No one much comes here at night, specially not in this weather. I like to come at dusk. I don’t mind the dark, Lord knows I’ve seen enough of it and I’ve no fear of the spirits. I like the peace that sweeps over me when I visit.

There’s not much flesh on my bones now. I suppose that’s why the stone slab under me feels so damn hard. The damp cold quickly starts to seep through my heavy overcoat, so I wriggle round to get my pack from the ground.

With freezing fingers I unfasten the strap on the top which holds the rolled grey blanket in place. I swing it around my shoulders and, lifting my cap, up over my head. I settle the hat on top then shuffle back into place.

As I lay looking up, the stars are just beginning to sparkle and shine in the darkening, frosty sky. I draw the blanket more tightly around me. The smell of death is ingrained in it, along with the dirt and holes. Tattered and darned, it served me well.

Christ, but we had something to put up with out there. Even when it stopped raining, the mud was always there, cold or sweltering. It seeped into our clothes, rotting boots and feet. It invaded our food, the stench turning stomachs. And along with it came the rats, and the fear, always the fear. The never-ending bang and crash of the shells drove many a man to screaming madness too.

If I close my eyes now, I’m back there in a flash, crouched among the dead and dying, just trying not to join them. But the picture in my pocket, Rose’s smiling face, gave me hope and warmed me. In the light from the flares and explosions I talked to my darling girl, telling her and myself it would turn out right.

I’ve kept all her letters, they’re still wrapped in an oilcloth at the bottom of my pack. She told me all the everyday things happening in the village; who’d been copped for poaching, who’d left his bike outside the wrong back door after the Harvest dance. All the gossip made me smile. And the sad news sobered, like who was wearing black mourning for a dead husband or sons, or both.

And always, always she closed with her dearest love and promises to wait for me. Rows and rows of kisses filled the bottom of the paper. What pleasure they brought! When a lull in the fighting let me drift off still crouched in the trench, I dreamed of collecting every one. The memory’s no comfort now, I can’t think of it without feeling cheated. Some good those dreams did me.

I survived somehow, against the odds. Nearly all my mates were lost, all the lads from the Parchment Works who joined up with me for the adventure. Only Leaky Cyril made it back to Blighty with me.

He was the tallest and thinnest of us all, a bit dopey looking really. The poor lad never complained at the teasing; he’d been Leaky Cyril since school, when he once didn’t make it to the outhouse in time. Turned out he was one of the bravest. Never complained when they took his leg either; at least he was going home.

When it was all over at last, we were shipped out. I stuck close to Cyril, helped to bring him back to Southampton. We’d got quite pally by then, telling each other secrets, sharing a gasper when we had one. Funny really, I’d always been Jack the Joker at school, leading the gang into scrapes and taking the punishment with a smile. Cyril was just a hanger-on. Now I was hanging on to him.

I stayed with Cyril in the hospital too. Weakened by the wound, he’d caught the ‘flu’ before they could send him home and didn’t last two days. I couldn’t let him die alone, not after all he’d been through. The loss hit me hard, I was a sadder man when I got back here.

The moon’s rising now, bright and clear. I wonder if it’s the same moon out in France over all those other graves. Perhaps Cyril’s up there too, watching me. I shiver in the cold, uncomfortable on my hard perch. I shift my shoulders, but it makes little difference. It’s too much trouble to get down. I’m so sleepy, I keep yawning.

My Pa died suddenly while I was away, his heart was never strong. Then Ma accepted the offer of marriage from the butcher, Eustace Searle. It seems he’d been sweet on her since she was a girl, but Dad had claimed her first. I didn’t blame her, she had three younger children to look after, and Mr Searle is a wealthy man.

Of course, he didn’t want a grown up ‘son’ as well.

It wouldn’t have mattered if I had my Rose. She’d waited, like she promised. And I’d run to find her, soon as I made it home. Just as I was, still in my dirty, rat-chewed uniform, carrying the little rosewood music box I’d found for her on a leave I had in Paris.

When I wrap my stiff arms around myself now, I can remember how it felt hugging her and sharing all those promised kisses. How sweet it was to feel all the strain and sadness melt away. We talked and talked, and kissed and cuddled, thrilled we’d been rewarded for our patience.

Next day, when she took sick I was barred from her house. Her father chased me away with a pitch fork, shouting and swearing. I had no idea I was carrying the germs, I wasn’t sick myself. I sat in the rain against the dripping hedge across the road and waited.

I saw the doctor come in the evening. It had to be serious for them to pay for the doctor. Still I sat and waited, where else would I go? I heard her mother’s wail from inside the house when it was over. My precious Rose, killed by the ‘flu’, killed by me.

It nearly finished me, the grief and the guilt, and the hatred flooding from her family. They’d never liked me, thought I wasn’t good enough for her. They wouldn’t let me see her or even go to the funeral. I stood outside the church and waited, my tears hidden by the drizzle.

She was laid in this raised tomb affair dating back to more prosperous ancestors. The flat stone top was carved with their names and hers was added to it. The minister took pity on me and let me say a prayer at her grave when they’d gone.

Nothing mattered after that. My mother persuaded Mr Searle to have me home with them, at least for a while, but I just shook my head and walked away. What good would it do me now? All I’d lived through was meant to bring me back to Rose.

I tramped the country roads but still I couldn’t walk away from her. I scavenged for food and accepted charity from the few who offered it, taking it to a camp I made in the woods. I spent my days there keeping out of the way, hiding from the sticks and stones of the boys who knew no better, and the taunts of the older folk who thought they did.

There’s no place for me in this changed world. Here I am, still wearing my kit, nowhere to go and no hope of work. The New Year is no better than the old for me. I can’t go forward without Rose.

So every night I come to visit her. I spent New Year’s Eve here, listening to the happy voices carrying from the celebrations in the pub, thinking of how we should’ve been there too.

Lord, but it’s cold. I’d like to move my arms and bend my knees to ease the stiffness, but somehow it’s all too much trouble. Instead I keep looking up at the black sky, fascinated by the moon and the stars. I remember they twinkled like that in France, when the nights were so dark.

I never learned much at school so I couldn’t really tell the planets from the stars. Now as I watch them winking at me, it keeps my attention and comforts me.

I’m getting very sleepy. When I think about dodging the watchmen now it hardly seems to matter, what do I care after all? They’ll only throw me out and I’ll gather a few more bruises. I can’t leave the beauty of the night sky, even if I could manage to get myself down from the tomb.

Anyway, the more I look I think I see faces in the clusters and patterns of stars. Over there, to my right, looks like Cyril’s shy grin in the linking stars. And straight up over my head there’s a group shaped like an angel. The wings are really bright and beautiful, just like the hymn. I start to sing softly, recalling the words from Sunday school.

“All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small.” I stop, trying to remember how it went on. It’s no good, I don’t have the energy to think that hard.

But looking up again I see the angel’s face. Now that’s a shaker. The longer I look, screwing up my eyes and gathering the last of my strength, the more I can see Rose smiling down at me. I blink a couple of times, my hands are too frozen, too entangled in the blanket to rub the film from my eyes.

I’m overtaken by a feeling of such joy and calm. If I hold my ragged breathing for a moment and strain to listen, I swear I hear music. A sweet-sounding tinkling tune, like in the music box I gave to Rose. It drifts down to the graveyard from the angel hovering overhead. And as the shape gets closer I’m more sure, the face is Rose’s.

I try to move, to raise myself up but my blanket is frozen in place now on the tomb. I feel no fear, just the urge to laugh and sing. Then a distant voice comes, softly musical.

“Come and join me, Jack,” I hear it say, “I’ve waited for you, you’re ready now. We can be together and no-one will ever hurt you again.”

I know for certain the voice is my own dear Rose. She hasn’t left me, she’s been waiting still, like she promised. Perhaps we can finish our story together after all. Journey’s end at last. My eyes are closing now, it’s too hard to keep them open.

“I’m coming, Rose,” I whisper.