

Dearest Mum,

It was especially cold last night, making it near impossible for any of us to fall asleep, but for those who did, it wasn't long before they'd wake up trembling and sweaty, the beast of the night plaguing them with the bombs in the harbour, or the bullets in the hills, or the bodies in our trenches. So, tonight, we will stay awake, some of us tossing and turning in the mere hope of falling asleep, some of us staring up at the stars in the sky hoping that the beast doesn't engulf them too...

The hall was a blur of colourful dresses, bright lights, and lively music. The tables lying in rows along the hall had since been vacated as the blues band started their arrangement of songs that play long into the night. Young girls pulled their reluctant beloveds to the floor to dance in the hopes that they could forget the devilish beast that tormented their sleep with horrors of the night.

The air was muggy and unpleasant, a whisper of summer creeping up to haunt the world once again. The men had strung their coats on the back of their chairs and the women had tied their hair up with dainty ribbons, while volunteers in their white, long-sleeved uniforms walked briskly between the groups to offer them refreshments. Even the strong wind sweeping through the open windows couldn't offer any relief from the humidity of the night.

In the middle of it all, an older woman stood clearing crumpled napkins and half-drunken whiskey glasses off cluttered tables. She brushed her salt-and-pepper curls behind her ears, while her weathered hands placed the plates in piles for a younger volunteer to collect behind her. She liked this job, working and clearing the hall as she watched the young couples laughing together, husbands twirling and dipping their wives in a delicate dance made for grand and majestic ballrooms, not an ominous farewell night, cursed by a beast of terror lurking in the shadows.

In the corner of the hall, a young man sat slumped in a rickety wooden chair. His cheeks were bright from the heat, and a sad smile was plastered on his face. His ice-blue eyes were dull; his very own beast cursed his mind, breathing malicious comments of fear and regret into his ears.

The woman placed down the plates and tottered over toward the young soldier. His eyes were familiar to her; sunken and without a spark, and in a moment, she understood him in a way only a mother could. He was heroic and selfless, at the expense of his own peace of mind. He looked up as she walked over to him, his troubled features giving way to a practiced candle-lit façade of cheerfulness and gratitude, carefully crafted to scare the shadows away.

The older woman clutched his hands before he could express his thankfulness for the night, frailly pulling him to his feet, and brought him over to the front of the hall. She gripped each of his hands in hers, and started to shuffle to the melody, her deep eyes lighting up with pleasure, as the music picked up pace. Gradually at first, and then more passionately, the young man began to guide her in a series of simple steps and spins, his face brightening as he enjoyed a night where the candles were lit to scare away the monsters, his mind slipping from the beast's tense grasp. And the woman, well, she enjoyed a night where she could light a candle to scare the beasts away, if not for her son, then for the young man with the watery ice-blue eyes and the bright, beautiful smile.