

Letter Home

by David Ackley

Your mother's letter is on the green tabletop before you in the tent with the buzzing and hissing pressure lamp, bright white light that seems to buzz and hiss on the walls of the tent. When the generators are down, the surgeons can operate by it, it's that bright and white. But it's hard on the eyes and makes your mind jump and twitch.

The pen point sits motionless on the paper refusing to make a word that will continue your reply to her, what to say. She's written about baked beans and codcakes on Friday night, a radio show with Bob Hope— “ He made Dad laugh, not always easy to do!”—church lunch where she was helped by a young lady named Alice Converse “who says hello though she doesn't think you'll remember her—(you don't though you think you should remember being remembered by anyone but your Mother and sisters).” You could just say to say hello and move the pen that way but it's still frozen, leaking a growing black dot.

The guns are well behind the tent, so the intermittent boom doesn't vibrate the walls. They fire at random really, just to throw the Germans off when they might expect the steady one then one then one of bracketing a target, then the salvos of *Fire for Effect*. Just a chance round now and then into the darkness, maybe catch someone crawling out of his hole to take a leak against a tree. Or just to keep them jumpy. And they did the same.

First the boom in the distance behind the tent and then the whoosh, whoosh as it rotates overhead toward the target, miles off, then silence until another boom in the distance. Like many other things it could kill you too: A bad fuse and you can get a short round that blows, right out of the tube, like once in the battalion: you'd pictured the orange ball just feet ahead of the barrel mouth, puffs in the dust around the gun crews' boots; the men frozen in place just

before they were cut down. When you saw them two had their boots and pants shredded, one had blood leaking from his ears and couldn't hear his own moaning,

Whoops.

That was the problem with the letter, you understood. All those things were your topic. You owed it, your mother would worry. You had to write. You couldn't write, your hand resisted, refused to move, your head couldn't think words.

Boom. Silence. Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh. Silence. You wait for the next one. Boom.

Not that you were afraid, in the usual sense. You'd assisted at amputation and debriding, smelled human meat and sepsis, stuck your bloody hands in some of the worst. Sometimes dead looked like mere relief, like a decent sleep without the buzzing white incandescent light. Just dark and silence. Nothing to fear.

It wasn't that. You feared writing the words, sealing the envelope, shipping it off to them alive. You hand it to the mail clerk when he comes around and as soon as he's gone you're dead.

Fine.

They send a telegram. It gets there before your letter. They weep and so on, you've sent the pain on to them, the pain that should have been held back here. Not to be helped, they've caught it now like cholera , those people you love, living in pain you sent them.

Maybe it settles after a couple weeks to something dull, but here comes your letter to rip off the scab, with a little white ball of incandescent living war inside.

They read it over and over as if you're still alive: you're killing them. After a while they take it up to your old room and set it on your desk with the humidor of your walnut pipes. It burns quietly there for a while and then ignites the curtains, burning out your old room, then one by one all their rooms and them, with its hot little flame, white, inextinguishable, never to be quenched.

Like white phosphorus it burns through everyone and everything it touches, the house, the town, out into the woods where you used to hunt, down the trunks of the trees into the ground, burning out

the roots, passing underground one to the next, now a quiet invisible smolder passed along through space and time, burning down the years, until someone unsuspecting strolls there and punches with a step down through topsoil into the hollow heat like into a slow fissure of molten magma, and then.

