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To the Mother of the Unknown Soldier

Ma'am, you do not know who I am. Yet I have heard your name called. I hear you in my sleep, in my haunted dreams. Your name is sighed on a thousand dying lips; you are the mother of your slumbering son. It is not guilt that finds me penning this letter, written a thousand times already. It is the need to answer a desperate plea.

I am a soldier in the Canadian Corps. I spent three years of my life fighting against your countrymen, your sons. Through the chronic thunder, the baptism of fire, I met them, saw them, shot them. I do not have regrets, that is war. However, there is one incident, in that monstrosity of incidents, that clings unwontedly.

It was that final day of battle, November 6, 1917. We had witnessed sights beyond our furthest thoughts and imaginations. As by some inhuman force we pressed on, gaining inches of freedom at a costly price. It was that day that my battalion, the 27<sup>th</sup> battalion, finally came through, capturing the village of Passchendaele, ending the final, great battle of attrition during the war. Mud soaked, and eternally weary, we stumbled across bodies, frozen in their final stupor, empty shells scattered all around in a barren and desolate wasteland. The motionless eyes followed us, their cries pierced us a thousand times over; the living dead. An eerie silence hung over Passchendaele and it was that cry, released in a sighing breath that jerked me out of my reverie. It was your son; clad with the shades of grey. A barrage of memories, images of comrades collapsing at my side, sounds of "Oh it's a Lovely War" being interrupted during the final chorus by choking mustard gas, grotesque mutations, the overpowering reek of death itself all whirled in my mind. As I gazed down, it was all visible in the emaciated face of your son. Hatred is strong; stronger than any other emotion. Loathing welled up; I spit, then that infamous groan, "Mama."

Sham silently seeped in. Your son did not see me, so hideous was his writing anguish. In those last moments, when death stalked him, he achingly cried out for you, for your loving touch, to heal the hurt of a savage fury. And who was I to treat him with such contempt borne out of knowledge that we are soldiers first, then individuals. Our lives on the battlefields had become on continual watch against the peril of death. The battlefield reinforced in as a numbing dullness; we were blanched faces, living in superficiality. Our lives were fields of shell holes, within and without. There was nothing I could humanly do for him,

nor was there anything I wanted to do for him. He, after all, was the enemy. In that awful melancholy of life, in the pitilessness of men, I watched him struggle, watched him cling tenaciously to those last frayed threads of life. Then with a sudden clearance he looked into my eyes, as if he knew I had been there all along. He raised his hand, and set it across his heart, right over a bulging, blood-stained pocket. There was that last effort to call out for you, as your son crossed the thin boundary of life and death. Curiosity drove me to see what it was that caused your son's pocket to bulge so. I found, in there a letter; I presume it was addressed to you. The scrawled handwriting was illegible as the yellowed paper was stained with life's fluidity and so I left it there in his pocket, in the battlefield near Passchendaele, Belgium.

But I did not leave that cry behind me in Passchendaele. No, I have carried it with me back home. I hear it in a child's cry; I hear it in the laborious breath of the old, in the sigh of the weary. You may wonder why I am telling you this. I have not written begging for forgiveness, nor is it my intent to do so. Your son and I both lived in desperate loyalty, a condition of life that arose out of the tension of death. Rather I have written to let you know that I will continue to fight against that which struck both your son and me down, life.

Sincerely,

Soldier X