

“The Trench”  
Chris Dickson

November 5th

1918

My love Emily,

*I hope the lack of letters I have sent as of recent have not worried you. I am terribly sorry about this. Either due to my ignorance of obeying every order I am given or that I am an expendable asset, I have been sent on a solo mission to give a message to colonel Gastly, who is at a trench in Northern France. The mission has been a success. I have arrived at the trench with message in hand. I was told to sit and wait for the colonel, and that is where I am now, writing you. Do not worry darling, I know you have probably heard many things about trench warfare back in Britain. However, I can assure you I will not be fighting, and that it is probably not as bad as they say it is. I miss you Emily. I desperately need your touch more than ever. I wish I could write more but I am afraid I do not have much time. I love you Emily. I will see you soon.*

*Much Love, Willem*

Stuffing this letter into his pockets, Willem hears a voice across from him. The man's voice is dry and raspy. From his eyes alone you can tell he's gotten used to things no man should get used to. His dead eyes say it all. He takes a drag from his cigarette and says, “Oye, heard you’ve got a message.”

Willem stands at attention and replies, “Yes sir, Colonel Gastly I presume.”

“No. I’m Lieutenant Evans. Gastly is not feeling well. Since I am second in command here, you can just tell me the message.”

Willem pauses for a moment, unsure of what to do. His orders were to give the message to Colonel Gastly and he has never disobeyed an order. However, considering the hell he went through the past five days to reach the trench, he gives himself a break.

Willem takes a deep breath before saying, “Very well sir, yes sir. So, sir, four days from now the Germans are planning a night raid with nearly all of their men. They will have rifles, machine gunners, artillery, and mustard gas. Our orders, given by lieutenant General Hughes, are to retreat back to St. Omer basecamp. Leaving tomorrow with all one-hundred men.”

Lieutenant Evans, while putting out a cigarette on the heel of his boot, says “Fourteen men.”

Willem jumps back in disbelief. One month ago, there were one-hundred men in the trench. Lieutenant Evans explains to Willem how the poor souls which he calls “Rat food” died. He goes into detail about the mustard gas leaks, the petroleum in the water supply, suicides, and diaseses. But Willem still can’t believe it. He starts to hyperventilate. Lieutenant Evans just chuckles, “First time in the trenches yeah?”

To calm Willem down he takes him to the camp where the last four-teen men have set up. The distance is short, however the wet mud and dead bodies they have to step over makes the trip longer. On the way to the trenches camp, Lieutenant Evans explains to Willem that it would be impossible to leave tomorrow due to food, water and sickness. They would need a few days to scavenge the support trench in order to find supplies. Willem doesn’t say it outloud but he is questioning whether Lieutenant Evans understands the severity of what is going to happen four days from now.

“Okay lad, this is where you’ll sleep.” Evans says pointing at a hole in the trenches mud wall, “Best to go to sleep now before dark so you won’t have to hear the rats chewing.” Evans then walks away.

Willem gets in his hole in the wall, lays down and gets his paper out. Writing to Emily usually calms his nerves. Just before he starts writing, he sees a rat scurry across the hallway of the trench. Willem leans out of his hole to see where the rat is going and notices a door. The door where Colonel Gastly is. The rat squeezes itself under the door, as Willem continues to stare.

Sounds of slamming begin coming from the door. *BAM. BAM. BAM.* It doesn't stop. Willem stares at the door as the stomping from the Colonel's boot continues. Once Willem lays back down he puts his paper away and attempts to sleep while the noise of the screaming, dying rat plays over and over in his head.

November 6th

1918

Willem wakes up to the sound of men laughing hysterically. When peeking his head out of the hole in the side of the wall, he sees a group of men huddled together exchanging money

and placing bets. Willem ignores this for now and looks towards the Colonels door, remembering the screaming rat and the thuds of the Colonels boots as he stomped the ground relentlessly.

*What could be in there?* Willem wondered as he stepped out of his hole and began walking towards the Colonels door. The mud is still wet from yesterday's rain and with each step Willem takes a deep imprint of his boot is left in the mud. Willems' heart begins racing as he gets closer and closer to the door but just before he can touch the door handle he hears a man yell, "Hey Geezer! Haven't seen you before. Want to play a round?"

Willem turns around to see all the men laughing from before staring at him. "What kind of game is it?" Willem replies.

"Get your arse over here and I'll teach it to ya!"

Willem walks back towards the men, leaving the Colonels door for another time. He makes sure to step in the imprints he left in the mud before to not make his boots even more muddy.

"Alright mate, so you hafta have heard of Russian roulette before right? Ya know one bullet in a revolver, spin the chamber, put the gun to your head, pull the trigger, last man alive wins the money yeah? Well we call this the Queens roulette. Over this trench wall, and two-hundred yards away, there's a German sniper waiting to pick us off. What we do is see who's got the bullocks to have their head peeking over the wall the longest. Whoever ducks their head back to safety first loses. You in?"

Willem does not reply, he just stares at the man in complete shock as he wonders why these men would risk their lives like that. All the surrounding troops stare at Willem for a reply but he is still in too much disbelief to even speak.

A trooper steps forward from the crowd, he's a large man who looks like he lived at a gym before he came to the trench. As he steps out he says, "He's not going to play, he looks like the type of bloke to order water at a pub, the wanger. Line me up against Mark, I'll put down three shillings."

"You don't have three shillings." Mark says laughing as the rest of the troops join in.

"Once I take them from your dead body I will. Get up on the fuckin' wall."

A wave of silence goes over the crowd as they hear from the large man's tone how serious he is. The large man and Mark climb up the wall together and wait for the countdown to stick their heads above the wall.

The troop who originally invited Willem over breaks the silence by yelling, “Alright lads, on my mark, you peek. Ready. Set. Up!”

The two men pull their heads over the trench, exposing their faces to the open field where a German sniper will soon find them. The game is intended to be a fun adrenaline rush, no man keeps his head up for longer than three seconds. However these men are stubborn. Ten seconds pass as the wind stops blowing, the rats stop scurrying, the clouds stop moving, and the world stands still as if nature itself is watching this very moment. Fifteen seconds now pass as the silence becomes loud. Twenty seconds. Thirty seconds. Forty seconds. *CRACK*.

The large man falls backwards as his body slams into the mud. The bullet went right between his eyes. Could not have been a better shot. Everyone stands still for a moment, trying to grasp what had just happened. A few men try to pick up the dead man's body as everyone begins to start moving from their frozen position.

Willem looks at the body for a second then quickly turns to look the other way, he starts to feel sick to his stomach. Before Willem walks back to his hole, he hears crying. He looks at the source and see's Mark sobbing, with his head still above the wall.

“Hey, get down!” Willem yells as everyone else takes notice of Mark still on the wall. Everyone starts screaming, “GET DOWN, GET DOWN, GET DOWN!” Mark's entire body is shaking as his sobbing continues. “GET DOWN!” They continue screaming. “GET DOWN! GET DOWN! GET DOWN!” *CRACK*.

Mark's body falls backwards and slams deep into the wet mud.

November 7th

1918

*My dear Emily,*

*Once again I will have to apologize. I will be home a little later than expected. There have been some minor setbacks, but everything will be back on track soon. My God Emily, writing to you just takes away all of my fear and anxiety. Not that I have anything to fear or be anxious about of course. As I predicted in my previous letter, the trenches are not so bad afterall. The men here all seem to have high hopes and even play games in their spare time. I just want*

*you to know that I am fine and apologize for the delay. Hopefully the next time I am writing to you it is on the way back home. I love you Emily. Will see you soon.*

*Love, Willem*

As Willem puts the letter into his bag, Lieutenant Evans walks towards him while taking a drag from his cigarette. Once close Evans says, "Walk with me."

They walk through the trenches for a while, not saying a single word to one another. The mud somehow seems to be getting thicker everyday and the rats seem to be multiplying. Lieutenant Evans stops walking and looks around. They are on a slight incline in the trenches and have a high view of everything, it looks like a maze.

"Look around," Evans says, "What do you see?"

"Well Sir, I see a gray sky, dark clouds, dead grass, mud, rats, and some dead bodies."

"If Aliens were to come down here, right where we are standing, and see what we are seeing, what do you think they would think they were looking at?"

Willem takes a long pause and replies, "I don't know sir."

"Here we have eighteen year old kids' dead bodies getting eaten by rats because two old men had a disagreement. So they sent their country's youngest to die for them." Evans takes a drag off his cigarette and continues, "They would think it was fuckin' art."

Evans flicks his cigarette into the mud and tells Willem that Colonel Gastly wants to see him. The sounds of Gastly's boot stomping the rat plays over in his head while they walk back to camp. Evans gives Willem a quick rundown on Gastly, that he is sick and seems to have gone mad. More importantly, to not take anything he says seriously. As they get closer to camp, Willem notices that all of the men have hatchets and are shirtless, sitting in silence. Some even covering themselves in mud.

As they approach Gastly's door, Evans pats Willem on the back and says, "Good luck mate." Willem knocks on the door and is invited in. The room is dark and filled with dead rats. Willem notices one dead rat smashed to a pulp which must have been the one he heard before.

"Sit down me boy," Gastly says, his voice sounding like thunder, "Evans has told me of what the Germans plan. But nevermind that. Have you seen the rats?"

"I have seen many sir."

"Do you look at them?"

"Yes sir."

Gastly begins shaking with rage and yells, “Do not look into the rats eyes! How dare ye! Do you understand me boy! You will not look into the rats eyes. Do not look into the rats eyes!”

Willem stands up to quickly leave but Gastly flips over the table that was between them. He begins screaming at the top of his lungs and chanting, “Do not look into the rats eyes!” Over and over again as Willem stands frozen in fear. Until finally the colonel stops and says quietly, “You may leave now.”

Willems legs feel weak as he slowly walks out the door and heads towards his hole in the trench wall. The sun is going down as a slight drizzle begins. He lays down in his hole and cries himself to sleep.

November 8th

1918

Willem is awakened by the loud roar of thunder in the middle of the night. It is raining heavily and as Willem looks out his hole he sees the shirtless men from before wrestling Lieutenant Evans to the ground. Once the men have Evans pinned down, one of the men grabs his hatchet, holds it up to the sky, but right before he swings down on Evans head, Gastly’s door swings open. Everyone stops what they are doing.

“Lads!” Gastly says, his voice sounding like thunder. “Once every one-thousand years comes a time where the underdog must fight! Where David and Goliath clash again! And tonight is that night! I am a liar. All of it! A lie! I have deprived you all and for that I am sorry. But I tell you now, do not fear the rat's eyes! Look into their eyes! Look at it, stare at it, gain its wisdom! Become one with the rat! The Germans think that they can take us over. To that I say rats eyes! To that I say they have not looked into the rats eyes like we have. They think they can surprise us? No, no, no, no. We will surprise them! Lads, tonight will strike. Tonight, we fuck them all! Tonight we kill every last German because we will have seen the rats' eyes. We know what it’s like to be in the dirt, and we will show them the rats eye’s through our own and strike them down dead! Dead I say! We will not take our guns, we will go there armorless, shirtless, gunless, with nothing but our hatchets! And we will strike them down dead! Down dead!”

While all the men begin cheering, Evans yells, “You’ve gone fuckin’ mad!”

Gastly walks over to Evans and pulls him up to his feet while the men still hold him tight. Gastly leans into Evans, forcefully grabs onto his face and begins to kiss him passionately on the

lips. Evans tries to break free but Gastly is holding his face too tight. Gastly pulls away his lips and says, "I've never been more sane in my entire life." Gastly then looks at one of the men holding Evans and commands, "Off with his head." The men slam Evans back into the mud and follow through with Gastly orders, beheading Evans.

While the men begin painting their bodies with the blood of Evans, Willem is making eye contact with a rat that sits next to him. He has been keeping eye contact ever since Evans was killed. However, his concentration gets broken by another loud roar of thunder, snapping Willem back into reality. He quickly stands up to see all of the men preparing for battle by holding rats close to their face and staring into them deeply. More rats seem to be spawning every second and scurrying towards Willem. He quickly grabs his paper and pen and sprints to Gastly's chambers, locking the door behind him.

*Emily,*

*I am currently writing to you in the Colonel's chambers. They've gone mad Emily, oh they've gone FUCKING MAD. They are shirtless using blood of a Lieutenant to paint eyes on their chest, THEY ARE THE ANTI-CHRIST. I don't know what to do Emily, they've gone mad, ALL OF THEM. Oh the RATS Emily the RATS. I CAN HEAR THE RATS. I CAN HEAR THEIR CLAWING AT THE DOOR TRYING TO GET IN, THEIR SCREAMS EMILY OH THEIR SCREAMS. HUNDREDS TRYING TO GET IN. THE RATS EMILY THE RATS. I CAN HEAR THE RATS OUTSIDE TRYING TO GET IN WITH THEIR PITTEPATTER PITTEPATTER PITTEPATTER SCRATCHING CLAWING SCREAMING TRYING TO GET IN. HUNDREDS OF THEM. I love you Emily, but the RATS EYES have sealed my fate.*

*Willem*

November 9th

1918

A British cavalry was sent over to the trench in northern France to see what was left of their British troops. Not a single dead British soldier was found. The war ended two days later.

