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One

There was a dark weight pressing down on Darcy Malone. For the better part of a year and a half he had felt its relentless presence. It had started with the war. He could not recollect the feeling before that. He closed his eyes and tried to will the weight away.

Darcy had slipped into the second last pew. He had come to the church with his uncle's family. Next to him, his cousin Caitlin O'Shea sat rigidly with her eyes fixed on the pulpit. She was a girl of medium size with ruddy cheeks and copper hair. Her balding father, Daniel O'Shea, sat thin and alert, fidgeting and restless next to her. Caitlin's brother, Phelan, had declined to join them preferring to stand at the back of the church where he settled clannishly with some other young men. They, Darcy concluded from a quick glance, projected an air of cockiness not dissimilar to that he had seen on the troopships.

It was Easter Sunday and the church was full. It was a special moment for Father Felix O'Shea who was presiding over his first full mass at his new parish. For that reason Daniel O'Shea had abandoned his usual place of worship and brought his family to the southern outskirts of Dublin to witness his nephew's service.

The first labored strains of the church organ were met by a general clearing of throats and hushes from chiding mothers. The wan sunlight that filtered through the open doorway, spotlighting countless dust particles and keeping the young children amused, was snuffed out as the heavy doors closed behind the priest. Father O'Shea commenced his entrance and the congregation rose as one.

Darcy was looking down, staring at his trembling fingers. It seemed they always shook these days. He squeezed his eyes shut and looked up again as he heard the flapping folds of Father O'Shea's cassock swish along the aisle between the pews. An entourage of white gowned boys followed awkwardly in his wake.

A strong voice raised itself from the front bench.

'I have risen.'

Other voices joined the antiphon.

'I am with you once more; you placed your hand on me to keep me safe. How great is the depth of your wisdom.'

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Darcy found himself mouthing 'Alleluia'.

Father O'Shea approached the altar. There he paused and signed the cross. One of the altar boys sneezed as a curling strand of incense tickled his nose. A titter rippled through the congregation as the boy's face reddened. Caitlin broke her stiff reserve and elbowed Darcy gently. He caught her smile and returned his gaze to the front.

'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' intoned the priest.

Father O'Shea turned and repeated the sign of the cross over the bowed heads of his parishioners. The priest asked everyone to sit and commenced to speak with grave solemnity about the glorious resurrection before slipping into the rite of blessing. The initial quaver of nervousness in his voice gave way to greater confidence as he engaged the familiar rituals.

Darcy was feeling increasingly uncomfortable and pulled at the woolen collar of his uniform to try and circulate some air around his sweating neck. The heat and musty stench of the tightly crammed congregation reminded him of the crush on soldier transports but without the humour. Father O'Shea left the pulpit and traversed the floor sprinkling holy water on those occupying the front benches.

With the pulsing weight in his head, Darcy was anxious for the Mass to conclude. He shared his prayer and hymn book with Caitlin and listened to her soft lilting voice while keeping his own in reserve. When the service reached the communion rite, Darcy breathed a sigh of relief. He shuffled into the aisle and joined the line of communicants edging forward. He knelt to receive the sacrament.

'The body of Christ.' intoned Father O'Shea placing the bread on Darcy's tongue.

'Amen.' responded Darcy as the priest held the cup of wine to his lips.

'The blood of Christ'.

'Amen'.

Darcy withdrew and stood patiently waiting for all to complete their communion. Caitlin bowed her head and stood in reverential silence. Her father knelt, his lips moving quickly in prayer. Behind them, Darcy noticed Phelan nodding in response to some whispered word from one of his colleagues.

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Darcy averted his gaze quickly. What were they talking about? Was it about him? He wondered. He did not like whisperers. Whisperers made him nervous. It was because of whisperers that he was now standing in a coarse, itching, woolen uniform. It was the whisperers who said Catholics could not be trusted. It was the whisperers who said Catholics were traitors. It was the whisperers who said that Catholics were slackers and would not pull their weight in the Nation's hour of need. So he enlisted. Though only seventeen he had lied about his age and forged a letter of consent from his father. He would give the Kaiser one in the eye and that would show them.

If he had hoped his patriotism would change things he was disappointed. His first commanding officer was a freemason with a decided prejudice against all things Catholic. Arthur bloody Smith, remembered Darcy with a narrowing eye, killed on the first day of the Gallipoli landing. Shot in the back.

Father O'Shea had returned to the pulpit to lead the final prayer. The noise of people preparing to leave was stilled as the priest again addressed the room.

'I am reminded in these troubled times of a verse in Deuteronomy. And before we leave today I should like to share it with you.'

His eyes fixed firmly on the group of young men standing shoulder to shoulder behind the last pew. They were perhaps ten in number and cast nervous sideways glances at each other. They tapped and dragged the toes of their worn brogues upon the floor. Their hands dug deep into the pockets of their breeches. Heads in the congregation turned, following the priest's deliberate gaze.

'When you go out to war against your enemies and you see horses and chariots and an army greater than your own, do not be afraid of them, for the Lord, your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt, will be with you. When you are about to go into battle, the priest shall come forward and say to the soldiers: 'Hear, O Israel! Today you are going into battle against your enemies. Be not weak-hearted or afraid; be neither alarmed nor frightened by them. For it is the Lord, your God, who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies and give you victory.'

The timbre of Father O'Shea's voice thickened with each word, reverberating through the gabled structure. His face was flushed as his final exhortation tumbled from

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his mouth. Some in the crowd stood slack-jawed and gaping. The young men listened in earnest.

‘Amen. Father. Amen.’ called one of the boys. There followed a murmur of disapproval at this brash impudence. A hint of smile creased the corner of the priest’s mouth. Father O’Shea smoothed his stole theatrically.

‘The Mass is ended. Go in peace.’

‘Thanks be to God.’ responded the congregation.

A rush of noise from moving talking bodies suddenly echoed about the church’s confines. Darcy felt a rising tension – an undisputed force of reckoning in the making.

Afterward, the church-goers gathered in groups in the small forecourt chatting sociably, catching up with friends and relatives. Father O’Shea smiled affably as he conversed with the various well-wishers while offering soothing words to the overwrought.

Darcy stood to one side with his relatives until the crowd thinned and presently Father O’Shea made his way to them.

‘Uncle Dan.’ beamed Father O’Shea, ‘Lovely to see you.’

‘And you, Father.’

Dan O’Shea grinned as he extended his hand.

‘Deuteronomy, Felix?’ queried Dan O’Shea impishly.

‘These are uncertain times Uncle. There’s many a man in uniform and some not yet who can find comfort in words from the good book.’ He paused and his eye fell upon Phelan ‘You heard about MacNeill, then?’

Phelan’s face darkened, ‘Aye.’

‘Tis the devil’s work and there’ll be hell to pay, for sure.’ added Dan unhappily.

‘Still. Let us not lose faith on the Sabbath.’ said the priest cheerily.

‘To be sure.’ replied Dan. ‘This is your Aunt Mary’s boy, Darcy Malone. He’s with the Australians. Over on leave from England.’

Darcy shook hands with the priest.

‘Welcome cousin.’

‘Thank you, Father.’

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‘Felix, please.’ laughed the priest, ‘Australia.’ He weighed the word a moment before continuing. ‘Now that’s a long way to come for a fight. A just cause, you think?’

Darcy hesitated. He had not really thought much about the justness of the cause beyond his own personal motivation. There was Belgium and Nurse Cavell, of course, the circumstances neither of which he could explain with any great exactness. The priest continued, not wishing to extend an awkward moment.

‘There are causes and then there are causes, I suppose. Each to his own.’

The priest emitted a weary sigh of reflection.

‘People ask me why does the Lord not intervene and end the war in Europe. I tell them that the war is not of His making. It is the will of man and so man must see it through. But I say to all men to do their duty and trust to an all knowing Providence. Be true to yourself and the Lord’s will, will be done. Have you been to the front yet Darcy?’

‘Dardanelles and soon to France.’ piped Dan O’Shea with a hint of pride.

‘A veteran then.’ responded Felix, ‘I’m told it’s an ugly business over there.’

Darcy nodded in affirmation.

‘So they say, Father.’

‘Well I really must get on. I trust you will enjoy your time in our fair land, Darcy. May the good Lord watch over you. Caitlin, you look a picture.’

Caitlin blushed. Her cousin smiled and then laid a hand upon Phelan’s shoulder.

‘When the time comes, cousin, remember the Lord, your God and Ireland.’

Father O’Shea shook hands with his uncle.

‘My thanks to you and your family, Daniel O’Shea. The Lord be with you.’

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Two

It was a long walk back to Northumberland Road to the two storey home of Daniel O'Shea. The mild weather made the journey pleasant enough, though the dampness of the previous weeks was everywhere to be seen. Caitlin linked arms with Darcy and with her father provided a commentary on the various aspects of anything they thought might be of interest to their guest. Darcy listened politely and proffered good humored responses, the weight momentarily lifted. Phelan ambled distractedly behind them.

As the small party drew close to the front of the O'Shea residence, a strong colonial accent issued forth from a young man in uniform sitting on the stoop with a basket by his side.

'Good was it?'

'Most pleasant thank you, Mister James.' responded Dan O'Shea. 'And what would that be?' he asked, spying the basket by the soldier's side.

'Oh, one 'uv the servants from Number twenty-five give it t'me. Said they wuz clearing out. Their guv 'as given 'em the week orf. Figured youse might do wiv some extras. I said I reckoned ya wouldn't knock it back. There's some nice tucker in there.' replied the soldier.

The lightness that had enveloped Darcy in the journey home was quickly transplanted with a burdensome and numbing fugue. Harold James had a marked effect on Darcy. The young soldier was an unwanted associate. It had been at the behest of the medical officer in London that Darcy had taken Harry with him. The clumsy dolt had apparently jammed his leg in a wagon accident and was a few weeks from being fit enough to join his unit in France. So Darcy had agreed. The medico had been kind to him and it seemed a reasonable thing to do. The trouble was, the infernal fool talked incessantly. The nasally twang of this brash suburbanite grated on Darcy's nerves.

'Ere ya go Darc. Try one o' these.' declared Harry brandishing an apple and tossing it in Darcy's direction. 'Bloody beautiful, I reckon.'

Dan O'Shea had turned to his daughter. 'Did you know about it, Caity?'

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‘Oh I had heard something. Irene...the maid’ prompted Caitlin seeing a lack of recognition in her father’s face. ‘Irene mentioned the possibility on Thursday. She said something about the Governor calling them in after a visit by two fellows. Said there was some serious talk but she couldn’t say over what.’

‘Ah, by crikey, ‘ere’s me blockin’ the way wiv all youse wantin’ t’git inside ‘n’ ‘ave some tucker, I reckon.’ said Harry apologetically as he got to his feet and pushed the door open for Caitlin. He removed his hat hastily, clutching it against his chest as she passed by, his face reddening slightly at her close proximity. The others filed in behind her. Phelan remained in the street.

‘Da, I best report in.’ he called out.

‘You be sure and be back for dinner.’

‘Aye, Da. I will.’

The evening meal was nearly concluded when the diners heard the front door open and Phelan appeared offering a mumbled apology.

‘Here you go you big ox. I kept some for you.’ scolded his sister playfully sliding a plate of food in front of him. He looked with relish at the piled contents. Mutton, ham, potatoes, pumpkin and beans doused in gravy. ‘You can thank Irene for that.’

‘Go on. Tuck in.’ urged Harry. ‘Bloody beautiful, I reckon.’

Dan O’Shea leaned back in his chair and looked at his son who was hunched over his plate eating ravenously.

‘How were the boys?’

Phelan sat up wiping some gravy from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. His eyes fixed on the two Australians with some suspicion.

‘Alright Da. Mick and Jimmy send their regards. They expect to be pretty busy over the next few days.’

‘Do they?’ Dan O’Shea smiled knowingly. He lapsed into thoughtful silence that not even Harry dared interrupt. Darcy was feeling oppressed. An evening of suffering through the inane patter of his compatriot was being compounded with riddles between father and son.

Dan O’Shea broke from his reverie and turned to Darcy.

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‘Tell me Darcy. How is it that a young nation such as Australia chooses to remain choked by the English yoke?’

Darcy was somewhat taken back by the unexpected question. It wasn't that he saw it as an affront or thought it some unsolicited prying into his heart and mind; it was simply that he was not political. His father was a passionate Trade Unionist who had known hard times and had fought the ‘good fight’ as he termed it. Darcy had enjoyed the fruits of his father's labours and worked as a telegrapher's assistant at the Railways where his dad had toiled as a ganger. The dinner table at home, the front parlour and street had been full of talk about religious and political issues, Catholic education, votes for women, universal conscription. Darcy had heard the discussions, always animated, names and places were familiar to him but placing which to where and whom with what was a task beyond him. For a young boy the back alley and park always held the greater attraction.

‘What do you mean Uncle Dan? We are a nation in our own right, surely?’

Dan O'Shea straightened his thin body, his elbows rested on the table and he pressed his fingertips together. He shook his head in mild admonishment.

‘No, you are not. Your laws are English laws. Your statutes must be approved by the King. You are no better off than Ireland. Where is the Australian republic?’

Among all the passionate discussions Darcy had heard between his father and his friends, nowhere could he recollect mention of an Australian republic. He sensed an edge to the political fabric of this land absent in his own.

‘Things are different back home, Uncle Dan.’

‘We're all Britons, Mister O'Shea.’ offered Harry with certainty.

‘All Britons!’ spluttered Dan O'Shea, his grey eyes blazing. ‘Darcy Malone, the son of my sister Mary O'Shea, a Briton!’ He snorted in contempt. ‘Thank God his aunt, my dearly departed wife, Maureen, is not at this table to hear such a damnable thing. I tell you both, the Australian heartbeat won't be found in an English bosom. Look at you, half a world away fighting an Imperialist war.’ He jabbed a crooked finger in his visitors' direction. ‘Australia, would be better served if its young men were at home. That's where your struggle should be. Take the axe to the deadwood boys and plant a young tree green.’

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‘Now Da, you should leave the boys alone.’ interjected Caitlin as she cleared the table. ‘Darcy and Harry didn’t come all this way to have you vent your spleen on things that don’t concern them.’

‘It should interest any Irishman no matter where he’s from.’ insisted Dan O’Shea stubbornly.

‘Maybe but now’s not the time, Da.’ reasoned his daughter while casting a disapproving look at her father.

Dan leaned back in his chair and with a diffident wave of his right hand, sighed resignedly, stuffing his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets.

‘For sure, Caity, for sure. Boys you’ll forgive an old man who cries for his country, won’t you? Humour a man who dreams of a rightful Irish state. It’s just that I’m tired of waiting. Tone, O’Connell, Parnell. Always the hope and still a foreign crown rules. And now, what? The orange *and* the green fighting for an English king. Damn Redman and damn this bloody war.’

‘John Redman is a good man, Da.’ said Caitlin.

‘Pah!’ grumbled Dan O’Shea disapprovingly. ‘Not good enough, I say. And nor is bloody MacNeill, the damned traitor.’

‘Only a fool would resort to the sword, Da.’ retorted Caitlin with rising heat. ‘And such talk at the table.’

Dan O’Shea smiled. ‘Praise be to God. Caitlin O’Shea you are your mother’s daughter. I’m sorry boys,’ he soothed, ‘Caity is right, the dinner table is no place for politics. A toast, gentlemen. To hearts, brave and true.’

Darcy, Harry and Phelan raised their glasses solemnly.

‘To hearts, brave and true.’

Darcy welcomed the dark. It relieved his head of the pain. He lay on his back in an upstairs bed. Harold James was curled on a cot not three feet away, snoring irregularly. Darcy had dared to think of having a room to himself and a set of civilian clothes to relax in. Instead Captain Box, his medical officer in London, had asked *that* favour. And now he was in Dublin and nothing much had changed. Belching, sweating bodies had followed him everywhere for eighteen weary months. In camp after

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enlistment; on the troopship across the Indian Ocean; in sand-fly infested tents in Egypt; in the trenches at Gallipoli; on the hospital ship to Alexandria, after he had been sent away; in the hospital at Cairo and on the ship back to Gallipoli and on his final evacuation. The same was true of the trip to France.

His thoughts wandered to the events of the day. A veteran, Father O'Shea had called him. Darcy Malone didn't see it that way. He hadn't even seen a Turk until he saw some prisoners gathered on the beach, two weeks after he had landed. That was the maddening thing. Bullets and death all round and not a Turk in sight. And then there was the day the parapet on his trench was blown in. He had never felt so impotent in his life. He didn't remember much. Earth and debris piled on top of him, dark and airless. He was screaming silently in the black. He awoke in the casualty clearing station, unable to speak so they sent him away. By the time he returned things had died right down. As for France, he had no sooner arrived than he was struck down by a severe bout of flu and some undiagnosed pulmonary disorder for which he was sent to England.

He liked Father O'Shea. The priest was ten years his senior and cut from the same O'Shea cloth as his uncle. He was a taller version, with jet black hair, heavy eyebrows and a hooked nose. Phelan was shorter and broader across the back. They all had piercing pale blue grey eyes. In his dwindling consciousness, Darcy was piecing the fragments of conversation together. They were proud Irishmen, fierce nationalists he gathered and, as he saw it, involved in some developing mischief.

As he lay waiting to slide into the comforting oblivion of sleep, he thought he heard Dan's and Phelan's voices. A door opened, then closed and the silence was restored. Harold gave a sudden rasping snort and tossed noisily on his cot. Darcy shut his eyes and wondered if he would ever escape the clutches of farting khaki.

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Three

Darcy woke early. An eternity of waking to the jarring rattle of phlegm racked coughs had conditioned his body to rise before the cockerel. On this morning, a tom tit flitting against the bedroom window provided a welcome change.

Harry was already up, dispensing his good cheer.

‘Rise ‘n’ shine, cobber. Reckon it might be a good day in town being the ‘oliday ‘n’ all.’

Darcy did not answer. He rubbed his eyes and stared at his bare toes. Already his head felt heavy. The thick salty smell of bacon aroused him.

‘We better get downstairs. Give me a minute to get dressed.’

‘Sure, cob. I’m starvin’. Can’t guarantee there’ll be anythin’ left if ya’ take too long.’

Darcy grunted in acknowledgement and watched his companion descend the stairs noisily. Harry’s chirruping was greeted by Caitlin’s pleasant voice and Darcy thought he heard Uncle Dan’s as well. He dressed slowly. His bones ached and he wondered if the pain in his joints would go when all this was over.

He passed the kitchen and stepped into the small backyard where he squatted by the tap. He pumped the lever a few times and the water splashed into the basin. Darcy dashed some water over his face and smoothed his hair back. He cupped his hand and drank a small quantity, swishing it about his mouth and giving his teeth a vigorous rub with his finger. Above him the tom tit issued an enquiring *peep* before it disappeared under the eaves.

When Darcy settled at the breakfast table Dan O’Shea gave a wink.

‘Caitlin, will you hurry up with some food for these two fine soldiers of the King.’ He grinned baring his yellowed teeth and Darcy was reminded of the line of new recruits that had paraded to have their rotten teeth pulled so that they might better serve the cause. ‘What would your mother say Caity Rose if she were to find two types of Australians in her kitchen?’

The two soldiers glanced at one another with incomprehension.

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‘Two types, Da?’ queried Caitlin, her own mind missing her father’s line of enquiry.

‘Aye, two types. Young Harold here, I think I’m right in saying, is an Australian-Briton. True?’ he said raising an eyebrow and darting a teasing smile in Harry’s direction.

‘Reckon that’s fair enough’ agreed Harry.

‘But young Darcy here, with O’Shea blood, is an Irish-Australian. You see, two types.’ Dan O’Shea looked about the room somewhat contentedly and finding himself unchallenged, continued, ‘Irish first Darcy. Never forget where you come from. Now boys what are you up to today?’

‘Bank ‘oliday Mister O’Shea. Reckon it might be a good day for a stroll in town.’

‘And I think I might join them. If the boys don’t mind, of course?’ said Caitlin looking at Harry and her cousin.

Harry blushed and Darcy smiled broadly, ‘It would be a pleasure Caitlin’.

Phelan, who was crouched in front of the stove, stoking the embers with some kindling, paused a moment.

‘Bad day to go into the city.’ he announced bluntly without looking up as he closed the stove door.

‘Why?’ asked his sister.

‘Just isn’t.’ grunted Phelan. He stood and pulled his cap down over his eyes, hitched his coat collar up around his ears and lumbered out of the kitchen.

‘You and your Fenian friends should leave what’s well enough alone.’ called Caity after him.

‘Trouble, Caity?’ asked Darcy.

Caity laughed. ‘No, not really, Darcy. Just talk. Lot’s of talk, as always. Blarney, that’s all.’

‘Now you mind what your brother says, Caity Rose.’ added Dan O’Shea. ‘Who’s to say today’s not the day a great blow is struck for Ireland. Just be careful, that’s all Phelan is saying.’

By the time Caitlin attended to some tasks around the house and errands up the street, the morning had slipped away. Darcy insisted on taking a Hansom cab into the city

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to hasten their journey. He hailed one down and the youthful trio climbed aboard. They settled into the comfortable seats of the well sprung carriage just as the driver flicked his whip and the horse drawn cab lurched into motion.

‘Well this is fine.’ said Caitlin happily.

‘Sure beats walkin’ Miss Caity’ chirped Harry, ‘I’ve done enough marchin’ t’last me a lifetime, I reckon.’

Darcy nodded in unconscious agreement. He was staring out the window as the cab moved briskly up the stretch of road toward the Mount Street Bridge over the Grand Canal. A three storey house that commanded the approach to the bridge and canal caught his eye. A tooting noise caused him to start. He felt the cab’s pace quicken as a motor car passed them. The Hansom driver tried to match its pace before giving up the impossible task. The motorist gave a breezy wave and Darcy thought he heard the Hansom’s driver curse. Darcy’s hands were shaking and he crossed his arms to hide them. Unexpected sounds had a way of fraying his nerves these days. London traffic had made him ridiculously jittery. Captain Box had thought the quiet of a visit to relatives in Dublin might calm him.

The three alighted in Sackville Street the main thoroughfare in the heart of the city. It was a busy intersection set at the northern end of the O’Connell Street Bridge. Double-decker trolley cars rattled along the tram lines in all directions. Bells clanged and mingled with the clip clopping of horse drawn sulkies and carts. Motor cars whirred past at irregular intervals.

‘Are you alright?’ asked Caitlin with concern.

A sudden cold sweat had washed over Darcy’s forehead. He pulled, gasping, at his collar and stumbled over the pavement, turning his back on his companions and coming to rest against the wall overlooking the Liffey River which divided the city into North and South. He stared at the river below, embarrassed and trying to still his trembling hands.

‘Darcy?’ enquired Caitlin laying her hand upon his back.

‘I’m alright. Just felt a bit odd for a moment.’ he murmured trying to conceal his twitching hands.

‘You’re shaking.’ observed Caitlin with slight alarm.

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‘I’m alright.’ Darcy assured her. ‘Nothing to worry about, really.’

Harry scratched the back of his head, tilting his slouch hat rakishly over his face, ‘Jeez, I dunno Darc. Y’look a bit orf colour t’me.’

‘I’ll be right.’ repeated Darcy with some irritation. He straightened his posture and offered a weak smile, ‘Come on, let’s go.’

Caity slipped her hand into the crook of his arm and in turn offered her other arm to Harry. Thus linked, they crossed the busy road and joined the throng promenading on Sackville Street. They stood on the corner gazing at the O’Connell monument. A bronzed and stately Dan O’Connell stood looking down the street and over the bridge as if expecting trouble.

‘Da says he became too much like his oppressors.’ explained Caitlin, her voice assuming a reverential tone, ‘Too conservative he says.’ She laughed. ‘But Da thinks everyone is too conservative. I don’t know. I think he did pretty well. Dan the Man they called him.’

‘Reckon ‘e must’ve done somethin’ decent.’ mused Harry. ‘They don’t juz build a stature for any ol’ cove, do they Darc?’

‘That’s a fact’ agreed Darcy.

‘Now Parnell,’ continued Caitlin skipping away from the two boys and pointing up the street to a column at the far end. ‘That’s the Parnell monument. Now he’s someone Da liked. He wasn’t one of us but he hated the English. Da says he at least got it half right. Parnell, the uncrowned King of Ireland, some say.’

Darcy listened to Caitlin’s words attentively. He had heard Parnell mentioned often in the family home. He did not share Caitlin’s apparent passion but he thought his father and mother would enjoy a letter describing his visit to the monument.

They walked on. Darcy was moved by a peculiar familiarity. The faces that looked out from beneath the brims of the passing toppers, boaters and caps were the same as those in his street back home. They strolled past the General Post Office where people moved about their business in and out of the columned entrance. A British soldier leaning against one of the front pillars with a rifle slung over his shoulder touched his cap.

‘Good day to you Aussie.’ he called good-naturedly.

‘Cheers, cob.’ rejoined Harry and Darcy.

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Darcy was feeling better. Caitlin's presence soothed him. In the male dominated world that he inhabited, the civilizing influence of female company was craved. Some of the boys had gone off with the whores in Egypt and in France. He had refrained despite his curiosity. Caitlin, though, was purity, kin whose company he could enjoy without fear or favor. There was another bonus. Harold James was smitten by her and in that besotted state, talked less.

When they reached the monument they spent a little time admiring the sculptor's artistic dexterity. The golden Harp of Erin etched into the stone gleamed in the sun and Parnell's shadow stood enlarged against the dusty pink granite column, adding authority to his pointing pose. Darcy read part of the gold-leaf inscription. It was a statement of intent that reminded him of his Uncle Dan.

NO MAN HAS A RIGHT TO FIX THE BOUNDARY TO THE MARCH OF A NATION. NO MAN HAS A RIGHT TO SAY TO HIS COUNTRY THUS FAR SHALT THOU GO AND NO FURTHER.

The trio stood marooned at the base of the plinth for a while as they waited for some of the traffic to clear before they crossed to the footpath. There was a noticeable swell in the numbers of people and a sudden flurry of activity seemed to break out in front of the post office. As they walked on, they heard the unmistakable sound of breaking glass. The pop and crash of shattering panes continued in a desultory symphony as Caitlin, Darcy and Harry quickened their pace.

Caitlin called out to a lone policeman who was standing idly in the street looking toward the scene, 'What's happening constable?'

'Oh The Sinn Feiners have taken over the post office.' he said rather absently. 'And they'd just finished the refurbishment, too. There's a shame.' he added with misgiving, 'I expect the military will be along soon enough.'

The law man sauntered off.

'Bejusus' uttered Caitlin. She tugged at Darcy's sleeve, 'Come on.'

A crowd of interested spectators had gathered at the front of the General Post Office. People were being ushered from the building by a number of men clad in dark green uniforms wearing tall hats with upturned brims. Other men in civilian clothes

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armed with various weapons were among them. Threading through the crowd were small groups and individuals, volunteers pushing forward to join their comrades within.

‘What’s goin’ on, Darc?’ asked Harry in a bewildered voice.

‘Revolution!’ interjected Caitlin with a hiss.

Presently two men emerged from the barricaded entrance and stood before the crowd. One read from a piece of paper, buoyed by a few ragged cheers. The other shook his hand vigorously when he had finished. Darcy did not catch anything of what was said.

‘You’ll all be killed ye dirty bowsies.’ shouted one of the onlookers.

‘Aye, and for what purpose?’ called another.

The two men withdrew seemingly content with the state of affairs. A few spirited and derogatory comments were hurled after them. The crowd, marked by a profound disinterest, began to disperse gradually. Darcy, Harold and Caitlin found themselves drifting back with others toward the Parnell monument where the great leader stood unmoved. Windows continued to be broken as they walked away.

Two young men approached them. One carried a pike and the other a sheaf of leaflets. The pike man took up an aggressive stance.

‘You two better come with us.’ he said waving the pointed weapon alternately at Darcy and Harry.

Caitlin laughed in a haughty way and glared at him. ‘They’re with me and I won’t hear anything different.’

‘Right ho.’ said the pike-less one contrarily while offering Caitlin a leaflet. ‘We’ll leave you to it, then. Good day boys.’

Caitlin looked at the sheet of paper and saw the words ‘proclamation’ and ‘provisional government.’

‘It’s madness. No good can come of this.’ she despaired. Caitlin called after them, ‘You’ll bring nothing but trouble to us all and likely die in the bargain.’

‘Aye! But what a beautiful death it will be, ma’am.’ trilled the boy with the pike.

‘We better get you back home, Caity.’ suggested Darcy as they halted and looked back down the street. Some of the volunteers were busy pasting copies of the proclamation upon the base of Nelson’s column, a huge monument to a celebrated colossus that dominated the streetscape outside the post office. A small green flag bearing

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the bold gold stitched inscription, Irish Republic, hung out over one corner of the post office on an angled flag-pole. An Irish tri-colour dangled in an uninspiring twist from the other.

‘We can catch a taximeter cab back to your house. That would be quickest.’
continued Darcy.

Their attention was quickly drawn from the work of hailing a cab to the sight of a column of soldiers on horseback.

‘Ain’t that a sight, Darc’ exclaimed Harry with wide-eyed admiration.

The cavalymen clipped by, four a breast, casting imperious looks at the citizenry who stopped to watch. A couple of horses sidled disobediently from the bobbing group but were quickly coerced back into the phalanx. Each of the troopers gripped a lance. Small pennants were fixed to their ends, adding a touch of colour to the drab khaki outfits. The horsemen bounced past the Parnell monument and gathered pace. The formation suddenly broke into a mad gallop. The horses’ hooves splayed sideways on the street. A resounding volley of rifle fire erupted from the post office building and soon the lancers came dashing wildly back. A scene of chaos ensued. Behind the Parnell monument the horsemen began to dismount. Horse holders led away the mounts while their riders drew their carbines and spread out across the road. Some crouched behind the monument peering anxiously down the road. Three rider less horses pranced in aimless patterns, confused by the sudden violent action. Another had fallen in a hulking heap, spewing blood onto the cobblestones. Three soldiers lay motionless on the ground and a fourth rolled onto his side and raised his arm in a pathetic limp gesture for help. The crowd that had been watching, huddled in the doorways of some of the buildings, now took alarm. Panicked people hastened in all directions to clear out of harm’s way as more rifle shots rang out.

One of the soldiers began to fire at the post office. Darcy grabbed Caitlin’s arm instinctively and dragged her toward the intersection. Harry followed. A passing motor cab was hailed. It slowed suddenly, Darcy having thrust himself into the middle of the road.

‘Northumberland Road, please.’ instructed Darcy as he stepped onto the running board.

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‘Have a care.’ scolded the driver as his new fare bundled into the car. ‘What’s the hurry?’

‘The volunteers have taken over the post office.’ explained Caitlin a little breathlessly.

‘Begorrah! Have they?’ exclaimed the driver as he removed his cap and wiped his brow. ‘Don’t they know there are brave Irish soldiers dying at the front so that their country may prosper?’ He shook his head sadly, raising his hands in a forlorn gesture to the sky, ‘Wreckers, the lot of them...and on such a lovely day, too.’

The driver drove on for a block then turned the cab south toward the river. All seemed normal as he took his charges across the Liffey. In front of them was the imposing facade of City Hall. Single rifle shots could be heard along with the staccato bursts of a machine gun. A bullet slapped into the front of the car and the driver braked suddenly. Caitlin screamed.

Darcy was half standing in the back, leaning over the driver’s shoulder and pointing to the left.

‘Down there.’

‘Too right.’ shouted Harry in support as a shot ricocheted off the road causing a spark. ‘It’s a bit bloody warm ‘ere’.

Action miraculously and perversely lifted the weight from Darcy’s mind, if only momentarily. The driver turned the steering wheel and set off in the new direction on the south side of the river. After a short way he turned into a laneway through which the car barely fitted. Slowly they bumped along until they debouched onto a main thoroughfare. The sound of a heated engagement was still audible behind them and the driver selected a side street that led into a busier arterial. His three passengers were sitting silently in the back.

Up ahead the archway into St Stephens Park came into view. A number of carts and drays of varying size were drawn in an *ad hoc* manner across the intersection. Several bicycles had been tossed uncaringly onto the pile. A group of armed men in bluish grey uniforms surrounded the motor car as it slowed.

‘Everybody out.’ demanded one of the men brandishing a pistol. His friends pushed the car into the mass of carts where it added to the rough barricade of confiscated

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transports. The protesting party was herded through the gate of the park, past the body of a policeman that lay crumpled on the pavement. A striking woman in a tailored uniform, cradling a German Mauser pistol, let them by. They were directed past some volunteers who were busy scouring out a trench in the pristine lawn of the gardens. A couple of British soldiers sat disconsolately on the grass playing cards.

‘Over there with the other limeys.’ said their escort, prodding Darcy and Harry
‘You two can go.’ he said turning to Caitlin and the driver.

Caitlin began to argue.

‘It’s alright, Caity. Get home to your Dad.’ urged Darcy. ‘We’ll be alright.’

‘Aye. Be a good lass and get along.’ reiterated their escort kindly, pointing to the east side of the park. ‘That way’s best.’

Caitlin nodded and called out tearfully before turning to leave, ‘I’m sorry, boys.’

Darcy lay on his back on the grass looking into the clouds. His head throbbed. The weight was back, pressing at his temples. He held his hands up in front of his face. His fingers were twitching uncontrollably. He sighed and let his arms fall by his side, allowing himself a silent laugh at the irony of his situation. A few days quiet with relatives would be an ideal restorative, the doctor had said. Reconstitute the nervous system, he had assured.

‘Darc. What’re we gonna do?’

Darcy did not hear Harry’s question. Harry persisted, shaking Darcy to get his attention.

‘Darc. What’s goin’ t’appen to uz?’

Darcy turned onto his elbow to face Harry.

‘We’ll be alright, Harry.’ he said quietly, seeing the creeping fear in his companion’s eyes.

‘Alright. Y’sure?’ replied Harry with unconcealed doubt.

Darcy nodded. ‘Nothing to worry about, cob.’ he added manfully in an attempt to provide some comfort.

‘Hey Darc,’ said Harry as if gripped by a sudden revelation, ‘What did ‘e mean callin’ uz limeys? We ain’t limeys.’

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Darcy was silent for a moment. He reached over and hooked a trembling finger into the sleeve of Harry's uniform, lifting the tunic slightly.

'This uniform makes us all the same to them. Best get some rest Harry. What happens, happens.'

It was not much of a thought, nothing more than trench born fatalism. Pithy, Darcy knew, but the truth none the less.

'Hey Darc.' said Harry after a time. 'Y'know them lancers that was shot? Were they dead? I know they weren't movin' but they wuzn't necessarily dead wuz they?'

'Most likely.' said Darcy in a wooden tone.

'Juz like that?'

A bleak feeling consumed Darcy.

'Yeah, just like that.' he replied hollowly, snapping his fingers theatrically.

'And that policeman, too?' continued Harry.

Darcy nodded.

'That ain't right, Darc. That ain't right.'

Right, thought Darcy, What was right? Since he had volunteered nothing seemed right. Right or wrong? Who was he to say? His old commander, Arthur Smith, shouldn't have been shot but he was. He wanted them to rush a machine gun on a ridge. It was madness. How many would have died in the attempt? Not one of them blamed the man who pulled the trigger. Arthur Smith died serving his country and his men got to live a little longer because of it. Survival was all that mattered.

Darcy closed his eyes and for a moment felt strangely unburdened, luxuriating in the sensation of the warm sunlight on his eyelids. It was obvious that the volunteers were out in force. In the distance a series of dull explosions mingled with the echo of continuous volleys of rifle fire. He was reminded of his time in the trenches. Gallipoli, France, Dublin, war was everywhere, it seemed.

'Hey chum.' whispered one of the English soldiers who had sidled up to Darcy.

Darcy opened his eyes and looked at the round white face staring at him.

'Hey. Tommy.' he acknowledged.

'Me and me pal are going to do a runner as soon as we get a chance at it. You with us?'

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Darcy sat up slowly. His body ached, as it always did. He thought the idea was a bit risky. As he collected his thoughts his need to answer was stymied by a familiar voice.

‘Would you look at that? If it isn’t Darcy Malone.’

The beaming face of Father O’Shea looked down on him framed against the white clouds above. Darcy scrambled to his feet and shook the priest’s hand warmly.

‘Now what would you be doing here in this place at this particular time, cousin?’

‘Well we....that is Harry there and Caitlin were...’

‘Caitlin is here?’ queried the priest with concern.

‘No. They let her go, Father. But me and Harry are prisoners, I guess.’

Father O’Shea smiled at Harry and nodded his head by way of welcome. He placed a friendly hand upon Darcy’s shoulder. ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

The priest walked off and was soon conversing with a couple of the men who stood near the deepening trench. Behind them Darcy watched the green keeper saunter down to the edge of the lake where he scattered some food for the ducks. The birds seemed untroubled by the affray down the road. Father O’Shea returned smiling.

‘Well then, Darcy, off you go. You best make haste while the going’s good. I’m sorry for the inconvenience. I’m sure you can appreciate that higher principles sometimes intrude on common courtesies. God’s speed, the Lord be with you.’

Darcy did not move immediately. He glanced at the two English soldiers who looked at them blankly.

‘What about them Father?’

The priest shook his head.

‘Away with you Darcy and trust in the Lord.’

Darcy was uncomfortable leaving the two English soldiers, after all, they were when all was said and done, brothers in arms. He bolstered his uncertainty with the thought that his cousin would look out for them. His admiration for Felix O’Shea had increased markedly. Back home, clerics of all persuasions had beat the war drum and preached the righteous cause. War offered a chance to swell the church coffers. Dwindling congregations were revitalized. Those who braved the front line were few in comparison by Darcy’s estimation. Father O’Shea was prepared to go where the ironmongery flew and for that, whatever the merits of the cause, he deserved respect.

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‘Come on, Harry. Let’s go.’

‘Head to the sou’west corner boys. You’ll need to climb the fence.’ advised Father O’Shea. He smiled and waved goodbye as his cousin and friend headed off at the double quick.

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Four

It was late afternoon when Darcy and Harry, footsore and exhausted, knocked on the door of the O'Shea home. They had found their way back without serious incident. At one point, some stone throwing youths had expressed their displeasure at their presence, crying, 'Down with the military.' as they fired off their volleys. Their aim had been wayward and their ammunition in short supply. Apart from that minor skirmish the tourists' return journey had continued unspectacularly.

'Thank God. You're alright.' exclaimed Caitlin hugging Darcy and the blushing Harry tightly as they entered the hallway. 'I didn't know what to think. I've been in a terrible funk.'

'Sit down boys. Sit down. I'll fetch you some food.' said Uncle Dan kindly.

The butter bread and hot tea he brought was a welcome tonic to the two Australians' jaded spirits. They recounted their experience since Caitlin had left them, not forgetting their chance meeting with Father O'Shea.

'He's a good one is our Felix. Not like the others, that's for sure.' commented Uncle Dan critically, 'You'd think they were on the other side sometimes, to hear their carry on. Your cousin is a good man. One of the best God ever put breath into. The boys have been grand, that's a fact. What would MacNeill be thinking now, I wonder Caity?'

'What would he be thinking?' snapped Caity angrily. 'He'd be thinking what most right thinking Irishmen and women are thinking. That it's a damned fool's errand that will put Home Rule back fifty years. And,' she added holding up her dress with added irritation 'they caused the ruin of a perfectly good dress. Fancy making me climb a fence to get home. I nearly skewered myself getting down. But look at you, sitting and crowing as if you haven't a care in the world...and with our Phelan out there, too.'

Dan O'Shea clicked his tongue and sat down drumming his fingers on the table. His face bore a pensive look and he spoke slowly, 'Aye. Phelan. He's a smart one is our Phelan. He knows how to keep out of harm's way.'

On hearing these words Darcy was transported back to the chaotic jumble of the trenches at Gallipoli. There, men of all shapes and sizes and in various states of undress cursed at their godforsaken situation. The sandbagged parapets of the enemy's trenches

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represented the horizon of their future. They examined their chances through roughly made box periscopes and wagered on the odds. Who would survive? Who would be first to go? Their conversation was stitched with ironic, black humor. The smart soldiers were the one's who hung back. Do only what you have to and no more, one old stager with experience in the South African war had told him. Down tools whenever the officers turn their backs and never volunteer for anything. It had proved sound advice. One thing that he learned very early on was that the Gods' of war did not play favorites. He had seen the very best die and scoundrels live. He had seen the most diligent blown to pieces and the slacker survive. It worked the other way too. On balance, by his reckoning, the heroes died sooner than cowards. These things he kept to himself. The truth was no calming balm to worried relatives. It was better for them to cling to whatever articles of faith they could find, no matter how thin.

'How about a drink, boys?' asked Uncle Dan. 'Wash your troubles away.'

'Yeah. Reckon that'd be alright Mister O'Shea.' replied Harry, who had not been his usual chipper self given the day's excitements, 'A drink'd be good., wouldn't it, Darc?'

Darcy pushed his seat back and said nothing. His mind was numb and fogged. His body ached, a constant reminder of a young life lived in tents and scraped out sleeping quarters in the sides of trenches. He complained of sore bones. Lumbago or rheumatoid arthritis, theorized his Battalion's medical officer, 'Try to keep warm.' he advised. He wrote to his mother. She sent him a jar of Zam-Buk, a bottle of Dinneford's Magnesia and a bottle of Hean's Essence for the winter.

'Just a wee drop.' encouraged Uncle Dan, 'A little tippie to brace the soul. The Good Lord would approve on medicinal grounds, I'm sure. Would you mind fetching some glasses Caity?'

Outside, the distant pop of gunfire was discernible. Caitlin listened as she placed some glasses on a tray. Her round face was lined with worry.

'The match is lit and now the Devil will have his day.' she muttered. 'Da I think I'll have an early night. Darcy, Harry, thank you for today, I'm only sorry that...'

Further words failed her and Caitlin retreated in a tearful condition. Her father raised a hand as if he wanted to say something but he, too, could not find his voice. He

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led his guests into the sitting room in the front of the house. It was a small anteroom with a tiny fireplace. The chairs were somewhat threadbare but comfortable. The front window was slightly recessed and presented a view of similar styled houses on the opposite side of the street.

Dan O'Shea poured a healthy measure of whisky into each tumbler. He raised his glass.

'To hearts, brave and true.'

'Good enough, I reckon.' said Harry raising his glass and gulping down a mouthful. He coughed, spluttered and settled back in his chair in a somewhat goggle-eyed fashion. He was not used to drinking spirits. Darcy had always welcomed the rum ration and sipped his whisky quietly, allowing his pallet to adjust to its potent after burn. The three drank in silence. Outside things seemed quiet. The sound of an odd gun shot carried to them, its belligerence muffled by the cooling evening breeze.

Dan O'Shea leaned forward in his chair and touched Darcy's knee, 'Tell me Darcy...and be honest, lad, tell me straight. Have we any hope at all?'

Darcy wondered at the 'we'.

'The rebels, you mean?'

Dan O'Shea looked momentarily annoyed. 'Rebels!' he objected. 'I prefer to call them volunteers, heroes all, young lions striking a blow for Ireland.'

Darcy sighed wearily. He preferred to stay quiet on such a delicate matter but knew he could not given his uncle's expectant gaze. He sipped his drink again and scratched his cheek with his thumb. The image of the dead soldiers and of the policeman oozing blood upon the pavement crowded into his head. He weighed his words carefully.

'From what we saw, they looked ready to fight, Uncle Dan. No doubt about it.' he paused, conscious of the hope his uncle craved 'But they're taking on the British Army.'

'And may the Lord bless their dear hearts.' said Uncle Dan prayerfully.

'They shot down four lancers today, Uncle Dan.'

'I know, I know. Caity told me.' He shook his head sadly. 'That my poor daughter had to see such a thing. Her dear mother would never forgive me.'

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‘The thing is Uncle Dan, the army looks after its own. They won’t let it pass. Reinforcements will be sent, and then...’ Darcy swirled his drink in contemplative silence.

‘A matter o’ time, I reckon.’ completed Harry. ‘That wasn’t a fair fight today, wuz it Darc? They shouldn’t ‘ave fired on ‘em like that, wiv no warnin’ like? That wasn’t right wuz it, Darc?’

Uncle Dan stiffened and turned in his chair to face Harry.

‘Fair!’ he shot back with vehemence. ‘Not right! Was it fair when honest hard working Munster men were forced from their land for Raleigh’s folly? And what of the thousands who died under Cromwell’s hand? Fair! I tell you my heart still weeps for the followers of Tone who died in glorious revolution. Were the Peep-o’-Day boys, fair? England’s contracts with Ireland have never been fair. Just look at the penal laws! Pah! Was it fair that English lords and their families grew fat off Irish cattle while Irish children starved during the great hunger?’

Uncle Dan stood, shaking with a rising rage and walked to the window. He stooped and peered into the closing darkness.

‘Well I expect good Irishmen won’t stand idly by. When word gets out, more boys will rally to the cause. They’ll give them the fright of their lives. You mark my words.’

Harry sucked his bottom lip and stared into his glass. Darcy felt sorry for him. This was not what either of them had volunteered for. Ireland was meant to be a holiday. Still, war was war wherever you found it and Darcy wondered at exactly what notions of it Harry had carried away with him. Darcy could not remember having had any real preconceived ideas himself when he enlisted. He didn’t know if that had been a good or a bad thing. All he remembered was the shocking power of his first experience, the panic, the smell, the sense of disconnectedness between mind and body. He had never felt so detached or alone as he had among all those men when he landed at Gallipoli. They were all fighting private wars and he knew Harry was now fighting his.

Darcy understood the sense of unfairness that nagged his companion. Nothing angered a soldier more than being sniped by an unseen enemy. He detested snipers and it was a feeling conveyed by many of his comrades to their own. The Battalion’s best

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snipers were hard men – loners, all. Sniping in the trenches was daily fare but you still never got used to it. A lapse in concentration, an idle civilized hankering was enough to embrace eternity. It had been the case with his mate Ray Haines. He and Ray had enlisted for similar reasons. Raynor Heinz had changed his name and joined to erase the stigma of his Germanic background. He had paused to marvel at the sparkling azure sea as they trudged grudgingly back up to the line, dazzled by the poetic majesty of the vista that spread below them. You never hear the shot. Ray dropped like a log. That was Darcy's first real unraveling. The shakes had started within the first twenty-four hours but Ray's death brought on a shameful debility. Someone brought a blanket to carry Ray away. Darcy could not remember much after that other than lying curled up in his dug-out, trembling and wondering when it would be his turn.

'Cold, Darc?' asked Harry noticing his companion's sudden shivering.

'A bit.' lied Darcy. 'I'm alright.'

Dan O'Shea had calmed down. He returned to his seat and sat down heavily.

'I'm sorry boys. I don't mean to preach. The Orange Lodge has worked against us so long its hard for a true Irishman not to feel anxious. My dear Caity's right, though, God love her. I don't know what I'd do if Phelan came to harm. All I know is that fair has nothing to do with it. As for those British soldier boys, well it was their choice to put on that uniform. If they were honest God fearing men then the Lord will look after them.'

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Five

‘They’re down at Number twenty-five you know.’ stated Caitlin as she poured some tea. Her face was pale and worn. The mental exertion of the previous day had caused her a sleepless night.

‘Are they?’ exclaimed Dan O’Shea happily surprised.

‘Who?’ asked Harry.

‘Some of the volunteers.’ elaborated Caitlin.

Harry looked confused.

‘The rebels.’ added Darcy.

Dan O’Shea scowled at the mention of the word.

‘Oh, right. Them.’ exclaimed an enlightened Harry.

‘Four of them.’ continued Caitlin.

‘Only four?’ Dan O’Shea queried with a hint of mild concern, ‘Are you sure?’

‘Aye, definitely Da. Mrs O’Hearn was round earlier. Her youngest is running messages for the volunteers. He told her last night.’

‘Young Dinny! Really? Why he’s barely twelve years old.’

‘Aye and they should be ashamed of themselves for dragging the likes of Dinny into their mad scheme.’ fumed Caitlin. ‘You know there’s no milk delivered. They didn’t think of that, did they? What will happen to all the bairns if it keeps on? I don’t expect we’ll see Mister Pearse and company come around with the cart.’

‘It’s a small sacrifice.’

‘Tell that to the starving poor.’

‘Any true Irishman will understand.’

‘Milk today, what tomorrow? More dead bodies I should think. Will they understand that? What if it was our Phelan lying in the street like those poor boys yesterday? Would that be worth the sacrifice? What about that policeman’s wife and children, Da? What good will one Ireland do them now?’

The two glared at each other, both pale and shaking. Dan O’Shea jammed his pipe into his mouth and stalked down the passageway to the sitting room, muttering his discontent through gritted teeth.

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Caitlin cast a pained look after him and then catching sight of the embarrassed looks on Darcy's and Harry's faces, withdrew sobbing to her room. Darcy nudged Harry in his ribs.

'Let's go for a wander, Harry.'

Darcy and Harry were glad to escape the fraught confines of the house. They walked in silence for a time and found themselves ambling eastward along the Grand Canal. They propped against the railing, adopting easy attitudes and Darcy began to roll a cigarette. He offered a paper to Harry who declined having always thought of smoking as a dirty habit. They stared toward the heart of the city where a meandering plume of brown smoke rose and spread in an ominous smudge against the skyline.

'Don't look too good, does it, Darc?'

Darcy took a long drag on his cigarette. It quivered in his fingers. 'Nah. Not too good at all, Harry.' he answered, exhaling a stream of grey smoke from his lungs. He coughed and spat into the canal.

'Hey Darc, I've been thinkin'. Shouldn't we go down to the barracks and see if they need a hand. I dunno about all that stuff y'uncle wuz saying. All I know is the Tommies are on our side, so I reckon we're 'onour bound t'help 'em, if y'know what I mean.'

It was a point that had crossed Darcy's mind. He had come to fight the Kaiser. That meant killing Germans, not Irishmen. Yet there was a troubling logic undermining his position. There was no greater favour an Irishman could do for the Kaiser than to kill British soldiers. When he walked down the streets in Dublin he was constantly reminded of kith and kin back home. Those around him were the original moulds. They wore the same cheery smiles and bore life's burdens with the same humour and fixedness of purpose. These men taking up arms were his mother's and father's people. The possibility of staring through his gun sight at Phelan O'Shea on the other side of a barricade, jarred him to the bone.

'Let's wait a bit and see, Harry. Maybe we've seen the worst of it. The heads might sort it out between them.' advised Darcy as he flicked his cigarette end into the water.

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‘Fair enough, Darc, if y’reckon. Not much uv a way to celebrate, any’ow, I reckon.’

‘Celebrate, celebrate what?’ asked Darcy with surprise.

Harry looked at Darcy in greater astonishment.

‘Don’t tell me y’forgot, Darc. It’s Anzac Day today. They’re ‘avin’ a proper march ‘n’ all in London. There’s a big service in the city. Billy ‘ughes’ gonna be there too they reckon. They was talkin’ about it before we left. Y’must’ve ‘eard about it.’

Darcy offered no response other than to scratch his chin thoughtfully.

‘Geez Darc I thought you would’ve remembered that.’

Darcy picked a bit of tobacco from his teeth. ‘Well there you go, Harry. I hadn’t thought about it at all.’

They began to walk again. Harry began to talk again.

‘I reckon y’must feel pretty proud to be one uv the originals, one uv those that put Australia on the map. It must’ve been somethin’ to see those Turks runnin’ the way they did. I only wished I’d ‘ave been there to ‘ave a crack at the bloody mongrels.’

The intensity in Harry’s voice was that of a long distance patriot.

‘Y’never did tell me what it wuz like Darc.’ he continued.

It was true, Darcy never had. On the train to Liverpool he had adopted a masquerade of fitful slumber to deflect Harry’s questions. On the ferry to Hollyhead he had done the same. On the train to Dublin he could honestly say he slept. Darcy could not blame Harry for wanting to know. The problem was he didn’t feel comfortable with his own experience. Harry had a right to know and old hands, like Darcy, had a duty to tell. He knew his reality could not measure up to Harry’s needs. Darcy protected himself as best he could through a smokescreen of the mundane. Banal observations and trite sayings were an effective censoring tool. The word of the veteran was gospel. People knew no better.

Darcy knew that no matter what knowledge he withheld, filtered as it was through self preserving expurgation, war would inevitably reveal all its sanity sapping brutality to Harry. He would find out soon enough and nothing Darcy had to say could prepare him for the stark revelations of the front.

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What use was it, reasoned Darcy to himself, to describe how he had gone to ground on the first day ashore at Gallipoli, how he had clung to his rifle waiting for night to bring down its curtain on the mayhem. What good was there in describing how others around him had cried and whimpered? How could that knowledge help a raw recruit like Harry who needed to be brave? Hero or coward was the terrible question they had all asked of themselves as they waited to land. He had got through it though. Each new day tore at his nerves. Conditions were wretched. Everyday was a variation of shellfire, sniping, digging, flies and carping officers. It gnawed at you, wore you down by degrees. Ray's death had been the real kick in the guts. For a time Darcy was rendered completely useless, reduced to a military imbecile incapable of performing the most menial tasks. They would not send him away. The Sergeant-Major thought he was malingering. The medical officer was sympathetic and eased him along. Then one day, mercifully, he was given an honorable ticket of leave, knocked unconscious when a trench was blown in on him. His shell-shocked induced insanity was politely written off as 'suffering from debility'. It kept him away for months. He returned, not sorry to have missed an outbreak of heavy fighting. There was nothing heroic about Private Malone, concluded Darcy.

Harry's innocent inquisitiveness moved Darcy to adopt a gentler attitude. Darcy had, when all was said and done, been rude to his companion. He had treated all Harry's entreaties with a lofty and detached disdain. Harry had not complained, just persisted.

'I tell you what Harry.' said Darcy suddenly, 'Let's find a place to have a beer and I'll tell you all about it. There's some stuff I can't tell you, mind, things you need to find out for yourself but what I can tell you I will.'

'Really, Darc! You beauty.' beamed Harry.

They settled in the snug of a small pub on the road opposite the canal front. Through the grime on the window they could just glimpse the heads of the crewmen on a passing barge. This part of the world seemed untroubled and Darcy welcomed the safe haven. He ordered two pints of bitter.

'Better than that whisky, ay Darc?' enthused Harry as he licked the froth from his top lip. The army had taught both boys to drink. It was a misguided proof of their manhood of which their mothers would have been appalled. 'So Darc, what's it like t'be under fire?'

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‘You get used to it after a while.’ Darcy replied.

He did not mention the accumulative fraying effect on the nervous system. He’d pissed his pants when under fire for the first time. Then there was the embarrassment caused by involuntary shaking and the visitation of tremors at night. This he kept to himself. In the trenches it wasn’t just the enemy from whom you tried to hide. He was thankful that Harry had been too polite to ask the reason behind his unsteady hands.

‘The big problem when you first get to the line is the wanting, wanting to look at everything.’ This was true enough. Darcy had witnessed several instances of curious soldiers getting their heads blown off – Ray, for one. ‘The trick is to keep your head down at all times, Harry. Do that and everything’s sweet.’

‘Yeah, right, I will Darc, I will for sure. Thanks.’

Darcy was relieved to find that most of Harry’s questions were answerable. He was able to say with some certainty that he had never killed a man. On two occasions he had been called to arms to beat back Turkish attacks and both times fear had wrapped its frozen tendrils around him. He had been unable to pull the trigger. He felt an abject failure over that inability. He’d let his mates down. There had been enough men on hand to act as soldiers yet, oddly, his failure in this respect was a comfort to him. It represented some ironic upholding of the preservation of human life and of his humanity which he held dear. He had been disgusted by the euphoric reveling of some of the men after the kill. Perhaps it was relief. Nevertheless, it seemed indecent, inhuman. Of course, he did not tell Harry this.

The publican placed two half pints of stout on the table.

‘On the house, boys. My Kevin was with the Tenth Division until...’

He hovered a moment with a distant look in his eyes. Darcy knew the look. He had seen it in the eyes of other soldiers. He wore the same expression, he knew, whenever Ray’s name was mentioned. It was grief, loss and anger rolled into a single fragile mask. It needed no explanation.

‘Sorry.’ said Darcy.

The man hovered a while, silently lost in thought, before he regained his sense of propriety. He smiled.

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‘Well never mind me, boys. You enjoy yourselves.’ he said casting a doubtful look out the window. ‘It’s madness, you know. And to think my Kevin enlisted to avoid all this. It’s a cruel twist of fate is what it is. Ah but there I go again, my troubles, not yours. You’ll stay for some lunch, will you?’

‘Yeah reckon that’d be alright, ay Darc?’

Darcy nodded.

Lunch and a few more beers saw Darcy in a rare and relaxed mood. His hands still twitched but he found Harry’s conversation to be unexpectedly pleasant. Harry welcomed Darcy’s belated attention. Darcy realized that they had more things in common than he had allowed. Only a year separated them. Harry, too, had lied about his age on enlistment. Harry’s father was an English immigrant who worked at the brickworks in Richmond. Like Darcy’s father, he was a trade unionist who thought the country needed, as Harry described it, ‘a good bloody revolution to get rid o’ the fat cats who wuz always tryin’ t’stand in the way uv the workers who juz wanted a fair go.’

Darcy asked if that included the King. Harry looked appalled.

‘Strewth no, Darc. The King’s the bloody King ‘n’ that’s that. Without the King, where’d we be?’

The question didn’t require an answer. Anyway, Darcy didn’t have one. The King *was* the bloody King. The King’s right, his very existence, was an exercise in absolutism. Uncle Dan or his father would have delivered a manifesto on the topic but not Darcy. In the centre of town young men were calling the King a tyrant and shooting down soldiers wearing the despot’s uniform. In France the King’s armies were mired in an abyss of mass slaughter against the concentrated legions of his cousin. The lightness left Darcy in a rush and the weight crushed down. He was homesick and it was his duty to King and country that was to blame.

‘Boys hold up a minute, won’t you.’ called the publican as they readied to leave. He was standing behind the bar with his wife. Her once obvious attractive elfin features were pinched by the *look*. Her dark greying hair was pulled back in a severe bun. Lines of worry scorched her face giving it a haggardness that belied her age.

‘Would you do me a grand favour? Our Kevin was killed at *Neuve Chappelle*. If you’re passing that way we’d be much obliged if you could place this on his grave. It’s

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not much.’ He pushed an envelope at Darcy. ‘Just a pressed flower, that’s all. But it’s from us and we might never have a chance to get to France being so far away. So if you can it would mean the world to us.’ His words were tumbling out and his and his wife’s eyes brimmed with tears.

‘Here’s a picture of his grave.’ said the grief stricken father offering the conclusive proof of his son’s demise. ‘The chaplain photographed it and forwarded it on before his return to England. Most decent of him, I thought.’

He lapsed into a numb silence as his wife stifled some heart rending sobs. Darcy took the photograph and wondered if his own mother would one day have to look on such a thing.

‘We’ll find it. Don’t worry.’

The man looked relieved. His wife bore the unearthly look of one whose spirit had been crushed and whose soul had been exorcised permanently from her body.

‘Take care boys and God bless you.’

Darcy walked down the street his few hours of lightness stifled by a sudden moroseness. He could not cripple their hopes and had taken the envelope and photograph. It bothered him. What if someone so deceived his own mother? He knew he had little hope of ever getting to *Neuve Chapelle*.

Harry was his usual inquisitive self.

‘Hey Darc. Where’s *Neuve Chapelle*?’

‘Somewhere in France.’ replied Darcy dryly.

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Six

Dan O'Shea stood at the door to Number twenty-five and knocked. Inside he heard a sudden scampering of booted feet, then silence. He knocked again and still there was no answer. Dan stepped back into the street and stood looking up at the top windows.

'Hoy in there. Is anybody home?'

There was no reply. Dan O'Shea repeated the question. A voice responded from within.

'Who wants to know?'

'Daniel O'Shea.'

'State your business?' called the voice.

A smiling face appeared at one of the upper level windows.

'Hello Mister O'Shea. It's alright, it's Phelan's da.'

Dan O'Shea smiled back. 'Morning Mick. Is Jimmy with you?'

'Aye he is. Hey Jimmy come and say hello to Mister O'Shea.'

Jimmy's face appeared at the other window.

'Top o' the morning to you, Mister O'Shea. How's the craic?'

'The craic's good, Jimmy.' responded Dan O'Shea warmly.

A look of concern overtook Jimmy's good cheer. 'What's this we hear about you putting up a couple o' British soldiers, Mister O'Shea?'

Dan O'Shea laughed. 'Not British, Australian.'

Jimmy looked puzzled. 'They're alright then?'

'Aye Jimmy,' assured Dan O'Shea 'They're alright. So I'd appreciate if you boys leave them be.'

'For sure, Mister O'Shea. You have our word on it'

'Have you any news on Phelan?'

Jimmy shook his head.

'No, 'fraid not.' said Mick sympathetically.

'Would that be Phelan O'Shea?' said a youthful voice within.

'Aye.' chorused the others.

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‘Never heard of him.’ called the voice. The others laughed loudly, as did Dan O’Shea.

A fourth young man, whom Dan O’Shea did not know, appeared next to Jimmy.

‘I know where he is Mister O’Shea. Your Phelan went up to Jacob’s factory with some of the others.’

‘Did he now.’ Dan O’Shea smiled, comforted by the information. ‘Much obliged to you boys.’

Dan O’Shea was not surprised to find that his son had gone to the biscuit factory. Dan had worked there as a leading hand for many years and young Phelan had often accompanied him at work, especially after his wife’s death. Phelan, too, had worked there awhile before taking on a coal lumping business. He still delivered to the factory. He’d know his way around thought Dan O’Shea.

Dan O’Shea cast a thoughtful eye over the house and down the street. ‘Tell me lads, is this all of you?’

Mick wore a slightly pensive look as he answered. ‘George Reynolds and a few others are up at the Bridge and there’s some of the Blackrock company lurking hereabouts. We’ll do our best Mister O’Shea.’

‘I’m sure you will Mick.’ replied Dan O’Shea solidly. ‘Take care, boys, and God bless you and Ireland.’

A small crowd had been drawn to the street curious to hear the conversation. A woman hidden beneath a tattered shawl nudged Dan O’Shea.

‘Are these the rebels?’ she asked.

‘Volunteers.’ corrected Dan.

The woman ignored him and, looking up at the boys, said loudly, ‘So that’s what a rebel looks like.’ She paused for effect. ‘God help us all.’ She turned with a shriek of laughter and walked away.

A rock thumped against the door, pitched with purpose by another woman.

‘Ease up you old hag.’ shouted one of the boys indignantly.

‘How am I meant to collect my separation allowance with all this shooting going on?’ she demanded.

‘What do I care.’ called the invisible young voice carelessly.

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The woman threw another rock which bounced off the window sill.

‘You ought to. At least my husband had the courage to go and fight the real enemy when he was asked, not like you worthless curs. Traitors is what you are.’

‘Keep that up woman and we’ll have to shoot you.’ called the boy next to Jimmy defensively.

The woman glared at him defiantly, ‘Go on. I dare you. Shoot a defenseless woman why don’t you. What noble Irishmen you are.’ She stood steadfastly before the embarrassed volunteers and with no fatal shot forthcoming, turned on her heel with a triumphant and disparaging ‘Pah!’

‘Well good bye boys. Take care.’ called Dan O’Shea tipping his cap.

‘Thanks Mister O’Shea. We’ll have a drink after ‘tis all over.’ replied Mick.

‘For sure, Mickey. For sure’

Dan O’Shea waved and walked home satisfied.

Darcy and Harry returned in the middle of the afternoon. They said little to each other or to Dan O’Shea or Caitlin. They were despondent. Things were quiet and they all sensed they were experiencing a surreal prelude to some greater event.

Daniel O’Shea was relieved to know where Phelan was and comforted himself with the strength of the position.

‘It’s a big place, the factory.’ he explained to his guests. ‘Like a fortress if it’s well defended. And they won’t starve, that’s for sure.’ he added sardonically.

‘And are there enough stupid fools to defend it?’ asked Caitlin.

Daniel O’Shea chewed on the end of his pipe and lapsed into sullen silence.

The evening meal was consumed with the same solemnity. Afterward Dan apologized and begged his guests to join him for a mood lightener in the sitting room. They were settling in enjoying better spirits when they heard a rasping grate of metal on the street outside.

Mister O’Shea rose and peered out the window.

‘Lord’s sake will you look at that.’ he laughed. He walked to the front door and opened it and called out. ‘Dinny, do you have a moment?’

‘Aye Mister O’Shea, in a minute. I’ve just got to say hello to me Ma and sister.’

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The boy disappeared into his home and returned shortly after laden with bags filled with foodstuffs. He wheeled his bicycle across the road and the bell dinged softly as he leant it against the brickwork out front of the O'Shea house. The front tyre had come loose and the bare metal rim set the hairs on Daniel O'Shea's neck on end with each tortured rotation.

'Any news Dinny?'

'Aye Mister O'Shea, I do.' said Dinny gravely, 'There's been heavy fighting in town. The Brits have cleared the Green but the boy's are doing grand. They're saying the army is expecting reinforcements at Dun Laoghaire tomorrow.'

'That means they'll be marching right by here.' surmised Dan O'Shea. 'You've let the lads know have you?'

'Oh aye. Mister O'Shea. They said they'll give them a warm welcome.' grinned Dinny.

Darcy and Harry had joined Dan O'Shea on the front step.

'Any news on the factory?'

'Jacobs, you mean?'

'Aye.' nodded Dan O'Shea.

'I believe it's been pretty quiet there Mister O'Shea. The boy's got in alright but that's all I've heard. Well I best get on me way.'

'Can you not find another bicycle, Dinny?' asked Dan with genuine concern. 'They'll hear you coming a mile off.'

The boy laughed, 'Oh it's alright Mister O'Shea I only need to get close then I go by foot.'

'Well, even so, we can do better than that Dinny. Run around the back and take our Caity's.'

'Are you sure, Mister O'Shea?'

'Sure as my name is Daniel O'Shea.'

The boy beamed and collected the bicycle. He wheeled his new transport on to the road and with a wild hurrah, vaulted into the saddle and sped away.

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Seven

The O'Shea household was awake early the next morning. Though they had all slept restlessly the mood was considerably brighter.

'A funny thing happened last night, Da.' announced Caitlin as she served the men some breakfast, 'Somebody stole my bicycle.'

'No.' gasped her father in gleeful shock.

'Yes, 'tis true but that's not the funny part. The real joke is that they left a broken down contraption out the front of our house in exchange. Now who would do a thing like that, do you think?' asked Caity laughingly.

'The wee folk, perhaps, Caity. They have strange ways, they do.' rejoined Dan O'Shea with equal good humour.

'Well I happened to be awake last night and it would appear that the little people sound and look a lot like young Dinny O'Hearn.'

Laughter filled the kitchen in a welcome flushing of the previous night's tension.

'Well it's for a good cause, Caity me darling. We couldn't have our Dinny waking the neighbourhood with that awful racket again could we?'

The four were sipping from cups of freshly brewed tea when a loud metal clang resonated through the air from the city's heart.

'Mercy sakes, what was that?' exclaimed Caitlin.

The breakfasters hastened to the street. Others, too, had hurried from their homes to investigate the noise. A number of similar metallic discharges, though not as loud as the first, caught the listeners' attention. Daniel O'Shea shot an inquisitive look at Darcy.

'Artillery.' stated Darcy authoritatively.

'Artillery.' repeated the older man. He stopped and scratched his head. People were moving automatically toward the canal, closer to the noise, pointing out the columns of smoke that marked the worst pockets of fighting of the previous days. The salvos of shells were building into a continuous rhythm.

Daniel O'Shea stared with disbelief toward the city centre. His daughter held his arm.

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‘Bejasus. I never thought I’d see the day that a capitalist government would bite the hand that feeds it. Fancy that, smashing up the properties of the fat cats. And I thought I knew men.’ Dan O’Shea shook his head sadly.

Caitlin squeezed his arm. ‘Come on Da. Let’s go home. You can help me clear up. Why don’t you see if you can fix young Dinny’s bicycle today while I prepare some lunch. Mrs O’Hearn would be most grateful. I don’t think her baby is well today so she could do with a hand, too.’

Darcy and Harry stood with their arms folded looking across the canal bridge at the rising smoke. Darcy cocked his head as he listened carefully to each report of artillery. There was increased rifle and machine gun fire, too.

‘It’s gettin’ worse, I reckon.’ observed Harry.

Darcy ground his teeth agitatedly.

‘I reckon we should report in, don’t you Darc?’

Darcy rubbed the stubble on his jaw, drumming his fingers upon his chin as he contemplated Harry’s question.

‘You’re probably right, Harry. It’s a tough call, though...with Phelan and Father O’Shea out there.’

He didn’t say it but he was acutely conscious of the betrayal such an action would represent to his Uncle Dan.

‘It’s the right thing to do Darc. We’re British soldiers. It’s our duty.’

‘And what about my family, Harry?’

‘Well if they’re on the wrong side, Darc...’

Harry checked himself as he caught Darcy’s frosty stare and fell silent. The smoke was thickening. The two boys watched with mixed feelings. Darcy knew that Harry was bred of my country right or wrong patriotism. He also knew that soldiers of similar bloodline to Harry’s would be marching up from Dun Laoghaire. At the same time, Phelan, Darcy’s first cousin, would be crouched behind a crate of biscuits somewhere in Jacob’s factory. Darcy massaged his throbbing temples and cursed the bloody war.

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The first intimation of the approach of the reinforcing British soldiers came when Dinny O’Hearn came pedaling wildly down the street on Caitlin O’Shea’s bicycle. He sped past Dan O’Shea, who was crouched around Dinny’s previously discarded machine fixing the tyre with Darcy’s and Harry’s assistance.

‘They’re coming. They’re coming. The Brits are coming.’ yelled Dinny as he skidded to a halt outside Number twenty-five.

‘How long?’ responded a voice from within.

‘About ten minutes.’ replied Dinny breathlessly.

There was a long pause as the volunteers digested the latest intelligence.

‘Thanks lad. You best get indoors.’

Daniel O’Shea gave Dinny a congratulatory nod as he wheeled the bicycle back to his house.

‘You be sure to look after your Ma and sister, Dinny.’ he added as the boy passed, his face flushed with pride.

‘I will Mister O’Shea, for sure.’

Dan O’Shea turned to his guests whose faces had paled.

‘It might be best if we all get inside, boys. Things might get a bit willing very soon.’

The tramp of marching feet mixed with the clinking of accoutrements caused the men to look up the street. Others were standing in their doorways. The column of soldiers came suddenly into view, appearing over the crest of the horizon in an impressive bobbing compact block.

‘We should warn ‘em.’ said Harry. He looked at Darcy for support. Darcy avoided his gaze.

‘You’ll do nothing of the sort.’ retorted Dan O’Shea acidly. ‘This isn’t your fight, Harry. Things were set long before you arrived and they will be played out as God intended.’

Harry looked at the closing mass of khaki and then back in the direction of Number twenty-five. He nodded a mute and reticent acquiescence. Dan O’Shea ushered his guests up the stairs and inside as the soldiers marched closer, urged on by the cheers

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of some of those lining the street with small Union Jacks in their hands, oblivious to the danger ahead.

Daniel O'Shea, his daughter and guests stood silently, crowded into the front room. Each was lost in thought. Each kept their own feelings suppressed. The sharp report of a rifle shot signaled the start of an affray of unknown dimensions. Dan O'Shea went immediately to the window. Outside the soldiers had scattered. Shots were ringing out in quick succession. Daniel O'Shea could see a young officer with his sword drawn. Two dead soldiers lay on the road, their bodies twisted in awkward stillness.

'Da, come away from there. It's not safe.' urged Caitlin.

'It'd be safer in the kitchen Uncle Dan.' added Darcy with the fate of the curious at Gallipoli uppermost in his mind.

'Come on Da.' urged Caitlin gently. Dan O'Shea allowed his daughter to steer him to the hallway. Harry watched, clenching and unclenching his hands in rising agitation.

'I'm goin' out there.' blurted Harry suddenly. 'I'm sorry Darc but it ain't right us being in 'ere. I'm goin' out.'

Harry stood staring at his friend waiting for a reply. Darcy began to speak but his words died in his throat. He nodded and dropped his gaze to the floor. Harry brushed past him and opened the front door. The clatter of gunfire and men shouting filled the room, as if a host of screeching banshees had been let in, a mad swirling cacophony of noise. Darcy watched Harry run down the steps and onto the street. He knew Harry had not yet been exposed to the cynicism of the front line. The cautionary voice of the South African veteran was loud in Darcy's head. Volunteer for nothing.

Caitlin closed the door hurriedly.

'I'll put the kettle on.' she said.

Darcy stood rooted to the spot as his uncle and cousin headed down the hallway to the kitchen. His head throbbed so painfully that black dots appeared before his eyes. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut trying to rid himself of them. Outside the gunfire swelled louder and louder. Each explosion made him shudder. A vision of his friend Ray flashed into his mind and evaporated in screaming fragments.

'I have to go with him.' stated Darcy robotically.

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Uncle Dan and Caitlin stared at him disbelievingly.

‘I’m sorry Uncle Dan, I have to.’ cried Darcy.

‘Darcy, my dear sister’s boy. It’s not your fight. Don’t be a fool son.’

‘I’ve got to Uncle Dan. It’s just...well, Harry’s me mate. I can’t let him go out there by himself.’

Uncle Dan looked despairingly at his daughter.

‘Bejusus Caity, am I hearing right? My own nephew, standing in my own house taking up arms against us, the very people that put blood in his bones. Is that so Darcy Malone?’

Darcy’s voice was reduced to a croak.

‘It’s not personal, Uncle Dan. It’s just the way it is...this uniform means I have to.’

‘Pah!’ spat Uncle Dan vehemently. He beat his chest with his open hand. ‘In here is what defines us not the rags of a tyrant’s henchman.’

The older man was quaking with rage as he pointed an accusing finger at his nephew.

‘Let me tell you something, young man, something I know your father and mother have not told you before. Did you ever wonder why your parents made the journey to Australia? All immigrants have a story. Every one of them is running from something, with hope in their hearts looking for a better life, a new start, salvation or redemption. You’re father and my sister were newlyweds when they left. And why would two young children, for that was all they were, mind you. Why, with all their family around them, would they choose to leave the land of their birth? We weren’t the poorest families Darcy, the Malones and O’Sheas. We did alright through all the troubles though others weren’t so lucky. That being so there was still inequity all around. We suffered under the boot of our oppressors, too. Can you imagine not being able to speak in your native tongue? Not being able to play Irish games? What sort of government is it that tries to stamp out the very essence of your native soul? We may as well have been invisible for all they cared. When your grandparents on your father’s side were evicted in eighty-one and when your grandpa was sent to Kilmainham gaol for daring to resist over a few shillings back rent it was too much for your father. The only way we could make them

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feel our pain was to take the rod to their backs. A few nights later the landlord's manor burnt to the ground. It was a political statement, mind, for grievances were many but needless to say suspicion fell on your father. He was totally innocent of any wrong doing I might add but he stood accused. That was not so bad but the death of the landlord's son complicated matters. I swear your father never laid a hand on him but he was there when it happened, in town, defending the liberty of Irish women and children from the insults of the Pharaohs. Knowing how hard it was for an Irishman to defend himself with English laws the two families and friends in the local land league decided to send your father and my dear sister away from any likely trouble, as far away as possible. You can't escape your roots Darcy, Irish first, always. Remember that. Your father would never let you walk out that door.'

This revelation set Darcy swooning. He leant against the front door short of breath. His body was twitching in reaction to the furious fusillades exploding outside.

Daniel O'Shea had more to say.

'And think on this young Darcy. There's a lad down there at Number twenty-five who bears the same name as you. Michael Malone, a true Irish hero, fighting the good fight as we speak. Look close enough at your family tree and you'll find his descendants springing from the same tap-root. Kith and kin, Darcy, it binds us. It's who we are. It's all we have, that and our honesty. Without it we are nothing more than soulless shells under God's eyes.'

Darcy was rattled. Tears welled in his eyes as he fumbled with the door handle. He looked at his Uncle Dan with unseeing eyes and offered a strangled apology before stumbling onto the portico.

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Eight

The unhurried atmosphere of Northumberland Road that had marked it in days gone by was now one transformed to a chaotic tangle. Darcy rested his hands on the balcony wall and looked out onto the street with rising anxiety. His body shook with every new explosion above the constant din of rattling gunfire. A line of English soldiers was drawn across the road. The men had adopted a variety of poses. Some crouched and some lay on their stomachs. Others fired from the kneeling position toward Number twenty-five.

Quite a few soldiers lay dead or wounded on the road. One lay crumpled across young Dinny's upturned bicycle. Behind this line a young officer, hardly much older than Darcy, crouched with a pistol in his hand staring ahead with an expression of incomprehension. Across the road Caity's bicycle was propped against the steps where Dinny had parked it. The parlour window to the O'Hearn house was smashed.

The ordered column of soldiers that had marched into view only minutes ago now stretched in confused clumps up the street. Sections of men crowded together, huddled against the walls and fences seeking refuge and comfort together. The brickwork of Number twenty-five was being chipped away by the bullets slamming into it. Darcy also sensed by the soldiers' positioning that they were coming under fire from another direction. Rebels had positioned themselves in the three storey house that had caught Darcy's eye a few days ago. There, by the bridge, they were successfully pinning their enemy down.

All this Darcy grasped in a moment as he looked for Harry. Stepping into the street Darcy's instinct turned him away from the fighting. An ammunition wagon had drawn up some distance away and Darcy could see soldiers in pairs busily grabbing the weighty boxes and hurrying them forward.

The soldiers ignored Darcy as he walked up the road. He was conscious of a strange numbness in his limbs and an unsettling lack of coordination. His left leg seemed to have assumed a life of its own, flinging itself drunkenly to the side with each step. Darcy halted and stared at the wagon where a tall and heavily set sergeant-major with a huge curling walrus moustache was gruffly barking encouragement.

'Hey Darcy.' called a delighted voice.

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Harry broke from the group of soldiers milling about the wagon and seized Darcy's hand.

'Good on ya. Darc.' enthused Harry while shaking Darcy's limp hand. As Harry's excitement subsided he saw that his companion bore the appearance of someone in a trance.

'Darc.' whispered Harry 'are ya alright?'

Harry's sympathetic enquiry was interrupted by the deep baritone voice of the sergeant-major.

'All right are we boys? This is no time for a chin wag. Be a good pair of lads and hop to it, now.'

Harry grabbed Darcy by the arm and dragged him to the wagon. A soldier stood in the tray and slid a box of grenades toward them. Harry took the rope handle of one end and Darcy followed mechanically.

'At the double lads.' encouraged the sergeant-major.

Harry tried to jog off but Darcy was only able to walk in a jolting and halting manner. His body convulsed violently with each increase in firing and his face twitched uncontrollably.

'Darc, what's up, cob?' asked Harry with deepening concern. 'C'mon Darc not far t'go now. You'll be alright. Jus' 'ang on a bit Darc.'

After a slow, tortured journey Darcy and Harry reached the front of the O'Shea residence. Darcy shuffled to a halt and let go of the box as if something told him he was home.

'Geez, 'ave a care Darc.' admonished Harry involuntarily as the box fell to the ground jerking his shoulder. 'Darc ya look crook as a dog. 'Ere let me get ya inside t'ya Uncles.'

Leaving Darcy rooted in the centre of the road like a dead tree, Harry dragged the box of grenades to a group of soldiers outside the O'Hearn house. Caity's bicycle had been knocked to the ground and Harry stopped to pick up. As he placed it carefully back in its place the front door of the house was flung open violently. Dinny appeared, wild-eyed and crying. His baby sister was bundled in his arms.

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‘Me Ma’s dead.’ he screamed in a demented choking rage. He glared at the soldiers and at Harry, in half recognition. ‘I hate you. I hate you all.’

Harry tried to calm him but the boy pushed past him ran up the steps to the O’Shea house and banged on the door. Harry thrust a guiding arm around Darcy’s shoulders and pushed him after Dinny. They stood hunched on the portico for what seemed an eternity, a trio suddenly and unexpectedly wreathed in tragedy, before Mr O’Shea’s face appeared through the space of the narrowly opened door.

‘Me Ma’s dead, Mister O’Shea. They shot her. The soldiers shot her. I hate them. I hate them all.’ wailed Dinny.

Mister O’Shea’s grey face whitened and collapsed in grieving empathy, ‘Dear God, no. Come in son.’ He opened the door to allow Dinny in.

‘Darcy’s not well, Mister O’Shea.’ offered Harry lamely.

A deep sadness clouded Mister O’Shea’s eyes as he saw Darcy.

‘You best come in out of harm’s way, lad.’ he said gently guiding Darcy across the threshold. There was a scream from the kitchen as Caity received the news of Dinny’s mother. The sound of Caity’s distress cut Harry deeply.

Mister O’Shea looked across the road and then ran down the steps to Dinny’s house. He pushed the door open fully and entered the hallway with Harry following behind him. The soldiers watched with rising curiosity but did not move to block their passage.

Dinny’s mother lay on her side in the front room. Her blouse was soaked with blood. Mister O’Shea knelt by her body and passed his fingertips gently over her eyes closing her eyelids. He looked up at the broken window pane and bowed his head at the realization that it was probably a bullet from the volunteers that had ended a sweet innocent life.

‘Y’should stay ‘ere, Mister O’Shea. It’s ain’t safe to cross. Best keep ya head down in ‘ere.’ suggested Harry.

Mister O’Shea stood slowly and turned to Harry. ‘No lad. I’ll be getting back. I need to find a priest for Mrs O’Hearn, may she rest in peace.’ He cast a lingering look at his neighbour’s bloodied corpse and added wearily, ‘It’s an awful business lad but all we can do is trust in the Lord.’

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Harry watched Mister O'Shea walk erectly and defiantly across the road. As he opened the front door he called to Harry, who cut a lost and lonely figure in the street.

'Darcy is with his family now. He'll be fine soon enough. It's not your fight Harry.'

The door closed and Harry felt suddenly isolated and cast into an unfathomable purgatory. The gunfire had not worried him unduly. As a soldier he was glad that he had stood it so far. Dinny's mother's death and Darcy's unraveling had shocked him. Oddly, his concern seemed less about them and more about himself. A deep abiding instinct of self-pity told him that what had happened to them could easily happen to him. The thought sent a cold shiver through his body. He felt consumed by resentments at all and everything that had conspired to place him in the situation he now unhappily found himself. He was feeling entrapped in a series of events not of his making. Yet despite his sudden anger, there seemed nothing left for him to do other than to return to the task of assisting the beleaguered soldiers in the street.

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Nine

Harry stepped out of the confines of the Hansom Cab that had drawn to a halt at the bottom of Northumberland Road. He paid the driver the fare and stood on the sidewalk for a few moments collecting his thoughts and hoping that the knot in his stomach would subside. Two weeks had passed since he had marched out of the street, across the Mount Street Bridge and into Dublin proper with the British troops. The memory of the day long battle at the bridge, of the repeated charges and carnage wrought had not left him. Much had happened since then and he wondered if he would be welcome at the O'Shea residence. Part of him said to return to England by himself but the greater part was curious to find out how Darcy and the O'Shea's had coped with events.

There were many scars indicating the severity of the volunteers' resistance to the soldiers' arrival a fortnight ago. Further on up the road from where Harry stood, the prominent three storey house that had dominated the approach to the bridge was but a shadow of its former glory. Its brickwork was blackened by a fire that had gutted its inside. The roof had collapsed and the shattered windows gaped mournfully at all who passed by. Harry had seen an even worse level of destruction visited on numerous buildings in the city.

Harry walked slowly with increased trepidation up Northumberland Road to the O'Shea residence. He paused at the pock-marked walls of Number twenty-five and gazed upon the freshly dug grave that graced the small front garden. Within, unknown to Harry, lay the bullet riddled remains of Michael Malone.

The young Australian resumed his walk and was soon knocking at the door of the O'Shea home. Caitlin O'Shea opened the door. She was cradling a baby in her arms.

'Harry!' she exclaimed with some surprise. They stood awkwardly struggling to find words. Harry offered a weak smile.

'Come in Harry.' said Caitlin eventually. 'Please forgive me. I didn't mean to be rude. It's just...well I just didn't expect to see you again. But I'm glad Harry. I'm glad you've come.' she hastened to add.

Caitlin led Harry to the kitchen where the two sat at the table.

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‘She’s beautiful isn’t she?’ said Caitlin as she stroked the gurgling child’s face. Harry nodded. ‘You miss your Ma, I know. But we’ll look after you.’ She rocked the wee one with maternal affection.

‘Is everyone alright, Caity?’ asked Harry.

Caity looked at him with something bordering on disdain before she collected her emotions and controlled her voice. She shook her head sadly.

‘Things have changed. Harry. Ireland will never be the same. I knew it was a fool’s errand from the start. Still they didn’t have to shoot all the leaders, did they? What good is there to be gained from that? Connolly was so badly wounded he could not stand. And they still shot him. Propped him up and shot him dead they did. Where’s the humanity in that, I ask you?’

Harry sat quietly unable to find a response. He thought the rebel leaders to which Caity referred should have been shot. They *were* traitors in his opinion. Yet he dared not express such an inflammatory thought.

‘At least our Phelan survived.’ she sighed. ‘They sent him to England with the others that surrendered. Lord knows what will come of him.’

‘And Darcy?’

‘Da and cousin Felix arranged to have Darcy and Dinny spend some time in the country. Get them away from the trouble and give them time to heal. No good has come of this at all, Harry, none at all. Can you tell me one good thing to have come from it?’

Again Harry was left floundering silently for an answer. He shook his head in agreement.

Caity stared at the baby in her arms. ‘Poor, poor Mrs O’Hearn. You poor bairn.’ she cooed holding the baby closer to her bosom. ‘They say the soldiers killed hundreds of civilians like poor Mrs O’Hearn up in North King Street, murdered them in cold blood.’

Harry felt chastened by the sharp withering look that Caity directed at him. He had been in North King Street and it was true civilians had been killed. He had witnessed some rough justice and it had appalled him. The sight of three terrified men being evicted from a house and then shot down in the street had left an indelible stain on his heart. He was gripped by an unshakeable guilt that such atrocities could be linked to the uniform he so proudly wore.

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‘I dunno about ‘undreds...’ he began to say before thinking better of defending the indefensible.

The two lapsed into further silence before Caity moved to close their uncomfortable reunion.

‘I’ve bundled up your belongings Harry, just in case you did drop by. I’ll get them for you. If you want to find out more about Darcy you should drop in on Father O’Shea at the church. I’ll write down the address. It’s not too far if you have time.’

Harry took his leave but before descending the steps he turned to Caity and with his hat clutched nervously to his stomach he asked in a stammering voice, ‘Caity, I’ll ‘ave t’leave for France soon after I return t’England an’ I wuz wond’rin’, if it’s alright by you, if I could write y’a letter or somethin’?’

Caity hitched the squirming baby up upon her shoulder rubbing its back softly. A melancholy look spread over her face as she stared into Harry’s hopeful face.

‘I don’t think that would be a good idea Harry. A lot has happened and I’m not sure me Da would approve.’

‘Ah right ho. Yeah well...thanks Caity. I better be shovin’ orf then. Bye.’

‘Bye Harry. Take care won’t you.’

Harry drifted away from the house in crestfallen misery. He looked at the address on the piece of paper Caity had given him then cast a last longing look at the closed door of the O’Shea house before heading off.

‘Why if it isn’t young Harold James.’ greeted Father Felix O’Shea as he opened the door of the manse. ‘Darcy’s friend. Am I right?’

‘Yes Father.’ replied Harry somewhat cheered by the warm welcome. ‘I remember ya from the park.’

‘Aye, and I you Harold, though I must confess my knowledge of you comes mostly from what I’ve since been told by Darcy and his uncle. I’ve just made a fresh pot of tea so please come in and join me. I’m sure there is much to talk about.’

‘That’s the truth.’ said Harry as he took up the priest’s kind offer.

‘Have you seen our Caity?’ enquired Father O’Shea.

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‘I’ve jus’ come from there Father. I don’t reckon she wuz too pleased t’see me. I asked ‘er to write me but she reckons she can’t.’

‘You must remember these are difficult times Harold, uncertain times and there is a lot of anger. You be sure to write her and I’ll make sure she replies.’ said the priest kindly.

‘Really!’ exclaimed Harry happily. ‘Yer a real sport Father.’

‘You know young Darcy has...’ Felix O’Shea hesitated as he tried to find the appropriate words while pouring the tea. ‘Well, let us just say he is recovering slowly. We think it’s best if he stays on with us a while. You’d agree I’m sure.’

‘Er well I dunno Father.’ Harry scratched his head. ‘The army ‘as some mighty fine doctors y’know.’

‘Oh yes I’m sure they do.’ agreed Felix ‘For now though I think it would be in Darcy’s interest to stay awhile with his family. Being close to those who know him best will hasten his return to good health. What do you think, Harry?’

‘Ah well I reckon maybe y’right but I’ll ‘ave to let ‘em know when I get back.’

Father O’Shea leaned forward and reached out a hand to Harry’s resting forearm. He squeezed firmly. Harry winced slightly as he felt the strength of the priest’s grip.

‘Well Harry, on that I’d be obliged if you could find it in yourself to not say anything about Darcy at all to the authorities. He’ll return in good time. Can you do that for me?’

Felix stared hard at Harry while maintaining an ever strengthening grip on his arm.

‘Ummm. Yeah I reckon that’d be alright Father.’ said Harry rubbing his arm after the priest released his grip.

‘Good, good, much appreciated Harold. By the way Darcy asked me to give something to you. He said you would know what to do with it.’

Felix reached over to the bench top behind him and handed an envelope to Harry. Harry held the envelope, turning it once or twice front to back before opening it. Inside was a pressed flower and picture of a grave.

‘I’ll do me best, Father.’

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‘That is all the Lord asks of us all, Harold. Sometimes things are unclear to us here on this Earth. Rest assured the Lord has a plan and all will answer in due course to his judgment. For now though, all you can do is to do your duty as you see it.’

Harry weighed the words carefully. ‘I will. Thank you Father.’

Felix rose from his seat clapping his hands in a delighted manner. ‘Now, Harold. Let me arrange a ride to the port. You have a ferry to catch, I know. And I have the means to get you there in style.’

The priest opened the door of the manse and pointed to the motor car parked in the street. A cassocked young man with his sleeves rolled was polishing the exterior lovingly.

‘One of the volunteers, may he rest in peace, has no need of it now and his dear wife thought it might be of use to me in carrying out the Lord’s work. Young Sean, our trainee priest, can drive you if you’d like, Harold?’

‘Too right, Father. That’d be great.’ exclaimed Harry whose only other ride in a motor car had been the mad dash through Dublin in the taximeter cab with Darcy and Caitlin. He thought he might write to tell Caity that this was one good thing to have come out of everything.

Felix waited until Harry was settled in the passenger’s seat. He offered his right hand to Harry. The priest and soldier shook hands.

‘Good luck Harold. May the Lord watch over you.’

Felix watched the motor car draw away. Its passenger gave a cheery wave and the young priest turned back to the church to pray.