

Christmas Hope Excerpts

(593 words)

Harry woke with a stab of fear. He reared up, groping for his rifle, afraid he had fallen asleep on duty.

He sank back into the bed as awareness flooded in. No enemy lurked. He reposed in soft covers in an unfamiliar room, his clothes had gone missing, and he wasn't alone. A small boy watched him steadily from the doorway. Memory flooded back—fleeing from Lens, frantic to get to Rosemarie. He hadn't deserted; he'd gotten leave or rather had it thrust on him with orders from Captain Mitchell to come back whole. He remembered a frantic journey, reaching her cottage, falling against the door, and not much else.

“You are dirty,” the boy said, approaching the bed. Harry ran a hand across the stubble on his face. It came away filthy.

“Apparently so. And you are tall, much too tall to be Marcel.”

The boy stiffened in offense. “I am Marcel. I am three.” He held up three fingers.

Before Harry could think what to say next the boy ran to the stairs shouting, “Maman, ‘arry is awake!”

His soldier's instinct took stock of his surroundings. The room spread out under peaked roof beams. He doubted he could stand upright anywhere but the center of the room; it had only one way out, the direction Marcel had taken. He had slept in an actual bed. *Rosemarie's bed, it has to be. Did we share it?* He thought not. *If we had, I would certainly remember.*

The blankets he lay in were worn and mended, but warm enough and clean—at least they had been until he lay in them. Since whoever took his clothing left his drawers

and nothing else, he thought it best to stay nested where he lay. A tiny window at the peak of the roof let in a beam of light. It appeared to be slanted low in the sky. *Does that window face east or west? Did I awake at dawn or sleep round the clock?*

He could hear the boy talking with his mother and the sounds of pots and pans. Sharp awareness told him one more thing. *Somewhere in this haven, fresh bread baked, sweet dough*, he thought. His mouth began to water. With that, came the realization of gnawing hunger.

He debated what to do, undressed and feeble as he was. He envisioned Rosemarie fussing over her baking, and an even greater hunger overcame him, one he might do well to tame before he got out from the covers.

Her appearance in the doorway, his own vision of heaven itself, carrying a basin of steaming water, saved him the decision.

She put it on the little three-drawer chest against the opposite wall, along with the towel and rag she had over her arm.

“You’ll want to wash up,” she said. “I’m sorry we have no bathing tub. I found Raoul’s robe in storage,” she added, pointing to a purple robe draped over a trunk. The trunk, Marcel’s pallet at the foot of the bed, and a chest of drawers furnished the tiny room. She looked oddly shy, as if having him tucked in her bed with her late husband’s things nearby made her awkward.

Raoul. He had forgotten the husband, long dead now. The acid of pointless jealousy ate at him, and he could think of nothing to say. He sat up, letting the blanket fall to his lap, and her eyes dropped to the floor, but not before he caught the heat when she spied his naked chest. The jealousy fell away.

(275 words)

“Whoever did this is a dead man.” Harry pulled his grandmother’s Bible from the mud that pooled inches deep in the trench and began to wipe it off with the filthy sleeve of his uniform. Sick of dirt, sick of death, and sick of the everlasting mud, he loosed a flood of curses.

“What do you care, Wheatly? It isn’t as if you ever read the damned thing,” McNaughton growled without looking up. The sergeant sat on a seat carved into the trench wall cleaning his rifle. McNaughton, ever meticulous about weaponry, tolerated filth in all other ways including his personal hygiene.

“Doesn’t matter. Somebody got into my kit,” Harry grumbled.

If he said why it mattered, the company would mock him for a week or more. Dumping the book in the mud had been a prank, and there would be more if he admitted why he cared. He might not read the Bible, but when he looked at it, or touched the cover, it put him back on his grandparent’s farm in Saskatchewan. Harry could almost see flowers on the sill and smell the wheat on the wind and the apple pie baking in the kitchen. For that moment at least, he escaped the rot and colorless muck.

Now, even his Bible lay covered in brown dirt.

He wanted to weep. The losses mounted. This one unleashed the grief he had held back by a thread for days, a toll of the dead too heavy to bear: Simpson, Morin, Reilly, Campeau, Erikson—so many dead in the months of fighting, and they were only thirteen kilometers closer to Germany, thirteen farther from the Somme.

(143 words)

“Damn it, I have my *Permission to Marry* form. How can I produce a marriage certificate if you won’t give me leave to get married?” *How can I marry her, if I can’t find her?* Harry felt sick at the thought—almost feverish. It had been over a year since he saw Rosemarie and months since he last had word from her.

“Permission ain’t the same as married. Can’t reserve a berth on th’ repatriation ships without papers,” the clerk repeated. “Plenty have ‘em, and they come first. Most of t’other women are British. There are plenty here as willing as the Frenchies. Easier to find too.” A sly look accompanied the infuriating suggestion.

He couldn’t help Rosemarie and Marcel from a cell, and that’s where he’d land if he pounded this officious little clerk into the ground. Harry’s hands hurt from fisting.