

## The Brothers

When both my brothers died in the Great War, Mother sewed a cushion to remember them.

We'd all sit night after night in the parlour. I was supposed to be knitting socks to send out to soldiers, but mostly I watched Mother and Dad. Dad would sit and stare into the fire, the baccy slowly drying in his pipe. Some nights he forgot to light it, but nobody reminded him. Mother would sit opposite, sewing in silence.

Mother asked me to chalk the cushion's design. She wanted both their badges, Jack's from the Durham Light Infantry, Fred's from the Royal Field Artillery. It took quite a while to get the lines to look right. Jack's bugle horn had a nice curve, but Fred's artillery gun was a challenge. Both their badges had crowns, but they weren't the same styles. One was radiant, the other more ornate.

But Mum said it was essential to get it perfect, otherwise it was disrespectful to the dead. Jack and Fred would want it like that, she said.

She spent ages trying to find the right colour threads to match the badge of the regiments. Cream and gold for the Infantry bugle, Autumn brown for the Artillery gun. In the end she had to go to Whitby to get them. When the woman in the shop heard the story, she pressed the skeins into Mother's hand, and wouldn't take any money. Mother's pride held out for a while, she wanted to pay, but in the end she had to walk away.

She was still weeping when she got home. I had to prise the packets out from between her fingers.

But as she sat night after night, bent over the cushion, I could see each tiny stitch was an achievement. Grief given into a commemoration. An act of remembrance, when our words could not bring consolation.

Those long silent evenings by the fire. The slow pluck of the grandfather clock, dull as a distant shot. We would listen to the flames grazing the logs, grumbling like the rumbling of politicians. Occasionally it was interrupted by spitting when the wood split, hissing its anger and flinging cinders at the rag rug, making us jump in our near slumber.

Eventually the fire would die down, and the cold chill from the corners of the room would creep down to place cold fingers on our shoulders. With both boys gone, I began to think we would be a house of mourning for ever.

But then James came back from the Somme.

Months later, but still as soon as he could. He came to us before he had even gone home to his own mother's. He wrote to tell her of our loss, and of the promise he had made, and so his own mother grieved along with us too, knowing how close death had come to her son. How different the outcome could have been.

He came heavy shouldered, his khaki still sticky from the trenches, his hair flattened to his skull with mud and blood.

The village saw a man tramping down to Barton Row and curtains twitched at windows. A soldier weighted with his pack. A son alive, one that had come back- it made everyone's heart glad.

When he knocked on our door for a moment we hoped –

You hear stories, you know –

But it wasn't Fred, or Jack. It was James. James Martin.

His at least was a name we knew. Fred's letters had said they were in the trenches together, so he wasn't a stranger.

Mother invited him in.

James came through the doorway slowly, bowed down with his pack and the weight of the story he had to tell us. We took him through to the parlour.

Mother hovered over, offering hot tea, boiled ham and hunks of bread. Even father sat upright, his eyes following James' every slight motion, noting the stained hands tremor as they took a plate piled with ham and ragged-cut Yorkshire doorstops. I watched Dad come back to life as he studied every stitch in the uniform, the badges visible despite the mud. Dad asked about everything that happened in the trenches. He kept on about the telegram we'd got, and

the short note from the sergeant.

That was why he had come, James said, it was hard to explain how it was in the Somme, he said. People could hardly understand. His gaze slid sideways around the room, staying low.

He said how he and Fred had seen how their fallen friends became only names. How their lives were limited to lines on a despatch, and the details were kept back.

Perhaps to protect people, James said, and he glanced at me. This time our eyes met, you could see his anxiety, but I was eighteen now, and sat upright.

Mother wept and Father questioned, but at least he was animated and talking again.

When I took James into the kitchen to wash up for dinner, I thanked him for coming. I said it was a brave thing to do.

He sighed, real deep, so that I could see the hollows in his cheeks. Then he looked right at me and said it was the hardest thing he had ever done, but he'd made a promise to Fred, and he always kept his promises, he said.

My mother was loath to let him go, she offered to wash his clothes before he went home, but he promised he would come back again.

And he did. Again and again.

We've learned to trust his promises.

So when he asked me to marry him, I said yes.

Mother gave us the cushion for a wedding present.

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*Frederick and John (Jack) Walker, gave their lives in September and November 1916 respectively. Their names are on Egton Bridge Memorial, Yorkshire. Their memorial cushion was donated to Pannett Park Museum, Whitby, gifted by James and Mary Ann Martin's daughter, Bernadette.*