

There was a boy, once, who would have been eighteen near the end of World War I.

*We lived, felt dawn, saw sunsets glow.*

He lived in Ottawa, with his parents and grandmother, close to the Rideau Canal, and he had skated on it ever since he was three years old, wrapped up in layers of woollen pants in case he fell. Even in high school he would visit the Canal with his friends, although these days he cared too much about his marks to stay long. His future looked bright, and his life was good. He knew there was a war going on, on the other side of the world and he knew what it was about, but he didn't really feel it so much. His mother figured out how to make cake despite the rationing, using no eggs, sugar, butter, or milk. He learned to sew up his boots when they had holes, instead of buying new ones. His family laughed about the concoctions his grandmother made to clean the house without furniture polish.

Then he was drafted. He had known it was coming for some time, but the notice, his name written in on it in the black script, somehow made it all deadly real. Even if he was prepared, even if he knew the Germans were taking over Europe and had to be stopped, even if he knew, that he wanted to be one of the soldiers who would stop them – well, he was *scared*. But he signed it anyway. He was issued a uniform and a gun, and he spent a few minutes in front of his mirror adjusting the hair on his forehead so that it looked dashing enough under his beret, hugged his parents goodbye, and then he was leaving for Europe.

The boy died three months later on September 27, 1918 in the Battle of Cambrai. He was shot in the heart and buried on the battlefield. His parents never visited his grave. They never could. All they knew was that it was somewhere in Northern France.

*They mark our place.*

Now the war is won. This boy and others like him fought and died to make our country free. They succeeded, but they never lived to see the victory. If he hadn't gone to fight, he would have had children. He would have married a girl he loved, read his children bedtime stories, and today there would have been a little boy in the world named after him, or a little girl who still heard stories about her great-great grandfather. He would have been remembered.

But it was taken away from him. "*We are the dead,*" say the soldiers in the poem, and increasingly, they are. There might have been a time where someone still remembered him, where he had a friend who survived the war who still thought about him and missed him, but no longer. More cadets than veterans are selling poppies in the malls. We don't know what trench warfare means anymore. We don't know what it means to go to battle knowing that tens of thousands of your countrymen have died on the battlefield before us, to fear we'll die, too, or to wonder whether it would even be a bad thing anymore. We're in danger of forgetting.

Every soldier who died in the war was a person. They had parents and families, hopes and dreams and fears just like all of us. It's getting hard to remember that, when the wars were so long ago, when nobody's left from World War I, and very few people are left from World War II. It's ironic that if they hadn't fought, they as individuals would have been remembered by their families, but that's what it is. If the soldiers who fought for our country are going to be remembered, it's going to be because we, as Canadians, make a conscious decision not to forget.

But we have to remember. *Take up our quarrel with the foe.* It still exists. If we don't remember what it took to protect our country, how much blood went into keeping it free, we stand to lose sight of what we have. They gave us our freedom, and today our fight is to keep it. They died for our country, and now it's our job to make sure that Canada stays a place worth dying for.

*If you break faith with us who die, we shall not rest, though poppies grow in Flander's Field.*