

War Comes Home

By Anthony Botelho

Kettle boiling, sound of water being poured into tea cups

There you are, and the milk and sugar. I know you're very particular with your tea, so I'll let you take care of that.

Oh, yes, I suppose things must look quite different since the last time you were here. We had a fire a half a year ago and had to rebuild most of the house. We got that done just in time for the cold, thankfully.

It's really so delightful to see you after all this time. When did I see you last? Why, it can't have been since The War began.

Yes, Thomas is home now. He's just down in the cellar. It's odd, I know, but that's where he goes to be by himself and relax. God knows he's earned some time to be alone.

How is... your cousin, was it? He was in Europe as well, yes? How is he?

Yes, I see. Well it could always be worse. It's not quite the same sort of thing, but Thomas has had his demons as well and things were difficult between him and myself for the last year or so. But we've made things work. In times like these, you just have to.

Yes, that's right. He left in '16, just in time to fight in the Somme. Vimy as well, the next year. But he made it back home.

Every day I would worry about him. Every time we got news here of some great big battle or skirmish, I would hope and pray until I received a letter. And every time I did, his words in his hand.

When I received his last letter from Europe, telling me that the war the was over and that he was coming home... well, I still feel slightly ashamed about this; I was worried in a different way.

I was overjoyed of course that Thomas was coming home, but I was afraid. Afraid of what may have have happened to him while he was away, and afraid of how I might react. He'd never mentioned any kind of injury in any of his letters. On the contrary, he told me—quite miraculously—that he had not been injured once during the war.

But I knew that this might not be true. He may have lying, to try and spare me the worry. Elizabeth Currie's Henry had sent her similar letters, but had then returned without his right leg. Worse yet, Allison Pryor's boy John had suffered terrible injury to his face from the gas. He wears a special mask now, they made it for him in France. It's quite brilliant, it looks just like him, but underneath I'm told the damage is quite severe.

And poor Mary Lesley. She thought her Robert was coming back, but it wasn't until months later she discovered that he had died a year earlier. Gangrene was taking him, so he wrote enough letters to last for several months and made his friends promise to send them. He must have been trying to save her the heartbreak, but the poor boy did more harm than good. Mary's been in a state since.

So I suppose I was fearing something similar. What if Thomas was missing his leg or his eye? I like to think that could put on the brave face and look past all that, but would a moment of shock or an involuntary glance aside betray me and leave him crushed.

I was thinking about that every minute until I heard that knock at the door. I was making breakfast, and I heard Max barking from outside first. And you know Max, he hardly ever barked.

Yes, I'm afraid we lost Max not long after Thomas got back. No, not the fire; it was shortly before then.

In any case, I knew that it must have been Thomas, and I was already rushing to the door by the time he was knocking. I opened the door, so happy but, still, with my heart in my throat and... there he was. Thomas, the same as he ever was. Everything there, not a scratch on him. Still handsome, in his Thomas way.

I hugged him, hugged him and kissed him for the all the time that I couldn't those near three years. We spent the day and night laughing, as he told me about his trip back. All the while, Max barking from outside...

It was easy enough adjusting back to normal life, to peace, but as I said that wasn't without its difficulties along the way. Thomas was back and he was the same, mostly. The same smile, the same laugh, the same general manner of carrying on, but he was changed in some ways as well.

He doesn't sleep well. He'll toss and turn for hours, often leaving bed in the middle of the night. I never knew where he was going for those first few months; in the morning I'd wake up to find him outside looking up at nothing in particular, having no idea where he'd been all evening.

He's a bit more rough of a man as well, taking more to smoking and the drink. Not so much, but still more than I'd like.

But mostly, I noticed how quiet he'd become and how often he preferred to keep his own company. I could still have fun with him, we could still share love, but those moments were so rare. Most times, he'd much rather go stare at the sky than carry on a conversation.

In many ways, it was lonelier now that he back when he'd been gone. During the war I'd have the young boys from town here during the days, paying them pennies to help me farm

the potatoes. And I'd spend so much time working with the ladies at the Daughters of the Empire. But now...

And not long after Thomas' return, I start noticing strange things in and around the house. Noises at first, at night. Something like the sound of distant thunder. Boom **["**more like "bum" or "b-ome"**"]**... boom... boom... off in the distance, in the middle of the night. Oddly, at around the same time Thomas would leave bed. Was he working on something? I didn't know what it could possibly be, but it was loud enough that we soon received complaint from our neighbours over the hill.

Back then the thought that he was making those distant cracks struck me as odd, considering how he is with loud sounds now. That was first physical tick I'd taken notice of since his return. He'd become very sensitive to overly loud noise. A terrible ringing in his ears he told me, a result of the artillery guns.

I certainly believed, with the way he covered his ears and broke into cold sweat when Max would make start barking at him.

That was another strange thing that had been happening. It seemed as though Max had entirely forgotten who Thomas was. He snarled and snapped at him every time he passed by, where he'd once been Thomas' best friend in the world, and he howled all night. For as much as Thomas wasn't sleeping, I wasn't getting much more myself.

That was all odd, there's no doubt in that. Still though, it wasn't *that* odd—maybe it just been too long, Max wasn't the brightest dog—and I tried to put it out of mind.

But then, stranger still and not long after, I began to find things throughout the house.

Well... I say things, but it was mostly one thing. One evening while I in the den, I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, a slight glint. Something on the floor, something shiny catching the light of the fire. I went over to see what it was, and I reached down I saw that it was a bullet.

I wasn't sure what to make of it at first. It was long, narrow round with a polished copper jacket; nothing at all like the rounds that were used for Thomas' hunting rifle. Was it some sort of trophy? I'd heard of many men who'd come back from The War with prizes and mementos, ammunition or equipment. Some things more grizzly, like the helmets of dead german soldiers.

Perhaps that is what I'd found. Maybe Thomas had just been fiddling around with it in the den and had dropped. That seemed normal enough. At least until I found the next one, and the next.

On the counters, beneath the sink, even in the bed. Bullets and tiny pieces of metal, sharp little scraps of iron, all around the house. It was becoming too much, and I had to ask him what was going on.

One night, while he was smoking in the den, I came into the room with a handful of bullets and I asked him where they'd come from.

He looked up at me for a moment, and then without answering took the bullets from me and walked out of the room and up the stairs. His leaving without even a semblance of a response froze me in place for a moment, but I quickly snapped out of and followed in angry pursuit.

He'd made his up to our bedroom, and as I came to door I could see him placing the bullets into his personal drawer in the cupboard—one that he kept under lock and key—standing in a way that I couldn't see what was inside.

I demanded that he tell me what was happening in our home. Not just that, but why he'd become so distant, why he never spoke to me. About hardly anything, and least of all about the war.

At that he turned to me with a flash of anger, but then looked away. I could see the look of hot shame on his face. A face I'd seen before, but mixed with so many more sad emotions than I'd ever known him to have. I worried that I'd gone too far.

"The war?" he said, and suddenly something changed. In a flash, his complexion changed from sadness to sick. He lurched over, dropping the cigarette from his mouth, falling to his knees and shaking. I looked on in horror as his face contorted and seemed to bloat. It was as though something were trying to escape his mouth, pushing on his cheeks and lips trying to get out, but he wasn't letting it. And as it seemed like he was just about to lose the battle, Max started making a truly awful racket outside, barking and growling.

Hearing this now too common commotion and turning his head to the window, it looked as though Thomas had got a hold of whatever spasm his body was going through and swallowed down whatever it was that was in his mouth. He stood up and wiped his mouth, raising his right hand to ear and wincing slightly.

"I'm sorry," he said standing and turning the key on the drawer. "I'm not feeling well. Could you clean up here, please? I'll go see to Max."

He walked across the room toward the door, avoiding my eye, but as he reached the threshold he turned back.

"I'm sorry about the bullets," he said, and left.

I've thought about that night, that night and the very next, every day since, even after all these months. But at the least Max seemed calm outside, and I managed to get some sleep. Thomas didn't come to bed that night.

The next morning was quiet, it almost seemed normal. Thomas was nowhere to be found and neither was Max. Perhaps they'd gone to town, I thought. Hopefully Thomas was going to the doctor, as he was clearly sick.

I carried on as normal that morning, and in the afternoon left the house to check on the fields. It'd been some time since I'd done that, but I thought it good since Thomas might be ill. But when I finally made my way out to the farthest parts, where our property bordered the backwoods, I saw something far harder to brush off than sounds at night and bullets.

A trench. There was a trench dug on our property, six feet deep and extending for hundreds along the edges of it. I walked along it and peered down, seeing the planks of wood that made for easier travel through the mud and the barb wire brimming from its lip.

And as I came near the end of that trench, I noticed something especially strange. A mound of dirt, down at the bottom of it. Dirt and mud piled high, covering something. I'm not sure drove me to it, but I jumped down in the trench and uncovering it. Digging away at the dirt with my bare hands. And when I finally found what was beneath, my heart sank and I let out a small scream.

There, lying on that trench, was sweet Max, dead. The blade of a bayonet sticking from his chest.

Well... I'm sure you can imagine how upsetting all that was. Max was dead, murdered, and Thomas was nowhere to be found. I buried him myself—properly, not in some awful pit—then locked myself in the house and tried to piece out what in God's name was happening.

Almost by instinct, by some intuition that knew to do it, I went to our bedroom and smashed the lock on that cupboard drawer. I found, almost unsurprisingly at that point, dozens of bullets. Maybe hundreds, bursting out and spilling onto the floor.

I fear I thought the worst things. That maybe Thomas had gone mad, that he'd cracked his mind as many I'd heard so many returning men had.

Or perhaps, even worse... that this man who had come into my home wasn't Thomas at all. They warned us of German spies all the time during the war, you know. How the threat was just as great here at home as it was overseas. You must have heard how they tried to bomb our railway, just outside of New Brunswick. And if Allison Pryor's son could be given a new face, why couldn't the Germans give someone else a new face entirely. Thomas' face.

Why shouldn't the Germans have been plotting something even after the war, trying to weaken our nation? I became convinced that this man was some sort of spy, made to look like my husband through some insidious means. He was stockpiling ammunition, preparing for some sort of attack, and he killed the dog, who could clearly see through the ruse. It all made sense. I found and loaded that old hunting rifle and readied myself for if and when this man would return.

I didn't have to wait long. He returned that very night.

I was waiting in the hall when I heard him walk up the porch to the front door and begin fiddling with the knob. He tried with his key, but I'd filled out the lock with wax. He started banging on the door and I brought the rifle to the ready, expecting what came next as after a minute of that he began to kick at it. With four strong kicks, he knocked the door off of its hinges and then stood there, staring at me with anger, confusion, and concern as I had the rifle pointed right him.

He asked me what I was doing, why I'd locked the door. He motioned forward, but I stopped his questions and his movement with a well placed warning shot, blowing a hole right through the doorway.

He recoiled, raising both hands to his ears.

I asked him, "Thomas, where is Max." I'd give him a chance, to explain himself. To be honest and prove to me who he was. He gulped, and told me he'd taken Max to stay with the Thompson's for a week.

The tears began to stream down my face and I started shaking. I told him that I knew what he'd done, and who he was. I demanded to know what he was planning, and most importantly to know what he'd done with my husband.

He tried to speak softly, saying my name, telling me calm down, but I wouldn't have it. I began screaming at him, asking my questions again and again. Still he persisted, saying my name softly, beginning to shake as well as he tried to protect his ears. I grew louder, and pressed that rifle right to his forehead.

And then he too screamed. The loudest scream I've ever heard. Not a scream, but a siren. The noise poured from his mouth, and I was struck dumb by its volume. He brought his right hand down and grabbed the gun by the barrel, still screaming, and something unbelievable began to happen.

The rifle... it didn't melt, but it seemed to just disappear into his hand and arm. Disappearing as though it were being slowly dipped into a deep pool of water, until it was gone entirely. He seemed almost as surprised at this as I was, and after a moment his scream stopped and he began to shake even more violently and sweat.

Or I thought it was sweat. No, it was... if his skin was like a surface of water, then that surface was starting to ripple. And slowly, and then quickly, bullets began to emerge from that rippling water. Tens, and then hundreds, falling from his body and pinging as they hit the floor. I backed away, the first movement I was able to muster after being frozen for a minute, and seeing this he reached for me. But as his hand reached out, his fingers became long and thin and sharp and metal. Bayonet blades. I gasped, and again his horror appeared to mirror my own.

He pulled back his hand and threw his head back to scream again, but this time no sound came. Instead, his neck and face shifted in sick ways and he began to look as he had the night before. Except this time, he wasn't able to hold back what was trying to come out. His mouth opened wide, and smoky yellow gas began to seep out of it. It moved slowly but steadily, filling the hall and coming toward me.

Survival instinct began to overcome my shock, and I continued moving back. But before I could turn and run, one more sight stopped me.

The gas continued, but slowed, the bayonets fell from his hands, and the bullets stopped pinging. But still, his body spasmed and his limbs were pulled toward his center. His joints locked in place and his whole person became more rigid and started the change. His skin became shining steel, and his arms and legs became beams and supports. His feet widening out into a metal base, somehow suddenly bolted to floor. And his face...

The gas stopped entirely now, and through the clouds I could see his fear. His head began to descend into his torso, the neck vanishing altogether, and there was a terrible distending of the jaw. His mouth moved forward, extending beyond the rest of his face. It grew longer and rounder, like a snout, but then kept extending until it was no longer a mouth at all. It was a barrel, the barrel of an artillery gun.

I ran. I climbed out of a back window, and made it 50 yards before the gun fired.

Boom.

I stopped again. I'm not really sure why. I should have tried running as far and fast as I could, to get away from the monster I'd just seen. But I thought of his confusion, his fear, his horror, and I turned back. It was a full moon that night, and the clearing where our house had been was brightly lit by moonlight and burning debris. And there, unmoved from where he'd been, on his knees, was Thomas, weeping.

I walked back, and he looked up at me.

"I'm so sorry," he said.

"I know," I said, and I embraced my husband, now understanding that, by no choice of his own, he had brought that horrible war back with him.

The doctor told us it's likely an advanced form of the shell shock, and he may have to cope with it for the rest of his life. Stress is a strong trigger, and the loud noises even more so. There are no doctors practiced in psychiatry close to us, and we can't just leave the farm, so we'll have to make do the best we can. Talking to me about the war, about the things he saw, the friends he lost, the many times he nearly lost his own life, has helped.

He still has his episodes, but that's what the cellar is for. We've reinforced it; it can't stand artillery fire, but most other things should be fine.

That awfulness with Max was just a terrible accident he told me soon after the incident, and we'll get another dog when Thomas feels he has a better handle on things. A quiet one.

I suppose Max didn't know who Thomas was because in a way he was a different person,. But even though the war changed him, like it did to so many of those young men, it didn't change who he is in his heart. He is someone no less deserving of help, and no less deserving of love.