

~DISGUISED~

BASED ON THE TRUE STORY OF DOROTHY LAWRENCE

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It was 11 o'clock. The night was lukewarm- a breeze from East Prussia was blowing into the British harbour. Autumn was close. A small group of admirals and a cluster of captains stood huddled on the cobblestones. A streetlamp dipped the men into light. I wouldn't call it golden light, nor the white-hot light you find at the bottom of a fire. It was rather a kind of pale shadowy light. Tension hung in the air. The tallest shadow broke apart from the group and started to pace. Startled, he stopped and glanced up at the clock on the square. A faint choir of God Save the Queen drifted over through the breeze. That's when I heard them. The chimes of Big Ben broke the silence of the night. A gust of movement swept through the group. Germany's ultimatum to leave Belgium had expired. The war telegram 'commence hostilities against Germany' would soon be flashed to all ships bearing the White Ensign. The tall figure straightened his russet waistcoat, and strode past the horse guards stationed in the far corner of the square. The deed was done. The prime minister frowned and squinted into the gathering darkness. Britain was no longer safe.

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I snuck down the staircase. I forgot to avoid the creaking stair in my rush, yet I paused and all that welcomed me was silence. Light was gathering outside in a slow chess-game- the daylight playing against the dark pawns of the night. Summer was almost over. I wrapped my knitted sweater tighter around my shoulders. The colour was a smoke grey- my mother's favourite. I slipped on my laced boots. I turned my attention away from mum. It would make me feel things I was not ready to feel yet.

Down in Bedworth, a heavy wind was blowing. My nightgown danced around my ankles, as I waited, huddled for the paperboy. The slouching white brick buildings supported by dark wood beams encircled the town, the last men of the night staggering out of the pubs, and the bakeries were opening up, fresh steaming loaves carted into the shops. Father and I lived too up north in Warwickshire-the walk to Bedworth was roughly a half an hour journey. Soon, as awaited the ginger boy, hair scruffy and freckles glowing cycled around the corner. "Paper 'ere!-anyone for a paper-three pence a piece!" Grinning he welcomed me. What're you doing out and 'bout so early - does father want his paper already? This lot has just been hot off the press- fresh outta the oven like I'd say." I smile. "No, father's not up yet." He hands me the paper. With clammy hands, I unfold the inky work. I have to see for myself about the events of last night. The pages before my eyes begin to swim. Silently I point to the bold words on the page, and Chester bends over my shoulder to see for himself. So its true he whispers- The Great War has come to Britain! I must tell my brothers, they'll sign up first chance they get! All around me people start to mutter and murmur and yell out, informing their neighbours over the battered fences. A milk-can is dropped- the heavy metal

container rolling downwards. "Cheerio"! I hitch up my gown and leave, the paper held tightly in my left hand.

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The straw beneath my feet is damp. A spring of scarmento green moss is growing between the stems. I come here to think, and me being me that is quite often. The old horse barn is abandoned- the horses sold and the scruffy barn cats thrown out. The Smokey grey cat was my mother's favourite. I remember it well. It had a black marking behind its ear. I remember how her long blue underskirt hidden behind her embroidered tunic of silky flowers rustled over the floor, whilst she was cooking and brewing up delicious pies in the kitchen. All of a sudden, a stream of memories come gushing back, tumbling and tearing at my insides. Those bloody Germans. I yell out in a rage, and jump up hitting everything within my reach. An old grain pot splatters to the floor, and a thousand pieces of dust lay before my feet. I glower at the paper besides me. A coloured ad of a soldier pointing directly at me catches the corner of my eye. He wears a drab crested captain's hat, symbol of Britain, and khaki uniform buttoned up to his chin. All of a sudden, a determination rises inside of me. This determination was no flame. It was a spreading wildfire, ablaze by vengeance and will. I would give those Jerrys a taste of what I was like when I was on fire. My mind made up and breathing steady again, I scrunch up the paper and leave the barn. It was time for me to make my mark and earn my mother's name a place in history.

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I blink. My reflection mirrors me. Tiered and weary I stare at myself in the mirror. My voice shakes as I urge myself to do what I must, yet my hand is steady as I lift the scissors. They are silver and a little battered and a little rusty too but they will do the job. I close my eyes tight and snip away.

Looking back, I don't think I did too badly. I make a note in my diary that when war is over after Christmas, I must make sure to keep my hair tied up until it grows back. It would be a scandal to parade around town like this. Scooping up the scruffy remains of my hair I push it back into a ugly felt hat. It should do for now. Mind set on the task, I scrape my solid oak chest with brass fittings out from under my bed. I push the button on the top latch and the chest opens up. My proud 4 crowns, two sixpence and a bob. I scoop them up and place them into a leather satchel. Now I must talk to Chester.

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I can see soft shadows through my half closed eyelids. The train is rattling and I am jolted into my neighbours lap every time the train stops. The first few times it happened were pretty awkward. I can smell burning coal. It isn't very pleasant. The wooden seats creak and rub splinters into my thighs. The flimsy compartment door slides open, a navy blue dressed soldier, brass buttons fastening the shoulder ruffle straps, steps into the compartment. Even through the dim light, I can tell his face is young. He must be around 18. Poor chap. He didn't know what the German's could throw at someone's head. Quietly, he sits down beside me. I sweep my hand around my hat, making sure none of my hair is peeking out. I

must keep a low profile. I settle back in my seat. I still cannot believe that Chester's and my plan worked. It really worked. I am on my way to Paris.

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Time ticks slowly. My father sighs, taking yet another large sip of coffee. His fingers tap impatiently on the carved oak desk. Or was it mahogany? He didn't know. Captain Milton enters the room, followed closely by Admiral George. "I'm terribly sorry, Sir, to wash the news over like this- I'm afraid- afraid your daughter, sir, she's gone missing". "Gone!" he jumps up out of his chair, astonishingly quick for his old age. The cup shatters onto the floor in a heap on dark coffee and pieces of floral china. A frilly-aproned girl, no older than 20 scampers into the room and begins cleaning up the mess. Pacing around the office, russet waistcoat crooked, he turns on his heels. "Milton, send a telegram to officer Stanley- George, be so kind to send a troop to Bedworth- plenty of places in nooks and cranny's to search". Both men leave the room. Father begins to pace again.

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The train is slowly coughing its way along the tracks, wheezing its way into the Parisian train station at five in the morning. I haven't even noticed. I clench the letter to my father, which I wrote last night, ensuring him I was safe and happy, but could not state my whereabouts. Most of my night was spent chatting away with the French soldier besides me. I forged my name and claimed to be a nurse in training, on my way to Paris. The French soldier, Louis, had as I had guessed just joined up for the army, and was travelling to the training camp in Etaples. A sweltering heat in Etaples at this time he explained in his accent. "Mon frère est la maintenant". I smile. I like the way he cuts out the vowels in his words. The train screeches and screams as its poorly oiled wheels pull to a stop. Were here. And all of a sudden it hits me that I have absolutely no plan, no idea and no clue what to do. I just sort of expected to arrive in France, and smuggle myself into the recruitment office. I don't even speak French, apart from the several disastrous lessons I had last summer. In my defence, the professor had absolutely no patience whatsoever. I grab Louis by the arm who is already standing at the compartment door, and desperately scrape my French remains together: "I besoin your aide si-vous-plait".

~ ~ ~ Several months later, Etaples, France ~ ~ ~

I feel like I'm layered in wrapping paper. Several layers of Khaki uniform, buttoned up to my chin engulf me. Chuckling, I rip off the outer coat, brass buttons echoing as they hit the floor. Louis hugs me, his mates clamping me on the shoulder. One of them hands me a bottle of whiskey. I decline. We settle down onto our wobbly iron spring bedsteads. After all the excitement, I haven't had proper time to process what had actually happened. We just passed the final test today. And all of us –all of us, including me, as private Dennis Smith, were admitted and fully registered soldiers now. Me. A soldier of the Great War. I drop back on the bed, the French murmur of celebration fading out, as I get lost in my own thoughts. It was crazy to think that only 1 years ago, I was rattling into the Parisian station, with 2

shillings and a bob, and a French vocabulary range of a pigeon. I turn my head to the left. Louis is taking a swig of the whiskey. I couldn't have done it without him and his chaps. I close my eyes. I've been in Etaples camp for long enough to know every inch of the place, and know where to nip the best croissant in the village. It's a rather small boulangerie. They never check a 'soldiers' pockets. I take a deep breath. The smell of dusty pillows and well, dust, welcomes me. Tomorrow at dawn we will leave for our first taste of the Great War. The Big Push. Abruptly, a mix of panic and exasperation and fear rises inside of me. I quench I angrily. I had no time for fear and cowards like my father. I must fight and be strong like my mother. My mother. The reason I am here. I thank her quietly. But by now, she is no longer the reason I am a soldier. I must admit, a part of me looks forward to wrapping myself into the sheet of cardboard every morning. I enjoy being a tommie in the group of French, I sort of 'fit in'. I frown. I enjoy being a soldier. That astonishes me just a little bit. "Bonne-nuit, mon fille britannique" Louis says. I smile, and throw a pillow at him. "Bonne-nuit."

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The reveille wakes us earlier than any morning before. In the early morning fog, we march. Dazed, I watch as bleached horse carts, wheels creaking, are stocked with supplies. The horses, strapped in girdles, whinny. They can sense the tension. The journey takes longer than expected. We are hit with a shower, bucket loads of rain pouring down upon us. My boots and puttees are soaked, drips leaking out of my military cut hair. Several horse carts are stuck- Louiss, several others and I push and jostle them out of the sucking mud traps. Through the sizzling and roaring of the rain, I can soon make out the faded outlines of the river Somme. We're here. We take the way to the reserve trench. One of the sand sacks is fractured, sand pouring out onto our feet. Soon I can no longer make out my hand before my eyes. It was a skill we had been taught in Etaples- one must walk at funny duck-waddling pace to make your way through the mud swamps. Every few steps snapped pieces of planks lay in our way- a poor attempt at a bridge through the mud. The communication trench zig zagged left and right, like a maze of mud and well... mud. A horrendous stench of rotting bodies and waste rises up my nose. I hold my sleeve to my mouth and stumble on. All of a sudden, like a vast ocean, the front line rises out of the mist in front of us. The Front. I have no time to process it-were ushered into a dugout, on the left hand side. I duck, others crouching down as the hollowed out steps of the dugout leads us into the pale lighted maze beneath. Shallow breathing is all that is heard. I am not the only one who is afraid. All was quiet. Rushed footsteps are heard, voices following. A rather short man, in his early thirties bens round the corner. His sleeves show off a rage of small medals and the Victorian cross. "Ah, les nouvelles sont arrivées."

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The attack was to be launched at dawn tomorrow. Uncountable amounts of men were preparing. Perhaps the German men were too. The soldier escorting me to the forward listening post would have been young, yet the wary lines in his face made him look old. Too old. I shiver. I was given the role the sniper back in the dugout. An honour the man had said. Tenderly, I ask the man besides me if he ever had the honour. Swiftly he turns to face me. "Innocence". He spits at my feet. "It disgusts me. A sniper's job is no honour. It is a ticket to

death. Then again- war is too". Shocked at his sudden outburst, I pull back. "I'm sorry. Excuse-moi. War will do that to a man. I've been here for too long". He shows me the listening post. I know what to do. I had not been assigned the job of a sniper for no reason- I'd practiced it over and over again in Etaples. It wasn't all that hard if you knew how. The man escorting me unfolds a dark leather bound book. He scribbles something hastily, then turns. I nod back at him. I now know what to do.

My breathing is shallow. Heat is engulfing me. Darkness is closing in on me. Breathing is hard. I shake my head to clear it. I've done this a thousand times before. The booming sound of a rattle rocks the ground. It hits me. This is absolutely no game. This is war. Dirt rains down into my eyes and lungs. I cough. The heat is making me faint. I must keep going. This is what I signed up for. I have to prove to myself that I, as a girl of 1916, am strong. Sweat runs down the side of my face. There's no turning back. Explosives must be laid, for the Great push tomorrow. My joints ache, screaming, on fire inside of me, my head pounds, I cough, more dirt comes down from the ceiling of the tunnel, I feel the panic rising inside of me, taking over, I have to get out of here. I take a deep breath of stuffy air. I close my eyes. I am digging a little too much downwards. I straighten the shovels and push the dirt away again. Just a little longer, I tell myself. Just a little longer.

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All was silent. Deadly silent. I had expected it to be louder. The gentle scurry of rats are heard. The stand to at dusk had come without any events, my sentry duty was over, and my stomach growling angrily at the 'maconochie's meat stew' and stale biscuit that served as my dinner. I had stayed digging underground longer than I should have, and by the time I came back all the good beds in the dugout were taken. The slicing hard wire had come off the bed frame. I have to hang onto the frame with my arms and legs, so as not to fall onto the man snoring below me. I have to admit, when he left for patrol several hours ago, I took his bed to get some good minutes of sleep. Louis whispers to me. We both climb out of the bedframes. A wiring party is waiting outside for us. Gingerly, we climb over the parapet, into no-man's land. The mud sucks at us, gnawing at our ankles. It's not a porridge mud, nor a liquid mud, but a sort of alive mud, a monster, pulling me into its jaws. I see something horrendous, buried in the mud. Revolted, I turn away. I do not want to describe it. Louis and I stumble side by side. I smile at him. He squeezes my arm in return. Dawn was approaching quickly.

I do not know what was worse- the sounds or chills. Heavy artillery booms and rattles the earth beneath our feet. Shells deteriorate, shrapnel launched into the air, cooled by the rain. Five nines drop behind us, dark Minnie's and machine guns, staccato fire rings in my ears, and over and over, smoke and screams flash before me. I find myself pointing rifles and loading artillery. I find myself listening to orders. I find myself at war. The sights slow before my eyes. My uniform with leather rattle straps and heavy boots that have are cleaned each day, are covered in mud. I am a soldier- and it's horrible. I am killing. This is not what glory looks like. Or is it more?

The attack goes on for several days. I find myself getting used to the revolting smell. There are daily stand to's at dawn, inspections of rifles at breakfast, and chores assigned by the platoon sergeant. But I am not really there. I have seen disgusting sights, and more and more I find myself fading out. And the nightmares. They're coming too. Louis and me are sitting in funk holes, splattered with mud, repairing one of the sand sacks. The German defence isn't snapping. I wonder if we have gained any land. I doubt it. Hastily, squelchy footsteps approach. I itch myself. I am sure I am covered with things I do not want to see. The stout French man bearing the Victorian cross followed by several company commanders who have just left the H.Q dugouts are marching round the communication trench's corners. "We have received the message from our air forces- the German barbed wire has snapped. Troops will be sent over the front, in large amounts we might make it through." A chill runs down my spine. Louis and I just gawk at the officer. Irritated, he directs us to the nearest gathering troop.

It has begun to rain again. We are lining up, tense, gripping the wooden ladders. My helmet has slipped over my eyes. I have no feeling left in me. Is this it? Is this how I will die? I feel empty. I had expected more, somehow. I had thought.....the order comes through. All men and this one foolish, naïve girl who thought she could be a soldier, are silent. Movement sweeps through the group. Men are climbing and jumping over the parapet, The first ones stumbling and falling into the stew that lies ahead. The Germans defence starts firing. But- I am stuck. I am willing myself to move, but I just can't. I can't move. My hands begin to shake, my entire body trembling as staccato shots are fired through the air. Tears well up in my eyes. I am a coward. A terribly weak coward. I slump back against the mud of the front trench, looking up at the sky above me, shaking and weeping as men are blown to bits before me. And that's when I see it. Louis, his navy blue coat, rifle straps gleaming, is thrown meters high into the air, and hits the ground several feet away. I would have recognised him from miles away. I stare blank eyed, scrambling to reach him. I can no longer cry, shake, or feel. Something drops besides me, at a breakneck speed; the sounds of the battle have defend my ears. I do not know what it is, but it throws me up into the air. I land in a sickening crunch, besides Louis. I feel no pain at all. I see spots of purple light before my eyes, and feebly reach out to grab his hand. I hold it tight and can see no more.

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Dorothy Lawrence

Birth: 4 October, 1869, London

Date of Death: Barnet hospital, 1964,