Cool Evening's Benison

by Makioka

Summary

Dickon returns home from war and the magic is still there to welcome him.

Notes

The title is taken from the poem 'Before Action' by W.N.Hodgson

When the train pulls into the station, he steps off and pretends not to falter at the harsh squeal of the brakes and the slow ominous sigh of an engine pushed too hard. The porter touches his cap to Dickon and though the first breath of Yorkshire air had made him feel like Dickon again, not Private Sowerby, not the Richard he’d been in the deep black stillness of camp, with the hot breath of fear against his face, it’s a moment that vanishes again and he’s a corporal on his way home, no longer part of this place. Old Toby doesn’t recognise him. There's a uniform on his body, and a knapsack on his back, and Toby salutes the soldier he sees, the tell-tale empty sleeve pinned at the shoulder, a sacrifice it seems that merits a civilian salute. He opens his mouth to correct him, but lets the air fall away empty from his lips.

He hadn’t told them what time he’d be home. There is no mother at the station, no eager tremulous faces, no Mary, her face pinched with the effort of holding back all her words, no Colin with all the frustrated energy and anger of a boy denied war, the chance of a jolly good time with gun in hand and flag at back. He wonders how much they’ve heard, how much they know. Do they take
the papers, do they know what has been done, where he has been? He takes another breath right in deep and begins to walk. He's never been more thankful to be home, every step he takes seems to strengthen him immeasurably and he's surrounded by things he'd thought were dead and gone. In the churned up mud of France and Belgium, a robin singing wistfully had seemed too far away to be real, part of some time that he could not imagine as being solid, something to be retreated to only at the times of greatest need, as though by taking the memories out of his heart and looking at them, he would somehow soil them, spoil them even by exposure.

He walks a little faster, doesn't look up at the sky. That's all too familiar, the same sky had looked on over the trenches, glimpses of blue amongst the clouds. The ground is an old path well-trodden and it leads to his door, and the blessing he doesn't deserve of his mother alone with her knitting, the brood dispersed for now at least. She's there, warm and flour scented to embrace him, and with her silence let him be at peace for the first time it feels since 1916. There is tea and warm bread, the result of arriving on a baking day, and he holds it almost reverently in his hand for a moment. There had been tea in London, doled out from urns, and sandwiches after a fashion, pathetic little squares of cardboard held together with a doleful jam that choked in the mouth, women handing him cups and carefully not looking at his arm. A man had bumped into him in the station and nervously, heartily, congratulated him on it not being his right arm.

"How did it happen?" one ghoulish child had asked him on the train, and shaken, he'd looked away. It's all in the paperwork, bloodlessly described, and after a hesitation, they'd omitted the W. Not shell-shocked enough, and they didn't want another one on the books, not when his arm was so much cleaner, so much neater to describe, a tragic loss in his country's defense, a piece of flesh not peace of mind. Not like Tom, the poor sod, who had to be spoon-fed and a rifle perched in his unresisting arms when inspection came round, the officer, a doughy man of barely twenty, pallid and twitchy, having been told *bring us no more cases*. Only weak units have weak men, and only weak men flinch when bombs get dropped. Tom who was whole and healthy if you discounted feet that he couldn't stand on, and it was no matter if he couldn't hear what you said.

As he alternates between sips of tea and bites of bread, he tries not to wonder what work there'll be for a one armed man now that he's home. The shape of his life has warped, like old wood submerged in water, no strength in him for the moment, even here, to look ahead. He's used enough already to its loss, to the weight missing, the jerk in the night of an arm no longer there, the phantom restlessness of an itchy hand, but he hasn't set his back to the plough yet, found the limits of what he can do. His mother doesn't ask him questions, trusts him to talk to her when he will, recognises in him now the same boundaries his letters had shown, contorted and twisted and tortured into acceptable things to send back home, and the silence is balm to his soul.

Later, when he's in bed, he hears Martha tiptoe in and wonders drowsily why she's home when this isn't her day off, feels her kiss his head quietly and slip back out, and the next day he realises that this means they'll know. Mary and Colin- or more properly as he knows now, Miss Lennox and Master Craven, will know that he's home. Will expect him to visit. More than that, he soon finds out, when an ancient ponderous old motor pulls up outside the door, the butler has been sent for him in the car, and unaccountably he feels rebellion surge in him for a moment, before being squashed down by years of training in the army and he gets in awkwardly. He's still in uniform, ridiculously he feels, but none of the clothes he left at home fit him, and his mother is taking them in, pinning up the sleeves while he's out, a sombre mourning of what was lost, that she'll never
express in words. It's cold out, a chill in the air, and his lips are cracked.

The butler lets him out on the driveway and he knows where he'll find them, even on this bitter day, and with slow, hesitant footsteps he makes his way to the garden. He knows the way, he's walked it a thousand times, followed the gravel paths around in strict concentric circles. He's been this way in his dreams, opened the latch, ducked in through the ivy and stepped into colour, into life a thousand years and miles away from Passchendaele and its kin, where poppies aren't rooted in dead men's skulls. They're huddled together on a wooden bench near where the roses in summer bloom thickest, their heads together, and a surge of something goes through him that he can't name, a gnawing emptiness for a long second until they see him, and abandoning propriety they are there, racing the short distance like they're ten years old again. Mary is first by a hair, throws her arms around him, kisses his cheek heartily, and then Colin has flung his arms around them both, head next to Dickon's, leans his chin for a second on Mary's head and for the first time since he's been back in England he feels warm.

The bench is just big enough for three if he squashes up close, and although he knows from exposure to the rest of the world that he should know his place better than this, to even hint such a thing would incense Mary and embarrass Colin. So he lets them jostle into him, takes his time at looking from one to the other, warm on both sides, observes that Mary has had her hair bobbed, practical and businesslike but it suits her, though she's thinner than when he went away as though she has been worrying. Colin is taller still, as though he's never going to stop growing now that he's found out how, and there's a tilt to his countenance that Dickon doesn't like, as though what worries Mary, is eating away at him.

"Is it very bad Dickon?" Mary asks, and she means his arm, he knows, and answers accordingly.

"Not so bad," he says. "I'm more whole than many a man still you know. A shock though," and she nods at him. He remembers her telling him once, before he went away, one bright hot day in June when the curlews above had inscribed themselves upon the sky, about that day of wandering through an empty bungalow, the scent of death heavy on the air, the silence, the great silence that echoed back at her, at how the horror hadn't struck until later, just a peculiar brooding sense of unease. Not the same as Passchendaele and where he'd been afterwards, not steeped in blood to the elbows, friend and foe alike identical in the mud, but not, he thinks, as different as they might seem.

"And you're young," Colin adds grandly, the same touch of hauteur that always attends him there in his voice. "You can heal. The magic will make it so," and he says it teasingly, but with that half edge of belief that's always there in his voice. Of all of them, Colin believes in the magic the most. Dickon believes more in healthy food, fresh air and less fretting. He is his mother's son in this, and Mary remains caught between them, as though she still wants to believe but draws away as her skirts lengthen and her hair shortens.

"I don't think the magic can fix this," he says, and if his voice chokes a little bit on that, he doesn't
think there's a court that'll hold him to that. Suddenly he's aware of it once again, that empty space between him and Mary. He wonders if that will be all they can see now, but then Mary's hand is there on that pinned up sleeve and it's like an electric shock has echoed down his spine, some prickling sensation and for one second, one irrational moment he wonders if it's the magic, but it's just Mary and as he turns to her, Colin leans into him from the other side.

"There's nothing the magic can't mend," Colin says gravely, and Dickon feels his throat seize up. "Only Dickon, I do wish I could have gone as well." There's that old anger there threading through his voice stemming from the day Dickon went away and left them behind. Colin too young to go as well, every grand noble ideal he'd ever heard about war urging him on to a fondly imagined victory, back by Christmas, a man. Dickon had never read the books Colin quoted, had no idea of the Iliad but he knew before he went that what he faced would destroy Colin and had been gladder than he could put into words, that age and Archibald Craven had refused any possibility of such an event.

“No,” he says, more roughly than he had intended, a roughness neither of them had known from him before he knew. “Colin, I am glad you weren’t there,” gladder than he can say, glad that they both remained here in this place, hidden from war, hidden from harm. Glad enough that he cannot take hurt from Colin’s careless words. Is an arm so small a price to play at war?

“I should have been,” Colin insists, and Mary possessed of her usual asperity leaned over and pinches his arm for him, a casual touch that unnerves Dickon in a way he doesn’t understand. Colin doesn’t take the hint, looks at him with bright eyes, "I only meant," he says softly, "that I wish you hadn't been alone, Dickon."

"I was there with a thousand others," Dickon replies with the beginnings of a smile, but the words that should have been light fell with the force of stone, and Colin flinches back as though the response was too much for his sensitive nature, and contrite at causing harm even by mishap, Dickon hastened to add that he was glad to be home. Glad to be back on the moor, even as it chilled and cooled in winter's grasp, the plants buried and sleeping away the long days. When spring came again, so would they, and quietly so he hopes, he will as well.

For a moment all that could be heard was the forlorn chirp of one of the Robin's many descendants, a descant sung from the branch of a barren tree, until it silenced itself and flew away, leaving them to their unease, a triumvirate restored and yet broken, unbalanced not by the loss of an arm, but a loss of ease. Not quite a loss of faith, Dickon thought, but a change in focus. Then Colin stood, slender and tall, possessed still of the same surety that Dickon had seen in so many others, and it struck him as it never had before that Mary and Colin were younger than him, but not by so very much. For a moment Colin reminded him uncannily of any number of men he’d met at the Front, and a chill passed down his spine when he turned his head and saw in Mary’s face that same otherworldliness there, and for a moment her resemblance to Colin was pronounced and striking.
“Come,” Colin says, the same old imperiousness saturating his tone, the boy who had played at being an Indian prince still there in him. “Give the magic a chance,” and he strips off his gloves to expose his hands to the cold air, looks at Dickon impatiently until he stands up as well and extends his hand. He doesn’t wear a glove, too awkward like this, and beside him Mary has taken off her own as well, and then Colin knelt and scrabbled at the iron earth, fingernails against the ground until he had turned a little of it over, dark and solid, the ground broken just a little, turns a little of the dirt over in his fingers, and half in jest, half in hope, Dickon extends his fingers and touches it. He’s been in mud and loam and dirt for the last two years but this is different somehow, and then Mary’s warm little hand is there as well, her fingers closing around his without shyness, and Colin’s face is close enough that Dickon can see the sweep of his dark lashes against his cheek as he looks down in concentration. Dickon feels no magic. There’s no life pulsing through the earth, no healing implicit in mind or body, nothing here for him.

But Mary’s fingers are warm on his, the dirt is solid under his fingers and Colin joins his own hand with theirs and says nothing at all, insists on no words or actions. There is no magic in the soil, but Dickon thinks suddenly, there is magic in the three of them. This is what he had missed, not the garden, and when he looks at them both, he thinks they know it as well, a certain wick strength in them, not yet in fruition, the time not ripe, but the potential there like the green in the wood.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!