

Perspectives



Published in *Perspectives* in 2009 by Future Leaders (www.futureleaders.com.au)

The Call To Arms

Sarah Kingston

The people came early, just as they had done on that day in 1915. They were a mass of Sunday hats, rare silk stockings, best dresses. On this day, however, there were no songs of glory and patriotism, no flags waving, no street vendors. Around mid morning the ship pulled in, slowly, silently. No brass band for this entrance. The waiting crowd watched silently, shading their eyes with gloved fingers. Children pulled anxiously at their clothing, uncomfortable in their stiff collars and straw hats. All movement ceased, however, as the ramp was lowered and they began to wheel out the casualties.

The men seemed hollow and crooked, far removed from the strong, brave youths that had sailed away from the quay only a few months ago. Some lay on stretchers, others hunched in wheelchairs, as though attempting to disappear from beneath the patronising, repulsed stares of those who stood, safe and sound, on the dock. Still others walked, concerned nurses hovering at their elbows, ready to catch them if — when — they fell.

Towards the back of the crowd a girl hovered, her gaze slipping between the wounded soldiers and the streets behind her. She watched the ramp vacantly, waiting. Another man in a wheelchair appeared, and she cleared her throat, straightened her hat, and fixed a smile on her face. The smile didn't waver, even as he was wheeled towards her by an orderly. Even when he was so close she could smell him, mud and decay and blood that they had somehow not managed to wash away. His

face was haggard, eyes like dugouts. She stepped forward – trying not to wrinkle her nose – and kissed him on the cheek.

‘Welcome home, darling.’ She carefully avoided looking at him too closely. If she let her eyes focus on the bandaged stumps below his waist, she felt like she might be sick. Keeping her eyes on her shoes, she took the orderlies’ place, pushing him slowly away from the crowd.

‘I really am very glad you’re home, Jim dear.’ People were staring. She tried not to notice. ‘It’s been simply ghastly without you here to help me.’

She had to strain to hear his murmured reply. ‘I don’t know how much help I’m going to be, Frances.’

Properly cowed, she quickened her pace, head bowed.



There seemed to be ruined men everywhere. Lining the streets, sitting hunched in bars, waiting in line for their pension on Mondays. And, always, that one ruined man, Jim, sitting in his armchair at the window, watching the world go by beneath the border of the shade. He never went out. Frances supposed he couldn’t, really. Not without her help. But he never seemed to show any signs of wanting to go out. Not like before the war. Nothing like before.

‘I’m going out, Jim. Do you need anything before I go?’

He shook his head slightly. ‘No. Of course not. Have fun.’

She was halfway to the door when he called her back. For the first time in what seemed like days, he turned and looked her in the eyes. ‘Frances ... you know I love you, don’t cha?’

Staggered by the sudden question, she smiled uncertainly. ‘Of course, Jim. I know that.’

He smiled slightly, and, for a second, she could see his old self in his eyes. Only for a second, though. He turned back to the window, huddling in his old wool coat.

‘Good,’ he said quietly. ‘Good. I’m glad you know that.’ Silence. ‘I’m ... I know it’s hard. You’re such a pretty gal. You deserve someone better’n me.’

Slowly, awkwardly, she walked back over to him, bending over to give him a tiny kiss. ‘You’re enough, Jim. My war hero.’

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She smiled, trying to ignore the sickly smell of him that filled her nostrils. She no longer knew whether the smell was real, or whether it was her response to the useless hunks of meat that were attached to his hips. She straightened, checking her appearance in the mirror on the wall. 'I'll be back soon, darling.' With that, she left him, in a swirl of perfume and powder.



There was a new man working at the grocer's. A new man — strong, healthy, tall. In Frances' eyes, he was perfect. And Jim — Jim with a crooked back from days spent in a wheelchair; Jim with empty, dugout eyes; Jim with useless stumps where his legs should be, just couldn't compare. The new man had clear blue eyes and straight teeth. He wasn't a cripple, a drunkard or a basket case. He reached up to the top shelves for the things that Frances couldn't reach, and he smiled at her over the shoulder of the veteran he was serving. The veteran, still dressed in his standard-issue jacket and balanced precariously on a set of crutches, winced every time the door of the shop slammed in the wind. The grocer shoved the man's parcels into his arms, and he tottered slightly under the weight. As the digger limped towards the door, the grocer kept his eyes fixed on Frances' face. He smirked slightly, and nodded towards the other man's twisted, broken figure, struggling to open the door.

'Boy, if I had ended up that way, I'd probably have put a bullet through me skull. Can't stand the thought.'

Frances didn't respond, shocked into silence. The man continued, the beginnings of uncertainty beginning to colour his tone. 'I'm bloody glad I managed to avoid getting shipped off.'

Again, Frances didn't respond. Through the numb pervading her mind, a tiny flame of outrage began to flicker. The way this man was talking about the men who had left their homes, risked their lives and given the best years of their life to their country set her teeth on edge. Suddenly, the man across the counter didn't seem to be strong and brave and handsome. He was small, smaller than Jim had ever seemed, and his eyes had a sly, cruel look to them.

She shook her head slightly, as if clearing her thoughts. 'I'm sorry. I don't think I'll be wanting these right now.' Not once looking back, she swept out of the shop, breaking into a run as soon as she reached the street, heading, without delay, for the place she knew she was meant to be — with Jim, ready to stand beside him in the battle ahead.



Sarah Kingston wrote this in 2008 when she was in Year 11 at Moreton Bay College in Queensland.