

Ancestry  
by Madeleine Dougherty

It isn't a surprise that you are a killer. Though I am now dead, it still isn't a surprise, and I still love you. You are my son. If I were alive, I would enfold you in my arms and tell your adult self just how much you've made me proud. Though I was weak and your father strong, I still passed on that fighting blood of our forefathers. I know you are ashamed that you could not save me, but I am ashamed that I could not help you to wrap your little fingers around a perfectly constructed piece of plastic and metal, and stretch them to reach the trigger. My family was strong. It just skipped me. But you are alive and carrying on our legacy. Your brother is, too. Yes, I know, he's a doctor, not an assassin, but you forget, in order to save a life, one must know how to take a life. It is only his oath that keeps him from a body count. Our family was made to kill, and there are many ways to do it.

In World War I, your great grandfather was a soldier in the trenches. He was a brave man. He entered into service without being forced. He told your great grandmother that he wanted to have one last solitary adventure before fully joining his with hers. The trenches were just as everyone says they were. Painful, awful environment. Bad, or no, food. Dirt and mud everywhere, always. Cold and disgusting. Cramped and dangerous. Just about the worst place in the world except for just above the trenches in no man's land. At least up there there was a certainty of your fate. In the trenches, all there was was fear. Fear that made its way into the smell of dirt, blood, gunpowder, and excrement. Fear that appeared in the men's stiff faces and clenched hands, and in the skyline made of bags of dirt and barbed wire. The sun rose and fell on that barbed wire. In the rare while, they would be ordered to advance their position. Men would be killed, both standing next to him and across.

Dougherty, 2  
April 12, 2012

Your grandfather was a good shot. Cunning, too. He made sure to go up a little after all the rest of the boys. Said they made very good cover in his letters. The younger ones didn't last long. They were so afraid. And exhilarated. I remember how he told them that some boys, the dumb ones, sometimes had smiles as they went over. They thought they were fighting for their country, for a worthy cause. They were just fodder; targets to cover the older officers, the ones who had been there long enough to know the value of some kind of barrier between them and the pieces of metal flying at them. He saw a lot of death during those years, but it never bothered him. Our family isn't much bothered by death, you know that.

Then, they sent over the gas. Mustard gas, or sulfur mustards, was an effective tool in debilitating troops. It works to burn its victims with a chemical burn. Anywhere the gas touches, skin irritation begins. Blisters form. If the eyelids are touched, they swell up causing blindness. If inhaled, the blisters form in the lungs. This leads to pulmonary edema and eventual death. Because areas contaminated with the gas appear normal, except when the gas is colored or scented, there is no way of knowing if a person has come in contact with it. Your great grandfather had to face the gas. Thankfully they had prior warning. He along with many others evacuated, some getting picked off as they ran for safety. Your great grandfather had made a friend, Billy, Bobby, something like that. The gas had been released. They could smell it. The boy had been injured. If gotten to help, he would have made a full recovery, but he could not walk well. Gunshot to the leg can do that to you.

Your great grandfather saw him there, still in the trenches. He watched him struggle to run. Later, he watched him die in a hospital bed from fluid in his lungs and a septic wound. He had not come to the boy's aid. It was pure luck that he had been found alive at all.

Dougherty, 3  
April 12, 2012

So, you see. Death comes in all forms. It is in you to be a part of it every day of your life.

Be proud, for you are an agent of farewell.