

## Portland

The North Sea is swollen and reckless against the Norfolk coast, its breakers burst against the beaches. The night is stormy, and January black. Nations are tired of war, yet the war persists. A lone RAF combat aircraft is returning home—returning to landfall over the turbulent sea. It has lost height because German fighters have crippled it. On a calm day with good visibility survival would have been probable, but for the plane to come down into the dark and raging sea there would be no chance, though land is not many flying minutes away. The plane is a descending struggling speck with its spluttering Merlin engines muffled by wind and rain. Landfall is battened down, but a radio operator on a distant airfield is in contact with the stricken plane. The waves of the sea stretch and reach up: they snap at the plane's underbelly, slow its progress, before dragging it down as a lion drags down its prey.

The long-dreaded knock on the door, comes. Elsie Fletcher stands on the coir mat. The messenger hands her the telegram, his face ridden with guilt and sympathy. Suddenly she is cold, blood-drained white, and staring at the little envelope in her hand. The messenger touches his hat, and is gone. She knows: she does not have to open the telegram—a mother's instinct knows. She closes the front door gently, and with the closure the old way of life vanishes forever—and, too, the life of love and companionship and the chance of grandchildren. Just for a moment her thoughts turn to butterflies, beautiful butterflies whose lives are short. Then she opens the telegram:

*Regret to inform your son Fl Sgt Frederick Fletcher was killed on  
war service 20th January.*

*Letter follows*

She goes to the drawer where she keeps important papers, places inside the telegram, and quietly closes the drawer. It would be many years before she is able to read the telegram again. She takes down from the mantelpiece the photograph of Frederick in his RAF uniform, of which she is so proud, clutches it in both hands and sits back into her easy chair, dry-eyed for a while, silent. He always loved butterflies, she remembers. He was one of them, beautiful, and he will always be young and beautiful. And so handsome in his uniform! She holds the photograph up to her face, studies it almost blindly for she has often gazed upon its every detail.

Then the cloud of loneliness settles over her, as a shadow obscures a sunbeam, and she lowers the photograph and begins to weep.

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Now there is a single white memorial stone in the churchyard that stands tall amidst other grey memorials of abandoned time. It is reflective white, aloof in its pride, and age has not wearied it. Beneath lies Flight Sergeant Fletcher who has lain there silent since he was twenty-four. Three times every year flowers are placed beside his headstone. Winter and early spring posies, thoughtful, delicate, and childlike in their innocence: and then the red poppy in November, Flanders bright, hopeful, militarily astute, formal. None knew the flight sergeant for he was not of the parish—he was just a young man unknown whose body was washed up onto the nearby beach on an incoming tide. A crippled and ditched de Havilland Mosquito returning from a raid over Germany, so they said, but no one really knew. They cared then, for a while. Of course they cared. It was wartime. So the parish buried him with the most simple of military honours. Then peace came, and with the peace came the white engraved memorial made from Portland stone, which was placed over him in recognition of service to his King and his Country—a navigator in the Royal Air Force. It says so on the memorial: Navigator. His name is engraved, and his service number confirming a real person, a real life. *Per Ardua Ad Astra*.

At the bottom of the white stone, and cut into the Portland, lie the leaden feelings of a mother: *My only child, who loved butterflies*.

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Martha Louise was six when her father dug the flight sergeant's grave. Her father, who was a farm labourer, had been excused military service on health grounds. 'Martha

Louise,' he would say, 'there's work to be done in the churchyard so best you help me carry the shovel.' This got her out of the cottage and from under his wife's feet. She was a very inquisitive child, always asking questions, always wanting to help, and wanting very much to be an integral part of her family, for she was an only child. Burials offered a well of information on which her curiosity could feed, which was not a morbid curiosity, only a child's curiosity about the village in which she lived and those who lived within it. She would sit on the grass, or shelter beneath the yew tree when it was wet, and watch her father steadily dig himself down and out of view, and while he dug she asked him questions about who was to be buried.

On a damp and dreary day in late January 1945 when the grass was dank and long, when the rhythm of life scraped along the bottom, when the war was not yet ended, when the thunder of overhead bombers too often obliterated both day and night the once accustomed sounds of Nature, Martha Louise sat by the yew tree and watched her father dig the flight sergeant's grave. As he dug the ends of his ginger hair, always a mop, danced out from under the wool of his hat. His lungs were not too good, and he stopped quite often to refill them with air. The churchyard robin, whom Martha Louise had named Homer, appeared at a digging and watched with a keen eye from the pile of new earth, She had called the little bird Homer because it reminded her of a particular American airman named Homer who use to sit outside the village inn in the summer wearing a red vest. He would peck at peanuts, before jerking his head back in satisfaction. Homer, the airman, does not visit the inn any more. He failed to return from a mission, but his memory remains at burials in the churchyard.

'What's his name, this airman?' asked Martha Louise.

'I don't know. But he has to be buried whatever his name is,' replied her father who went on digging, mechanically, ginger tresses dancing in time with the shovel.

'Someone must know!'

'Oh, yea, someone does know ... and his next of kin will know soon enough'.

'Next of kin? What's that?'

'Like, who is the closest relative. Like your Ma and I are your next of kin.'

'So who'll be here when the vicar buries him?'

‘I don’t suppose anybody will be here as he is not a local man. Could come from anywhere, couldn’t he?’

‘Well, I shall be here! Not right that nobody’s here when he died for the country.’

‘King and country, remember? He died for King and country. God Save the King.’ Martha Louise’s father stopped digging, straightened his back, filled his lungs with fresh, damp air, and removed his woollen hat in genuine respect. His mop of red hair appeared above the side of the grave like a decayed tuft. ‘He’s a good man, the King. One of us. He’s got a soul.’ And with that he rammed his woollen hat back on his head and once again began to dig and throw up the earth.

Martha Louise wrinkled her nose, thought.

‘Have I got a soul?’

‘Indeed you have, my darling. And you’ve got to watch out for it.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the vicar says so.’

A thoughtful silence broke in on the endeavour in the churchyard: just the sound of digging and the wheezing intake into the lungs of breaths of damp air. Homer hopped about, pecked here and there until the vicar appeared striding down the path, confident, kindly and assured as if God was beside him. Homer watched the arrival of the black, flowing cassock, remembered its size and uncertainty and hopped off the mound of soil to find safety in the yew tree.

‘Good morning, Alfred ... and good morning to you Martha Louise,’ the vicar greeted them jovially. ‘Looks like you have almost finished.’

Martha Louise’s father touched humbly the front of his woollen hat, and resting both his hands on the shovel looked up from the bottom of the measured hole.

‘That’s so, Vicar, we’ve nearly finished here.’

‘This damp air cannot do your poor old lungs much good ... but we are all very grateful to you, Alfred. The burial is tomorrow morning, if that is all right for you.’

‘Aye, I expect that’ll be fine. Have to make up my hours on the farm at the weekend, I expect ... that is providing no one else gets washed up in the meantime.’

Martha Louise left her spot beneath the yew tree and sidled up to the Vicar. She looked up at him in awe. She was not a modest little girl.

‘I shall be here tomorrow. It’s just not right that someone dies and nobody cares. So me and Homer will be here tomorrow.’

‘My dear child, we all care,’ responded the vicar kindly.

‘What he needs is a next of kin!’ she exclaimed emphatically.

The vicar was taken aback by the girl’s spirited use of this little bit of knowledge she had just acquired. He glanced down at her father, and raised his eyebrows.

‘Oh! ... But I’m sure he has a next of kin. Maybe someone has already been contacted. Sincerely, we must hope so.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Now that I *can* tell you, Martha Louise. It is Frederick Fletcher ... Flight Sergeant Frederick Fletcher. God rest his soul.’ The vicar made the sign of the cross, and was gone. Homer reappeared, and soon the grave was finished.

Mrs Elsie Fletcher did not come alone to the funeral of her only child. She was accompanied by one of her son’s colleagues, a sergeant, who was smartly dressed in a long, blue RAF overcoat. They had arrived early, and had waited a while inside the car, before getting out to stretch their legs. Now they were standing beneath the lich-gate, she huddled against the cold in a black coat carrying a floral tribute of winter flowers—pansies, hellebores and viburnum, and he occasionally stamping his feet to keep warm. She wore a black beret. Looking up the path towards the church she could see the closed doors of the church. The sky was blue cold, the silence eternal. She had travelled there in an allocated staff car that was parked prominently, was the only vehicle parked, outside the church. There was little more she and the sergeant could say to each other, as all necessary condolences and small talk had been said during the journey to the church. The silence was not oppressive. Every now and then the sergeant stretched out his hand and touched the grieving mother’s arm, giving her assurance she did not grieve alone. She acknowledged the gestures, and held back thoughts that, if expressed, would have brought on a flurry of tears. Thus they waited patiently, in the silence, in the cold, in the clear blue light of an otherwise perfect day for her son’s body to be brought for burial.

When the coffin arrived the sergeant slipped over it a Union Flag, which removed the ordinariness of the coffin and gave it the sheen of purpose and individuality—and the heroic sentiments of selflessness.

They followed it along the churchyard path between the rows of other settled bodies to the mound of newly dug earth. Standing there, waiting, was the gravedigger with his historical shovel, and his daughter. The sight of these two solitary and motionless figures affected greatly Elsie Fletcher. She faltered, momentarily lost her footing, and the sergeant grasped her arm to stop her falling. The vicar stopped the tiny cortege, put a compassionate arm about Elsie Fletcher's shoulders and only when she was ready to proceed did the tiny procession move on again steadily towards the grave. A temporary wooden cross was propped against the pile of soil.

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The pallbearers placed the coffin on the slats above the grave, and the vicar intoned:

*I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord ...*

Mrs Elsie Fletcher and the sergeant stood beside each other and close enough to feel the comfort of bereavement. Martha Louise stood with her father a polite distance away, by the yew tree. Martha Louise fixed her eyes on the grieving mother,

‘What’s she going to do with the flowers?’ she whispered to her father.

‘She’ll leave them for us to lie on the grave ... when I’ve filled it in. Or they’ll go down with the coffin.’

‘She looks ever so sad.’

‘She is ever so sad.’

‘Is that another son?’ asked Martha Louise indicating the sergeant standing in the blue overcoat.

‘No, no. He just drove her here ... and to keep her company, like. Not nice being alone on these occasions.’

‘Where’s her husband then?’

‘Probably away somewhere in the war.’

‘I hate this war!’ exclaimed Martha Louise.

‘We all do.’

*... man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery ...*

The pallbearers moved forward, folded away the Union Flag and made preparations to lower the coffin. In a display of extreme grief, and grey with fatigue and

heartbreak, Elsie Fletcher stepped forward and rested one maternal, despairing hand on the coffin, where it remained quite still.

*... earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to ...*

‘Not many people, are there?’ whispered Martha Louise.

‘Sometimes there isn’t anybody,’ replied her father.

‘Why’s that then?’

‘Because they have outlived all their friends, I suppose.’

‘How old do you have to be to outlive your friends?’

‘At least a hundred, I should say.’

‘A hundred! Grandad must be nearly a hundred.’

‘Don’t let him hear you say that when he’s around! He’s got a lot more years before he’s a hundred.’

Elsie Fletcher placed her floral tribute on the coffin, and rearranged the blooms to their best effect. When she raised her head she could no longer hold back her tears. The sergeant took her arm, steadied her. The pallbearers lowered the coffin, and the vicar cast upon it a small measure of the newly turned earth.

The vicar looked at Elsie Fletcher who, though still supported by the sergeant, seemed not to want the little ceremony to end, wanted to remain close to her only child, wanted to be there for him for as long as possible. The vicar went up to her, and speaking softly said:

‘Sometimes I recall a verse from one of my favourite poems when we have reached the end of the formalities. Shall I, today?’ he asked gently. She nodded. And above the judicial silence of the reflective grave the vicar began to recite, very slowly, beautifully, sombrely Auden’s:

*‘He was my North, my South, my East and West/My working week and my Sunday rest/My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song/I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.’*

The quiet, the sadness, the tormented closeness of a mother and her only child beneath the pale and cold blue sky.

The vicar guided Elsie Fletcher away from the grave and back towards the lychgate, followed by the RAF sergeant entrenched in his blue overcoat.

‘Would you like to take tea in the Vicarage ... before your journey home?’ asked the Vicar.

Before Elsie Fletcher could reply Martha Louise was by her side, slightly out of breath and quite ruddy in the cheek.

‘No need to worry,’ she said addressing the bereaved mother almost immediately, ‘I’ll make sure the grave is looked after. I can be your son’s next of kin when you can’t come. And I’ll make sure he is not alone.’

Now Martha Louise had her father’s red hair. She had big appealing eyes as well. She wore a raincoat down to her knees and Wellington boots up to her knees. She had the complexion and demeanour of a girl brought up in the country. She was one with Nature, in many ways, and saw things how they are, unalterable, and dependent on seasons that could be hostile. She stood square and stolid before the grieving mother, appearing precocious rather than well-meaning, very much too assured of her herself and unaware of intrusion into the immediate thoughts of a bereaved mother. Elsie Fletcher looked to the Vicar for guidance. But before any could be given she changed her mind, wiped away her tears and bent down towards the little girl.

‘This is Martha Louise, the gravedigger’s daughter,’ put in the Vicar.

‘Ah, yes! I saw you with your father. Thank you Martha Louise for your sweet thought. Yes, Frederick would like your company. Though he was often content with his own I know he appreciated company. And I thank you because you have given a kind thought to me on a very sad day, and I shall rest a little easier now I know Frederick will not always be alone.’ She touched gently the top of Martha Louise’s red head, raised herself and set off weeping openly towards the Vicarage.

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Auntie Gladys embodied those homely characteristics that endeared her to Martha Louise. She was conciliatory, never judgemental, was an authority on minor ailments with remedies for hiccups, cuts, grazes, bruises, sore throats, colds, insect bites—and had encircling arms in times of adversity. She was formidably soft-spoken and would consider herself in error if someone tried to pull the wool over her eyes believing she had

failed to present, in an understandable way to the perpetrator, the moral agenda that had guided her life. One did not lie to Auntie Gladys, or forget to say ‘thank you’, or forget ones table manners, or fail to respect the wisdom that age had bestowed on her. Martha Louise adored her. After church on the Sunday following Frederick Fletcher’s burial Martha Louise was walking home accompanied by her aunt. The weather was cold, the sky again an unbroken blue, and there was a ‘rural’ vigour in the air that put a crisp edge into their walking paces. They passed the public house where once Homer sat nibbling peanuts.

‘Auntie, you know the bush which is like a bit of a hedge in your front garden,’ began Martha Louise.

‘Yes dear ... I do.’

‘Could I have some? Not much. Just a little.’ Martha Louise glanced upwards at her aunt, and kept on walking.

‘Dear ... whatever for?’

‘To put on a grave.’

‘And whose grave would that be?’ Auntie Gladys smiled down kindly at the top of the ginger mass under which her niece existed. She understood her niece. That is she knew and tolerated, encouraged Martha Louise’s pursuit of knowledge and all her worldly little ways. Something would have been wrong if Martha Louise had walked in silence, had failed to ask a question or had not solicited confirmation of an answer someone else had given her. The latter usually started: *Is it true that ...*

‘The airman’s grave,’ she said, ‘the one Daddy just dug. I’m his next of kin when his mother can’t be there.’

‘Well I never did!’ exclaimed Auntie Gladys, slowing her pace to an almost halt.

‘I did ask her.’

‘Oh, I’m sure you did! My, my, what an extraordinary little girl you are.’

‘Can I, you know, have enough? It’s the only plant I’ve seen that has colour.’

‘So you have noticed! It is called a skimmia, and you are quite right it does have colour right now ... red flower buds at this time of year. But goodness me! Next of kin. My, oh my ... what a lovely little handful you are. Next of kin indeed! Why, of course

you can have some, and I shall be pleased to make a little posy for you. Run along and tell your Mother where you shall be, while I go on and find the secateurs.'

Martha Louise skipped off, her Sunday best dancing about her knees and her mop of hair in time with her feet.

Auntie Gladys watched her go, and was once again humbled by her niece's capacity to respond above her age and experience.

When Martha Louise returned home with the posy her mother reproached her.

'You are too young to get involved with someone else's grief.'

'I'm not.'

'Well, I say you are.'

'I feel it here ... here ... here.' Martha Louise patted her heart defiantly. 'It isn't right that nobody cares.'

'But somebody does care, Martha Louise. The airman's mother cares.'

'How can she when she lives a long way away?'

'Just like you say ... in her heart, and I'm sure she cares deeply.'

'She said I could be there for Frederick, that he would like company. And everybody puts flowers on graves.'

'Putting flowers on graves is one thing, but pretending you are related is quite another thing. And keeping company with the dead is just plain morbid.'

'What's morbid?'

'Gloomy ... and that's not healthy for a girl of your age.'

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*Dear Martha Louise, as I do not know your address I have sent this note to your vicar who will give it to you. He tells me you have been to Frederick's grave and placed flowers on it. This is very thoughtful and it means much to me to know that someone cares for my dear Frederick. Please show this letter to your Mother and Father and ask them if I might see you again when I come to the church on the afternoon of Saturday 31st March. That is Frederick's birthday, so the day is very important to me. It would be nice if you could be there—when perhaps we could say a little prayer together.*

*With love from Elsie Fletcher (Mrs)*

Martha Louise's mother had continued to be intolerant of her daughter's interest in the churchyard, and in particular her obsession about the airman's grave. She blamed her husband for encouraging Martha Louise to accompany him when he went grave digging. The arrival of the letter prompted her to restate forcibly to him her position.

'I will not allow it. It is bad for the girl to be always going to the churchyard. She should be playing with her friends and doing things suitable to her age. Gathering flowers is one thing, but putting them on graves is quite another.'

'It's only the one grave, and I don't see no harm in it. Nor does the vicar ... if he did he would have said so! The airman died for us.'

'And don't you start taking the high moral ground with me, Alfred. You dig the graves, you fill in the graves, and the vicar pays you ... and that's as far as it goes. The war has nothing to do with it.'

'Well now, why don't you try putting your feet in poor Mrs Fletcher's shoes ...'

'I don't have to! We've got a beautiful little girl, and girls don't fly aeroplanes! And girls shouldn't go moping after dead strangers. And that sister Gladys of yours is no help, encouraging her and all that. *Have some of my hedge, take my entire hedge, and stick it on the airman's grave* ... I ask you. I shall be having with words with her, I can tell you. I'm going to write back to that Mrs Elsie Fletcher and say it's just not right to have our Martha Louise's head turned this way. Next of kin, indeed! For heaven's sake, she's only six!'

Martha Louise did not go to the churchyard on that Saturday afternoon. She went in the morning. She stopped first at her Auntie Gladys's where she picked some daffodils that grew without restraint in her back garden.

'I'm not asking where you are taking those, because it's best I don't know,' said Auntie Gladys. 'But I shall tie a string around them and wrap them in newspaper so they won't get damaged.' Martha Louise stood on tiptoe and gave her auntie a lovely kiss.

'You're the very best,' said Martha Louise meaningfully.

'And you're the sweetest ... but don't ever ask me to lie for you or the devil will have my tongue.'

Martha Louise set off by an indirect route, which took her to a little used gate into the back of churchyard. A wooden bridge that crossed a backwater of a dyke reached this

gate. On both banks of this motionless backwater milk-parsley struggled to survive amongst the more aggressive reeds. She sat down by the bridge, crossed her legs, and resting back against one of the bridge's posts tied a label to the bunch of daffodils. *With Love from Martha Louise* it read. She continued on into the churchyard, and was laying the fresh tribute on the sergeant's grave when the vicar surprised her.

'Hello, Martha Louise, my, those daffodils look lovely. When Mrs Fletcher comes this afternoon she will be so pleased to see that she is not the only one to remember Frederick on his birthday.'

'I'm not allowed to come this afternoon,' said Martha Louise, flatly.

'Oh, I know that, and I shall understand Mrs Fletcher's disappointment ... and yours as well. I also understand your mother's worry that perhaps you are a little too young to become involved. Now if the sergeant was part of your family ... that would be different. Nevertheless, I commend your Christian thoughts, and I shall tell Mrs Fletcher you have never failed, in her absence, to visit her son's grave and to place on it tributes in his honour.'

'I shall go on looking after his grave, but I don't want anybody lying for me. Not my Auntie Gladys ... or you. It would be quite nice if you haven't seen me this morning.'

'Oh, but I have! But you can rely on my discretion.'

'What's discretion?'

'Using my best judgement ... which is why I'm here and having this nice little chat with you. If I do not see you God will ... and I am sure He will recognise the goodness in your heart.'

'I want to always remember, like on his birthday today.'

'I know you do. Remembering, now that's like praying for him, which you can do when you come to Church on Sundays.'

'I do that already.'

'And for all the others who have given their lives in the war?'

'Sort of. But Frederick Fletcher is the only name I know. So he gets very much most of my prayer.'

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Every year Martha Louise laid flowers on Frederick Fletcher's grave. Every 20th January—the day he was killed, every 31st March—the day of his birth, and every 11th November—the day of national Remembrance she solemnly laid these tributes. Her Mother conceded, eventually, there was no harm in it, that the gestures were reputable acts from which danger to her daughter's sensibilities would be unlikely. She became proud of her daughter's diligence, and her relations with Mrs Elsie Fletcher developed harmoniously becoming consanguine in its fluency whilst Martha Louise slid without intention into the vacancy left by Mrs Fletcher's only ever son so that she prevailed as her only ever daughter.

The Portland headstone stood untainted white and proud—a beacon of personal sacrifice amongst its grey and forgotten neighbours.

Then on a warm summer's day in June when Martha Louise was sixteen years old she saw the butterfly stretched out on the Portland stone. Its yellow and black markings were magnificent—and its tail had two extensions. Its two false eyes stared out!

'That's grand news!' exclaimed her father. 'It means the swallowtails are back. I remember them when I was a boy by the graveyard ditch they were ... just where they cut the reeds last year for the roof of Mr Bramble's barn. It's the milk parsley they like. That's where they lay their eggs. You just saw only the one?'

'Yes. I'm going back tomorrow with my camera. Maybe I'll see some more. They'll make a nice photograph to send to Mrs Fletcher.'

The following day was gorgeous, sunny day—a day for lazing, a day for idleness, and for observing the idyllic pace of the countryside. Martha Louise waited in the shade beneath the yew tree in the churchyard, her Kodak Brownie by her side. The churchyard echoed the summer hum of insects. Homer's descendents lurked in the cooler shadows of the hedgerow. It was an empty, waiting churchyard where moments hung suspended in time, and where time unhurriedly followed the seasons. Nurturing the dead was, by nature, its disengaged occupation. Every so often Martha Louise would pretend the butterfly had arrived and took imaginary photographs of its flight. She went home for lunch, and returned in the afternoon to continue her vigil. Then it came, a solitary fluttering swallowtail, a majestic masterpiece that hovered for a while around the Portland headstone before alighting onto it and opening its wings before the sun. Martha

Louise photographed the butterfly from where she sat, and then moved quietly forward taking more pictures until her roll of film had been used up.

*Dear Martha Louise,*

*Such a lovely photograph. And so clever of you to take it. I shall treasure it so. It makes me feel our Frederick (I say 'our' as the years have made him almost as much yours as he is mine) has come back. If there is such a thing as reincarnation then I know Frederick would have wished to return as a butterfly; and why not as a rare swallowtail, because he was a rare being, and just as beautiful. The photograph shall take its place on the mantelpiece beside the one of him in his RAF uniform. You have been like the sister to him that he never had, and it would be a great comfort to me if one day I might hand over his two war medals into your safekeeping.*

*I hope I shall be well enough to travel to Norfolk for Remembrance Sunday this year. I do want so much to be able to do that, but I know you will be there and will place a poppy for me if I cannot make it.*

*With very great affection*

*Elsie (Fletcher)*

Elsie Fletcher was not well enough to travel to Norfolk that Remembrance Sunday, and paid her final visit in 1958, the year before she passed away.

On this last visit she came by ambulance car, and as usual had pinned Frederick's medals onto her coat. Martha Louise met her at the lich-gate and pushed her wheelchair into the church for the Service during which the names of those from the parish who had been killed were meticulously read out—though none had been buried in the churchyard. They lay in official war grave sites closest to where they had fallen. Only Flight Sergeant Frederick Fletcher, a parish stranger, lay in this Norfolk churchyard.

'Might we go alone?' asked Elsie Fletcher.

'Of course you may,' replied the vicar.

Elsie Fletcher and Martha Louise observed their own minutes of silence at Frederick's grave. They appeared as one tragic bundle, huddled together against the November cold, like a Mother and daughter—and being together perhaps for the last

time. Martha Louise placed the poppies beside the headstone: two symbolic flashes of red honouring courage, with love. Martha Louise laid a comforting hand on Elsie Fletcher's shoulder:

'Love matters,' she said. 'I shall always be here for our Frederick.'

Elsie Fletcher took off the two medals from her coat'

'I know you will ... please wear these when you do.'

Unwanted reeds had again colonised the ditch behind the churchyard snuffing out the milk parsley. Swallowtails had not been seen for years.

One warm July afternoon in 1970 Auntie Gladys was taking a short cut through the churchyard. Whenever she did this she would pass close to Frederick Fletcher's grave, and there she would pause respectfully for a moment or two. This afternoon a swallowtail butterfly had spread its wings on the Portland headstone.

'That can't be,' said Martha Louise's father. 'There's no milk parsley growing in the ditch ... only reeds.'

'Be that as it may, it was a swallowtail I saw all right ... with those two false eyes staring at me,' retorted Auntie Gladys.

When Martha Louise heard this she hurried to the churchyard, but by the time she got there the butterfly had gone. She went up the next day, and the days thereafter, but it did not return.

In the November of that year she travelled to London for Remembrance Sunday. She had never been to the ceremony at the Cenotaph. She wore Frederick's medals. She mingled with the crowd, and when the marching started she slipped unchallenged into a marching column, which swept her along towards the Cenotaph. The martial music, the ceremonial fervour, the solemnity, and the volume of spectator participation bore down on her so that the sense of pride of being British almost outweighed the honour of bearing Flight Sergeant Frederick Fletcher's medals on this very special occasion. Ahead, she could see gentlemen in top hats collecting the poppy wreaths from the marchers and laying them beside the Cenotaph. Those carrying the wreaths marched on the left, which made passing them to the top-hatted gentlemen a less disruptive manoeuvre. So, as she approached the Cenotaph, she sidled to the left and braced herself as she caught the eye of one of the gentlemen. She held out the photograph of the Portland headstone with the

swallowtail butterfly she had taken many years before. Onto the photograph she had fixed two poppies. The top-hatted gentleman at first hesitated, and then with a kindly smile took the photograph and laid it amongst the wreaths.

This simple unscripted and unofficial act of remembrance was captured by a news cameraman, later to be published. Momentary fame descended on the Norfolk churchyard, and onto the status of the endangered swallowtail butterfly. This led, early in the following year, to the cutting of the reeds in the ditch behind the churchyard and the revival of the milk parsley.

In the years that followed swallowtail butterflies were seen again in the summer amongst the gravestones.

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Martha Louise, who, at the time of writing, is seventy-four years of age, continues to place floral tributes beside the Portland headstone. Once she saw two butterflies resting on it.