

# The Unreturned Soldier

Boom! My eyes snap open, I rush to the window, my legs don't seem to move as fast as I would like. The sky is a maroon colour behind our little town, Methven. It is a flaring orange colour when another one hits. Bang! I cower back as the window shatters. I race down the stairs, my vision blurring. My gaze is caught in a timelapse, dumb-struck I see my parents and siblings lying still on the ground. My Dad grasps an unfamiliar newspaper, the heading 'September 1st, 1939 War Has Broken!' I scan around the room and my Mum comes into vision through my blurry eyes, one word emerges from her lips,  
"Laura..."

I sit up in bed coated in a cold sweat, my arms feel sticky as I look round the room. There is a blare of light and I look over to where the light was coming from. My vision locks with the window. I question myself, '*Didn't the window shatter?*' I pinch myself, hard, it all felt so real... I continuously affirm myself, "It was just a dream, it was just a dream-" I rush down the stairs. It is my biggest fear that war is going to break out, think about the rationing! In the background, I hear the familiar buzz of the radio. I follow the sound when I see Mum and Dad, Tom and Fred gathered in a close huddle around our small radio. A series of gasps followed by my Mum yelping is what centres my attention to what the announcer is saying,  
"September 1st, 1939, war has broken! Germany has caused an attack on Poland..." We were in shocked silence when there is a knock on the door and William, the postman, stands in its wake holding a rolled-up newspaper. He hands it to us with a grim expression on his face. I rush forward hoping war hasn't broken out, But it is true, war has indeed broken out.

I am in shock when I am reading the most recent newspaper, the one headed 'War Has Broken!' On the front, there is a picture of a weird man pointing at me. There is big writing underneath that portrays,  
'We Want You For The N.Z. Army!' I look towards the advertisement reading, '*Come to the town hall to get rationing tickets, be quick or you will miss out!*' Fred's little, quiet voice breaks my sorrow when he asks me a question I feared he wouldn't,  
"What is war, Laura?" I took a few seconds to compose myself and think of an appropriate answer.

"War is a horrible thing, you never know what it holds." I stutter back.

"Everything will be alright," Fred assures, "As long as we're a family." He quickly adds. With that sentence, it leaves a smile on my face. Maybe the war will be alright after all. I go to bed with that smile still plastered on my face.

A week later I am reading a book, I hear Mum and Dad in the kitchen arguing about rationing, when loud banging echoes from the door. While Mum crouches behind a table, Dad goes to open the door. All that sits there is a box labelled 'JIM'. We were all staring at this mysterious box that had the limelight on the porch. As Dad ventures forward to reveal what the package held, our gazes were fixed on him, as he slips off the ribbon and lifts the lid. He drops the box instantly and backs towards us I quickly scatter out of the way when he says two words, "I'm going."

Our hands lift simultaneously towards our mouths and when I look toward my 8-year-old brother, Fred, he looks like he is about to cry. But Mum didn't go to him instead she goes to see what's in the box, she reels back when she sees it's content, a pure white feather. I peek inside before Mum throws the box in our stove fire. I watch as the feather curls and smokes inside the hot stove. Fred comes up to me.

"I like feathers. We played with them last year when I went to school. I wish I still went to school." I held him tight after he said that. I felt I could never let him go, never.

The next morning Dad is gone. Tom sulks off back to his room, I think he's angry because he can't go to war. I think back to the newspaper advertisement and I ask Mum if Fred and I can go get some rationing tickets. Mum must be lost in her own world because she doesn't refuse and try to protect us like she usually does. So Fred and I wander off in the direction of the town hall. We line up in the endlessly long line that snakes down the main street. It seems like hours of playing 'Eye Spy' and 'I'm going to the moon and I am taking...' until we finally reached the front. Fred has a blank expression on his face but I can tell he's nervous. The man at the bench asks in a gruff voice,

"How many's 'n yer fam'ly?" I am taken aback by his horrible slang and it took me a while to reply.

"Uh... 5, wait no 4, Dad's gone." It hurts me to say, 'Dad's gone.' Dad always made things better. I guess he can't when he's gone.

It feels weird going from eating whatever I like when I like, to eating the bare minimum when I could. I was always sent to get the food, Fred has stopped coming because Mum repeatedly says there is a threat of Japanese bombing. New Zealand is supposed to be a safe country away from all the bombing in Europe. The radio announcer is always repeatedly saying great things about fighting for your country, but are we really? We shouldn't be involved with the war. I always think back to radio announcements when I'm bored. These are the exact thoughts I am thinking now while I walk to the town hall to get our share of rationing. I am almost there when I hear a whistle then an ear-popping series of bangs and booms. I cower away and shelter under a wagon as shrapnel and children screams are surrounding me. One thousand thoughts are rushing through my head, one for each piece of shrapnel. But one speaks the loudest. *'Will I die, is this what war is?'*

Everything was quiet and everyone was still. I crawl out from my awkward sanctuary when I see the horrible mess I am walking into. It is like your worst nightmare, only worse. When I could not bear looking at the ruined food, clothing and the tattered and ripped apart people and children. I turned my back and walked with my head to the ground, back to our little farm. I was embraced by my family, wait no, just Mum and Fred. Tom is still sulking in his room, sad about not going to war. I hope he doesn't. Fred looks up at me with his brown-puppy-dog eyes and shakily says, "I thought you-" and acts like he just slit his throat with his finger. I give a little laugh at his hilarious acting but deep down inside I imagine what Fred would do if I had died and I feel terrified. He points at my arm and questions, "You got hurt? Is it sore?" I look down and realise there is a small gash on my upper arm, I wince as I suddenly realise how sore it is. "Yes, it's very sore," I tell Fred.

When I wake up the next morning I hear Mum wailing in her room I rush down and see she is holding a piece of paper in her hands. I immediately recognize Tom's handwriting. I skim read the letter. Dear Mum, Laura and Fred, I am sorry to have left so suddenly without you knowing... *'Ughh, are you really sorry?'* I think to myself angrily. I continue reading, ...I know the war has been hard for all of you but I have gone to end it. I stop reading as my eyes are blurry and foggy. I rush up to my room and look out through the window, out over our ruined, bombed town, Methven, out past the horizon and I imagine my brother fighting fiercely against enemies and protecting his friends. Tears start to roll down my face as I think more about it.

We are just settling down to eat the last of the canned food when there is an announcement over the radio, "Due to the bombing of the town hall and other stalls, all food and rations are gone, we cannot supply you any more food." This dreaded sentence leaves me hollow inside. 'Are we going to die?' Is the only thought rushing through my head. I am just about to accept my fate when Fred interrupts the silence, "I am small, I can go out and find food from the people who are richer!" I think my face lit up but Mum's face is just getting darker. "I think it might be a way of surviving, worst-case scenario," I tell Mum, "Plus Dad and Tom are- fighting, so we only have three people to feed," I add carefully, not wanting Mum to have another emotional breakdown. "It could be a solution," Mum adds frailly.

We are planning what Fred would do if he got caught when there is a fierce knock on the door. I stand up to answer it, fear bubbling up inside of me. I open the door, just a slither, to see who it is. Out on our humble porch stands an awkward-looking man. Seeing the door is open he looks up. "Hello, You must be the Calcook family." He says to us. I look up and ask what he wants. "I hear there is a shortage of food around this area." He answers. "Well, I think there is a shortage of food all around the world." I matter-of-factly shoot back. "But there is a particular shortage in this town and a few others," I add. He introduces himself properly as he says, "I am Fred Boxley from the newly formed 'Ration-Help' organization. I have got 10 weeks worth of food and clothing for you in this box." Fred rushes forward and states, "My name's Fred too! That's so cool!" Mr Boxley just smiles at him. At this point, Mum has turned her attention to the conversation. "Is this free? Do we have to give you rationing tickets?" She questions. "No, It is completely free." With that, he drops the box and swiftly walks down the driveway to find another house. I turn to face Mum and Fred, give them a smile, then rush to put the food away.

We are finishing eating a make-shift dinner of canned peas and pork when Fred questions,

"Do I have to find food now?" There is a small pause then I assure him,

"No, thankfully." Mum shoos us off to bed, but before I let the power of sleep take over I ask one last question,

"When does the war end, when will Dad and Tom come back?" Mum lowers her eyes and stares at her un-finished food. Still staring at her food she answers,

"I don't know." Those three words shoot daggers to my heart. '*Will they ever come back?*' I then slump up the stairs and I stare out the window, the sky a little clearer, the stars just peeping out from their hiding places, when I turn and practically roll into bed. Before letting my eyes close, I stare at the ceiling and hope that the war is going to end. With this thought in my mind, I gladly let my eyes close.

5 and 1/2 years later, I stumble through the door to the kitchen, only to finding Fred pouring a glass of water. He has a serious expression on his face, it gave me a feeling of dread in my stomach.

"What? Has the war ended?" I say as a joke and I think he is rolling with it when he says,

"Oh yeah, just then the radio announcer said the war has ended for us!"

"Oh, really?" I say like a posh person. We both crack up in hysterical laughter, but then the serious expression returns to his face.

"No, literal, the announcer just said the war has ended. But there is still a threat of being bombed."

"What!" I explode. I push past him and rush towards the radio.

Mum was listening intently to the radio as I entered the room.

"...war ended. Soldiers are rejoicing over this great victory, they really did serve their country. Although the war has ended for Germany, as they have surrendered, the Japanese are still threatening to bomb New Zealand. More of this dreadful news after this rationing announcement..." I look up absorbing the new information when a thought comes to my head, '*When are Dad and Tom coming home?*' I say the thought aloud and surprised glances head my way from Mum and Fred. (I think it is because we haven't spoken about them for 2 years.) My only reply is their turned backs and sighs.

A few months ago I had mentioned their names, now I wish I hadn't. I am standing by the door, crossing all my fingers and toes that they are here. I go for the little silver handle, yank

the door open, a smile ready on my face, but it quickly fades as I see who is here. Fred rushes past and screeches, "Dad!" But I have the opposite feeling, a feeling of anger, a feeling of hurt, a feeling of guilt. I scream and yell into my hands and bolt up to my room and lock the door behind me. Tears roll down my face as I mumble to myself, "How could he leave us and turn up like this? How can he be here without Tom? How could he... How could he..." More tears roll down my face and I feel foolish for leaving Dad as soon as he arrived. I feel foolish for opening the door and 'closing' it in his face. 'How could I?!' I slam my fists down and my bed creaks beneath me. A slither of sun finds a way in through the cracks in the roof, the sun always finds a way to creep in. It's a joke. The sun thinks it can make me happy. It can't.

Written By Rachel



Rationing World War Two