

Cher Ami

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Forest of Argonne, France, 1918

Cher Ami, a Black Check Cock homing pigeon trained by the U.S. Army Signal Corps, was responsible for saving hundreds of American soldiers after being dispatched with a message attached to her foot that read: WE ARE ALONG THE ROAD PARALELL 276.4. OUR ARTILLERY IS DROPPING A BARRAGE DIRECTLY ON US. FOR HEAVENS SAKE STOP IT

I should explain something about how she works. It's simpler than you'd think. There's what we've taught Cher Ami and there's what she's always known. She came knowing, for example, that the earth is a humming. The humming some kind of sound map of pattern pointing directions. She understands the earth is always geographic north, magnetic north. With the fibers in her inner ear, she hears sounds falling far below either your ears or mine. Sound resting below any wind, any weather, any water, any air, any mountains.

We've taught Cher Ami to know our coordinates. We've taught her to use the humming in the map, as we want it used. You see, that's the trick. We've taught her our coordinates and what to do with the low falling sounds between them. We've taught her to trust her ears.

And when ready, the soldiers moved Cher Ami, 25 miles in a small, warm box, from one destination to the other.

They moved by armored cars, through the broken villages and unpruned orchards of France, past the dazed faces of women washing clothes at pumps. When they reached the point where the earth was too torn for wheels, they took to marching the remaining distance, taking turns carrying Cher Ami in her small, warm box.

They marched her deep into the Argonne forest, in between the German trench string, three lines in. Past the first line—simple trenches, shell holes, listening posts. Past the second—wired trenches, firm in the hands, unwavering. Past the third—machine gun covering, targets, entrenched natural and man-made barriers. Then only wire. Miles of it, barbed over dirt and at the bottom of streams. Then enemies and the first fire. Marching turned to the dragging of spines, guts, heads, muscles, hearts, memories, tactics, and Cher Ami over the mud. The radios cut out. They found no room for their voices. They took to throwing hand signals. They worked themselves into some trenches. In there they lay scattered, stressing to hear through the fire, unsure anymore what they were listening for. Just pieces of themselves down there, talking to their gods, under blighted trees.

Before this destination, on the other side of a tough wide ocean, before fire, before they needed hand signals or birds to fly messages, they spent their days and nights on streets filled only rarely with troubles. Streets filled with dice throwing, girls eating strawberries in doorways, church steeples, jokes, the back firing of motors. On Sundays they gathered and read psalms, ate spaghetti Bolognese. At night, when the sun moved elsewhere, they went calmly to sleep, knowing the light would come again, predictably, easily, soon enough. On these streets they moved whenever they wanted and with little thought to how free and easy moving came. And when it was less than just right, they knew right would come soon enough.

Images and reminders of former ease sucked away the freedom to move in a tight, dark trench. The fact lurked just off course. Just on the margin of a slowly deteriorating defensive line. Nearly as out of sight as the targets hunted.

With any animal you know food comes first. It's the food that brings the trust. So we started there. We've taught Cher Ami that the earth holds two boxes, located at different coordinates, on opposite, unpredictable spots of the earth. We've taught her to trust that, if we shut her out of one box, she can take flight to the other food-filled box. With the humming of the earth, the sound patterns, she can always keep the two points of her boxes recognizable. We've taught her tactics not so different from our own, but she is naturally so much better.

Cut off in position the most present sound came from the ghosts of the absent. Or, when, intermittently the gas cleared and fire subsided, by way of a natural push toward wanting breathing to continue. A sound like no other came in the hollow of the trench, and the sound rarely left the head, the heart, or the muscle. They paced over the sound of distance in their hearts.

To remind them of where they'd been, or who, they kept their pockets stuffed with letters and lodged responses in their heads, their hearts and their muscles. Compositions not with words but with heaviness, with the variation of weight and air running through the body. They responded to the ghosts of the absent. Those who still walked those old sidewalks, stood in the doorways, sat behind steering wheels, filled those old kitchens. They responded, explaining how they got lost. Or, they responded in explanations of similarities and differences between the two points on earth. How, at both points, days repeat themselves. One day, and then another day. How strangely, little extinguishes the two. Death for example. All goes in the same direction of gone. The same extreme unctions.

I wish you could see Cher Ami. She always looks so patient. Her coo helps ease the stress. When you peek in at her, you feel the steadiness in her little black eyes. It says she's ready. Just a little twitching in her neck, her legs. We feed her what we can. She always gets something. Usually breakfast biscuits and pieces of apple, some snatched abandoned beans left to dry on a wall. But sometimes these days it's seeds we find and even the lice off our greatcoats. We always apologize when its seeds or lice, but she never seems to mind. She eats it all the same. We are always careful to feed her. You know, its like she knows we're sorry. It's like she gets it.

And when they could they spoke to each other. When they could they lit a candle. They gave each other words within flare lights, under skies low with cotton color, their voices thin and words small. They listened to each other. They listened to the earth, a humming through the zigzagging, and hunted for pattern.

I want to say I have your letter safe in my pocket. I want to say I'm writing you under a beech tree full of bird songs in a field of young alfalfa. Clean, clear air and no flies. I want to describe the peasant childrens' eyes, when they try to sell you their wax-gray, over-priced chocolate. Or, how it looks when a war pigeons clears the tree line. How there are no longer surprises. How the most homelike thing I can think of right now is a Bosche helmet full of water and 200 men in a cramped wine cellar, all just wanting to sleep. I want to say don't bother to send pajamas. There is no room for those things. Where I am they won't find me now.

They kept an ear out for patterns, keeping count and easily losing count. They counted what they could: the dig in and dig out, the big pushes and fall backs, how many nights of sleep, how many mornings the stretcher-bearer arrived.

They listened for what they'd never hear. They listened to how they trembled, scattered, crawled toward water. Disjointed, splashed into the dust. Sipping soup and coffee, with few tactics and too much time.

Remember how we memorized the 46th psalms? 1. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble? 2. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea? 3. Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof? 4. There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad

the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the Most High? 5. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early? 6. The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: he uttered his voice, the earth moved: he uttered his voice, the earth melted? 7. The LORD of hosts is our refuge? 8. Come, behold the works of the LORD, what desolations he hath made in the earth? 9. He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire? 10. Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth? 11. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge?

The best compositions came when the sun went elsewhere. When the heart couldn't change position. Cold air and the simple croaking of some near rodent. Too dark for dreaming. Or, the best compositions came with the sun, at the entrance of a dugout, some chalk clay walls lined with lice and rats. Waiting to stand to, waiting to light up, waiting to move out.

Cher Ami doesn't come off like she's caged, but we all got a version of ourselves when we're caged. I know I'm cooped up, but actually I don't think I've met my caged self yet. Don't worry. I've seen it. Some of the guys have gotten there, but it's got no one way that it looks. You just know it when you see it. Maybe you don't see it as much as hear it. Some soldier, a hole or two over, late at night when we can't move.

No I don't think I'll get that caged feeling because I feel too much of the size of what's out there. It's strange. Being holed up but aware of how much is out there. Like when it's freezing out and your sweating under your clothes anyway or its summer and your freezing.

One soldier's wife scolded him for having written out her whole name: Eveleyn. She said *it's just too cold and dignified*. She said *send more of those dried wild flowers in the mail*. In exchange she'd send *pajamas, tooth powder, and some hymns*. Remember: *He shall give His angels charge over thee to keep thee in all thy ways. Is this letter cheerful enough? I do hope so. It seems some duty to keep.*

One soldier's wife confessed she had her *own model of closure figured out* and he folded her words over in wet darkness. A patch of quiet, the sound of waiting in a shelter, a far fire subsiding. He folded her words over and over.

Tonight I'm thinking of Spaghetti Bolognese. I wish you'd make me dinner tonight. The worst part is crawling under fire to water streams to drink. Makes you, too aware of what you don't really have.

I will not call you Evelyn again. I promise. I will know your name. Don't worry I'm hard as nails and never in better health in all my life. I always sleep well. Can keep up with the best of them.

I want to explain horror to you.

There are tactics that involve thinking. There are tactics that involve remembering. Then there is luck.

And when they could they reached for each other. Through the humming and airplanes, covering one long yard at a time, with messages and with signals. From shelter to shelter, the fire louder, limbs taken. And when they couldn't reach the distance they yelled messages toward the line, loud and hopefully plucked from the fire.

We didn't just carry in Cher Ami. We had four carrier pigeons altogether. But we let three go and we watched two of them get blown up before they even cleared the trees. But using them is one of our tactics. You know, when these soldier birds change direction, so does the sound of the air. They detect the smallest of changes nearly before they happen. Someone said they have iron particles in the beak. But still, they are up against so much.

Waiting orders to move, in the hell built from such a cut-off, a dead radio.

Spaghetti Bolognese said the soldier.

What said the other soldier.

Spaghetti Bolognese said the other soldier.

On that day just two guns remained. Two boxes of ammunition. Dozens of moving hearts. Fading muscle. Such a long list of names, numbers, permanently incomplete.

Considering the darkness—this involves thinking.

The trees unpredictable placement—this involved remembering.

When the fire would come, when the silence—this involved remembering, but mostly luck.

Slipping a message around the last pigeon's ankle, pushing her from her box of food on earth—this involved it all.

So she flew above the tree line. When enemy fire hit her she hit the earth but then she inclined. She flew 25 miles in 65 minutes, above 194 men. A lost foot, a lost eye, but the girl was close enough. When she

declined from the Argonne forest, landing in her second box, it sounded a buzzer, alerting our troops. They found her on her back breathing heavily.

Ev? You know that night at Gowanus Canal, lying under the Carroll Street Bridge? One of those nights we tried to never go home? Remember the cars rattling overhead? It was storming. Remember the thunder and lightening? Remember I said how amazing that it could all be going on around us. The cars, the thunder and lightening and the rain. It felt like the earth was exploding but it wasn't. Everything rattled and lit up around us and we stayed still down there. I think that's how it is for Cher Ami in her box. I want you to know, it's all kind of like that. When you ask, that's how I'm going to explain it. I'm not sure how else to. Remember all that going on around us under that bridge? Each sounded heavier than a ton of steel? When I see you again, and I ask, please say you remember that.