

THE LITTLE SOLDIER

When this story began, Pau was still very small. He couldn't even remember what his father smelt like.

Pau's father was a young man sitting in a hole, wearing a green uniform, with a helmet and big boots, a backpack and a rifle. A young man with a freckly face and eyes as round as pennies. Pau's father was...

The Little Soldier

The first thing they did when they arrived at the front was to dig sunken tracks in the ground, which they called trenches. They were dark, wet holes full of mud. Young men like Pau's father spent hours and hours in them, watching the far horizon that they all wanted to conquer. The enemy was invisible, but when they imagined him they were filled with fear. The enemy had also dug dark, wet, muddy trenches, from which they were watching too. Neither side could tell the other was there, unless someone cried out in the tense silence.

In wartime, memories and photographs are very important. All the soldiers in the world carry a photograph to remind them of the people they love. Well, not to remind them, but to be able to see their faces. Pau's father carried a photo of Pau that showed his little round eyes, which were just like his own. As the days went by, and turned into months, and then years, Pau's father felt more and more homesick, and thought:

“When will I see my son again? When will we be able to play with a ball together? When will I be able to read him a bedtime story?”

The trenches are a horrible place, but the soldiers have time on their hands, so they get bored, and some fill their days by playing cards or a game of chess. Others write letters to their friends and their family, and others read.

Pau's father started reading when he found a book near a drainage ditch, the letters peeping through the mud. The first pages were missing, but he saw that it was the story of a father, Ulysses, who is returning home after a war, and of his son, Telemachus, who is waiting for him. He began to read:

"Here begins the extraordinary adventure of a man, a hero who sailed the seas and fought in a thousand battles, until he set out for home, where he was awaited by his wife and by his son, to whom he had said farewell as a child, and who was now almost a man."

Pau's father carried on reading. And he liked it so much that for a moment, he felt as if he was not there, but in the midst of a different landscape, in a sea of adventures. And because he couldn't stop reading, he had an idea:

"Every day I'll start at the beginning, and read just half a page more each time. That way, it will take me longer to finish it. Because who knows when this war will end, and whether I'll ever find another book?"

As a bookmark, he used the photo of Pau. That way he kept them both together. Day after day he reread the story:

"Here begins the extraordinary adventure of a man, a hero who sailed the seas and fought in a thousand battles, until he set out for home, where he was awaited by his wife and by his son, to whom he had said farewell as a child, and who was now almost a man."

Until one day Pau's father, who had sailed the seas and visited fantastic islands with Ulysses, read the very last words:

"And when it was all over, they agreed that the peace should be long and lasting."

The Odyssey was over. But the war carried on. So he decided to read the book again, but this time, all the way through in one go. And so he started from the beginning.

"Here begins the extraordinary adventure of a man, a hero who sailed the seas and fought in a thousand battles, until he set out for home, where he was awaited by his wife and by his son, to whom he had said farewell as a child, and who was now almost a man."

When he finished, Pau's father brooded sadly. The book and the photograph of Pau were his great treasures, and now that he had finished the book, he saw that time was passing very fast, and he felt terribly empty. Sick of the war, and with nothing to read, Pau's father had an idea. He picked up a white cloth and a stick, and made a flag.

He lay face down on the ground and raised the flag over his head, very slowly, in case they started shooting at him. It was a long time before he finally heard a whistle.

Very cautiously, he peered across the ground... and among the barbed wire, another flag popped up, just as white as his own. (06:36) Pau's father drew a book on his white flag, and a moment later, a book appeared on the invisible enemy soldier's flag too!

Suddenly, books were crossing no-man's land: *The Voyages of Sinbad* flew past, next to *Danny Champion of the World*, while *Tom Sawyer* and *Alice in Wonderland* passed *Peter Pan* without crashing. One of the invisible enemy soldiers was seen helping the *Jungle Book* out of the barbed wire it had got entangled in, and a soldier in Pau's father's trench was busy cleaning a copy of *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* that had fallen in the mud.

It was wonderful while it lasted, and the soldiers were not afraid to stand up. A book might bump you on the head, but it won't do as much harm as a bullet. Finally the last book, *Round the World in Eighty Days*, reached its destination.

That was the beginning of the end of the battle, and why it had started, nobody could remember. It is hard to aim a gun at the other side when you've seen their faces. But it would be a long time yet before Pau's father was able to set off back home. Days went by, and turned into months, but not a year, and the journey didn't feel long because he knew where he was going. (08:06) And one evening he arrived at his own home, where Pau was waiting, looking at an atlas that showed the same sea that Ulysses – and his own father – had sailed on.

Just then Pau heard the doorbell ring.

Script: Carme Aymerich