

## Toy soldiers

Gabrielle Sing

*In memory of my great-grandmother, whose memories and stories informed this tale, and whose steadfast love inspired it.*

I WAS FIFTEEN when Claude joined up. My favourite, laughing-eyed brother: strong, gentle and mischievous, whose love was absolute.

My lifelong comrade and idol, who had not laughed when I cast aside my dolls and my spinning wheel, but had taken my hand and welcomed me as one of the boys. We ran down the hill, ignoring Mother's scolding, barefoot in the dust, heedless of my clean skirts. Claude taught me to play cricket, where I ran as fast as any of my brothers or cousins, and how to climb trees and how to swim. We pitched battles with swords made of sticks and lovingly fashioned slingshots, and chased our adversaries through the blackberry paddock, laughing at our own blood-curdling battle cries. Toy soldiers broke too easily. Claude bandaged my cuts and bruises when I inevitably incurred them, and raised his fists to anyone who questioned my right to run freely with the rest of them.

He smiled with pride when I surpassed him at school and told me that my future would be a bright one. Of his own future, he said nothing. He lived so wholly in the present, in each exuberant moment, and had little use for grand and solemn plans. A far-removed conflict in a faraway place: a war that had come about so suddenly and, as far as we could see, so

inexplicably, was grand enough, but far from solemn. Or so they thought, those eager eighteen-year-old boys, of whom my beloved brother was just one set of arms and legs, one whole, beating heart, one smile. Working at the railway — seeing people come and go, come and go, pass through, pass by, leave or return home — had sparked something in him that could only be endured if it burned fully. A chance to see the world, a grapple with the Hun over nobody quite knew what, and home for Christmas with a wild tale to tell. So they went willingly: farm boys, country boys, schoolboys a'plenty, fresh with enthusiasm and youth.

They trained them for a month, dressed them in uniforms and hard hats, and called them soldiers.

Whilst my brother marched across lands of dust and mud half a world away in distance and a thousand worlds removed from my experience of life, we at home tightened our belts and clung to what little information filtered through newspapers and public men. With our brothers gone to fight a war of foreign kings, it became less unusual for girls to lay aside needlework and cookery and to take up tools so long forbidden us. But I felt that this, like the games I had so defiantly joined during my childhood, could not last. There had been such a general certainty that it would all be over within months, but hope turned to resignation as seasons came and went and brought no resolution.

I often felt that in those years we lived in a strange, halfway place somehow cut off from all that had come before, but from which no future seemed visible, or even possible. A dutiful fervour to 'do our bit' mingled with what seemed to me a dispassionate complacency; as though knitting socks and tearing linen bandages could in any way bring us closer to understanding what unfolded slowly and torturously on the baking sands of North Africa and on Europe's frozen fields. But amid the relentless public assurances of the need for patriotic

duty, and the carefully evasive letters that were our only connection to the front, how could we hope to understand?

For a year and a half the letters came: letters written by a young private of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Battalion. A soldier who was so unmistakably still my brother, but who had seen places and things that had fed that hidden flame, fed it until it burned away anything that remained of the boy in him. This man, whose rapid departure from our shared childhood I had no way of understanding, wrote to me of places with strange and incongruent names: Wipers, Patchdale and Poteers.

But he always tried to make me laugh, convinced me that there was nothing worse than a bit of mud facing him in the field, and told me that he would have so many tales to tell and games to teach me when he returned. And when I wrote back, I wrote as the sister child he knew and missed. But worry, work and waiting had made a woman of me. For that year and a half, my brother's messy scrawl kept the fear at bay.

When the telegram came, its neatness terrified me. It was brief, formal, and written 'in deepest sympathy'. Private Atkinson received a wound to the thigh in action at Poitiers on August the 6th, 1916. He bled to death in a field hospital and was buried amongst his comrades in a place with the most incomprehensible name of all: Etaples. I felt like an old woman at sixteen, praying that an end would come before my younger brothers were of an age to be taken away in their turn. I watched the lists of the fallen grow longer and thought that I would never smile again. I tried to imagine the grave I would never see and resigned part of my heart to a land which, for me, existed only on a map. When the war finally ended, a couple of the lines on that map minutely shifted. Victory.

Claude, his life so cruelly extinguished at the height of youth, did not live to see the cares that life and age etched on those left behind. He was not part of that sparse and shattered generation who returned to an everyday life no longer recog-

nisable to them. He slept beneath the fields of France as those who remained sunk in a society that could not bear to notice the missing limbs, the nightmares, and the strange and singular nostalgia that held them together, those ancient young men.

Claude was not there to see the romantic dreams of so many girls wither away to resigned silence in a land whose heroes had been used and spent. He did not see me, bereft of my cricket-playing classmates whose names now peppered monuments across the world, come to marry a gentle man some years my junior whose passivity drove me to helpless anger. And so I became a wife and a mother in the scant two decades between the war to end all wars and the one that came after. Claude did not see me raise my son, his own flame-haired nephew, as a good and loyal man who was mercifully too young to be swallowed by Europe's next great letting of blood. He did not know my consuming grief as I buried my daughter, a twenty-three-year-old beauty, whose light touch on the piano would linger another half century in my heart.

Oh Claude, my brother, how I wish you had seen them. My children: the one who slipped away too soon and the one who lived long and fully to welcome his own joys and bear his own grief. The grandchildren for whom I sewed clothes, cooked meals and who grew into adults before my disbelieving eyes. And the little ones they in turn brought to see me, a pack of children whose enthusiasm for tree climbing and make-believe adventure is as strong as mine had ever been. My great grandchildren still play at games of war, building fortresses of broken shale and carrying out guerrilla water balloon attacks from the branches of the enormous pine tree that looms at the centre of my property. And somehow this still manages to make me smile.

The older children's visits become less frequent as school and new friends claim more and more of their time. But the littlest of the brood comes often, sitting on the edge of my bed

when I grow too tired to leave it. She wears her hair in two plaits, just as I had so often and so tenderly braided my own daughter's hair. She longs to play the piano but I cannot bear to hear it; and she prefers, in general, to be one of the boys.

But of all the children, she is most often here alone, and she sits with me, an adept listener, watching me with her huge, possum-like eyes. How those eyes light up when I tell her about you, Claude, and about the adventures we used to have. My mind holds those long ago days so clearly that many of my visitors are surprised, but the little one has not yet seen enough of life to know the way in which, so often, memory fades. She loves my stories, and although I often lose myself in the telling of them, I return to find that her rapt attention has not shifted.

I hope she will remember them. I hope she will remember you, and me, and all that we have seen and done and lived.

I believe, somehow, that she will.



**Gabrielle Sing** wrote this in 2013 as a university postgraduate student in Victoria.