

An Unforgettable Tragedy

by Raeesa Lambat

The wind blew through the open window and into Shannon's face, waking her briefly from her daydream about Luke, the guy sitting in front of her.

"Shannon, what did I just say?"

"Huh?" Shannon looked up at the teacher.

"You weren't listening were you? Next time, pay attention or you'll be seeing me after class. Jasmine, explain to Shannon what we've been doing so far."

Jasmine, one of Shannon's friends gave her a sympathetic smile.

"We're writing a report about ANZAC day. It can be anything to do with ANZAC, maybe the wars, the people who stayed behind, or even just what ANZAC means to you. It's due at the end of the week, and needs to be at least a page long."

"Thank-you Jasmine," said the teacher. "It's nice to know *someone* listens. You got that Shannon?"

Shannon nodded, secretly wishing death upon the teacher. She hated school, and now she had this added assignment to put up with. If it wasn't for her parents pressuring her to get good grades, Shannon wouldn't even have bothered. She wanted to become a model, and they didn't need to know science or maths or English. She wasn't like Jasmine who was a brainiac and actually enjoyed learning, and besides, *Luke* never noticed smart girls.

The bell rang, and with a sigh, Shannon launched herself out of her chair, relishing the fact that she could now go home.

"Hey Shannon," Luke nodded to her as he left.

Shannon felt her insides melt.

"So how was school today?" Shannon's Mum asked her over the dinner table. "Got any homework?"

"Only a stupid English assignment about ANZAC," Shannon muttered.

"ANZAC, did you say?" her father looked across at her. "Interesting."

Shannon rolled her eyes.

"Why don't you read that diary your great-grandmother Kate got from your great-grandfather's best friend?" Mum looked at me. "It might help."

Shannon groaned. Her great-grandfather had died at the ANZAC war, and his best friend had given her great-grandmother a diary recounting his point of view on her great-grandfather's death. Shannon's mother had already read the diary, but Shannon had tuned out when her mother was talking about it. Shannon now desperately wished she'd payed attention, that way she might have avoided having to read the silly thing herself.

That night, Shannon sat in her room with the diary in her hands. It was an old, battered brown thing that was nearly in bits.

Sighing, she opened the book to a random page and began to read.

31 April 1915

I crawled upon the mud of Gallipoli, watching, waiting, looking for any sign of those soldiers.

Crouching behind a thick bush, I glanced around for any movement, saw none, and settled down for my long wait.

I was thirsty. I could feel that my mouth was dry, almost like there was sand in my throat. Pulling out my water bottle, I looked at its contents. There was a little under half, so I put it down. Who knew when I'd get fresh water again. It wouldn't do to waste what I had now.

Picking up my rifle, I glanced around again, but still the area seemed deserted. It was silent, too silent. I desperately longed for some noise, maybe the wind rustling the trees, or some birds singing, but there was nothing.

The silence pressed on me, weighing me down. Fear crept up my spine, causing me to shiver even though it wasn't cold. It was a miracle that I'd survived this long, and an even bigger miracle if I survived longer. Where was the enemy? Could they see me? Were they hiding? Why hadn't they shot me yet? Maybe I was as alone as I thought after all.

WAIT! Was that a footstep? I listened intently, my ears straining, a ball of fear in my mouth.

A twig snapped.

I froze. Glancing around quickly, I searched desperately for the newcomer, but . . . nothing. I saw no-one.

Someone touched my shoulder.

I gasped, whipping around, my rifle in my hand, ready to blast the man to bits.

"Daniel?" a voice whispered.

"Charles?" I stared at the man in surprise. "Bloody hell Charles! What were you thinking creeping up on me like that? I could have killed you!"

"Sorry," Charles plonked himself down beside me.

Charles was about my age, actually, a little older. He was twenty, and had a young wife, newborn baby and little brother back at home. He and I had become close friends during our time here.

We were both silent for a while, waiting. It wasn't as bad with a friend beside you, but still, the fear wouldn't leave me.

"We should go," Charles finally said. "Nothing's happening here. We may as well go help the others."

I knew I should go, but panic and fear had a too strong hold on me, rooting me to the floor, to safety, where I might survive.

I shook my head.

"I'm going to stay," I told him. "You can go if you like."

Charles didn't move. He wouldn't leave me alone here, and I knew that. We waited some more in silence. I don't know how much time passed, but before I knew it, it was happening.

The enemy burst through the bushes – I don't know where they came from – raining bullets everywhere!

I yelled and dived for cover, shooting back as soon as I got the chance.

A stinging fire hit my shoulder, inflaming it. Looking down, I saw that a bullet had pierced it, sending a raging pain against my limb. My arm couldn't move. This was the end. I saw my mother and younger siblings, remembered my dead father. I waited for death, it didn't come.

Our people must have heard the noise, because Australian soldiers were now in the clearing, firing away at the enemy. Blood and bullets flew everywhere, while bodies dropped like bowling pins. There were more of us, so they soon retreated, leaving blood and smoke in their wake.

I felt someone pick me up and dump me on a stretcher. I was in a haze, I remember yells, and red, smelt the seared flesh.

Then . . . nothing.

I woke up – probably some time later – in a tent where I saw a nurse and officer standing and talking to each other. My arm was still sore in a bandage, but it didn't stop me from glancing around. There was a body beside me, a dead body. I looked fearfully at his bloodied face, hoping against hope that it wasn't . . . oh no . . . it couldn't be . . . NO . . . but it was.

Charles.

No! No! NO!

Horror crashed over me, my breath heaved, my body trembled, a knife seared my chest, but no tears came.

I felt like my heart had been ripped out.

Why him? Of all people, why did he have to die? He had family to return to for God's sake! How could this have happened? Then it struck me. It was my fault, all mine. I had been too coward to leave with him, had chosen safety instead of helping my comrades. Now, because of that, he would never see his wife again and his child would grow up without a father. A good man had died today. A very good man had died before his time, leaving before he was meant to.

All because I was a coward.

The shame and misery overwhelmed me, preying on my conscious. I forced myself not to give in, or I would go mad. It was a massive burden, being responsible for someone's life, and even worse when that someone was your best friend. The tears finally leaked, and I sobbed my heart out.

Later that night, the commanding officer came and told me that I could no longer fight. My shoulder wound was too serious. I was to go home.

I smiled for the first time that night, feeling warmth entering my emptiness.

Shannon was crying by the time she had read the first entry. That man Charles, he had been her great-grandfather. Daniel must have journeyed to visit Charles' wife, and had given his diary to her, that's how her great-grandmother Kate had gotten it.

Shannon wept for the loss of her great-grandfather, and the fact that his child – her grandfather – had grown up without his Dad. How many other families had that happened to? How many others had suffered like Charles and his family, *her* family?

Shannon flicked back through the pages and read the part again about when Daniel had realised that his best friend had died. She felt anger towards Daniel for his cowardice, yet also pitied him at the same time. He had been afraid. At any minute he could have *died*, his life ended forever. It must have been horrible, knowing that in just a second, all the childhood years you survived through, all the happiness and sadness you experienced, all your memories, could be gone, never to return, replaced with a lifeless, unfeeling corpse. A shadow of what you once were, a mockery.

Shannon felt sick. Here she was, getting hung up about school and a boy, too lazy to do even the simplest of tasks, concentrating only on socialising and the latest fashions, and there in the diary were memories of how a man had fought for his life and survived, had lost a friend due to his own actions and had accepted the responsibility and burden of what he had done.

Charles' family must have been anxiously waiting at home, hoping against hope to hear news of his survival, only to find out about his death. Yet they had carried on, they hadn't despaired. They'd had courage despite the sadness in their hearts. Shannon knew this because how else could she herself have been here today.

The times during the war had been hard, very hard. Those people had lived through a horror that she hoped she would never have to live through herself.

Picking up the diary, Shannon turned to the next page and read as quickly as she could. She found out that when Daniel got home, he had felt too ashamed and miserable to talk to people or look them in the eye. His family were also grief stricken due to Daniel's father's death earlier on that month, but still, they worried about him, as a family should. The war had changed Daniel. Two weeks later, he left his home village by the seaside and journeyed to find Charles' wife. He knew where she lived because Charles had told him. Kate had been heart-broken when she heard about Charles, but she tried to carry on bravely, inviting Daniel into her home as a guest. Daniel spent a few weeks at Kate's house, and during that time, he spent time with and fell in love with Kate's younger sister, Lauren. He also met Charles' younger brother Anthony.

Shannon read on and on. Every night of that week she picked up the diary and read until her mother forced her to go to bed.

Basically, Daniel seemed to find new life at the home of his best friend, and Kate treated him like family – until she heard the details of how Charles had died. After that – though she didn't really blame him – Kate

just couldn't seem to look at Daniel in the same way again, and asked him to leave. It seemed like she just couldn't bear the thought of her husband choosing to stay with his friend when he could have walked away and survived to see her and his son again. Heart-broken, Daniel showed her the diary in the hope that it would make amends. It worked. Kate realised just how horrible and guilty Daniel felt, and forgave him. Eventually, Daniel and Lauren married, and the whole family – including Kate and Anthony – moved to Daniel's home village, to stay with his family. On his death bed, Daniel gave the diary to Lauren and Kate, as a recollection of what had happened to him and Charles.

Once she finished reading the diary, Shannon picked up a pen and paper and began her assignment. She had decided to write about what ANZAC meant to her, and now, with Daniel's memories, the words just flowed out of her.

On Friday at school, Shannon handed in her assignment, convinced that she had aced it for once. She was right. At the end of the lesson, the teacher asked Shannon to read it out to the rest of the class, and Shannon did.

"Good afternoon everyone," she began. "My paper is about what ANZAC means to me personally, and how I feel about everything that happened during that ANZAC period.

"Basically, up until a few days ago, I didn't really care about ANZAC. ANZAC to me was just a bunch of guys who died at war, Big deal. Until, on Monday, I started reading a diary given to my great-grandmother by a friend of hers. When I read that diary, I wasn't just reading words. I was reading feelings and emotion, a man's pains and joys, his experiences during the war and the time that followed. I realised the fear and horror of what these people had to go through. I mean, imagine having to go to war, not knowing if you'll die or live to see another day. Imagine your family waiting at home, praying to God that you're still alive. The suspense is unbearable. Life these days is easy. We have sophisticated technology and there are new discoveries everyday. Basically life is a breeze. I mean, a teenager's biggest worry will be what they might wear to a party, or the next school assignment. Their minds are filled with the latest fashion, and looking cool in front of others. Well, you know what? In those days, they couldn't worry about things like that. They had much much more bigger things to worry about, and when I think of what they had to go through, I must say that I'm proud of our history. I'm proud of what they did, and the courage they possessed to do it. ANZAC to me isn't about a bunch of people just dying for their country. It's about a bunch of people being terrified, yet still having the courage to go on. It's about a bunch of people who never gave up, who always kept on going, even when they ran out of food and drink, when their friends died, or when all seemed lost. It's about a bunch of people who gave up their lives for the good of others.

"Now how many of you think you could do that?"

Shannon sat down to a *big* round of applause. She saw Jasmine flash her the thumbs up and grinned. She seemed to see the world in a whole new different light now.

'When I'm older,' she thought, 'I'm going to join a charity group and do my best to help those who need it.'

Half-an-hour later, the bell rang, and Shannon walked out of her classroom into the brilliant sunshine of the day, feeling as if Charles, Daniel and Kate could see her now.

Feeling glorious.