

I Was Only 13

Pattie King

It was still early, not even the guards had come to deliver the morning rounds as I unsteadily climbed out of bed and over to my small bedroom window. As I pushed up the sliding glass of the frame, I slowly inhaled the fresh and invigorating autumn morning air. I could taste the crisp flavour of the awakening honeysuckles and smell the soft, musty aroma of the surrounding earth. The maple tree, situated beyond the entrance gates, was lit up like a Christmas tree as the sun's rays placed a golden aurora around its almost bare branches. Around the base of the tree, there was a blanket of wrinkled auburn leaves that were perfectly placed to create a neat circle around the tree trunk.

I had to resist the urge to run outside and roll in the crisp leaves, just as we used to when my brother and I were kids. We would chase each other around the backyard, throwing leaves at one another, laughing until our bellies hurt. I missed my family so much; I had not seen them since I was taken in January. The good memories of the past were the only thing that I had left to hold onto, now that the war had shrouded my life in fear and uncertainty, putting a hold on any dreams for the future.

I was called up to fight in the cruellest way. There was no warning; just one phone call that sealed my fate. I used to read about the child soldiers in Africa and how they were kidnapped and subjected to a life of violence and cruelty. But that wasn't what had happened to me. They just took me out

of my home to some faraway place at the other end of the country. They tried to comfort me with brochures and information about where I was going, but a piece of paper brings little relief when you're fighting on the front line, fighting for your life. There are people out there who are trying to save me, trying to crack the code that will free me from my enslavement. But they are years away from finding any sort answer, and until they do, I am stuck here like so many others, far away from the love and support of my family and friends.

The war is like a never-ending nightmare, there is no relapse for the distress and anxiety which travels though our battalion, faster than a wicked rumour spreads around the school yard. There is no break from the endless turmoil, and even when sleep overpowers my desire to remain conscious, my dreams are littered with the cries and sounds of war. The pounding of the machines, the endless poking and prodding of guns, and the pessimistic views of the lieutenants and generals — they all resemble the loss of hope, as they look at us with the kind of pity one would give their dying puppy or deranged cousin.

They said we wouldn't survive the war, that one day we would be forced to run from the safety of the trenches and into the enemy's territory. They told me I would never finish school, be employed in a job or buy my first house. But these last couple of months have made me realise that none of those things are important any more, that materialistic items which seem so essential in our lives are actually worthless. When the day comes when I will have to march into the enemy's lair, I won't miss the fact that I will never graduate or earn money; but rather, I am so appreciative that I have a loving family and supportive friends, whose loyalty and encouragement has never wavered, despite the distance separating us. I am so grateful that I was able to see the beautiful countryside and marvel at how the sunflowers turn their faces to the sun. That I was able to relish the cool autumn air and stand at the

bottom of a waterfall and feel the cool, fresh spray of the churning river on my face.

The sun was escalating higher into the sky, brightening the land for a brand new day. Stiffly, I closed my window and turned towards the calendar, as a pulse of excitement shivered through my body. Today was the day she was coming to see me, my golden-haired saviour whose endearing love fills the room and squashes away the fear and unhappiness in my life. I longed to feel her warm arms around me again and hear her soft, gentle voice reassure me that everything will be okay. She is the one who gives me hope that I will survive, and rejuvenates my desire to continue fighting.

I had just climbed into my bed when the nurse knocked on the door and entered my room. She carried my breakfast tray and morning pills, which she placed lightly on the bedside table. She turned towards me, with a much too common smile of over-enthusiasm.

‘Ready to fight the war, Emily?’ she asked.

I grimaced, and gingerly extended my wrist towards her.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said as she inserted a drip into my arm. ‘Try to relax and let the little red chemo-soldiers fight it for you.’

I tried to return her smile before I rested my head back against the soft pillows, turning to face the window. Outside, the wind was slowly disturbing the neat circle of leaves around the maple tree. Seeing the leaves take flight, I thought of my mother’s aeroplane, which would be leaving soon. I smiled in anticipation of her arrival, and along with my courageous red soldier comrades, I continued to fight the war waging inside my body.



Pattie King wrote this in 2012 when she was in Year 12 at Warwick State High School in Queensland.