

UNRAVELLED

A Novel

M. K. Tod

1 OCTOBER 1935

Edward Jamieson tapped the thick, cream-colored envelope against his left palm. He turned away from his wife and glanced out the window where scattered leaves caught fading threads of light. When the letter arrived that afternoon, a hint of disquiet had spread through his body. The opening words—*To Those Who Served*—had punched hard. Phrases had leapt from the page like sudden bursts of gunfire: *Glorious dead . . . great monument . . . lie beneath French soil . . . Vimy Ridge.*

“Do you want to go?” Ann said, eyebrows raised in a way he had come to know as concern edged with caution.

“It’ll stir up something I’ve tried to forget. Not sure if that’s a good thing.”

“Maybe seeing some old friends would help.” She touched his cheek.

Old friends, he thought. *They’re all dead. Except for Eric.*

Instead of replying, he opened the envelope and passed her a sheet of paper embossed with a government seal. He watched her scan the page with a small smile, then furrowed brow, and finally, lips pursed thin and tight.

“Sixty thousand Canadian dead. Was it really that many?”

He nodded and shuddered at the thought.

“‘This monument on Vimy Ridge will proclaim to the world of the future that you and your countrymen fought gloriously when the need arose. We ask that you consider attending the dedication to be recognized for your valiant service and to honour your fellow soldiers.’ That’s what the prime minister wrote.” He felt the warmth of her hand on his. “You should go. We should both go.”

“Well . . . anyway, I’m not sure we can afford it. And what would we do with Emily and Alex?”

“We have until July to sort that out. My parents would be happy to look after them. Mother said just the other day that she misses having them stay overnight, now that we’re back in the city. And we have some money set aside—you know we do.”

Ann was only being logical, an approach Edward normally took. He loosened his tie and shrugged off his suit jacket, draping it on the back of a kitchen chair.

“I’ll think about it.”

He formed a small smile to take the sting out of his dismissal. Ann did not deserve his anger and he knew he should explain himself. He would do so, only not now when he could barely control his thoughts. How could anyone use the word “glorious” in reference to war? As far as he was concerned, nothing about his experience deserved to be remembered, let alone celebrated.

After dinner and a lengthy telephone call with his father, Edward sat in the living room with only the ticking hallway clock and clunking of cooling radiators to keep him company. A chunk of wood fell through the grate. Shards of blue quivered amidst the orange glow of embers.

Ann had gone upstairs over an hour earlier and he wondered whether to stoke the fire or follow her to bed. He knew he would not sleep. Memories would claw, grab, suck and twist, swallowing him once more into that world of death.

A burst of light in the distance. Edward checked his watch. At five fifteen, a still-hidden sun smudged the black of night and after hours of random machine-gun fire, the Germans were quiet. Through stinging sleet, shapes in no man's land were barely visible. A cart, lopsided in the mud, the carcass of a horse, a lightweight howitzer damaged beyond repair, remnants of a large wooden barrel. The massive ridge loomed four hundred yards away.

Five twenty-five. Edward scanned his unit.

"Tell Robertson to keep alert," he whispered to the soldier on his left.

The reminder was unnecessary but he could not restrain himself. Time ticked away as hordes of men held their collective breath.

At five thirty, the ripple of light was strangely beautiful, spreading like an endless wave in that instant of calm before the fury of one thousand guns erupted. Though Lieutenant Burke had described the battle plan in detail, no words could have prepared them for such brutal vibration. Shockwaves compressed Edward's chest, his ears distinguished nothing but pain, his legs braced to remain upright while he fought for breath. Death crooked its finger.

In the distance, flames erupted over German trenches followed by a continuous line of red, white and green SOS signals. Edward's platoon sprang into action as messages poured in.

Night receded inch by inch, revealing the field of battle. German artillery stuttered, then replied with more conviction, deadly shells flashing against the clouds. Reaching for his earphones, Edward saw a red light mushroom beyond enemy lines, followed by a boom that scattered bits of clay across his makeshift table.

"Christ, that felt close," Eric Andrews said.

"Ammunition dump?"

"Probably. But theirs, not ours."

Edward grunted at the friend who had been with him since the beginning, then cocked his head as another message came through. He hunched forward, a gas mask around his neck, rifle propped against a wall of sandbags. His job was to keep information flowing, whatever the cost.

By six a.m., sleet had turned to drizzle while thirty thousand infantry advanced in three waves of attack.

“Snowy,” Edward used Eric’s nickname, “get a runner for this message.”

“Binny is ready. Just back from the sap.”

“He’ll do.” Edward tore the message from his pad as the telephone rang. “Wait a minute till I see what this is.” He scribbled a few words. “Yes. Yes. Got it.” He held out the second message. “Tell Binny to take this one too.”

Another member of Edward’s team staggered in covered in mud. “It’s hell out there but we’re advancing on schedule.”

Edward twisted around to look at his linesman. “What about casualties?”

“Hard to say. Germans are getting the worst of it. Their shelling is weak compared to ours.”

“That’s good news, Arty. I need you to head back out. The line from here to Duffield crater is down. Take Simmons and Tiger with you and get it repaired.” The telephone rang again. Edward turned back to his work without waiting for a reply.

Hours passed like minutes. Duties swept Edward and his men from forward trenches to command posts stationed up to five miles behind the lines. Twice he was blown off his feet by the concussion of exploding shells. His mind quivered with the unceasing flash and rumble of guns. Falling shrapnel screamed overhead.

As they worked to install new lines and roll out signal cable behind advancing troops, shells roared liked angry beasts and confused men stumbled to find their way. Silent prisoners filed by. Edward heard bagpipes and sudden shouts and the anguished moans of wounded men. All the while, British planes buzzed overhead, swooping low to assess the damage.

In the comfort of his Toronto home, the chaotic intensity of battle was with him again. At the time he had felt nothing, thinking only of his next task, his mind focused like a microscope on the minute details of execution. He had known that if he survived, there would be more than enough time for reflection.

Staring into the neglected fire now giving off mere dribbles of heat, he questioned what they had achieved. Taking the ridge had been followed by failure to exploit success. *All those lives*, he thought, *all that sorrow which my country will commemorate next July.*

Edward wondered if he could bear the pain of being there again.

2 NOVEMBER 1935

Edward glanced up as Ann came down the stairs, blue dress cinched at the waist. At thirty-three, her slim figure, full breasts and wide, almost sensuous lips seemed even more attractive than when they had first met. He supposed that motherhood had something to do with the change, rounding the sharp bones of her hips and adding a certain softness to her face, and perhaps time had done the rest, like an artist daubing extra brush strokes on a work only he sees as incomplete. Thinking of the feel of her ripened body against his, he smiled.

“We need to talk,” she said.

His smile slipped away. Ann’s grey eyes seemed deliberately cool and he wondered what direction their conversation would take. He knew what the topic would be.

“Of course,” he said, and then waited for her opening thrust.

The first week after he brought the invitation home, she had mentioned the trip several times but he had deflected or ignored each comment. Lately, when she seemed on the verge of speaking, she would purse her lips instead or take a deep breath and look away. Once he had seen her put the invitation back into its envelope and slip it beneath the pile of accumulated mail. Preferring to avoid questions where he had no clear answer, he had not pursued the matter. Eventually, a decision would emerge.

Each day, when neither business nor family held his attention, he considered what travelling to France would entail. Some days he thought he might be able to manage, other days he worried about being overwhelmed. Not once did he think the trip would be enjoyable. Perhaps it was time to tell Ann about the war, or at least a sanitized version of events.

She sat on the sofa and crossed her arms. “You’ve been avoiding my questions about going to France. You need to share with me what you’ve been thinking.”

“You’re right, I do.”

Ann’s eyes warmed. “Ever since that invitation came, you’ve been distant and tight-lipped. You haven’t asked my opinion. You’ve just closed yourself off like you usually do. I can imagine how difficult this is, but if I knew more, perhaps I could help.”

Edward had the impression that his wife had rehearsed what to say, since she rushed to complete the last sentence before dropping her eyes. Closing down was indeed his usual course of action, one that had caused friction in the past. Each time she confronted him, he promised to do better, but the habit of bottling his feelings was a hard one to break. Ann’s frustration was justified.

“You want to know about what happened.” She nodded. “It’s not pretty.” She nodded again. He set aside the newspaper then rubbed a hand across his face, feeling the scrape of that day’s stubble.

“A sniper’s bullet nearly killed me at Vimy Ridge.” Ann’s sharply drawn breath sounded like a muted whistle. “We prepared for months,” he continued, his voice devoid of emotion. “My battalion arrived in December and right away we began building a communication system that could support a line of attack more than five, maybe six, miles in length. Eric and I and the others in our group worked in underground tunnels much of the time, installing telephone lines and other devices so that we had a fail-safe network. At times we went out into no man’s land to place special equipment designed to intercept German signals. I lost more than one friend

doing that nasty work. In three months, we signallers laid more than twenty-one miles of cable and sixty-six miles of telephone wire.

“By late March we were almost ready. Every day we rehearsed the plan. I knew what to do if my sergeant fell, and even if our lieutenant fell. I was in charge of a platoon and we were told to keep messages flowing regardless of cost.” A laugh scraped from his throat. “‘Regardless of cost’ meant that it didn’t matter how many of us died. Did you know they dug graves before battle began? I have no idea how many bodies they planned for, but the area set aside was enormous, and every time I walked past it I wondered whether I would be buried there.”

Edward noticed a flicker of horror on his wife’s face. Her arms were no longer crossed; instead she leaned forward slightly and kept her eyes on his.

“For three weeks prior to zero hour, our guns hammered German positions. Afterwards, we heard that twenty-five hundred tons of shells were used each day. Tons, not pounds, Ann. The sounds and vibrations were staggering, and still we worked and rehearsed day after day, again and again.

“You can’t imagine the opening barrage of a battle on that scale. We’d been waiting underground for hours. I kept looking at my watch. My stomach was in such knots that I threw up, and I wasn’t the only one who did. Fear also makes you sweat. Imagine thousands of men waiting, crammed together so tight you could barely move.

“Like other assaults, once we began, I felt strangely calm. All morning and most of the afternoon, I was too busy to think about anything except my men and our duties. Vimy wasn’t the only battle we endured. I was at Cambrai and Ypres—I’m sure you’ve heard about the bloodbaths at Ypres. Valenciennes, the Somme. For me they aren’t cities, they’re places of slaughter.

“And you can’t believe how we lived. The filth and smells were so terrible, we were rarely clean. I wore the same socks for weeks. Lice? Everyone suffered from lice. At times I scratched my scalp so hard it bled. And there were rats. Disgusting beasts with their beady little eyes staring at me. The food was terrible and rarely hot.

“I lived through gas attacks. Even breathed in some gas once or twice, but not enough to kill me. Watching someone die in a gas attack is the most horrible experience and there’s nothing you can do to help. I killed people, Ann, even though my job was in signals. I killed people.” Edward looked and sounded bewildered. He closed his eyes and shook his head back and forth, back and forth. “Sometimes I was close enough to see their faces. A man who’s been shot often looks surprised for a moment. The whole thing was horrible. Gruesomely horrible. So you see, that’s why it’s so difficult for me to decide whether to go.”

Edward closed his eyes. He was exhausted. He doubted whether he could even stand. He had not intended to disclose so much, but once he had started, he felt compelled to go on. Ann had been silent the entire time. She had barely moved, her expression slipping from concern to dismay and shock.

“Oh, Edward. What you lived through sounds so horrible. I don’t know what to say. No wonder you never spoke about it. The thought that you might have died . . .”

“I don’t think I can tell you about that.”

“Of course, dear. Only if you feel like telling me. To think I might never have known you.”

A tear trailed down one cheek. Ann got up and came to sit on the arm of Edward’s chair. She took his hand and held it to her lips. The gentleness of her kiss eased his pain a fraction.

“I didn’t mean to be so remote,” he said.

“Hush. You did nothing wrong. I should have been more patient.”

“If you think we should go . . .”

“Darling, it’s your decision, not mine. I love you. Whatever you want to do is fine with me.”

“That bloody invitation. Ever since it arrived, I’ve been remembering things I thought were long buried,” he said. “So many things.” Edward shook his head slowly from side to side. “So many things.”