

Mrs Corey's Lament

Here I am walkin' the roads again cryin' me eyes out. But I just can't stay in the house since I got the news about Pat. He's everywhere in there. If I sit at the kitchen table there he is, six years old again and askin' me, "Ma' can I have more of the cake?" Or, "Can I go out with Jimmy to play football?" I go in the cowshed and there he is again in the summer of '14, a big strappin' lad of 18 milkin' the cows and his backside too big for the milkin' stool, sayin', "Here Ma' we'll have to get Daddy to make a new stool."

In his old bedroom I can still smell him off the blankets... I never washed them after he left see.

I can't bear it now. It were bad enough to lose my Paddy to the sickness last winter but I could bear that, he had a good long life anyway.

But Pat, Pat, he told me he'd be back by Christmas with some extra money for things we needed round the farm. He didn't come, not that Christmas, nor the next, nor the one after and now he's never comin' at all.

I know the neighbours think I'm gone crazy and Mrs Mac told me there's whispers about puttin' me in the mental. I don't care really what they do – there's only me left now and no-one to leave the farm to when I'm gone- no nieces or nephews, no cousins, no nothin'. The neighbours have been kind to me though, they're takin' turns to look after the farm for me. But they turn their eyes away, they can't look at me 'cos their sons are all safe so far. I'm the first from the village to lose a son, though there's lots been lost in Omagh and Castlederg and all the towns round about.

If I'd known it was goin' to be like this I'd a' tied him to the big post in the barn to keep him home. But he said it'd be fun, an adventure, an' he was always up for a bit of fun anyway.

He'll have no fun where he is now, tho' maybe they play football in heaven.

I don't know, don't care really. They can put me in the mental if they want- I can't go back to that house, not with Pat's ghost sittin' there at the table.

John Monaghan

Frank's Letter

(with interjections by Cathy Donnell as Resa and John Monaghan as Frank)

My dear Cousin Resa

Frank: What side of the bush did yon rose spring from?

Just a p.c. to acknowledge your welcome letter received some weeks ago.

Resa: Feels like a lifetime.

I would have written a few lines before this if I had not been expecting to go on leave any time

Resa: Heaven forfend

but it seems now that leave has been put back for a few weeks, on account of things being a bit unsettled.

Frank: Bloody Fritz and this bloody war!

I am having a tip-top time

Frank: as Colonel 'Stupid' Platt says

out here

Resa: Wherever 'here' is

at present & am not too keen about getting leave. This is a home away from home.

Resa: What's wrong? Is James..?

Frank: Lying to her is getting so hard.

I will now conclude.

Both: Phew-ee.

*I hope you are well. Very best wishes from
Your affect. Cousin Frank Cost.(Costelloe)*

Resa's reply

(Written by Cathy Donnell with asides by John James and John Monaghan)

*Dear James,
Received Frank's letter last week. It would seem that you're both having a jolly time.*

Frank: If only..

James: I wish..

It will soon be Christmas and I'm so sad to hear that you'll probably not be home.

We are all well. Your Uncle John calls most days. He's aged a lot since you left. October was wet and cold. The spuds proved a good yield this year again, thank God, but with only myself here the work was hard and in the end I had to ask for Martha's help.

James: Her sister

Frank: Shortage of fit men these days

James, you know how I hated you joining the British Army but I'm starting to understand your reasoning.

James: At last

Redmond might succeed. Please God he will. Mrs Corey got bad news about Pat.

James: Poor Pat

The poor craithers is walking the roads weeping and lamenting. There's talk she'll be taken to the mental.

James: God help Mrs Corey

James please mind yourself and look out for Frank, you know how reckless he can be. The fox took two chickens

Frank (to James) I told you fix that henhouse on your last leave
but I've fixed the henhouse so that not even ould Nick himself could get in. I'm sending you socks and an Aran jumper.

James: good, we'll need the warmth for the winter.

Come back safe James. I'll be needing you.

James: I wonder why she said that?

Resa: I'm pregnant

Love from your wife Resa

James's letter to Resa

(written by John James and John Monaghan)

My dear Resa

Frank is writing this for me. I hope when you get this everything is well with you and the family. Is your Mam still there in the cottage?

Resa: She went home last week

I am pleased the potato crop turned out so good. Pity you didn't have more help from the village.

Resa: I couldn't ask Uncle Dan, he's so thin these days and you know the neighbours haven't spoken to me after the rebellion in Dublin

Things have settled a bit since Frank wrote to you. I am hopeful for leave soon. I'd love to have Christmas at home.

Frank wants this business over with now.

Your loving husband James

The Truths I Couldn't Tell

I have no words to tell you
about the squalor and the smell.
No letter I could ever write
can describe this man-made hell.
I have no words to tell you
what it's like to see no grass;
nor words to paint a picture
of our fearful dread of gas.

I have no words to tell you
how our nerve-ends all scream stop
when we stare out at no man's land
but still, we carry on 'over the top'.
And I have no words to tell you
how it feels to see a mate
get stuck in the mud and injured
and you must leave him to his fate.

But I have the words to tell you
whether British, Hun or French
when this cursed war is over
I'll not set a foot in any trench.

John Monaghan

A Wonderful Experience

During the First World War the staff members of Belfast Public Libraries who enlisted in regiments of the British Army remained employees of the library on half pay if they corresponded regularly with the Chief Librarian, Mr Elliott, and his assistant, Mr Goldsbrough.

Joe took a deep breath and leaned over to dip his fountain pen into the inkwell he had set on the rough wooden floor beside the bed. He blotted the ink on a scrap of paper then began to address the right hand side of the postcard.

Central Library, Royal Avenue, Belfast, Ireland.
B.E.F.
5th July '16.

He turned the postcard sideways to write his message.

Dear Sir, At present we are up to the ears in work through this great offensive. I will write a letter at 1st opportunity. At present I have only time for a postcard.

Maybe it's for the best I've not time to tell him in more detail what I've seen these past few days. How could he even imagine the state of the lads we've had come through our station, their heads and limbs swathed in bandages and worse? Often I can barely find the dressings under all the mud and blood. A right job it is to get the muck off them so I can clean their wounds and change their dressings to get them ready for the hospital trains.

He stopped writing and sighed, scrunching his eyes closed and opening them again. The long hours of work, straining to see in the dim light of the windowless tented ward wasn't helping his weak eyesight. It was as well that they had declared him unfit for active service. If he'd been up in the firing lines, he probably wouldn't have been able to find a Hun even if the devil was right on top of him. His lips twitched in a rueful grin at the thought.

Like as not, it's as well I don't have the space to write about the wounded. I don't want to whinge. Even in a great offensive like ours, there'll be wounded, and perhaps it's best not to call attention to such things. When we win the war the suffering will be forgotten. I will tell him about the German wounded though. Not that I would gloat, but they know when they've met a better army.

We have had many German wounded prisoners in hospital and they look a beaten lot.

The Boche soon won't have the spirit left in them to fight back. Look at how many of theirs we've wounded in only a few days. They'll soon be suing for peace, so they will.

Joe frowned.

There are a right lot of our own wounded coming in too. More than the Germans, if the truth be told. I've heard rumours about how many bodies are lying out there. Our lads. In No Man's Land. But the rumours mustn't be true. Our casualties can't be as high as some say.

I'm almost out of space on this postcard. What else shall I tell him? I won't say anything about how relentless and hard the work is. We've been working day and night since this offensive started Saturday last. Halfway through the week and I can count on my fingers, and maybe a few toes too, the number of

hours of sleep I've had since it began. I'd nod off if I don't will my eyes open, and even when I do snatch some sleep, in my dreams I hear Lieutenant Morris calling me to fetch the iodine or change a dressing.

But sure, that's nothing to whinge about. Look at those wounded Tommies coming into the station nearly buried under their filthy bandages and they laugh and joke, begging cigarettes from the orderlies. They're a marvel, so they are. Their courage makes me proud to tend to them. Such brave lads. And so young, the lot of them.

God save us, you wouldn't think it's scarcely more than half a year since my twenty-first birthday, sure you wouldn't? It was only a few days past when I shipped out November last. But I feel much older than that now. Mr Elliott, in his last letter, praised the wonderful experience I'm having and said it will widen my knowledge of life.

Joe reached inside his unbuttoned tunic and scratched at his rough wool flannel shirt. The temperature had dropped several degrees since the offensive began a few days ago but it was still clammy in his uniform and heavy boots. It was time he got this postcard finished and was back on the ward. What else should he say? If only he had had a bit more sleep, his head might not be so woolly. It felt like the morning after a few, maybe a right few, jars of porter. An idea struck him and he scribbled hurriedly.

I have great expectations of a victorious end to this great offensive. Yours Sir, Joe Fitzsimons.

That was it. He wasn't the sort to boast, but it was not a lie.

Joe set the postcard carefully on one corner of the bunk to let the ink dry and re-buttoned his tunic. He put the lid on the inkwell and set it in the tattered Red Cross Disinfectant Soap box he kept in his kit bag before he hurried out of the tent.

As he stepped into the tent which housed the orthopaedic ward, Lieutenant Morris hailed him from the other end of the large structure.

"Fitzsimons, there you are. Remove that dressing for me."

The medical officer indicated a patient lying in the bunk next to the soldier he was examining.

"Yes, sir."

Joe strode down the centre aisle to the patient the medical officer had indicated and began unwinding the bandages on the soldier's right forearm. As he unwrapped the layers of the dressing, the unmistakable putrid smell of infection assailed him. The smell didn't bother him anymore, but he felt a moment of pity for the soldier. The young corporal lying on the cot had had his broken left leg amputated below the knee at the field station. Fragments of shrapnel had pierced his right eye but its removal had had to wait until he arrived here yesterday. Before Lieutenant Morris spoke Joe knew that the soldier would be returning to the surgical theatre to have his right arm

amputated, like as not, at least to the elbow. He heard Lieutenant Morris's cluck of annoyance behind him and was surprised by the medical officer's uncharacteristic outburst.

"Blast it, anyway. I had great hope the arm would mend."

The medical officer looked at Joe.

"Move him to the surgical tent."

"Yes sir."

Joe carefully replaced the dressing and summoned two stretcher-bearers to move the patient. As they transferred the patient to a stretcher, Joe stepped out of their way.

"Fitzsimons, fetch iodine tincture and fresh dressings. After I have a look at this wound you may re-dress it."

The medical officer's tone of voice was still irritable as he glared at the ragged wound on the leg of the patient he was examining. Joe turned to look at him, then glanced back at the young corporal who was being borne away by the stretcher-bearers. The injured soldier was silent and looked as dejected as any of the German prisoners Joe had seen. If he survived, he would be invalided back to England. What sort of life would the poor man have there?

Joe shook his head slowly, thinking of the many soldiers who had passed through the station with horrible injuries during these last few days.

I have great expectations of a victorious end to this great offensive.

That's what he'd written to Mr Goldsbrough not half an hour ago. Some of the pride and confidence he had felt in the righteousness of the campaign ebbed away. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly as his thoughts churned.

A disturbing idea emerged: could Mr Elliott be wrong? The Chief Librarian had always encouraged him to improve himself, to read and learn everything he could to widen his knowledge, and had praised his decision to enlist. As well as doing his patriotic duty, he would meet people and visit places that he would never have encountered otherwise. But how was it a wonderful experience to watch others' lives ruined? He should have heeded Mam when she implored him not to join the Colours. Standing behind the lending desk in the library, surrounded by books, and, in his free moments gaining a different knowledge from their pages, would have done him rightly.

"Fitzsimons!" Lieutenant Morris barked.

Joe was startled out of his thoughts.

"Yes, sir. I'm away for them this minute."

As he walked briskly up the aisle to the supplies cabinet at the end of the tent, the last sentence he had written on the postcard ran through his mind. He shook his head, chiding himself for his naivety.

He rested his hand on the doorknob of the cabinet and closed his eyes for a brief moment.

God willing, this wonderful experience will soon end and I shall be home for Christmas.

[Dianne Ascroft](#) writes historical and contemporary fiction, often with an Irish connection. Her series *The Yankee Years* is a collection of Short Reads and novels set in World War II County Fermanagh.

This story was inspired by Private Joe Fitzsimons's postcard to Mr Goldsbrough, the Assistant Chief Librarian, at Belfast Central Library, on 5th July, 1916, during the first days of the Battle of the Somme. The postcard is in the Belfast Public Libraries collection (FIT-010)