Road to the Jews’ Gate, across the Royal Anglian Way, over the Queen’s Road and finally up through St. Michael’s cave, took several hours and the August afternoon heat helped little.

It took the better part of the day for them to reach the summit, starting early in the morning while the rising sun did not yet cast its light on the east side of the summit. Waves were lapping at the seawalls, the lighthouse at Europa point was due for a new coat of paint and the constellations were beginning to recede into the sky.

“Bloody hell,” Henry muttered as he lowered the latch to his flat on McKintosh Square, “did you have to wake me so early? It’s so cold out and it was lovely in there with Delina.”

“Believe it or not, she’ll be there tomorrow.”

“Well,” Henry invoking Chamberlain, “so will the Rock.”

Fortunately, the ascent went easier than expected and they managed to intercept the soldiers they were relieving above the midline and before dawn. The second part of the climb would be more difficult, though, on account of the heavy equipment they would be carrying: binoculars, a large telescope, lunar transit tables, log books and coding equipment. Protocol stipulated that no heavy arms or valuable supplies could be left at the summit because of the apes. Rules had been put in place following an unfortunate

situation two months prior, when soldiers had left supplies at the top station only to be fired upon by their own Vickers machine gun wielded by a pair of industrious apes.

The animals made their presence known as Solon and Henry continued the latter half of the climb. Howls rang out and ricocheted off rock faces. They saw the apes caroming off the shale cliffs, setting minor avalanches and cackling off-key. The adolescents had not solidified their footing and were prone to recklessness. While approaching the southern summit of the Rock, Henry saw one bickering with another, the first losing his purchase on a boulder in the process. The ape, falling from the cliff towards the water catchment far below, let out a piercing shriek. The soldier's watched the path of its fall the full 400 meters through the empty air towards the ground below. At the distance, the sound of its wail seemed incongruous with the image of its fall, following behind the minute, plummeting body like a comet tail.

Once, they were nearly impeded by a large sycamore tree that had fallen over their path.

"It seems we are at an impasse." Henry contemplated the trail before them.

"Here," Solon pushed ahead, removing the heavier equipment and hanging it from the limbs of the fallen tree. In an awkward, crablike movement Solon shuffled over the trunk and then braced his feet against the high side of it, extending a hand to help Henry over as well.

"Righto." Henry puffed and threw his hand into Solon's, hoisting him over the trunk.

They made the summit station by late afternoon and immediately set about their official duties. A strict regimen followed:

1. Securing the perimeter- Henry traced the ridge for the better part of an hour, screening ships moored off Catalan Bay and the Moles for suspicion. This duty also involved checking the battlements for wear; each bunker would have to be examined thoroughly for dry rot or disrepair.
2. Establishing Contact- Solon, the better versed in Morse code of the two, would have to establish contact with command posts across the bay, in Algeciras, and



the Strait, in Ceuta. The message was usually: •- ••• ••• •• •• ••• •  
 •• ••• --- •- •- •- •- •- •- •-

To which they would usually reply: ••• •• -• •

3. Demonstration of Prowess- this was a Rock tradition where the newly posted soldiers would fire the rifles at a set interval no less or more than twenty times. As the interval was usually no more than twenty seconds, it was difficult to switch cartridges while also maintaining it and the successful execution of this procedure was supposed to impress the enemy. Solon and Henry briefly considered allowing the apes the honor of firing the ceremonial rounds into the air, but lost their nerve when one tried to throw his excrement at them. Each salvo went up without hesitation.
4. Getting Drunk- This was the official pastime of soldiers stationed on top of the rock, ostensibly to better appreciate the view.

Once the first three “official” duties had been attended to, Solon broke out a bottle of Cutty Sark which they drank over cold water collected from the cement cistern outside their bunker. A few tin cups had been left inside a wooden locker; Solon washed them and poured drinks. The late afternoon sun was blazing over the Mediterranean, its reflection a glittering carpet leading to the west. With their legs suspended over the sheer cliff that comprised the eastern side of the rock, Henry and Solon took in the view.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Henry asked.

“Aye,” Solon replied.

Late that night, they laid their bedrolls along the cold concrete floor of the bunker. A storm had washed in from Africa and the occasional lightning bolt shone through the slit that looked over the strait. Sleep came quickly for Henry after their long hike and the drowsiness of a drunken stupor, but Solon awoke at three during a lull in the storm. Crickets were singing in the cistern outside, their music amplified by its round, hollow walls. A thermos of cold tea was leaning against the door; he took it along with his torch and satchel and ventured outside. With a large boulder as his perch, Solon drank his tea,

then, feeling reflective, opened his satchel to retrieve his notepad to write Jocelyn a letter. While sifting through the contents, a scrap of paper fell to the concrete of the bunker. In the flicker of the torchlight, he read:

*Congratulations, I hope to meet him some day- W. Aristedes,  
Tanger 7 August 1900*

That note, that name! When Solon had first read it nearly year before, Tangier might have been the furthest, darkest corner of the world. Now, if he strained his eyes, he could make out the faint glimmer of its lights across the strait. He folded the note and placed it back in his satchel, then scrambled down the battlements to the gas-lamp light of their bunker. Shaking Henry awake, Solon asked, "Is there any way to get to Tangier from here?"

"Bloody hell Solon, what time is it?"

"Never mind, how can I get to Tangier?"

"I thought you were setting out on the *Impervious* for Aden?"

"That's in September, I'll be back before she sails. I need to get to Tangier."

"I have a friend in town, Royce, he goes twice a week, I'll set you up with him on Tuesday just let me get some sleep for God's sake."

Solon sat down to finally draft the letter that Josie, just then sitting in a coach car of the Pacific Western Railway train putting into San Francisco, so desperately ached for. It began:

*I never thought myself capable of making someone else  
happy and you, when you walk in a room, the walls begin to  
shake for the love of you.*