This Is Our Fight

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Author's Note: When people say *write all the self-indulgent fanfic that you need to write to be happy*, this is it. This is the kind of fic that I really want to read but that I know chances are slim that anyone else will ever look at it, let alone write for me. So here we are in a non-existent fandom for a TV series from thirteen years ago that no one remembers. Do I care, though? Nah. Self-indulgent fanfic it shall be.

So if you're that one person who will stumble across this and think, *oh yay, a whumpy canon-compliant Middleton story*, you have all my admiration. And if you leave me a comment, you'll also have all my undying love.

That said, all the kudos to John Simm and Maxine Peake for bringing these wonderfully complex, three-dimensional characters to life in a way that I totally fell in love with them and wanted to put them in my sandbox to play with. It's been fun because Grace Middleton is a total badass and John Middleton will always have a special place in my heart, even though sometimes I don't know if he deserves Grace.

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It was the silence that disconcerted Grace the most.

In this house, there was always something going on. The children, her husband, the chickens in the back. But this past week, everything had been a lot quieter. Even the animals seemed to know something wasn't quite right.

As she walked up the small set of stairs and through the short corridor that led to their bedroom, she stole a glance at their bed before she entered. John was lying there, the blanket drawn up, his eyes closed.

She wondered if he was asleep but he probably was. He was sleeping a lot these days but she knew he needed the rest, needed time to recover from the blow to the head that had almost killed him several times over.

It had been a hard time since the trespass. Terrible, really. The fits were the worst – when he would rouse her from her sleep, jerking and twitching next to her and there was absolutely nothing she could do to help him. It was the worst feeling in the world. Thankfully, the fits had stopped after the operation – that horrible thing on their dining table where she'd held his head while a hole was being drilled into his skull. But as terrible as it was, it had helped. Perhaps even saved his life.

He'd finally opened his eyes three days ago, and the relief had been tangible around the whole farm. They could finally breathe. He hadn't spoken, hadn't been able to communicate anything. But the way he looked at her, at his children, she could tell there was recognition.

That massive knot in her stomach had eased just a little bit, but it wasn't completely gone. His brain had definitely taken a toll, it had become clear quickly in how he couldn't move his left arm and leg, how the left side of his face was slack and didn't move right.

No one could tell her if that would get better. All they had was hope, but hope had got them through all the toils of life in the past, so she tried to hold on to that.

She drew back the covers on her side of the bed and crawled under the blanket, trying to escape from the damp cold of the house. When she had settled in, she whispered his name. "John?"

There was no movement, no sign he had heard her. She had to suppress the urge to reach over and touch his cheek but she didn't want to wake him. "Sleep well, John," she whispered before she turned over to lie on her side, hoping sleep would claim her soon.

When she awoke the next morning, she found him looking at her. Even in the dim light, she could see his brown eyes were attentive on her, perhaps curious, but there was also something else swinging in them that she couldn't quite place.

"Morning, John," she said.

He blinked, then averted his gaze.

Grace frowned. Was he upset? In pain? Frustrated? What did he remember?

"Are you in pain?" she asked.

He shook his head ever so slightly.

Noises drifted up to the bedroom from the houseplace. Probably Bert getting ready for the first milking. Mary might be up, too. Ever since John's injury, everyone had been pulling their weight around the farm. Margaret and her boys were also still helping out. Grace was more grateful than she could ever express.

She looked at John. "I'm getting up. I'll bring you breakfast in a bit."

He acknowledged her with a quick glance, then looked away again. There was something there that felt like resentment. She knew he'd seen her with Gibby at the protest. She wasn't sure what he thought he saw or why he'd even been there, but deep down she knew, it had been apparent that she had been drawn to Bill Gibby. That had to have hurt John. She had secretly hoped he might not remember, but now it was becoming more obvious that he did.

Bert was already sitting at the table with a mug of tea and a piece of bread. She drew her crocheted shawl closer around her to try and shield her from the morning cold with the fire only just getting going.

Looking at her son, she said, "Bert, can you help me with your father?"

He briefly looked up. "Yes, mother. Can I do 't milking first?"

"I'd prefer if you didn't."

"Want me to do it now?"

"Yes, if you could. He's awake now."

He stuffed the last of the bread into his mouth and went up the stairs. Grace followed. This was the part that was the most awkward – taking care of his bodily needs. She picked up the wide-necked bottle they had misappropriated for this purpose as Bert went to his father's bedside.

"Come on, let's get you sitting up."

John gave his son a long-suffering look, then his gaze fixed on Grace. He nodded ever so slightly at her with his chin, his glower intensifying. Bert saw it too and looked at her. "I think he wants you to leave."

Grace stood transfixed for a second. She was his wife. It was her job to take care of him, to help him with whatever he needed help with. There was a sharp pang in her stomach. She swallowed before she stepped towards Bert and wordlessly handed him the bottle before she turned and left the room.

Outside, she stood at the railing at the top of the stairs, leaning her hands on it. The concerned eyes of her young daughter were on her. "Is father alright?"

She looked at Mary. "Yes. He's getting better every day."

"Then why do you look worried?"

She closed her eyes for a long moment, not sure how to answer that in a way that a nine-year-old could understand. "I'm just tired," she offered.

When she had made a fresh cup of tea and some porridge that she took to the bedroom, John was sitting up, leaning limply against a pillow behind his back. He eyed her warily, following her with his eyes.

She sat down at the edge of the bed, putting the porridge on the nightstand, holding up the cup to him. "Cup 'o tea."

He feebly reached up with his right arm, but he could barely lift it, so she held the cup to his mouth and tilted it. He took a sip, some of the tea dribbling down the left side of his mouth.

She quickly wiped at it with a towel, but she could see the shame and humiliation all over his face. She opted for an encouraging smile, because what else could she do?

Next, she started feeding him the porridge. His chewing was deliberate and slow. She'd mixed some extra sugar into it because he really needed to get his strength up. He made it through a third of the bowl before he capitulated. Small steps. It was all small steps now. He'd already eaten more than the morning before.

"That's good," she said as she put the bowl back onto the nightstand. "Do you want more tea?"

She thought his look said yes, so she guided the cup back to his mouth, but out of nowhere his right arm clumsily swiped at it, pushed her hand away with a strength that completely surprised Grace. She lost her grip and it sent the metal teacup clattering to the floor next to the bed, the remaining liquid spilling onto the floorboards.

She glared at him. "John."

He glared back. She wished he would say something. *Could* say something.

"Why are you angry?"

His glaring intensified but of course it told her nothing helpful.

"Are you frustrated because you can't feed yourself? If that's what it is, we'll work on it together. You'll get your strength back. You're already getting stronger. It won't be like this forever."

He had turned his head away, was no longer looking at her, and she didn't know what to make of it. In a quiet voice, she said, "I know you can't speak right now, but I wish you could tell me what it is. I want to help you. But you'll have to let me."

He kept looking away, so she added, "How about we get you out of bed later? It'll be good if you get used to using those muscles again. I need to change the bedsheets, too. Bert can help."

There was no response from him, so she looked at the mess on the floor, then got up to take care of the spilled tea.

When she was done, she said, "I'll come back to check on you later."

She gave him a long look before she left the room to go back downstairs and tend to the duties of the day. There was still a farm to run that didn't care about whether you were poorly or not.

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It was well after lunch that Grace found Bert at the dining table, sorting through some of his photos, a wooden tray lying on the table next to them. He'd always had such a gift for capturing the right moment in a picture. His camera had been destroyed during the protest – another hapless victim of the unfounded violence. That day had ruined so many things.

She stood next to his chair. “What are you doing?”

He picked up a photo of Joe and put it on the tray. “Thought it would be good for father.”

“To rekindle his memory?”

“To ask him to put them in order. He needs to work that brain of his.”

Grace placed a hand on Bert’s shoulder. “That’s a very good idea.”

“You think he’ll ever be able to speak again?”

She squeezed Bert’s shoulder a little. “I don’t know. I hope so. It’s only been three days.”

“What did the doctor say?”

“He didn’t. Said it’s impossible to say. But he said we should try to keep him stimulated. So this is really good, Bert. Can you help getting him out of bed for me? The bedsheets need to be changed.”

Bert put two more pictures on the tray where there was already a sizeable collection of family photos. “Yes, mother.”

John guardedly eyed them when the two of them entered the room, fresh bedsheets in Grace’s arms. It was hard to ignore the accusatory undertone that seemed to swing in his looks. Or was she just imagining it? Was it her own guilt getting the better of her? She’d already apologised to him, but he’d been in a coma at the time, so it was unlikely he had heard it or understood it.

Bert put the tray with the photos down and went to his father’s side. He pointed at the chair that now stood by the foot of the bed. “Let’s get you in there while mother and I change the sheets.”

It wasn’t a question, and John knew that, too. Yet he made no attempt to yield.

“Come on, father,” Bert encouraged him.

John closed his eyes and let out a weary breath through his nose. The humiliation was tangible for all of them, but there was nothing to be done about it. They were a family. They’d do what was needed.

John eventually slung his right arm around Bert’s shoulder while Grace did what she could to help heave her husband out of bed. He wobbled on his feet when Bert got him to stand up and made clumsy attempts to hop to the chair on his right leg with Bert supporting most of his weight. He collapsed ungracefully in the chair, slumping to the right to lean on the armrest, his head leaning awkwardly to that side.

Grace had to look away. It was hard to see him like that. Not as hard as seeing the doctor drill a hole into his skull, but he'd always been so strong and resilient. He'd go out and scythe the fields or milk the cows even when he was ill with the flu, he'd push through the pain of an injury to get things done that needed to be done, but this wasn't something he could just toughen out.

She unfolded the clean bedsheets and got to work to distract herself, Bert lending a hand to help her.

"He's going to speak again," Bert said, his voice full of conviction and hope. "And when he does, he'll tell us why he was there. And what he saw."

Grace cast a furtive glance at John. His expression was grim, his eyes set on her, the accusation right there. Yes, he'd seen her with Gibby. He'd seen exactly what she wished he never had, what she wished had never happened. And Bert couldn't know. She would not tell him. It would stay between her and her husband.

But Bert kept on, "He wanted nothing to do with the trespass, why would he even be there?"

"I don't know," she said. And that was true. She had no idea why he had come. He had been adamant of not wanting any part of it. Had been a coward about it, in fact. What had changed his mind?

"Right," she said when the sheets were all tucked in. Bert was already by John's side. "Ready?"

Bert got John back into bed. She helped him get her husband back into a comfortable position with a gentle, "Easy."

Grace cast a last look at him before she went to the kitchen with the dirty bedsheets. She better get to work.

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The day got away from her. There was always so much to do on the farm, especially now that John wasn't able to work. Margaret's boys had helped so much and they were getting by for now, but Grace was exhausted by the time she was ready to go to bed.

She had pondered the idea for a while whether it would be better if she slept in Joe's old bed upstairs because John needed rest and space to recuperate. From the looks he was giving her, she also thought he might prefer it that way, but she also wanted to be there if he needed anything.

She went into their bedroom, sat at the edge of the bed and looked at her husband for a long moment. His eyes fluttered open.

"Sorry," she said in a low voice. "Didn't mean to wake you."

It lasted only a second, but for the briefest of moments, she saw the old John there, and there was a pang in her gut. Would they ever get back to that?

She reached over and took his hand in hers. “I’m going to bed now. Do you need anythin’?”

He shook his head ever so slightly.

“Alright. Sleep well.”

He closed his eyes and pulled his hand away from her.

She sighed. “John…”

It was what it was. And with them not being able to talk about it, they’d have to work around it. She slung the blanket aside and went to bed.

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Their days now settled into a strange routine. Grace and Bert made sure that John was comfortable, fed and washed, that he had what he needed.

Bert kept encouraging him to work with the photos, and Grace was glad to see that he took to the idea and he was trying. The weakness in the left side of his body and his inability to speak were signs of his brain not working quite right, but he seemed to have no trouble understanding them, and there was no reason to believe he had large gaps in his memory.

She wanted to think that he was grateful for the care and support, but she couldn’t pretend his lingering rejection didn’t hurt. Yet, she knew he needed her, and she needed him to work on being the best version of himself, to not lose hope. There was absolutely no question that she would be there for him and keep caring for him, whatever that might look like in the long term.

Sitting by his side again, she held the bowl with potato stew that he was slowly eating. His hand was still shaking from the effort, but he was capable again of holding a spoon by himself. More progress.

Grace stole a glance at him, her eyes catching on the wound on the side of his head that was still healing. The bruising was starting to fade from purple to green now, the open wound was beginning to close. It would certainly leave a nasty scar, but that was the least of their worries.

When he was done with the stew and Grace had taken the spoon from him, he lifted his gaze at her, and there was something more intense in his expression that was less resentment and more a question that he didn’t know how to formulate.

“What is it, John?”

His eyes widened. His right hand tentatively came up, his index finger weakly pointing at his left temple. She frowned. What was it that he wanted to know?

“Your injury? Do you want to know what happened?”

He nodded.

“Do you remember any of it?”

He closed his eyes for a long moment and she wasn’t sure if that was a yes or a no. But irrespective of the answer, it wasn’t that he could tell her what he remembered anyway, so maybe she had to start at the beginning.

She had thought about the events of that day so often, had fretted about it over and over in the long moments of worry and fear while John’s life hung in the balance. She didn’t want to relive it again, but he had a right to know, so she recounted all of what she could remember – how he’d been struck down by a butt of a gun, how they had brought him back home, how he’d started having those terrible fits. Her voice shook and finally broke on the retelling of the operation right there on their dining room table.

When she looked at him, his expression was a lot softer, concern swinging in it. Concern for her? She wasn’t sure.

And that hadn’t been all. Then his wound had become infected, he’d broken out in a fever and he’d have damn near died on them again if it hadn’t been for Margaret’s ingenuity. “The woman probably saved your life,” Grace said softly.

His brow creased with emotion and Grace’s hand came up to gently cup his jaw and stroke his cheek with her thumb. “You woke up two days later, and I couldn’t have been happier.”

The smallest of smiles played at the right corner of his mouth and Grace had to smile, too. It was the first time she was seeing him smile since he’d woken up. She bent down and placed a soft kiss on his forehead. “I’m so glad you’re back with us.”

His smile widened a tiny fraction and Grace could feel tears prickling in her eyes. Losing him would be unfathomable, despite everything they’d been through. She knew that now.

Her hand came up to wipe at her eyes, then she picked up the empty bowl. “Right. I’ll come back later with your supper.” She nudged her head toward the tray with the photos. “Keep working on that.”

His gaze went to the photos and stayed there as Grace got up and went back down to the kitchen.

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It was that afternoon, Grace was up in Mary’s room, when she heard a voice downstairs. A woman’s voice that sounded vaguely familiar.

When she came down the stairs, she was just as surprised as a wide-eyed Caro Allingham who was standing there. The young woman looked strangely out of place in their house – all fancy clothes, make-up and snappy haircut, underlined by the stark contrast of John sitting in their old bed in his well-worn union suit.

Caro's expression certainly didn't betray the awkwardness of the situation. Grace could tell John had recognised her, judging by the look he was giving her from where he was sitting against the pillows, his right index finger on one of the family photos.

"Caro," Grace greeted her.

"I need to speak to you," she said bluntly.

Grace gestured at the wooden chest that stood at the foot of the bed as she went to her husband's side and sat down on the edge of the bed. It was apparent why Caro was here, that this was about their grandson, and John needed to hear this, too.

Caro tentatively took a seat. "Something's been on my mind lately."

"Joe's son," Grace said.

"Do you ever think about him?"

"Of course I do. I wonder what he looks like, what kind of man he's growing up to be. Where he is..."

Caro nodded. "I have all the same questions. It's been ten years. I tried to imagine what he would look like now, if I could remember what he looked like when he was a baby, but I can't. I can't picture my own son, then *or* now."

Grace looked at her. "His eyes, maybe. What about the colour of his eyes? His hair?"

Caro looked away, shook her head. "I can't remember. But I want him back."

"Well, could you not find him?"

"They won't tell me where he is."

"You could find out. There must be records. And a woman in your position..."

Caro nodded, so Grace went on, "Date of birth, name..." She realised something. "I don't know his name."

Caro averted her gaze. "My family never mentioned him and I'm not allowed to speak about him. He doesn't exist, so I promised myself I wouldn't say his name out loud until I can say it to him."

Grace nodded and saw her stealing a look at John. She turned and saw that John had his eyes closed, was breathing evenly. She gave Caro an apologetic smile. “He still gets tired. Let’s go downstairs.”

Caro nodded and followed Grace. As they went down the stairs, Grace asked, “Why did you come now?”

“I just wanted to make sure that you would want to see him.”

“See him? There isn’t a day goes by without me longing to see him.”

Just then, the door opened and Bert walked in. He sat down and tied a shoelace that had come loose.

Grace didn’t pay him any heed and told Caro, “There’s a bond between a mother and her child that does not break. Doesn’t matter who wants to break it or why. It cannot, it *will* not be broken. A mother has no choice in that. It’s there, deeper than memory.”

Caro’s mouth curved into a smile. She had to know what Grace was talking about if she was here now. Grace sighed. “I’m sorry, I’m not helping you. I don’t know how to help.”

But Caro told her, “Oh, you have.” She briefly looked at Bert, then turned to go and walked out the door.

Grace exchanged a knowing look with her son. This was certainly a new development. Was there a chance that they could meet their grandson? Get to know him? Even see him grow up? It was a dream she had long given up on, and she almost didn’t dare hope.

She blinked away the hint of tears in her eyes. Bert asked, “What did she want help with?”

She sighed. “She wants to get her son back.”

“Joe’s child?”

“Yes.”

“And she asked you for help with it?”

Grace shook her head. “No. I think maybe she wanted our blessing.”

“Does father know?”

“Yes, I think so. He fell asleep when we were talking about it.” Grace smiled again. “He’s still working on your photos, but I think it’s tiring him out a little bit.”

“He’ll get stronger.”

“Yes, he will. He already has.”

And that's all they said, the unspoken question hanging there how much strength he'd ever get back. Perhaps that was something they should work on more.

She pottered around the house for the next few hours, fed the chickens, collected the eggs, cleaned the pens. When she went to check on John he was awake, his eyes attentive on her. She hadn't washed him yet today, so this was as good a time as any.

When the water had heated up enough, she went back to his room and put the bowl on the dresser on the side. First things first. She wanted to put something into practice.

"John?" She took one of the books that was lying on his nightstand. "Hold out your hand."

He frowned and she repeated. "Hold out your hand. Like this." She extended her right arm in front of her, her palm facing up.

He did as she said and she placed the book in his outstretched palm, supporting his hand from underneath with her own. "Hold it up as long as you can."

He glared at her at first but kept holding the arm out when she lowered her palm so that it no longer touched his hand.

She started counting down. "Three. Two. One."

He dropped the arm and she caught it. "Good."

A smile tugged at his lips, and that still sent a flock of butterflies into her stomach. He was trying, giving his best, and she was so proud of him.

"Alright. Let's try again."

He held the book up again, this time she counted down from five. "Good," she said again.

His smile faltered quickly this time, his gaze catching on his useless left arm that lay limply by his side. He must be having those same doubts she and Bert had. His head lolled listlessly to the side, his expression grim.

She looked at him, tears threatening to rise. How had they got here? How had she let it come to this, how had she given in to temptation? It seemed very far away now, her short escapade with Gibby.

It had been so different with Gibby, with the way he treated her, the way he saw something in her that she'd never got from John. Gibby was a very different kind of person to the man whom she had shared a bed with for over twenty years, the man who had given her three beautiful children. The man who, she knew, was flawed, who had weaknesses, but was fiercely loyal and whom she loved despite everything.

Gibby had been a mistake. She knew that now. She'd said it to John before, but he hadn't been able to hear it then, so she needed to say it again.

"I'm sorry."

It wasn't just Gibby, either. She felt so helpless that she couldn't help John overcome his struggles. That he was bedridden and unable to do anything. That his biggest achievement was holding up a book for five seconds.

She looked in his eyes, but they were hard and unforgiving, a stern frown lingering on his forehead. Was he ever going to do what she had done for him all those years ago, when he'd impregnated her sister while she herself was with child? Maybe that was why it hit even harder. She wondered if he could find it in his heart to forgive her.

She looked down at her lap and stood up, rolled up her sleeves to turn her attention to the washbowl. He'd let her do that for him, at the very least.

And then, just when she was about to wring out the cloth, she heard it. It was clumsy and slurred, but it was his voice.

"Bhh..."

Was that—? She turned around. "Again."

He was pointing to a photo of Bert on the nightstand. "Ffff-bhh..." he vocalized.

He was trying to speak! Something giddy worked its way up her chest.

His finger pointed at another photo—one of Mary. "Mmm-hh."

She laughed and took his hand. He was smiling at her, drawing in a breath that he released like the proudest little sigh.

This was big! It was amazing! He was going to speak again, she was sure of it!

"John," she said reverently. "This is... I'll have to go get everyone!"

She flew out the door, called Bert, Mary and Phoebe's names until they all came running. She beckoned them inside, beaming at them. "He's speaking. Father's speaking! Come!"

They all assembled by John's bedside like it was some kind of recital. Bert sat in the chair, Mary next to him, Phoebe hanging back. Grace stood by her husband's side. She pointed at Bert and John's mouth twitched before he said, "Bh."

Bert smiled and Grace said, "Good," then pointed at Mary.

"Mh," he said.

"Good."

Next was Phoebe.

"Ffh," he said.

“Good,” Grace nodded with a smile.

Bert got up from the chair and said, “Mother.”

She sat down as Bert went to the foot of the bed, looking at his father and pointing at her.

John’s gaze turned stone-cold as it flicked back and forth between Grace and Bert. He stayed quiet.

The air in the room became suddenly frigid, all joy of the moment gone in one fell swoop. Bert’s face hardened, he turned around and left the room without another word. Mary and Phoebe followed suit, leaving Grace alone with her husband.

John’s expression was steely and unforgiving, his face turned away from her. He closed his eyes and knocked the back of his head once against the bed’s headrest.

This wasn’t just a lapse of memory or an inability to communicate. He was angry. He wouldn’t say her name. That was going to be her penance, she realised that now. And maybe she deserved it.

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“Grace! You’ve got to come! Now!”

Phoebe’s voice was urgent, calling to her down the street. Grace turned around, and her initial feeling of dread and alarm vanished quickly when she saw the excitement on Phoebe’s face.

Grace hurried up to her. “What is it?”

Phoebe just took her hand and pulled her up the street. “You have to see it for yourself,” she said enthusiastically.

“Alright,” Grace said reluctantly. “It is John?”

Phoebe just nodded and fastened her steps.

Grace hurried after her back to the farm where Mary was smiling at her in the houseplace, taking her hand. Phoebe stood next to them, and then Phoebe started singing.

“Blow the wind southerly, southerly, southerly, blow the wind south of the bonny blue sea.”

She paused, and suddenly there was a familiar voice coming from the bedroom. “Blow the wind southerly, southerly.”

John’s voice. Fluent and clear as ever. Grace rushed up the steps into the bedroom where John was still repeating the verse. “Blow the wind south of the bonny blue sea.”

Grace rushed to his side, sat down on the bed and clasped his hand. This was amazing! “You’ve come back to us!”

He looked at her with a strained expression and she pressed on, “Talk to me, John. Tell me what happened.”

Bert must have heard the commotion too, he strode into the room and stood at the foot of the bed with Phoebe and Mary. “Father?”

John just breathed, looked from Bert to Grace, but his mouth wasn’t moving.

Grace squeezed his hand. “You were singing the words in the song, clear as day.”

He tried, she could see it, struggled to form words, but something was keeping them from coming out. He was trying so hard and Grace didn’t understand. He made another attempt, his face scrunched up in concentration, and then the only thing that came out was just the repeated lyrics from before. “Blow the wind southerly, southerly...”

It wasn’t working, the words were still locked up in his head, and Grace could see the confusion and frustration in his expression.

Bert didn’t understand either, he was getting increasingly irritated with his father. “I don’t understand.”

John went on, “Blow the wind southerly, southerly...”

Bert took a step closer to the bed. “If he can sing, he can speak.”

“Bert...”

“No.” He turned around and left.

Grace rubbed John’s hand. Neither of them really understood, least of all John, it seemed, and that pained her as well. “Alright. Here’s what we’ll do. We need to find a way to get those words out of your head. So we’ll practice.”

She turned around and looked at Phoebe. “Help me get him up.”

The two of them helped manoeuvre John into a sitting position. Grace sat beside him on the bed. She signalled to Phoebe and Mary to leave, then turned her attention back to John. “Look at me, John. Repeat what I say.”

She had his full attention now, so she thought they should start with the basics. She formed single letters. He’d said those before. “B.”

John dutifully repeated, “B.”

“T.”

He did the T as well.

“B,” she said again.

He repeated it, although it sounded a bit more like a P.

“Berta.”

It was a little stunted, but he repeated, “Ber-ta.”

She tried again. “Beeer-ta.”

“Beeer-ta,” he articulated.

“Bert.”

“Bb-bert.”

There it was! Grace couldn’t help but laugh and he was beaming, too. It looked all lopsided because of the facial paralysis, but he looked truly happy and proud.

He was on the way there now, so she wanted to take it further. “What’s my name?”

And then his face darkened, he shot her a glare that was all cold and piercing. The accusation and the betrayal was still written all over his expression, so Grace knew for certain now that it wasn’t just him struggling with the letters. He was refusing to say her name on purpose.

What had he seen at the trespass, what was he thinking that had happened? She looked down, then at his grim face again. “John.”

He closed his eyes for a long moment, the elation of his achievement suddenly gone.

“You were doing so well.”

He let out a breath that might as well have been a sigh, then inhaled and said, “Bb-bert.”

Grace nodded, smiling. “That’s good. Can you say Phoebe?”

He inhaled again, then pursed his lips, formed a, “Ffff-eeeb.”

“Phoe-be,” she said.

“Ffff-eeee-bee.”

Grace’s smile widened. “Now Mary.”

“Mmm-maer. Ee. Mm-mary.”

“There you go. We’ll have to keep practicing, it’ll become easier.”

He gave her the smallest of smiles and she told him. “I’ll speak to Bert.”

He sighed and she gave him a good-natured pat on his thigh. “It’s alright. We’ll sort it out.”

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During supper that night, Grace, Bert, Phoebe and Mary sat at the table together. Bert stuffed a piece of cheese into his mouth and Grace said, "I'm proud of him."

Bert's gaze on her was almost accusing. "But he won't say your name. Why not?"

"I don't know."

Phoebe cut in, "Won't, or can't?"

"Why do you think?" Bert pressed on.

Grace ignored it and looked at her daughter next to her. "Eat up, Mary."

"Mother."

"I don't know," she repeated more assertively. "Why are you attacking me, Bert?"

"Was I?"

"I'm your mother, and you may well be doing the job that your father used to do, but you are still my son and I will *not* have you speak to me like that. Do you understand?"

"You—"

She angrily shot up from her seat. "Do you understand?!" She hit her hands on the table for emphasis.

Bert flinched. No one spoke.

Grace got up and walked into the scullery. This was wrong, this was all wrong!

She thought back to what had happened earlier that day, before Phoebe had come to get her to hear John sing. That conversation with Gibby, and then Margaret and the others seeing him holding her hands. Half the village to had to know by now, had to have pegged her as unfaithful. Which was bad enough as it was, but with an incapacitated husband at home, some would see her as a monster.

Of course they all knew the history, they all knew what John had done. The village had shunned him for it for a long time. Some still blamed him for Catherine's death even to this day. But for Grace to be involved with another man while the father of her children was bedridden at home, that would be regarded with contempt.

And what would Bert think? He'd judge her, condemn her. He'd feel just as betrayed as her own husband. That was why she couldn't tell him. She hoped he would not bring it up again.

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"Mother."

Bert's voice from across the table pulled her from her reverie. He added, "You look tired."

She was. Not only was there a bedridden husband to take care of next to the demands of the farm, Mary had thrown up several times during the night, keeping her awake, and the day had been relentless, even though it was only lunchtime. This was the first opportunity she'd had to sit down for more than a minute at a time.

She rubbed one side of her face. "Mary kept me up all night."

"Do you need help with father?"

She sighed. She hadn't been to see him since the morning. "I'll bring him some food."

Bert just nodded and Grace made him a sandwich that she took up to their bedroom. The sight that greeted her made her stop by the doorframe. Mary lay curled up next to her father, his right arm awkwardly draped around her small frame.

It was such a loving picture that it brought tears to her eyes. John wasn't a naturally touchy person. Seeing him get cosy with his children was not something she saw very often, although she knew he loved them dearly.

He looked up at her when she moved, and there was something gentle in his expression. It gave her hope that perhaps one day, he might get past that resentment he harboured for her.

She stepped closer, nodded at the plate in her hands. "Bit o' lunch," she whispered.

He let out a vague hum that wasn't really a word, although perhaps meant to be one, she couldn't quite tell.

Grace waited patiently by the side of the bed in the wooden chair that had become an eternal fixture. He could eat on his own now, although progress was still slow.

When he was done, she took his plate. "You want more?"

He moved his mouth, then formed an awkward, "Nnnn."

She took it as a no and nodded towards their daughter who was still fast asleep next to John. "I'll ask Bert to put her in her own bed."

John looked at her. "Llll." He struggled with the consonant, then a whole word followed. "Llleave."

"You want me to leave?"

"Nnnn," he said immediately, his face scrunched up in deep concentration. It was so hard for him. "Leave. Mmmm." He paused again, tried harder. "Mm-aer."

"You want us to leave her here with you?"

He nodded and Grace couldn't help but smile. "Something didn't sit right with her. She was sick all night."

He struggled with another word, but it was only a, "Hhhh," that came out. Giving up on verbal communication, he put his arm around his daughter and gently cupped her head with his hand.

Alright, then. She wasn't going to argue. "Do you need anything else?"

He looked a little embarrassed, then looked down to his abdomen. "Wwww," he said.

"Alright. I'll have Bert help you with that."

With that, she took the plate and went back down to where Bert was still sitting at the table. "Father needs you with the bottle."

It had become a routine by now. "Yes, mother."

She sat back down at the table and rested her face in her hands. Farm life was tough, now even more so. But they'd made it through all the years of hardship. They would make through this, too.

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John was improving day to day. It was small steps, but his coordination and strength was getting better. Bert had got him a sturdy wooden stick that he had used for the first time this morning when he was getting out of bed. He wasn't quite able to walk more than a few steps on his own yet, and it was more hopping than anything, but they were making strides.

They'd got him to join them for breakfast this morning after the milking had been done and it had almost felt like the old days with John at the head of the table. It gave Grace the confidence to hold on to more hope.

Bert had just done the afternoon milking, and she carried a bucket with milk to the house. She was going to make rice pudding with it later. When she rounded the corner of the farmhouse, she looked up – and slowed to a halt.

John was there, kneeling in the dirt, held upright by his stick, Caro Allingham right next to him. A young boy in a maroon jacket and blue cap, maybe nine or ten years old, was standing in front of him.

It didn't take long for her to understand.

Joe's son. Caro had brought him home.

She almost dropped the bucket of milk.

Caro turned to Grace, and there was a smile on her face. Grace put the bucket down and hurried closer. "Is this...?"

Caro beamed at her. "Your grandson."

Grace couldn't believe it. Joe's son. He was here! She looked at him, took in his blue eyes, the hint of freckles on his cheeks.

John's deep voice said, "Jhh-oe."

She looked at him, couldn't wipe the smile off her face. "Yes, it's Joe's son."

"No," Caro supplied. "His name is Joe."

She suddenly had a lump in her throat. "Joe," she whispered.

Caro stepped to stand next to her son. "These are your grandparents. Grace and John."

Joe's eyes were attentive, he was taking everything in. Surely, he must have questions.

John now moved, tried to get a better grip on the wooden stick to get to a more upright position. Grace realised that he was still kneeling in the dirt, so she went over to help him up. "What were you doing out 'ere?"

John didn't grace it with a response, his full attention now focused on trying to get back on his two feet. "Come on, let's get you back inside."

It took a bit of manoeuvring and some help from Caro to get John situated at the end of the table, and not before Joe asked, "Is he hurt?"

Caro was quick to explain, "He injured his head and that's making it difficult to walk and speak."

"Is his brain not working right?"

Grace looked at him. "You can ask him yourself. He can understand every word you're saying."

Joe nervously looked at John and repeated the question. John needed a moment with the answer, but finally, awkwardly said, "'s not."

Grace added, "He's getting better every day." She gestured to a chair. "Here, sit down. We've... we've wanted to meet you for such a long time."

There were footsteps at the top of the stairs, and Mary came into view. Grace told her, "Come down here, Mary, and meet your nephew Joe."

"Nephew?" she said as she sat down opposite Joe.

"Joe's son."

"Are you new here?" Mary asked.

"I'm going to live with my mother now."

Grace went over to the shelf beside the table and picked up the photo of Joe that stood there. She crouched down next to Joe jr. and showed it to him. "This... this is your father."

Joe jr. studied it closely, and just then Bert came into the room from the kitchen. Grace pointed at him. “And this is your uncle.”

Everyone was smiling. It was hard to believe they had their grandson sitting at their table.

The stairs creaked from behind. Phoebe came into the room.

Joe turned to her. “Are you my sister? Have I got a big sister?”

Phoebe awkwardly hugged the bowl and jug she was carrying to her chest. “No. I’m...” She and Bert exchanged awkward glances. “I don’t know what I am, really.”

Grace threw Bert a furtive look. His face darkened but he remained silent. The two of them had been dancing around each other for so long. Too long.

Grace was not the type of mother who wanted to meddle, but it was time he made up his mind. Something had to change. And she hoped that Bert was going to realise that before it was too late.

She looked at Joe jr. again in the chair next to her, then got up. “I’ll make tea for everyone.”

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It kept Grace up all night. Phoebe was leaving. As soon as the wall was finished, she was going to pack her suitcase and go. It was clear that she loved Bert, and she knew that Bert loved her, too.

She wasn’t sure what was keeping him from proposing. All he had to do was say it out loud and Phoebe would say yes. She was practically already part of the family. They could have one of the rooms upstairs for the both of them. There was enough space in the house.

Perhaps it wasn’t entirely surprising, but Bert was a lot like his father. Proud, stubborn, passionate, and he had an incredibly strong sense of justice. Maybe that was why he was so upset with his parents when neither of them wanted to say what had happened at the trespass.

She knew he was suspecting, knew there was something unspoken that had tainted their relationship. And he was suspicious of Gibby because he’d already confronted him about it. And maybe that was what kept him from wanting to commit to marriage. If his parents couldn’t keep their family together, perhaps he thought matrimony was a fallacy.

But Phoebe wasn’t going to wait forever, and suddenly Grace knew she was setting a bad example. Maybe it was time to put it all out in the open – everything she knew of Gibby’s plans, of the threat it posed. Because that, too, was weighing heavily on her mind. The village was at stake, everything she had worked for, had known all her life.

No. She couldn’t stand for this. The people had to know!

She made the decision that afternoon, sitting at their table, kneading Bert's woollen cap in her hands. And when Bert came in, she got up and threw it against his chest. "I wanna talk to you. You ready?"

He gave her a look of pure confusion but followed.

She marched into town at a brisk pace, Bert on her heels. He kept asking what she wanted to talk to him about, but she told him he'd have to wait and see.

As they were passing Hankins, he tried again. "Mother. Where are we going?"

She kept walking, strode onto the marketplace, then climbed up on one of the crates that were piled there to have a better vantage point. She didn't wait to see if it would draw attention and announced in a loud voice, "There's a great threat to us all that has not yet been announced. I'm announcing it now."

It had the effect she hoped. People were turning and starting to pay attention to her, so she continued. "Our village will be drowned. Where we stand now will no longer exist as dry land. Your homes will not survive. Our school, our church, our chapel, our bathhouse... The places where we meet to talk and argue and love – all gone.

"I was born here. My family have lived here for 200 years. And it is my intention that we will still be here 200 years from now."

That drew a round of applause from the onlookers. All of whom she knew, she realised. She went on. "I have been tempted away from home by excitement and passion. Both of which are a part of politics. It is a great temptation to let passion take over your life. But that would be to forget and betray all that is at the heart of what really matters.

"It has become clear to me that it is my home, my family, my village and all of those who live here are what I really care about. And I hope I judge you right when I say *this* is *our* fight. And as long as we have breath in our bodies, *this* will be *our* village."

More applause erupted, everyone around her clapping and cheering.

She nodded. "We may be small, but we will be heard. And what we say will echo over these hills and far beyond, so that in years to come, people will say *that* was a voice. There was a village that filled its lungs and called out for what it stood for! And if those who want to drown us think they can do it, then they do not understand. And they will *never* understand who we are and what we can be *together*."

She paused, her chin trembling, relishing at the people clapping their hands in support and approval. When she looked around, people's faces were smiling, encouraging and affirming expressions all around. And then her eyes fell upon one person in particular.

Her husband was standing there, leaning on the walking stick, framed by Mary and Joe jr. How he had got here, she didn't know, but it didn't matter because he looked at her with a quiet pride touched with tenderness, the smallest hint of a smile on his face.

As she climbed down from the crate and went up to him, she wondered how much of her speech he had heard.

He looked at her, silently, because he still didn't have the words to say it out loud, but she knew. She knew he was proud of her speaking up, of her standing up for all of them. And then he looked down and unsteadily raised his arm. His left arm.

It said more than words ever could, and she felt her throat choke up as she grabbed his hand and held on to it.

"John," she whispered.

He met her eyes, looked into them, drawing in a breath, his mouth trying to form a word. Was he going to say he was proud of her? Was he—

"Grace."

Her name. It was soft and low and full of reverence. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever heard, and she didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

His face spread into a smile and she had never wanted something so much than to kiss him right there on the spot. She squeezed his hand again.

"John," she whispered again. "You said my name."

He was still smiling – a little sheepish and coy, and she could see some of the young man who had proposed to her over 20 year ago in that sweet little smile. Her eyes filled with tears and she self-consciously wiped at them.

Before she could say anything else, Margaret was there next to her. "That was quite something," she commented.

Grace turned to her. "It was, wasn't it?"

"Good on yer for speaking up."

Grace looked to the ground, it suddenly hitting her what she'd done, what she might have started. "I don't know that everyone would agree with that."

But Margaret was full of admiration. "Someone had to say it. And we're here, and we'll fight. This *is* our fight. And like you said, we'll make sure that our voices get heard."

Grace smiled a little unsurely but then Margaret turned to John. “And you, John Middleton, you better keep that wife of yours on her toes.” She softened a little. “It’s good to see yer on yer feet.”

John looked at her, gave her an appreciative nod and a bit of a hum, which made Margaret smile and give him a light pat on his shoulder before she turned to go.

Grace looked at John. “Did you walk ‘ere the whole way?”

Mary piped in, “We took Molly with ‘t cart.”

Of course. She vaguely remembered hearing them bridle the horse earlier but hadn’t thought much of it. Mary added, “I helped father getting nails and hinges. And new harness straps.”

Grace nodded. Bert had talked about it the other day, but she didn’t know John would take matters into his own hands. This was good, though. His mind was still sharp.

She lightly touched his arm. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

It was a bit awkward to get John into the back of the cart, and the number of grunts from him told the tale of the effort it took. She knew he hated all the stares from the villagers around them, and it annoyed Grace just as much.

At some point, she looked up and called out to them, “What are you starin’ at?”

It had the desired effect of people self-consciously looking away and moving along. John gave her a look that was equal measure appreciative and embarrassed.

But then they were all set, Mary at the reins, and her and John leaning their backs against the wall of the cart, looking out at the rolling hills around them as they tottered along the uneven paths. There was something serene about his expression, like he was grateful that he was still here, grateful for what he had.

Something had changed today. She hadn’t really planned on making that speech before this afternoon. But now that she had, she knew it needed to be said, and she knew that it had done more than just rally the village against the impending threat.

It had healed her marriage, healed the rift between her and John. Maybe she thought her devotion to her family would have been apparent in everything she’d done to keep the farm together after John’s injury, that her actions would speak loudly and clearly. But sometimes that wasn’t enough. Sometimes the words had to be said, and they had to be heard.

She reached over and took her husband’s hand. He looked at her, a contented smile on his face. He squeezed her hand in return and a feeling of happiness spread through her insides. She kept holding his hand all the way back to the farm.

When they arrived, they all helped getting Molly back in the field before they returned to the house. John was slow on his feet and his hobble was anything but graceful, but he was already so much steadier on his feet than he had been just a few days ago.

Uncharacteristic giggling from Bert and Phoebe was coming from the houseplace when she opened the door, and when Grace came into the room with John's arm slung around her shoulder, the first thing she noticed was that Bert had his hands playfully around Phoebe's hips, the two of them laughing about something.

They both looked up at the rest of the family entering the house, somewhat sheepish smiles on their faces.

"I asked her," Bert beamed at his parents. "I asked her to marry me."

"And?" Grace asked eagerly, not able to keep the smile off her face.

"She said no."

Grace's forehead pulled into a frown, but then Bert added, "She said no, and then she asked me to marry her. And I said yes."

Phoebe let out a small laugh next to him.

They were all surprised when John spoke. "Abb-bout... time."

Everyone broke out in a laugh.

"I know," Bert said.

Grace looked around at all the smiling faces. "We will celebrate. Tonight."

And that, they did. Later that night, the fire flickering in the hearth, their bellies nicely filled with meat pie and ginger wine, Bert was helping his mother clear the table. When he put some of the plates by the washstand in the scullery, Grace turned to him.

"Father said my name."

That stopped Bert dead in his tracks. "He did?"

"After the speech. He held out his hand – his weak hand – and then he said my name." She smiled at the memory. "It was beautiful."

Bert smiled too, but then his face clouded over. "On 't marketplace, what did you mean when you said you were tempted by passion?"

She looked down at her hands. Yes, Bert had heard that. Of course he had. She wasn't sure what to say.

"Mother." There was accusation in his voice now.

“Nothing happened.”

“What do you mean, nothing happened?”

“Bert…”

“It was Gibby, wasn’t it?”

There was no way denying it. “Yes,” she said abashedly.

“I knew it! That damn little bastard!”

“Language,” she hissed at him.

“Why, Mother?” he asked in a lowered voice.

“I don’t know. He… It was new and exciting and I thought it could be something different. Something I didn’t have ‘ere.”

It must have dawned on Bert. “Is that why father was angry? Did he know?”

“He saw me with Gibby. At the trespass. Just before all hell broke loose.”

“Is that why he was there? Because he thought you were betraying him?”

“No. I don’t know.”

“Did you ask him?”

“No. How would he answer anyway? He can barely get three words out in a row.”

“I’ll ask him.”

She grabbed Bert’s arm. “No. This isn’t for you to talk about. It’s between me and father. Do you hear me?”

Bert looked at her hand, then in her eyes. His expression was grim, his mouth a thin line before he softened somewhat. “Yes, mother.”

“Promise me. Promise me, Bert.”

He hesitated a moment, then said, “I promise.”

She watched him leave through the doorway, hoping he’d keep his word.

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“Grace.”

She was barely awake. It was the early hours, the sun just starting to rise. Hearing her husband say her name was still beautiful, and it warmed her heart beyond belief, if only she wasn’t feeling so awful.

It had started yesterday afternoon, and she would have gone to bed early, but then they'd had the celebration and alcohol had made her feel giddy and elated and she forgot about it. But now it hit twice as hard – that feeling of exhaustion, her bones aching, the headache, sore throat.

She knew she was running a fever by now. She hoped it was just a bout of the flu.

John drew in an audible breath. "You're hhh-hot."

So he *had* noticed.

"I'm alright. I'll get up in a minute, make us breakfast."

"No," he said, then he rolled over to face away from her and reached for the new, shorter walking stick that Bert had whittled and sanded for him just the other day.

"John," she said, but he ignored her and heaved himself out of bed with a grunt, giving her a no-nonsense look. She sighed and lay back, listened to him hobbling out of the room. She knew he could take the stairs by himself. Barely. With insistence that he didn't need help or want help. And most days Grace would concede, but it had already got him in trouble a few times, and she didn't want him bedridden again with injured limbs.

A chill washed over her, and she decided maybe it was one of the days she could let him fend for himself and hope that Mary or Bert were downstairs. She pulled the covers around her as she closed her eyes. She'd get up in a bit. Just a few more minutes.

She woke again when the bed dipped and her husband sat down next to her with a bit of a thud. His mouth formed a, "Ssss," but it got stuck there. She figured it was meant to be, 'Sorry.'

Mary was there too, setting a plate and a cup on Grace's nightstand. She wasn't sure she was hungry. When she looked, she saw a piece of buttered bread and scrambled eggs. What time was it?

Grace pointed at the food and looked at John. "Did you make this?"

Mary volunteered, "I helped."

"That's very kind of you."

"Father is not a very good cook."

John's mouth formed into a small, lopsided grin. "'m not."

"No, he's much better at farmin'," Grace confirmed.

His face darkened, a frown now lodged in the centre of his brow. She knew what he was thinking. That he used to be. That he wasn't anything really these days. Maybe he thought of

himself as a burden. They'd have to talk about that. When she was feeling better, when her head wasn't so muddy.

John nodded to Mary that she could leave, then he reached out his right hand and gently placed his palm against Grace's forehead. "Ssstill hot." Then he nudged his chin to the nightstand. "Hungry?"

She shook her head. "No. Maybe later."

"Grace," he said. His voice was low. Gentle. In a way that she wouldn't often hear from him anymore, at least before he got injured. And he was saying her name. She couldn't get enough of hearing him say it again.

"What is it, John?" Her voice felt scratchy.

He let out a low hum, then worked on the words to follow. It came out like one long word. "Whaddoyouneed?"

"I'm alright," she tried to reassure him.

He reached over and took the teacup on the nightstand, held it out to her.

She smiled, pushing herself into more of an upright position. "What's all this?"

He frowned. "This?"

"You being all concerned about me."

His expression darkened a little before it softened again. "'m... your husband."

"Yes, and I've never known you to hover like this."

"'m not... hh." He got stuck on the word, then eventually said, "Hovering."

A thought suddenly occurred to her. "Is something wrong?"

He frowned. "You're ill."

She let out a small chuckle. "Other than that."

He gave her a long look. "I mm-milked 't cows."

"On your own?"

"With Mary."

Grace smiled. "That's great."

He made a grimace. "Spilled a bb-bucket. Bert was angry."

"Because you did it on your own?"

He nodded.

"John. You have to let people help you. You have to be patient."

He let out a frustrated sound, the expression on his face saying it all. She shifted her position. "I'll be up tomorrow and help you."

"No," he said quickly.

"John. You're still healing. It'll take time. The doctor said the same."

He stomped a foot on the floor with a thump. "You've..." His eyes met hers, his expression steely and determined. "...done enough."

"Enough? What do you mean?"

"For me."

A frown creased her forehead. "I've done enough for you? What are you on about now?"

He vaguely pointed a hand to the left side of his head. "This."

"You mean taking care of you?"

He looked down, stared intently at his hands in his lap. He stayed quiet.

"John. You're my husband. You needed my help. Of course I took care of you."

He lifted his head and looked at her, his face scrunched up in concentration. "You're mm-my wife. I'll take... cc-care of you."

She couldn't help but smile. She couldn't recall the last time he'd been this concerned about her, this loving. He really was a changed man. "While I appreciate the attention, it's really not necessary. It's just a bout of the flu. I'll be right as rain in a day or two."

She looked over to the plate on the nightstand and took the piece of bread and nibbled at it. More for his benefit than her own, if she was being honest.

She looked at him. "You know what you can do for me? Read to me."

He frowned as he looked at her.

"You need to practice."

"I cc-can't."

"Yes, you can. Slowly. Word for word. The more you practice, the faster you'll get better."

He looked away. His damn pride. Gently, she said his name. "John."

He closed his eyes, then slowly nodded. "Read," he said.

Grace smiled. He did always have his heart in the right place, even though he'd done astray a number of times. His unfaithfulness, then drowning his sorrows in alcohol, the time he had almost ended his life because he saw no way out. Then he'd found God, and even though she didn't understand how he could blindly put his life in the hands of an unseen entity, she was thankful it had ultimately made him a better man.

She watched as he limped to the other side of the bed. It took some effort to take his shoes off, have his legs up on the mattress and his back against the headrest. He reached for the book that lay on his bedside table. "Dickens," he said haltingly.

"Dickens," she confirmed.

He sighed, then leafed through the pages until he found what he was looking for and started reading out loud.

It was slow and awkward and stuttery, but to Grace it was the best thing in the world. For a while, they had been afraid he wouldn't be able to speak again at all. A shadow that had hung over their house like a storm cloud ready to shed. And now he had his voice back.

She closed her eyes and listened.

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It was three days later that Grace stood leaning on the top of a fence post, watching her husband with his daughter and his grandson. Caro had asked if they could watch Joe for an afternoon while she was out on an errand, and of course they'd said yes.

She wasn't quite over the flu yet, but the fever had broken and she'd had enough energy to help with the more urgent things around the farm today. She could tell John was also adamant to do more, to push himself. It was endearing but also didn't surprise her. He'd always been stubborn as hell.

Blowing her runny nose into her handkerchief, she watched as John animatedly explained something to Joe about the farming business. He'd already tried to teach him how to milk the cows. Although it hadn't exactly gone that well, Joe seemed to be enjoying himself and he had easily taken to John's choppy speech with the apparent patience of a saint. Mary was also happy that she had a companion her own age she could fraternise with.

What made Grace even happier was that John was in his element. He was more energetic and animated than she'd seen him in a long time. He was smiling, trying his best to get the right words out, was even laughing now at a question that Joe had asked, his hand on Joe's shoulder. She should talk to Caro about having Joe over more often.

That evening after they'd done the milking, she took Joe into town to meet Caro at the train station. Grace enjoyed the walk and the bit of time the two of them had together to make more conversation.

Joe was still full of energy, talked about all the things that John had taught him. It made Grace's heart swell a little.

"Grace?"

She looked at Joe. "Yes, Joe?"

"How did Grandpa John get hurt?"

The question hit a little out of the blue, but it wasn't surprising that the boy would be curious. John's impediments were very noticeable, including the scar on his head. But what version of this story would be suitable for a child this age?

The boy was smart, no doubt. And he'd probably learn the full story one day. "We were at a gathering in the woods and there was a bit of a skirmish that got out of hand. Your grandfather was struck in the head."

"Why?"

She slowed her walk. Yes, why? She'd often asked herself that question because, really, John had nothing at all to do with the trespass, and with the memories of that day becoming hazier and hazier, she couldn't remember now if it had seemed like a deliberate attack.

"I don't know. I think he was probably just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"And now he can't speak right and walk right."

"He didn't speak at all for a while." God, the memory still smarted. That harsh first week afterwards, the fits, the operation, the infection.

"Will he be normal again?"

She wished she knew the answer to that. "I hope so. But his brain will take time to heal. We just have to be more patient."

"We learned in school that the nerves carry messages from the brain into the body. Is that why he has trouble walking and talking?"

Grace wished she could answer that, but she knew nothing about how the brain or nerves worked. "Yes, maybe. But your grandfather is a very proud and very strong man. He will get better and maybe one day he'll be back to how he was. And even if not, Bert and Phoebe can take care of the farm, and he will help where he can. The farm's been in our family for many generations, and we'll make sure that it'll stay that way."

"Mary said you started with one cow, and now you have twelve. And they all have names."

Grace smiled. "Yes, that's right. We're expectin' a new calf from Gertie soon."

"Can I watch when it gets born?"

Grace chuckled. “We can try to call for you when Gertie is in labour, but it often happens in the middle of the night. Sometimes we don’t even know until ’t next morning when we get up and there’s a baby calf suckling on her mother’s udder.”

“I’ve never seen a baby calf before.”

“Well, then we will put that right very soon.”

They kept chatting until they arrived in town just when the train was getting into the station. They stood on the platform and searched for Caro, who alighted from one of the coaches near the front. Joe ran over to meet her and Grace followed.

Caro put her arm around her son’s shoulders. “Oh, my sweet boy. Did you have a good day?”

“Yes!” he said enthusiastically, then launched into a quick recounting of the most exciting part of the day.

Caro dryly commented, “Yes, I can smell it on you.”

Grace had to stop herself from frowning. She tried not to think about the crass difference in class between them. Caro didn’t seem the type who would look down upon anyone not of her standing, but the disparity would always be there. Grace sometimes wondered what would have happened with her and Joe sr. if her son hadn’t died in the war.

She sidled up to Caro. “We had a very lovely day. Joe had a lot of fun.”

Caro smiled. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“Listen, can we speak for a moment?”

There was a sudden frown on Caro’s forehead. “Did something happen?”

“No, no, nothing like that.”

Caro steered them to one of the benches on the platform where they sat down. Grace wasn’t quite sure how to start. “I know this is a lot to ask, but I was just wonderin’... You know how John is still struggling with his speech and his movement. Havin’ Joe there today has done wonders for him.

“He was out with him all day, talking, teaching him things. He hasn’t been like that in a while, and it was—” Grace’s brow creased with emotion, she had to swallow. It had been such a tough time.

She felt Caro’s hand come to rest gently on her thigh. “I understand.”

Grace sniffed her nose. “I was wonderin’ if maybe we could have Joe come over more often. It would do a lot for John.”

“Yes, of course.”

"We can give him some of Bert's old clothes to wear when he's there, if that's what you're worried about."

"Oh no," Caro waved her off. "I want him to know what his father's world was like. Your Mary is the same age, isn't she?"

"A few months younger."

"It will be good for Joe."

Grace couldn't believe it would be so easy. She'd expected more resistance. "Thank you," she said a little choked.

Caro smiled at her. "How *is* your husband?"

"You know... Getting better every day."

"If there's anything else I can do for you..."

Of course there was. Money, for one. But that's not how this worked, and Grace would cut off her little finger before she ever said that out loud. She nodded. "Thank you, Caro."

"Of course. Was there anything else? I really have to get going."

Grace stood up. "No. Thank you again. It was really lovely to spend time with Joe today."

Caro smiled at her. "No, thank *you* for having him."

"Any time."

Caro nodded, then took Joe's hand and went to go. Grace watched them leave, her heart just a little fuller and a little less heavy.

When she came home, John was sitting at the head of the table in his usual spot. She could see he was tired, but he also looked content. She walked up behind him and placed both her hands on his shoulders, feeling him melt just a fraction beneath her touch.

"Tired?" she asked.

He just hummed and she massaged his shoulders with her thumbs through his shirt. He released a breath and tilted his head backwards a little with his eyes closed.

"This was a good day," she said.

His mouth curved into the smallest of smiles, and god, she still loved him. Loved him so much in these small moments when he'd let his guard down.

"You hungry?"

"Starvin'."

And that was good, too. He was doing more physical work now, was getting his strength back. Having Joe jr. back with his family was not just a blessing for his mother. Perhaps the best thing that could have happened to all of them.

She lightly patted John's shoulder beneath her touch. "I'll make us supper."

His question surprised her. "You alright?"

"What do you mean?"

"'t flu."

Well. She wasn't back to full health. Her nose was still running and there was still the headache, but the fever had gone and her energy was returning. "I'm fine."

His gaze on her couldn't quite hide the underlying concern, but he didn't say anything. What was there to say, anyway? Supper had to be put on the table for the family, and it wasn't going to make itself. It was the harsh part of farm life – that demands and duties were always there, relentless, with no mercy on personal circumstances. And they'd all accepted that.

Just then, the door opened and Bert came in. John said his name, which had his son's immediate attention.

"Help your mm-mother."

She looked at Bert, then said, "It's alright. Sit down, have a cup of tea first."

"No," John interjected, then threw Bert a stern look that his son knew all too well how to interpret.

Bert went over to her. "Help you with what?"

Before she could answer, there was a sharp itch in her nose and she sneezed twice, three times, four times. She let out a frustrated sound as she fished for her handkerchief.

Bert's hand was on her shoulder. "Mother. Go and lie down. I'll have Mary help with supper."

She shrugged it off. "No, I'm fine."

"Mother. Bed. Now."

She looked at Bert, then at John. Both looked back at her with no-nonsense glares, and she knew she was already defeated. She lifted her hands. "Alright, alright. I'll go lie down for a bit."

And truth be told, perhaps it wasn't the worst idea. Her energy was draining quickly now.

She was asleep within minutes after lying down in bed.

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"I saw Caro today," Grace told John.

They were sat at their table, having lunch. She'd gone into town earlier to buy some groceries, and she'd run into Caro and Joe jr. They started chatting, and it had been such a lovely encounter. She never thought they'd have this kind of relationship with the Allinghams, but Joe had really brought them closer.

John was finishing the last of the mutton stew, looking up at her to signal he was listening, so she elaborated. "They're trying to decide what school to send Joe to. Caro doesn't want him to be too far away, so they're considering Denstone College."

She looked at John to gauge his reaction, but his face was pretty inscrutable. "Oh, and she gave me this. Said we had to try it."

She slid the tin with the round, yellow fruit rings over to her husband and elaborated, "Pineapple. It's from Hawaii. A tropical island. Or so they say. I'll admit it looks... a little strange, but she said it's the latest fancy and what everyone loves in their house. Do you want to try?"

John's brow was furrowed. He liked to stick to what he knew, wasn't the adventurous type. And maybe that was what had drawn Grace to Gibby, she realised. He was more open-minded, less set in his ways. Although, she had to admit that John wasn't always as stubborn as she'd made him out to be. He'd been pretty inventive at times where keeping the farm afloat was concerned.

Grace put a ring of the pineapple on her saucer and tried a piece of it. It was stringy but sweet. A little bitter, perhaps. She chewed some more, trying to decide whether she liked it.

John's eyes were on her, curious about her reaction. "It's nice," she said.

"Nice...?" he echoed.

"Well, it's a little chewy. It's like very sweet apple, but softer. And sharper."

She slid the rest of the ring over to John and he removed a piece with his spoon, then hesitantly put it into his mouth and chewed slowly. She could tell he didn't like it, and she smiled.

"It's not your cup of tea, is it?"

He grinned a little bashfully. "No."

"Let's ask the children. See what they think."

"Pine...apple," he swirled the word around in his mouth. "Why's it cc-called that?"

"I don't know." She picked up the tin that the fruit had come from, looked at the label on it. "It looks a bit like a pinecone, doesn't it?"

John looked at it. "'Spose it does."

"Caro said Joe really liked it. She had five of 'em tins in her basket. Gave this one to me."

She remembered their encounter vividly now, the way Joe had insisted that Caro gave Grace one of the tins. "How amazing is it that we have Joe's son back with us. I can't believe he's going to be ten soon." She smiled. "Can you?"

John stayed quiet, and Grace looked at him. There wasn't any happiness in his expression. His jaw was set. He looked grim. Sad.

"John?"

He stayed quiet for a long moment, then said haltingly, "Cathe...rine."

That name. It bore a great deal of significance and even more history. She met his gaze. "My sister?"

His eyes were on hers now, dark and expressive. Ever since he lost the ability to communicate what he wanted to say with words, he'd been so much more attentive, and it hadn't taken long for the two of them to develop some kind of shorthand.

His brow creased into a pained frown. He swallowed. "It ww-was my fault."

Grace closed her eyes. They'd been over this. He'd apologised. Begged her to forgive him. And then, all those years ago, he'd told the story to Martha while Grace stood right there and listened.

Looking back on it now, it struck her that it had been an act of bravery. Some villagers might consider John Middleton a coward, but Grace knew that despite his weaknesses, he had courage. A whole lot of it when it counted.

"John..." she said just above a whisper.

"No," he said assertively. "I killed her."

She shook her head. "No. That's not on you. She killed herself."

"I mm-might as well hh-have."

"John. It's in the past. We can't change it now."

"You blame me."

The look in his eyes was now steely. But it wasn't just that. There was also regret – the same regret he felt when he had confessed his transgression to Martha, when he'd sat at their table ten year ago, teary-eyed and full of sorrow for a life ending too soon. Two lives, really.

"I did," she admitted. "But I also forgave you. Catherine, she... She wasn't completely innocent. She knew what she was doing, and she tempted you. Used you."

"I was the... one. Who said yes."

“Once.”

“It sh-shouldn’t have hh...”

He struggled on the consonant, his mouth hanging open while he struggled to get the word out, but it wouldn’t come, and he frustratedly thumped his fist on the table. An angry growl came out instead of the word he was looking for, and now there were tears in his eyes.

“John...” Grace tried to placate him, but he hit the table again, looking away from her. It was irritating him to no end that he wasn’t able to express himself – she knew that.

She kept her eyes on him. “It shouldn’t have happened. Is that what you’re trying to say? Because yes, you’re right. It shouldn’t have happened. But it did. You knew it was wrong then, and you know it was wrong now. And you’ve never done it again. Or at least that’s what you’ve told me.”

She looked at him. “John. Did it happen again?”

His head shot up and his eyes bore into hers while he emphatically shook his head. “No. Never.”

And that made her think. When the rumours started all those years ago that he and Caro Allingham might have been intimate... Was that what had brought this talk on about Catherine?

It also made her wonder. Had she believed John then, when he’d sworn nothing had happened between him and Caro?

She couldn’t remember now. So much had happened since then. And then Gibby... Which begged another question, one that had never been answered.

“What were you doing at the trespass?”

His expression immediately turned grim. There were no good memories there, and she could see it written all over his face. He pressed his lips together and said nothing.

“John. Why did you go there? You wanted nothing to do with it.”

He turned his head and looked away. She wasn’t sure she was going to get the answer out of him, and that was even more puzzling. What had happened that day?

“Did you know? Did you want to spy on me?”

His answer was immediate. “No.”

“Then what?”

After a long pause, he said, “Snap.”

“Snap? What does that mean?”

“Bit of ss-snap for you.”

She frowned. “What are you saying? That you brought me food?”

He met her gaze briefly to confirm, and she wasn’t sure what to think. He’d come there to bring her food? That didn’t seem very like him. But why would he lie?

“Why?”

He held her gaze, didn’t say anything, and she wondered if it was because he didn’t want to or because he didn’t know how to say it with the limited capability to speak he currently had.

“John?”

He opened his mouth, halting there. Then he closed it again. More silence.

He wasn’t the type to say things out loud. He never had, and Grace knew that. It would always be the small things – the looks, the things he’d do, the things he’d say between the lines.

She thought about what he’d just told her. He’d made a decision to bring her food during the trespass. He didn’t want to be there, but he kept thinking about her, wanted to do something nice for her. Maybe he’d even been worried. So he threw caution to the wind and came.

John Middleton was a man of principle, a man who could not be swayed if he’d made up his mind. So him changing his mind to go there, that meant something. His way of showing her he loved her.

Something in Grace’s chest constricted. She could feel tears prickling in her eyes and she knew she loved him too, knew that she should tell him that, but things had been complicated by the situation with Gibby.

And then she was back there at the riot, staring at John staring at her, Gibby’s hands helping steady her after she had lost her footing in the fray.

“I know you saw me with him. And I know it made you angry. Do you… Do you ever wonder what would have happened if you hadn’t been struck down?” He frowned and she added, “What would you have done after?”

He closed his eyes for a long moment. “Grace…”

What was it really that she was asking? Would he have got physical with her again? Not talked to her for weeks? Would their household have been reigned by resentful silences and avoidance, like it had been after his transgressions with Catherine? She didn’t think he would have asked her to leave. After all, she had forgiven him worse. Maybe it was better not to think about it.

His eyes met hers. “What would you have dd-done? If I hadn’t been at the trespass?”

Yeah. What would she have done? She wanted to think that he wouldn't have let it go any further, that it wouldn't have amounted to anything more than it did.

John's voice pulled her from her reverie. "How ff-far did it go?"

"John," she said pleadingly. "It wasn't anything. We talked. He helped me. We spent time together."

"No kissin'?"

She shook her head. "No. No kissing."

"Did you ww-want to?"

Did she? To say no would be a lie. Well. At the time. Thinking about it now, there was no more desire for Gibby, physical or otherwise. He'd betrayed the village, put politics before the people – the people she knew and loved. And maybe John deserved that honesty from her.

"I might have wanted it then, but not anymore."

John looked away, but she could see the disappointment in his expression, the betrayal.

"John," she said softly. "I love you. And you've changed. And even though it was a terrible thing that happened, I think something good has come from it, too."

"Nothing good has come ff-from it," he denied curtly.

"Look at us. You and me, we never used to talk like this. I have wished so many times that we did, but you would just walk away, and we would never speak of it again. We're both better when we talk about things."

He snorted a breath out through his nose. "I'm tt-terrible at tt-talking."

She looked at him. Really looked. His greying beard, his brown eyes, the prominent scar above his temple, the hair at the nape of his neck that was only just long enough to start curling slightly. She didn't even know why she suddenly remembered this, but maybe because he so rarely said it out loud.

"Last year, when Bert did the manhunt, you stood right here, at 't table, and you told me you loved me. You hadn't said it to me for a very long time."

He looked up at her, met her gaze just briefly before he looked away again.

"Words matter, John."

And then his attention was back on her. "I couldn't have dd-done this without you."

She stood up and put her hands on his shoulders and let them lie there for a moment.

His hand came up to place it on hers, warm and affirming, and it took Grace a moment to notice it was his left. She bent down and said softly in his ear, “I love you.”

His voice was low and gentle when he answered, “I love you, too.”

Words mattered indeed.