

This work is inspired by the painting “The Menin Gate at Midnight” by Australian artist Will Longstaff (1879-1953)

Winds of War and Time

The ceremony was far more moving than Katie had anticipated. The service only lasted twenty five minutes, the mournful Last Post, the lowering of flags touching the ground with the silence of the night broken by mournful birdcall somewhere over the town. At eight o'clock on the late December evening, police had closed the road. It was snowing but people seemingly appeared from everywhere like a rising tide, silently filling the spaces allocated behind waist high crowd control barriers.

The travel app had been accurate *“get there early because this ceremony draws a big crowd.”*

The Menin Gate's imposing structure reminded her of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra which she had visited years ago in her teens. While the Belgian memorial had a road passing through its centre she felt both monuments shared solemnity and sacredness.

Among thousands of other fallen soldiers listed, under the 49th Battalion Australian Infantry Forces, she located her great-great grandfather's name engraved into the stone honour rolls. Even in death the names were marshalled according to each soldier's rank on the day they were killed or presumed annihilated into atoms by enemy artillery fire.

“Simmonds O P” listed with the battalion's captains.

‘Octavius Patrick but the family called him Paddy,’ her Nana Winnie had said months ago back in Australia, ‘that’s what your great grandmother told me.’

Winnie had raised a thin sun weathered hand to the ageing framed photo on her living room wall. Four young men all in uniform, two of them with the distinctive Light Horse regiment emu feathers in their slouch hats. It was a professional studio photograph, two of the men standing, two kneeling, the four of them surrounding their sister who looked modestly at the floor with a shy smile on her face. The four young men looked supremely confident.

Paddy Simmonds wore an officer’s Sam Browne with its distinctive pouches on the shoulder cross strap and the pips of a sub-lieutenant on his epaulets. For some reason his brass uniform buckles and buttons was just that bit shinier than his brothers.

The portrait was clearly taken before the boys embarked for Europe and the Western Front. Their innocence touched Katie, wishing there was some way she could warn them of what terror was to come.

‘According to his war service record, by the time of his death he’d been promoted to Captain because so many officers were killed. Four brothers went to war, three came back, one with no legs and one who was never quite right in the head,’ she said, ‘Paddy was only twenty-seven, your age, Katie.’

A few seconds of silence had passed between them. Katie knew the family history well. Even though the First World War was three generations ago it had burned and branded the heart of her family.

‘Anyway while you’re back-packing across Europe, if you’re in Belgium you should go visit the Menin Gate.’

'The What gate?'

'Menin. It's a First World War memorial for allied soldiers who never came home. It's dedicated to the men buried in unmarked graves, you know, like the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Well there are over fifty thousand of them listed on the honour rolls at the Menin Gate. Six thousand of them are Australian including Paddy. Your grandfather always wanted to go visit but never got the chance. You would be the first of the family to see his name, pay your respects.'

God, Katie thought, why me?

'It's in Ypres' her grandmother pronounced the word *ee-pruh*, 'Your grandfather researched it all on the internet. Drove me batty with all the detail. He said the city holds a service every night.'

'Every night?'

'Every night except the Second World War is what he said.'

Katie's European sojourn was meant to be therapy she told herself, a chance to get over a disastrously failed marriage and the resultant forced sale of her drapery shop, a victim of the divorce settlement. The proceeds she'd got from her half of the business financed her trip, much to her family's disapproval except for Nana Winnie. She thought a twelve month trip around the world "was a bloody good idea." Katie had just wanted to get away and hide. Bugger the future for the time being.

The large assembly of people at the Menin Gate astonished her. There must have been hundreds attending, similar to an Anzac Day dawn service back home, the same reverence

and the same moments of ceremonial stillness. But Anzac Day was a yearly observance. The Menin Gate ceremony was night-time and had indeed been held for over many decades.

'In a few short years, a century of the ceremonial vigil would be marked,' she overheard a local telling a fellow tourist, 'the only exception being the years those Nazi bastards occupied the town in the Second World War.'

By chance this particular night's events turned out to be especially meaningful because an invited Australian Army honour guard was participating in the proceedings. Katie was surprised to see the soldiers sported the emu plumes of the Light Horse, something she thought had been discontinued after the First World War. A nearby Australian's explanation in a hushed voice to his teenage son clarified the reason.

'They're Royal Australian Armoured Corps. The emu plume remains part of their dress uniform. See the First World War tank on their shoulder flash?'

'Cool,' the boy said.

Katie felt fierce admiration witnessing the men and women of her nation's army conducting themselves with dignified precision. Far deeper was her sense of homage for thousands Australian Diggers buried somewhere in a foreign land and the searing anguish of their families back home.

The ceremony over, Katie had intended to head back to her hotel but instead found herself merrily ensconced in the Café Henri, a lively bar with good food and music. The Belgians, she discovered, loved their beer which suited her down to her Western Downs bootstraps. The bar was a great mix of locals and tourists and to top it off the Australian soldiers from the ceremony had appeared, uniforms shucked, joining the happy throng.

'Chinchilla!' she had to raise her voice over the crowd belting out an Elvis Presley song as she responded to the rather striking corporal's question. He had been the Australian flag bearer at the ceremony.

'Where the bloody hell is Chinchilla?' he bellowed back at her.

'Queensland. The Darling Downs. Actually, we prefer to call ourselves the Western Downs, population about seven thousand. And you?'

'Dargo,' he yelled back just as the song concluded

'Where the bloody hell is Dargo?'

He laughed. His name was Derek. He tried to explain Dargo's location in an isolated part of the Victorian Gippsland, population at last count, about one hundred.

It was close to midnight by the time she left Café Henri. Dargo Derek was potentially scrumptious though he and his army mates were a tight clique that seemed to be just that little bit insular. They hinted their CO had read the riot act to them about representing their country, being on their best behaviour and woe betide any transgressors of protocol. She could see and hear them laughing quietly as she trudged after them, with one eye carefully watching the exposed patches of ice on the footpath and road

Before she knew it she was at the Menin Gate and realised she had not taken a picture of Paddy Simmonds's name on the honour roll to send back to the family, especially to her grandmother. She stopped to re-read the plaque at the entrance;

TO THE ARMIES
OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE
WHO STOOD HERE
FROM 1914 TO 1918
AND TO THOSE OF THEIR DEAD
WHO HAVE NO KNOWN GRAVE

'Octavius Patrick, Paddy,' Katie breathed slowly, her hand touching his chiselled name. Like earlier moments of this night, the Last Post, the Australian honour guard, she was surprised at how deeply moved she felt seeing her ancestor's name, 'blood is thicker than water hey? I'm so very sorry Grandpa by three.' Or was it four she wondered, acknowledging the potency of Belgian beer.

She stepped backwards and readied her phone's camera function. Whether it was the ice or a piece of uneven path she recognised she was about to fall backwards, crying out more in surprise than alarm. Peculiarly, the fall seemingly unfolded in slow motion where she felt suspended before gravity took charge. This is not going to end well, she thought, marvelling that she even had time to make that observation.

'Got you Digger,' the man's voice said, his accent unmistakably Australian

There world had suddenly seemed to go dark. She felt a searing pain at the back of head and a numbness in her body. Nausea gripped her but miraculously passed.

'What happened?' Katie asked, 'where are the street lights? Has there been a blackout? I ... I've dropped my mobile, God the town's pitch black.' Katie fumbled on the hard cold roadway and to her relief sensed the shape of her phone.

'Bugger,' she could tell the phone's face was cracked as she worked the torch button. It shone brightly and she turned to highlight her rescuer.

Captain Octavius Patrick Simmonds stared back at her.

'Hello Katie,' he said

She thought she must have blacked out for a second, maybe longer. Katie blinked and tried to clear her head. The town still seemed to be in darkness but the light from her torch was strong and intense, bleaching the man's face. Katie looked again. He was in uniform but it was filthy, mud splattered with a dark circular patch over his left breast and a tunic button hanging by a thread.

'Douse the light Digger. It makes some of the blokes a bit nervy.'

She did as she was bidden. The lights in the town and the street lights were again operational

'Who ... how ... were you in the honour guard ... but your uniform?' Katie shook her head again. 'Why do you look like my great, great ... how do you know my name? Did Derek from Dargo ...' she felt faint again.

'Easy Digger,' he said, 'let me get a durrie going.' He reached into his tunic and with one hand rolled himself a cigarette put it to his lips and lit the thing sucking and exhaling the smoke in a satisfied sigh. He held the cigarette out to her.

'You want a drag?'

'No thanks, I'm good.' Why couldn't she smell the cigarette's smoke? The soldier sucked on the cigarette again, this time blowing smoke out his nostrils.

'We come every night. The bugle calls us.'

'You're part of the ceremony?'

'Been that way for ages.'

'How, how do you know me?'

'You touched my name on the roll and spoke the words, "*Blood is thicker than water.*"

Besides, Simmonds sheilas are the best looking, how could I resist' he grinned.

Katie could not help but smile. She knew she should be frightened. Nana Winnie would have irreverently said scared shitless. If anything she felt calm, warm and strangely secure. There was something ancient here. This time Nana would probably have said it was the spirits of the ancestors. Whatever it was, a complete absence of fear enveloped her.

'Tell me about home,' the soldier said, 'about Chinchilla, about the family.'

Katie gathered her thoughts. Where to start?

She told him of his brothers, of the young pregnant wife he had left behind, and his son Patrick and that child's offspring, and the four generations that followed, all male it turned out in a direct line to her birth, the first female. She told him of the Memorial Hall where his name was also inscribed. She gave a potted history of the family's cattle station and that in the late nineteen forties his son, Patrick established a successful Hereford cattle stud, one of

the bulls winning show champion at the Chinchilla Show and the Brisbane Exhibition in the same year.

‘What about the bloody cursed prickly pear? God that was a curse on the land’

‘Well,’ she beamed, ‘we saved the country.’ The soldier grunted his satisfaction as Katie explained how a humble Argentinian moth, bred and exported all over Australia from the Chinchilla Prickly Pear Experimental Station had almost eradicated the pestilent plant.

She spoke of the Great Depression and how Chinchilla struggled, the Second World War but mercifully this time, the Simmonds family lost no loved one to its ravages. She spoke of the prosperous years and Charleys Creek flooding the township.

‘Then there’s your great grandson, my grandfather, Albert. He was a bit of a rebel back in the day. Started commercially growing watermelons, married Winifred, a Barunggam woman.’

‘Barunggam? I know that name ...’

‘Barunggam Country is the traditional land owned by First Nations people, Aborigines.’

The soldier was silent. Katie wondered if she had touched on the traditional prejudice white Australians in his time would have had for indigenous people, racism that was still prevalent for decades thereafter and something her Nana Winnie had certainly experienced. The Simmonds family line extended back to its roots in Cornwall and was one of the pioneering families settling in the Western Downs in the eighteen sixties. But Katie was as fiercely proud of her indigenous family blood line as she was her white pastoralist forebears which paled against thousands upon thousands of years of aboriginal occupation and heritage.

‘So your dad was half-caste and you’re a quarter ...’

'Those are offensive terms in my time,' Katie said quietly.

The silence was there again.

'Bravest man I ever knew,' Paddy said, 'was Corporal Harry Burrows. The man saved my life along with others at great risk to his own. He was awarded the Military Medal though many of us thought he should've got the VC. He was an aboriginal man. If it's the only thing this bloody war taught me it was to not judge a man by his colour but by his worth.'

Relief and pride in the soldier's statement flooded her.

'You were shot Paddy?' It was the first time since his apparition that she had spoken the name he had given himself.

'Shrapnel, from a whizz-bang. At least I think that's what sent me west of hell.'

'Whizz-bang? West of hell?'

'Enemy small shell, that's the noise they make. Knocked me dead. Thank Christ there was no pain. Ruined my tunic though. Bloody button keeps falling off.'

Katie looked at the bloodied patch on Paddy's uniform and the loose dull black button. She recalled the framed photo in Nana Winnie's living room, how Paddy's uniform brass buttons and buckles seemed particularly better polished than his brothers.

'What of you Katie Simmonds? You haven't told me anything of your life.'

'Oh,' she said, slightly surprised. It was the only expression she could muster. She felt too embarrassed to rake over the detritus of her marriage and the toll it took on her. She sensed Paddy somehow understood.

'The most frustrating thing for me,' he said quietly, 'is that I can't get up. If the shrapnel had only but wounded me, if it had only hit me on my shoulder or my leg, or my hand. I could have ... got up. I would not have been afraid just to have ... got up. Don't be afraid Katie. Get up. You're a Simmonds. And you're a Barunggam woman.'

**

'Katie, Katie, are you OK?'

Dargo Derek had his hand in hers, his warm, hers cold. She heard the siren and felt the straps. She tried to shift her weight but could not move.

'Easy mate. You're in an ambulance. We're on the way to the hospital.'

'What happened?'

'We heard you cry out then watched you fall. Rather graceful, really. At the Menin Gate.'

'Paddy?'

'Who's Paddy?' Derek said gently. He sounded so far away. His image faded.

**

The hospital discharged her the following day in the early afternoon. Derek had turned up in the morning and they got an Uber back to her hotel where by luck he was also staying.

'I had a few days leave owing,' he said somewhat self-consciously, 'I don't want to impose on you or you know, I'm not stalking you. If you've got plans elsewhere I can easily catch up with my mates.'

'No. I mean, no it's good to have you here,' she smiled.

'OK, that's great. The doc said you should have some rest today. Say I call back around six for dinner?'

They decided Café Henri was bit too rowdy so they tried a new restaurant recommended by the concierge. The food and wines were excellent though Katie, mindful of the medical advice nursed a single glass. They talk for hours but it seemed like minutes and were the last to leave. Yes she thought, he certainly was scrumptious.

They found themselves at the Menin Gate and the spot where Katie fell. Over dinner she had confided some of the previous night's encounter, both agreeing concussion must have brought on the episode.

They turned to leave when she saw something wedged in the path. Derek reached down, picked it up and examined it.

'Definitely First World War,' Derek said quietly, handing it to Katie who stared awestruck at the button. Its metal had oxidised. The centre was the raised emblem map of Australia, surmounted by a crown which Derek said represented the king. The words *Australian Military Forces* encircled the emblem map. Katie turned the button over. On the reverse side, entwined through the shank was a fluttering skerrick of thread.

Like a whisper in the wind.

'Did I tell you, Derek from Dargo,' she said, 'that I'm descended from the Barunggam people?'