

And in the Morning

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For my mother

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*At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We shall remember them.*
'For the Fallen' by Laurence Binyon

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SHE IS ALMOST RUNNING. Lil holds the crown of her hat, conscious that she is crushing the linen flowers that less than an hour ago she carefully wove into its ribboned brim. Her skirt snaps around her shins, obstructs, at the length of her stride, the speed of her flight. Her hair is coming loose. She wants to pause and return everything – the hat, the hair, the battered roses – to order, but there isn't enough time. She must keep moving.

'Come on. Quickly now!' She tugs and Teddy lurches. She knows, without looking, that his new boots will be scuffed at the toes and his eyes will be filling with tears. Lil sighs. Somewhere, beneath the flurry, she is disappointed. She'd wanted everything to be as she imagined. Smiles. Boots. A cheery how-do-you-do. Absurdly, impossibly, she'd wanted everything to be perfect.

She sighs again and squeezes between a lamppost and a woman pushing a perambulator. Soon, she thinks, there will be rain. What a surprise that will be after years in the desert.

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Lil tries to imagine it, the endless sand and burning sky, the horses and the men a strange calligraphy against the blankness of that geography. A world away from this city street and its people – mainly women now – going about their business, tuned to the subtle shift in atmosphere that signals rain is imminent.

She firms her grip on Teddy's hand. A young man in a battered coat with a cigarette clasped between his teeth smiles at her. She returns his smile as one grants small, tedious wishes to children. It's barely a smile at all. Nevertheless, the young man steps towards her, a dirty palm turned upwards. 'Spare a penny, love?'

Teddy stops and she stumbles.

'Teddy!' she hisses.

Teddy opens his mouth as if about to bawl.

The young man retreats.

'Come on. You're all right.' But she is too late. Her son's arms are around her thighs and his face is submerged in the navy wool of her winter suit. She pushes his forehead with the heel of her hand, mindful of his tears and his nose, which has started to run. He emits a wail of despair that draws in its wake a trail of disapproving glances.

Lil picks him up, swiftly and without tenderness, and props him on the half-moon of her hip. Freckles of rain darken the footpath. A woman in a pale suit raises her hand then rubs her fingers together, as though inspecting the texture of the air. Another opens an umbrella. Lil looks at the sky. *Of course*, she thinks.

She takes off again, hand to hat, squinting against the rain. Teddy slips. She stops. Hitches. Strides. Stops again. The situation is impossible. A bicycle clangs, then curves around her, as neatly as a knife peeling an apple. She wonders, desperately, if Bert has

arrived. She imagines him standing on the platform, watching the slow progress of the unfamiliar weather. She imagines the thought forming, small at first, like an itch or the prelude to a headache, then growing larger. *She isn't coming ...*

Lil shakes her head. She is letting her thoughts get away from her. Surely, he knows she will arrive. Four years. All those letters. And for each letter, how many had she written in return? Three? Four? Enough for him not to doubt her.

She bumps her son higher on her hip and steps clumsily across a gutter. At last, they are at the station. Her arms are trembling. She sets Teddy down on the footpath.

'It's time to be a big boy now,' she says.

His face puckers. Lil watches him impatiently. He closes his eyes and sticks out his tongue to taste the rain. Then his pale face smooths and he laughs.

Lil bends down, relieved. 'How about I race you?' she says. 'Better hurry or I might beat you!'

Teddy clambers up the wet steps, his small arms swinging. Beneath the station's tin roof, the air is warm and close. Teddy pulls at her skirt. He wants her to look at everything. She tries to follow the flit of his fingers. A man. A dog. The bright and predatory flowers that leer from dank buckets at the station's entrance. She tries to smile but the expression is beyond her. Instead, she leans against a wall. A middle-aged woman in a plain suit and tartan tam asks her if she's all right. She nods, although she's not at all certain. Something about being here, at last. The woman hesitates and moves on.

Lil straightens, inhales. 'Time to go,' she says, attempting to brighten. 'Your father is about to arrive.'

She expects Teddy to wail, but he doesn't. Instead, his face stills and he inhabits himself as one inhabits a stranger's house. His hand in hers is a small animal; ears pricked, eyes large in the darkness. She bends down to touch his cheek. *Father*. Even in her own mouth it has the taste of a foreign language. She wonders what it means to him, this word with nothing to point to.

'Everything will be all right,' she whispers. She kisses his soft hair. At night she inhales his breath, cradles the soles of his feet. She will never have her fill of him.

She squeezes his hand, and they move towards the platforms. There are people everywhere. Amongst the drab flannel and damp tweed, the tussock-coloured greatcoats of the men in uniform are like beacons. She moves from one to another. Each time it is the same. The edge of a smile and the quick tick of the pulse in her throat. And then the feeling, somewhere at the back of her eyes, that the world has grown lighter and she less attached to it.

She stops. She cannot find him. There are so many people and she has brought with her so little. The half-remembered angles of his face and how the vivid light of Weraï spoke to each a gilded dialect. The texture of his voice. But she cannot recall the exact colour of his eyes or, with precision, his height. She cannot remember the shape of him in her arms.

Her fingers flutter to her forehead. Teddy is restless. He shifts his weight from foot to foot and hums beneath his breath. The tenderness of the moment before is forgotten.

'Hush!' she snaps.

Teddy stops what he is doing. She looks past him, into the ebb and flow of the station's traffic. Perhaps she is too late. Or perhaps their eyes have already met and they are now only this:

a woman with a small boy, a man returned from war, waiting for his beloved.

She touches again the pinched flesh at the centre of her forehead. She has brought with her so little, but surely it is enough? The tips of his fingers, dry like paper. The high ride of his cheeks beneath the shadow of his hat and the way of his smile. Even without the Weraï sun, and despite the long years between, she is certain she will know him.

She tightens her grip on her son's hand. They walk towards the ticketing booths and past the stairs. Teddy scrapes his boots against the tiles and makes a tearless, blubbing sound. When she reaches the other side of the station, she stops again, disheartened. Teddy flings his arms around her. The blood thumps in her temples. Someone asks if she's all right. She nods. Yes. Really, she is.

'You sure?' A hand touches her shoulder.

She opens her eyes. 'Bertie?'

But it's not a question. The mouth. The breadth of his shoulders and the slow dawn that is his smile. She throws her arms around his neck and laughs out loud.

'Bertie!' she cries. 'You're home!'