

SMILING

They made love, and for a while the horror that is war was forgotten. But in the ensuing silence his fears were conveyed in a simple clasping of her hand.

Sleep would have been wonderful but it would not come, to smother his thoughts, to dim his recollections.

Sleep fled from the sounds of gunfire, the helpless cries of comrades, the acrid sulphur skies. He trembled slightly, squeezed her hand tighter. She tried to share his pain but could not know the phantoms that lived within him, and for ages they lay there, like snowflakes in helpless defence against the rain.

These few days, respite, far from the insanity enacted within that sodden landscape; these days were not real, they were merely time allotted.

His uniform, hanging there, constant reminder of a commitment greater than love. The tunic he wore that demanded he leave her, for King and country: For King and country.

Now those days were almost gone and tomorrow was for the leaving, with a resolve that tears would not mar their parting.

She rose from the bed, lit candles and began to make tea.

Her nakedness was natural; his thoughts were not carnal, as he watched her movements made spectral by the candles' glow.

She set tea on a tray, put on a nightdress and came to bed.

On the tray was a small photograph that she gave him to keep in his breast pocket beneath the ribbons that he wore.

It was a lovely photograph that captured her natural beauty and perfect smile.

He thanked her by way of a gentle kiss then slipped it in to his tunic pocket.

They drank tea and spoke of their dreams of a life together when the conflict ended, and briefly they laughed, a fragile laughter engendered by false optimism in a way that hears us whistling in the dark to suggest we are not afraid.....

Once in a letter home he mentioned how cold his feet were in those waterlogged trenches and with this in mind she knitted socks which she showed him now.

They were far too big and an odd colour, made from scraps of wool.

They laughed when he put them on. Fear made them laugh too much; a laughter too long that inevitably ended in embrace and tears. Eventually emotion exhausted them and they slept. A perfect sleep not trespassed upon by sound or image conjured by the mind's wanderings.....

They woke early, the atmosphere tacit acknowledgement of how little time remained together. They ate breakfast and for long periods the only sounds were of cutlery or china or a teacup returning to its saucer.

Soon he would return to the squalor of a small scar in the earth; a place that men despised and yet defended with their lives. A place we should not describe too graphically lest we deprive historians of their thunder..... Breakfast was completed, second cups of tea drained the pot, more by way of distraction than thirst, and the sun grew higher in the sky.

Time was moving to the hour of departure but neither should be seen glancing at the clock. Instead it would be polite to suggest they cared little for the hour or need for punctuality..... At the railway station, under a steam-filled canopy of glass, people said their goodbyes. A gallery of emotions in clear exhibit. A finale in a simple blowing of a whistle, a waving of a flag. That was goodbye.....

At home she recalled their time together and how quiet he had become. This gentle soul, loving but never sentimental, now almost completely withdrawn. And as she considered this she felt the symptoms of tears and struggled to contain them.....

For him, on the train, the window threw his haunted expression back at him and after studying it for a while he began to smile at the ridiculousness of the situation.

He laughed aloud, throwing his head back slightly and those near him who observed this immediately assumed another casualty of war who, by all rights, should not be returning to participate in the carnage. He withdrew the photograph from his breast pocket, spontaneously returned her smile then replaced the photo.

No conversation passed between him and the soldier squeezed beside him. Unlike others whose idle banter was an attempt to allay their fears and whose laughter was affected.....

In the morning she returned to work as a clerical officer in a government department while he continued his journey that would send him deep into France.....Lunch times in St. James's Park she would sit and feed her sandwich to the birds. She had no appetite for food, and if possible she sat at the bench where they met; reminder of the first time he spoke and how she felt that rare instant affinity when he quietly enquired, "Excuse me, would you mind if I sit here?" And by way of excuse for his request, with a sweep of his arm, gestured to other benches fully occupied.....

She was taken by his quiet, dreamy melancholy, as one might find in an artist or poet; while he was completely smitten by her smile, her perfect smile.....

The rumour was, whispered amongst the men, the regiment would be moving further north, in to France, to be joined by other regiments for a major offensive.

Troops passed them moving in the opposite direction. Sad, pathetic souls. Not dead but lifeless.

Hopeless casualties of decisions made by those bereft of reason, lacking in compassion.

Steady streams of men; survivors, and those yet to be sacrificed, but never a word exchanged.....

That night he felt no bond with any man. A rifle and his terror were the company he kept; and a snapshot that she gave him, buttoned in his tunic pocket.

And in the morning, at dawn, he obediently climbed the steps to rise intact above that musty trench.

To advance briefly before being cut down in the indiscriminate sweep of machine gun fire. While she is smiling, smiling still, in a snapshot that she gave him, buttoned at his breast.