

AT THE EXHIBITION

The small man sat at the kitchen table with a stub of pencil in his hand. It was glaringly hot outside and the strong sunlight blurred through the muslin curtains as he pondered on the the words he had to write. It occurred to him that if perhaps he didn't write them all this might not be real, might all have been a terrible mistake, and life would return magically to normal. He recorded the date, 1st March 1919, in the neat copperplate the good sisters at St Bridgets had thumped into him, then paused again, his mind uncontrolled and wandering.

The kitchen was unnaturally cool. He hadn't summoned the will to light the wood stove, the engine of the house. This would have vexed his wife who never allowed it to extinguish, no matter what the season. Every night she was up in the early hours and he would hear her slippered feet padding down the corridor to meet its demands. He would hear the familiar thumps of wood landing on the hot ash and her vigorous scraping with the poker. Sometimes he would hear her talking to it, coaxing it back into flame, as if it was a living thing. Then she would return to bed and go straight back to sleep, the ritual over.

Her apron was hanging behind the door and he got up to hold it to his face. Smoke, wood dust, fat, spice. It brought up a sharp familiarity. Not with his mother - the last he had heard of her was the clip of her boots on the tiled floor of the orphanage as she got out of there into the sunshin as quickly as she could. But with a Nun in the kitchen there who took a liking to him, thought his skinny body needed feeding up. He would be given left over bits of dough and on special occasions was allowed the delight of licking the bowl, the closest thing to heaven. Then one day he darted to bury his head in her ample, aproned middle. This flustered her and she pushed him away firmly with a "Behave yourself, you little galoot."

He sat down again to resume his mournful task. God knows he could do with a drink, but he had things to take care of, unwanted responsibilities Had to keep his head clear. Later in the blankness of night he could allow himself the consolation of oblivion. He would need it, having to sleep alone in their bed, every inch of which was filled with her fragrance and presence. Perhaps he would sleep in a chair instead with a bottle handy.

He found himself picturing the first time he had seen her, at a dance in the town hall, sheltering in a knot of girls made bold by their numbers. His mates had gone for the

skinny, giggling ones, but straight away he had liked her dark hair and her ample body. She didn't seem much impressed with him at first, but he had a certain cheeky charm in those days and he soon had her laughing.

He made himself write her names. The first one, Hermione, that she never used. She was always just Beryl.

She loved dancing. That first night she'd told him about a ball they'd just had at the Exhibition Buildings, she'd seen it in the paper. Beautiful twirling gowns, men dapper in evening dress. The domed hall brimming with flowers and potted greens. She would have given anything to go to something like that.

He found out later that she kept a scrap book of all the society balls. Knew all the dances on the programme, the waltzes and polkas and the Pride of Erin. They used to put in what all the women were wearing "Lady Muck in black crepe de chine, Miss La-de-dah in heliotrope satin" and so on, and she devoured it all. The book was kept in the drawer of her dressing table and he knew that sometimes she would look through it, turning the pages slowly, relishing her fantasy world. Swirling around with some rich gent among the flowers and the palms, dizzy and out of this world. The way things had turned out, he didn't blame her.

But back then he had a decent job in a warehouse and though he couldn't run to High Society he did take her dancing every Saturday. Sometimes he even managed to acquire a bunch of violets or the occasional gardenia. He was a bit shorter than she was which made him embarrassed at first, but they moved well together and people said they made a grand couple on the floor. At first she was very proper, keeping him a respectable distance, but gradually, with some sweet talking and perseverance he was permitted to investigate some of her plump warmth and even take a few liberties.

He had to meet her parents of course and he knew right away they thought she could do better. So when he got her in the family way he was only too pleased to do the right thing and take her off their hands.

At the wedding she insisted on wearing this blooming great hat with a tall feather in it. The picture was on the mantle shelf, a bit brown from the fire but he smiled at the thought of it anyway, despite knowing he looked like a little twerp in his cheap suit.

He got up slowly and ventured into the stifling heat of the back yard. Bypassing the lavatory, he urinated under the struggling lemon tree that he had been trying to grow for her ever since they moved in a dozen years ago.

They had rented the house just after the wedding and he was earning enough to get her a few nice things. Life as a married man had seemed pretty good back then. He loved sharing her bed, not just because of the sex, but having spent so much of his life alone, her nearness was a wonderful thing to him. Then young Olive was born and he couldn't believe he'd had a part in creating this perfect little being.

For a while they thought she'd be an only child, but five years later young Stanley made his appearance. A son! He was over the moon. But the next day he turned up late at work still pie-eyed from his celebrations. When the manager challenged him he had said something inappropriate and was shown the door. From that moment his good life started slowly unravelling like string. He had never stopped hating himself for his stupidity.

A bleak reality set in as he tried to find work. He went from working in a comfortable office to taking anything he could get, any sort of dirty job that was offered. It got harder to manage all the time and they were just scraping from to week. He found a few drinks after work helped ease the worry, then felt guilty for spending the money and needed a few more. He despised himself for it.

There had to be something wrong with the soil. He'd tried tomatoes but they grew straggly and scarred. The potatoes turned up like dirty marbles. The only damn thing that grew was the choko vine climbing rampant on the dunny wall which produced crop after spiky crop of pallid green fruit. The mushy insipid flesh reminded him of all the joyless institutional meals he had forced down in his life. But sometimes it filled a hole when times were really tight.

He went back past the sleepout and found himself reliving that stupid night in the winter of 1915. He couldn't even remember what they were fighting about, probably his drinking, it was usually that. And then Beryl had said that he wasn't man enough to support his family and he'd said "I'll show you who's man enough" and the rage had sustained him through the cold night outside right up until he marched into the recruitment office in the morning. His enthusiasm began to wane as they questioned him endlessly, poked at him here and prodded him there. Officially recorded on the enlistment form were the meagre details of his life: Born Fitzroy, Victoria, age 30, Height 5 ft 5 1/2 inches, warehouseman, currently unemployed. Distinguishing marks: scar on left knee, tattoo of a rose on the left arm. That was courtesy of a

blonde bint named Rosie who'd dumped him like a brick right after he'd had it done. By the time he had to sign his name the impetus of his anger had totally gone, but he scrawled it anyway. He'd gone so far he couldn't act like a coward now.

He was the worse possible candidate for a soldier, being an amiable sort of bloke who had no desire to rip the guts out of another human being. And he would be the first to admit he had a bit of a problem with authority. It started when he was fined 5s for jumping ship in Port Said. Well he wasn't Robinson Crusoe there, half the men on board had done the same, keen to have their first sight of foreign parts.

When he'd been over there a little while they'd sussed him out and gave him a job in the stores, but he still had to turn out if there was a big push. The only way he could survive the horror was to disappear into a bottle. His mates found their consolation in other ways and often got more than they bargained for, but he was turned off by the skinny whores with their unhealthy, parchment like skin. Truth be told he was too drunk to get it up and too frightened of facing Beryl if he caught anything.

Then he began going AWOL, just a couple of days here and there. Just lost most of his pay. One awful night he found himself in a bomb crater with his mates when a shell hit them full on. He was blown up in the air like chaff and then dumped back on the undecipherable mess of what remained of his pals. After that he'd scarpered for ten days, found an abandoned cellar filled with cheese and liquid consolation and settled down for the duration. When they found him he he was rather glad because the wine had run out and the cheese and was doing terrible things to his bowels.

He tried to explain the horror of it to the court martial, but he got six months anyway. One day sitting in the relative safety of his cell, they came to tell him he was going home, services no longer required. And under their breath "glad to be shot of you, you useless piece"

And so, early in 1919, he found himself tentatively walking down the bluestone pavement to his home. The narrow street was familiar but somehow seemed not quite right. The modest timber houses weren't blasted to pieces. There was glass in all the windows, a scattering of flowers in the small squares of garden. His home was near the railway end of the street and as he approached his anxiety rose alarmingly. Stopping outside the wire gate he saw in the front garden a young girl he didn't know. Had he come to the wrong place? Had they moved and not told him? Then he recognised his own daughter, grown out of sight. Tall and plump like her mother, the beginning of little titties pushing out her cotton dress. And then he saw the boy, small and wiry like him, hiding behind his sister's skirts.

As he stood there an overwhelming desire to run away came over him, but then his wife had appeared in the doorway, arms akimbo, staring non-committedly at him. He tried to read her face, the face he hadn't seen since that dreadful night all that time ago. And now here he was standing at the gate like a lost soul, waiting to see if she'd even let him in. In the end she'd said sarcastically: "You'd better come in and stop loitering in the street".

She was very cool to him at first, complaining how hard it had been surviving, but later that night she must have felt sorry for him. And when he was allowed to himself inside her cushiony warmth he felt he had another chance at life. He determined he would do better, get a good job, look after them all.

But it was tough out there. Everyone coming home and no favours for returned men. Day labouring was all he could get. Beryl had taken a job at the weekend at the market to stretch their money out. It must have been there that she caught it, this awful thing that was running its silent, deadly course through the city. A strong, healthy woman in the bloom of her life, but she had stood no chance against it. He wondered if there was a God how he could let this happen after the hell of the past few years.

He sighed and returned to the house.

He knew when coming home on the ship that there was some sort of strange sickness about. Mates who like him had come through the war unscathed had fallen victim to it. Even his mate Jonno, a great brick wall of a man, had succumbed, gasping for his last breath just as the ship was coming through the Heads.

When he'd taken the kids to her mother's place she'd given him a withering stare and he knew she was thinking "It should have been you". He didn't take her on, knowing he'd need her help desperately from now on. To be honest he wondered why he hadn't come down with it as well. Too much blood in your alcohol, Beryl would have said. Christ, the whole thing just wasn't right. It was all arse about. Why was it that young people were dying, like his wife, solid, healthy, so full of life and warmth and spirit?

He knew there'd been things like it in the past, had learned in school of the carters crying out "Bring out your Dead" and the bolt of cloth that carried it up country. There had been plagues like this before and he expected there would be so again.

But not now. Not after all the loss and grief of the war. Hadn't the world been punished enough?

The worst of it was that there was no-one with her at the end. He could only stand outside the great building, waiting each day for what seemed an eternity. He'd seen photos in the paper of rows and rows of white covered narrow beds laid out in the vast vaulted space. No flowers or ferns now, no evening dress or crepe de chine gowns, just tired looking nurses and grim faced doctors. So many heads on the pillow who all meant something to someone who like him could only hope against hope.

Trying to shake it all out of his head he took up the pencil again. He needed to get it into the paper tomorrow, so he finally forced himself to write it out. Born Richmond 1887, loving wife of Wilfred, caring mother of Olive and Stanley.....daughter of Wiliam (dec'd) I and Mary, and loved sister of Edward, Mavis, (Mrs Brown), Ethel (Mrs O'Brien)..... passed away on 1st March 1919.....at the Exhibition.

2580 words