

THE DEAD OF NIGHT – by Bradley Garnham

A hero's welcome. That's what they promised us. Said we were doing our part for king and country, believed them too, every word of it. It was our 'patriotic duty'. A way of giving something back, protecting everything we love. And I did, didn't I? I did my part. Helped push Fritz all the way back to Passchendaele, until something ... broke, and they dragged me here.

St. Clements 'mental hospital', that's what they call it now, as if changing the name had made it any less horrifying, as if scrubbing 'asylum' off the sign had made it any less of a prison. Just a bunch of white coats with plastic smiles, telling you they understand while they try to hide you away like some sort of freak, a disgrace to everyone you ever knew. Suppose it's just easier to call me a coward and insist I'm the problem, than to figure out what actually went wrong. To try and find the part of me that's still stuck out there, in that endless sea of metal and mud.

I still hear their voices. Even after so long, they never stop. I hear them crying for me, out from the darkness, begging me to save them. They didn't want to die, not one of them. Not James, or Sam, or William, but I still watched them all go. Watched the abyss swallow them up one after the other. Some of 'em went quick, the lucky ones I suppose. Artillery took out Michael – he knew he was dead the moment it hit; we found out a second later when what was left of him coated our boots. Saw lots of 'lucky ones', by the end, but they aren't what keep me awake, shaking like some addict. It's the strugglers. The ones who couldn't or wouldn't go right away.

Gas attack. Left eye on Tom's mask had cracked. Took six minutes. Wailed a bloody scream for his mum, even as that foul mist ate away his lungs. That night, I gave Edward my last smoke. Wanted to do something nice, something human amidst all that monstrosity, but some bastard saw the match strike a mile away, and he took a bullet the second it caught. Fell straight into my lap, staring up at the sky all wide eyed like he was expecting to see god. I don't know what he saw, but I have never witnessed such pure, unbridled terror. That one'll stay with me forever.

They all will, I suppose. Wouldn't have found me quivering in my trench otherwise, wouldn't have been so damned nervous that I shot at them thinking they were the enemy, come to take more of my boys. They told command I cracked, went mad; I guess it's as close to the truth as they can understand. Coming back here, I hoped I'd leave that hell behind, but it seems I took plenty of it back home. My souvenir. Something to keep me company, in the dead of night.