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Searching for Number 6452040

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LINDSAY SIMPSON

Searching for Number 6452040

October 8, 2007

Arras, *la ville martyre*

The buildings of Arras are pastel-painted neatness in autumn sunshine. From the windows of the train, I imagine gaping façades, cottage gardens rent asunder, but the curved Flemish roofs disappear into an orderly distance betraying nothing of the torrid past. Closing my eyes, I try to hear shells hiss. Danger, said Robert Graves, in his World War One autobiography *Good-bye to All That*, was forecast by sound. A faint plop meant sausage mortar bombs. Muffled rifle noise was a grenade being fired. But all I can hear is the clatter of commuters and the loudspeaker's singsong French announcing trains. Day-trippers back from Paris disembark with impassive faces.

The writer depends on imaginings. But *how* to imagine such a long time past? Marcel Proust called the deliberate attempt to record the past an act of voluntary memory. He claimed it was inferior to involuntary memory, the kind evoked, for example, by familiar smells. A deliberately reconstructed past did not bear the past's essence, he said. Gilles Deleuze, the French philosopher, on the other hand, believes that the "search" for memory is guided neither by the will to recall something, nor by an automatic exploration of memory, but by a desire for truth. This is more familiar territory to me.

In Arras, I take to the streets approaching the task as a journalist, trailing small leads and hitting brick walls. The records I accessed through cyberspace render your handwritten words, but do not tell me *why* you came to Arras; only that it was in this place your life ended, and that death came not during a bloody battle, but two years after the war ended when violence should have ended.

If you were murdered, perhaps there were stories, the sort of stories I once wrote as a crime reporter for a major metropolitan daily. *La Voix du Nord* in the main street is a nondescript office with half a dozen well-dressed, bespectacled journalists who speak little English. An "*anniversaire*" celebration allows readers to order old

newspaper editions for a cost. If a British soldier died two years after the war, didn't that constitute news? In this case, it didn't.

I visit the town archives and leave my card. The archivist photocopies your war record and notes the date of your death. Later, when I ask if there is any likelihood of hospital records, he shakes his head. Which hospital? he asks. I shrug my shoulders.

In this town that bore the brunt of the German advance, I search for signs of your presence. I wander the back alleyways, listening for the sound of your hobnailed boots somewhere on the 17,000 square meters of cobblestones. Where did you die and how? After four years of fighting and carting bodies through trenches and mud, then two more years working as a gravedigger burying some of the thousands killed, why did you end up here?

The pilgrimage to recapture your past life began in Scotland, my birthplace and yours. During my travels, World War I has unfolded in dreamlike sequences. The waxen models at Fort George in Scotland, dressed in the kilts and jackets of the Seaforth Highlanders, reinforce a distance between the past and now, their plastic mouths denying dialogue. In the basement of a mediaeval church in the Place des Héros, neatly arranged in a small glass case, I find a steel helmet, dry biscuits, and a machine gun arranged around a few personal effects. Replica sandbags are piled high across a corrugated iron tunnel, as though blocking out a need for the real.

On Vimy Ridge, on the outskirts of Arras, two white columns thirty meters high announce to the world that something catastrophic happened on these gouged and wooded mounds where sheep now gently graze. Tourists walk as though intruders. The trenches have concrete sandbags and tailored paths. In the forest nearby, the shell craters are softened by bright green lawn, but the unsymmetrical earth itself bears memory.

"Don't let any of the boys join up." My grandmother, at ninety-six years of age, far away in Australia, remembers these words on every letter you sent home to Inverness. Remembers you carrying her on your shoulders. Or perhaps there was a photograph that preserved the memory? Almost ninety years later, she can still remember the day you came up the laneway unexpectedly. You'd stolen away from your recuperation time in London, a hole the size of a golf ball in your shoulder. Injuries were welcomed by those in the trenches. One Scottish soldier, according to Robert Graves, was so desperate

that he waved his hands above the trench and performed a handstand in order to catch the bullets from the snipers. Limbs were expendable. Organs were not.

My grandmother was eight years old when the telegram boy's bicycle brought news of your death. November 15, 1920. You were thirty-five. She remembers her mother's tears and the neighbors' comforting silence. Your death certificate cites "natural causes," but in times of war, truth blurs across boundaries of chaos. With the soft lilt of the highlands still in her accent she tells me she remembers hearing the word "concussion" for the first time and that someone told her you were found propped up against a wall. No one, it seems, asked any more questions.

I walk along a river in Arras beside gliding swans, to the bicycle hire shop, a bike being the easiest way to visit your grave near Duisans, a village nine kilometers from town. How does a writer negotiate the unremembered? Did you want to be remembered? In formalizing the act of remembering, are we really recreating the past or our own construction of the past? History or memoir, the past must surely be a narrative guided by the one who is telling the story.

I scour bookshops on World War One, searching for a doorway into this story that is consuming me. I hear the words of my fiction-writing friends who each speak of an interior voice that demands to be told. For the first time I think I know what they mean.

On a tour of Great War graves, I visit cemeteries across a narrow dirt road from each other. On one side four German bodies are buried in one grave. The dark German crosses are somber, and the surrounding trees are planted asymmetrically. Across the road run precise rows of shrubs and roses and white tombstones, one for each Allied body or body part. Siegfried Sassoon describes, in his *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, coming across the body of a German in the Battle of the Somme propped up against the bank:

...his blonde face was undisfigured, except by the mud which I wiped from his eyes and mouth with my coat sleeve.... He didn't look to be more than eighteen. Hoisting him a little higher, I thought what a gentle face he had, and remembered that this was the first time I'd ever touched one of our enemies with my hands.

Cycling past wild poppies and tilled fields, I hear gunfire, not the desultory rifle fire of my imagination, but rapid fire from two jacketed farmers, silhouettes etched against the horizon. Their carefree dogs bound across the field intent on prey, and the men follow, walking across a landscape of ploughed fields and wild ducks, traversing ridges which once represented victory or defeat for soldiers moving inch by inch. At night they slithered on bellies for hundreds of yards between rotting corpses, unexploded mines, and barbed wire to reclaim no man's land. I pass thatched roofs, an abandoned chateau; the houses still, in a Sunday quietness. Along the way are more memorials to the fallen. I am almost through a village square before I notice a single soldier frozen in stone, a rifle slung across his shoulder.

The cemetery is on a hill between highways that hum in the distance. I leave the bicycle under the archway. Where to begin? The 3,205 graves stretch in row upon symmetrical row almost as far as the eye can see. Unlike ordinary graveyards of angels and tombs, none is distinguishable from the rest. I begin the search, my eyes like a minesweeper combing this way and that, names and regiments blurring one into another. In the last row, next to the hedge-row that screens the ploughed fields behind, I finally find you. Your headstone is set back from the impersonal rows, placed next to six other graves, the last to be buried in this common ground selected for the Eighth Casualty Clearing Station in February 1917. I read your name aloud. Then, I notice the words written underneath:

From Memory's Page

Time Cannot Blot

Three Little Words

Forget Him Not

Tears come to my eyes. The springy green foliage of the purple flowers I plant reminds me of heather. A piece of Scotland. I snip some buds to send to my grandmother in the sunburnt country so far away from the father she hardly knew.

An image comes to me of my great-grandmother, Rose, buttoned up in a coat queuing outside the cinema in Inverness. Inside, she'll relive the touch of you through stolen kisses from Hollywood's famous. And then I decide I *can* write about your imagined life. She wanted you to be remembered. The blank page is beckoning.