

DULCE ET DECORUM EST

“The spot where Owen was killed lies 100-220 yards to the left of the bridge.”

My husband is nothing if not precise.

This canal is an unremarkable stretch of water. So bland that I find it hard to imagine the noise and the chaos those poor men must have experienced.

We’re staying in a small *pension* in Ors, the small village where Wilfred Owen met his death just one week before the end of the war.

I didn’t want to come, but I know how much it means to Neil. He studied the First World War poets at school. This is what sparked his interest in the Western Front, the soldiers who died there and all the horrible things that went with it. It was only recently that he found out his own great-grandfather had volunteered at the age of thirty-one and had been gassed at The Somme.

“Can you feel it in the air, Susie? All those lost souls never quite laid to rest?”

I shiver.

There’s a plaque next to the bridge in Ors giving information about Owen and his death, as well as the four men who were awarded Victoria Crosses for their bravery in that particular engagement.

The words shimmer like ghosts and I almost feel faint with the emotional effort required of me.

Some of Owen’s fellow soldiers in the Manchesters made it across the canal. No one was sure whether Owen was one of them.

The poet is buried in the Ors Communal Cemetery. Neil first visited his grave ten years ago, but this year, the 100th anniversary, he wanted me to accompany him. Today, as we walk across there, a glimmer of sunlight bounces off the silver frame of a photograph someone has placed against the headstone. I look at the poppies, the small wooden crosses placed next to them and wonder what I’m doing here.

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The answer is simple. I'm trying to build bridges of my own. Just like the Lancasters and the Manchesters in November 1918, many of my attempts at construction have failed and I wonder whether I'll ever reach the other side.

"Shall we have a coffee? I don't know about you, but I need a break," says Neil.

He has his back to me. To the casual observer he's studying the inscription on the gravestone.

*Shall life renew
These bodies?
Of a truth
All death will he annul*

I've never understood that bit of Owen's poem, *The End*. To be honest, there's very little poetry I do understand. I like Pam Ayres and Wendy Cope. That's about it. I'm not well educated like Neil. The girls' secondary modern I went to didn't have the sort of teachers who were enthusiastic about their subject, except those who taught Art or Needlework.

Wilfred Owen's mother received the telegram notifying her of his death a week after the event, as the Armistice bells rang out in jubilation. You don't have to be well educated to see the irony in that. I feel more for her than I do for him. I am a mother, too. I have a son who is living away from home. He isn't fighting on a battlefield or trying to cross a canal under fire, but he isn't safe either. Other demons are chasing him. They are more subtle than the Hun or shell fire or ghastly, glimmering guns.

I feel sick when I think about Darren. Best not to.

"Coffee would be great," I say to Neil, thinking that a stiff brandy to go with it would be even better.

"At least Ors has a decent little café/tabac. Murielle serves the best coffee in the world, don't you think?"

Neil turns to face me now, removing his wire framed spectacles as he does so.

He has those boyish question mark-shaped furrows in his brow and I remember why I fell in love with him all those years ago.
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“It’s good coffee, yes.”

He turns back to the grave.

“We can come back later, if you like?” I tell him, knowing he wants to study the others that surround it in more detail.

“Can we? Sure you won’t be bored? I can come back on my own and you can have a lie down, if you like.”

I think about the big comfy hotel bed and the latest Danielle Steele novel on the bedside table. It’s tempting.

But I can’t. I’m building bridges.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll come back with you. What did you want to see next? Will we need the hire car?”

“Possibly. I’d like to see where Sandy Crerar was killed at Fontaine Au Bois. Keith MacPherson wrote a poem about him. Sandy was killed a week before the Armistice.”

My heart sinks. Another one. I don’t know how much more of this doom, gloom, death and destruction I can take. It’s Neil’s way of coping. He can lose himself in history and poetry. To him this is a world away from Darren. To me it’s a heartbeat away. How can he not see that?

The journey to Fontaine Au Bois is excruciating. We neither of us feel like normal conversation. Every now and then Neil points out a landmark or comments on the scenery. As far as I’m concerned we could be anywhere in the world. I can’t see France’s beauty.

L’Eglise Saint-Rémy dominates the centre of the village. It’s a sombre building and does nothing to alleviate the sadness I feel as I step out of the car. Then row upon row of white headstones at the British cemetery. How many more of these am I going to see before we leave France?

Neil looks enthusiastic and is taking photographs as well as notes. On the way here he’d mentioned writing a book. In a way I’m pleased for him. Pleased that he is so absorbed in something that he can forget the real world. I’ve tried. I started running, then injured my knee. I

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tried a ballroom dance class, but a woman without a partner doesn't really fit in. Nothing could hold my attention for long.

I check my phone. Still no reply to my text. My intestines feel as if they're in knots and an image of a WW1 soldier, his entrails spilling out of his body in the middle of the battlefield dives into my head and won't shift.

Just answer, Darren. Just a few words to let me know you're still alive.

"Text from Darren?" Neil asks, as he puts the lens cap back on his camera.

"No."

"He'll be fine, Susie. He's come on leaps and bounds since that last episode. This new medication seems to suit him."

I don't know what to say. Call it mother's instinct, but I sense something isn't quite right. We should have brought him with us.

"I'll try phoning later," I tell him. "Are we off?"

"May as well. The light's fading a little now. Anywhere you'd like to go before we head back to the *pension*?"

I don't know what makes me say it. "Let's go back to the Lock Bridge in Ors."

Neil smiles and opens the car door for me.

We drive towards a winter sunset and something inside me relaxes a little. I feel the stress of the past few weeks leech away and out through the open car window.

When we get to the bridge the sunset has faded a little. Neil takes my hand and we look down at our reflections in the water.

"He was only twenty-five when he was killed. Same age as our Darren," says Neil. "We sometimes forget how young they were. And Owen's poetry was so deep and meaningful. As if he'd had a lifetime of experience."

“He did in a way. The things he saw, no one should ever have to see in their lifetime. I feel for his poor mother. Somehow being killed just a week before the end of the war makes it so much worse.”

Neil turns to me.

“Don’t worry about Darren, Susie. Compared to all this, it’s nothing.”

A spark of anger flares up inside me. “It’s nothing? Did you really say ‘it’s nothing’? Our son suffers from crippling depression and you say ‘it’s nothing’?”

“Calm down, Susie. You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t, Neil. You’re saying that it was much worse for men like Owen who were shot than for those poor buggers who survived, but had to live with those terrifying mental images for the rest of their lives? Those men suffering from shell shock, stumbling around the grounds of those big old country houses like Craiglockhart and wishing they were dead.”

Neil pulls me towards him. “Please, Susie. Let’s not argue. You know that’s not what I meant.”

“The old lie. You’ve swallowed it hook, line and sinker, Neil. *Dulce et decorum est. Pro patria mori*. It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country. Try telling that to my great-grandmother. I was going to tell you about her brother, Frank, but I can’t possibly now.”

“I already know, Susie. I looked up his military records on that ancestry website. He was shot at dawn for cowardice. Darren obviously gets his mental weakness from your side of the family.”

I almost push him into the canal. What on earth made him say such a cruel thing? This holiday was supposed to help us build bridges, but just like Owen and his men, our attempts have been mostly futile.

Suddenly a light appears on the dark water. We both turn as one. Car headlights dim and I can just make out the shadowy figure of a man. I gasp. The ghostly image is in uniform and as we walk towards him, he salutes.

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“Darren?”

He opens his arms wide and I fall against my son. After I’ve held him, taking in the smell of tobacco and feeling the rough serge of his tunic against my cheek, I look up into his face and see him smile. He looks happy. More content than I’ve seen him in years.

“I got leave,” he says, “And I couldn’t think of a better way to spend it than with you guys.”

I look at Neil. The look of pleasure on his face almost extinguishes the cruel words he’d uttered just moments previously.

Darren must have noticed my smile fade.

“Hey, Mum, stop worrying. It’s all going to be okay. I’ll be office-bound for the rest of my army career. No more tours. No more fighting. PTSD is a recognised illness. It’s not like the bad old days when these poor souls had to cope alone and go mad.” He spreads his arms wide as if to embrace the whole of the cemetery and the bodies beneath the ground.

I shudder when I think that back then my dear, dear son would have been shot for cowardice, turning his back on the enemy, a jibbering wreck.

I turn back to the bridge and watch as the silhouette of a lone soldier, rifle at the ready, falls to the ground.

Dulce et decorum est.