

# Connections

You never stop seeing their faces.

No matter how evil they were, no matter how long ago, their faces, those *faces*, never leave you. It is their final revenge, a mocking *go-to-hell* from each and every one of them. For every person you murder, every life you take, those memories eat away at your own, like maggots in dead flesh. I can still remember that first man, the first time I killed. His face is frozen, crystal clear behind my eyelids every time I blink, every time I sleep, or dream. That sunken face, and those eyes, haunted and sad, reproaching me, are the first thing I see in the morning and the last thing I see before sleep. They will never leave me.

I don't even remember why I killed him, what battle we were in, whether he or I was at fault. But I can still see his face, the sunken lines that spoke of pain and hardship, the coarse beard like vicious wires, each hard year spent toiling for breath, for a life that mattered. I can still see the calloused skin, the thin hair like faint wisps of cloud, and there's a numbness in my head, a burning cold that steals over my body, and I can't move, I can't breathe...

And when the panic calms, when the guilt of twenty years of war and death has subsided, when there's nothing but silence and isolation, those eyes stare out at me from the void. Unspeakably sad, they gaze at me as if beseeching me not to do it, not to do the one thing that will break me in my very soul. But I do it anyway. And those sorrowful eyes, pools of regret, shatter into thousands of shards of memory and loss, sharp as a dagger. They cut into me, splinters of glass and hate, every pore, every wiry hair, every year of his life that I have stolen from him.

What right do I have to take that away? What right does anyone have to steal something so precious?

These questions; they have haunted me, hurt me, for years, gnawing away at my soul like rats. There is no escape, not from the eyes that plead with me, not from the hundreds of other eyes that are frozen in my mind, the sorrow and the loss and the grief that will never stop hunting me. I try to live my life, to carry on, but I blink, and his coarse beard flashes before me; sleep, and I see his calloused skin, so vivid, even after so long; dream, and he shatters into dust and memory before me.

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I cast away my gun, my uniform, all those contracts I signed, all the medals I've earned. I watch them sink to the bottom of a deep lake, until there is nothing but my crimson jacket in my hand. I throw it, and it lands on the surface, floats there for a moment, spreading on the water like a patch of blood, and then sinks. And yet that image does not leave me, the years engraved in that man's face, the skin that tells his story of pain and toil. They left me, all the people I cared about, and now I have no one left. No one.

You never stop seeing their faces.

They only seem to grow clearer over time, and I cannot escape their reproachful eyes. They watch me, day and night, like dark gods. I can see the man's traditional clothes, the way his beard covers his lips, sealing them — he cannot speak to me, cannot tell me his story, the story I most want to hear. I want to know what his life was like, what he did, who he loved, what he fought for. I want to know the story of the man I killed. Part of me feels like that is a bribery, not to the dead man, but to myself. But I still want to know.

Perhaps I want to know because it will remind me that this despair and grief and pain — that this is not the end. There is a better world out there, and maybe I *should* fight for it. Perhaps I want to know because the sorrowful eyes deserve to tell their story, deserve to have someone who will listen. Perhaps it is to convince myself that mine will not be a story of darkness. That this will not be the story.

I will fold it into myself, these people, this fear, but it will not be the whole story. It will not be my story.

I do not want to stop seeing their faces.

I want to remember them, remember every detail, because they deserve not to be forgotten. I will not forget his face, the sunken lines that speak of a life lived to the full, the coarse beard like unbreakable wires, each hard year spent toiling for a life that mattered, for that better world. I will not forget the calloused skin, the thin hair like faint wisps of cloud, and those eyes, staring out at me from the void. Full of agony and despair and fear. Full of joy and laughter and pain. Life — life is pain. Pain, and joy. Joy *because* of the pain.

I see it in the man's face. In every line and age mark. In every wispy hair. A life lived — in happiness. The pain of leaving this world because of how wonderful it had been.

I do not want to stop seeing their faces.

They do not deserve to be forgotten.

Rhiannon Ashby

## Emma Shaw Creative Writing

Thrashing, kicking, wailing around... like a fish out of water. The internal struggles of each and every individual, emotionally and mentally. As life progresses and the mundane monotonous rhythm of life presents itself and becomes ever more apparent. A thick black sea consumes you. Gasping lungs, collapsing. A fear of what you assume to be the inevitable. Drowning.

I once thought of this sea as one of my own. Oh, how self-centred of me. This sea is not my own. This sea is for anyone and everyone that has had the unfortunate pleasure of being devoured by their thoughts, worries and problems. It's for the hopeless and helpless. The out of control, the dreamers who dare to dream despite their disparity. Thoughts swirl around in my head like a whirlwind. Everyone has found themselves in this sea at some point, delving deeper into an unknown all terrifying black abyss. Overwhelmed even you.

Something my mother said inadvertently, gave me the most important lessons regarding this sea. I feel in my experience, although just 16 years, is that some people are born with anchors tying them down. Some, through desperate struggles and a prolonged battle against an improbable escape, ascend their chains. Some better at staying afloat than others. And for a few, the consumption of sadness is comforting. Which one was my mother? The anchors that bound her had chains as secure as Fort Knox. Thick and rusted. A momentum of all the malicious, unjust and vile things she had seen and experienced.

It disturbs me.

Another unwanted memory. Another drop of water in the sea. It was one of many, many dysfunctional days. I was cooking us a bountiful splendour. The sun rose above the crooked trees, wailing their arms around signalling that it was far too early for breakfast. My mother stood by the open window, fag in hand, eyes like caved in crescents. Long streams of smoke caressed her clothes and she stared into a world far, far out of her reach. It was so unexpected, so nonchalantly spoken. The profound effects of a 9-word sentence...

So, when a woman who I perceive to be a joke. With no ambition. Incurable. Whose idiotic display of childishness had numbed me to the cruelty of the world. Turns to me at 4 o'clock in the morning and says: "I want to do something with my life Emma."

I sank.

How could she? I glared at her in disbelief. I turned my attention to the reflection of a petulant downtrodden, whimpering child in the kitchen window. Was this me? My eyes, screamed something fierce. What is this? I hate it. No, I despise it. A punch in the stomach. Gut wrenching internal conflict... guilt. It's considerably easier to be angry and blameful, rather than empathetic and understanding. You can't fix people all you can do is love them.

What I now saw was a broken woman. One whose past had created a Tsunami that engulfed her. Never letting her get a grip. And still she was, if not more so, human than myself. In spite of her adversity and what her experiences should have led her to believe... even what the

sea of thoughts inside her head told her... she still dared to dream. That is the bravest thing I have ever seen anyone do.

I used to think that, to be friends with someone, you had to be the same. It made sense. How were you supposed to connect if you didn't both like the same things? I always thought it was like those paper chains you used to make, where you'd cut a doll out of paper and then it pulled out to create a whole line of little girls holding hands. All the same.

I remember making them when I was really little. I think I must've folded the paper wrong or something because the girl on the end had half of her arm cut off.

"Whoops." The teacher had laughed, snipping her off the chain. "There we go, all better now."

The broken doll went in the bin. That was the way it worked.

Then there's Carys Lucas. She doodles on her hands and talks back at teachers. She snaps pencils just to hear the sound. She's not like me. That's how I know we can't be friends.

Once we were paired for a writing activity in English and we talked a bit. She was funny. Afterwards, though, I asked if she wanted to come round to my house for tea and she pushed me over.

"Shut up." Carys had yelled. Then my mum had shouted at her mum and Carys was being dragged away and there was gravel in my hands and tears prickling over my eyelids. My palms stung. My eyes stung. Everything stung, stung, stung.

I knew I should've stopped there, but I couldn't. We were never going to be friends, and yet I really wanted us to be. I started waiting by the school gates for her each morning. Every time she saw me, she'd push me over and wouldn't talk to me. It stung a little. I got used to it. We walked into class together.

Then one day she didn't turn up. I waited by the school gates even as everyone went inside. It was winter and frost coated the ground like dust. I could almost feel it crawling up my legs the longer I stood there, shivering.

I crept out to the road, looking for her familiar battered book bag. Nothing. I leaned out further, stepping into the ice-slicked road and craning my head around the corner.

The headlights of a car appeared, spiralling around the corner like a pinwheel. It was going very fast. I tried to step back but my foot slipped. Ice. I was falling- forward. The car was still coming, lights blinding.

Then there was a hand on my collar, yanking me away. I fell backwards onto the pavement. The gravel stung my hands but I was used to it. I looked up. Carys looked half-worried, half-angry.

"Be careful." She snapped, then offered me a hand. I took it.

We were friends from then on. The thing with connections, as it turns out, is that you don't need to be the same. Sometimes those odd dolls at the end of paper chains can be taped together. And sometimes, although they don't look as pretty, those messy bonds are the strongest ones of all.

*Amelle & Warkworth*