**When Hell Freezes Over –** an exercise in using six random words in the first sentence:

I, cried, he, slept, fast, forward.

*Letter translated from French by K A Hays*

*The top half of the first page has been obliterated by water marks. We know the letter was written after October 1917 from the references to the Passchendale offences within the document. Written by Caterina Dufuys to her cousin Ameliarann Coker in New Zealand, the New Zealand Army Museum has kindly given permission for the translation and publication of this important document. Due to water damage, the letter begins mid-sentence.*

‘his terrible wounds. He slept then, and I cried, my tears fast absorbed into the bloodied bandage around his head, as I wondered what in life he might look forward to in his condition. His face was beautiful in repose, belying the fact that half of his skull was cracked from the force of the explosions he’d experienced in the battle. I actually prayed that he might not live. Was that wrong? I wondered what woman would undertake to care for a man like that, whatever he made of his life.

Meli, I’ve managed to subdue most of the emotions I felt as a nurse in the advanced dressing station in the fields near Passchendale, but this one man undid my defences. He was a casualty from the offensive on October the 4th, one of many from the regimental posts of the New Zealand division. We prepared them for the base hospital, nothing more. I did blood transfusions, splinting, wound dressing, pain relief and comforted soldiers as they died. I think they were the lucky ones.

He looked so like Michael, this soldier, right down to the shape of his eyebrows and the little frown that wrinkled the skin above his nose. I don’t know where Michael is, or if he’s alive in this hell on earth, but I wanted to protect this wounded man who reminded me of him. I didn’t have a chance. They took him away the next day and I don’t know what happened to him.

Oh Meli, hold the remembrance of our farm in your mind, of the times when you came to stay with us; the green grass dew-covered in misty rain, the poplars that lined the walkways, the hedgerows for the wild creatures to shelter in, the cows walking along the paths to be milked, for none of it exists now. There’s only mud, filling the shell hole craters, mud up to the knees, in holes so deep that dead bodies of men and horses are barely noticed. And then, when the temperature drops, it freezes. Wounded men have been left in those conditions for 36 hours, even while they’re planning for the next offensive. How could anyone survive that?

The trees are shattered stumps. The farmhouse was shelled to nothing months ago. It’s a lunar landscape laced with barbed wire. The cellars of the all the farmhouses (remember how we stored the root vegetables from the autumn harvest, the apples, the jars of pickles, the bacon sides and the cheeses) have been converted by the Germans into strong-points. These are low concrete bunkers they have reinforced with walls metres thick that house the machine gun teams.

Horses were useless in the mud. Your New Zealand men had to push their guns onto higher ground themselves. Each gun needed logs and wooden planks under their wheels to stop them sinking into the mud and moving off target. I heard that sometimes it wasn’t enough, and shells landed amongst their own troops, blowing up men and the precious ammunition.

Meli, one day I shall come and visit you, ask you to do your best to cover over these memories and make new ones from the land you tell me is as fertile and green as ours once used to be.

I send you blessings and love –

Caterina.