

## Within

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My breath is slow, but my heart is racing. While my mind is challenging light itself across galaxies of thought, my eyes stay still. Unmoving. Staring discontented at the surface upon which my arms anchored themselves as my hands held up my head, and under which my legs hung, clad in unpolished shoes and simple trousers, and crossed with insecurity.

Despite the weight of my head as it rested on my arms as they rested on the desk, nothing burdened its weathered structure, as did the two items that lay dead center of my vision, the table, and the broader view of the room, in all its stale disorganization. The very fabric of the universe seemed to curve, to bend, to pull away from the two items, the two remnants of a distant past, two gifts of hell I had not dared approach, lest open, for years on end. They sat, no, rather stood as a stronghold, filling my eyes with their curious yet painful visage. If I were to shift my gaze, it seemed, a ghost of the objects' form would follow, accompanied by a phantom of the past.

My fingers trembled as I reached out to stroke the embroidery on the cap, the crest with the words *Dieu et mon droit* inscribed on its surface, the perfectly round but red-stained holes that punctured its sides. "God and my right," it said. "God and my right," my father said. "God and my right," said the 700,000 British troops as they marched forth under skies darkened by dying souls, and over land dyed red with the blood of the Great War.

I pulled away from the grasp of that bewitched cap, the cap of he whose son I used to be. My chair creaked and complained under my shifting weight as I leaned back from the table, my hands retreating to my lap under the desk. He died more than 15 years ago, and yet I still cannot escape him. Despite the medication. Despite the therapy. Despite the love of my friends, now long lost. His omnipresence haunts me, his memory an imprint on my heart, installed when I was young and free and malleable. The time that passed made no difference to the pain I felt at the mere thought of my father, my inspiration, my best friend, my hero, simply not being there anymore. At the mention of that man, I would ball up in the darkest corner of my thoughts and stay there, protected by the blackness, shielded by the evil.

Behind this blackness I stayed. I lost interest in life, I didn't want to learn. Most school days were cut short as I slipped away unnoticed. I never went to college. I never took any chances, I never allowed myself to hope or to try. I blocked out all possible ways I could start feeling again. I never mentioned it. I never moved on. My mind was frozen for the rest of my life in the same state as that when the wound was still fresh.

I bring my attention back, away from my hands as they fumble with each other in my lap, to the desk and its burden. To the left of my father's tattered cap hovers, seemingly as if it could sink into the surface or float off at will, an envelope. Old, the corners warped with moisture and its surface stained with dust and age. It seems frail, yet, given how it bent the air in the room, indestructible. Volatile, even, as it challenges me to open it. Dares me, implores me, to see that which I know will destroy me. And for my whole life, time and time again, I backed away. I refused. In the time since this very envelope and this very cap, torn by war, came to my doorstep, I had allowed my gaze to rest on them and my fingers to feel their shape but once before this moment, and for the purpose of pulling them out of the depths of my cabinets and bringing them to this very spot as they rested now: laid out before me, awaiting my confession, and taunting me with hope.

My arms moved my hands up from my lap and onto the table, sliding across its surface with a rough scratching as loose threads in my coat caught on undulations in the wood. My hands met with the envelope, slid it back towards me, and then proceeded to lift it up and hold it before my eyes, as if pausing for my brain's consent to continue. I had vowed never to open this letter, to read my father's last words, to allow myself to feel my father's touch again, even if only for a moment. Yet here I was, letter suddenly in hand, by way of my arms working against my mind, absently bringing my hand up to tear at the seal, which promptly crumbled at the touch. The ease of the task caused my eyes to tear. I knew I could not wait any longer to face my past, but this knowledge made it no less impossible to bear. In all my days, never had the pain been this fresh. This present.

My breath is slow, but my heart is racing. While my mind is challenging light itself across galaxies of thought, my eyes lay still, unmoving, watching idly as my hands open the letter. As they watch idly, my fingers run across the top edge of the now exposed letter, the clean white surface stained yellow by age and ignorance. As I watched my hands, my very hands, pull letter from envelope and begin to unfold it. Unknowingly, my lungs seize the air within them as I hold my breath. There is no sound. There is no noise but the crinkling of paper as I unfold the letter, crease by crease. First my father's signature is revealed and the closing statement, which I could not bring myself to read before having seen the former statements.

As the final crease of the letter unfolded in my hands, a single tear of blackness leaves my eyes and trails down my face. My mind collapse in on itself, my heart crushed under its own weight, my thoughts drowned in their own blood as they fell away. As my conscience becomes blank, my vision cleared, my mouth dry, and my mind emptied.

In that moment everything disappears. There is nothing in existence but my hands, my eyes, and the letter. I have to wipe my eyes of the tears in order to read the words upon the page, the words within which a soul was weaved. The words through which my father would speak one last time to his son. The words which had waited a lifetime for one person to gain the courage

To look within.

*“My Dear Boy,*

*I missed so many opportunities ...”*