

*"Diary of
Forget-Me-Nots"
by
Jeffrey Beaty*

DIARY OF FORGET-ME-NOTS

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A Short Story of
About 3900 words

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While a work of fiction, this story quotes two poems by real war-time poets. The descriptions given in the story of the poets and their fates are fact, not fiction. The story of a war-time diary and those who have written in it that I have wrapped around these two poems is fiction. While a veteran myself, I am in no way trying to use this story to somehow put my unworthy self in their "ranks". The sacrifice these two men made, and the skill with which they communicated their experiences of war, humble me. My use of these poems in this story is only my attempt to work out the feelings and ideas they moved in me, and I believe I have used them in a way that compliments (if only poorly) what they so brutally yet elegantly describe.

"Vergissmeinnicht" from *Collected Poems* by Keith Douglas, (Editions Poetry London 1951, reprinted 1966).

"Dulce et Decorum Est" from *Poems by Wilfred Owen; with an Introduction by Siegfried Sassoon* (Chatto & Windus, 1920, currently in the Public Domain and available via Project Gutenberg & other sources).

Dear Diary,

It is Sunday again, and I was all prepared when Beaker and his monster nose appeared with his allotment of two sheets of paper and an envelope. I have to thank you, diary, for if Stephanie hadn't given you to me before I left, I wouldn't have been able to write her such a perfect love letter. Writing a rough draft of the letter beforehand was a great idea.

Okay, I admit it was actually all Loner's idea. I never thought of him as the kind to know how to impress a girl (he *is* called Private Loner after all,) but it really worked. Since I worked on the letter in my diary throughout the week, I had plenty of time to think about just what to say — and how to say it, if you know what I mean. There's another advantage too; with a first draft already written, all I had to do was copy the letter down.

So here I am. I finished my letter with so much time to spare that I decided to write some more in my diary. Only now I don't know what to write about. I guess I'll tell you, dear diary, about Private Loner and the story he told us when he suggested I write a rough draft love letter...

We've been on standby for so long now that even the grunts are bored. There can only be so many briefings and exercises before time begins to wear — especially when we know that it's all just make-work. We know the action is coming, but all we can do is wait. So on the rare occasions when Loner decides to talk, everyone listens; when Loner talks, there's usually a good story in the making.

It started when I told Mic how I felt my letters to Steph were really lame, and that I just couldn't think what to say to her when it came time to write. Loner overheard and said, "Maybe you should start writing rough drafts in that diary of yours."

Needless to say, everyone laughed. I spun to face him then, angry and stunned. The guys give me a lot of flack about my diary, but Loner had never joined in on the teasing. I thought he somehow respected me for it. But when I turned around I saw he was completely serious.

Loner explained that it would be a lot easier to, "compose a good letter," if I worked on it before it came time to actually write. As Loner continued his lecture, that serious mask he almost always wears never left his face, despite the ever increasing gales of laughter around us.

And suddenly the laughter stopped. For just a second a new look crossed Loner's face, filling his eyes with a crafty glint that made you think of gears whirring in his head. We knew that look, and knew what he would say next:

"You know, this reminds me of a story..."

It's at this point — when everyone begins to really listen — that Loner always shuts up. He waves us off, saying he knows we really don't want to hear his blabbering, that it wasn't anything important. After a little needling, Loner always gives in. Someone will loan him a cigarette — he's kept supplied for as long as it takes to tell the tale — and Loner will begin.

This story was about some dude named Serino Kojak or something. It seems Serino had women problems because he had a nose that would dwarf even Beaker's massive snout...

Dear Diary,

Beaker has come in with the mail, and I have already read Stephanie's letter now too many times to count. And to think I actually spent the time to "compose" her a love letter in this damned diary of hers. Hey, just call me Private Dim-Witty. With military efficiency such as it is, she hasn't even received that letter yet, and here I get a letter from her saying that she's getting married. Isn't that what always happens to guys that go out to war? And this isn't even a war! I'm supposed to be here, "protecting America's interests," and I'm sitting here writing a diary while Psycho is busy picking his nose in the next rack. And the word now is that hostilities won't even start. The situation, they say, is cooling off, and we haven't done a thing! Except sit here and lose our girls.

I don't feel like writing anymore...

Dear Diary,

It happened! I have time to write only a quick note, and I'm not supposed to be doing that. The urge to record this, to remember, hit me as soon as we heard. We are going to see action. As strange as it seems, I am actually happy, excited. And I have to write this before I go.:

I miss you, Stephanie; still love you even. I wish you the best. I feel I would strangle the man you left me for, if I ever met him, but I want the best for you. Really. I pray that you still remember the way it was with a smile; that you don't hate those good times we had. Damn! This all sound so corny, but I'm excited, in a rush, and don't know what I'm trying to say.

Forget-me-not, Stephe...

9-12

"Forget-me-not, Stephe."

Forget-ME-not, world. And so that I won't be forgotten, or more importantly, so that I won't forget myself, I will continue this "diary".

My parents named me Brian Anthony Woods; my platoon named me Private Loner. If I had to pick between the two I would probably choose the latter as it is the most appropriate. So this will be the *journal*, (journal sounding much more astute and dignified than the simple word, "diary",) of Private Loner. Private Loner, this is your life...

James Witt, Private Witty, this is your death...

You can always tell when Gunnery Sergeant Yale is angry. Whenever the Gunny's anger surfaces, and it surfaces quite often, faint red spots begin to bloom on his face. The more he raves, the darker the spots and the paler the rest of his face becomes. He was *really* pissed now — his face, nose to nose with Private Mickey, looked distinctly like a pepperoni pizza.

"What are you telling me private?!"

Mic seemed ready to burst into tears.

“Sergeant! Private Witty is missing, sergeant.”

“Missing?! What do you mean, missing? Isn’t Witty your partner, Mickey? Didn’t your nursery school teacher tell you what the buddy system means? You’re supposed to keep an eye on each other. So where is he?”

“I don’t know, sergeant. I guess I got kind of excited on the final approach and forgot to watch out for him.”

Needless to say, things go worse after that. After what seemed an eternity of watching the spots on Yale’s face grow to the point that I thought they would explode, four of us were sent back to find the missing soldier. It was Psycho who finally found him, or rather tripped over him.

The grass was about waist-high, brown, tough and sharp as a razor. It would rather slice you to ribbons than be trampled, which I quickly discovered. I hadn’t really noticed the tenacity of the grass on the way in. In fact I had been eternally grateful for what little cover there was. Now, more nervous than I had been when the bullets were flying, I pushed aside the wall of weeds before me, and cursed at the small cuts I received.

Psycho, who was plowing ahead with his usual bulldozer gait, looked over his shoulder to laugh — and fell, disappearing in the grass. It was our turn to laugh now, but it was strained laughter, and didn’t last long. In the nervous silence that stretched after it, there was no sound from Private Psycho. Psycho did not rise from the grass, brush himself off, swear and dare us with that stare of his to say more, as he should. Psycho was not playing fair. He was just trying to scare us — that was it. Good old Psycho.

A sudden gust of wind rattled in the weeds, making waves in the sea about us. And then Psycho screamed. This was no quick shout, no startled yell. This was a genuine scream-till-your-lungs-burst kind of scream. And as Psycho’s voice ripped the air, we found ourselves running forward, ignoring the grass slapping our thighs and ripping our hands. What we saw brought us to a stumbling halt.

Psycho lay where he had fallen, his massive body poised over the almost petite form below him. Body on body, the two seemed locked in an act of passion, their faces mere inches apart. Yet Psycho was screaming. This was no furlough hooker; this was Private Witty. And as the wind whipped at the grass around us, the gaping chasm that had been Private Witty’s face seemed to scream back.

And so, Private Witty, this is your death, dutifully recorded in what was *your* diary. You were our only casualty, but somehow I suspect you will not be the last. This whole business has the feel of escalating into a full blown war. We will see.

Meanwhile, I will keep this diary of yours so that you will be remembered. But mainly I keep it for more selfish reasons; I want to be remembered too. And frankly it’s about time I started writing again.

This reminds me of a story, a poem actually. I’ll have to tell it later though. Time to sign off of now...

9-13

“Forget-me-not, Stephanie...”

I came across the poem in college as I worked to become a *world-famous-writer*. That is how I thought of it: all one word and in italics. Little did I know that I would soon make a complete ruin of my education and wander about aimlessly in an attempt to “find myself”; that instead of becoming a *world-famous-writer*, I would become simply, Private Loner...

(I believe you are wandering from the subject at hand!)

As I started to say I came across the poem in college. A poetry class I was taking at the time required that I memorize a poem and recite it for the class. So it was that as we trudged on in our monotonous march, I tried to bring that poem out of the cesspool of my memory. But after considerable struggle, and many miles, I still could not remember more than the poem’s name and its general subject.

Now, moments earlier, as I prepared to bed down for the night and write down what I could of the poem, my eye caught again on the last sentence of Witty’s final entry.

“Forget-me-not, Stephanie.”

As I read that one sentence, I saw myself in front of that classroom full of bored college students, reciting my chosen poem. I heard it all, once again, word for word, and a pit opened in my stomach. It turns out the poem is far more appropriate than I had thought. The similarity between the poem and recent events is more than just ironic. It’s damned haunting.

VERGISSMEINNICHT by Keith Douglas

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone,
returning over the nightmare ground
we found the place again, and found
the soldier sprawling in the sun.

The frowning barrel of his gun
overshadowing. As we came on
that day, he hit my tank with one
like the entry of demon.

Look. Here on the gunpit spoil
the dishonored picture of a girl
who has put: *Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht*
in a copybook gothic script.

We see him almost with content
abased, and seeming to have paid

and mocked at by his own equipment
that's hard and good when he's decayed.

But she would weep to see today
how on his skin the swart flies move;
the dust upon the paper eye
and the burst stomach like a cave.

For here lover and killer are mingled
who had one body and one heart.
And death who had the soldier singled
has done the lover mortal hurt.

Keith Douglas served in a tank battalion in World War II, and wrote the poem about something he personally experienced. I can picture him ready to bed down, bent over some beat-up book as I am now, carefully converting the gruesome sights of the day into pure poetry. Later, in the final invasion of Normandy, Douglas was killed. And so his poem remains behind as his forget-me-not. I am haunted by the feeling that fate has decreed this diary as yet another forget-me-not.

“Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht...”

“Forget-me-not, Stephanie...”

The similarity is too strong. Will this be all there is to remember me by? Will this be my forget-me-not?

10-7

I'm a little wasted right now, so forgive me, dear diary, (“journal” that is,) if I seem a little sarcastic.

“Hey, it's my birthday, and I can be drunk if I want to, drunk if I want to...”

As a birthday present, the President declared this little argument between countries an official war. It seems the enemy is a little stronger and a little more determined than Uncle Sam first believed. And then there are the rumors...

“I heard it through the grapevine...”

...that the dread enemy may have more loyal friends than Uncle Sam first thought. Seems that the bordering countries may start picking sides and throwing their two bits into this little argument. The fire is catching...

“But if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.”

The more this goes on, the more time I find myself spending on this little girl's *diary*. It's getting to the point that some of the guys have started to call me Private Poet. It's like that Pink Floyd song:

"Got a little black book with my poems in,
Got a bag with a toothbrush and comb in..."

Only, in my case, that last line would be, "Got an M-16 to blow your head in..."
I think I'm going to throw up...

Hi. I'm Mickey. They named me that cause I got a high voice and they say I sound like Mickey Mouse. Today's October 8th. Private Loner-Poet is dead. We were having a party for him last night, (it was his birthday and all,) and he got pretty trashed. Ended up curling up in the corner to write in this book like he always does, and then he started to get sick. I guess he wandered out to the edge of the encampment to toss his cookies and a sniper nailed him. No one ever did find the sniper. He's probably still out there. I feel kind of dumb writing in this book, but Loner asked me that if anything ever happened to him, to take it and write in it. He called it his diary of "forgetmenots". He told me to make sure it got around so that all us guys, and guys in other platoons, could write in it and be remembered. I don't know what else to say...

I began to hear vague murmurings of a Diary of Forget-Me-Nots back in January, but never paid the stories much mind until the day my jeep hit a mine. It happened so quickly — the jeep flipping, the wonder of flying through the air with nothing below me, the blinding flash of pain, and the sudden night which followed. I was thrown clear; but Captain Matthew Sloan, who had been my driver and friend forever it seems, was not so lucky. And as horrible as this sounds, I am almost glad luck did not look his way; I never would have come across the diary if it had.

I went through Matt's locker personally, collecting and organizing those things that would be sent home to his family. There, next the neatly folded underwear, I found the book. Even before touching it, I knew what I had found.

The diary looked — even in its battered and broken condition — as if it belonged hidden under a little girl's mattress. Its once bright and flowery cover had been bleached a mottled beige by many miles of heat and rain, dust and mud, sweat and blood. The binding had broken long ago, and the sheaf of loose, wrinkled pages was held in only by a rubber band. Perched on the edge of Sloan's bed, I removed the rubber band, opened the book with the care reserved for ancient and valuable tomes, and began to read...

The diary was originally owned by a Private James Witt, but it was Private Brian Woods, Private Loner, who really started the thing — who made it a Diary of Forget-Me-Nots. Of all the soldiers who have contributed to the diary, Private Loner has the most entries, even though his section comprises a very small section of the book. After Loner's death others wrote, at the most, only a few pages before passing the book on... One way or another.

Between these battered covers you meet all kinds of people. Most of the entries are by the men and women of the Army and Marines — the grunts — but there are contributions from every branch of the service and from nearly every rank and rate. There are simple signatures, brief entries of only a few sentences by near illiterates, and lengthy wanderings from people, like Loner, who could have been *world-famous-writers*.

Every page, except the last few I am now writing on, is packed. On some pages there is graffiti-like prose, and on others, complex poetry. There is art of all varieties, from the crude drawings of female anatomies to the brilliant pencil sketches of war torn landscapes. There are the murmurings of the lovesick, the homesick and the just plain sick. This is no mere diary of day by day events — though it does relate the progress of the war quite well — this is a Diary of Life... A Diary of Mankind.

And so I've kept it safe. I do not feel that I am wrong in doing so. This is not any one person's diary, but everyone's. When the war is over I plan to have the pages photographed and published just as they are. I want the world to see this diary in all its tattered glory, with its rips and stains and smeared handwriting.

So it is my turn to contribute to this work. While many who have written in this Diary of Forget-Me-Nots have written their own material, I am not so skilled. I will simply borrow from another, and quote, as Loner once did, a poem I came across in my past. Private Loner started this diary with Keith Douglas' *Vergissmeinnicht*, and I feel it is appropriated that I end it with the poem *Dulce et Decorum Est* by Wilfred Owen. The poems belong to each other, and they belong in this diary. Both poets were English, both men fought in the World War of their time, both wrote a poem with a foreign title describing the scenes of death about them... And after placing pen to paper both men died an ironic death. Private Loner described the end for Douglas; for Owen the end came one week before the signing of the Armistice.

DULCE ET DECOREM EST by Wilfred Owen

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through the sludge,
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
 of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling,
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime. -
 Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs
Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, -
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

The people in this diary want to be remembered. They want this diary of Forget-Me-Nots to go out and carry a part of themselves to the rest of the world. They want people to know, and understand for once, that the Latin phrase quoted in this poem — that phrase which means, “it is sweet and becoming to die for one’s country” — is truly a lie. Why can’t we learn that?

Major General Arthur C. Mathews. March 3rd.

April Fools Day

Just this one page left. I had planned to end this Diary of Forget-Me-Nots with my last entry. No such luck.

I thought maybe we had learned. The bigwigs on all sides had agreed to a peace conference. They would attempt to defuse the bomb this war had started ticking. But the bomb went off in their faces. To be more precise, someone brought a *real* bomb to the party — a bomb of the thermonuclear variety.

It seems the entire world was waiting for this to happen, for as soon as the peace talks went up, so did the missiles. We blame them, who blame someone else, who blames us, while another doesn’t give a damn who did what, just as long as they get in on the action. So the sky begins to fall, and I find myself turning to the diary.

As I opened the book for the last time, I noticed that one page was stuck to the inside of the broken, front cover. After carefully removing the page, I found these neatly printed words:

This diary belongs to: James Witt
With love from Stephanie.

But that is not all. Below that are the words, "Brian 'Private Loner' Woods," and next to that the signature of Private Mickey. And so the list of names and nicknames continue. They are crammed on the inside of the front cover, and on the blank page that faces it. All those names...

I managed to squeeze my name in one of the few blank spaces. After a little thought, I added another name to the list of owners: Humanity.

Maybe, if I shield this book with my body when the sky falls, it will survive. It must survive, for this is humanity's plea not to be forgotten. In a few minutes this diary may be the only thing *left* of humanity. If so, who will remember us?

Forget-Us-Not.

The End.