

The Spirit of Irony

By : **Burgundy**

After a year of absence since the beginning of the War in 1914, Stephen's father finally returns home for a visit to his family. By this point, Stephen finds himself unconsciously believing that his father is immortal, however, winter is approaching, and with winter comes sorrow.



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Aye; all was hushed. The about-to-fire fired not,
The aimed-at moved away in trance-lipped song.
One checkless regiment slung a clinching shot
And turned. The Spirit of Irony smirked out, "What?
Spoil peradventures woven of Rage and Wrong?"
â Thomas Hardy, from â And There Was A Great Calmâ

â Paâ s coming home! Paâ s coming home!â Mabelâ s childish voice shrieked, her heavy footsteps thumping as she ran through the house. â Paâ s coming back! Stephen!â Stephen looked up from his reading when the door to his room burst open. â Yes?â His younger sister grabbed his arm and yanked, saying, â Paâ s coming home today!â Stephenâ s eyes widened, â Really?â Mabel nodded, a wide smile bright on her face â Yep! Thomas just got the letter!â â Thatâ s great!â He felt a rush of happiness flow through him. His father had been gone for a year, having enlisted at the very start of the War in 1914, like so many others in their small community. Now finally, in December of 1915, he was coming back for the first time since the end. Even if he would have to leave again soon, Stephen was happy.
â Come on,â he said, taking Mabelâ s hand, â Does Mother know?â
â No,â she said, shaking her curly head.
â Letâ s go tell her, then.â
Their mother, was, of course, overjoyed, and immediately ordered Stephen to go out and buy a ham
â Oh, and,â she called after him, â Donâ t forget to invite the Vansittarts over! This needs some celebration!â
He waved a hand in acknowledgement and took off.

â So, how has it been?â Alfred Vansittart asked Stephenâ s father. â Curse them, I canâ t go. I say Iâ m perfectly healthy!â he flexed his biceps to show it.
Stephen, his younger brother Thomas, and Clementine Vansittart, Alfred and Adela's daughter all laughed, Mabel was too engrossed in something she was drawing to pay any attention.
â Well,â Father said carefully, â I have to say itâ s not all itâ s cut out to be â â
â More drink?â Mother asked, changing the subject and shooting a look at Alfred as if to say, Don't. Alfred nodded, â Yes! Thank you,â he told her as she refilled his glass. Mother smiled in acknowledgement. Father looked relieved, Stephen noticed, if only slightly. Why? Doesn't he want to tell us about what it's like?
â Whatâ re you drawing, May?â Thomas leaned over, his elbow barely missing his glass of juice, to look at Mabelâ s work.
Mabel immediately drew the paper up to her chest. â No!â shrieked Mabel, â Itâ s for Daddy!â Thomas laughed, and didnâ t notice the warning look his mother was giving him. â Well,â Thomas thought for a moment, then said, â Maybe you can let us see it and we can help you make it better. How about that, May?â
â No!â she shrieked again.
â Thomas Stones, youâ ve been bothering your sister all evening,â His mother scolded. â If she doesnâ t want to show you her picture then you have no right to make her. If this continues Iâ ll make you

The Spirit of Irony

go outside and stand in the snow for the entire night. And on the night your father's back! she said sternly, snapping her fingers in his face.

"Yes, mother," Thomas said, the grin still stuck as if superglued to his face. Stephen tried his best to keep his face blank.

"Good."

"Anyone up for a bit of poker?" asked Alfred.

"Ooh, that's nice," Mother rubbed her hands together.

Mr. Stone agreed, saying with a smile, "Hm, I am in."

Thomas asked, flashing his trademark grin, "Can we play, too?"

The pale morning light was filtering through the curtains when Mr. Stone came down into the sitting room, quietly so as not to disturb the rest of the family.

He had to leave now. Go back to the battlefield. Back to the carnage of war that he hadn't dared to tell anyone about. He closed his eyes and sighed.

Suddenly there was a light thump on the stairs behind him. He turned to see Mabel standing there, her curly hair disheveled in the way that a sleepy four-year-old's hair is untidy, grasping a folded piece of paper in her stubby fingers.

She stuck out her hand, offering the paper to him.

"For you, Pa," she said.

After taking a moment to digest, he took the paper, "Thank you, Mabel," he murmured, and unfolded it. The moment he saw the drawing the tears welled up in his eyes. It was of the family, Mabel standing next to him and holding his hand, Stephen and Thomas, and Mother beside the boys. All of them were smiling and happy.

Happy and innocent.

He hugged her one last time and murmured again, eyes wet, "Thank you, Mabel."

"Boom!" shouted Thomas.

Stephen laughed, "Is that your substitute for New Year's fireworks?"

Thomas laughed, too. "Hey," he said, "at least I managed to find a way to make something explode!"

"That's hardly exploding," their mother said wryly. "Unless you mean my temper, which probably is at the point of exploding since you came up with the brilliant idea of placing a basket full of dirty clothes above the door so that when I opened it..."

"It wasn't all me, Mother!" insisted Thomas, "Stephen got the clothes!"

Their mother leaned in closer, "Oh, did he now?"

"S-sorry!" Stephen choked out between laughs.

Mother's face darkened. Oh no, Stephen thought.

Luckily, he was saved from Mother's wrath by Mabel's shriek of, "Mommy! The fire is almost gone! It's getting cold!"

Mother straightened, "Oh, is it. Stephen," she said sharply, "Please go outside and get some more wood."

"Yes Mother," he said, getting up and ignoring Thomas's cackles.

As he opened the door he heard Mabel comment to their mother, "I wonder how Pa is. I wonder if he still has the drawing."

Hopefully, he's well. He stepped outside into the chilly air and closed the door, cutting off the warmth. The sky was grey and the snow was still falling, drifting in the wind like lost spirits. Why am I thinking that? Stephen began crunching towards the back of the house where the firewood was kept when some instinct told him to look up. His dark eyes moved instinctively to the woods beside their house. At first he saw nothing in the trees, but then something caught his eye. It was nothing more than a shadow but he thought he recognized it....

"Pa?"

It was clearer now. A ghostly form of his father stood among the snowy trees, watching him kindly.

The Spirit of Irony

"Pa...."

His father smiled, then turned and began to walk away, fading into the trees.

"Pa! Wait!" he called. The figure didn't turn back.

Stephen began to chase after him, but tripped and fell face-first into the cold snow, as if some godly power were holding him back. He stretched out an arm and pushed himself up to his knees again, his eyes searching in vain for the ghostly figure. It was gone.

He stood up then, his mind swirling in a mixture of confusion and numbness. He stared at the spot where he had seen his father for a long while.

Had he seen... his father's ghost...? No.... Hallucinations, I'm hallucinating. What's wrong with me?

Finally, after what must have been an age, he dragged himself out of his drowsy reverie and turned away to complete the task to which he had been assigned. Once again, something stopped him. This time, it was a ragged sheet of paper, blowing against his leg in the biting wind. Acknowledging its insistent flapping, he picked it up and carefully unfolded it, so as not to destroy the already fragile sheet.

It took him a moment to realise that the black-stained and partially burnt image was a child's drawing of five people, a family. One person was all gone except for a hand, which was holding the hand of the child next to them. Another's head had been torn off, but the faces were all smiling.

But what made his heart twist was what was at the very bottom.

What... In a blurred but mostly recognisable child's scrawl below the picture, next to what must have been a heart but what was now only half of one, were the words:

â I love you Daddy! From May.â

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