

## BROTHERS IN ARMS by Mary Marken

That's Michael there on the mantelpiece – my big brother with his best friend Johnny, in their uniforms, before the dreams got knocked out of them. It was Johnny gave me the photograph, framed and all, so that I wouldn't forget what he looked like. He was always one for making a joke. There he is, forever 21, and here am I, now old enough to be his granny.

When war broke out they joined the First Royal Irish Rifles. They thought it better to fight against a common enemy than to be killing other working men on the streets of Belfast – even if they were Unionists. They left home like boys about to do battle on the hurling field. And I remember thinking then that the dreams of men and women are worlds apart.

Anyway, what I'm about to tell you happened after the war. It must have been 1921 or so. At that time Mammy, Michael and I lived in a wee two-up-two-down in the Pound Loney. She and I worked in the Blackstaff Mill by day and shared the bed in the front bedroom by night. I was a doffer and she carded the flax. The flax got everywhere – in your hair, ears, mouth, lungs – which is why her coughing was bad a lot of the time. On the particular day I'm talking about, she'd been laid up for a week.

It started off peaceful enough. It was a Saturday and the mills closed at noon. We walked out of the gates, the mill horn giving way to the bells of Clonard Monastery and St Peter's sounding the hour. As usual, many of us women stopped to say the Angelus, and standing there in the bright sunshine I felt like the bells were celebrating our release.

As the chimes faded, my friend Bridie and I linked arms and walked back down the Falls, laughing and singing. There was something about the Saturday morning walk home with the mill behind us for a day and a bit and the house not yet closed round us that lifted our spirits. For those fifteen minutes we were betwixt and between.

Bridie walked me back to our house. At that time she always found a reason to call by. We walked through our doorway with a spring in our steps. I remember there were diamonds of sunlight on the flagstones. I stood there, well pleased at my handiwork, for I'd made a half-curtain out of an old cream blouse of Mammy's, and had cut out a border of diamonds. 'Fancy as lace,' I thought. Well, pride always comes before a fall, for by

the end of the day the window and the curtains were ripped to smithereens.

Bridie went upstairs to have a word with Mammy. Michael called from the scullery that he'd just wet a pot of tea. 'We'll have one,' says I, going in to him. He was standing at the stove and he looked like a man twice his age, what with the droop of his shoulders and the tired way he poured the tea.

My heart went out to him as it often did. 'Wait 'til you hear the story Bridie

came in at the bottom of the woman's bedroom window and passed over her as she lay in the bed.' She paused for effect and graced us both with a nod of her head before delivering her punch line. 'And as if that's not enough of a miracle,' says she, 'the bullets sprayed the wall in between the pictures of the Sacred Heart and the Blessed Virgin. Seven bullet holes and there wasn't as much as a mark on either of them. Would you ever credit that?' She turned to look full at Michael.



told me when we were walking back,' says I. Those days I kept wanting to coax a little bit of light into the blue of his eyes, kept wanting to find the lad who had sent many a girl's heart racing with a look in their direction. I suppose it was the nearest I could get to having Johnny back. He turned round, his eyebrow raised, humouring me. 'You could set the clock by that Bridie one on a Saturday,' says he with a hint of a smile.

We sat round the fireplace. Bridie had the gift of the gab and her eyes would light up with the marvel of whatever she was recounting, even if she was only detailing a piece of soup bone that the butcher's lad had kept especially for her. She described how the night before this old woman, nearly 90 and not able to get out of her bed, had missed death by inches when a truck load of Black and Tans had come clattering down the street, firing all round them.

'Would you believe it? Seven bullets

He looked at her and me as if he didn't know us. He stood up, his jaw tight. 'It's a pity God pays so much attention to holy pictures and those near death instead of sparing a thought for those of us stuck at the other end,' says he, limping back into the scullery.

Bridie's cheeks flamed and she fidgeted with her shawl. I was that mortified, I didn't know where to look. To not be able to pass yourself with a friend and neighbour was nearly as bad as the blasphemy. I was glad Mammy wasn't there to hear it.

That knocked the shine off the day. Bridie left as soon as she decently could and I was glad Michael went out not long after. I brought Mammy up a cup of tea and sat on the edge of the bed, feeding her titbits of mill gossip until she lay back into the pillows and closed her eyes. I gave the scullery a clean and put some whites to steep in a bucket of water and bleach. It was only then that

I put the griddle to warm and kneaded the flour, baking soda and buttermilk for soda bread.

As my hands worked the sticky dough in the quiet of the house, the pleasure of the walk home from the mill came back to me and I smiled to myself as I rolled out a circle, cut it into four farls and put them to bake on the griddle. By the time I heard the call of the butcher's lad, I was more than ready to pass the time of day with the neighbours.

'May everyone of that British Cabinet roast in Hell for signing up any criminal willing to blatter us to death. And paying them for the privilege!' Mrs Dobbin was standing at aul Harriet's step, next door but one. Her big hands flailed skywards as she spoke.

Harriet, her tiny frame wrapped as always in her black shawl, clucked in sympathy. She had already lost her only son at the Somme. Mrs Dobbin meantime was beside herself worrying about her two lads still alive and at home. We traded stories of the goings-on the night before, but my heart wasn't in it for I'd had enough talk of the Black and Tans for one day. At the corner, I could see Wee Alec, scrawny as the scraps on his wheelbarrow, elbow Mrs Pick and hear her gulder of laughter. I headed in that direction.

Later, Mammy came down to sit by the fireside for an hour or two before supper. I combed and plaited her grey hair, lank from the sweat of coughing, and recounted Bridie's story to distract her as she sat hunched in the rocker. In between times, I pondered what Michael had told me – that the Black and Tans were ex-soldiers, men like himself, only English, who had fought in the War and then come back to discover the politicians' promises were empty. 'No work and all the hoo-hah and glory calling when they signed up, dead and buried like their comrades.'

Mammy was beginning to look anxiously at the clock when Michael arrived back, a few minutes before the curfew. He'd never been a big drinker but he'd had one or two, for you could smell the stout and the smoke off him.

Their bodies jolted and knocked together as the lorry rattled over cobbles and careered round corners. Rifle butts thunked and scraped on the floor as men steadied themselves. The fading light seeped in along the sides and through a triangle at the end of the lorry where the awning was rolled back. The trapped air stank of sweat and fear. He recognised the smell from the trenches, from sitting

immobilised week after week, muscles stiff with cramp and cold. It was different here – moving, on the attack, terrorising rather than being terrorised.

He had wakened this morning, wet from another nightmare and with the howls of the dying again fresh in his ears. Was he howling with them? Had others heard him? He watched for the slightest hint in how they were with him, but his comrades sat, eyes averted, faces sealed.

Comrades. That word used to have a different feel, a warm fierce strength. Now it felt putrid, like the bodies rotting in the trenches, rats and flies feasting at the holes from which flesh erupted.

He mustn't drift. He mustn't lose himself back there. He fixed his eyes on a boot tapping out an urgent rhythm on the floor boards.

'Delaney, you look like you're about to cough up your guts.' The menace in the sergeant's voice jerked him alert. He looked up at the lean figure silhouetted against the triangle of light and forced himself to hold his gaze. 'Not me Sarge. Must be the light playing tricks.' The lorry swerved, throwing the sergeant off balance.

Mammy had gone to bed and Michael was nodding off at the fire. I was about to go up myself when I heard a lorry screech to a stop further up the street. My heart was in my mouth even before I heard men shouting and the ring of boots on stone. There was a thud, crack and splinter as one door and then another were kicked open. A voice I barely recognised as Mrs Dobbin's howled for someone to leave her Joe alone.

Michael started awake. He jumped up to a half crouch.

'Hide yourself,' I cried, for I knew he couldn't scale a wall with his injury. He stared through me. 'For Christ's sake Michael, better a live dog than a dead lion. Hide yourself.' Still he crouched and stared, and I realised he was having one of his turns. Whatever his eyes were seeing and his ears hearing, it wasn't me there in front of him.

By this time the bin lids were banging their warning to other streets and the boots were pounding nearer. There was a burst of rifle fire and the window glass fell dead to the floor.

I crouched down beside Michael as our own door crashed to the ground. Two Black and Tans erupted through the doorway, rifles at the ready. I stood up, arms raised, half-sobbing. Michael stayed on all fours, hands scrabbling at the floor as if it was earth, mouthing sounds in the language of the dead.

'Get up you Fenian bastard,' the front one yelled, 'for I'd as easy drill you as the window'. I tried to reach over with one hand to help Michael up, but the front one motioned me away with his rifle.

'Mother of God, pray for us!' I cried.

Right at that instant, a piece of coal split and spat into a burst of flame. Its light caught the photograph on the mantelpiece. Both of them glanced to their left and the front one stared at the image of Michael and Johnny as if he was seeing ghosts. 'Who are they?' he demanded.

'My brother here – and his friend who never came back.' I could barely get the words out, for by this time Michael was crawling slowly in their direction. And now we could hear his words, 'Hold on. I have you. Hold on.'

The one at the back trained his rifle on Michael's chest. I could feel my legs begin to give way. But the front one pushed his mate's rifle to point at the floor, and squatted down by Michael, his own laid by his side. He placed both hands on Michael's shoulders and shifted his own head so that their eyes met.

He spoke like a mother to a baby. 'Your friend can't suffer any more. You need to leave him be and look to the living. He'd want you to do that. He'd want you to live.'

The frenzy in Michael's hands ceased. He started as if out of a dream and his body began to shake. The front one guided him up and back and sat him in the rocker. Michael looked at me, at the other one, and then back to the front one. They exchanged a long look and a nod, and then Michael sank back into the chair and closed his eyes. The man picked up his rifle and motioned his mate towards the door.

'But Corporal Delaney,' the mate protested.

'Quick to it, soldier. Nothing more to be done here.' And with that they disappeared back into the chaos.

Michael sat as if asleep. I walked up the stairs to Mammy, holding on to the wall for support. I knelt by her bedside and we said a decade of the rosary in thanks to the Mother of God. ■

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**MARY MARKEN** is 63 and comes from Ireland, but is currently living in Sheffield. She works part-time as a mentor and psychotherapist, and has recently graduated with a Certificate in Creative Writing from Sheffield University. She tries to write every day, even if it's only for a few minutes, usually averaging nine hours a week. Her poems and stories have been published online and she is sustained by contact with and feedback from other writers, and mentoring from Writing Yorkshire.