

***Joint Third Prizewinner in the Schools Section***

## **My Army Boy**

**Daniella Brownlow, Sexey's School**

'This is just the beginning of what promises to be a very long day,' I muttered to myself as I closed the door behind me, still living with the hope that this clouded dream would disintegrate to nothing but dust. I had tried to pretend, hide behind the misdirected smiles, but it was clear. I had continued oblivious to the growing world around me, I was no longer part of the earth, I didn't belong here. Deep down I knew you were gone, that familiar smell, like that of a sweetened car fume, consuming the air that surrounded it, taking over until I could breathe no more, it was gone. Every memory that I had of you was slowly fading away, rotting like your frail, burnt corpse, tossed amongst the dirt like uninvited debris. We used to be together every day; I had watched you grow, from a young boy to a strong man. I had seen the transition between a feeble five-year-old, running at the first sign of danger, to a handsome soldier, my army boy, fearless. Now your heart was no longer beating, your obsolete body exhausted. You had given everything to them, your mind, your soul and now your life. I had no one. When you had been away, all I had done was wish for you to come home, I would write you letters, telling you that I loved you, that you would be home soon. I longed to cradle you in my arms once more, feel your heart beat, hear your soft breathing by my ear.

You never replied and only now can I understand why. It wasn't because you didn't care, it was because you were dead, deceased, a victim of the devil's heart-scolding poison. Livid, with no reply, I despised you, eager to churn up the ground that you once walked on, I am sorry for that, sorry that I ever doubted your love for me. Stiff with anxiety, I felt insensitive, insecure; you had departed from this world without knowing just how much I cared. I'll never forget you, my baby boy. Photographs of you as a child still lie scattered around the house, undisturbed, but never forgotten. For the first time in my life, I felt weak, unsure of myself but at the same time, indestructible. Like the blade of a knife would not be sharp enough to pierce my fragile, child-like skin. It left scars, memories stained to my thumping heart, but at least mine was still beating, a sign of life amongst the dead, a subtle drip of blood, unlike that of a river, drowning those last soldiers that stood tall, brave and undefeated, that same river that drowned you. A sea of bodies created as the men took their turn to fall, the murky green air that surrounds them, the smothered dreams, the one who clouded your eyes. I'll never forgive him for what he did.

I bet you saw his face, creased up like an old unwanted handkerchief, his eyes, a crystal blue, sparkling like the moon, I hear him laughing as I lie in bed at night, an inconsiderate guffaw of glee, back to haunt me, a constant reminder of your death. That was the last thing you ever saw; the devil's bloodstained face, fuming, tempting the soldiers with a life-devouring poison. The only way out yet the only way in. Escaping the war meant becoming the devil. Each day that passed since your death, I would venture

further into my memory, the past, the times I treasured. You changed me. Seeing you take your first steps, hearing you calling my name, without you, I'd always be left wondering, questions I always thought about, resolved, but without an answer. Now your ears have been defended by the sound of the gun, the snipers aiming for your heart, your broken voice has been silenced, there is nothing to say. I want you to know that I'm proud of you, my darling son. No matter where you are, what you do, just know that I love you. Nothing can compare to what you must have gone through that day, watching your band of fighters fall before you, the last man standing. Endless fields, stretching in advance of my eyesight, I am the tyrant, and the soldiers are my sea. The troubled birds, watching wide-eyed from a safe distance, are my men, my faithful followers spread under my wing. Everything must have seemed so simple. His life had only just started, when it was all over.

Hesitantly, I began to feel that for every door I closed, a new one would open. That morning, when I closed the door of the mortuary, I felt like I had buried you in my past and moved on to the future. The way the resting corpses lay undisturbed, neatly aligned in rows of twelve, regardless of their past, the way you looked as you did when I last saw you, even though you were dead, your skin taking on the colour of a pale white milk, once drunk I could replace it, but I could never substitute you. It didn't matter what you looked like, you'll always be my son. As the day grew old, and the young night came, as the sparrows silenced their song, and the timid sun cowered away behind the frosted clouds, I saw you change, I watched you grow and now I had seen you die.

Now your life has been put to a stop, the hands of the clock will slowly unwind, your springs will unravel and your frail body, broken down to nothing but bones. You do not look much but you are everything to me. Your bones like our predecessors, our ancestors, left behind, a clue to the past, the wounded remainders of your flesh, left out in the sizzling heat of the sun, to burn and char, a smouldering flame of yellow, an obscure fog, a shadow left lynching in the air. An uneasy figure suspended on the edge of darkness, your ghost. The presence of you is bought forward by him, although I do not love him like I loved you, the memories suspended in a single moment, the full picture captured in the blink of an eye. Just like that you lose sight of what's important.

Some people wish for things like filthy money, won on a bet, wasted on bitter liquors, others wish for cars, a show of nothing but petty cash, but my only wish was for your happiness. Now I can't give you that, I can't give you anything. I always wanted what was best for you, regardless of what it made me do, and now I have driven you right to the edge. I had sold your life, like an insignificant object, with no meaning, no purpose, to the army, and now I won't get you back. I had forfeited everything I stood for, my principles, my being, for your life. My darling please forgive me. If you can hear me now, show me you care, show me that no matter how old we both grow, no matter where we both are, that you'll always be my baby boy, the one I fell in love with. Now my world is shattered, the dark glass of night has faded, I have nothing to cower behind but I know I'll always have you. As the day comes, and night falls, I'm ready.

I sit silenced by your moss-infected grave, despising those who troubled you, even after death. I watched the sun, bouncing shapes, rays of light, from way up there, right down to the earth. I wonder where you are, who you're with, what you're thinking, whether you remember me. It was so long ago now, but I still see your face, your perfectly shaped lips, chapped from the harshness of the cold, your soft freckled cheeks, often a rosy red. I miss that. Seeing you, part of who I am became who I used to be. I no longer

think of you as my son, but as a lifelong friend. No mother should ever put their child in jeopardy like I did to you, I know it's too late, but I'm sorry. There are no words that explain it, there is no easy way of saying, but I need to try. Somewhere out there, I know you can hear me, tell me you feel it too. A bond like we had can never be separated, a love so strong, leaving a strain forever tightening the forces of my heart, the strength I need to carry on, comes from inside of you. We'll be together again some day. As I continue on this world alone, I live with hope; hope of loving, hope of death. Everything here reminds me of you, the soiling earth, the bloodstained grass, the blazing fire, the fuming guns, the way you died, my army boy.