



ALL TOGETHER NOW

Truce

a short story

Nicolas Chinardet

1. Walter

25 December 1914

Although little has been happening in terms of fighting and we are all bored out of our minds as a result, I've only just managed to finally find time to sit down and update this diary. Since the last entry, I've been either too busy (they always seem to think up something for us to do: from repairing the trench wall to emptying the latrines) or too tired to do anything but collapse on my bunk and nod off. Sometimes, when you're already struggling from lack of sleep, simply walking around is an effort, not made any easier by the mud that covers everything and sucks in your feet like it won't let go. The sudden frost we are experiencing since yesterday is helping a little in that respect, even if it makes life miserable in most others.

Last night I was on sentry duty. Soon I could barely feel my hands and feet, standing motionless for two hours in the cold, star-pricked night. Inordinately, perhaps because it was Christmas Eve, our sector was totally quiet. It had been like this since the late afternoon. I could only hear distant gunfire and artillery explosions on our left.

Earlier in the evening we'd all tried to get in the festive spirit and had decorated the trench as best we could. This mostly consisted of lit candles spread along the length of our section of the dug-out, and someone had managed to find a Christmas tree somewhere at the rear. The green of the tree and the lights all looked rather eerie and in the end not very festive in this devastated landscape: barbed wires, bomb craters and mutilated tree trunks reaching with broken limbs to an indifferent sky.

Still, they had given us an extra ration of beer and soon enough, we were singing Christmas carols quite heartily. Some of the men shouted greetings and wishes to Tommy on the other side of the no-man's land. Amazingly, they responded and ended up singing along with us.

We exchanged small presents too. Neumann gave me the bracelet he's been working on for days, welding and filing bullets, empty cartridges and spare bits of metal together. Perhaps this is because the other day I had expressed awe at his ability to turn those scraps into something. He made a joke about the fact that it's the sort of thing men give to their sweetheart. I think I blushed visibly.

In exchange I gave him a bar of chocolate and a handkerchief I had received in the Christmas parcel from home. This feels so inadequate. I shall ask the parents to send me something more substantial to give him. The bracelet is not exactly a beauty, but he has spent much time and care on it, and it comes from him.

The situation remains confusing, even if nothing has changed since I last wrote about him here. I'm still terribly smitten with him. His wit and his kindness mean I think about him a lot (we have much time to think!) and do my best to be around him as much as I can without appearing needy or odd. In return he responds positively to my attempts at friendship but doesn't seek my company particularly. And then he goes and does something singular, like giving me that bracelet and making that joke, and my mind is sent racing again.

There are other men in the unit I'd like to know better, but none of them seems interested in talking to me, let alone becoming friends, of the special kind or not. Neumann is the only one of my comrades with whom I have any kind of relationship. Most of the men knew each other before the war, coming from the same area, or formed a bond during drilling. Only Neumann and I were attached to the squad when we were

all sent to the front about a month ago. Perhaps that's why he is so patient with my attempts at befriending him. All this makes for a rather lonely life.

I expect mutti and vati had dinner with aunt Agneta last night before going together to midnight mass at the Dom and opening their presents on returning home, as we usually do. I opened the present mutti had sent me when I got back from sentry duty: a copy of The Grey Cloth by Scheerbart, which I had told her I wanted to read. As I was idly leafing through its pages, getting acquainted with it, I found a branch of dried forget-me-not she had placed at the front page.

Christmas and all this have put me in a meditative mood. I am feeling miserable and sorry for myself. It was all going to be such an adventure, full of opportunities to be a hero, while doing what we've been told is our duty: serving the Vaterland and doing God's will. I was all for it but after about a month, reality could not prove further from my imaginings.

Our time is spent waiting for something to happen. Then every few days, someone's artillery starts shelling the other side and suddenly a whistle goes and we're all scrambling over the top, fear in our bellies, ears full of noise and screams, hoping against hope not to be one of those who won't make it back to the dug-out.

Some of the men return wounded, some with limbs missing and it would almost be better for them not to come back at all. Periodically, at a time agreed with the other side, we can go over the top to collect an injured man who couldn't drag himself back to the trench after the latest outing. Usually the pain would have left him screaming for help for hours on end, while we would all have done our best to ignore him until it was time to go and fetch him, using his cries to locate the mud-filled crater in which he is lying. Some of them don't survive that long. Mostly we use those occasions to collect what is left of our dead. Where is God in all this? He was supposed to be on our side, protecting us.

Right now, I'd give anything to be in Berlin with "the girls" at Frohsinn or Café Dorian Gray, drinking schnapps and gossiping all day. I wonder if they are having their usual Christmas celebrations at the Mikado, despite everything. That would be just the ticket against the doldrums: the Baroness flirting with every man that comes remotely near her piano, sneaking rude lyrics in the carols every time the owner disappears into the back office. What a lark!

I remember my 19th birthday there, back in May. How we'd all dressed up to match the oriental decor of the place. Heinrich wore an outrageous silk number and tried to kiss that handsome young soldier who looked so uncomfortable and out of place, as if he'd walked in by mistake. Until he'd had a few in him, that is. By which time he turned into someone else altogether, leading the drinking games and the dancing. And later on, he kissed ME!!! Oh, we had such a good time...

But I must stop for now. The CO has just called me to his digs, probably to complain about something, as per usual. The silence is still deafening out there.

2. Tom

Dear Ma,

Merry xmas! I hope this finds you in good health and good spirit. You must all be getting ready to tuck into the turkey with all the trimmings and your xmas pudding I like so much. Please say hi to Pa Michael and Milly when you see her next though I'll be writing to her too. Oh and give Buddy a pat on the head as well of course. I bet he'd love it here with the fellas to fuss him and all the mud he could want to roll around and turn himself into a mess like he does when he escapes to the woods at the back of the farm. I rather miss him. Thank you for the parcel you sent over. I'm enjoying the chocolate and the extra socks. Could you send me a couple of hankies next time? They didn't issue us enough and I have to wash mine every 5 min it seems. Did Pa buy that plot of land near the mill in the end? I hope he did and that he got a good deal on it. It'd make life so much easier when moving the cows. It's a good thing they haven't started calling up people. I know Michael's sort of keen but he's still just a lad really, a baby, even if he's almost 18 and the things you see over here... I wouldn't wish it on anyone. God, King and Country feel very far away. Even less of a reason to be here now than when I got my papers. With all the men that are getting wounded and killed daily they'll be needing more so I expect he'll be joining us here all too soon. The later the better if you ask me. Remember how everybody used to say the war would be over by xmas. It's obvious that it'll last much longer than that and we're stuck here in the mud for a while. I was a bit under the weather the other week but I'm ok really though I'm rather feeling the cold right now. The weather turned suddenly yesterday but at least it's not raining any more. That's why your socks have been so welcome. I can see my breath and my fingers are numb trying to hold my pencil. That explains my odd writing in case you're wondering. The training is over and they've sent us to the front just in time for xmas. Strange experience to be spending xmas here in that queer landscape. But having my mates around is helping a bit. We are keeping each other's spirit up as best we can. We try not to think too much about the next time we'll have to go over the top. I've started a collection of bits and pieces I find here and there. I've even managed to get meself one of those funny Kraut helmets with a spike on top. The fellas are quite jealous of it. I'm finding it hard to get used to the noise though. The sound of shelling even when it's quite far makes me jump though I'm getting better. Still "you can get used to anything" as George would say. I think I mentioned him before. He's the fella who got assigned the bunk next to mine during training and we sort of hit it off from the get go. He's from Lincoln. He'd been working in his Pa's shop who's a butcher when they called him up but he said after the war he doesn't want to go back and he'd train to be a mechanic. He has this passion for motors and he's already picked up quite a lot about them. We spent all our time together, whether on or off duty. The other men started ribbing us about it and some wag came up with the idea of calling us G&T which all the fellas took up. That's how close we've become. What a grand chap he is! Was... He got shot by a sniper the other night. A single bullet hole right between the eyes. I don't think he felt anything. We'd only been at this position for a couple of days. It wasn't long after tea that it happened. We'd gone out in the trench for a ciggie and for a bit of quiet. The other fellas were getting a bit wild on account of it being xmas soon I suppose and we just wanted to have a quiet chat. George had received a letter from his girl and he was a bit miffed because in every letter she'd been dropping hints for him to propose and he says it's not really for him. We were just standing there close to each other, looking at the sky and the stars. Everything was really quiet for once. No explosions or anything. Just the voices of the men inside, laughing and chattering. I looked at him and I could see his face against the light coming from the entrance to the dugout. He looked like one of those statues you see on posh buildings. A straight nose and nice plump lips made for kissing you'd think. Though he wasn't pasty white like them statues. He'd got a bit of a tan during training and he had freckles on his nose. And he had amazing eyes too like

you didn't really know what colour they were because they kept changing with the light. I liked looking at them. I think they were greenish brown. He'd leant his rifle against his legs seeing as they tell us to never let go of it and treat it like it's our sweetheart. He got his baccy out and started rolling himself a ciggy with those big strong hands of his all the time talking about his girl like I said. I wasn't really listening if I'm honest just looking at him and enjoying being near him. Then he lit up and drew deep on his ciggy with the angry tip of it glowing bright orange in the night. As he blew the smoke out he looked a bit surprised and he just keeled over. That's only then that I heard the repeat of the shot and I figured what had happened. I fell on my knees to see what's what. I was yelling his name but looking at his face with that black third eye in the middle of his forehead staring at me I knew. They keep warning us about smoking at night saying we'd make ourselves like sitting ducks for the snipers. The lit tip is very easy to spot in the night from the other side. But somehow we'd forgotten or maybe it was something about the quiet of the night that had tricked us. The other fellas came out running and they too guessed what had happened straight away. They took him away and someone brought me into the duggout and gave me a drop of brandy they'd got from somewhere. I was trying to keep it together but I don't think I did a good job of it. I'm still working on that if I'm honest. This has really hit me hard. Such a waste. I miss him a lot. And I never got a chance to tell him what a good pal he was like another brother really. I love you Ma.

I think I'm going to have to rewrite this letter. I wouldn't want you to read most of this and there is much of it I don't think I'm allowed to write down in the first place.

3. Truce

No one is quite sure how it happened. Some time in the late afternoon, the light already fading, groups of weary soldiers from both sides find themselves in the open field of the no-man's-land, making tentative contact with the enemy, who, for a few hours, is not longer the enemy. They become what they really are: two groups of very young men of the same age, dirty and tired, a long way from home – the only obvious difference in the way they are dressed. Two teams meeting at half time.

The Germans in their greenish-grey uniform appear the more daring. They had initiated the greeting and singing the previous night. This has possibly given them more confidence: they come forward further than their counterparts to meet them. Some introduce themselves to the slightly bewildered youths from opposite, proffering small gifts.

Slowly, the British, dressed in muddy khaki, relax and embrace the occasion. In turn they offer cigarettes and sweets. The cigarettes are lit, some of the sweets eaten. Small groups come together around the mournful tree stubs shredded by the artillery, which become improvised rests or uncomfortable seats. Conversations plod laboriously on, propped up by wild hand gestures, exaggerated laughter and emphatic slaps on the back.

Tom steps up the ladder to join the others, having just finished a short letter to his family. Writing to them is becoming more and more of a chore. Not only because of what he can't say but also because of the turmoil of feelings, most of them in the minor key, though not so much any more, this brings to the surface. He hovers near the gaping mouth of the trench, not sure what to do or which group to attach himself to. If only George were there. He tries the huddle nearest to him but the circle of men doesn't open to make space for him, so he moves on a little further. He has stupidly left his gloves on his bunk and his fingers already numbed by the cold from holding his pencil are starting to hurt. He should ask his Ma to knit him mitts for writing. He blows on his fingers but that doesn't seem to help.

A few steps away, slightly to his right, is another group he could try to join but as he is about to do that, the face of Hopkins comes into focus. Tom keeps walking, looks the other way, willing Hopkins not to notice him and shout another one of those throw-away remarks that never fail to make Tom feel awkward and slightly ashamed.

On he moves. Trudging on the frozen mud. Hesitant. He surveys the field once more. There is one other soldier on his own. Tom can see him a few feet away, near the German position. He too has just surfaced from his trench and he observes the scene with mild interest. But unlike Tom he isn't trying to join a group and make himself less conspicuous. He merely observes the men clustered together, confident in his individuality. This makes him seem older than Tom, though they are the same age really.

Suddenly a shout pierces the air, followed by several others. They are excited, joyful - unexpected in this place. Walter turns to the direction where the sounds are coming from. One of the men, a Tommy, has produced an empty tin of food from somewhere and is running after it, kicking it along as several soldiers take up the chase. Soon, goal posts are improvised, marked by helmets and pieces of garments, and a football match of sorts is underway.

The tin rattles on the uneven ground, its trajectory often either curtailed or suddenly altered by its own geometry or that of the hardened earth. This gives rise to more cries – of joyous consternation this time, both from the players and from the onlookers who

have drawn closer for a better view, tapping their feet for warmth in an odd little dance. The compact line of their bodies coalesced by easy intimacy gives substance to the pitch, forming an exclusive rampart.

Walter doesn't even consider joining in. He has never been one for the raucous male chaos of group games but today, more than ever, he is feeling wistful. He slaps himself on the back a few times to warm up and directs his steps away from where the men are gathered, towards the forlorn remains of a stone cross.

The truncated shaft of the calvary and its altar-shaped base would have stood next to a path that no longer exists, offering spiritual respite to the passer-by. The metal cross that used to crown the structure is resting at its feet, at an angle, slightly mangled. One of the arms of the cross, festooned with rusty vines and grapes, is twisted upward as if reaching to the sky in mute admonition. Some scraggly bramble is surrounding the stone, protectively or in an elusive attempt to smother it. Walter, in his gloom, favours the second option.

Lost in his glum reverie, it is only when Walter is quite near the defiled monument that he realises someone is already there, leaning against the base, smoking. Before he has time to change the course of his steps, the other man has caught his eyes. Reluctantly, Walter feels drawn in, feels that somehow he has to make contact with that young man now staring at him so intently.

Walter gestures for a cigarette. Their first and only words are to introduce themselves, as if they need to make the moment official and more meaningful by knowing each other's name. Tom proffers a cigarette from a packet he extricates from his coat. He holds a lighter, and so Walter draws in towards the flame for a light. As Tom cups a protective hand reddened by the cold over his, they stare into each other's eyes with the thrill of an electric shock coursing through them.

Suddenly, uncomprehendingly, they are holding onto one another as if for dear life. Cigarettes and lighter discarded, breaths short, their bodies come together, pressing hard, hands grappling with backs and shoulders. It is almost as if they are fighting. Soon they are kissing. Desperately. Mouth squashed against mouth, tongues mingling in blind frenzy. The taste of tobacco. Clinging to each other as if trying to become one, they fall to the ground, hidden by the monolith, oblivious of the other men and their futile chase of the now crumpled little bit of metal.

Their bodies, swathed in scratchy wool, are burning, inflamed by the unattainable proximity of that other body. As their passion progressively finds a focus, their kisses become more deliberate and almost gentle. Their fingers are cold and stiff as their hands fumble with the buckles of their belts, then with the buttons of their flies. Anything to be closer.

But they relent almost immediately. Something has altered. Their eagerness ebbs. Slowly their limbs relax, the breath in their throats still coming hard. Walter is now lying on his back on the cold unyielding earth and Tom's head rests on his heaving chest. Walter's hand is covering Tom's right cheek and ear, his mouth on his hair, his nostrils breathing in the acrid smell of stale macassar oil. Their energy is spent before it has had a chance to be fully unleashed but they've reached some kind of peaceful solace all the same. Together. And as the pure icy blue of the sky deepens towards night, and the steam of their breath rises towards precocious stars, tears glimmer in their eyes.

4. War

Nothing stirs. They could easily still be asleep in the gloomy dawn enveloping this ruined part of the French countryside. The weather has turned again overnight. The air is still cold but a thick mantle of grey clouds has descended oppressively over the expectant no-man's land and the network of opposing trenches skirting it. The sky is so low it almost feels within reach.

But, of course, none of them can possibly be sleeping. For the past 30 minutes, the artillery has been shelling the area in preparation for the attack and the commotion is so loud and all-embracing it even obliterates your thoughts. There is no element of surprise here: the aim is to destroy as much as possible and weaken the enemy before the assault and more destruction.

The young officer looks away from the periscope he has been using to spy on the enemy line and stares once more at his watch. His attempt at making himself look older with a wispy moustache is betrayed in this moment by the widening of his eyes and the tautness of his pale lips. The infinite boredom of waiting for something to happen has disintegrated and he wistfully misses it.

The bleary eyes of the men gathered around him are unseeingly staring at the void. Most soldiers are smoking nervously. Some fumble with shaky hands to retrieve religious medals or the image of loved ones they have hanging around their necks or stashed in a pocket of their uniform, and kiss them. He can see the lips of a few moving. They must be praying, as if any god can hear them from this antechamber to hell. Another look at his watch and he nods at his deputy who turns and bellows an order: "Fix bayonets!". More fumbling. The metallic clicks ripple audibly along the trench now that the shelling has abated a little.

The young officer mechanically checks his watch once more although there is no need for that any longer. In the same movement he arms his pistol and brings his whistle to his lips. He turns to his men whose eyes are now boring into him and he lets out a loud, shrill hiss like the fateful shriek of a harpy.

This is echoed by a roar from the men. An awesome, visceral cry fusing animus, relief and fear. The soldiers scramble over the edge of the trench, flowing like ants fleeing a galloping fire. But some of them don't even make it over the top. The screech from the whistle was also the signal for the enemy's machine guns to start vomiting their deadly bile.

The enemy's canons have gone into action now, pounding the no-man's land, launching tall plumes of earth, fire and smoke into the air. Blinded by the stinging smog shrouding them, deafened by their own yells, the soldiers run forward through the field of fire, clambering over barbed wire and around water-filled craters, somehow dodging the invisible bullets coming at them. Many hopes of doing so are disappointed. The bodies mowed in full flight perform a last grotesque dance before dropping to the ground in a heap, like discarded rag-dolls.

Like the others, he aimlessly rushes forward, spurred on by desperation. His mind is numb, his whole being straining madly in that suicidal sprint. Severed limbs, mingled with the earth spraying all around him, vault into the air with a last spurt of illusory life as shells hit. Breathing corpses, mangled and bloodied, add their cries of pain and agony to the overwhelming clamour.

Still, he ducks and stumbles and runs, occasionally firing his rifle at the billows of smoke in front of him. He tries not to register the images flashing before his eyes, tries to avoid taking in what they mean. A thought blooms in his mind: only yesterday, men were playing football on this very ground he is now crossing. He hasn't time to explore this idea further. An explosion throws him to the ground behind a small mound of earth. He rolls onto his back, gasping for breath, shocked by the blast and reeling from the running.

Despite the cold, he is sweating. He wipes his face with his handkerchief, briefly taking off his helmet to reach his scalp. His mouth is dry and his eyes prickle. He takes a swig of water from his can and winces at the metallic taste. He finds he has somehow moved beyond fear, to an odd state of frantic indifference. You really can get used to anything.

He takes a few deep breaths and prepares himself to rejoin the fray. As he slowly turns himself back onto his belly, ready to stand and start running again, he notices the grey stone shaft of the calvary slightly to his right. A shell must have fallen quite near it because it is now leaning at an angle, like a tree partially uprooted by high wind, the ground underneath it raised on one side.

What happened here only a few hours ago seems so far away already. But he cannot dwell on this memory, both a strength and a weakness, or he will not be able to move on. And move on, he must, even if he knows that the attack probably will not change a thing, that within an hour or so, retreat will sound and both sides will find themselves back where they started the day.

The desolate geography of the no-man's land will have been rearranged, its indifferent earth churned anew and washed with the combined blood of the combatants. Parties will be organised to locate and recover the bodies of the wounded and the dead. Others will be sent to disentangle and repair the barbed-wire defences and both sides will return to the numbing wait until the order arrives to prepare for the next attack.

Despite this knowledge, he rises and quickly looks around. The ground is strewn with the bodies of his fellow soldiers. There doesn't seem to be many of them still standing. As they are now close to the enemy's trench, the pace has slowed down. The shelling has stopped and an eerie silence has descended on the field. Only the intermittent cries of the wounded and the muffled moans of the dying can be heard, with the odd gunshot. The men are becoming more circumspect, lest they get picked up by a sniper.

He gets down, crawling, extricates himself from a last line of protective barbed wire and finds himself overlooking the enemy's trench. He can see its occupants frantically attempt to rebuff a number of his comrades ready to storm their position. Somehow they have not seen him. Like an automaton, he reloads his rifle and prepares to join the group of invaders. As he stands up, one of the soldiers below notices him and, with a grunt, lunges at him, bayonet first.

As a reflex, he fires at the man's chest, point blank, just as the lethal blade pierces his uniform and penetrates his abdomen. For both men, the shock of the bodily pain comes with that of recognition. As they slowly crumble into a tangled mass, each soldier's last breath carries the other man's name.

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Cover image and design by Nicolas Chinardet - All Together Now, by Andrew Edwards (detail), memorial to the Christmas Truce football match of 1914 at St. George's Park, the English Football Association's national football centre, Burton upon Trent.