

the theatre

an original short story by anj medhurst

/ Then

It's a different smell. In the city it was brick dust and sewers that clogged your nostrils in the aftermath but here it is earthier, more elemental. Smouldering beech and oak, the charred forest floor – it's still scorched earth but with subtle green notes, an altogether less ominous stench. They stand around the crater, dragging on their cigarettes, sleeves rolled up, trousers tucked into boots.

Close one that. Big too! What do you reckon – fifty feet, seventy-five across? If that had hit the billet, we'd be toast.

O, then, what graces in my love do dwell, That he hath turn'd a heaven unto a hell!

The billet is a big country house at the end of a long driveway. It has a grand portico, once-manicured lawns, and endless outbuildings, it's scruffy inside but frankly he can't believe his luck. There are one or two men who make a big deal about how they'd rather be on the front, fighting the good fight, and of course most of the evacuees arrive with nothing more than the clothes they were in when the bomb hit, and you wouldn't wish that on anyone but for the bulk of them this is the best war they could hope for. Tucked away in the middle of

nowhere, helping with the harvest, a keg from the brewery every couple of weeks, even the odd dance with a local girl.

And now they'll have plenty of firewood this winter. Surveying the destruction, he can see a good number of smaller silver birches and large oak boughs that have been wrenched from stately old trees by the force of the blast and strewn around the edge of the deep crater.

He turns to the man standing next to him, we'll damp it down, give the smoke a chance to clear, and then get the Land Rover down here first thing tomorrow to winch those out, no problem. Good lot of wood there, better get the axes sharpened!

About the wood go swifter than the wind

Once they've dragged the felled trunks back to the stable yard there'll be hours spent chopping, splitting, and stacking the wood ready for winter. Although it's back-breaking work, they will be companionable, satisfying hours working together; the tea will flow and they'll get some of the more useful looking lads to shift the split logs into the wood store. A lot of them arrived nothing more than skin and bone but the Suffolk air and an occasional extra churn of milk from the local farmer for their porridge has put some colour back in their cheeks, and it's good to have some chatter around the place.

He's seen this place through all four seasons since winding up here after the accident up at Catterick. He'd not even made it out of the training camp when he'd gashed his thigh pretty

badly climbing into one of the massive Churchill tanks on an exercise. The wound had taken an age to heal, he'd been in and out of the medical bay for weeks, and eventually it was decided that he'd be sent here. He might be useless on the front line but at least he was fit enough to help keep this place running smoothly. It was a bit of a home for waifs and strays all round really; evacuees who'd lost everything in a London bombing raid, fellas like him – some of them back from the front, some like him who had never left these shores – a couple of senior officers that they didn't know what else to do with, and a few WRENS to keep an eye on them all while they oversaw army supplies being shifted around. 'Logistics' they called it – he called it a pretty cushy number if he was honest.

What angel wakes me from my flow'ry bed?

The blast last night had been a near-miss though. Close enough to the house to send a big old rumble through the foundations, and as he'd leapt out of bed the flash from the explosion was still lighting up the sky beyond the trees. Him and the half dozen blokes he shared the bunk room with had peered through cracks in the blackout curtains and seen the orange glow, smelt the pong of explosives and then gone back to bed. No point in worrying about it until morning.

One sees more devils than vast hell can hold

He'd drifted back into a fitful sleep, laced with disjointed dreams. His dear old dad, kids from the street he'd grown up in, one of the village girls he'd had a dance with last week. Some of the other men, who'd seen things no one should see over in France, had a bit less sleep. The

blast noise, that eardrum-sucking whoosh that arrived just before the impact, the smell, the eerie glow, all triggering memories that were enough to keep even the most hardened trooper awake. No screams though, thankfully. This one had landed plum in the middle of the nearby birch copse by the looks of things. No need to send out a rescue party, no rubble to sift through while neighbours look on, thanking their lucky stars it'd missed their homes.

Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend

More than cool reason ever comprehends

Just that afternoon, he'd sat on his bunk writing a letter to his mother, while Frank fiddled with the wireless, and Owen darned his 'lucky socks'. Apparently, he'd been wearing them when half his regiment had been wiped out in a single artillery hit at Arras and he'd no doubt be giving them credit for this near-miss in the morning. Owen had lucky socks, he'd had a lucky war – if there was such a thing.

/ Now

I must go seek some dewdrops here,

And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear.

She wishes she had a bell jar to capture everything about this moment. The tang of woodsmoke and leaf mould, the sonorous voices carried on the warm air, the sound of the violin and accordion resonating off the wooden benches that form the amphitheatre, the sunlight through the leaves – that soft, warm light unique to an early autumn evening. She'd heard someone call it the 'golden hour' and thought it the perfect description. She stacks

some beer glasses ready for the dishwasher, wipes down the wooden bar top, and leans forward on to the polished oak surface closing her eyes.

To say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays.

It's A Midsummer Night's Dream and the performance is great fun. She'd not even really known the story until now – this run of performances is the grand finale of a summer of open air theatre. If it had been Chekhov, now that would be different; they'd endured plenty of Chekhov at her high school in Kyiv but not so much Shakespeare. The tiny cast of just five actors have been very entertaining this week. Much more so than the troupe of 'Molly' dancers she'd endured from her perch behind the tiny bar last week. I mean, honestly what on earth was that all about? And blackface? In the twenty-first century? She'd seen some reports of Ukranian cultural life on TV here since the invasion that had made her heritage look a little bit 'cringe', as the kids would say, but honestly, such a thing would be ridiculed even in her home country!

A sweet-faced man, a proper man, as one shall see in a summer's day, a most lovely gentlemanlike man.

The actors had shown a remarkable tolerance for alcohol after the shows, especially Puck. He'd been knocking back the local vodka like there was no tomorrow (she'd later found out his name was Alex and yes, the vodka had indeed put hairs on his chest). Local vodka, that had made her laugh when she'd first seen the bottle on the bar shelf. It had won awards for its 'smooth, soft finish' according to the label, all down to the East Anglian barley

apparently. Where she'd learned to drink vodka, they preferred it a little bit rougher round the edges. She'd bring back a couple of bottles of the homemade rye vodka her brother distilled for next summer's season. If she was able to get back home of course, at the moment that possibility seemed remote.

I'll follow thee and make a heaven of hell,

To die upon the hand I love so well.

She'd spoken to Danylo just a few days ago and been reassured that he was safe, his family carrying on as usual – they'd adjusted frighteningly quickly to the new normal. She'd been terrified immediately after the invasion, begged him to leave, to come to her any way he could but he'd insisted that he needed to stay. To work, to look after his wife's family, to sit it out. She should stop worrying he said, she was lucky she wasn't there, and she should get on with her life, her teaching, her work at the theatre. That sounded like fun he'd said, what an idyllic place nestled in the beautiful English countryside, and what an entrepreneurial idea, to build a wonderful open-air theatre in an old bomb crater. Maybe he would steal it once the Russians had been defeated. They could set up a cultural exchange, Shakespeare in Kyiv and Chekhov in Suffolk, how about that for an idea? They'd laughed and joked but it broke her heart to think of the devastation they were wreaking on her country.

She'd been working at the theatre bar all summer and she'd miss it once they closed it up for the winter. It could be hard to find a social life in a new country but spending two or three evenings a week here, serving beer to men wearing chino trousers, cider to women who wished they'd worn a heavier jacket, and topping up the bowl of water for a surprising

number of dogs, had been a great opportunity to improve her colloquial English, and the other theatre staff and various actors, musicians, singers that had visited through the season had a nice habit of sticking around for a drink or two once the audiences had dispersed.

Are you sure

That we are awake? It seems to me

That yet we sleep, we dream

This week there had been a definite end-of-term feel to proceedings and a couple of extra late nights as they'd sat with the cast and crew and recounted some of the memorable moments from the preceding weeks. This little theatre company had been all over the country, performing in church yards, on village greens, and in pub gardens but they'd declared this theatre to be the highlight of their tour and a fitting end to their summer season. She'd walked through the darkening woodland with Alex/Puck after their first night and they'd shared a bottle of cider and a pleasantly tipsy fumble as a pair of tawny owls called back and forth above them.

/ Then

Weaving spiders, come not here;

Hence, you long-legg'd spinners, hence!

Beetles black, approach not near;

Worm nor snail, do no offence.

Wow, that's a big old hole!

It had taken a dozen of them several days to clear the usable timber from around the crater, but the centre of the blast site was strangely empty. The force of the explosion had cleared it almost entirely of trees and undergrowth and the scorched earth, coated in a grey crust of ash, looked other-worldly. Better warn everyone to keep away, we don't want any accidents. The countryside's going to look like a big piece of cheese by the time they've finished, isn't it! It's not just the cities that they've got it in for, I thought we were pretty safe here but I reckon we were lucky that missed us.

/ Now

*Or, if there were a sympathy in choice,
War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it,*

They'd talked a bit about the war. He'd assumed she was a refugee when she'd told him she was from Ukraine, that she'd left her home after the invasion. No, she'd said. I was here already. I'd come to teach, and to learn. That was lucky, he'd said. Really lucky.

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{with thanks to William Shakespeare}