

HOMESICK

SHREYOSI ENDOW

The alarm pounding against my ear disrupted my protective cocoon of sleep. My sorry eyes fixed on the calendar: I remembered the day winter barged in on the campus, and this veil of gloomy depression fell over my little dorm room. I was not a winter person. At least not in the last few years.

It had been four days since mother had sent her holiday special homemade gingerbread and chocolate chip cookies. The mailman had left the basket at my doorstep, and along with the melodious jingles and carols, in swept the mouth-watering smell of warm butter and cinnamon from the tiny gap beneath my door. I loved my mother's homemade cookies but the minute I bit into one on this occasion, my insides revolted. It tasted of memories I had suppressed with all of my might.

As the night grew dark and the lights turned brighter, I decided to take a stroll outside. I regretted it as soon as I stepped into the corridor, laced as it was with fake snowflakes and

pot-bellied gnomes. Enthusiastic students had set up Christmas trees in front of their dorm rooms. Twinkling lights wrapped around the green and a big red glittery star on top. Back home it was always I who placed the star on the tree after the decoration was done. 17 and I was still treated like the baby of the family.

I wondered who'd put it up this time.

The basketball court was brimming with happy faces and excited squeals and best wishes. They had allowed the schoolkids who had siblings in this college to come and spend the night with them. I saw a little boy tugging at his sister's clothes because he wanted to go see the reindeer made of snow. I wished I had a little brother.

The faint squeals vanished slowly as the crowd proceeded towards the hall for supper, and I was left to myself again.

These last four years had been daunting. Maybe I was what they said I was, a weak wuss who was too young to stay away from home. But I couldn't help it really. My taste buds couldn't forget my mother's chocolate pudding,

and I really truly missed the sound of ripping the wrappers off in anticipation of something magical inside.

Icy tears almost made their way down my eyes when I heard footsteps. Pitter-patter, pitter-patter, they pierced through the new-fallen silence of the night and halted next to my red leather shoes. The silent nerdy boy from biology class who would sit at the back as if he didn't exist stood with his hands tucked in his pocket, and his nose a bright ruby red. We hadn't talked much in class, but now he slumped down next to me, and for a while, jagged silence and bone-chilling air jostled between us in the cozy wooden bench. 'I miss home,' his grumble sliced through the silence. 'Me too buddy, me too,' I nodded in agreement, slowly thawing out the ice in my heart and between us.

'Cookie?' I looked up to see a pale extended hand, holding a cookie the size of my head, with chocolate chips and rainbow sprinkles. As the smell of cinnamon swept through my nostrils, the air between us suddenly became comfortably warmer.

THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE

SHUPROVO ARKO

Ron died today. Roger too. Jeff died two days ago maybe, I don't really remember.

The general wants us to channel our hate against the Germans and avenge our brothers. But he's not the one stuck in a trench with their bodies. He can't see them slowly turning into what they always were in his eyes -- dirt.

Ron stepped on a mine. Roger's grenade exploded in his hand. Jeff shot himself in the face.

Who's doing this? Who's killing us? Who do you blame for this? God? Why would God let anyone get killed like this? Today of all days? It's Christmas Eve and I'm trying to shoot a person in the head.

Christmas in London had always been a fond memory to me. Every year on Christmas Eve everyone in my neighbourhood would take a

handful of snow from the front of their houses and build a huge snowman in the middle of the street. I would be in charge on finding the most perfect twigs to use as his arms, and I'll be damned if they weren't the best twigs ever. On Christmas day, my mother would take me to the local market to see the fireworks. Red and green and silver lights filled the sky, the sound of the carolers drowned out everything else, the air smelled like sugar and honey. The only thing I didn't like about Christmas was the cold.

Cold is all you feel in the trenches. When you've been stuck here as long as I have, the hate, anger, sorrow and grief - they all vanish. All you're left to feel is numb. When you're done feeling numb you feel cold.

Hans and I have been shooting at each other for three days now. I gave him that name. It was the most German-sounding name I could think of. To

me Hans is more than just a grey speck in the distance, he is a person. But in this war we aren't people, we're soldiers, and soldiers shoot at the enemy. We've silently decided to shoot each other in the head, so that at least one of us gets a quick end to all this suffering. For three days we've been trying. For three days we've missed every shot. I can't decide if God is being cruel or merciful. Maybe Hans has a family back in Germany. Maybe he has memories of a white Christmas just like me, caroling in the streets of Berlin, opening presents under a tree, absorbing the warmth of the day. Maybe he has a name for me too.

Hans is now holding up a white cloth at my direction. It has writing on it, written in black paint. I can barely make out the words at first, but the binoculars help me read it. "Nicht Heute"

I put down my rifle. I don't need to know German to understand what it means. "Not Today."