

You Listen To Me

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The door clicks shut, extinguishing any noise of the busy Sydney Street. The silence presses in, only held back by the click of my black leather shoes on the wooden apartment floor, and the rustle of a newspaper from the next room. I step into the dark lounge, curtain drawn against the late afternoon sun, and slip my satchel into a corner.

“How was school, my boy?” booms around the space. The top of his grey head is just visible behind a copy of *The Sun*, sunk deep into a warm brown armchair. The headline reads ‘THE YPRES FIGHT’, and just beneath, ‘GALLIPOLI CAMPAIGN’.

“Very tiring, father,” I answer. “The final examinations are nearly here, yet no learning is happening with all the talk of the war.” It is hard to keep the disgust out of my words. I feel a growing tension, but I can’t help from adding, “Every boy seems to believe it the most romantic opportunity. It makes me sick.”

Bristling slightly at my disagreeable opinion, he huffs, “Why worry about the examinations boy? You’ll be eighteen on Thursday, and we’ll go serve our country. Your peers have their priorities right; our country is at war. We must help.”

He hasn’t so much as glanced my way, and I feel my anger rising. “You already know I will not go with you. I thought I made that clear. In three days I’m an adult, and I’ll make my own decisions then.” I hear my voice growing louder, “The first of which will be that I believe no act of war justifiable. The second, I will never participate.” I swallow as soon as I shut my mouth. I almost regret my outburst as the newspaper lowers and my father’s stormy face comes into view, but I will not take back what I said.

“And I thought I made it clear that while you live in my house, you do what I say.” His quiet words are as full of anger as his red face shows. “Our new Australia is an advancing nation under the British Empire. It is no place for foolish imaginings...”

“I am not foolish. Going to war is,” I retort. Oh gosh, I’ve been stubborn before, but I have never spoken back like that to my father. What has gotten into me? A thwack resounds as the newspaper hits the coffee table. My father is not a tall man, but as he stands and stares me down, I feel dwarfed.

"Your pacifist views are what threatens the freedom of our country more than Germany. I will not stand for anyone under my roof to follow such nonsense." The disappointment in his eyes hurts me more than his stinging words, but it's the thunder in his step as he marches down on me that causes my hands to shake. "Get out of my house until this absurdity is out of your head and you can do what I say." Spit lands on my face. I stare at him for a moment before ducking my head and brushing past him. I pull a coat over my uniform and I'm out the door and down the steps. A horse-drawn wagon passes before I'm across the street and whisked away by the electric tram.

I wander. The chilly night breeze smells of salt water and burning gas. I find a park bench. The green paint peels underneath my fingernails. This late at night, the only sounds in Hyde Park belong to the distant rumbling trams on Elizabeth Street, and the hissing lamps. The chill is seeping into my clothes, but I feel colder from the echo of my father's words. A man for the revolutionary thinking of a promising age of new ideas, he has always encouraged me to think for myself. But a man for the new evidence of science, he holds stubbornly to his 'correct' opinions. Where can I exist in that? We have talked for years about his views. Will holding my own mean I can't be loved by him? I regret the manner in which I expressed myself to him, but will he forgive me?

A shadow passes over me in the light of the streetlamp. He lowers himself onto the bench next to me. His soft exhale clouds in the air before being lost to the wind. We sit in silence. When my guilt becomes overwhelming, I turn and gasp out, "Will you forgive me?"

My father's sore voice responds, "For what?"

Words choke me and I pause before answering. "I didn't mean to, to be so... I meant what I said, but not the disrespect, not any." I take a breath, and my raspy voice whispers, "I'm sorry."

My father's face is scrunched in emotion. I can see he is struggling, searching for the right the words to use. "Let me say that I am hurt. I will never agree with what you said, because I meant what I said too. I will, however, accept your apology."

"Really?" My face lifts in surprise.

"Yes. But, as stubborn as you are about not fighting, may I impress on you a need to assist in other ways here? I might just die of shame otherwise." The last comment is oddly weighted; forlorn, yet humorous. I nod. He smiles faintly, "Good. Now go home. It's late."

I stand and turn to him, "What about you?"

His smile vanishes. "I said go home. I am your father; you listen to me. Go."

I swallow, but nod, and turn to walk down the path. The gravel crunching under my feet turns solid as I reach the street. With every step, I feel the weight of our argument lifting. The world becomes brighter in the light of the street and the stars above. The whirr of an approaching tram draws my eyes down to the street. I head home.

Three days later, when I return home from school, father is not there to meet me. Since our late-night talk, we had had small conversations, and he seemed to go out of his way to ridicule my beliefs. I ponder this as a coping strategy as I walk softly across the carpet to his empty leather armchair and the note lying on it. Written in my father's scrawling handwriting, I read: "Happy Birthday, my son. I leave you today to serve the Empire, but you stay as an adult." A tear rolls down my cheek. "I'm sorry to have left on such terms but consider this my apology."

As I unfold the note and continue reading, that tear turns to many. When I reach the last line, I'm sobbing. My breath comes in shudders as I fold the note in my hands. "I love you," I whisper. "Goodbye."