

4,997-words

The Great War

David-Henry Booth was twelve years old when he found his way to Point-aux-Trembles, just outside Montreal, Canada. He had walked for days, too many to count, occasionally stopping at a farmhouse looking for work in exchange for something to eat. It took every ounce of energy he had to just place one foot in front of the other. So it was no wonder to Henry that no one took him up on his offer. If they had, he didn't know how he would manage, but simply begging was not an option, so he offered his help just the same as a show of good faith.

His feet were blistered, having outgrown his hand-me-down shoes. When the sole broke loose days ago and detached from the seams, it provided some relief. His toes, no longer pinched and confined, were now exposed to the air and bleeding. The folks he encountered took one good look at him with sorrowful eyes. Henry could read their thoughts just as sure as they could read his own. That look of pity and aversion that told him there was no way they would hire this lightweight vagabond who was more than likely a runaway, someone not to be trusted. At times they would send him on his way with a chunk of old dried bread and a swallow of water from the well pump. It was barely enough but had to suffice to get him through another day.

The sun was at its brightest on this hot summer afternoon; the ground was dusty and dry. A sticky film filled the air. Henry swatted the horseflies that

flitted about his head. He imagined himself—wishing it was more like it—swimming in a bed of water, even a creek would do to cool himself off. It had been well over a week, ten or twelve days maybe since his last bath. He had lost track of time. It was a Saturday that much he knew, before he left that God-awful place.

Henry kept his ears and eyes open, always on alert should they be on his tail. If he heard someone coming, he would duck in a bush, if there was one, behind a tree if there wasn't, or lay flat in a ditch in hopes of not being seen. Risking being picked up by police or worse, anyone who worked for Monsieur Trambly. He shuddered at the thought.

The long lonely walk filled his mind with a purpose. It was what he did during his idle time. Think. Plan. Dream. About life mostly. He had lost so much in the past years. A family who was taken from him, others who were left behind. It surprised him that after all these years, he still thought of his mother. He'd been so young then. A mere child at eight, the oldest of his three siblings.

Henry looked up the road, hoping for a sign that he was nearing the city. His luck was bound to change once he made it there. The first thing he would do was find him something to eat. After that, it would be a place to sleep. In the morning, he would seek out work. He'd shine shoes, wash windows, sweep the sidewalk—anything to get him through another day.

He pushed the thought of his brothers away. Where ever they were, they had to be faring better. If only Henry could forget it all, everything that had

transpired, he would have one less burden to carry.

Noah would be eight by now, Samuel ten. The two of them were blonde-headed and fair-skinned like their mother. Henry, on the other hand, was red-headed and freckled like his father. He still remembered the day Isabella was born. The miracle child, his mother had said. Her pink puckered mouth and button of a nose, the tiniest fingers, and toes. Henry marveled at his doll-like sister with blotchy skin and silky hair. He wanted to hold her and rock her, but his mother said there would be no holding until he was older.

That day so long ago seemed more like a dream. Henry shoved his hands deep in his pockets, frowning, as he searched for breadcrumbs. Whenever he was lucky enough to get him some food, he would force himself to eat it in sections, save some for later. In these parts, there were fields of cucumber and carrots. If he could manage it without being spotted, he would swipe a few, enough to fill his pockets and then quickly move on.

The angle of the sun proved that the day was far from over. He couldn't risk stopping until nightfall. If only the days were shorter. Henry felt the growling in his belly, demanding food. If only he had a little something—anything to tide him over. Even enough water could trick his body into believing it was full, for a while at least.

The memories lingered like a dark cloud. Henry's mother, her image now blurred in his thoughts. Had she known he and his brothers would be separated? Did she lie awake at night, regretting her decision? Did Isabella

know of her three older siblings? And how would their absence be explained? These were the questions that Henry asked himself over and over.

But what good was there in asking when the answers were never there? He stopped walking then, reached down for a pebble, and then tossed it as far as he could. He wanted to end the torment, not relive it.

And there it was all over again. Henry had come home from school, holding a drawing he had made of his family. A mother. A father. A house. He and his brothers, and baby Isabella, who was barely a year old at the time.

"Mama, why are you crying?" Henry asked. He watched her from the doorway of her bedroom. Her shoulders were slumped and shaking, her face buried deep in her apron. She sobbed with such intensity that it frightened him.

When his mother didn't respond, Henry approached her slowly and extended his drawing, hoping it would somehow make the sad thing go away. But instead, she ignored his artwork and clung to him with such force, it nearly knocked the breath out of him. It was later that Henry understood, his father would not be coming home.

Henry had not thought of him in a long time. When the war took his father all those years ago, it might as well have taken his mother. With no means to feed her four children, she was left with no choice, she said. Henry didn't understand at the time. Not really. A boy his age could not possibly grasp the depth of life and death and the struggles of those left behind.

Henry pitched a larger pebble into the distance. He gritted his teeth, sighing deeply, refusing to be overcome by emotions. What good was there in rehashing what was helpless to change and only made him ache inside? He decided then to forget. He willed himself not to care. To do so was a waste of time and energy that would only distract him from what was necessary. His father had been a brave soldier. Henry would prove that he, too, could be brave.

The sound of an engine coming interrupted his thoughts. When he turned, he spotted the pick-up headed his way. In his haste for a place to hide, he tripped over his open-toe shoes and fell flat on his face. Unable to move and gripped by fear, he lay there still on a dusty patch of overgrown grass along the side of the road.

The sound of the truck drew nearer and nearer. Henry's heart hammered in his chest as the engine slowed and then stopped. His fear was bone-deep as he held his breath. If there was a God, he thought, now would be a good time to prove it.

The door of the truck opened and then slammed shut. Henry thought this would be his chance to get up and run. But where would he go? And catching him would be effortless in his condition. So instead, he lay there like a dead man.

"Hé, tu es blessé?" the man said. Henry knew French when he heard it. The men back at the farm where he came from spoke nothing but French between them. In the weeks he worked there, he'd picked up on some of it,

understanding more than he could speak, which wasn't saying much. But Henry was sure the man leaning over him was asking if he was hurt. Still, there was something that kept him from moving, his face down in the dirt.

The unexpected touch to his shoulder made him flinch. "Hé. Es-tu blessé?"

When no reply came, the man placed two of his fingers on the side of Henry's neck. Henry continued to play possum and waited.

"Tu a un pouls." The man rolled Henry over onto his back and proceeded to check his eyes with the thumb of one hand. The dirt that clung to Henry's nose and lips caused him to choke and sit up. He swiped his mouth with his sleeve and then shielded the sun to assess the Frenchman beside him.

"Tu a besoin d'eau. Attende une minute." Henry watched the Frenchman hurry to the truck and back with a canteen.

In a moment, the mouthpiece was brought to Henry's lips. The cool liquid felt good against his tongue, even better as it glided down his throat, filling up his belly. He could not remember a more satisfying sensation. "Mer-ci," he muttered finally.

"Tu parles français? Non?"

Henry's attempt at the language was a dead giveaway. Though he knew the word to thank him, his pronunciation was off.

"No fran-çais. Just a little." Henry was grateful at least that the Frenchman was no one from the farm he fled from. It was what he had feared most.

"I speak English," said the Frenchman with graying temples and a white trimmed beard. He seemed relieved then and smiled. "You be okay?"

Henry nodded, getting up on his feet. He was already feeling better from the water that was so generously provided. "Yes. Thank you." He brushed off the dust from his shirt and trousers as if to make a better impression. The Frenchman frowned at Henry's sorry-looking shoes, with the tips of his toes clearly exposed. Henry could only imagine what thoughts might be running through the Frenchman's mind. *A runaway. A filthy one at that. This kid could be trouble.*

"My name Luc," he said, with no comment as to Henry's appearance. "You come? Go to city?" He pointed to the bed of his pickup that held some bales of hay. Henry saw then a large dog in the passenger seat of the truck. Funny, he hadn't noticed him earlier. Not a peep had come out of him.

"Caesar. My dog. He little bit sick. Not feel good. You come. Sit in back. Okay?"

Henry hesitated. Could this be a trick? People were not always who they seemed. He had learned that the hard way. And yet, he needed to trust someone. He was tired of walking. Dog tired. And without food and nourishment, he wouldn't make it on his own much further. Luc was offering him a ride to the city. Maybe there he could scrounge up something to eat and then find him a park or somewhere to sleep.

Before Luc could change his mind, Henry climbed into the truck and positioned himself near the cab, between two bales of hay. "Thank you," Henry

said, smiling for the first time in days. "I'm Henry, by the way. Merci."

Luc nodded, hopped in the front seat. He fired up the engine, gave Caesar a rub behind the ears, and then steered the truck back onto the road. It took no time at all for the vibration to relax Henry. For the moment, at least, he was no longer hungry. The aches in his feet and legs had all but disappeared. A cool breeze swept through his hair, filling up his nostrils with the scent of fresh hay and countrified living. He was given a gift, Henry knew. A show of kindness that made him feel hopeful. For the first time that day, he hoped the city was still a reasonable distance away. Long enough for him to get some rest so that he could figure out what to do next.

In no time at all, Henry drifted into a deep sleep. One minute he was playing in the backyard of their home. He and his brothers built a fort out of scrap wood and cardboard to protect them from the enemy. The next minute, weeks later, the three of them were sent away, all but Isabella.

The orphanage had been overcrowded and chaotic. But despite that, the children were housed and fed, fitted with proper clothing, and given a basic education until they reached the age of twelve. Those that remained, that is, unlike Noah and Samuel, who were adopted out. It was what Henry believed, at least. Not that anyone gave him answers. It had been the second-worst day of his life.

"Where are you taking my brothers?" Henry cried out.

"That is not your concern," the woman named Florence replied. "Run along," she said, dismissing him.

Henry, terrified of losing yet another family member, did the only thing he could do. He lost it by grabbing her long skirt, clawing and screaming, begging, pleading not to take his brothers away. *We're a family!* He belted. *Let me go with them, Pleeeeze!"*

Somewhere in the chaos, another woman pounced on him. She grabbed a fistful of his hair, yanking him so hard into a quiet room, he thought his head might be ripped off his shoulders. The door was closed and locked, keeping him trapped inside. He remained there, alone, till the following morning, without food, and had urinated on himself.

It seemed no time had passed when the truck stopped, and the vibration died, waking Henry in the process. He rubbed his sleepy eyes before taking in his surroundings. To some, he may be seen as just a boy, but he knew this was no city. Not the kind he imagined, anyway, with stores and shops and eateries, and peddlers on the streets among traffic of people.

"Where are we?" Henry asked.

"Point-aux-Trembles," came the reply. "City."

Henry was skeptical. They were parked in the driveway of someone's home.

"Viens!" Luc said. He held the door open for Caesar to hop out. The German Sheppard looked a bit under the weather. Henry followed Luc toward the white house with freshly painted black shutters, taking in the flower boxes out front and the weeping willow tree with a hammock and set of chairs beneath it.

Henry let his guard down just a little. In the kitchen was an older woman stirring something on the stove. The aroma nearly made him drool right there on the spot. He swallowed hard and shifted from one foot to the other.

"Qui a tu la? Un visiteur?" The woman looked tired and old, her hair pulled back in a loose bun. She placed the lid on the pot, dried her hands with her apron, and then offered Henry a seat. Caesar made his way through the kitchen into the living room and plopped himself down on his bed.

Luc and the woman exchanged dialogue so fast; that Henry had no idea what about, other than it had to do with him. The woman was likely disgusted by his appearance. *Why would you bring home this dirty vagrant in my clean house? Do I not have enough work to keep me busy? You have to get me more?* It was what Henry suspected, at least.

The woman quietly removed a glass from the cupboard, filled it with tap water, and set it on the table in front of Henry. "Bonjour." She smiled then. "My name Madame Dansereau. Luc mudder. Please . . . sit."

Henry sat. "Thank you, Madame. I'm Henry."

"Henri? Good name." She sat then across from him. Luc checked on Caesar and then returned to join them at the table.

"C'est au . . . uh . . . where . . . you home?" Madame Dansereau wanted to know.

Henry didn't know how much to share. He refused to be sent back to that awful place. But something deep down, a hunch maybe, told him if he hoped to get a meal out of this, he needed to be somewhat forthcoming.

"UK, Madame."

The woman flinched. "Long way you home. Not walk. How?" She glanced at Luc.

"Yes, Madame. Long way."

"How you come Canada?"

"First by boat," he told her honestly. And then . . . " Henry lowered his eyes, saying nothing further.

"Where you mudder . . . fudder?"

Her English was not the best, but Henry understood just the same.

"Dead." Henry cast his eyes down to where his hands lay nervously on his lap. It was a half-truth, after all, more truth than a lie. In all fairness, he had no way of knowing if his mother was even still alive. She hadn't come back for them. *Had she told them she would?* Henry tried to remember. But what mother wouldn't return for her children?

"Mon Dieu, il est sans abri, ce pauvre enfant."

Luc nodded in agreement but then changed the subject. "You like chicken? Buk Buk..." He squawked to lighten the mood.

Henry was relieved, beyond grateful. It was all he could think of the moment he entered the home filled with delicious smells. To keep the tears at bay, all he could do was give a slight smile and nod. Luc led him to a large sink, outback. Together they washed up and then shared a clean towel to dry their face and hands. For the first time in days, Henry felt human again.

When they returned to the table, the food was ready. A large bowl held the meat. Another, the potatoes and mixed vegetables. In a cloth-lined basket were chunks of French bread still hot from the oven. The smell alone was enough to make a bear sing. Henry wanted to dig in and eat as much as he could, not knowing when his next meal would be. But he held back, contained himself, and remembered his manners.

Henry was passed a bowl to serve himself first. Once everyone had filled their plate, they began to eat. Luc and his mother exchanged a few words about Caesar. Madame sighed in relief. Henry focused on his food, could not remember anything tasting so good. The chicken was tender and juicy. The potatoes, carrots, and green beans were full of flavor. The toasted bread with melted butter and garlic tickled his mouth palate. When Henry all but licked his plate clean, Luc offered him seconds. Henry could not believe his ears.

"C'est bon, eh? Good? You like poulet? Chicken?"

"Oui." Henry grinned. "Good poulet. Very good poulet. Exceptional!" They all laughed.

Once dinner was over, Madame Dansereau cleared the table. Luc invited Henry outside, where he suspected he would be taken to the city, to go who knew where, but he wasn't eager to leave. Luc led them to the area of the weeping willow tree, offered Henry a seat.

The two of them sank back into the wooden chairs, stretching their legs out as the sun went down. It felt good to just relax, Henry thought. "Nice

chairs!"

"You like?"

Henry nodded, feeling the wide armrests, the high-back slats, the smoothness of the wood.

"I make," Luc told him. "It call Westport chair. 1903 Thomas Lee design in New York, close Lake Champlain. I see in magazine, make myself. Not bad, eh?"

Henry was impressed. It was an outdoor chair unlike any other. "Wow! How did you do it?"

"Hammer. Nails. Saw. Drill. Much patient mostly."

Henry grinned. "Do you mean patience?"

"Ah oui, c'est ca. Patience." The two remained quiet, and then Luc surprised him with what he said next.

"You like here, Henri?"

"Oui, Monsieur. Very much."

"Call me Luc. Is okay. Mister sound very hold, like my fudder."

Henry wondered if his father was still alive, but he didn't ask. "Okay . . . Luc." He paused but wanted to say more. "You have a nice home and a kind mother. Thank you for inviting me to stay for dinner. My belly," he gave it a pat, "is so full. I feel like a stuffed pig. I shouldn't have eaten so much, I . . ."

"No worry. I know what is like to be hungry. This war . . ." he began, "is very bad for how you say, e-con-omy."

Henry lowered his eyes, his thoughts elsewhere. He didn't understand all that much about the war. It all seemed very complicated. "My father . . ." Henry began, "never came home from the war."

Luc understood. "Many million men die. Many ages. Boys too young to know what we fight about. Much senseless, you ask me."

Henry nodded and then sighed, turning his face to the sky.

"How hold you when your fudder die?"

"I was eight years old." Henry closed his eyes briefly and then opened them again. "My brothers were four and six. My sister Isabella was just a year old."

Luc remained silent, just listened.

"It was the first time I ever saw my mother cry," Henry began. "We had no money."

"How you mudder die?"

Luc felt ashamed. This man had shown him nothing but kindness. He deserved to know the truth. "I'm sorry, Luc. . . I want to be honest with you. My mother . . . she didn't die exactly. Not that I know of, anyway. I haven't seen my mother since she sent us to live in the orphanage four years ago, when I was eight."

Luc showed no surprise. "All four of you went to the orphanage?"

"No. Just me and my brothers. Isabella stayed with my mother."

"I see," Luc said. "What happen your brothers?"

Henry gave a shrug, looked down to the ground, then back up again to meet Luc's eyes. "They took them away. Maybe to live with a family. Adoption, I think. They wouldn't tell me anything."

"Boys ship to different colony. Non? To work for farmer. Is what I read, what I hear people say. Tell me . . . Henri . . . if you want talk about, is okay."

Henry felt as if he might be dreaming. Was this man for real? A mere stranger he met on the side of the road, who showed him more compassion than anyone in his life. Before he could change his mind, Henry spilled the whole sorted details, what he could recall, at least. The long lonely years at the orphanage. The day Noel and Samuel were taken away. When he was twelve, Henry and others were loaded on ships, later sold to farmers to take in, in exchange for work.

When finally he landed in the province of Quebec, a man from Trois Rivières who spoke no English chose Henry from a lot of boys, paying a fee as the highest bidder. It was cheap labor, Henry soon discovered. He was told only that he would work there until the age of twenty-one, the age of maturity. At first, Henry was grateful to be gone from the orphanage that held so many memories. That evening, however, the day he arrived on the farm, he was handed a blanket and led to the barn, where he would sleep—with the animals and other field workers.

Henry didn't mind his nights in the barn, but the long days in the fields left blisters and calluses on his hands. The slop meals were barely enough nourishment for the work they were expected to do. But even worse was the

treatment he received. Henry was considered an outsider, a homeless immigrant. It didn't matter that he could outwork some of the others. No one cared to befriend him.

"Why you leave, what happen?" Luc asked finally, unable to stay quiet any longer.

"The other men and boys there, they all hung out together like friends. They wouldn't speak to me unless they were making fun of me. Someone, I think, stole money from Monsieur Trambley. I couldn't understand it all, just that it was about money. When they did a search, the money was found under my blanket where I slept."

"Who find the money?" Luc asked.

"Tonio," Henry said. "Monsieur Trambley's son."

"Did you take the money, Henri?"

"No! I never took nothing. But nobody even asked me. Tonio accused me of taking it."

"What happen then?"

"What happened . . . " Henry shuddered his gaze off to the side.

"Monsieur Trambley took me out behind the barn and . . . "

"Tell me. Is okay."

"He beat me with his belt. Beat me until I was nearly unconscious."

Henry stood, pulled his shirt up to show the welts on his back. They had begun to fade but were still visible.

"Mon Dieu!" Luc uttered. "It sound to me Tonio stole money. What you think?"

"That's what I think too."

"Is why you leave?"

"Yes. In the middle of the night. I won't ever go back there!"

"I no blame you. Trambly, he not good man. Selfish."

"You know him?"

"Unfortunate. Yes. I no respect." Luc sat thoughtful. They had been outside for quite a while. The sun was now setting. "You sleep here tonight. Okay? Is safe here."

Henry couldn't believe his good fortune. It was too late to go into the city anyway. "Merci, Luc. I appreciate that."

Shortly after, Henry was led to a loft on the second floor. There was a small bed with a soft mattress near a window. He was given a towel, a clean set of clothes, and a pair of work boots that were slightly too big, but with socks thick enough to make do. For the first time in a long time, Henry showered and shampooed his hair. When he lay in bed that night, he noticed the full moon through the open window. *A full moon meant something good. Didn't it?* It was what his father used to say. Funny, he still remembered that. He closed his eyes then and slept.

A wet nose nudged Henry's hand. He opened his eyes to find Caesar beside him, his paw pressed against his pillow.

Henry rubbed Caesar behind the ears. "Hey there, boy. Are you feeling better today?" It dawned on him that Caesar didn't understand English.

"Bonjour, Caesar. Bonjour!"

Caesar woofed a response, making Henry laugh. He heard voices then coming from the kitchen, someone at the door. Henry spotted the familiar beat-up truck out front. Monsieur Trambley's truck. Fear took hold of him. No way he was going back there. He would die first. Quickly, he slipped into his clean clothes and work boots and then removed the screen to crawl out the window. A gnarly oak tree stood beside the rooftop, allowing Henry an escape route. Once on the roof, he cautiously made his way near the edge, pausing briefly before making his leap. The branch he latched onto bowed and swayed but held his weight.

Caesar yelped excitedly, causing a stir, first in the house and then racing his way outside. Henry swung his body to and fro, walked his hands toward the tree trunk where he hoisted himself up, and then straddled the branch to sit back and wait. He figured this was as good a place to hide as any, high up and shaded by foliage. What Henry had not counted on was Caesar, who appeared beneath the tree causing enough racket to wake the dead. Henry was trapped now, with no way out.

Luc came to check on Caesar with Monsieur Trambley and Tonio close behind. Henry was sweating and shaky as he steadied himself to keep from falling.

"Qu'est-ce que c'est, César?" Luc said. Caesar's front paws were against

the tree trunk, his snout in the air. There was no calming him or steering him away, so Luc looked up.

Tonio was the first to spot him. "C'est lui. Henri. Il est là-haut!"

"Henri," Luc called. "Come down. Please. No worry. Okay?"

Henry waited several minutes, with more coaxing, before making his way down. Caesar was the first to greet him when he landed on his feet.

"You okay?" Luc asked, giving his shoulder a squeeze.

Henry nodded but eyed the two men.

A heated discussion broke out between Trambley and Luc. Henry understood none of it, just stood there, expecting a fight to break out any second. But instead, Tonio lunged at Henry, causing Caesar to react and lock his jaw firmly onto Tonio's leg. Trambley kicked at the dog, pulling a knife from his pocket.

A gun fired, and everyone froze. Madame Dansereau stood there not ten feet away. She aimed the double-barreled shotgun at the Trambleys. "Sortez de ma propriété, maintenant, et ne revenez jamais!"

Trambley mumbled something under his breath but got the message, and the two of them drove off.

Henry threw his arms around Luc with tears in his eyes. He couldn't believe what had just happened. Luc gave him a fatherly hug and repeated the words over and over again, "Is okay. You home now. He come look for farm help. I tell him you family. No worry. I call police, he come back. Okay?"

On November 11th of that year, in 1918, the war finally ended. Years later, Luc discovered that Isabella and her mother were both victims of the Spanish flu, where millions had lost their lives. Henry's search for his brothers continues.