

Who am I? Where am I? What am I? These relentless inquiries swirl through his consciousness, both in the light of day and the shadows of night. Who am I? John Copland, he responds to the echoing voice within, yet that is merely a label - where am I? A void that feels both infinite and confining. What am I? A soldier, he thinks, but the weight of that identity is heavy, burdened by the incessant call of names that reverberate in his mind, dragging him through a tumultuous sea of memories and emotions, never granting him a moment of peace. He envisions himself as a solitary log caught in a furious current, hurtling towards an inevitable waterfall, the destination both terrifying and strangely alluring. Yet, amidst this chaos, the names linger, faceless yet familiar, a haunting reminder that in the theatre of war, truth often becomes the first casualty. What am I? A question that remains shrouded in uncertainty, echoing endlessly in the recesses of his troubled mind.

"John, John," a soft voice calls out to him. He opens his eyes and sees the face of an angel - a Valkyrie, but in reality, he is looking at the face of nurse Emma Somersby. "Time for your medication," she smiles pleasantly, her English accent agreeable to the ear. John grabs the pills from her hand, his fingers trembling uncontrollably as he raises them to his lips. With a swift motion, he swallows them, the capsules sliding down his throat, aided by a generous gulp of water from a nearby glass. The tremors in his left hand are pronounced, a visible sign of his inner turmoil as he tries to steady himself in the moment.

Emma Somersby embodies the essence of an English rose, radiating beauty and grace at the tender age of twenty-five. With her warm and kind manner, she exudes a vibrant energy that draws people in. Her light brown hair, elegantly styled in a bun and tucked neatly beneath her crisp white nurse's cap, frames her delicate features perfectly. Those striking deep blue eyes, coupled with her slender figure and an infectious smile, have the power to soften even the hardest of hearts. If there were ever an angel dispatched to tend to the wounded souls of war, it would undoubtedly be Emma Somersby, a beacon of hope and compassion amidst the madness.

"And how are we feeling this morning, better?" she asks, her voice laced with sincere care and warmth.

He responds with a sense of uncertainty, his voice tinged with a mix of agreement and hesitation, saying simply. "It's the same."

"Well, it certainly is a lovely morning," she remarks, her demeanour calm and unaffected by his attitude. Her gaze sweeps over the sprawling grounds of Shadowland, the hospital located just beyond the outskirts of London. The imposing red brick structure, a relic of the Victorian era, once served as a mental asylum but has now been transformed into a sanctuary for those recovering from the ravages of war. The soft light of the April sun dances upon the dew-kissed grass, creating a shimmering effect that resembles a polished sheet of glass, elevating the natural beauty of the landscape to something almost ethereal. "Yes indeed, it's going to be a beautiful day. And your grumpiness isn't going to spoil it," she affirms good naturedly.

"Doesn't anything dampen the British spirit?" He questions.

Her smile radiates warmth, a gentle glow that lights up her face. "Oh, just irritable Yanks," she responds with a playful tease in her voice, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Well, I'll try and be more agreeable."

"That would be much appreciated. Now Doctor Abbott would like to see you this morning when you're ready."

He sighs heavily, his voice dripping with a lack of conviction. "Why, it does no good."

"Come on, he's nice, you know that. He only wishes to help."

John gives a wry grim, suddenly remembering a joke. "You know, there was a patient who went to his doctor and said he thought he was suffering from amnesia, so the doctor asked for his bill in advance."

Emma smiles in response. "At least you still have your sense of humour."

"If not my marbles."

“Oh, I’m sure there around her somewhere,” she responds, pretending to look for them.

“Why are you so kind to me?”

“It’s my job. And I enjoy my job very much.”

John gazes intently at Emma, a whirlwind of self-doubt swirling in his mind as he grapples with the belief that he is unworthy of kindness, haunted by the shadows of his past experiences and actions. Yet, what exactly weighs on his conscience? As if she can read the turmoil within him, Emma locks eyes with him, her expression a blend of curiosity and concern. “Have you recalled something?” she asks, her voice laced with a hint of optimism, as if her words might coax a revelation from the depths of his troubled thoughts.

“Just dreams...nightmares.” He murmurs softly, clutching his robe more closely around himself, as though an unseen presence had just brushed past him, stirring a chill that runs deep within his bones.

Emma gazes intently at her patient, her mind swirling with questions about his past. She meticulously examines his face, a familiar ritual for her, yet the anguish reflected in his eyes seems to resonate more deeply than that of any other patient she has encountered. He is undeniably handsome, with warm brown eyes, short black hair, and delicate features that contrast sharply with the haunting experiences he has likely endured. His slight frame and refined appearance stand in stark opposition to the shrapnel scars that mar the left side of his face, stark reminders of the violence he has faced. She estimates him to be in his early thirties, but beyond that, they are left to speculate, as little is known about his history or the traumas that have shaped him.

Returning to the task at hand, she asks with a hint of curiosity. “Have you had your breakfast yet?”

“I’m not hungry.”

Emma, brimming with excitement, urged him forward. “Alright, let’s go grab something to eat! I’ve heard whispers that there could be bacon on the menu today!” Her enthusiasm was infectious, completely overshadowing his earlier refusal.

“I don’t have an appetite,” he tells her once more.

“You wouldn’t want me to get into trouble now, would you?” She gazes at him, her smile radiating warmth and charm. “Come on, Yank, I’ll race you.”

John finds himself unable to suppress a smile in response, though he is reluctant to acknowledge it, he has developed a deep affection for Emma. She has emerged as the singular source of light and joy in his otherwise bleak existence, which is overshadowed by demons and fragmented memories. “Alright, let’s go, Limey,” he replies.

Emma gently assists John as he rises from the cozy embrace of the wicker chair, carefully placing his walking stick into his hand. The sun has been casting its warm glow over the lawn since the early hours of the morning, where John has been enjoying the tranquility of the outdoors. With a playful grin, she declares. “Alright, I’ll give you a ten-meter head start.”

“I think I might need a bit more than that,” he suggests. As the nurse and patient navigate the path to the main building, they weave through a sombre scene filled with fellow residents, each grappling with their own battles against a myriad of injuries. The sight is haunting, with many bearing the scars of conflict, their bodies marred, and faces altered in ways that tell stories of suffering and loss. The relentless cruelty of war extracts its toll, leaving behind a trail of anguish. John’s gaze sweeps over the wounded, and in their eyes, he recognizes a reflection of his own torment, a shared understanding of despair. A haunting voice reverberates in his mind, declaring, “I am numb to the pain.”

Doctor Joseph Abbott, a charming and astute man in his late forties, is a proud alumnus of Oxford University, where he specialized in psychiatry. As he sits at his desk, he finds himself

lost in thought, reflecting on his growing waistline and quietly resolving to reduce his indulgences. Known for his meticulous nature, he has always taken great care in his appearance, donning a suit and tie outside of his medical attire, embodying a polished and sophisticated image. His hair, a distinguished mix of black and grey, is meticulously styled with a touch of brylcreem, giving him a dapper look that would easily fit in at a lively nightclub. Despite the gradual changes in his physique as he approaches the milestone of fifty, his mental acuity remains as sharp and vibrant as ever, a testament to his enduring intellect.

His perceptive grey eyes drift back to the copy of *The Times* lying on the desk, its pages brimming with articles detailing the ongoing conflict in Europe. The lead story captures the intense final offensive by the Allies as they advance into Germany, a pivotal moment in the war. Analysts predict that it may only take a few more months before Hitler is forced to surrender, a sentiment echoed throughout the paper's extensive coverage. Doctor Abbott's train of thought is interrupted by a rap on the door. "Yes, come in," he invites.

Emma shows John into the room. "Here he is," she announces.

"Ah, John, how are we today old son?" Abbott stands as John makes his way to the chair.

"The usual doc," he replies.

"Yes, well, we'll have to see what we can do about that, won't we. Thank you, nurse," he dismisses Emma.

Emma nods in agreement, her voice barely above a whisper as she replies. "Of course, doctor," before she gracefully steps out of the room, ensuring the door clicks shut gently behind her.

John loathed the atmosphere of this room; the murky, pea green paint clung to the walls like a bad memory, while the bare, utilitarian furniture offered no comfort or solace. It was a space that seemed designed to induce anxiety rather than ease.

Doctor Abbott leans casually against the edge of the desk, a knowing smile playing on his lips as he addresses John. "Well, John, it seems like nothing has changed, has it?" he inquires, his tone a mix of curiosity and familiarity, as if he's stepping into a well-worn conversation that has unfolded many times before.

John responds with a heavy dose of sarcasm. "You know how it is for us nutcases."

Abbott, exuding an air of complete professionalism, states. "In fact, I do not possess that information, and I would appreciate it if you could share it with me." He then inquires. "Have there been any further recalls?"

"Not really," he tells him in a cursory manner.

"Not really, so you have had some more recollections."

"Just images, really."

"Are they of war, John?"

John pauses, a heavy silence enveloping him as he gathers his thoughts. "What do you expect me to say, doc? The memories from that place are a blur," he finally replies, his voice tinged with uncertainty. Deep down, he wrestles with the distinction between what he can't recall and what he chooses not to share. A nagging question lingers in his mind: why haven't I mentioned my last name? It's a detail that feels both familiar and distant, leaving him to wonder if it truly belongs to him or if it's just another fragment of a life he can barely grasp. Or perhaps he truly is afraid of what might be discovered. John pushes such macabre thoughts away from the surface of his mind. He gazes intently at Doctor Abbott, a flicker of desperation in his eyes as he implores. "Don't you think I want to remember?" The weight of his words hangs in the air, a silent plea for understanding. In that moment, he clings to the fragile thread of hope, aware that while mere hope may not sustain life, the absence of it would leave him adrift in a sea of uncertainty.

He inquires with a warm and relaxed tone, fully aware of the fragility of this man's mental state. "Could you elaborate on the images you've experienced? I'd love to hear more about them." His voice carries a gentle encouragement, inviting a deeper exploration of the thoughts

and feelings that lie beneath the surface, as he seeks to understand the intricate tapestry of the man's mind.

"Like I said...killing." John is hesitant to say more.

Doctor Abbott extends a cigarette from his elegant silver cigarette case, inquiring. "Would you like a smoke?" John, with a trembling hand, accepts the gesture and leans closer as Abbott flicks his lighter to ignite the cigarette. As John draws in the tobacco, he does so with the fervour of someone deeply reliant on the substance.

Abbott expresses his intention to accompany him, stating, "I think I'll join you," as he ignites a cigarette. He takes a moment to collect his thoughts, carefully considering the most effective way to move forward. John has increasingly become the focal point of Abbott's attention, as he revisits the details that have been etched in his mind regarding John's situation: last December, during what has come to be known as The Battle of the Bulge, John was discovered unconscious in the Ardennes, having sustained both shrapnel and knife injuries. After receiving medical treatment, he remained in a coma for three weeks, ultimately awakening with no recollection of his identity, save for the knowledge of his first name.

When he was found, he bore no identification tags, and the only clues to his identity lay in the remnants of his tattered, blood-stained uniform, which indicated he was part of an American unit - most likely one of the infantry divisions that had been overrun during the German advance. After being repatriated to England for medical care, he eventually arrived in Shadowland, where he has spent the past month. While his physical injuries have begun to mend, the scars on his psyche tell a different story. Doctor Abbott believes that John's amnesia stems not only from the severe concussion he endured but is also deeply intertwined with the traumatic experiences of war, suggesting he is grappling with battle fatigue and stress - conditions that the medical community is only just starting to understand.

"Is there nothing more you can tell me about these images?"

John grumbles. "They're merely fleeting moments," as he takes a deep drag from his cigarette, the smoke curling around him like a ghostly shroud. He fights against the tremors that threaten to betray his composure, each inhale a desperate attempt to steady his nerves and mask the turmoil brewing beneath the surface.

"Look John, you must be honest with me and tell me anything you remember, no matter how insignificant it may seem. Any minute detail can be a help to us in unlocking your forgotten memories," Doctor Abbott implores his patient.

John's voice escalates, tinged with frustration as he exclaims, "I genuinely want to assist, but please don't pressure me." The tension in his words reveals the mounting irritation he feels, as if each syllable is a plea for understanding amidst his turmoil.

Abbott backs off. "Take it easy mate, it's alright, it's alright, I'm not here to hurt you," he insists genuinely, "I'm here to help you. All I want is for you to get better, to get your memories back and then to go home. You do want that don't you?"

"Home," John murmurs softly, the word slipping from his lips like a forgotten melody, leaving him to ponder whether he truly possesses a place to call his own. The thought lingers in his mind, a haunting echo that stirs a sense of longing and uncertainty.

"I'm sure there must be someone waiting for you back in America." Abbott crosses to his patient and places a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Family, girlfriend, a wife."

An overwhelming sensation washes over John, a deep intuition that someone is present, or perhaps once was, but it seems to belong to a distant past, in a realm far removed from his current reality. He turns to Doctor Abbott, his face etched with desperation and confusion, as if he is grappling with shadows of memories long forgotten. "Please, I need your help," he implores, his voice trembling with urgency and vulnerability.

Abbott expresses his heartfelt desire, looking directly at him with earnestness. "That's all I want to do."

"You really think I could be married?"

"That's one of the many things about you we need to find out about."

"But I can't remember, doc," he's anxiety is just lurking beneath the surface, threatening to erupt at any moment.

"Are you still having those dreams, you mentioned, or nightmares?"

John continuously rubs his temples, a gesture that betrays his discomfort. "It happens every time I shut my eyes, and occasionally even while I am fully awake. It feels as though I am perpetually on the brink of being confined in a straitjacket, surrounded by those in pristine white coats. No offense intended, doc."

"You're not crazy, John, believe me, I know crazy people, it's my job," he adds with a wry grin. "But seriously, your suffering is linked to what occurred to you during this war, more precisely what you went through back in Belgium. It's the key to unlocking everything, I'm certain of it."

"So, you still think this is some kind of shell shock or nerve disorder, I'm suffering from?"

Abbott responds with conviction. "Indeed, war places a high toll on the soldier, and not just those that sacrifice their lives but even more profoundly those who come back. Whether we label it battle fatigue, stress, or something else entirely, it is a mental affliction that we are just beginning to understand. During this war and the last one soldiers have faced execution for abandoning their posts or going absent without leave, labelled as cowards in a society that often fails to understand the profound psychological toll of warfare. Yet, these individuals are not driven by cowardice; rather, they are grappling with unseen battles of their own, suffering from the debilitating effects of trauma. Once the dust settles and the war concludes, these soldiers are discharged, returned to their homes, and instructed to erase the memories of their harrowing experiences, as if they never occurred. This attitude will change in time and hopefully before the next war."

"There's always another war isn't there? I guess they never end. I hear what you're saying, doc, and I understand, but these dreams are different," he stresses.

"How?"

John forcefully extinguishes the remnants of his cigarette in the ashtray, the embers hissing as they meet the cool surface. He pauses, his brow furrowing as he reflects. "These visions, if they can even be called dreams, seem more like echoes of a past that isn't my own. I witness the chaos of war, the clamour of combat, and the desolation of battlefields that have long since crumbled into oblivion, shrouded in the fog of history. And then there are the names." A heavy silence envelops him, the weight of his thoughts hanging in the air.

Abbott leans in, urging him to elaborate further on his line of thinking. "What about names?" he presses, his curiosity piqued.

A faraway gaze settles in John's eyes as he moves forward. "Countless voices, perhaps even thousands, beckon to me, as though they are extensions of my very being, each one intertwined with my essence in some inexplicable way. Their presence is intensifying – the names swirl around me, threatening to drown me in an overwhelming tide of insanity."

"This is good news," Abbott replies enthusiastically, "it means your memories may be coming back to you."

"Didn't you hear what I said, there not my memories, not of this life anyway."

In a gentle and reassuring tone, Abbott explains to him. "Your mind is constantly active, weaving together images and connections, even if they seem jumbled right now. These are your memories, John, and they belong to you."

"Are you sure about that, doc?"

"Yes, and we are getting closer to unlocking them."

John falls into a deep silence, his thoughts swirling around the words of Doctor Abbott, who may indeed have a point, yet an unsettling feeling gnaws at him, suggesting otherwise. A storm brews within his mind, a chaotic whirlwind of doubt and fear, leading him to wonder if he is losing his grip on reality. The creeping sensation of madness looms over him like a dark cloud,

and he feels utterly alone, as if he is teetering on the edge of an abyss with no one to reach out and pull him back.