War Fiction audiobook scripts

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Do Not Worry

Letters home, France 1917 · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral British · 1 minute

Dear Mother,

Do not worry. I put that first because I know you will read no further until you have seen it.

We are in a quiet part of the line. I am not permitted to say where, but there is a church with half a tower, and a cat that has adopted our section and answers to nothing. The food is plentiful. It is not good, but it is plentiful.

Thank you for the socks. Tell Elsie I have named the left one after her because it has the hole.

I had meant to write that I am not frightened. I find I cannot quite put it down, and you would see through it anyway. So I shall say instead that I am frightened and quite all right, both at once, and that it turns out a person can be.

Keep my room as it is. I intend to be very untidy in it.

Your loving son,

Arthur

The Boy on the Bicycle

Home front, Ohio 1943 · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

In the summer of 1943 the most feared person in Dunmore, Ohio, was a fourteen-year-old boy on a bicycle.

Eddie Marsh delivered for the telegraph office. He had wanted the job for the uniform cap. Nobody had told him what the yellow envelopes were, and by July nobody needed to.

Women watched him from porches. When he turned onto a street, it went quiet ahead of him, house by house. When he rode past a gate without stopping, he could hear the breath go out.

On the ninth of August he turned onto Sycamore, and he got off, and he walked the bicycle the last half block.

It was his own house.

He stood at the bottom of the steps with the envelope. His mother came to the screen door. She looked at the cap. She looked at his face.

"Well," she said, gently. "You'd better come in and read it to me, Eddie. You've come all this way."

Page Forty, Hold This

At sea, pharmacist's mate 1944 · Mature (55+) · Midwestern US · 45 seconds

I was a pharmacist's mate on the Abner Kell, a destroyer escort, which means I handed out aspirin and held on.

Mostly it was seasickness and smashed fingers. I was twenty-two. I had one year of college and a manual.

The night we were hit I had eleven men in a space built for four. I don't remember being brave. I remember reading the manual out loud, because my hands worked better when they were being told.

A kid from Tulsa said, "Doc, are you scared?"

I said, "Page forty, hold this."

He laughed. He kept on laughing the whole time I worked. I think it's why we both got through.

He Handed Me the Keys

Return, 1970 · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

I came home in March of 1970, on a commercial flight, in a uniform I had been advised to change out of.

My father was at the gate. He shook my hand. In our family that was a fair amount.

We walked out to the truck and he did something he had never done in my life. He handed me the keys.

"You drive."

It was two hours to Pell Creek. He didn't ask me anything. He talked about the price of feed, and a fence the Hendersons had put up crooked, and a dog we'd had when I was six.

I thought he just didn't want to know.

About ten miles out, I saw he had his hand on the dash. Braced, white at the knuckles. He hated being driven.

He had figured I might need something to do with my hands.

"Fence looks bad," I said.

"Terrible," he said. "I was hoping you'd tell them."

Six Hundred Yards

Medics, stretcher bearers 1916 · Adult (25-40) · Scottish · 1 minute

There are four of us to a stretcher, and we do not carry rifles, and the men call us the body snatchers.

I was a postman in Dunbrae. It is not so different. You go out, whatever the weather, and you bring something back.

Tonight it is a lad from the Strathallan Rifles with his leg broken in two places. He weighs nothing. They all weigh nothing by now.

"Am I going home?" he asks.

"Aye, likely."

"Will I walk?"

I do not know. I am not a doctor. I have learned to say so.

"I couldn't tell you, son. But here's what I do know. It's six hundred yards to the aid post, and I've not dropped a man yet."

The mud pulls at every step.

"What did you do before?"

"Post."

"Did you ever lose a letter?"

"Not one," I say. And for some reason that is what sets him weeping, and me not far behind.

Beans in the Front Yard

Home front, Georgia 1942 · Mature (55+) · Southern US · 45 seconds

My boys went one, two, three, the spring of 1942, and I dug up the whole front lawn and planted beans.

The neighbors thought I had lost my mind. Mrs. Tolliver said a lady did not keep vegetables in the front.

I told her I had three sons across two oceans and not a blessed thing I could do for any of them. But I could make a bean grow. I could do that.

I put up ninety quarts that year. Gave most away.

Wesley came home in forty-five and stood at the gate looking at it.

"Mama," he said. "What happened to the grass?"

I said, "I was busy."

The Ten Past Six

Waiting, England 1919 · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral British · 1 minute

Every evening at ten past six, Florence Meade meets the London train at Alder Junction, and every evening her brother is not on it.

The armistice was in November. It is now March. The stationmaster has stopped asking whom she is expecting, and has started leaving the waiting-room fire lit.

She knows what people say. She has read the letter from his captain. Missing, believed. She has read it until the folds gave way.

But believed is not a fact. She was a schoolteacher. She knows the difference between a thing proved and a thing supposed.

Tonight the train is late. Four men get down. Two soldiers, neither tall enough.

She turns to go.

"Miss?"

It is the stationmaster, with a cup of tea she has not asked for.

"My lad went in 'sixteen," he says. "I met this train for a year. I'm not telling you to stop. I'm only saying, you needn't stand out here alone."

Mail Call

Front line, Korea 1952 · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Private Lonnie Kaczmarek never got mail, and by the second winter the whole platoon knew it.

He stood for mail call anyway. He'd stand at the back with his hands in his armpits against the cold, and when the last name was read he'd nod, like a man checking a clock, and go back to his hole.

Sergeant Ruiz watched that for four months.

In February there was a letter. Kaczmarek, L. He read it standing up, and then he sat down in the snow and read it again.

"Who's it from?" somebody asked.

"A schoolteacher in Fairhaven, Ohio. Says her class drew my name." He turned the page over. "They want to know if I have a dog."

Ruiz kept his face still. He had four sisters, and one of them taught third grade, and he had written to her in November.

"Well? Do you?"

"No, Sarge."

"Then you better make one up. Those kids are waiting."

Tell Me It Can't Be Fixed

Medics, field hospital 1944 · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

I was an Army nurse with a field hospital in France, and on the night shift, when the ward was quiet, I wrote letters for the men who couldn't hold a pencil.

You learn a lot that way. I knew who had a sweetheart and who had two.

Corporal Dale Emery had lost the use of his right hand. He had a wife in Nebraska named June, and for three nights running he got as far as "Dear June" and stopped.

"I can't tell her," he said.

"Tell her what?"

"I'm a mechanic, Lieutenant. That's all I am. What's she want with a one-handed mechanic?"

I had forty beds and a head nurse who timed us. I put my pen down anyway.

"What's she like?"

"June?" He looked at the canvas overhead. "Stubborn. She once drove a truck with no clutch eleven miles because I said it couldn't be done."

"And you think that woman is going to quit over a hand."

"Corporal, I've written two hundred of these. The wives want to know you're still the fellow who'd say something that dumb."

He laughed. It hurt him, and he kept on.

"All right," he said. "Dear June. Write this down. I've gone and done something stupid to my hand, and I need you to tell me it can't be fixed."

I wrote it just like that. She wired back four words.

"Watch me. Love, June."

Roll Call

Front line, 1863 · Mature (55+) · Midwestern US · 45 seconds

They called the roll that evening the same as always. Sergeant Meachum had the book and a lantern, and a voice like a gate.

"Adams."

"Here."

"Bell."

Nothing. He made his mark and went on. That was the way of it. You did not stop.

"Carver, John."

"Here."

"Carver, Thomas."

Nothing. A long nothing. I heard the pencil touch the page.

"Here," said John Carver.

The sergeant looked up. Every man in that line knew Tom was not there. We had seen.

John stood straight, with his chin shaking. "He's here, Sergeant. Long as I am."

The sergeant looked at him. Then he lifted the pencil, and he read the next name.

About the Car

Letters home, 1944 · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Dear Frank,

Everything here is fine, and I want you to remember that sentence, because I am about to tell you about the car.

The car is in the creek. Nobody was hurt. I was teaching your mother to drive, which she asked for, and I will say in her defense that the creek was not well marked.

Mr. Dobbs is pulling it out Saturday with his mule.

The baby has four teeth and your stubbornness. I put your picture by her crib and she says "Da" to it, and also to the radio, so do not get a big head.

I know you can't say where you are. I know you write "fine" the way I just did.

So here is our deal, Frank. I will tell you the truth about the car, every time. And when you come home you will tell me the truth about everything else, as slow as you need.

All my love,

Ruthie

The Cellar Under the Chapel

Home front, London 1940 · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 1 minute

I am the air-raid warden for Tamar Street, which means I have a tin hat, a whistle, and the authority to tell Mrs. Pargeter to put that light out.

There are thirty-one of us in the cellar under the chapel. I always count them.

The guns start at nine. Dust comes down from the ceiling with every thump, and nobody looks up.

A small boy tugs my sleeve.

"Miss, are you frightened?"

Thirty faces turn. I am supposed to say no. It is more or less the whole job.

"Yes," I say. "A bit. Aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's two of us. What shall we do about it?"

Then, in a high, cracked voice, he starts on a hymn, with the wrong words and the wrong tune.

Mrs. Pargeter joins in. She is worse.

By the all-clear we have done most of the hymnal. I have never heard anything so dreadful, and I would not have missed a note.

Four Places

Waiting, 1968 · Adult (40-55) · Midwestern US · 45 seconds

For thirteen months Carol Lindgren set four places at supper, though there were three of them at home.

Nobody mentioned it. Her husband passed the potatoes around the empty plate. Her daughter learned to reach.

She wasn't a superstitious woman. She was a Lutheran. But a place set was a place kept, and she didn't see the harm.

The night Danny came home, he walked in the back door at ten to six with his duffel, unannounced, thinner.

He looked at the table. Four plates. Four forks.

"You knew I was coming?"

"No," said Carol. She was already getting the butter. "Sit down. It's getting cold."

They Have Left Them On

At sea, convoy 1942 · Adult (30-45) · Irish · 1 minute

I was third mate on the Maren Tide, a tramp steamer carrying grain, and in three years of war I had not seen a lit window.

Ports dark, ships dark, your own cigarette cupped in your hand. I had come to think of light as a thing that got you killed.

In the spring of 1942 our convoy was routed close along a neutral coast. I had the middle watch. About two in the morning I saw a glow off the starboard bow and my stomach dropped. Fire, I thought. Some poor devil has caught it.

It was not fire. It was a town.

Streetlamps. A lighthouse, turning, as if nobody had told it. One window high up with a yellow blind, where somebody was sitting up late over a book.

I ought to have called the captain. I stood there instead with my face wet, saying it over like a child. Look. Look, they have left them on.

Inside the Bulkhead

Home front, the shipyard 1944 · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

I weld hull plates at the Corliss Yard, swing shift, and I am better at it than my husband ever was. I don't write him that.

I write that I miss him. That is true. I write that the job is only for the duration. That's what they tell us.

But I signed my name inside a bulkhead tonight, where nobody will ever see it.

Somebody ought to know I was here.

A Bigger Piece

Front line, 1917 · Mature (55+) · Australian · 1 minute

It was my birthday in the line, and I had not told a soul, so I don't know how Blue found out.

He came down the trench with a mess tin held out in front of him like the crown jewels. Army biscuit, soaked in condensed milk, with a blob of plum jam and a match stuck in it.

"Many happy returns, young Tom. Nineteen today."

The boys sang. Quietly, on account of the neighbours. I blew out the match.

I don't know what got into me. Maybe the jam.

"I'm not nineteen," I said. "I'm sixteen. I put my age up at Wirrabee."

I waited for the sergeant to be fetched.

Blue just looked at the cake. He was thirty and had kids.

"Well," he said. "Then you'll want a bigger piece. You're still growing."

He never did report it. He just stood closer to me after that, every time, on the side the noise came from.

What the Field Gave Back

Aftermath, France 1920 · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 1 minute

In the spring of 1920 Henri Vasseur goes back to plough his field, and the field gives him back the war, a piece at a time.

A buckle. A spoon. A length of wire that takes him an hour to drag clear. He stacks it all at the end of the furrow, tidily, as his father stacked stones.

The men from the ministry said to wait. Ten years, they said. Henri is sixty-three. He has not got ten years to give a ministry.

At noon the plough turns up a tin box. Inside is a photograph. A young woman, squinting into the sun. Not French, he thinks, from the hat.

He does not know whose side the box belonged to. He finds, standing there, that he cannot make it matter.

He sets the photograph on the pile, facing the sun. Then he clicks his tongue at the horse.

There are potatoes to get in. Somebody has to begin.

Wave at All of Them

Aftermath, the parade 1946 · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

They held the parade in June of 1946, with a band and bunting, and I stood on the curb in front of Kessler's Drugstore with my daughter on my shoulders.

Everyone was cheering. I cheered too. It seemed like the least I could do for the ones marching.

"Which one is Daddy?" she said.

She was four. I had explained it, and I had plainly not explained it well enough.

I looked down that whole street of boys who had come home. I thought, I can hate every one of them, or I can borrow them.

"All of them, baby," I said. "Wave at all of them."

So she did. And they waved back.

Nine Names in a Cigar Box

Aftermath, a father's desk · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

My father never talked about the war. After the funeral I found out he had been writing about it the whole time.

It was in his desk. A cigar box, and in the box a list of nine names, and next to each name a town. Under that, receipts for Christmas cards, by the dozen, every year since 1946.

I called the first number I could find. A woman in Larkin, Iowa, answered.

"Mr. Abbott's boy? Oh, honey. Your father wrote my mother every December. He was with my brother at the end. He'd tell her one new thing each year. That Billy was funny. That he shared his cigarettes." She stopped. "Mama used to say he was rationing it out so she'd have something to look forward to."

I sat down on his bed with the box in my lap.

There was a card in there already addressed, for this year. I found a stamp.

Two Minutes

Aftermath, remembrance · Any · Neutral British · 30 seconds

At eleven o'clock the whole town of Penhallow stops. The bus stops. The butcher stops with his knife in the air.

Two minutes. You can hear the flag rope tapping the pole.

Old Mr. Treece stands at the memorial with his cap off. Six names on the stone are his, one way and another.

At a minute past, a small girl he has never met takes hold of his hand. She doesn't say anything. She has been told not to.

The Bed Is Too Soft

Return, 1945 · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

Walt Hagen came home in October of 1945, and for the first three weeks he slept on the bedroom floor.

He did not explain it. Betty did not ask. He would lie down beside her at ten, and sometime after midnight she would feel him ease out from under the quilt, careful as a burglar, and in the morning there he'd be on the boards with his coat over him.

Her mother said give him time. Her sister said see a doctor. The pastor said pray, which she did, and it was a comfort, and it changed nothing.

On the twenty-second night Betty got up when he did. She took her pillow. She lay down on the floor next to him in her nightgown, and she pulled half the coat over herself.

"Bet. What are you doing?"

"Sleeping."

"It's hard down here."

"I've noticed."

He was quiet a long time. The house ticked. Somewhere down the street a dog was telling the whole neighborhood about it.

Then she felt him shaking, and she did not turn over, because she thought he would rather she didn't.

"The bed's too soft," he said finally. "I keep thinking I'll sink."

Betty considered that. It was not the strangest thing she had heard that year. It was not even close.

"Then we'll get a harder bed," she said. "Saturday. Move over, you've got all the coat."

Twenty Feet of Gym Floor

Return, present day · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

You have rehearsed this for eleven months. The gym, the banner, the families behind the rope. You know exactly how it goes, because you have watched other people's on your phone, in the dark, more times than you'd admit.

She will run. That's the part you held on to. She'll see you, and she'll run.

The doors open. You find them in about a second, your mother, and beside her a little girl in a yellow dress, taller than you left her.

She does not run. She gets behind your mother's leg.

It is like stepping on a stair that isn't there.

So you do the hardest thing you've done all year. You stop. You kneel down right there on the gym floor, twenty feet away, and you take off your cap, and you wait.

She looks. She looks for a long time.

"You have Mommy's hair," she says.

"Yeah," you say. "I kept it for you."

Saving You the Chair

Return, 1953 · Adult (25-40) · Midwestern US · 45 seconds

I got back to Harlan Falls in August of 1953, and the first man I saw was Gus Petty, sweeping in front of his barbershop.

"Ray," he said. "Haven't seen you around. You been away?"

Two years. I had been colder than I knew a person could get. I had a ribbon in my bag.

"Yeah," I said. "I was away."

"Well. You need a haircut."

I nearly walked on. Then he held the door, and I saw it taped to his mirror, yellow already. My picture from the paper. The day I shipped out.

"Sit down," Gus said. "I been saving you the chair."

The Dog Was Left at Home

Return, 1945 · Any · Neutral American · 30 seconds

The whole family went to the station, and the dog was left at home, being fourteen and mostly deaf.

Will had been gone four years. He was shy with them. They were shy with him. His mother kept offering him pie.

Then the back door banged, and that old dog came across the kitchen on legs that had not run since 1941.

Will sat right down on the linoleum. That was when he finally came home.

The Letter I Am Not Sending

Letters home, 1969 · Young adult (18-25) · Southern US · 1 minute

Dear Mama,

This is the letter I am not going to send you.

It rains here like the sky has a grudge. I am scared most of the time, and the rest of the time I am bored, and nobody told me a person could be both in the same hour.

Tucker is gone. I will not say how. He owed me four dollars and I would give forty to have him owe me still.

I don't know what we are doing here, Mama. I do what I'm told. I look after the man on my left. That is all the war I can see from where I sit.

Now I am going to tear this up, and write you the other one. It will say the food is bad and I am fine and tell Daddy the truck needs oil.

Both of them are true. I want you to know that, though you never will.

Your son,

Leon

Eight Words from Corporal Shaw

Letters home, the censor 1943 · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 1 minute

One of my duties as a junior officer was to read the men's letters home, and cut out anything useful to the enemy.

I hated it. I was twenty-four and I knew things about forty men that their own mothers did not.

Mostly there was nothing to cut. They wrote about food and feet. Private Gowan wrote to three girls and I had to check that each got the right envelope.

Then there was Corporal Shaw, a big, silent drayman. Every week he wrote to his wife, and every week the letter was the same eight words.

I am well. I think of you. Bert.

I thought him rather a cold fish.

In the spring his wife's reply was returned to us, opened. It was four pages long. It began, "My dearest Bert, your beautiful letter came on Tuesday, and I have read it until the creases have gone soft."

I never thought myself a better writer than Shaw again.

Tell About the Pie

Waiting, the troopship 1944 · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

They have been sitting in the hold of the Calder Bay for nineteen hours, four hundred men, waiting to be told to stop waiting.

Nobody talks about tomorrow. They talk about baseball. They talk about a diner back home that does a pie you would not believe. Private Joe Baptiste has explained the pie three times.

The chaplain is losing at cards, on purpose, to anybody who looks like he needs to win.

Around midnight the engines change their note. Every head comes up.

Then the kid from Maine, the one who has been sick in a bucket since they left port, speaks up in a small clear voice.

"Joe. Tell about the pie again."

A few of them laugh. Joe doesn't.

"Sure," he says. He sits down next to the kid, shoulder to shoulder. "So first off, you got to understand about the crust."

And four hundred men lean in to listen, as if it were the news.

Four Days to the Shipping Lane

At sea, the lifeboat 1942 · Adult (40-55) · Australian · 90 seconds

There were fourteen of them in a boat built for ten, and the only one who had ever been in a lifeboat before was the cook.

His name was Alby Crowe. He was fifty-one, and for two years on the Kestrel Star the crew had complained about his stew. Now he sat in the stern with the water cask between his knees, and nobody complained about anything.

"Two mouthfuls each, morning and night," he said. "We're four days from the shipping lane. I've done the sums."

He had not done any sums. He had no chart. He had a wristwatch that had stopped, and a rough idea which way was west.

The young wireless operator, Finch, kept looking at the horizon as if it owed him something.

"Four days, Alby? You're certain?"

"Would I lie to you, son?"

"You told us that stew was beef."

A couple of the men laughed.

On the second night Finch crawled back to the stern, where the others could not hear.

"You don't know, do you. Where we are."

"No, mate. Not a clue."

"Then why say four?"

"Because a man can do four days. He can't do I don't know." Alby tipped the cask, careful, and poured the lad his share. "Now you know, so that's two of us carrying it. Take the tiller. I've not slept since Tuesday."

They were picked up on the sixth day. Finch never told.

Sunday, Six A.M.

Waiting, present day · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

My wife calls on Sundays, at six in the morning my time, and the connection lasts until it doesn't.

I have a system. Kids up at five thirty. Drawings ready. Our son holds his up too close to the camera, every week, so that all she ever sees of his art is a blur and one nostril.

We don't waste it. No bad news in the first five minutes, in case that's all we get.

This Sunday the picture comes up and she's in a plywood room with a flag behind her. She looks tired. She looks great.

"Hi, team."

"Hi, Mom!"

And the screen freezes. Her mouth half open, one hand lifted.

"Is she stuck?" says my daughter.

"She's just buffering, honey."

Twenty seconds. A minute. The little wheel goes round. I keep my face doing what it's doing. That is my whole job on a Sunday, my face.

It's a bad connection. I have told myself that on forty Sundays, and I have not once believed it before the picture moved.

"Daddy, you're squeezing."

I let go of her shoulder.

The screen jumps. Sound comes back in the middle of a word.

"...see me? Hello? You all froze. You looked like a painting." She's laughing. "Nate, bud, back the drawing up, I can't see it."

He backs it up. It's all four of us, with her the biggest.

"We're here," I say. "We're all still here."

The Quiet Ones First

Medics, afterward · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

They teach you to go to the quiet ones first. The ones making noise have air.

That's the whole lesson. It takes about a minute to learn, and I've been learning it for twenty years.

I'm a school nurse now. Skinned knees. Stomach aches before math tests.

But when I walk into a loud room, I still look for the kid who isn't saying anything. And I go there first.

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