

## NATHAN STEWARD

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### *Mask*

The earliest thing I remember a soldier telling me was to never be first.

“It don’t matter what for,” he said. “It don’t matter if it’s just linin’ up to piss.” I remember I laughed at that, although the resulting glare silenced me quickly. “Nothin’ here is worth dyin’ for lad. Nothin’. So don’t be a fool, stay at the back, an’ live.”

I thought of him as a coward. I blinded myself to the cynic’s wisdom and believed I was better. The cultural narcissism which pervaded my childhood made me proud. I, like many, had not enlisted to be the second man to shoot.

*‘Let us go on and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others.’*

These words of Homer were my mantra. Glory, that sweet dream of every desperate boy, clawed at my soul like a cancer, gnawing away at my common sense. I never awoke from that dream, not really, it simply changed—changed into a nightmare. I remembered that old soldier’s words then. When the whistle blew and we dragged ourselves through the mud and over the edge of the world—to run through hell, with bullets whispering our names as they hissed past.

I never felt more alone. Even my God deserted me, the voice of consolation I thought ever present was instead replaced by the jeering of shells and those simple colloquial words. They reverberated through me with every waking moment, like some twisted prayer. Soon, Homer was forgotten, for the advice of an unnamed veteran.

Then there arose a moment; ineffable and subtle, yet I believe beautiful, in its own crude fashion.

I let go.

I marched, I charged, I shot my rifle and polished my bayonet like any other Private. But I did not laugh, I did not pray, and whenever my fellows would huddle and exclaim the same, useless questions—“When will the war end?” “When will the post come?” “Do you think I’ll be home for Christmas?”—I would stay silent, and think.

I wasn’t always good at thinking. I believe my parents hoped for a melancholy genius when they named me Edgar, after Allan Poe, but I disappointed them. I loved my games more than my books, and though they assailed me with the classics, and beat me black and blue with philosophy, I never allowed myself to become what they wanted. I was too happy I suppose. That was my burden—a weighty optimism. How proud they would be to see me now; the secluded nihilist, wrapped within my thoughts as the greatest war of mankind raged in the distance.

That’s where I am now, musing to myself, as I trudge at the back of my platoon winding through an abandoned trench. Belgium, I believe, is where I am, Ypres to be exact, although I could be wrong. Not that it mattered when every battlefield was the same. Blood and mud and murder, that was my world now. Names and identities lose all meaning in the desolation of war.

“Chin up Private, Haig wants us on our best form.”

I felt a light cuff against my back and straightened, wild-eyed.

Being roused from deep thought within such surroundings was always startling—humanity has great skill at forgetting one’s suffering, but much less prowess at actually confronting it.

The man who had spoken watched my awakening with cold bemusement. He had thrown the word ‘Private’ at me as if he was a General, but I could see only a single tattered chevron on his shoulder. Sometimes that scrap of cloth was all a man needed to survive—physical knowledge of their own fragile superiority. Certainly, it seemed to be helping this particular Lance Corporal, who grinned lopsidedly at me.

“Just a joke old chap, no need to glower.”

Seeing I was not going to comment, the man started talking beside me, matching every one of my plodding footfalls with something of a swagger.

“I’m Lance Corporal Summers, but call me Ralph. You know, I saw you a few times back home. My father knew your father, I’m fairly sure they were pals even. Funny isn’t it? This entire regiment comes from the same shire, and it just happens they stick us together in a platoon. You know anyone else here?”

In truth, I did recognise this ‘Ralph’, but had never before noticed him, as I had never before noticed any of my other comrades.

“No.”

“You speak!” He laughed at that. “I wondered if I was making an ass of myself in front of a mute. What’s your name again?”

“Private Peterson.”

“I know that, I mean your real name.”

“Edgar.”

“Well, Edgar, I’ve been watching, and don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to.”

The look of confusion, edged with fear, that appeared on my face warranted another smile. He leaned in to murmur.

“It’s a wise man who stays at the back.”

Upon those words, an excruciating whine erupted from the sky, and a shell catapulted into the front of the platoon. I was thrown backward by the impact, and watched, as if paralysed, as men screamed and tore at the shrapnel fragments in their flesh, while others rolled on the ground clutching at invisible injuries. There was a dull ringing in my ears.

Shadows flitted in front of me, barking orders and curses, and then suddenly there was a terrifying noise. It was not the discharge of a gun, the scream of a shell or the sound of Germans.

A man was coughing.

Next he was choking, and another was too. Soon, I could smell it, stabbing at my sinuses, and then it was even visible. A yellow-brown haze, dilating in the darkness of the narrow trench, which snaked its way ever nearer.

I don’t have a mask, I thought to myself, closing my crusted eyes.

This is how I die.

Suddenly, I felt myself being grasped and dragged backward into further darkness while a cacophony of screams and hoarse pleas echoed around me. I heard a trap slam shut, and opened my eyes to

see absolutely nothing.

Is this... Death?

A scratch and a crack sounded to my left, causing me to snap my head around like a madman.

“Calm yourself old chap, I’m just lighting a match.”

Another scratch, and a paltry light crackled into existence; the flame was thrust into the gas of a lamp, and soon the sight was brought into clarity. We were in a large dugout, a dozen soldiers, illuminated by a single lamp clutched by a crouching Ralph who was still grinning, a strange look in his eyes.

“What did I say? Eh?” he muttered to me.

I realised he must have been the one to drag me in there, and opened my mouth to thank him, but then hesitated.

Was I really thankful?

“Hurry up with that bloody lamp!” one of the men hollered from the other side of the dugout.

I saw the lines of Ralph’s face tighten in irritation at being spoken to in such a way, yet nevertheless he got up and went over, so that the other two lamps could be lit.

The dugout was large but bare, roughly circular in shape with the rounded edges stretching into shadow. A wooden door—the only exit and entrance to the dugout—was situated to my right. Already, I could see two of the soldiers by the door, frantically scrabbling and patting at the soil at its sides in an effort to insulate it against the gas.

“Where is the Corporal?” a Private asked, his rat-like face bobbing and twisting in an effort to take stock of his surroundings.

“He’s here,” answered Ralph, who was looking at a dark lump on the floor. I saw him drop down to stare at the Corporal’s pale, contorted features.

“He’s dead,” he added.

At this, a murmur of dissent seemed to trickle through the men in the room.

“I, however, am still alive,” Ralph added, “and in the absence of any other authority, will be taking control of this platoon. Is that clear?” He gestured at the badge of Lance Corporal in order to accentuate his proclamation. No objections were sounded, and orders were issued for the men to take stock of their situation and the wounded.

Of the twelve soldiers who had made it into the dugout, only seven survived the next hour. The Corporal and two others were discovered dead almost immediately; the other two took far longer. A man who has never seen the effects of a gas attack could never understand its enormity in the capacity of suffering. It was nigh on forty minutes that we sat there in the dim light, listening to the frantic burbling and spluttery spasms of poisoned throats. To hear the feverish, choked moans of a man who has swallowed gas, is akin to listening to Azrael himself. As soldiers, we all believed ourselves intimately acquainted with the angel of death, but that hour was truly when we were first introduced.

The silence afterward was stark and uncomfortable. The bodies had been deposited into the far edge of the room, and Ralph had given me the instruction to search them and fumble through their equipment for anything of use.

A division of sorts had developed within the dugout. I was at the edge the farthest from the door amongst the dead, while the other six had split into two trios, both conversing and eyeing each other respectively. On the right was Ralph, who talked and debated with the rat-like man from earlier who I had learnt was called Roger, as well as Roger's portly brother, George. If the divide could be seen as class based, then they would undoubtedly be seen as the 'upper' of the dugout society. On the left were three other men who we had learnt had grown up together; a short fellow named Peter, his bulky, perpetually scowling friend Tom and the leader of their group—a rather friendly, good-looking Private whose name was Edward but insisted on being referred to as Eddy.

While I worked, turning out pockets and sifting through packs, these two subsets muttered heatedly to each other. Finally, the leader of the left of the dugout stood up and approached Ralph, smiling easily as he did.

"We were wondering, Sir, what are your orders?"

"Nothing for now, except to sit tight while I evaluate the situation," Ralph replied rather curtly.

"I understand that, Sir, however, I hope you realise that with the gas outside, and us all without a mask, we cannot hope to venture out."

“Of course I do.”

“Then, Sir, you must understand the German army is most likely advancing on our position as we speak.”

Ralph stood up.

“What would you suggest then, Private?” he said calmly, staring Eddy straight in his eyes.

Unfazed, the soldier continued.

“I believe we should start digging, Sir.”

“Digging?”

“Yes Sir, digging with our rifles. If we have no other way out, we must make one.”

Ralph snorted derisively, and I noticed Eddy’s eyes narrow although his smile did not disappear.

“I have already considered that, Private. Even if we had started digging when we first got here, we would not have the time to construct a tunnel long or stable enough to take us out into a gas-free trench before the Germans arrived.”

“Then, Sir, what would you suggest?”

“I would suggest sitting tight while I think, Private.”

“And what help would that do?” barked another man from the left, the thickset one called Tom.

“Are you questioning orders?” Ralph said quietly.

I noticed the two brothers sitting behind him gently placing their hands on their rifles. The move did not go unnoticed by the other side.

“Rank means nothin’ when we are all going to die anyway,” Tom barked, standing up. “I agree with Eddy, we should be at least doin’ something.”

“Rank means nothing? Let me remind you Private, that rank and order is all humanity has in these times of chaos,” Ralph retorted.

The short man, Peter, also stood up to join the others, gazing at Ralph with visible resentment. “We’d need a miracle to get out of here if we just sit around. Do you have a miracle stashed in your sleeve Lance Corporal, Sir?” he said goadingly, sneering at the chevron on Ralph’s shoulder.

“I am the Corporal now, boy, and you’ll address me as such.”

“Boy is it?” Peter let out some very unpleasant laughter, “I’m

probably older than you are.”

Ralph glanced quickly in my direction to see how I was reacting, opened his mouth and then paused. Slowly, he turned around to stare at me, with the others following likewise.

“Edgar, what is that in your hand?” he said after a moment.

While the interaction was taking place, I had absentmindedly been sorting through the old Corporal’s belongings, pulling the items from his pack. Startled at the attention, I glanced down to find a gas mask clutched in my fist.

“It’s... It’s a mask,” I said.

Ralph did not even care that I had forgotten to say ‘Sir’. A hungry look had come into his eyes and he advanced toward me.

“You were asking for a miracle, I believe, Private?” he muttered, staring at the mask, before finally snapping his head up. “We have a single chance of life for one man here.”

All the men were standing now, aside from me, and had crowded over to gaze at the mask.

“Now, I would rather not pull rank to attempt to take it for myself, and as such we must decide who receives this mask in an orderly, logical fashion,” Ralph continued. “Does any man here have a family?”

All the men shook their heads.

“Well then, I suppose lots could always be drawn. We’d just need to find seven items of varying length...”

“Six,” I interrupted.

“Six?” Ralph inquired, confused.

“I don’t want it.”

“You don’t bloody want it?” Tom burst out.

“Yes, I don’t want it,” I repeated calmly. “I would rather somebody else did.”

At those words, Ralph clapped his hands with a calculating smile. “Gentlemen, I have a solution. We shall have a vote!”

“A vote?” Tom asked, rather stupidly.

“Yes, a vote. Each one of us will state their case for why they deserve the mask, and we shall vote on whoever needs the opportunity the most.”

“But surely,” Eddy said, “you must know that everyone will vote

for themselves?”

“Of course I do,” Ralph replied, before pointing a finger at me. “But Edgar here has already admitted that he does not wish for it.”

What Ralph was proposing was starting to sink in.

“And therefore shall be the tipping point—the key arbiter if you will.”

“But...” I began, only to be cut off.

“Edgar here knows none of us, nor has he been talking while we have been in this dugout. He is the perfect judge of who deserves the mask—of who deserves life.”

Much to my discomfort and worry, the other men actually seemed to be agreeing with him. It seemed ludicrous that the placing of all their fates into my hands was the only thing they were unanimous upon.

A rota was conjured, and after a few minutes of silence, Ralph exclaimed that he was ready to begin. The dugout represented a morbid amphitheatre, as he confidently walked to the centre of the room.

“You already know my name, and you already know that I have distinguished myself in gaining the rank of Lance Corporal...” he began, ignoring the wrinkled noses of the men on the left. “I am a Christian soul, and have only ever tried to do what is best for my comrades and my country. My upbringing was educated, but modest, and I have never pretended to be anything otherwise. While I will admit to not having a family, there is a girl I love, back in England, whom I would wish to marry if I ever return.” He paused then, to let a melancholy expression form on his face.

If he was acting, I thought to myself, then he is doing a dastardly good job at it.

“At my heart, I am a peaceful man—an artist even. I hope to write a novel, about the war I mean, about all we have suffered, all we have fought for...” He continued along such lines for another minute or so, before turning to look straight at me.

“I know the importance of what is clasped in your hands. I know what life is, I know its immeasurable value, and thus understand everyone’s reluctance to relinquish it. I also, however, understand the importance of democracy—of fairness. If I am not the man who



takes that mask, then I swear on my King, and on the great Christian God, that I will protect the chosen recipient, and not allow the mask to be taken by any malicious means. That is all.”

He winked at me, unseen by the other men, and then sat himself as the next man, Peter, rose to speak. The wink surprised me, setting my mind reeling, and then, with grim certainty, I understood.

Of course he suggested a vote, in the knowledge I would be the chosen judge. Ralph, for all his poeticisms and perceived humility, was a cunning man. The confidence and composure was not strength of character in the face of death, but instead a faith in my decision. After all, he had saved my life, unbeknownst to the others, and therefore would expect me to return the favour. And why shouldn't I? Why would I doom the man who saved me? An educated individual, pious and reasonable—if perhaps a little prideful—who had shown me kindness.

I would be a fool not to choose him.

After that realisation, I paid little attention to the others and their speeches. Most were rather tedious and clumsy, with men scrambling for reasons that their lives had been worthwhile, for reasons why they would achieve the most in a world where they might be shot next week.

The only other notable person was the handsome one they called Eddy, who sauntered up with even more confidence than Ralph. His speech lacked in substance, but showed him to be a good, moral man, and more importantly—a humorous one. It seemed incredible, but even in that hellish place, he managed to make most of the men laugh.

The last man to give his speech was the rat-like Roger. He faltered with his words, never able to take his eyes off the mask in my hands.

“... And... I... I have a sick mother. I want... no, I need... to return. To look after her, to...”

An uproar greeted his words.

“He's lying!” bellowed Tom.

“His bloody brother has already spoken and didn't mention no sick mother!” shouted Peter.

Roger blushed and I noticed a bead of sweat cutting a clean line down his filthy face. Then, without any warning, he violently jerked

forward and snatched the mask from my hands, turning to make for the door.

Tom roared incomprehensibly and charged at Roger, throwing the smaller man to the ground before beating him over and over with his cinder-block fists.

Shouts were erupting throughout the dugout, yet no one moved forward to intervene until, like a harbinger of anarchy, a single shot rang out. George, whether out of fear of loss of the mask, or love for his brother, had aimed his rifle at Tom's large head and fired.

A scream of outrage spilled from Peter, as we all watched the gigantic figure collapse. A large patch of reddened soil inflated underneath Tom's skull, while I could do nothing but stare at the gaping pit in his helmet.

George however, like some deranged elephant, threw down his gun and stumbled over. He grabbed the mask, not even pausing to look at the mangled face of his brother.

Storming toward the door, he desperately clawed at the soil blocking the edges which he himself had helped fill-in. Both Ralph and Peter charged toward him, with Ralph spinning the fat soldier around only to scream futile threats of a court martial in his face. Peter, however, had other ideas of justice, and without any delay, thrust his bayonet into George's belly. Ralph turned to him in astonishment and fury, only to back away quickly from a consecutive bayonet slash which carved through his jacket, leaving a shallow yet bloody cut.

"Are you mad!?" he cried, holding his palm to the wound, collapsing at the edge.

"No," Peter spat. "I want to bloody live."

He turned back around to the pitiful sight of George, sobbing and blubbering on the ground, and lifted his bayonet once again to finish him off.

A gunshot fractured the dugout.

Panting, his face drawn and pulsating with adrenaline, Ralph limped over to the door, his officer's pistol smoking. He looked down at George, who was still rolling and whimpering on the ground, ignorant of the body of Peter beside him.

"I'm sorry, Private."

Another crack and a blast of smoke and the fat soldier was silent.

I could only watch, as Ralph discarded his gun and bent down to yank the mask from George's dripping fingers. He turned back around and hobbled to the centre of the room, one hand clasping the slash on his chest, the other triumphantly gripping the mask. A smile, blissful and dreamy, wreathed Ralph's face as he looked upon me, still frozen at the end of the dugout. He lifted the mask like it was a toast and opened his mouth to speak.

But I would never know what he wished to say.

A smidgeon of steel peeked out from Ralph's jugular, winking at me in the lamplight, before it was quickly withdrawn to make way for gushing crimson.

Eddy, amiable, amusing Eddy, had been watching the entire spectacle unfold forgotten in the corner. Almost comically, he sidestepped the blood like he was afraid to stain his boots, and plucked the mask from Ralph with languid grace. Without even looking at me, he made his way to the doorway and pulled the carcasses of Peter and George out of the way, pausing only when he heard a rustle behind him.

He span around, grinning, the mask which had taken so many lives dangling like a pendulum from his fingers.

"Now this is a surprise. Edgar, what are you doing over there?"

Almost unknowingly, I had picked up George's rifle which he had thrown down earlier, and was now levelling it straight at Eddy's face. A thousand thoughts were spiralling inside me, an anthem which coursed through my entire body, deafening me to Eddy's words.

Yet I did not shake.

I had been trained for this, after all.

"Edgar, we both know you don't want this. Look at all this waste—this death. Why create any more? When you could just rest," Eddy murmured, an understanding smile peaking at his lips.

With methodical precision I flicked back the bolt and squinted down the iron sight at the man in front of me.

Eddy's smirk was starting to droop.

"You don't have it in you," he said finally.

I however, wasn't listening to him. All I could hear, was that old soldier's words.

“Nothin’ here is worth dying for lad”

“So don’t be a fool”

“An’ live.”

*Dear Mother,*

*I hope you and father and little Daisy are well, I know it has been many months since my last letter. It has been a strange past few days for me—I suppose you could say I have had a revelation of sorts.*

*My regiment was ambushed you see, and a gas was unleashed upon us. I couldn’t even begin to explain why, but I was the only man amidst fifty who had in his possession a mask. It is impossible perhaps for you to understand that moment, alone in the darkness of the mist, as I staggered onward blindly past my choking comrades. That mask was my saviour, and now my lucky charm. I carry it everywhere I go, as a reminder of what I went through. To think, out of all those brave men, it was me whom the Lord chose to survive—well, it’s astounding. I felt terrible, yet at once liberated. The mask showed me that there is purpose in survival, a beautiful purpose, and it is my duty to make my way back to you all in England—to live my life.*

*I believe I have found my calling. Amidst the suffering of this war, I have discovered the eerie beauty of poetry. I know I have not always risen to the expectations you and father placed upon me—I know I disappointed you both—and I am sorry.*

*I have however changed, and no longer resist my natural calling as an artist. I believe I shall make you proud, and look forward to my return home.*

*Best wishes,*

*Edgar*

*P.S. I have enclosed a poem I recently penned. It’s a bit of nonsense really, and I’m not too fond of the title, but I hope you enjoy it nonetheless.*

### **The Battle of Sin**

*The seven sins of old met deep in the dark  
Before them stood life’s faded spark,  
Greed lunged first, desperate and alone,  
Wrath inflamed, instead took it for his own.*

MASK

*Greed's brother-in-sin reared his bulbous head,  
Gluttony, in all his glory, shot Wrath dead,  
Envy slashed Pride, then leapt into the fray  
Wounding Gluttony, to steal life away.*

*Pride in his fury, killed both with ease  
Then turned triumphant, clasping life's keys,  
Lust, ever forgotten, stabbed him from behind  
And made to leave, victorious and blind.*

*Sloth, the observer, took the final shot,  
And left with the life which he had sought,  
For if one talks of the battle of sin,  
Then know it is the least impressive who shall win.*