

A long time

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We've been here such a long time. It must be near a hundred year by now. I know we came here in 1917. It was 1916 when I had to go to the Army. Mary didn't want me to go. We got married so she'd get my pay and a pension if the worst happened. Just as well we did. Mary just wanted to keep me and the little ones close and safe. Shame she couldn't.

At least I've got plenty of company. There were too many of us died that day.

We were exhausted been up most of the night. they said we could sleep but we were too worried about what was to come. It was my first real attack. The rum helped calm us a bit and the officers told us that the barrage would keep the Huns heads down.

It was so loud. Out of the trench I could see my mate Bob laughing and trying to shout something but I couldn't hear a thing. The ground was shaking and you could see the shells exploding across no mans land. And then the officer s waved his arm for us to advance and we all started walking.

I was so scared, but so was everyone else I reckon. I just wanted to get wounded bad enough to get me out of all this. The Lieutenant had told us we were attacking a concrete building that the Huns were using now. When we started across no man's land it was easy. We followed behind the shelling as it moved ahead. I could hear bullets zipping past. I saw Sergeant McLoughlin get hit and go down. Tommy Longstaff got hit three or four times, twice after he fell to his knees. We were told not to stop whatever happened so we just put our heads down and carried on. Me and Bob got to where the others were without a scratch. We

found the building flattened and there was no cover, you just had to scrape out a hole. Machine guns opened up from the flank and a lot of our boys got it then.

It was almost dusk when the Hun shelling started. I was lying in my little hole with my hands over my ears, crying for it to stop when there was a flash and then I was standing looking down at the smoking hole and pieces of what I knew must have been me. I should have been frightened out of my wits but I wasn't. I felt calm and peaceful. When I looked around I could see others like me confused as to what was happening. I tried to move and found that I could walk like I could when I was alive. But I could only move a short distance, maybe ten yards or so in any direction. It wasn't like the Bible said. We weren't angels. We looked exactly like we did when 'it' happened. In uniform.

I could see Jimmy Fairclough nearby and he looked at me and said, 'Well, I don't suppose I'll see Lizzie or the kids again. What do you suppose will happen now? Will we go to Heaven or Hell or what?'

'I don't know', I said, 'but I've got a feeling that this is it. I think that we stay like this. Ghosts, I suppose. Perhaps we'll stay in this place for ever.'

'I don't want that,' he replied, 'I just want to go home and see my family, even if I can't touch 'em or speak to 'em. This can't be all there is.'

'We'll just have to wait and see what happens.'

I could see fifty or so yards further on there were Huns standing, looking around, just like us. It seemed the same thing was happening to them. No reason why it shouldn't.

We stayed that way. Others joined us that had died in other attacks or just from the odd shelling. We even had Huns among us who had died when they counter attacked. But we all just waited patiently. At first, when living men came towards us we moved to let them pass. But we soon found out that they could walk right through us so we didn't bother.

Then, after a long while, something happened. Men were digging over the ground. They were looking for bodies or what was left of them. When they found someone they looked for their identification discs. When they identified someone they would wrap the remains in an oilskin sheet and enter their name on a list.

When they did the ghost of whoever they found started to fade and disappear. It happened with Jimmy Fairclough. As he started to fade he said, 'Bye John. Perhaps I will see Lizzie again. I hope they find you and you go.....' That was all he could say before he was gone. Others went and we got fewer and fewer.

As we waited we saw the changes. The town was in ruins when we were fighting but it gradually got built again. There was another war and more people joined us, though most were found and faded quickly after the fighting stopped. Where we were became a park and we could see children playing and people walking.

The years passed and you could see the changes. As the years went by there were more and more cars and aeroplanes but they were different, sleeker. And the clothes. My Mary wore her dresses down to her ankles. But now women wore dresses above their knees, some even wore shorts.

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None of us had faded for a long time. I was standing, as I had since I died when I heard people speaking English. I had heard the language only a few times over the years and it always made me feel a little closer to home.

There were four of them, Three men and a boy. One of the men was old, grey haired. The other two were younger, in their forties, both tall compared to me. I couldn't tell how old the boy was. He was obviously the son of one of the men, the one wearing glasses. The other man called the old man Dad, so it seemed that they were grandfather, sons and grandson.

They stood about ten yards from me. The old man pulled a folder from a bag he had over his shoulder. The other men and the boy looked at it as well and, as he pointed, he said , ‘They attacked across here, towards that cemetery. He must have been killed somewhere around here. But we can’t know for sure.’

One of the sons called Andy started taking photographs of the view in all directions. When a local man walked along the path he spoke to him in French and the man took a photograph of the family

Then the old man said, ‘Come on John Henry where are you?’ Could it be my name! I couldn’t be sure, there must have been many others called John Henry. The old man went to his bag again and pulled out a small wooden cross. It had writing on it but I was never much good at reading and the writing was very small. He called to the boy and said, ‘Come on Nathan, you put the cross in the ground.’ We were near a hedge and the boy took the cross and pushed it into the earth around its roots. ‘That’s it, well done Nate,’ the old man said. He was taking something else from the bag. I saw that it was a photograph attached to a piece of wood with a sharpened end. I thought that this was going into the ground as well. I moved closer to look at the picture to see if I had known the man.

I knew him alright. From the moment I had died I had felt calm. Through the years, nothing had changed that. But now I felt very different. I recognised the photograph. It had been taken in the photographers in the High Street, something for Mary to keep by her. It was the only photograph of me there was. After all this time these people had it. Was the old man my boy Charlie? No, it couldn’t be. He would be too old, probably dead by now. A grandson perhaps. Charlie’s boy, and the others would be his sons and grandson.

The old man knelt and pushed the stake into the ground then stood up.

He then said, ‘Well, John Henry, we got here finally. From one John Mitchell to another I hope somehow you can hear me.’

I wished I could tell him that I could hear him. I tried to but I couldn't. There were so many questions that I wanted to ask.

There were tears in the old man's eyes. One of his sons said, 'Are you OK, Dad?' and the old man said, 'Yes, I'm fine. Let's finish up here.'

I didn't want them to go. I didn't want to be alone again. Then one of the men took a small white box and a trowel from the bag he had over his shoulder. He knelt down and scooped earth from under the hedge into the box until it was about half full.

The old man said, 'We'll take this back with us. At least we'll have a bit of the place he's been if nothing else.'

But there was something else. I knew from that moment that it was different. The earth must have had some tiny part of what had been me in it. When they had packed their things away and started to walk away I felt myself drawn after them. As they walked back into the town I found I could follow them. After walking for a while they went into a building and were given keys. The old man had the box of earth and when he went to a room I followed. He changed his clothes and went out. I tried to follow but I couldn't. I was somehow tied to the box or the earth in it.

Later, the old man came back and went to bed. In the morning he packed a case, put it on the bed and went out. He had put the box in the case so I had to stay with it. When he came back for the case and left the building with the others I followed. Everything was different and strange. The shops, the people, everything. We walked to the station and onto the platform. When the train arrived, what a train it was. No clouds of steam, sleek like a bullet. The trip from then on was a blur, so much was different I couldn't take it all in. Eventually we arrived in London, for me nigh on a hundred years later than I ought to have done.

In London the man called Andy left and the old man, the other man who was called Matthew, and the boy went on together. When they got to another big station the man and boy went off leaving the old man. We had another train ride and then he and I eventually got to his house. His wife was there. I couldn't believe what their home was like. So clean, so light. They talked a lot about the trip while he ate and later he opened his case and showed her the box with the earth in it. She said, 'We can go to East Ham tomorrow if you like.' The old man said, 'That'll be good.'

The talk of East Ham made me think about the time before I went to the Army. We lived there in that little house, Mary, the children and me. Life was hard but there were some good times too. It would be good to go back.

The next day the old man and his wife drove to East Ham, the box and me on the back seat. Parts of the place looked familiar but I couldn't see exactly where I was, it had changed so much. They stopped their car in a little street and walked to the gate of a churchyard. They went in and I recognised where I was. I had been here before, many, many years ago. They walked along a path until the old man said, 'This is the place.' His wife took the box out of a bag and handed it to him. He opened it and took a handful of the earth and sprinkled it on ground. As the earth struck the ground I heard a voice say, 'I've been waiting such a long time for you to come home.' I turned and there was Mary standing, holding out her hand. I realised that this must be where she had been buried.

As I took her hand I could see that I had come home. Mary and I started to fade and I just had time to say 'Thank you' to the old man before we went together to a different, better place.