

## *The Home Front*

***January 15, 1919***

He shivered violently, not from any force of weather, cold as it was. He barely heard the rain assaulting the window, nor the cold air seeping in. He sat up, kicked off the blanket, but somehow failed to wake his wife asleep next to him. He watched her breath rise and fall, rise and fall. He hated her for sleeping. He stared across the room towards the dim silhouettes of the children as they also slept soundly. He hated them too.

He grabbed the brown bottle on the floor beside the bed, opened it, and felt the warmth flow inside him. The drink helped, it always helped, but it did not take it away. The knot tightened in his stomach, as he observed the darkness surrounding him. He was safe back home in Dundee. But it didn't matter. The knot tightened further. Thick sweat oozed down the side of his head, and his right hand would not stop shaking. His mind rattled with the sound of machine gun fire, and his heart jumped with the sound. It haunted him. Night and day. He tried to hide his suffering to everyone, but the more he tried, the more his body betrayed him. He held his right hand with his left, willing the shaking to stop.

He peered over at Mary, still asleep, and felt the loathing arise once more. Her work at the mill tested her, he knew, but she did not know real suffering. He thought briefly of speaking to her about the torment in his mind, then shunned the thought almost as soon as it arrived. He was a man and would deal with it as such. Maybe if he found work, he would feel more useful, and then be able to sleep. He took another drink.

Now the bottle was empty. He grunted, lay down, and forced his eyes to close, willing his mind to rest.

And just like that, he was back in the trench.

## January 16

In the dark early morning, she groaned as she rose from her bed. A powerful stench of sweat mingled with whiskey hit her. He lay asleep, an empty bottle by the bed. A dark stain of sweat lay upon his clothes and on the bed, almost silhouetting his body. She turned away, disgusted, felt her body cry out in pain as she rose to dress. The pain never left her. These initial badges of honour in employment were now the price she had to pay.

She gazed across at the children before heading for the door. She turned back to look at the husband she barely knew. He had physically returned from the war, yes, but he had changed. Jobless, joyless, he spent his days drinking, and, she knew, most nights too. Two months after he arrived home, she sometimes found herself wishing he had never returned. This thought was riddled with guilt. She locked it away in the corner of her mind and closed the door behind her.

The wind was strong, threatening to lift her off her feet, and the cold was making a mockery of the layers of clothing that she wore. However, she felt she would have gladly spent the entire day walking the streets rather than pass through those steel gates at the Dundee jute mill. She forced herself to walk on. At the gate she dropped her gaze to the ground to escape the porter's penetrating stare. She hated the way he looked at her, it made her feel threatened somehow. And he always kept his eyes out for her, every single day. Today, just as every other day, she found herself wishing that she were at home with the children, and not at the mill.

Just twelve hours to go, she thought.

## January 24

He saw the barrels of countless guns arrayed before him, the dark eyes taking aim at him. He had taken aim himself, but his right hand would not stop shaking. He dropped the gun and turned to flee. An officer was at his back, barring the way. He could hear the cries of 'coward!' and 'traitor!' and knew he couldn't run away. He sank to his knees and, covering his head in his hands, and waited for the bullets to hit him.

He sprang up with a yell, peering out into the stillness of the room. His right hand shook violently, and he was covered in sweat. His left hand searched for the bottle next to the bed, but there was less in it than he hoped. He took a measured gulp, knowing the rationing required.

Dropping the bottle back down, his gaze shifted to the kids and Mary. He loathed them when they slept, and himself even more, trapped as he was in his mind and his fear. He fought to regain control of his thoughts and escape the memories that still haunted him. He grabbed for the bottle, drank it empty and pressed his hands so tightly against the side of his head, as if trying to squeeze the memories away.

He had barely slept in months. Waking weighed him down; his whole body ached. Exhausted, he still could not rest. He crossed to the window, making no effort to be quiet. It was late. Mary would be up for her shift soon, but he did not want to be awake when she woke. He had no desire to speak to her. She did not understand. He returned to bed and pretended to sleep.

As Mary rose and readied herself for work, he lay there very still. When she left, he sat back up and resumed his struggle.

## February 4

The incessant clamour of the factory floor threatened to overwhelm her. Her ears rang and her body ached, worse and worse each day. She was bone tired. Her shoulders were weighted down, pressed upon by thoughts of home and the realities of the mill. The noise of the machinery reverberated violently within her. The layout of the factory floor lent itself to supervision. She felt eyes on her, and looked up in time to spot a tenter spying down the line. He was one to watch out for; always on the prowl to catch the girls straying from their post. He knew that the girls would cover for each other, taking over each other's looms when nature called or when they simply needed a minute's break. The women stuck together in the mill; they always did. The collective spirit of the women was the only time, at least recently, that Mary felt empowered or safe.

The lunch break arrived. Her friends asked her to come outside for lunch, but she shook her head tiredly. She was exhausted; she would break where she was. She unwrapped a hastily-made sandwich and ate it in the dust-filled air, alone. Last night's events reformed in her mind. She had never seen Billy so unhinged – and so angry. Her hand traced gingerly the growing bruise on her arm from where he grabbed her.

As the horn blew for the end of the lunch hour, she noticed that she was alone on the factory floor. She rose, confused, and walked down the line and out the door. There was a great din, composed of loud, cheerful female voices. Mary approached the commotion; it was coming from outside the gates. She listened from a distance, still cautious. Her mother had always warned her not to strike, doubly important now she was the only wage earner at home. Inside, however, she was already among the strikers.

The strike was a pay dispute. A 5% increase in pay packets in fact. The singing continued. The laughter, the joyfulness, and the powerful display of mass unity was apparent. She glanced to her left as something caught her eye. At the gate, the porter stood with a tenter, scrawling something rapidly on a piece of paper. She knew immediately they were taking names. At that moment, the porter looked up and stared straight at her with that same unsettling glare. He pointed her out to the tenter and scribbled some more.

Whether she willed it or not, she was one of them now. The reality awoke something in her and she strode boldly toward the crowd. They sang a song she knew well; she heard her mother sing it often. She began to find her voice, the infectious enthusiasm of the

occasion threatening to sweep her away and carry her away with the strikers as they began to march down the Blackness Road. The moment had stripped away, piece by piece, all the troubles awaiting her at home. And they awaited her return.

Billy shook uncontrollably. The shaking spread now from his hand to his entire body. Was it fear? Or rage?

He glared again towards the door. Mary should have been home an hour ago. He took a drink, slunk back into a chair, and waited. Finally, in she came. She wore the happiest expression he had seen in some time. Her elation made him worse. He was suffering. Why should she be happy?

She was talking to him now, but he did not hear what she said. He was drowning in his own struggle. He felt the all-too-familiar knot in his stomach, his head pounded, he felt sure he was going to explode. He fought hard to keep the memories at bay. Not tonight.

Why was she still talking? Her voice took on the rattle of gunfire. It was too loud. It surrounded him. It enveloped him. He brushed past her, seeking the bottle he left on the table. Far away, her tone had changed, more accusing now it seemed, and yet more remote. It wore the voice of his officer, flanked by distant bangs of grenades, the sound of whistles blowing.

His eyes found her, if only for a second. She seemed to be yelling. She had to stop; he needed the quiet. He needed to make it stop. Billy gestured back; he thought he may have made contact with something. Silence, finally. He took another drink.

Suddenly, he felt hands on him, pushing him towards the door. Startled, he initially resisted, long enough to grab the bottle. Machine gun fire still reverberated through his head. He was shaking all over. Another drink.

He found himself out in the close now, at the top of the stairs. He looked at his hands, one shaking uncontrollably, the other clutching at the bottle. He walked down the stairs after taking another drink. He stepped out onto the pavement. Silence. The carnage in his mind died down slowly. Billy took another drink and made his way down the street.

Mary cried throughout the night. Swelling was developing around her eye. Sleep was impossible. She passed the hours thinking of him, and them, before the war. She knew he needed help, but people like them did not get help. She had heard someone say that earlier at the strike.

The kids had seen everything, and they clung to her now. They huddled together through the night, though her eyes barely closed. She would have to get up for work and leave them at home, she knew.

### **February 5**

Mary finally got up for work. She laboured to get dressed, cleaned up her eye as well as she could and trudged out the door. She felt the wind bite before she even stepped out onto the street. She knew that her exhaustion would make it a long and difficult day.

The Blackness Road had never seemed so dark, so threatening. Mary huddled her clothes tight against the cold, arms folded, head bowed, struggling against the icy rain. Something was wrong. Women were passing her, going the other way. She recognised some faces. They were from the mill. Their faces were downcast; they did not see her. A knot grew in her stomach.

She rounded the corner, seeing the gate loom large ahead and heard raised voices which seemed to reveal much anger and exasperation. The knot tightened. One gate was closed, the porters manned the other. Every worker was stopped and checked against a sheet of paper. Her chest tightened; she could barely breathe.

The porter raised his head as she approached, as he always did. His widened, callous smile stopped her in her tracks. He beckoned to his fellow porter as she reached the gate. They were running their pencil down a piece of paper. Finding what they were looking for, they barred her entry.

She staggered back to the pavement, sat at the edge of the kerb, and wept.