



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG

Classification: vignette

Spoilers: none

Disclaimer: The one character you'll recognize in here is not mine. Also, the poem "In Flanders Fields" was written by Dr. John McCrae, a medical officer in the First Canadian Contingent, in 1915.

Author's Notes: I was sitting at my desk, embarrassed about the fact that I was planning to use Veterans Day (Remembrance Day in Britain, Canada, and Australia; Armistice Day in mainland Europe) to start my Christmas shopping, when I decided to start scribbling something down. I just liked the idea of each of us remembering just one person, keeping their sacrifice from being lost to time.

For those non-Americans reading, Veterans Day has been expanded here to include all veterans, not just those of the Great War, so I'm attempting to apply "In Flanders Fields" more widely as well. I've been trying to find a way to work this amazing poem into a story for ages; I hope I've done it justice.

He didn't often come down here anymore. The Park Service tended to politely but firmly suggest relocation, and ever since that fall day in 2001, security around national monuments had tightened considerably. There were other places for people like him, places where a warm bed and a meal could be found -- but there were times when he just had to be here, even for a little while. A long black wall couldn't talk to him, couldn't laugh with the voices he ached to hear, but it was the only link he had left, and so on some days he just had to come.

The eleventh of November was one such day. The generation that had secured that day's place in history had long since passed; to this generation it was a day when banks closed, barely worthy of a mention on the local news. He wondered what his war's legacy would be once all who'd fought it were gone. Would the 'baby-killer' taunts outlive him? They'd certainly outlived all the names on this wall.

He looked down at the paper flower in his hand. It was a crumpled red poppy on a bit of green wire, the kind handed out by veterans' charities in exchange for a few coins dropped in a bucket. He'd found it abandoned on the steps of some office building weeks ago, and had waited patiently to bring it here today. It wasn't much, but he would lay it in front of the panel that held the names of three members of his platoon, three boys from three different states who hadn't gotten to see 1971.

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

A low, steady murmur of voices grew nearer, and he realized that a school group had arrived. High school students milled around, apparently on a Veterans Day field trip. He didn't move from his slouched-over position on the bench, hoping they would leave him in peace.

For the most part, they seemed not to notice his presence, and he took the opportunity to observe them. Some, maybe most, conducted themselves with the proper respect; others looked bored, and a few troublemaking types hung back in huddled groups, carrying on with their conversations as if it were a bus stop.

A trio passed by his bench, studying the ebony granite.

"Doesn't really have the 'wow' factor of the World War Two memorial, does it?" one muttered.

"I think that's kinda the point, numbskull."

Under the hood of his too-thin jacket, he cast his eyes downward, dismayed. He shouldn't have been surprised. It wasn't their fault if they didn't understand. They hadn't lived it. But if those who hadn't lived it couldn't be made to understand, how could it continue to hold meaning?

Tears burned at the back of his eyes. He despised this increasing tendency of his to get over-emotional. But the threat of being utterly forgotten was a pretty strong justification for it. Not for himself, really; he was accustomed to being forgotten, in a way, though it still stung. But those names -- those unending rows of names were preserved, yet names were all that remained of them.

"Man, are you drunk?"

The boy's voice was sharp and contemptuous, and there was little doubt that the question was directed at him. He ducked his head even lower, hoping silently for reprieve.

But the boy was bound and determined to get a response. "Shouldn't you be cleaning somebody's windshield or something?" he demanded, voice dripping with scorn. "At least do something to earn your booze money, will ya?"

"Knock if off, Daniel." This voice was just as young, but female.

"What, you think it's okay for him to be here?"

The girl crouched down next to him, moving into his field of view. He flinched a little, caught off-guard, but the compassion in her blue eyes was striking. She looked at the sad little poppy in his hand and somehow picked the truth right out of the air. "Sir, were you in the war?"

Unable to say anything, he merely nodded. The girl looked at him solemnly and said, "Thank you for your service."

The boy protested, "How do you know -"

"Daniel, go play in traffic."

Mumbling a curse, the boy wandered off, and the girl took a seat on the opposite end of the bench, allowing some space between them. "Ignore him. Some people are born to be idiots."

He managed a small smile in reply, though the tears fought harder against his pride. "I'm not here to beg. I just ... need to be here."

"I understand. Someone I love comes here to be close to his dad. It's a piece of stone, sure, but it's more to him. To a lot of people."

He lifted his head finally, impressed by the wisdom of this teenager. She gazed back at him, unflinching.

"It's good to know that this place doesn't only mean something to those of us who were there," he said quietly. "It's just -- those names once had faces, you know?"

She nodded, her eyes returning to the flower clutched tightly in his roughened hand. In a low, steady voice, she recited, "*We are the Dead. Short days ago/ We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,/ Loved and were loved, and now we lie -*"

"*In Flanders fields,*" he finished with her. "So they do teach you kids something, after all."

The girl shrugged. "They try. Some of us listen better than others. I'm a Navy brat -- or at least I'm learning how to be one."

He looked out at the Wall again, searching for a way to put his fears into words. "We're still fighting," he began, and he could hear the age in his own voice. "We fought an enemy, and then we fought for respect when we got back. Now we're fighting time, and this one I don't know how we can ever win ... When we're all gone, the only people these names will mean anything to will be their families, and some of us don't really have that ..."

She leaned forward and spoke earnestly. "I can think of at least a start." She reached into her bag and withdrew a pad and pencil. "Give me your names, and your friends'. I'm fifteen, almost sixteen -- I've got a lot of remembering ahead of me."

He dared once again to look at her, and saw the determination there. "You don't owe me that," he started, then stopped.

"I think maybe we all do."

Awed by her, he slowly recited his friends' names and hometowns. He finished with his own and the unit in which they'd all served.

"Mattie!" That shout came from a middle-aged woman a few yards away, likely a teacher. The girl's head jerked up, but she ignored the woman's nervous gestures and continued writing. "Come back to the group, please!"

Sensing that her time was up, Mattie instead slid closer and reached a tentative hand toward the poppy. "Can I?"

Entranced by the innocence and the certainty in her young eyes, he could only nod.

The teacher, alarmed by the proximity of a homeless man to her student, cried: "Mattie, don't!"

Mattie whipped around to glare obstinately at the interruption. Her small hand brushed his as she took the flower from him. Then, with resolve, she stood up and moved to the Wall. As her classmates watched, she located the panel with the correct names and knelt to place the token at its base.

"Thank you," she said simply, the words all but swallowed up by the November wind.

The class began to move toward the street, where a school bus sat idling. Mattie turned around, conflict evident in her features, and returned to the bench. "I have to go," she said, an apology in her tone. "Can I -- I mean ..." Her hands fumbled in her bag for her wallet.

"No, no. I'm okay." Seized by impulse, he reached into his pocket for one of the few possessions he still carried. Coming out with a fistful of metal, he held it out to her. "Take these. Please. Just to make sure."

Tears brimmed in her eyes as she twisted her fingers through the chain of the dog tags. "Mattie!" shouted the teacher one last time, as the rest of the students began boarding the bus. Mattie started, unsure what to do, then hastily unwrapped the long striped scarf from around her neck and thrust it at him. She hurried toward the bus, and then she was gone.

In a Washington winter, any little thing to help break the bitter cold is priceless. But that wasn't the reason he held onto that scarf as if it were solid gold. Every time he touched it, he felt the brush of her fingers, saw the unspoken promise in her eyes. And he felt a glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe, there might be a way to defeat time itself.

Harm ducked his head around Mattie's bedroom door, seeing her engrossed in her computer screen. "Got a paper due?"

"Nah. I'm just looking up some stuff. Just out of interest."

She appeared to be surfing the website of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Perplexed, he nodded toward something in her hand. "What've you got there?"

Mattie rubbed the flat metal tag under her thumb with a wistful smile. "Something to remember."

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

To all those who serve, and all those who have served: Thank you.

*** THE END ***