

# When The Dawn Was Grey

A short play based on the poem "*The Deserter*" by Winifred M. Letts

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**CHARACTERS:**

**Mother:** 40 years old, English

**Deserter:** 19 years old, English

**Soldier:** 30-40 years old, English

**Gunman:** 21 years old, English

**TIME:**

Late autumn 1915, close to the beginning of winter

**PLACE:**

Mother's home, Soldier's camp

*Curtain rises. We see MOTHER sitting at her kitchen table. She is making a quilt. On one of the patches we see a rabbit. Mother is quietly humming a tune to herself. After a moment, she accidentally pricks herself on her needle. She brings her finger to her mouth. When she pulls her hand away, she smiles brightly and laughs.*

*Mother resumes work on her quilt. Suddenly, a gust of wind causes the curtains by the kitchen window to flap wildly. Mother quickly goes to shut the window, and the flapping ceases. She straightens out the curtains before walking back over to the table. She spots a cup on the table. It was **his** cup. She gently holds it in her hand and admires it, as if it were an artifact in a museum.*

MOTHER

*(aside, reminiscing with the cup in hand)*

My son died a hero.

*Pause.*

My son had been the bravest of us all, willing to put his life at risk in order to protect those who mattered most. I remember sending him off that day. He had first embraced his siblings and made them promise always to be kind and to help out when needed. He then moved on to his father, took his hand in his, shook it with much vigor, and told his father he would make him proud. Lastly, he came to me. It wasn't until he got to me that I could see the tears in his eyes, tears he had been holding back so courageously. His eyes flashed wildly against the summer sun. I had seen that same look in the eyes of hares being chased.

*Pause.*

So, I wrapped my arms around him and held him for what I didn't know would be the last time. He had thrown his arms around me, holding onto me as if his life depended on it. Maybe it did? I told him the things I would say to the hares when I caught them. I said to him, everything would be alright and soon the fear would wash away. He only let go once they started calling for the soldiers. He had almost forgotten that he was one of them. With a deep breath and a quick wipe of the eyes, he pulled himself away, stood up straight, wished us the best, and went on his way.

*Silence. Mother places the cup back on the table.*

They told me he died when the dawn was grey. My son... My son died a hero that day.

*Lights go out on Mother. Lights come up on SOLDIER and GUNMAN. Soldier is standing very stoically. His uniform is neat. It should be*

*neat enough to suggest the question of how he could keep it so clean with all of the destruction around him. Gunman is scrawny and little. He is shaking in the cool autumn air. The snow might fall soon. It smells like it.*

*A few feet away from them is DESERTER. He is on his knees, trembling in fear. He keeps his head down, unsure of what to say or do. Gunman can also be seen shivering, but it is not due to the cold. Gunman's shivering begins to agitate Soldier.*

SOLDIER  
Stop that! You need a steady hand, boy.

GUNMAN  
I am trying my best, sir.

SOLDIER  
Not good enough.

GUNMAN  
Yes, sir.

*Soldier turns his attention to Deserter and smirks. Why not have a little fun with his meal before he indulges himself?*

SOLDIER  
*(to Deserter)*  
I knew it would be you.  
*Pause.*  
I knew that out of all these men... *you* would be the one to run.

DESERTER  
*(exhausted, out of breath)*  
I wasn't running-

SOLDIER  
Save your words, boy. We don't know how many of them you have left for this earth.

DESERTER

Sir, please! Let me return. I will stay with you and fight. I know I had a lapse of judgment but I swear to you that I will...

*Gunman is shaking his head at Deserter. Soldier notices Deserter's gaze is fixed on Gunman. Soldier snaps his head towards Gunman, catching Gunman shaking his head just before he stops.*

*Soldier understands this interaction and smiles before turning back to face Deserter.*

SOLDIER

So... you *do* admit to running?

*Deserter goes to speak but stops himself once he looks back at Gunman, only for a moment. Soldier laughs merrily as he adjusts his gloves.*

We cannot waste our time on boys like you. We need strong men... men like wild animals with a thirst for blood, particularly German if they can help it. I want wolves, lions, beasts that can rip a man apart with their claws.

*Looking Deserter up and down.*

You... are no beast, and you have proven that fact. You are no predator.

DESERTER

I may not be a beast, but I can fight! Please!

SOLDIER

If they run once... they will always run again.

DESERTER

I swear to you and to God, I will not run. Let me stay and fight.

SOLDIER

Your number has gone up today.

*Pause, inhaling the air.*

This glorious dawn! Shame about what's to happen.

DESERTER

Spare me, please! I beg of you. I made a mistake! I had a moment of weakness, but I promise it will not happen again.

SOLDIER

Men do not beg. They take what is handed to them and carry on with their day. Boys will shout and shake, crying out for their mother's help.

*Pause.*

Where is she now? Where is your poor mother? What would she think if she knew that this was your end? Her son... killed by his fellow man.

DESERTER

What else am I to say to make you change your mind?!

SOLDIER

Nothing. Your time is up, boy.

*Soldier walks over to Deserter and grips his collar. Deserter flinches and shuts his eyes. Soldier gets into his face, smirking, enjoying watching Deserter squirm.*

*Soldier furrows his brow, thinking for a moment. He smiles and turns his head to look at Gunman.*

SOLDIER

*(to Gunman)*

What's his name, boy?

GUNMAN

His name?

SOLDIER

Yes. Tell me his name.

GUNMAN

Why?

SOLDIER

You do not ask the questions here. Tell me his name.

GUNMAN

Williams. David Williams, sir.

SOLDIER

Would you say that the two of you are... good friends?

GUNMAN

I...

*Soldier chuckles lightly, already knowing the answer.*

SOLDIER

*(to Deserter)*

David Williams?

*Deserter nods his head.*

Williams the Deserter. That is what the rest of my men will remember you as.

DESERTER

I did not desert this camp.

SOLDIER

Really? Then what did you do?

DESERTER

If I were a true deserter, I would not be here.

*Pause.*

I was caught.

SOLDIER

Goes to show that my men are quick to catch their prey.

*Soldier looks over at Gunman and nods his head.*

DESERTER

*(with throbbing heart and sobbing breath)*

Please, do not do this! I can fight! Let me fight! I can become the beast you desire me to be!

SOLDIER

A beast is not something you become, boy.

*Gunman walks over to Deserter and kneels down. We hear Deserter softly pleading with Gunman to stop.*

GUNMAN

*(quietly, to Deserter)*

It'll be alright. It'll be over soon.

DESERTER

You'll meet me on the other side?

GUNMAN

Some day... but I will.

*Gunman knows he has to follow orders no matter how much this hurts him. Gunman ties the blindfold around Deserter's eyes before stepping back next to Soldier.*

SOLDIER

Any last words?

DESERTER

No. I see now that my time has come. I just ask that you make it quick. You can fulfill a dead man's last wish... can't you?

*Soldier sighs and looks over at Gunman. Gunman steps forward as Deserter trembles and mumbles a prayer to himself. He hears Gunman loading his pistol.*

SOLDIER

*(to Gunman, quietly)*  
Aim for his head. Make it quick.

*Gunman's hands shake as he struggles to load the pistol.*

*(a bit louder)*  
I said make it quick.

GUNMAN

*(voice wavering)*  
Yes, sir.

*Gunman loads his pistol and aims it at Deserter. Gunman tries to steady his hand to aim at Deserter's head. Soldier becomes frustrated by the continued silence.*

SOLDIER

For the love of- Give that to me!

*Soldier grips Gunman's pistol. They struggle with the weapon throughout.*

GUNMAN

I've got it, sir! I can do it!

SOLDIER

If you had it, the boy would have been dead already!

*In the commotion, Deserter attempts to stand. Just as Deserter raises himself from the ground slightly, Soldier takes the pistol from Gunman and aims it at Deserter. Soldier pulls the trigger as Gunman forces himself to look away. Deserter lets out a groan, and all is silent again while the gunsmoke fades in the cool autumn air.*

*They watch as Deserter takes a few steps backward and rips the blindfold off of his face. Deserter's eyes are no longer wild with fear. His breaths are not labored and no longer filled with sobs. Deserter had been shot in the heart.*

*Gunman slowly turns around and meets the eyes of Deserter before Deserter falls to the ground, dead. As Gunman moves to exit, Soldier kicks the back of Gunman's legs, causing him to fall to his knees. Soldier then stands in front of him, and Gunman's body freezes as he keeps his eyes on the ground.*

SOLDIER

You said you were good friends with him?

GUNMAN

I... Yes, sir.

SOLDIER

You talk to him?

GUNMAN

About what, sir?

SOLDIER

Your life? His life?

GUNMAN

Yes, sir.

SOLDIER

What do you know about him?

GUNMAN

He told me he had a sweetheart back home waiting for him. They... they were going to be married.

SOLDIER

Pity. Poor girl's waiting on a dead man.

*Pause. Aims pistol directly at Gunman's forehead.*

Was this your idea?

GUNMAN

*(looking up at Soldier)*

What?

SOLDIER

You said you talk to him. You know things about him, intimate things.

*Pause.*

Was it your idea for him to desert this camp?

GUNMAN

No, sir! It wasn't!

SOLDIER

Whose idea was it, then?

GUNMAN

None of ours, sir! We tried to talk him out of it. We told him what would happen if he was caught. He said... he said he didn't care about the consequences, because no matter what happened, he would just try to keep on running.

SOLDIER

*(aside)*

Mmm, they will always keep running.

*Soldier lowers his pistol, and Gunman lets out a breath, his body relaxing completely.*

*(to Gunman)*

Write to his family. I am sure you know where they are. Tell them how their son has made a mockery of their name. Before that...

*Soldier looks over at Deserter and scoffs.*

Pick up the body and bury it in the trenches.

*Soldier moves to exit but stops. He turns back around to face Gunman.*

I hope you learned a lesson today.

*Soldier exits.*

*Gunman takes a moment before looking over at Deserter. Deserter lies dead on the ground. Suddenly, snow begins to fall only around Deserter. The sun finally rises. We see the beauty of the field shining through. If only he had been able to enjoy it. Gunman looks towards the rising sun and smiles brightly.*

*Mother walks onto the stage carrying the finished quilt. She smiles as she walks over to Deserter and kneels beside his body, looking over him. Gunman takes out a piece of paper and pencil from his jacket and begins writing on the paper.*

*Mother lays the quilt over Deserter's body and runs her hand over his chest, soothing what looks like a sleeping boy.*

MOTHER

My son died a hero when the dawn was grey.

*Pause.*

He had thrown his arms around me, holding onto me as if his life depended on it. Maybe it did?

*Silence.*

They told me he died when the dawn was grey. My son...

*Gunman kneels beside Deserter's body and places his hand on Deserter's chest. Mother looks up at Gunman and smiles.*

I've been waiting for you to come and visit us.

GUNMAN

I know.

*Pause.*

I'm sorry.

MOTHER

I made you a gift.

*Mother gestures to the quilt.*

I was making it for him, but... it deserves a home.

*Pause.*

Who better to have it than my son's protector?

GUNMAN

Pardon?

MOTHER

He often wrote to us about you. He called you his protector.

*Pause.*

Thank you for being by his side for as long as you could.

*Silence.*

*Mother takes the quilt off of Deserter's body. She does not see the body, but Gunman reacts. He is reliving that fateful day.*

*Mother hands Gunman the quilt. Gunman is hesitant at first but takes the quilt in hand.*

My son has made his family proud. I can still remember your writing. When the dawn was grey...

MOTHER

My son died a hero that day.

GUNMAN

Your son died a hero that day.

MOTHER

Take good care of that quilt... as if your life depends on it.

GUNMAN

I promise you I will.

*Pause.*

I shall cherish this quilt and care for it until the end of my days.

*Mother nods her head and exits the stage.  
Gunman holds the quilt close to his chest as he  
looks down at Deserter's body.*

*We are left with the image of Gunman, bowing  
his head and holding onto the quilt as Deserter  
lies on the cold, firm ground. Suddenly, the snow  
ceases to fall. It is silent. No winter wind  
blowing by. No morning birds singing their  
songs. All is silent.*

*Curtain.*

*End of Play.*