

# The Angle

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## The Coward

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## The Coward

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Yes, sir, I'm glad about one thing - the thing has finally come to a real war." Fat, puffy fingers twirled the drink round and round on the table. "I only wish I were young enough to be with our young men. They'll be sorry they ever tangled with us! I have a nephew" -here he wiped his nose on his sleeve- "that's gettin' all the adventure I'd be dying to have. To the young fellas belongs the vengeance. Lucky young dog. Ha, there'll be no holdin' him when he comes back. Why I bet ... "

### Cover Page Footnote

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## THE COWARD

"Yes, sir, I'm glad about one thing — the thing has finally come to a real war." Fat, puffy fingers twirled the drink round and round on the table. "I only wish I were young enough to be with our young men. They'll be sorry they ever tangled with us! I have a nephew" — here he wiped his nose on his sleeve — "that's gettin' all the adventure I'd be dyin' to have. To the young fellas belongs the vengeance. Lucky young dog. Ha, there'll be no holdin' him when he comes back. Why I bet . . ."

The young soldier stood at his post facing the lines. On his right and left other sentries stirred restlessly. He leaned outward against the breastwork that edged the high ridge of the hill. Close before him loomed other misty hills and below lay the damp, checkered farmlands. Wherever a defense line was set up, the view seemed always the same. From many such heights had he watched and waited. He liked to lose his thoughts on the soft edges of distant color, and with the sweep and roll drift into timelessness. But not this day. His eyes kept narrowing. He felt troubled somehow.

No matter where he gazed in the morning light, his thoughts kept carrying him to home, to a low house with roses budding in the yard, his dog running to meet him, to a warm, happy kitchen, his mother moving pans about the stove. Would he ever see those roses, his dog, that kitchen, or Mom again? And Julie — would he see her again? He stood once more by the train and beheld her looking up solemnly into his face. What he had read in her eyes that last week she finally spoke with words. "You must come back to me. You must come back." She had said those words simply, but he knew that her whole life lay in them. "You must." He had promised her as solemnly and as simply that he would. He would. He would come back — to Julie and to all those things.

The first shell hit, bursting but yards away, and showered him with dirt. He dove behind the sandbags and stayed where he had fallen, grasping at the grass, waiting for the falling fragments of earth, steel, and bloody flesh. The bombardment was a heavy one. The soldier lost all track of time before the final hail of man-made brimstone ended. Then he pulled himself up to the edge of the

bunker, dirt slipping off his body as he moved. The boy peered over the rim into the newly ordered chaos that once, some ages ago, had been neat farmlands. The fields were covered with bursts of smoke, flame and raw pits. Through the swirls of smoke moved a hoard of bayonets and men — blood-hungry and wild, men who wanted to kill him. And still the only thought that held his mind was a desire for home. It was then that the threatening danger found fear in him. This was battle, perhaps his last. Maybe he would die. What would happen then? There would be no more Mom, no more kitchen, no more Julie. She had said he must come back. He would. He had to.

He dropped back into the dirt clutching his head. Shells were killing, maiming, annihilating all around him. He crawled deeper in his hole and sobbed.

He was cringing there, sobbing, when he felt a sharp pain in his ribs. It felt like a kick but he knew it could not be. One of those random shells had found him. He was hit and would die. But he could not die. He had to go back. Home was waiting. Julie was waiting. He felt another pain hitting him and a bony hand pulling at his shoulder. It was death, trying to turn him over. He was going to see Death face to face, man to horror.

He opened his dusty lids and there silhouetted against the terror stood Death — thin, vague, dark. But Death wore three stripes on its uniform. It was Death in the guise of a sergeant. But he knew its tricks. It was trying to fool him, but he was too smart for that. He would not face it. To do so would be to die. He wouldn't face it. He wouldn't die. "Go away, go away. I don't want to die," he sobbed. "I've got to go home."

Death answered, "Get up, soldier, And fight."

"No, no, leave me alone."

"Get up, damn ya. Get up."

"Go away, please go away."

"Fight, ya coward," screamed Death.

"I want to go home. Mom?"



The sergeant never heard him. Death shouted and drew its pistol. The boy felt the pain and it hurt. The pain was sharp, but still it was pleasant, for with its impact the battle and the terror dissolved soundlessly into darkness — gentle and welcome. He was safe. He had escaped. There was Julie waiting for him at the end of that long, dark tunnel. The train had taken him right into his backyard. “Julie, I’m coming,” he whispered. Wait for me.

Even as he was breathing this, they dropped the blanket over his face and carried him down the hill. They carried him on to an unknown grave in that unknown land to a coward’s burial.

“Who’ll buy me that drink to toast our lads with?”

Charles Lyons