Testament of Youth

by

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Based on the autobiography of Vera Brittain
CLOSE ON -

The face of VERA (24); her expression is watchful, uncertain. Around her, the muffled, distorted sounds of street celebrations. She has striking features, expressive of great intelligence, yet tired by experiences beyond her years.

Suddenly, SOUND comes CRASHING IN -

- Vera is on a London street thronging with merrymakers. A swell of revellers push past, sweeping her away with them.

A caption: London, 11th November 1918.

EXT. LONDON STREET - EVENING (WINTER)

In the enfolding gloom of evening, Vera is BUFFETED in the crowd; people wave flags, swig from bottles, sit astride each other’s shoulders.

Vera mingles in the crowd but seems isolated, as though in a separate bubble. The sound cuts in and out, as though she’s having trouble connecting.

EXT. LONDON STREET - EVENING

Vera is moving through the throng, having to elbow her way, overwhelmed by the densely packed bodies -

The noise still CUTS in and out - as a sudden loud ROAR crashes in on her -

She gasps, turns - to see a MOTOR CAR, spilling over with revellers. A WOMAN sits on top swigging from a champagne bottle. A YOUNG SOLDIER, his head bandaged, sees Vera, and leaps out.

He grabs her hands, pulling her into a hectic dance, as others around them dance too. Vera SPINS!...dizzy, as faces fly past her -

She’s trapped, the panic rises - she BREAKS FREE -

- Pushes through the crowd, desperate to escape, elbowing, annoying people -

She sees some church steps ahead of her, and stumbles up them.

INT. CHURCH - MOMENTS LATER

Vera hurries inside, her footsteps echoing on marble. Above her, a high-vaulted dome, ahead of her, rows of pews. It’s another world in here, silent, dark, seemingly empty.
Vera walks down a side aisle, and sees a rich oil painting looming - Francis Danby's "The Deluge". Dark waves tower menacingly in a STORM-RIPPED SEA, people are tossed around in it like flotsam -

Helpless -

Vera is pulled in, mesmerised, towards the image of apocalyptic destruction -

And SUDDENLY -

CUT TO:

SHE'S UNDERWATER -

in a murky gloom, struggling against the water's force, trapped, DROWNING! Her hands claw at the fabric of her heavy Edwardian skirts -

CUT BACK TO:

INT. CHURCH -

Shapes take form around her in the gloom - figures, kneeling in prayer in the pews, women all of them, some on their knees, others staring into space -

As the air fills with their whispers -

VERA takes in the sight, her eyes flickering with panic, the whispering sound magnifying in her mind -

We CUT back and forth between this and VERA DROWNING -

- And she realises the church is full of them - woman after woman after woman, like an ocean of grief separated from the world outside - as WE -

CUT BACK TO:

VERA IN THE WATER -

Floating now, not struggling, as though she's given up -

She starts to sink, folding in on herself, but with a last effort pushes up, and starts to slowly FLOAT UPWARDS -

- towards the surface -

She BREAKS through the water -
Vera surfaces in a beautiful lake, shimmering in a spring heatwave. It’s five years earlier, and another world.

She’s younger, fresher. Her face clear of the experiences that have so marked her.

Vera swims, keeping herself concealed behind lakeside greenery, spying on two YOUNG MEN getting undressed on the lake side – her brother EDWARD - 18, private, artistic, elegant - and his close school friend VICTOR – kind, soft-natured.

EDWARD
We used to swim here when we were children...

She catches Edward’s eye, ducks out of sight. He smiles to himself.

EDWARD (CONT’D)
Where is Vera? I hope she hasn’t gone in yet, I completely forgot about the rats -

VICTOR
(disgusted)
Rats?!

EDWARD
A big nest of them apparently, we’ll be alright in the shallows, but we definitely shouldn’t go over there -

He gestures to the water – where Vera swims out, happily smiling.

EDWARD
Oh no! Vera!

On VICTOR, down to shirt and trunks – his alarm!

VICTOR
Get out of the water! RATS!

Vera waves serenely back, seemingly unable to hear.

VERA
Come on in!

Victor RUNS down the pier, DIVES in and swims towards her.

He surfaces to see her grinning face. He turns, to see Edward now fully undressed, who grins at him and dives in.
Victor realises he’s been had.

VICTOR
BASTARD!

He SWIMS back towards Edward - who feigns panic.

EDWARD
Oh no! Help! They’ve got me!

Victor DUCKS him – Vera watches, laughing.

7A OMMITTED

8 EXT. EDGE OF LAKE – A LITTLE LATER

Vera is finishing getting dressed behind a towel held up by Edward. Victor can be seen further away, hurriedly pulling on his trousers.

EDWARD
So what about you and Victor?

VERA
What about us?

EDWARD
Come on....

VERA
(non-committal)
He’s sweet.

EDWARD
Sweet! All the attention’s making you arrogant!

He sees she’s finished, flicks her with the towel, they play fight, as a shivering Victor comes over, holding his shoes.

VICTOR
I’m a block of ice!

Vera smiles, hands the towel to him, holding it out like a cover for his bare torso. He takes it, grinning, and dries off.

Edward, finishing getting dressed, checks his watch.

EDWARD
Come on, we should be getting back.

VERA
(disappointed)
Do we have to?
EDWARD
Mother and father are expecting us.

Victor pointedly takes Edward’s jacket and puts it on. Edward smiles.

VERA
(playful)
They’re always expecting us!
They’re driving me mad!

VICTOR
I like your parents.

VERA
That’s because you don’t have to live with them.

EDWARD
And Roland’ll be here soon.

VERA
(sighing)
Oh yes, how could I forget...the perfect one.

The two boys smile, as they gather their things together.

VICTOR
He is good at everything.

VERA
Including being modest, I hope?

EDWARD
Of course.

VERA
Brilliant and modest, I hate him already!

They start to walk away.

EDWARD
(light)
Give him a chance, Vera, alright? I mean it!

As they enter the trees Vera lingers behind.

She pauses, turns back to the lake for a moment –

Breathes it in one last time –
- The breeze across the water, glittering in the sunlight, the swaying rustle of the leaves - the tranquil, mysterious beauty of the place - she smiles, loving it - *

**EXT. COUNTRYSIDE, DERBYSHIRE - MINUTES LATER**

Vera, Edward and Victor walk home across a beautiful stretch of countryside.

**9 EXT. MELROSE - MINUTES LATER**

The three of them walk towards the front garden of MELROSE, the family house, a grand, grey Victorian building. Vera suddenly remembers her wet hair, and hurriedly tucks it up, out of sight. Then she sees -

Parked outside - a delivery van, with “Somerson’s Pianos” written on the side.

Vera stops, dismayed - immediately looks at Edward, who looks sheepish. Fearing the worst, she hurries to the garden path and strides up it, Edward and Victor right behind her.

**VERA**
(furious, thrown back at Edward)
You knew about this!

**EDWARD**
I knew Father wanted you to have one -

**VERA**
You colluded with them!

**EDWARD**
No -!

Vera goes through the open doorway, into the house -

**10 INT. HALLWAY/LIVING ROOM, MELROSE - CONTINUOUS**

Vera sweeps along the hallway, towards the living room -

The sounds of a heavy object being moved into place, the CLANG of piano keys -

VERA enters the living room, to see delivery men manoeuvering a GRAND PIANO, overseen by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. BRITTAIN, and family friend Mrs. ELLINGER, with a teen daughter in tow.

Mr. Brittain is a self-made businessman, extrovert, kind, but prone to outbursts of temper and depressions.
His wife is both more delicate and more level-headed – once less conventional than her husband, now the subservient wife, she flaps on the surface, but underneath exerts complete domestic control.

MR. BRITTAIN
(seeing her)
Vera! Come and see your surprise!

Her mother comes over and takes her arm.

MRS. BRITTAIN
I’ve been dying to tell you, but I just couldn’t. Mrs. Ellinger’s been in on the secret, she wants to hear you play!

Mr. Brittain opens the piano lid with a flourish. Vera holds back, her expression is tight and sullen.

MR. BRITTAIN
She’s an absolute beauty – so I’m told. Come on darling, give us a taste of what we can look forward to!

As the delivery men finish and leave, Mrs. Brittain takes a seat next to a very proper Mrs. Ellinger and her daughter. Victor sits too.

An expectant silence. Edward gives Vera a pained look – he understands her feelings. She goes and sits at the piano –

– Stares at the keys for a long beat –

Hands raised –

Then brings them CRASHING down, BANGING out a CACOPHANY!

She stops – stark silence. Her mother and Mrs. Ellinger look shocked. Vera leaps up and heads for the door, her father immediately on her trail –

INT. LIVING ROOM DOOR/HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

Mr. Brittain stops her before she can go any further.

MR. BRITTAIN
Vera! Come back and apologise now!

Vera’s expression is defiant. Mrs. Brittain hovers anxiously in the background with the others.

MR. BRITTAIN (CONT’D)
If you can’t show me the respect I deserve, then at least show some for our guests!
Their faces are close, Vera’s pent-up anger and hurt almost bursting out.

VERA
I don’t want a piano. You knew I didn’t want one and still you bought it! I won’t be bullied by you!

Mr. Brittain turns to his wife, looking incredulous.

MR. BRITTAIN
I buy her the most expensive gift of her life, but no, I’m bullying her!

MRS. BRITTAIN
Your father hoped you’d be happy, dear -

VERA
That piano could pay for a whole year at Oxford!

MR. BRITTAIN
Ah, here we go again!

VERA
(bursting)
All this time you said you couldn’t afford for me to go!

MR. BRITTAIN
I can’t afford to waste money, no!

Vera glowers at him in speechless fury - turns and STOMPS upstairs.

He glances at his wife, who gives him an admonishing look -

MR. BRITTAIN
Vera – I didn’t mean – VERA! Come back here!

MRS BRITTAIN
Oh dear. (to Mrs Ellinger) I do apologise...

INT. VERA’S BEDROOM, BUXTON - A SECOND LATER

Vera is in her room, looking round for an outlet for her fury and frustration -

She sees a pile of papers on her desk, covered in her scrawled hand writing, and a small pile of books - she gathers up the whole lot, marches over to the window, chucks it all out -
Edward is starting up the stairs after Vera, when they hear the thud of objects falling — they turn to see, through the open doorway behind them, a shower of papers floating down to the ground.

Mr. Brittain groans in exasperation. Vera charges back down the stairs.

VERA
I’ve thrown my work out, you can take it to your factory and pulp it for all I care!

MR BRITTAIN
Now stop it! I’m simply concerned you’re turning yourself into a bluestocking, because they don’t find husbands!

VERA
I don’t want a husband!

On VICTOR — a little crestfallen at this.

VERA
How many times do I have to spell it out?! I’m sorry you didn’t have a daughter whose sole purpose in life is to hitch herself to a man, but there it is! I’m not getting married, not now, not ever!

A sound makes them all turn. ROLAND stands there, holding his luggage; well-built, with an intense gaze and a self-assurance beyond his 19 years, he’s a physical, sensual person. We see him from Vera’s perspective.

Everyone is caught by the moment. After a pause —

ROLAND
(small smile)
Well. That’s clear, then.

Vera glares at him for a moment, then turns and stomps upstairs. Edward and Victor descend on him, shaking hands.

A maid lights an oil lamp as Edward sits at the piano, his musician’s hands running along the keys, playing a gentle melody. He hears a sound, looks up, sees Vera watching him, as the maid slips out.
I’ve lost track of how long I’ve wanted one of these.

Vera comes and sits next to him at the piano.

Oh Edward, I was so caught up in myself - I didn’t think what this must be like for you.

She certainly didn’t deserve the treatment you gave her.

Well - I got you your piano, that’s something to be happy about at least.

Oxford really means a lot to you, doesn’t it?

I can’t breathe here...

Edward smiles in understanding, he plays a few bars.

We’ll escape marriage and the paper factory yet!

He carries on playing – a beautiful melody. Vera is lost in the music for a moment, gazing at her brother with love and awe at his talent.

A sound makes them look up. Roland and Victor come in. Edward keeps playing. They come over and listen to the music, Roland watching Vera.

Something in his gaze makes her feel self-conscious. She gets up, walks to the other side of the room.

Victor joins Edward at the piano and they switch into a jaunty duet. Then Roland joins them – they all play together, a fun routine that’s obviously familiar.

Vera watches them, chuckling – seeing how united they are.

Vera is outside in the dark, searching in the shrubbery for her books and papers.
From inside, we can hear the piano still being played. A sound makes her start - she turns to see Roland, smoking a cigarette, quietly watching her.

VERA
You frightened me!

ROLAND
Can I help?
VERA
No thanks.

But he stubs his cigarette out, starts searching anyway.

VERA (CONT’D)
Please, I’d rather be by myself.

ROLAND
(playful)
It’s the books I’m worried about,
I’ve never seen anyone beat them up
that way!

Roland finds a few battered books. Then picks up a piece of
paper, glowing white in the dusk. He sees it’s a hand-written
poem, and makes the snap decision to pocket it.

ROLAND
(looking at the books)
Wordsworth, Shelley. Poor Byron.
All these romantics aren’t good for
you, you know.

She snatches them from him, examines them for damage, then
leafs through the pages, as though looking for something.

VERA
Don’t worry, they have very little
influence.

ROLAND
(a smile)
So I saw earlier.

She flashes him a look. His self-confidence both riles and
attracts her.

ROLAND (CONT’D)
(more sincere)
I’m sorry about the badly timed
arrival, by the way.

VERA
(defensive)
Why should I care?

She starts to head back inside, then stops, turns to him –

VERA (CONT’D)
I can see this is all highly
amusing for you –

ROLAND
No –
VERA

Yes, you’re polishing up the anecdote already, for your friends back at school! (Raw) But it’s my life –!

Exasperated with herself, and embarrassed, she heads back inside. Roland thinks for a moment - touched by her. Then produces the poem he pocketed. He reads, his expression moved.

INT. VERA’S ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

Vera is up with some open text books before her, studying. There’s a knock at the door. Startled, she gets up, goes and opens it. Roland stands there.

VERA

(thrown)

What?

ROLAND

(smiling)

You’re studying.

VERA

What of it?

ROLAND

(more vulnerable)

Nothing, I – Look, I’ve done the Oxford entrance exams, it’s all about technique. I could help you. Once you’ve learnt it, you’ll sail through I’m sure.

VERA

Like a masonic secret, passed from teacher to boy.

ROLAND

Actually my teachers weren’t that good. I worked it out for myself.

She looks at him - the reaching out to her beneath the smooth, confident surface.

VERA

(softly)

Then so will I.

She closes the door in his face. Taken aback by herself, she leans against the door with a smile.
INT. CORRIDOR OUTSIDE VERA’S ROOM - SAME TIME

Roland is also taken aback. But after a moment, he turns away with a smile.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE, BUXTON - DAY

The three men and Vera are walking up a beautiful, gently sloping green hill, talking and laughing together. The boys are ribbing Vera, who takes it in good humour – she teases Edward back, giving as good as she gets.

EXT. HILLSIDE OUTSIDE BUXTON - LATER

Vera, Edward, Roland and Victor are lying or sitting on the hillside, gazing at the countryside stretched out before them in the green beauty of spring. The atmosphere is relaxed.

ROLAND
(lightly - the view)
The world at our feet!

EDWARD
(grimace)
Except we’re nearly back at school.

ROLAND
We’re here now, Ted, come on. Live in the moment a little.

VICTOR
One more term and it’ll all be over. It’s sort of daunting, seeing your whole life stretched out in front of you. I mean, wonderful too...

ROLAND
I’ll stick with wonderful.

VERA
At least you won’t be buried alive in Buxton.

EDWARD
Come on, think of all the gossip you’re providing the local ladies with!

VERA
Talking of which, Mrs Fraser mixed her china sets at dinner last week. The whole town’s buzzing with it!

EDWARD
The triviality of female lives...
Vera playfully swats Edward.

VERA
Don’t you dare...!

ROLAND
(a chuckle)
Have we got a suffragette on our hands?

VERA
I would be, given the chance, I suppose that shocks you?

EDWARD
You’re talking to the wrong man, Vera. Roland’s a supporter.
Vera assumes he’s joking.

ROLAND
Well, my mother does admire them.

EDWARD
She’s a novelist, and she writes for the papers, she supports the whole family in fact. (To Roland) I hope you don’t mind me saying...?

ROLAND
(smiling)
Not now I’ve seen Vera’s face!

Vera is thrown.

VERA
I had no idea....

ROLAND
Perhaps you’ve jumped to conclusions about me.

VERA
I think that’s mutual.

ROLAND
No, I’ve researched you quite thoroughly. I found a poem in the garden, in fact, and took the liberty - (of reading it)

As he takes the piece of paper from his pocket -

EDWARD
(interrupting)
Poems! You’ve kept that very quiet! Let’s have a look!

He takes it off Roland - Vera snatches it off him -

VERA
Give it back! It’s nothing - it’s just a - stupid thing!

She pockets the poem, upset and humiliated. Roland realises his mistake.

ROLAND
I’m sorry, I thought...you two...

He gestures to her and Edward.

VERA
It’s fine...

They sit there in awkward silence.
VICTOR
(trying to lighten the atmosphere)
I don’t know about anyone else, but I could do with a drink of something.

EXT. GREEN GLADE, OUTSIDE BUXTON - A LITTLE LATER

On the way back - Vera has deliberately slowed her pace to fall behind the others, needing a moment alone. Roland carefully approaches her. We can hear Edward and Victor talking and laughing off-screen.

ROLAND
I didn’t know you kept it secret -

VERA
Really. That’s why you stole it from me and stored it to use like - like ammunition!

ROLAND
No -

VERA
Stop pretending!

ROLAND
I kept quiet because - I was moved by it, I thought it beautiful, and - you seem an impossible person to say that to.

This silences her. She plays with a stick she’s picked up.

A long moment.

VERA
I’m not.

ROLAND
No.

VERA
(hesitant, more open)
You really - don’t think me ridiculous?

He smiles, shakes his head.

VERA
What if I told you I want to be a writer - and - I even dream of earning a living by it?

Roland smiles his gentle, confident smile.
ROLAND
Don’t you need some experience first?

VERA
Of course!

A beat.

ROLAND
I want to write too, as it happens – I’m a little in my mother’s shadow.

She looks at him –

VERA
Is she good?

He nods.

VERA
How’s she done it..?

ROLAND
Sheer pig-headedness. You should meet her, you’d get on.

They both laugh gently.

ROLAND
(sincere)
You must write. Really.

VERA
No one’s ever said that to me before.

They smile.

18 OMMITTED.

19 EXT. WHITE ROAD, BUXTON – LATER

They’re on the way home. Vera, holding some flowers she’s gathered, walks ahead of the three men, down a long, winding white road across the gentle sloping hills.

She can hear them chatting and laughing behind her, she turns to look back at them –

And her eyes directly meet Roland’s. He’s been concentrating on her. She looks away again, in sudden shyness....
INT. VERA’S BEDROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

Vera is putting some of the flowers she collected into frames. She snaps a frame shut, takes it across to the wall to hang there, when she catches a glimpse of herself in a long mirror -

- she looks again at her reflection, suddenly thinking about herself in a different way, as a woman -

She runs her hands over her waist, her hips, turning to look at herself, trying to assess her appeal.

She puts a finger to her lips - imagining his kiss -

She starts at a sound at the door; goes over. Someone is on the other side, she can feel the presence; she knows it’s him. Quietly, she presses her body against the door -

Roland, on the other side, is very still too -

A rustling noise - she looks down. He’s pushing a piece of paper under the door - a poem. She picks it up and reads: “Untitled” by Roland Leighton - a soft smile.

Vera waits, listening - to his presence retreating down the corridor.

INT. HALLWAY/LIVING ROOM, MELROSE - MORNING

Vera is in front of a hallway mirror, checking her appearance - she’s made more effort than usual with her dress. Satisfied, she walks on down the hall when she hears voices in the living room. She stops to listen.

EDWARD O.S.
It’s just three years of study, father. You know women don’t even get degrees at Oxford?

Vera peeps through the crack in the door, sees Edward pacing in front of her father.

MR.BRITTAI
Three years of extra expense!

EDWARD
I’d share my allowance with her, that would help.

MR.BRITTAI
What if she doesn’t get in? Don’t you need tuition for such a thing?

EDWARD
You could let her have a shot at it.

(MORE)
I wouldn’t feel right about going myself if she didn’t have the chance. She’s always been so bright.

Vera watches Edward, feeling grateful, as her father ponders. He looks up, catches sight of her. She ducks quickly out of sight.

MR. BRITTAIN’S VOICE
Vera!

She winces - turns and enters the living room. Comes and stands before her father.

MR. BRITTAIN
Very well. You can sit the wretched thing if you want to.

Vera is overjoyed - she hugs her father.

VERA
Thank you Daddy!

MR. BRITTAIN
You’re just sitting it, mind! Then we’ll see. Now play me some of that piano!

Vera laughs. Edward watches, smiling.

INT. STAIRCASE, MELROSE - DAY (SPRING)

Vera is pinned to the staircase wall, making way for Edward and Victor as they clatter past with suitcases and boxes - on their way back to school.

Vera follows them downstairs as Mr. Brittain, dressed to drive his car, strides into the hallway.

MR. BRITTAIN
Come on, you’ll miss the train!

Vera pursues Edward into the hall, glancing up the stairs every now and then, wondering where Roland is. Outside, Mr. Brittain and Victor are loading up the car.

VERA
I don’t want you to go.

He gives her a smile and a quick hug.

EDWARD
We’ll have the whole summer.

Victor comes back in and shakes her hand, as Mrs. Brittain appears.
VICTOR
Good bye.

VERA
Victor...

He acts cheerful - but she sees the hurt in his eyes.

EDWARD
We’d better be off...

Victor turns to say goodbye to Mrs. Brittain, as Vera sees Roland finally coming down the stairs. She hurries over to him.

VERA
I wish you weren’t going so soon!

ROLAND
Did you read the poem?

VERA
(slightly caught out)
Of course.

ROLAND
And?

VERA
(hesitant)
It’s well crafted.

ROLAND
But -?

VERA
It was a little - dry. As though you were holding back. And possibly slightly derivative.

ROLAND
(stung)
Derivative.

VERA
I couldn’t find you in it.

ROLAND
Well I can assure you it’s mine!

VERA
Of course, I didn’t mean -

EDWARD
(calling)
Roland, Come on! We’re already late!
Vera watches in dismay as Roland throws her a final, tight smile, and heads out. She joins her mother at the doorway as Roland runs to leap aboard the car, already creeping along the drive. The atmosphere is jovial -
But Vera is worried, upset with herself -

VERA'S VOICE
Edward, send me news of Roland
Leighton. Tell him - how much I
enjoyed meeting him, will you? You
know I can be my own worst enemy -

INT. VERA’S BEDROOM, MELROSE - DAY

A happy Vera falls back onto her bed, holding an envelope; she opens it, takes out a letter and starts to read.

ROLAND’S VOICE
Edward assures me you won’t mind me
writing direct. You set me a
challenge, you see, and I’ve done
my best to meet it.

A piece of paper floats out - she sees it’s a poem.

ROLAND’S VOICE
I hope you find more feeling in
this one.

Vera reads the poem, emotions flitting across her face.

ROLAND’S VOICE
Down the long white road we walked
together
Down between the grey hills and the
heather,
You seemed all brown and soft, just
like a linnet..

INT. VERA’S BEDROOM - LATER

Vera sits at her desk, eagerly writing a letter back to Roland.

ROLAND’S VOICE
Your errant hair had shadowed
sunbeams in it...
And there shone all April
In your eyes.

OMMITTED

INT./EXT. TRAIN/OXFORD - DAY

A smartly-dressed Vera, accompanied by her chaperone AUNT BELLE - a small, round, warm but flustered woman - is sitting in a train compartment looking out of the window;
on the horizon, the beautiful, sunlit spires of Oxford shimmer into view, redolent with promise....

EXT. BROAD STREET, OXFORD - DAY

Vera is walking down Broad Street as Aunt Belle hurries to keep up with her, chattering away like background noise.

Vera drinks in the sights - students cycling around on bikes, or engaged in animated conversation, the Radcliffe Camera - it all looks wonderful.

EXT. SOMERVILLE COLLEGE, OXFORD - DAY

Vera steps inside Somerville college, gazes around in awe at the emerald lawns and elegant buildings, female undergraduates passing by, as Aunt Belle witters on.

AUNT BELLE
(rapid)
I know you’re only here for two nights but Oxford can get chilly you know, it’s in a basin-

VERA
Aunt -

AUNT BELLE
I bought you an extra nightie just in case -

VERA
Aunt -

Vera has noticed two plainly-dressed female dons standing nearby, gazing at her in puzzlement. One of them, Miss LORIMER - glasses, youngish, clever, dry - approaches.

AUNT BELLE
I promised your mother to keep a proper eye on you, she does worry-

VERA
Aunt, please!

AUNT BELLE
Bedsocks! (Seeing Vera’s face) My final word!

Miss Lorimer is looking Vera up and down, taking in her attire.

MISS LORIMER
I’m sorry, are you lost?
VERA
I’m here for the exam.

MISS LORIMER
(clearly surprised)
Oh. Well, the porter’s lodge is that way, they’ll direct you.
VERA
(flustered)
Thank you.

Aunt Belle smiles at Miss Lorimer.

AUNT BELLE
I’m her Aunt Belle, I’ll be staying nearby!

Miss Lorimer manages a patronising smile. As Vera and her aunt turn to walk away, the other don approaches.

MISS LORIMER
Is it an entrance exam we’re holding or a debutante’s ball?

Vera hears – and winces inwardly.

INT. DINING HALL, SOMERVILLE – EVENING

Dinner-time. We move along a row of women, all dressed in serious black or grey, all scoffing heartily and talking. We reach Vera, who stands out in a blaze of coloured silk, like a provincial fashionista. She stares glumly at her plate of rather grey food, half-listening to an animated conversation.

CANDIDATE 1
It’s the Latin essay I’m dreading.

Vera is instantly startled.

CANDIDATE 1 (CONT’D)
My tutor’s convinced Virgil will come up. I hope he’s right.

VERA
Essay...?

The others carry on their conversation. On Vera – she didn’t know.

INT. DINING HALL/EXAM HALL – MORNING

Vera is sitting in a silent exam hall full of young women, as Miss Lorimer moves between the desks, placing exam papers face down. She puts one down before a nervous Vera, who stares at it.

MISS LORIMER
You may begin.
Vera turns the exam paper over, together with everyone else. As she reads, her face fills with dismay. Around her, girls start eagerly scribbling.

Miss Lorimer, walking through the rows, catches her eye for the briefest moment.

Vera picks up her pen, takes a deep breath - and starts.

EXT. QUAD, SOMERVILLE - LATER

The candidates file out into the fresh air, chattering, seemingly in high spirits. Vera emerges last, her shoulders slumped, on the verge of tears. That didn’t go well.

As the crowd dissipates, she stands there, alone. Then she sees Miss Lorimer, striding purposefully along some cloisters. She follows.

VERA
Excuse me!

Miss Lorimer keeps walking.

VERA (CONT’D)
About the Latin paper...

Miss Lorimer glances at her impatiently.

MISS LORIMER
What is it?

VERA
It’s - I didn’t realise an essay was required.

MISS LORIMER
It’s stated quite plainly.

VERA
I must’ve missed it. I didn’t have a tutor, I’ve prepared for this by myself.

Miss Lorimer stops, takes her in.

MISS LORIMER
You seemed to be busy writing, Miss....

VERA
(wincing)
Brittain. I wrote it in German instead.
MISS LORIMER
German! Perhaps where you come from
Latin and German can be equated,
but not here, I’m afraid.

She starts walking again, dismissing her.

VERA
You’ve judged me already!

Miss Lorimer turns, surprised, a little affronted.

VERA (CONT’D)
(nothing to lose)
You think I’m frivolous, a
provincial upstart, but I’m not!

A beat.

MISS LORIMER
I think you’re keen to stand out.

Vera’s face – proud, but wanting it so much....

VERA
Yes!

MISS LORIMER
(an ambiguous half-smile)
Good day, Miss Brittain.

She turns and walks away – Vera slumps – sure she’s blown it.

32
INT. LIVING ROOM, MELROSE - DAY

Vera is sitting with her mother, Mrs. Ellinger and several
other local ladies, talking and drinking tea. Vera fidgets,
bored.

VERA’S VOICE
It’s over, Edward. A disaster. I’ll
never escape Buxton now!

33
EXT. PLAYING FIELD, UPPINGHAM - DAY

A mud-splattered Roland and Edward are playing rugby on a
school playing field, running with the ball. Edward throws it
out of the scrum, he seems to look across at Vera and give
her a small smile.

VERA’S VOICE
Roland Leighton hasn’t written back
to me. Although, now I won’t be
joining you both at Oxford, perhaps
that’s for the best.
The tiniest smile plays on Vera’s lips as she sits, listening to her mother and the gossiping ladies.
INT. ENTRANCE HALL, MELROSE - DAY (SUMMER)

It’s roughly six weeks later. Mrs. Brittain stands in the hallway holding some hats, looking up the stairs.

MRS. BRITTAIN

VERA!

A flushed Vera comes thudding down the stairs. She’s wearing a lovely dress.

MRS. BRITTAIN

Hurry hurry, strict instructions from Edward, we can’t be late for his parade —!

She takes in Vera’s very smart outfit.

MRS. BRITTAIN (CONT’D)

Goodness it’s only a school speech day! (The hats) I don’t know if these are going to be nice enough.

VERA

(impatient)

Of course they are.

Vera takes one and puts it on her head before the mirror. Her mother looks at her.

MRS. BRITTAIN

No.

Vera takes it off - as some letters are pushed through the letter box. She leaps on them immediately, rifling through - sees the Oxford post stamp on one, and quickly pockets it.

MRS. BRITTAIN

What was that?

Vera fights not to show her tension -

VERA

Nothing.

She hands her mother the rest of the letters. Mrs. Brittain purses her lips, but hands her another hat. They both look at her reflection in the mirror.

VERA/MRS. BRITTAIN

No.

Her mother puts the final one on her.

MRS. BRITTAIN

That’s the one!

Vera pulls it off.
VERA
Awful!

Mrs. Brittain sighs with irritation.

MRS. BRITTAIN
What’s in the letter, dear?

Vera keeps stubbornly silent.

MRS. BRITTAIN (CONT’D)
You can’t go hiding things in this way, Vera, now tell me!

VERA
(tense)
It’s from Oxford.

MRS. BRITTAIN
(disappointed)
Oh! I thought it might be from a boy. Why don’t you open it?

Vera hears her father approaching.

VERA
Don’t tell father!

Mrs. Brittain sighs—her daughter perplexes her. She puts the last hat back on Vera, as Mr. Brittain appears, absorbed in reading a newspaper. We glimpse the headline: “Archduke Shot, Austria in Turmoil”.

MRS. BRITTAIN
That one really is perfect. (To Mr. Brittain) What do you think, dear?

Mr. Brittain is lost in his reading, a frown on his face.

VERA
Daddy!

MR. BRITTAIN
What? Oh. Perfect, yes.

Vera sighs, looks at her reflection.

MR. BRITTAIN (CONT’D)
Was that the right answer?

Mother and daughter share a smile.
The glint of gun metal in the sun - we see rows of schoolboy officer cadets, in gleaming uniforms, formed into neat rows and stiffly marching, under orders of "Left, right.." from an officer teacher.

On the sidelines, proud families stand watching the parade. Vera threads between them, towards the front -

**HEADMASTER’S VOICE**
So as a new crop of Uppingham boys step out onto life’s stage, we say to them, be strong, be loyal, be brave!

She picks out Edward, then Victor.... She gives them both a smile, there's a flicker of a smile in return. Her eyes search for Roland - there he is. She makes eye contact, smiles at him -

But he looks through her, his gaze fixed - as though on a distant goal she can’t share.

**CUT TO:**

At one end, we FIND - the headmaster, speaking from a podium.

**HEADMASTER**
Loyal to yourselves, loyal to kith and kin - but above all else, loyal to your homeland, ready always to serve the glory of our empire!

We MOVE OUT - to see the field of officer cadets before him, still now, and listening to his every word. Row upon row of them...

**HEADMASTER**
...For if a man cannot be useful to his country, his life is surely worth little at all!

They stand there, obedient. Innocent. Proud.

Ready.

Vera watches as the families break into polite applause.
Vera and Edward, in his officer cadet uniform.

She pulls the Oxford letter from her pocket and shows him. Edward sees it, and her nervousness. He takes her hand.

    EDWARD
    Come on.

Edward leads her towards a secluded corner.

EXT. SCHOOL APPROACH, UPPINGHAM - CONTINUOUS

Edward sees her nerves.

    EDWARD
    No one’ll disturb us here.

Vera holds out the letter in a trembling hand.

    VERA
    I know what it’s going to say!

    EDWARD
    Shall I...?

He gently takes the letter from her. She nods. He braces himself, nervous too, and opens it.

She watches his face as he scans the contents, his expression neutral.

He looks up at her for a beat - his face blank. She fears the worse. Then he breaks into a gentle smile -

    EDWARD
    You got in.

Vera’s face - total SHOCK. Then she LIGHTS up - with disbelief, with delight. Edward puts his arms round her, LIFTS her up - they laugh and jump like two excited children -

Then - as he sets her down - referencing the letter -

    EDWARD
    But you have to work on your Latin.

Vera scans the letter, laughs.

    EDWARD (CONT’D)
    You better tell Roland.

    VERA
    (unsure)
    Do you think...?

    EDWARD
    Go on!
She smiles, shy and excited at the thought - then turns and runs off, he watches her go with a smile.
Vera moves through groups of people, until she spots Roland, in his cadet uniform, standing talking to his parents, Mrs. LEIGHTON, a tall woman in flamboyant dress, both sharply bright and playful, and Mr. LEIGHTON, older, sophisticated, with a walking stick and a limp. Victor is with them. He sees Vera first, gestures her to come forward.

As she approaches -

ROLAND
Mother, father, this is Edward’s sister Vera.

MRS. LEIGHTON
Oh! I didn’t know Edward had a sister, how nice to meet you, dear.

Vera flashes a look at Roland, but his expression is unreadable. She shakes hands with his parents, then greets Victor.

VICTOR
You look happy about something.

VERA
I just heard, I got a place at Somerville!

VICTOR
Wonderful! Congratulations!

MRS LEIGHTON
(playfully sly)
Ah, now suddenly she’s becoming a very intriguing young lady, don’t you think Roland?

Roland’s smile is reserved. Vera interprets this as disinterest.

VERA
Excuse me, I must tell my parents -

She hurries away. Roland immediately excuses himself, and follows after her.

He quickly catches up with Vera as she strides through groups of people, standing chatting.

ROLAND
Vera! Wait!

VERA
What for?!

He knows....
ROLAND
Can we talk alone?

She hesitates, he gestures ahead.
Please?

Vera looks reluctant, but nods her agreement. As they disappear, we see Victor watching them...the disappointment palpable in him. Mrs. Brittain also clocks them.

39A EXT. WOODLAND PATH - CONTINUOUS

Roland and Vera walk silently through the garden. Roland wants to find them a more secluded place, he looks around, then guides her round a corner, towards a half-crumbling Greek folly covered in richly foaming roses.

40 EXT. GREEK FOLLY - CONTINUOUS

As they enter the folly -

ROLAND
It’s such good news about Oxford.

VERA
You don’t have to say that.

ROLAND
I know -

VERA
(blurting)
Look, if it’s friendship you want that’s fine with me!

Vera winces at herself - was that too much? - but she ploughs on.

VERA
I prefer clarity, that’s all!

ROLAND
No, it’s been a busy term, exams and - ending school is quite a time-consuming business, as it turns out.

A beat. Awkwardness in the air.

VERA
Your mother didn’t even know I exist.

ROLAND
No, that - that is self-protection.

He smiles his charming smile - then - sincerely now -
ROLAND (CONT’D)
It was wonderful seeing you at the parade, more than I could’ve imagined.

VERA
I’m unsure about this too, you know! It’s not exactly what I had planned!

Roland reaches into an inside pocket and takes out the letter she sent him.

ROLAND
I’ve been carrying it around with me.

A beat.

VERA
So why didn’t you write back?

ROLAND
Not good with words...?

VERA
(glimmer of a smile)
For someone who wants to be a writer...

A warmer beat -

ROLAND
We’ll be able to see each other every day.

VERA
(shaking her head)
I’ll be concentrating on my work.

ROLAND
You’ll need fresh air, surely. And a chaperone? (Off her look) Lap dog? Humble slave?

He wants to get her to smile - she does. He takes her hand, softly - pulls her towards him.

ROLAND
(intimate whisper)
Vera...Let’s agree. No more fear.

They look into one another’s eyes -

VERA
No more fear...

as Mrs. Brittain’s voice CRASHES in -
MRS. BRITTAINE O.S.

VERA!

They turn to see her mother descending on them.

MRS. BRITTAINE

What do you think you’re doing?!
This isn’t proper at all!

Roland steps forward.

ROLAND

I’m sorry, I’d like permission to see Vera again, Mrs. Brittain.
Fully chaperoned, of course.

Vera and Roland smile at one another.

41

EXT. TRAIN, COUNTRYSIDE – DAY

A train chugs through Derbyshire countryside.

VERA’S VOICE
The days feel like weeks, and the
weeks like years. Mother keeps
expecting me to drop Oxford, as
though it’s some sort of whim...

41A

INT. TRAIN CARRIAGE – DAY

Vera sits in the compartment gazing at the view outside, full
of anticipation.

VERA’S VOICE (CONT’D)
...and Daddy’s depressed about the
Europe situation, he wants to talk
endlessly about it...

42

EXT. TRAIN PLATFORM, CHARING CROSS – DAY (SUMMER)

Vera strides along a train platform, full of eager
anticipation, followed by a huffing and puffing Aunt Belle.

VERA’S VOICE (CONT’D)
...but terrible as it sounds, as
long as I get on that train to
London I just don’t care!

Up ahead, she spots Roland waiting, an apricot pink rose in
his hands. She hurries over, stops before him.

They’re both suddenly tongue-tied.

Awkwardly, he hands her the rose. She opens her coat and
fixes it in the waistband of her blue satin dress.
On Roland’s face - his pleasure. As Aunt Belle reaches them, huffing -

AUNT BELLE
I won’t get in your way! I know what young love is!

Vera and Roland share a look.

EXT. LONDON STREET - LATER

Roland and Vera are walking fast down a London street, as Aunt Belle struggles to keep up.

AUNT BELLE
Slow down you two! Your mother was very particular that I -

They round a corner, disappearing from view. She sighs.

ON Roland and Vera, walking fast.

ROLAND
Can we shake her off?

VERA
Mother’s expecting a full report back, no details spared.

They smile like conspirators. Roland sees a theatre up ahead, pulls Vera towards it. Aunt Belle appears round the corner, sees them and follows.

INT. THEATRE - MINUTES LATER

A show is taking place on stage, the theatre is almost empty. Roland pulls Vera along an empty row of seats, they sit next to one another, and he drapes one arm across the back of her seat. Aunt Belle follows, squeezing along the row past Vera, then stops.

AUNT BELLE
(to Roland)
Move along, dear.

Reluctantly, Roland moves up a place. Aunt Belle sits herself firmly down between them with a smug expression. Vera smiles.

Roland carefully reaches an arm behind Aunt Belle, finds Vera’s neck, and caresses it gently. Aunt Belle realises and, with an abrupt push of her shoulders, knocks his arm off.

Vera and Roland suppress their laughter.
Roland and Vera hurry together, ahead of Aunt Belle.

ROLAND
I know where we can go!

Roland and Vera are in a silent gallery, gazing at paintings on the walls - Aunt Belle is nearby. ON Roland’s expression - irritated that they still haven’t lost her.

But he sees she’s before a painting, absorbed in it. He guides Vera carefully towards an exit, right behind an oblivious Aunt Belle...

They burst like truants into a secluded stairwell, laughing.

ROLAND
I thought we’d lost her at the impressionists!

Vera laughs.

VERA
Aunt Belle’s got eyes in the back of her head!

ROLAND
We’re being very bad, you know, we’re going to get a terrible report.

VERA
Mother won’t be surprised. She finds me constantly exasperating. She thinks she has a very odd daughter.

ROLAND
Not odd, just different.

They stop, Roland turns to her - both suddenly aware they’re alone. Roland is close now - he wants to kiss her.

VERA
I’ve never known where I fit.
Roland takes her by the upper arms, pulls her a little closer to him -

**ROLAND**

Does it need to be a place?

He leans in to kiss her, he’s just about to - when Aunt Belle appears on the very periphery of their vision.

**AUNT BELLE**

Well!

They both see her. Roland keeps looking at Vera, tightens his grip in frustration - as Aunt Belle hurries towards them -

**AUNT BELLE**

I don’t know what to say to the pair of you, really I don’t!

---

**INT. TRAIN STATION - LATER**

The three of them are walking through the station, Aunt Belle between them now.

**AUNT BELLE**

My feet are hurting, we better call it a day.

She sees a newspaper stand.

**AUNT BELLE**

A newspaper, and a cup of tea, that’s what I need. I’ll be back in a minute.

She hurries off towards the newspaper stand, which is surrounded by a small crowd. Vera turns to Roland with a smile.

**VERA**

We’ll see each other again soon...

ON - Aunt Belle reading her paper at the stand, on the billboard, is written: “GERMANY - ULTIMATUM TO WAR!” The people around her are buzzing - mutterings such as: “They’ve got until morning” “I said it would come to this!” “They’re not to be trusted!”

She looks across - at Vera and Roland, lost in one another, oblivious.

---

**INT. TRAIN COMPARTMENT - LATER**

Vera is sitting opposite Aunt Belle, travelling home in a reverie. Aunt Belle is talking to some other passengers. Gradually, Vera tunes in -
PASSENGER 1
...My boys will be at the head of
the queue, and it’ll be a long one!
There isn’t a lad in the country
doesn’t want to go and thrash that
bloody Kaiser!

They all nod. Vera picks up a newspaper and starts reading, her expression suddenly troubled.

INT. VERA’S BEDROOM, MELROSE – NEXT EVENING

Vera is finishing changing into her night dress. As she turns, she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror, and spots a faint purple bruise and a red mark on her upper arm, where Roland gripped her. She smiles in soft delight, as the memory of that moment floods back to her...touches the marks with her fingertips, then turns with a start, as Edward knocks at the door then walks in.

EDWARD
I’ve been talking to father about
signing up.

Vera is taken aback.

VERA
Already...?

EDWARD
I’m an officer cadet. This is what
we trained for.

ON Vera – as she realises he’s right.

EDWARD
Father was his usual calm self,
said he’d rather put a gun to his
head than let me go!

Vera’s mind is whirring.

VERA
It’s all happening so fast –

EDWARD
There are boys from town who’ve
signed up already. How will it look
if I’m not among them?

VERA
I’ll talk to him. (Off his look)
Calmly, I promise!

Edward gets to his feet.
EDWARD
I should let you sleep. (Sees the marks on her arm) What happened to you?

VERA
(hastily covering up)
Nothing.

As Edward heads for the door -

VERA
I don’t think Roland will go. He’s really not the military type.

Edward looks at her.

EDWARD
Don’t go losing your head over him.

VERA
Why not?

A beat - then Vera grabs a cushion and playfully chucks it at him. He grins, ducks out.

INT. HALLWAY, MELROSE - THE NEXT DAY

A furious Mr. Brittain storms into the hallway, Vera following him -

MR. BRITTAIN
No, no, no, no, NO!

He marches into the living room -

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Her father is pacing, he turns when he sees her, is about to say something -

VERA
Let me speak!

He concedes.

VERA (CONT’D)
All the papers are saying it’ll be short and fast -

MR. BRITTAIN
I know a little more of war than you, young lady, and believe me, it’s never short and never fast!

Vera takes a deep breath, contains herself.
VERA
If we believe that from the outset it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, doesn’t it?! Maybe this time, this generation, if everyone plays their part, it might just be over quickly like they’re saying. He might not even see any fighting!

He looks at her - his expression haunted.

MR. BRITTAHN
You’re so young -

VERA
What’s Edward going to say when everyone around him is signing up and he isn’t?

A pause -

VERA (CONT’D)
Let him be a man. He won’t forgive you if you don’t.

ON Mr. Brittain - the beginnings of self-doubt.

51A
EXT. WHITE ROAD/LAKE - DAY
SHOTS of the winding white road...the tranquil lake...

52
INT. VERA’S BEDROOM/ MELROSE - NIGHT (AUTUMN)
Several weeks later. Vera, in her night gown, is packing her things for Oxford, when she hears the phone ring. She hurries out...

53
INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS
...Over to the phone, and picks it up. A crackly line. Mrs. Brittain, in her dressing gown, appears.

MRS. BRITTAHN
Who on earth rings at this time of night?!

VERA
Hello?

ROLAND’S VOICE
Vera?

She can barely hear him.
VERA
Roland? Are you alright?

At a look from Vera her mother makes a token retreat, but she’s all ears.

ROLAND’S VOICE
...When do you leave for Oxford?

VERA
(not wanting to be heard)
Tomorrow morning’s train. I change at Leicester.

ROLAND’S VOICE
We can travel together, I’ll meet you there-

The line crackles - and cuts off. Vera tries, but he’s gone. She hangs up, smiling to herself. Her mother bustles over.

MRS. BRITTAIN
Why did he want to know that? You can’t travel alone together!

Vera looks at her, half-pleading, half-defiant.

VERA
Please, mother...?

She waits.

MRS. BRITTAIN
Alright. Don’t mention it to your Father.

Vera smiles gratefully.

INT/EXT. TRAIN, LEICESTER STATION - DAY

Vera’s train is stopped at Leicester station. She hangs out of a window, looking for Roland among the crowds climbing in and out, some soldiers in khaki visible amongst them.

INT. TRAIN, LEICESTER TRAIN STATION - A MINUTE LATER

Vera is moving down a crowded train corridor, lined with private compartments. Her eyes search for Roland, straining to find him. Then she sees him, coat on, further down the corridor, looking for her, emerging from a compartment.

She hurries towards him, drinks him in with her eyes. Then she notices -

VERA
Where’s your luggage?
The flicker of something in his face - he indicates a compartment, leads her inside.

INT. TRAIN COMPARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Roland shuts the door. They’re alone.

ROLAND
Sit down, there’s something I need to tell you.

VERA
I don’t need to sit down, what is it?

ROLAND
I’m not coming to Oxford, Vera.

Her shock -

VERA
You’ve signed up...

ROLAND
A commission with the Fourth Norfolks, I’m joining them tomorrow.

VERA
Tomorrow!

She sinks down onto a seat under the impact of this news. Roland sits next to her.

VERA
How...? Edward’s still waiting, everybody is!

ROLAND
My Uncle Theo’s a military man. He pulled some strings.

VERA
Did he push you to it?

ROLAND
No! No I - asked him to.

She looks at him, stricken, betrayed.

ROLAND
Vera...I have to go. How many generations get a chance to be involved in something like this?! I can’t let others do my duty for me.
Vera’s reeling...she sees his excitement.

ROLAND (CONT’D)
I’ll be in Norwich, it’s not even active service. You wouldn’t want me not to?

She shakes her head miserably.

ROLAND (CONT’D)
There’ll be months of training, by which point the whole thing could be over. Ted and I will probably be coming to Oxford with you in the new year!

Vera has tears rolling down her cheeks. Roland is upset, confused himself - he puts an arm round her.

He turns her face to him - they KISS, finally, for the first time, a hungry, passionate, long-awaited kiss.

CUT TO:

- The BLUR of TRAIN WHEELS chugging along the tracks -

INT. TRAIN COMPARTMENT - LATER

Roland and Vera sit holding each other in exhausted silence, as, outside the window, a vista of the dreaming spires of Oxford comes into view.

VERA
Isn’t it strange, that I’m the one going to Oxford without Edward or you.

Roland holds her closer...his uncertainty showing...

CUT TO:

The TRAIN wheels churning round...

- As a SPADE DIGS into brown earth - We see a MAN digging a trench.

Behind him, other men are digging.

CLOSE ON the man’s spade as it uproots a beautiful flower -

As THE TRAIN speeds on -

The man, cigarette in mouth, climbs out of the trench -
He throws his cigarette down, crushes it with his boot, gazes around him. We see what he sees - a tranquil, silent meadow, SLASHED across with trenches -

Like open wounds in the green earth.

EXT. QUAD, SOMERVILLE - DAY

Vera is walking along a quad, books in her arms, when Miss Lorimer nearly bumps into her.

MISS LORIMER
Ah, Miss Brittain, surprised to be here no doubt?

VERA
Considering I had no tuition...

Miss Lorimer’s rudeness always manages to be eccentric rather than spiteful.

MISS LORIMER
Yes, and how it showed. Luckily you also displayed an original mind. Although whether you can bring any discipline to bear on it is quite another matter.

And with that, she walks off. Vera looks after her, lost for words.

INT. LIBRARY, OXFORD - DAY

Vera is getting some books down from a shelf, she carries them over to the desk where she’s working.

VERA’S VOICE
I’m trying my best, Roland. But there’s little peace of mind for me anymore. Every time I open a book, it’s your face I see.

VERA’S ROOM - DAWN (AUTUMN)

Vera is scribbling an essay. Through her window, we see an early sun rising over the Oxford spires. Vera stops writing, pulls out a half-written letter to Roland, and adds to it.

VERA’S VOICE
Of course I want to ask you to leave the army and come to Oxford.

(MORE)
VERA’S VOICE (cont’d)
We should be here together! But I can’t do that. I won’t.

EXT. BROAD STREET, OXFORD - DAY

Vera is making her way along Broad Street, among students on foot and on bikes - ahead, on the other side of the road, she sees -

VERA’S VOICE
Victor’s been turned down because of his poor eyesight...

- EDWARD, in a soldier’s uniform. He hasn’t seen her yet, he’s looking for a way through the traffic - her view of him is blocked by a passing vehicle -

VERA’S VOICE (CONT’D)
But Edward’s joining the Sherwood Foresters soon.

Vera catches another glimpse of him -

Suddenly he’s a CHILD of 7, in baggy shorts and a short haircut, beaming at her -

A cart passes - and it’s him again, the grown Edward in his uniform. He sees her, smiles and crosses over -

VERA’S VOICE (CONT’D)
My heart lurched at the sight of him - my little brother, suddenly so grown up - at the thought of all of you, headed for the unknown. It comforts me at least to know you’re both on English soil.

Vera and Edward embrace.

OMMITTED.

EXT. QUAD, SOMERVILLE - MORNING

Vera emerges from a staircase entrance to see, around the area of the porter’s lodge, stacks of metal beds and mattresses piled up, while porters carry more in. One of them says to a colleague - “convalescent ward’s in the next quad”.

Vera turns to see a man in a wheelchair at the college entrance - a war veteran. He’s young, barely twenty, with bandaged stumps where his arms once were. He’s slumped awkwardly, to one side, and slides a little further down without being able to right himself. Vera feels his humiliation. Their eyes meet briefly.
A NURSE comes bustling over, sees his predicament and helps sit him up. Vera watches the nurse’s smile, the boy’s gratitude...

OMMITTED.

INT. PORTER’S LODGE/POST ROOM - DAY

Vera is taking letters out of her pigeon hole. One, a telegram, catches her eye. She quickly tears it open.

ROLAND V.O.
Leave for France Thursday. Charing Cross, twelve o’clock. Please confirm can come. Roland.

Vera looks up, utterly stunned; the news she had been dreading.

INT. MISS LORIMER’S ROOM - DAY

Vera stands before Miss Lorimer, who is sitting in a faded armchair, knitting with intent. The hearth is empty. On a side table is a photo of a fresh-faced young man.

MISS LORIMER
We can’t let students go gallivanting off to London!

VERA
(fuming)
It’s not a gallivant -

MISS LORIMER
We have to work twice as hard as the men, Miss Brittain, we have to be twice as good! Otherwise what’s the point of us fighting all these years to prove we’re worthy of degrees?

VERA
It’s to say good bye to someone going to the front.

The needles work furiously. Vera notices the photo.

VERA
(risking it)
You have someone there already perhaps...?

Miss Lorimer throws Vera a cross look.
MISS LORIMER
My brother.

She holds up the sock, full of mistakes.

MISS LORIMER
Not where my abilities are best expressed. But then that’s war for you, isn’t it. The men go and fight, and we stay behind - and knit.

VERA
How many pairs of socks will it take...?

They share a smile.

MISS LORIMER
You’ll be back the same day?

VERA
Yes.

MISS LORIMER
And you’ll have a chaperone.

VERA
Yes.

Miss Lorimer nods her consent.

VERA
Thank you!

INT. CHARING CROSS TRAIN STATION - DAY

Vera strides down a bustling platform towards Roland, standing waiting for her. He looks pale and weak, not his usual self. Behind him is a poster of a gorilla holding a fainting maid in one arm, a club in the other. It reads “Enlist Now! Destroy this Mad Brute!”

The platform is bustling with soldiers and their families and friends. A certain cheerful British repression prevails - no one wants to make a fuss.

Vera runs up to him, wanting to hug him. But she stops short. They look at one another.

VERA
(eyes burning)
How long do we have?

ROLAND
About an hour.
Vera’s face - so little time.

VERA
You told me you weren’t going to France yet!

ROLAND
Vera -

VERA
(realising)
You got a transfer!

Roland nods.

VERA
You’re so eager to face death, then, are you?!

ROLAND
No -

VERA
Yes you are, you must be!

ROLAND
Please...

She sees his face - suddenly vulnerable, hot with fever. She feels his forehead, as Aunt Belle comes bustling up.

VERA
You’re sick, you’ve got a fever!
I can’t even be angry with you now!

Roland can’t help a weak smile.

AUNT BELLE
(reaching them)
Oh, doesn’t he look handsome in that uniform!

69 INT. CAFE, TRAIN STATION - LATER 69

Roland and Vera sit at a table together, as Aunt Belle bustles round them. She gets some aspirin from her handbag, gives them to Roland.

AUNT BELLE
Take these, dear, they’ll bring the fever down.

ROLAND
Thank you.
Roland gets up to fetch the tea from the counter, but Aunt Belle pushes him back down.

AUNT BELLE
Don’t you move, I’ll get it.

She bustles off. They turn to one another, their fingertips lightly touching on the table.

VERA
(immediately)
I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to be harsh.

ROLAND
I’ve let you down.

VERA
No -

ROLAND
Now it’s here I have a dust and ashes feeling about it.

They gaze at one another, too choked to speak. Aunt Belle, returning to the table, sees them - her face shows her kindness and sympathy. She puts the tea things down, starts to serve the tea.

AUNT BELLE
Influenza’s ripping through the troops, you know, I read about it in the paper. Still, you’ll be right as rain in no time, and don’t you worry about Vera, she’ll be taken good care of, won’t you dear?

A pause, filled with aching silence. Aunt Belle looks at them both -

AUNT BELLE
What? Too deep for words?

She sees it really is - sighs in sad sympathy.

INT. CHARING CROSS TRAIN STATION - LATER

Roland, Vera and Aunt Belle emerge from a subway, up onto a platform.

ROLAND
Over there.

Roland indicates a train - puffing out steam like a sinister, waiting beast.
Vera and Roland are bustled into an empty compartment by Aunt Belle. An older couple try to enter the compartment too, but Aunt Belle stops them – determined to give the lovers their privacy. 

**AUNT BELLE**

I’m sorry, this one’s taken!

As the older couple move off, Aunt Belle throws Vera and Roland a sympathetic look and shuts the compartment door, leaving them alone together.

Roland moves over to her, puts his arms around her and kisses her – passionate, desperate. They hold onto one another.

**ROLAND**

I am coming back.

A whistle blows, there’s a bustle in the corridor, voices shout, as people hurry to get off the train. They get to their feet; suddenly, time has run out.

**VERA**

Already!

Roland and Vera are caught in a wave of pushing, shoving bodies headed for the train door. Around them, couples kiss goodbye, relatives cling to their loved ones, the buttoned-up mood has transformed into near-hysteria. As they reach the door, Vera is suddenly tumbled outside by the crowd. She pushes and shoves to get back in, but the door is slammed shut. Aunt Belle is nearby in the heaving crowd.

Roland forces the window open, leans out. She grabs his hand, they hold on tight.

With a great groan, the heavy train starts to move, the women thronging around Vera fall away, but she keeps holding onto Roland, refusing to let him go...

**VERA**

Roland –

**ROLAND**

We’ll write!

She runs with the train –

Their fingers pull apart – she lets go –
And she’s left there – watching Roland, every fibre of her being straining towards him – there’s a great hiss of steam, a howling hoot –

- and the train disappears from view.

Aunt Belle finds her through the crowd –

AUNT BELLE
Poor child!

And we LIFT UP, to take in the length of the platform and its sudden absence of men – only women are dotted along it, frozen like statues in their emotion; wives, sisters, fiancées, mothers…

...As a strange, deathly silence falls over them all.

73
EXT. LANE, OXFORD – EVENING

Later that day. A pale, shaken Vera is walking down an Oxford lane, back towards her college, when she hears a voice behind her.

VICTOR
Vera!

She turns to see –

VERA
Victor...

He’s striding towards her, concern on his kind face.

VICTOR
Roland asked me to come. He thought you’d need a friendly face.

VERA
Thank you.

Vera suddenly feels her emotions, her exhaustion. Victor sees, gestures to a nearby bench, they sit together.

VERA
What a mess...

Victor sighs, nods in agreement.

VERA (CONT’D)
I can’t stay here, not now.

VICTOR
What would you do?
VERA
I don’t know...nurse? There’s a call for volunteers.

Vera shrugs, they smile....He wants to find the right words for her.
VICTOR
Roland won’t die young, Vera. He was born to make his mark on the world.

Vera’s face – eager to believe.

VERA
Do you think?

VICTOR
I’m sure of it.

She smiles – grateful –

VERA CONT.
Thank you for being here. (A beat)
I’m sorry if you were hurt Victor –

VICTOR
(interrupting)
No, please, it’s fine.

VERA
But I feel I –

VICTOR
There’s no need. In fact I’ve – met a girl.

VERA
That’s wonderful, I’m happy for you! What’s her name?

VICTOR
Molly. She’s keen.

VERA
And she has you here with her. She’s a luckier girl than I am, then.

She puts her hand on his, squeezes it with a smile.

EXT. PORTER’S LODGE, SOMERVILLE – DAY

A new day. Vera emerges from the porter’s lodge to see a boy of about 13 riding a red bicycle. He sees her, cycles over, scrabbles inside his satchel and pulls out a telegram.

BOY ON BICYCLE
Telegram, from the War Office.

Vera takes it, reads the name.
VERA
(dismay)
Miss Lorimer...

She holds it out to him, but he resists taking it back.

BOY ON BICYCLE
Would you, Miss...?

Vera hesitates, looks at the telegram in her hand.

BOY ON BICYCLE
Thanks Miss! I hate it when they cry!

And with that, he turns and cycles off.

75  EXT. QUAD, ORIEL - A LITTLE LATER

Vera is waiting as Miss Lorimer emerges from a doorway, behind a few chattering students.

She sees Vera looking at her, and hesitates, sensing something. Vera steps over and hands her the envelope. Miss Lorimer tears it open - reads quickly, and staggers.

Vera supports her arm, and helps her to the curved dip in a stone arch. Miss Lorimer sits, stiff, stricken.

CLOSE ON Vera's face....

76  EXT. BROAD STREET, OXFORD - DAY (AUTUMN)

Vera, on her way to a lecture, passes a news stand. A chalked headline catches her eye: "Heavy Casualties in Neuve Chapelle." Small groups of women are already congregated, anxiously reading newspapers. Vera buys one.

She opens the paper, inside is a column of "Fallen in Combat". Vera looks down the column. It continues over the page. She turns over; sees an entire double spread, with column after column of men's names in tiny print. Reeling, she sits on a vacant bench, and turns over - another double spread. Hundreds of them - all dead.

CUT TO:

77  IN VERA'S MIND - SHE SEES -

Roland, in pouring rain, hunkered down in a muddy trench with other men, under heavy shell fire - he turns and looks straight at her -

A whistle goes, he turns to mount the trench -
INT. MISS LORIMER’S ROOM - DAY

Vera is standing before an astonished Miss Lorimer.

MISS LORIMER
Nursing?! What on earth for?

VERA
They need volunteers.

MISS LORIMER
And I’m sure there are lots of eager young women out there who haven’t embarked on promising careers at Oxford!

VERA
I need to do something, I can’t stay here buried in books, not now!

MISS LORIMER
You don’t own the truth about how to get through this, Miss Brittain! Your opinion is just that – an opinion. You’d do well to remember it.

VERA
(chastened)
I’m sorry...I didn’t mean...

MISS LORIMER
This crisis needs people who can stand back and reflect. How can you think of giving up a golden opportunity you’ve worked so hard for?

Vera looks down, says nothing.

MISS LORIMER (CONT’D)
So your mind’s quite made up.

A pause - Then -

VERA
(shaken)
Yes, it is.

Miss Lorimer turns away from her. Vera realises she’s dismissed.

VERA (CONT’D)
Thank you, for.....
She peters out, and heads for the door. Throws Miss Lorimer one last look, but she still has her back turned.

ON Miss Lorimer – the upset showing on her face.

INT. CORRIDOR, 1ST LONDON GENERAL HOSPITAL – DAY (AUTUMN)

Vera, dressed in the floor-length uniform of the VAD nurse, walks down a long, draughty corridor in the 1st London General, a Victorian construct in Camberwell. Her footsteps clip-clop on the floor.
She cuts a resolute figure, but it’s an image of isolation - of a person dwarfed by bigger events.

CUT TO:

80 INT. WARD, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - DAY

Vera stands in a row of freshly scrubbed, eager VADs, as a stern career Sister in her 60’s, JONES, inspects them.

SISTER JONES V.O.
I know what visions have brought you here, and I’m happy they carried you to our door, but that’s where you leave them. You’re not Angels of Mercy swooping down to mop the brows of grateful men; you’re workers! And you’ll do whatever you’re asked, no matter how dirty, no matter how dull. Do I make myself clear?

VADS TOGETHER
Yes Sister.

Sister Jones’ steely gaze lands on Vera, she stops before her.

SISTER JONES
Hands.

Vera holds out her hands. Sister Jones examines them, sees they’re smooth, white, spotless - a small sneer. She drops them, walks on.

SISTER JONES
Airs and graces will not be tolerated, especially from those who’ve come down from an ivory tower. If you’ve any doubts, the door’s there, you can leave now.

Silence. No one moves. Sister Jones gazes sternly at them.

81 INT. DORMITORY, CAMBERWELL LODGINGS - BEFORE DAWN

An alarm clock on a bedside unit rings. 5.45 am. Vera, asleep in a narrow bed in a bare, cold room with five other women, struggles to get up.

SISTER JONES V.O.
Your duties commence at 7 a.m sharp. You do not sit down in the wards, ever.

(MORE)
You take instruction from the professionals who’ve been doing this job for years before you came along.

Vera boards a crowded bus, as rain beats at the windows outside.
She pushes her way through the weary commuters, and manages to find a seat for herself at the back. She gazes out through the rain at the dreary grey street outside.

INT. WARD, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - LATER THAT DAY

Sister Jones, a surgeon and two nurses are conferring together as Vera and fellow VADs bustle in. Sister Jones rounds on them.

SISTER JONES
Who sterilised the instruments?

Behind her sits a tray of silver surgical instruments.

VERA
I did, Sister.

The Sister’s eyes beam in on Vera, who looks tired.

SISTER JONES
And would you say you’ve done a good job?

Silence - Vera is thrown, but holds her nerve.

VERA
I - think so.

SISTER JONES
You think so. Really.

She reveals a tray of instruments underneath that haven’t been touched.

SISTER JONES
What about these?

VERA
(shame)
I forgot -

SISTER JONES
You forgot. And what if someone had used them, not realising?!

VERA
I’m sorry -

SISTER JONES
It’s human lives that could be put at risk! And I thought you were supposed to be intelligent.

Vera smarts - but says nothing.
SISTER JONES
Well get on with it, then!

Vera hurries forward, she catches another Nurse - Scott - smirking.

SISTER JONES
(disgusted, to Scott)
Help her, will you. (Calling after Vera) We’re waiting!

84 INT. ANNEXE - CONTINUOUS

Vera is hurriedly sterilising the instruments as Nurse Scott enters - she manages to drop some clattering to the floor. Vera is shaken, as Nurse Scott helps her pick them up, her expression milking every second of it.

NURSE SCOTT
Bloody bluestockings....

Vera looks at her, dismayed.

85 INT. 1ST LONDON GENERAL -

MONTAGE of Vera -
1) WARD. As she correctly arranges the instruments under Ward Sister Jones’s eagle eye -

VERA’S VOICE
The nurses here know I’ve come from Oxford, Roland, they’re determined to break me.

2) CORRIDOR. She carries a tray of sputum cups out of a ward -

3) OMMITTED.

VERA’S VOICE
Little do they know, the harder they push, the more grateful I am.

4) ANNEXE. She stands in a production line of three VADs, as they pass medical trays along, quickly assembling them.

VERA’S VOICE
Anything to stop me thinking, and fill the hours between news of you.

END MONTAGE.

86

INT. DORMITORY, CAMBERWELL – NIGHT

Vera is sitting on her thin mattress, pulling socks off her damp feet. They’re swollen and red with painful chill blains. BETTY, a pale, middle-class Northerner in the bed next to her, is gazing mournfully at a photo of a soldier.

BETTY
(tearful)
Do you have a photo of yours?

VERA
No.

Betty kisses the photo.

BETTY
Personally I couldn’t get through the day without seeing his face. I don’t sleep at night for the worry.

VERA
(dry)
Really.

BETTY
I’m too sensitive. I wish I was more like you!
She flings herself across her bed. Vera sighs to herself.

87  INT. DORMITORY, CAMBERWELL - NIGHT

Vera lies in bed, wide awake, while next to her, Betty snores loudly in her sleep.

VERA’S VOICE
I hate it sometimes, of course I do. But then I think of you, out there in the danger, darkness and cold - precious life, a thousand times more tired than I!

She gets a newspaper out from under her bed and reads an article, frowning to herself. Then she gets up and studies a map of France on her wall. Drawing pins mark the front line of battle. Carefully, she repositions a few of them, as Roland’s voice rises.

ROLAND’S VOICE
(a letter)
"One of my men has just been killed - the first. I’ve been taking the things out of his pockets and tying them in his handkerchief, to be sent back somewhere, to someone who will see in them more than a torn letter, a pencil and a piece of shell..."

88  INT. WARD, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - LATER

Vera hurriedly carries a basin of hot soapy water across the ward to a curtained-off bed. The other beds in the ward are dotted with neatly bandaged men, but it’s not full.

Vera enters through the curtains to find Nurse Scott and another nurse, Miss Milton, working with urgency on an unconscious man; one is cutting away his ragged, filthy uniform, the other is completing the dressing to a head wound. We should suddenly feel the mud and stench of the trenches.

NURSE MILTON
Fancy sending him over in this state.

NURSE SCOTT
We’re seeing more and more of it.

Vera watches bits of blood-soaked khaki cloth fall to the floor. She puts the basin down, arranges some towels. When she turns round again, the man is suddenly naked; lying there Christ-like, broken, strangely beautiful.
Nurse Scott sees her.

NURSE SCOTT
Since you’re so eager, Brittain, you sponge him down.

The two nurses leave. Vera hesitates, slightly awe-struck by her task. She squeezes a wet sponge out, and, tentatively, starts to wash the blood and mud from his chest. His eyelids flutter.

WOUNDED SOLDIER
(hoarse)
Vera...

Startled, Vera leans in close.

VERA
What did you say?

He opens his eyes wider now, looks at her...

WOUNDED SOLDIER
Sister...

Vera realises her mistake – continues sponging him, smiling.

VERA’S VOICE
I felt so close to you today, Roland. As though we were touching.

89 OMMITTED.

INT. CORRIDOR, 1ST LONDON GENERAL – DAY (AUTUMN/WINTER)

A tired Vera hurries along a corridor, rounds the corner to see – up ahead, Edward, with a friend, GEOFFREY, a willowy young man of delicate features.

She reaches Edward and hugs him close. He looks at her, concerned.

EDWARD
You look exhausted, what’re they doing to you here?

VERA
I’m alright.

Edward turns to make introductions.

EDWARD
Vera, Geoffrey Thurlow. A friend from the battalion.
VERA
(anxious)
You’re not leaving for France?

EDWARD
Not yet.

VERA
(relieved, to Geoffrey)
I’m sorry, forgive me...

She shakes Geoffrey’s hand. He’s shy, can’t make eye contact with her.

GEOFFREY
No, the relief is all mine.

Vera smiles.

VERA
A peace-loving soldier?

GEOFFREY
Or a cowardly one perhaps.

EDWARD
Nonsense. Geoffrey was about to train as a priest, that takes courage.

They both smile.

GEOFFREY
Saved by the War, imagine that.

He glances at Edward, a shy, intense look.

EDWARD
(to Vera)
So, shall we go?

VERA
Where?

EDWARD
Didn’t he write and tell you? Roland’s home on leave!

VERA’S FACE -

91

EXT. GARDEN, LEIGHTON HOUSE, LOWESTOFT - DAY

Vera, Edward, Geoffrey, and Victor are in the Leighton’s front garden with a flamboyantly-dressed Mrs. Leighton. The family house is perched dramatically above the beach.
MRS. LEIGHTON
He walked in the door yesterday and fell asleep for twenty hours straight. He’s hardly said a word, he’s outside - just sitting there...

She gestures beyond the window, to a field.

EXT. BRACKEN FIELD, CLIFF, LOWESTOFT - A LITTLE LATER

Vera approaches Roland, sitting in a bracken field adjacent to the family house, gazing out across the sea. He hears her, and turns. He’s still in his dusty officer’s uniform, and he looks different - worn, somehow, his expression full of anxiety, and remote.

ROLAND
(as soon as he sees her)
I have to go back in three days.

Vera is shocked - but sits next to him.

VERA
Let’s not think about that.

Roland looks at her almost as though at a stranger -

Then he sees Edward and Victor approaching. He leaps to his feet, suddenly more relaxed.

ROLAND
Ted! Vic!

He goes over to them, they all shake hands. Vera hears Edward introducing Geoffrey to him. She’s confused - this is not what she expected.

EXT. BEACH - LATER

Roland is preparing to throw his army knife at an old wooden post in the sand, as the others watch. He takes aim, and throws - bulls eye. The men show their appreciation. Roland goes and pulls the knife out, a swagger to him.

As he comes back -

ROLAND
The worst is when you have to go out and repair the wire. Boot polish on the face, crawling on your belly in the mud and rain.
He sits on a dune, the others do the same.
ROLAND (CONT’D)
I was out one night with an officer called Harrison. We were so close to the Germans we could hear them whispering in their trench. Hast du feuer?

The others chuckle, hanging off his every word.

VICTOR
Were you scared?

ROLAND
You don’t think about it. He’s a good man, Harrison. I invited him to stay, but he’s not interested in home leave. Says it makes a man soft.

VERA
God forbid any of you should be soft!

VICTOR
If I could get out there I don’t think I’d want to come back.

VERA
(sharp)
You don’t know the first thing about it!

Edward, sensing the mood, claps Victor on the back, indicates to Geoffrey.

EDWARD
Come on, let’s get some tea.

Vera is left there with Roland, a tense mood between them. After a moment, Roland decides to head after the others.

VERA
Roland!

He turns to her.

ROLAND
That was unnecessary.

VERA
Talk to me! Otherwise how can I understand?!

ROLAND
(hard)
Perhaps you can’t.

A pause.
VERA
I sent you some poems a while ago,
I don’t know if you got them.

ROLAND
I don’t think so.

VERA
Have you written any yourself?

Roland kind of snorts with derision at this idea.

ROLAND
Poems?! Please...

He sees her stricken expression -

ROLAND
For God’s sake!

He turns and strides away. Vera follows him, her skirts catching round her ankles. He moves faster, as though desperate to escape her.

VERA
ROLAND!

She catches up with him, roughly GRABS his arm. He SHAKES her off so hard, she stumbles and falls. He looks stricken, helps her to her feet.

ROLAND
I’m sorry - I’m sorry -

She grabs his hands.

VERA
This isn’t the real you! This -!

She puts his hand to her cheek, then kisses it, then puts it to her waist, almost forcing him to hold her -

VERA
This is real! Feel it! Remember, Roland! You and me together - now - here - this moment!

He looks at her, raw, his armour cracking -

VERA (CONT’D)
The most precious part of you -
don’t let war destroy it!

ROLAND
It might be gone already -

VERA
No! It’s not! I promise you!
He PULLS her to him, in a sudden, desperate hug - buries his face in her shoulder. Vera hugs him back, holding him tight.

EXT. ABOVE THE BEACH, GRASSY SLOPE - A LITTLE LATER

Roland and Vera are sitting next to each other. Gulls keen overhead. The mood is quiet.

ROLAND
Harrison’s brother came back from leave engaged to his fiancee. Within ten minutes he’d put his head above the parapet and got his brains blown out. I was next to him when it happened. (Pause) Home leave makes you soft.

She strokes his hair, his face.

VERA
We don’t need to get married, or engaged!

Roland looks at her for a beat -

ROLAND
Perhaps we should.

VERA
It’s not what either of us wanted -

ROLAND
Imagine it, though. You, in a beautiful dress. A sunny day, an old church. All the people we love. Champagne.

VERA
(gentle smile)
Cake.

He smiles - haunted.

ROLAND (CONT’D)
Does it get any better than cake?

A beat -
ROLAND
Marry me Vera, next time I’m home!

VERA
(emotional)
Alright. Yes!

ROLAND
It’ll give me something to fix on.

He hugs her to him, tight, his eyes burning.

ROLAND
I’m going to live.

A WIDE SHOT of Vera and Roland, two small beings clinging to one another.

EXT. BEACH, LOWESTOFT - DAY
Vera and Roland are flying a kite along the beach together, running with it, as it flutters up and down in the breeze, laughing.

Vera stops and watches him for a moment - the look of almost childlike concentration on his face. Carefree, just for an instant.

VERA’S VOICE
Our generation will never be new again, or truly young.

OMMITTED.

INT. DORMITORY, CAMBERWELL - NIGHT
Vera, back in her VAD uniform, places a photo of Roland on her bedside, gazes at it.

VERA’S VOICE (CONT’D)
Our youth has been stolen from us. As for peace of mind, who knows when it will return...If it ever does.

INT. CHARING CROSS RAILWAY STATION - DAY
Vera is hugging goodbye to a uniformed Edward, next to the train he’s about to board for France. The platform is swarming with men in khaki and family members. Geoffrey is saying farewell to Mr. And Mrs. Brittain.

Edward pulls some sheafs of paper from his coat, and hands them to her with a smile.
EDWARD
My music. Keep it for me.

Vera nods, takes it.

Edward steps over to his father, shakes his hand. Then Mr. Brittain pulls him in for a stiff embrace.

Vera overhears two company commanders walking past -

COMMANDING OFFICER
I wish they wouldn’t come, it makes it so much harder for the men.

The train whistle blows. Geoffrey and Edward bound onto the train with a final, cheerful wave. Vera and her parents watch, stricken.

INT. PLATFORM, CHARING CROSS STATION - A LITTLE LATER

Vera and her mother are about to enter the station cafe when Mrs. Brittain looks around for her husband. She sees him further along the platform, his back to them, seemingly studying a timetable.

MRS. BRITTAIN
Go and tell your father to hurry up, dear, will you.

Vera walks over towards her father, who is oddly immobile.

VERA
(approaching)
Daddy?

She reaches him, realises he’s battling to hold down his emotions. She puts a hand on his shoulder.

VERA
Oh Daddy.

His shoulders start to shake - small, silent judders. She gets out a handkerchief, hands it to him, he puts it over his face.

INT. CORRIDOR, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - EARLY MORNING

Ward Sister Jones is holding the door open as nurses push trolleys piled high with laundered bed linen through. The mood is urgent.

SISTER JONES
Move it! Move it!
Vera, Betty and a few other girls come rushing along the corridor, making hasty adjustments to their uniforms - they’ve obviously been hauled out of bed.

SISTER JONES
Two hundred extra beds by lunchtime! Hurry now!

INT. CORRIDOR, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - LATER

A white sheet flutters up - and down onto a military bed. Vera and Betty tuck the sheet in, as around them, other nurses make up beds, and orderlies busily erect new ones.

They finish, and stand back - as we PULL OUT to realise they’re in the long hospital corridor, now filled wall to wall with newly prepared beds, with barely an inch between them.

BETTY
What now?

VERA
We wait.

EXT. STREET, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - LATER

Vera and Betty emerge from the hospital to see a gaggle of nurses outside, standing still and listening. They join them.

VERA
What is it-?

One of the other nurses holds her hand up for quiet. They listen.

A distant, muffled BOOM resonates. Vera looks down at her sensible lace-up shoes. The pavement beneath her feet is shuddering.

Betty looks at her in disbelief.

BETTY
It can’t be...

Another boom resonates, the pavement shakes.

VERA
It’s France.
INT. WARD, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - DAY

A scene of barely contained chaos. Vera and Betty balance medical trays as they squeeze their way between the tightly-packed beds, which are now crammed full of groaning, wounded men. Blaring, jaunty gramophone music goes some way to drowning the cries.

INT. ANNEXE - LATER

Vera is arranging surgical instruments on trays at one end of the annexe.

SISTER JONES

Brittain!

Vera whips round. The Ward Sister’s beady eye sweeps across the trays – then an exhausted Vera.

SISTER JONES

Good work, Nurse. Make sure you get your rest.

Vera nods, pleased – some praise, at last.

EXT. LONDON STREET - DAY

Vera is walking along a street in the city of London, past a wall covered in propaganda posters.

VERA’S VOICE

There’s news of Geoffrey, Roland. Edward’s asked me to go and see him.

One poster, repeated over and over, shows a man sitting in an armchair with a little boy on his lap, and the caption: “Daddy, what did YOU do in the War?”

INT. FISHMONGER HALL - LATER

Vera is sitting next to Geoffrey, in a cramped little space partitioned off from other invalids in the huge, vaulted hall.

Geoffrey has changed, and it’s shocking. He’s seated in a chair, next to a bed, a blanket over his knees. His face is grey, his expression haunted, and he’s shaking.

VERA

Can I get you anything?

GEOFFREY

Edward...?
She knows what he’s asking.

VERA
  We had a letter yesterday, he’s well.

A pause. Geoffrey’s mind wanders.

GEOFFREY
  It’s the way the men watch your every move, as though you have the answers, as though you have a clue...

He stops, breathless, almost choking.
GEOFFREY
When we went over the top...I held it together for them.

VERA
You’re very brave.

She tries to take his hand but he pulls it away, unable to bear human contact.

GEOFFREY
I need to get back there.

This baffles Vera.

VERA
...Why?

GEOFFREY
The fear of going’s the worst. (Pause) Nothing will be better until it’s over.

107 INT. CORRIDOR, FISHMONGER HALL - ANOTHER DAY

Vera is helping Geoffrey to walk – he has the strange, flailing walk of the shell-shocked; a toddler’s stagger in the body of an old man.

VERA’S VOICE
He was at the front just eleven days. It’s taken three months for him to even start to walk again.

108 INT. WARD, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - EVENING

Vera is on night duty in the dark, quiet ward. Her duties finished, she sits down and eagerly pulls out a letter from Roland. She starts to read.

ROLAND’S VOICE
Good news. My Christmas leave has been approved. I’ll be home to make you my wife!

Vera is delighted.

ROLAND’S VOICE (CONT’D)
And I have a surprise, something I think will please you.
VERA
(whisper to herself)
What?

ROLAND’S VOICE
You’ll see when we meet. I’ve been posted to company headquarters, three miles behind lines. I’ll be here until my leave. I’m safe, Vera.

VERA
Safe...

109 INT. WARD, 1ST LONDON GENERAL – EVENING (WINTER)

Vera and other nurses move between beds of sleeping men, hanging up Christmas decorations – tinsel and some holly.

As she’s next to one bed – the occupant, Billy, calls out.

BILLY
Nurse!

Vera turns to look at the man, his expression warm.

BILLY
You’re walking on air, Nurse!

Vera smiles.

BILLY
Go on, spill the beans.

Vera hesitates, then decides to tell him.

VERA
I’m going to Brighton in the morning to meet my fiance, we’re getting married.

BILLY
Over there, is he, fighting the Boch?

She nods.

BILLY
Now you’re a reason for a man to get through, Miss, if you don’t mind my saying.

She tucks him up with a smile.

VERA
Settle down and get some sleep.
An excited Vera is fixing a hat on, in a large gilt mirror in a corner of the elegant, high-ceilinged lobby. Her mother is with her, helping. Around them, we get a sense of the coming and going of guests, and smart, uniformed staff. Muffled, discreet elegance. A phone is ringing somewhere.

VERA
How do I look?

MRS. BRITAIN
(adjusting her)
Positively bridal.

Vera glances at a clock.

VERA (CONT’D)
Half an hour to go. He’ll have had a long journey, he’ll be tired.

A HOTEL CLERK in black comes over.

HOTEL CLERK
Miss Vera Brittain?

VERA
Yes.

HOTEL CLERK
A telephone call for you, Miss.

VERA
(surprised)
That must be him! I hope he’s not going to be late.

She follows the clerk over to a desk, where apricot pink flowers sit a blue glass vase. Her mother watches, with a trace of anxiety.

ON Vera’s hand as, in slight slow motion, she reaches for the receiver. She lifts it to her ear.

VERA
Hello?

The line is fuzzy, but no one replies the other end.

VERA
...Roland?

She hears a sob – someone is crying. Anxiety floods her.
VERA

...What?

MRS. LEIGHTON’S VOICE
(choking sobs)
Vera...Oh God Vera...Oh God...

Vera’s blood starts to turn to ice. All other sound cuts out - just the throbbing pulse of her heart.

Around her, the lobby FREEZES - people stopped in their tracks, the hotel clerk, her Mother -
- The world at a standstill.

MRS. LEIGHTON’S VOICE
(choking sobs)
He’s dead...Roland’s dead.

Vera’s EYES - staring at a silent, frozen world. A breeze tinkles the ceiling chandelier - then ruffles the flowers in the blue vase, their colour so dazzling bright, it hurts the eyes.

EXT. BEACH, BRIGHTON - DAY

Gulls, flying against a grey sky, keening angrily.

Vera, standing on the beach, gazing stunned and numb into the waves as they crash and suck at the shingle...

A small crab scuttles across her shoe, Vera barely noticing -

CUT TO:

HOTEL BEDROOM - A numb, blank Vera sits in an armchair, anxiously watched by her parents, a cup of coffee in front of her. There’s still no sound.

She tries to pick up the delicate porcelain cup, but her hand shakes so much, it’s impossible. The cup chinks loudly against its saucer. Her parents exchange a worried glance.

CUT TO:
Vera sits, straight and still, on a couch. Mrs. Leighton is nearby, red-eyed, lost in her own world. Roland’s younger sister Clare, 15, is there. So is Victor, now in uniform. Grief isolates them all.

Mr. Leighton stands before them, reading from a letter.

**MR. LEIGHTON**

It’s from an officer in his company. (Reading)...died of wounds at Louvencourt clearing station.

**VERA**

What was he doing at the front?

Mr. Leighton looks at her blankly - in shock.

**MRS. LEIGHTON**

Why was he in a trench?

Mr. Leighton scans the letter.

**MR. LEIGHTON**

Suddenly sent there by all accounts, for a big push.

**VICTOR**

There was nothing in the papers.

**MR. LEIGHTON**

Never happened. False alarm. He was out mending wire. (Scanning the letter) Shot by a sniper at 2 am while bravely carrying out duties. Taken straight to Louvencourt, died late afternoon...noble and painless death.

**VERA**

That’s a long time after he was shot! What happened?

Mrs. Leighton, agitated, gets up; none of them want to think about this.

**MR. LEIGHTON**

Painless...I suppose the man would know.

Mrs. Leighton goes over to a record collection, pulls out a gramophone record.

**MRS. LEIGHTON**

He loved this piece....
She turns away, close to tears. Vera feels someone taking her hand - looks down. It’s Clare, smiling at her through tears, reaching out. Vera gives her hand a quick squeeze, but she can’t respond to the emotion...

EXTERIOR. GARDEN, LEIGHTON HOUSE - A LITTLE LATER

Vera is standing there, in a bleak wind, as Victor comes out and joins her. After a moment -

VICTOR
I’m off to France in a few days.

VERA
Oh Victor...

VICTOR (trying to keep it light)
Yes, funnily enough the eyesight doesn’t seem to be such a problem anymore.

VERA
Will you see Molly before you go?

Victor quickly nods....He struggles to find the words -

VICTOR (CONT’D)
He always told us to seize the moment, Vera, remember? He was so good at that...living to the full.

Vera manages a smile - nods.

VICTOR (CONT’D)
A painless, noble death...It’s important to hold onto.

VERA (detached)
He had nearly a whole day after he was shot. Why was there no message for us?

Victor doesn’t know what to say.

VERA (CONT’D)
I have to find out what happened. Someone must have been there with him.

Victor looks at her, eyes brimming with sadness.
INT. DORMITORY, CAMBERWELL - DAY (WINTER)

Vera sits at a small desk, reading a letter. On the desk before her are a few other letters, and blank writing paper.

VERA
(under her breath)
Thank you for your letter...I’m sorry not to be of more help...

Frustrated, she screws the letter up into a ball, chucks it away, then picks up a pen, and starts intently writing.

INT. WARD, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - DAY

Vera notices Betty and two VADs. They’re looking at her, obviously wanting to say something. Vera turns impatiently away - she has no interest in hearing it -

BETTY
Vera -

Vera turns. Her closed expression is not encouraging.

VAD 2
We’re sorry for your loss.

VAD 1
He’s in a better place now.

VERA
(sharp)
I doubt he’d agree with that.

BETTY
Time heals all wounds.

VERA
I have no desire whatsoever to be healed!

She pushes through them, and walks away. The women look miserably at each other.

INT. ANNEXE, CONVALESCENT HOME, LONDON - DAY

Vera, holding a letter, walks through an annexe in a convalescent home.
She enters a large, light-drenched sun room dotted with recovering soldiers. She enquires of one of them, he points to a young man in convalescent blues - GEORGE - at the far end, one arm in a sling. As Vera approaches, she takes in a tall, slim young man with an attractive face - nothing much of the soldier about him. A Nurse is helping him to his feet.

VERA
Excuse me I’m Vera Brittain, fiancee to Roland Leighton -

George realises who she is - his expression closes, with gentle weariness.

CONVALESCENT NURSE
The officer’s not receiving visitors today.

GEORGE
(a gesture to the nurse)
I did write to you, Miss Brittain-

VERA
Yes, thank you, and I’m sorry to bother you again, it’s just -

GEORGE
(interrupting, gentle)
There’s really nothing more I can say.

VERA
But you - you did see Roland at the clearing station that day -

George starts limping painfully away, propped up by the nurse, who tut-tuts disapprovingly at Vera.

GEORGE
Comfort yourself that it was a quick and painless end.

VERA
Everyone keeps saying that, but Roland lived for hours after he was shot!

George didn’t know she knew this.

GEORGE
(closing it down)
I’m sorry for your loss.

He keeps walking. Vera hesitates - then pursues him.
VERA
I understand. You’re afraid I’ll make a scene. You think I’ll throw myself around like some hysteric. And why should you be the messenger of some terrible end? You’ve never even met me!

He turns to look at her - she sees the hesitation on his face.

VERA (CONT’D)
I need to know the truth. It’s the one thing left I can do for him.

A beat. George gestures to the nurse, who leaves them. Vera waits.

GEORGE
Would you like to sit down?

VERA
I’m fine.

George clears his throat. This is difficult.

GEORGE
It was a messy wound, low down in the abdomen. They operated, they did their best. I was in the bed next to him. He didn’t stand a chance.

Vera looks straight at him the whole time.

GEORGE (CONT’D)
He came round for a few hours.

VERA
Did he say anything? Was there a message?

GEORGE
(gentle with her)
The pain was too great, Miss Brittain. It made anything else impossible.

Vera remains steady.

VERA
I see. Yes, that would explain it. (Pause) Did he - suffer a great deal?

George just looks at her - then nods.
Vera closes her eyes for a brief moment, struggling to deal with this.

GEORGE
They’re short of everything in the clearing stations, it’s chaos, not enough medics for the number of wounded. They were waiting for morphine stocks.

VERA
Did some arrive?

GEORGE
He got a dose near the end.

Vera’s relieved to hear this.

VERA
Were there - any words? Anything?

George is silent.

VERA
Please...

GEORGE
He said - Lying on this hillside for six days has made me very stiff.

Vera looks at him – then down, defeated by this.

GEORGE
I’m sorry. None of it makes any sense.

Vera holds out a hand.

VERA
You’re very kind. I won’t forget it.

George takes her hand, presses it between his; suddenly drawn to that strength and resolve of hers.

Vera turns and walks away. He watches her go.

Vera sits in her small room, writing a letter to Victor.
VERA’S VOICE
Dear Victor. I met the officer in question, he...

She stops, thinks. Takes up her pen again.

VERA’S VOICE
He confirmed what Roland’s colleague told us. It was a painless and noble death. Comfort yourself with this, dear Victor, as you face the trials ahead.

121 EXT. LEIGHTON HOUSE, LOWESTOFT – DAY

Vera is heading up the snowy garden path when Roland’s distraught sister Clare comes running out to greet her.

CLARE
Roland’s kit. They’ve sent it back to us!

Clare runs back into the house. Vera hesitates, not sure if she can face this.

122 INT. LIVING ROOM, LEIGHTON HOUSE – SECONDS LATER

Vera walks into the living room to be met by a terrible sight. Mr. and Mrs. Leighton are standing frozen in horror, looking at a heap of blood and mud-stained khaki clothes in the centre of the room. The smell is terrible – Vera covers her nose and mouth with her hand.

MRS. LEIGHTON
How could they do this?! How could they send us that....that, it’s not my Roland!

Mrs. Leighton turns away from the horrible sight.

MRS. LEIGHTON
Take it outside, take it!

Mr. Leighton steps forward, but Vera stops him.

VERA
Wait.

She goes over to the bloody heap, stares at it for a moment. Then kneels down beside it. She has to brace herself to breathe normally, because of the smell.

VERA
Oh God....
She reaches across, picks up a damp, blood-soaked item - Roland’s vest, ripped and torn.

She picks up his cap, all flattened and squashed. Next, his jacket, covered in dried viscera. Vera holds it up. She has to look, she has to check...Bracing herself, she reaches into the inside pocket. The filth of the trenches comes off on her hands, but she carries on. She feels something - pulls out Roland’s wallet. Her fingers are trembling, but she opens it. Inside, is a photo of her. Vera wipes hair from her face, gets a streak of dirt across it. She feels something else, reaches in and pulls out - a sheaf of papers.

Vera lays them down. They’re splattered, filthy, but she smooths them out. They’re poems, headed “For Vera”. One has dried violet flowers folded into it.

Vera gazes at them - overcome, her emotions rising to the surface; sobs of grief and joy combined. At last - something from him. At last, she can grieve...

123  EXT. GARDEN, LEIGHTON HOUSE - LATER

Vera and Mr. Leighton are digging a hole in the frozen ground, as Mrs. Leighton watches, Clare pours boiling water from a kettle to help thaw the soil. Over this:

ROLAND’S VOICE
Violets from Plug Street Wood,
Sweet, I send you oversea.

Vera and Mr. Leighton shovel Roland’s kit into the hole. Then they start to bury it.

ROLAND’S VOICE
(It is strange they should be blue,
Blue when his soaked blood was red,
For they grew around his head;
It is strange they should be blue.)

CUT TO:

124  EXT. PLUG STREET WOOD, BELGIUM - DAY (SPRING)

We see Roland as he spots some violets growing beneath a tree. He walks over to pick them - sees a man’s semi-decomposed corpse lying there, very still. The violets are growing in the blood-stained earth around his head. A bird twitters somewhere, leaves rustle in the breeze.

ROLAND’S VOICE
Violets from Plug Street Wood -
- Think what they have meant to me -
Life and Hope and Love and You.
(MORE)
And you did not see them grow
Where his mangled body lay,
Hiding horror from the day.
Sweetest, it was better so.

INT. CORRIDOR, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - DAY (SPRING)

125

Vera hurries down a hospital corridor, towards a ward.

ROLAND’S VOICE
Violets from oversea,
To your dear, far forgetting land:
These I send in memory,
Knowing you will understand.

INT. WARD, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - DAY

126

Vera approaches a man sitting in a chair by his bed, his head entirely bound in dressing save for the lower face and one eye. It’s Victor.

VERA
Victor...

He stirs. He looks different - shrunken, almost child-like. Vera tries to make eye contact, but his one eye stares back at her, sightless.

VICTOR
Who is it? Is that...?

We realise he’s blind. The shock...she takes his hand.

VICTOR (CONT’D)
Vera.

VERA
Oh Victor....

VICTOR
(trembling attempt to be light)
What a fix, eh.

He plucks at the blanket across his lap.

VICTOR
This blanket’s driving me mad, it’s far too itchy!

VERA
I’ll take care of it.

Upset, she takes the blanket off, then sits back down, trying to keep her voice steady.
VERA
Does Molly know? Would you like me to contact her for you?

A beat.

VICTOR
There’s no Molly, Vera. There never was.

On Vera - stricken.

VICTOR (CONT’D)
(managing a smile)
Couldn’t have you feeling sorry for me, could I?

127 INT. DORMITORY, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - DAY

A thoughtful Vera is getting ready to go out - coat and hat on. She checks her appearance in the mirror - gazes at her face for a moment, gaunt, worn. Then she goes over to a box of cakes, closes it carefully up, and readies to leave.

128 EXT. GARDEN, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - A LITTLE LATER

Vera is settling herself down in a chair next to Victor, who has been brought outside to get some fresh air. The opened box of cakes is beside him.

VICTOR
I’m getting a visit from an officer who lost both eyes at the start of the War. He’s going to tell me about Braille.

VERA
That’s the Victor I know, always the optimist.

VICTOR
(A new cynicism)
Yes, inspirational stories for the damned. What about you? Still writing?

VERA
Writing! Goodness no.

VICTOR
Really? You’ve got some material now.
VERA
That belongs to another life. I have much more important things to interest me, like being here with you.

Victor gropes for her hand, she takes it. He gives it a squeeze.

VERA (CONT’D)
I’ve been thinking, Victor, and I want to look after you. We belong together now, don’t we? You’re going to need someone, and I -

Victor listens, alert and very still.

VERA (CONT’D)
(swallowing)
- well, Roland would like it. You knew him better than anyone in the world, except Edward.

VICTOR
Poor Vera. Are you proposing to me now?

VERA
Yes, yes I am.

Victor lifts her hand to his lips and kisses it.

VICTOR
(gently)
Then I must turn you down.

A moment – as Vera accepts, gradually realising he’s right. They sit there, lost together, holding hands.

129 INT. DORMITORY, CAMBERWELL - NIGHT

Vera is fast asleep in her narrow bed when there’s a sudden pounding at the door. Vera and Betty both sit up with a start.

VOICE OUTSIDE
Brittain! You’re wanted!

130 INT. BIG WARD, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - DAWN

Vera hurries into the ward, looking for Victor. She sees his bed has been curtained off. A Nurse – SISTER ELIOT – sees her and steps over.
SISTER ELIOT
He called for us about an hour ago, said there was a loud clicking noise in his head.

Vera pulls back the curtain - sees Victor lying in bed, dead.

SISTER ELIOT
It was very quick. I’m sorry.

Vera nods, sinks into a chair by the bed. Sister Eliot pulls the curtain closed and leaves her. Victor’s peaceful in death, his hands folded across his chest, that shrunken, child-like look accentuated.

Vera gazes at him....

EXT. TRENCH, FRANCE - DAY
The hollow FACES of young tommies, standing in a trench, waiting silently to go over the top.

One smokes, another nervously bites his lip, another’s gaze is vacant...we come to Edward, his hair greying at the temples - remembering he’s still only 20 - the truth of War etched on his face.

EDWARD’S VOICE
I’m so glad you were near, and saw him so nearly at the end. We share a memory of both of them, dear Vera, that is worth all the rest of the world, and the sun of that memory never sets. And you know that I love you, that I would do anything in the world in my power should you ask it, and that I am your servant as well as your brother. (Pause) Edward.

INT. LIVING ROOM, MELROSE - DAY (WINTER)
Vera, composed and pale, sits opposite her parents.

VERA
My mind’s made up.

MRS. BRITTAIIN
But France, the front, it’s so dangerous!

VERA
I’ll be behind the lines. It’s as close to Edward as I can get, I - need to be there.
Mrs. Brittain, agitated, gets up and fetches some gifts – jars of jam and cream, some rollers.

MRS. BRITTAIN
    I’ve been gathering some things for you, I suppose you can take them to France too. There’s so little available now, but – cook’s last jar...

She puts down some jam.

MRS. BRITTAIN
    Damson.

Vera sighs, exasperated.

As Mrs. Brittain moves off again, Mr Brittain touches Vera’s hand – his expression asking for her understanding....

Mrs. Brittain comes back with more things.

MRS. BRITTAIN
    Some rollers for your hair...and cream. It’ll help stop your hands chapping. And don’t forget those poor elbows, it’s easily done.

A beat. Vera reaches out, takes her mother’s hand.

VERA
    I’ll make sure I use it. And I’ll write every day, I promise.

Mrs Brittain nods, trying to be alright. Mr. Brittain’s eyes glimmer with admiration for her.
MR. BRITTAI
Why was I ever disappointed you weren’t a boy?

They share a smile.

INT. ARMY LORRY, ETAPLES MILITARY BASE, FRANCE - DAY

Vera, in her VAD uniform, sits in a crowded army lorry as it pulls into Etaples military base. It’s raining outside.

Through the window, she sees wounded men on stretchers carried past, army personnel and nurses hurrying along, red cross vehicles rumbling by. Some Chinese labourers are building a new hut, shouting to each other in Chinese. Her fellow passengers, all army personnel, leap up and bustle out.

Vera gets to her feet, takes hold of her suitcase and climbs out. Her feet immediately sink into the MUD of Norther France. From somewhere comes the distant sound of song. It’s soldiers singing: “Good bye-eee, Don’t Cry-eee, Wipe the tear, Baby dear, from your eye-eee...”

As the army lorry departs, the sight that greets her is desolate—mud, rain, and a warren of makeshift wood and tin huts.

EXT. ETAPLES - SECONDS LATER

A wet Vera enters a small courtyard of huts, her feet sinking into a quagmire of mud.

Then she sees him—outside one of the huts, a shellshocked Tommy, wrapped in an old army blanket, standing there shivering and soaked. The look in his eyes cuts right through her. Two nurses emerge to encourage him back inside, but he seems not to hear them.

Vera sees a young VAD, Dorothy, pass, and approaches her, showing her a piece of paper.

VERA
Excuse me, I’m to report to C section.

Dorothy looks at the paper, points.

DOROTHY
That hut there. (grimace) You’re under Sister Milroy—good luck.

And with that, she’s gone.
Vera, now drenched with rain, has found Hope Milroy and is following her as she strides along between huts. Young, vivacious, Hope has a clipped manner and a reputation as an eccentric.
There’s about thirty men to a hut, some of them are an absolute mess -

She turns to Vera with a bright smile, opens the door to a tin hut.

They’re supposed to pass through the clearing stations, but that’s not saying much anymore.

She steps aside to allow Vera to enter.

Vera walks in to discover a hut crammed full of thirty men. Some groan with pain, others are unconscious. Their wounds are visibly dreadful.

Hope leads Vera through them, talking in a loud voice. A few of the soldiers follow them with large, expressive eyes. Hope gestures to a door at the far end.

The theatre’s through there.

We’re short on everything, including surgeons.

She steps over to one patient, who is unconscious, with a bandaged arm stump.

Had to saw this chappie’s arm off myself yesterday, quite a job.

Vera looks horrified.

Not ideal, of course, but then - (beaming) this is War.

A voice calls out.

Schwester! Wasser, wasser bitte!

Vera spins round, startled. The man, very sick and weak, is looking at them. Vera’s face - as she realises her patients are Germans. Hope sees.

Oh, didn’t I mention? This lot are Huns. I find it best to number them, myself, much quicker.

(MORE)
Vera’s reeling. ‘Fourth’ is the wounded soldier who cried out.

WOUNDED SOLDIER
Ich sterbe! Hasst du kein hertz?

HOPE
Well, that’s it. Best to get stuck in right away, I find.

VERA
(sudden panic)
I - do I have to? What about the British huts?

HOPE
(oblivious smile)
You’ve been in charge of your own ward before, I take it?

VERA
No, never!

HOPE
Lovely! Over to you, then. (a passing nod to how wet Vera is) Plenty of time to change later.

And with that, she heads for the door. As she passes the wounded soldier’s bed –

HOPE
(to Vera)
See to him, will you. No idea what he’s on about.

Vera is left standing there, stunned.

VERA
He says you’re heartless.

INT. GERMAN WARD - LATER

A sweating Vera is dealing with the dressing on a soldier’s back wound. She lifts the blood-stained gauze to reveal a raw mass of pus and blood. A moment’s shock.

Then – she goes to a nearby work top. The only equipment is a pair of grubby forceps in a cracked jar. Soldiers cry out for her help. Vera looks around her, overwhelmed, trying not to panic.
EXT. DISPENSING STATION - ETAPLES

A queue of nurses wait to collect medical supplies from two orderlies manning the dispensing station. Vera, at the head of the queue, hurries away with her arms full of lint, bandage, medicines and antiseptic.

INT. GERMAN WARD - LATER

Vera has a bottle of antiseptic, but is looking around for a jar to use. There’s nothing.

A CORNER OF THE WARD - Vera is rummaging through her suitcase. She pulls out the jar of cream her mother gave her.

BACK AT THE WORK TOP - Vera is washing the jar free of all the cream. Quickly, she pours antiseptic into it, shoves in instruments for sterilisation.

INT. GERMAN WARD - DAY

Vera is dressing a leg wound on a German soldier. On the hut floor, lie piles of dressings saturated with blood and pus. As she finishes, her eyes meet his - his look of intense gratitude moves her. Vera smiles and nods in acknowledgement.

VERA’S VOICE
Here I am, dear Edward, fighting with every inch of strength to save men who, fifty or so miles away, you’re risking your life to kill. It makes you wonder, Edward, really it does.

EXT. HILL, ETAPLES BASE - DAY (SPRING)

Vera is standing at the top of the gentle slope above the base - below her, the vast stretch of huts that makes up Etaples base, cut through by the railway line. She’s been here a while.

VERA’S VOICE
I waited for you again on Sunday. I’ll be here every week, until you can come.

A figure walks towards her, waving - Hope.

HOPE
(as she approaches)
Miss Brittain! You’ll get sunburn!
Vera says nothing, Hope can see she’s upset.

HOPE (CONT’D)
Another no-show?

Vera nods.

HOPE (CONT’D)
He’ll get here when he can, I’m sure. Come on, let’s walk.

VERA
I need to rest.

HOPE
Nonsense. Best thing for nervous upset is exercise.

She’s already striding off.

VERA
(calling)
I’m not upset!

HOPE
(calling)
Chop chop!

Vera sighs, follows her.

EXT. WOODS, ETAPLES - LATER

Hope and Vera are walking together through beautiful, sun-dappled woods. Quite a way ahead of them, a limping officer and a VAD are walking, a self-conscious distance between them.

HOPE
Look at those two. All the signs are there. Give them a few minutes and they’ll be in the bushes. Not my preferred location, the flora and fauna round here are prickly as hell.

Vera looks at her in surprise.

HOPE (CONT’D)
Do I shock you, Nurse?

Vera smiles, shakes her head.

VERA
I don’t think there’s going to be much room left for etiquette when all this is over.
HOPE

Won’t life be dreadfully dull, though? (Seeing something) Ah, there we go.

She gestures to where the couple were a minute ago.

HOPE (CONT’D)

You see? Gone.

Hope runs on, calling out.

HOPE

Here little bunnies! Where are you?
Come on out, Mummy won’t be cross!
Bunniekins!

A rustle in the undergrowth - they catch sight of two figures scampering off through the trees, the man with his trousers down throws her a dirty look. Vera laughs. Hope grins, enjoying her prank.

142A

EXT. WOODS, ETAPLES - A LITTLE LATER

Vera and Hope walk, enjoying the fresh air.

VERA

(hesitant, a confession)
You know, some of the time here I’m actually happy -

‘Course you are, you’re addicted to it, Brittain, just like the rest of us. It’s what happens when it’s over that’s the real worry.

Vera looks at Hope - whose face is flooded with sudden unspoken pain.

HOPE (CONT’D)

All that mopping up to be done - ghastly.

But she battens down the hatches, grabs Vera’s arm.

HOPE

Come on, race you back!

They run off, laughing.

143

INT. GERMAN WARD - DAY

Bloody chaos. About 15 freshly wounded men have been brought in, in a critical state.
Vera, Hope and another VAD are desperately trying to cope, rushing between the beds, as orderlies bring more men in on stretchers.

Hope passes the bed of a man whose arm is turning black.

HOPE
Gangrene. Brittain, get some powder on this filthy Hun!

Vera throws Hope a look at this language, scurries over with a powder bottle, shakes it on the man’s arm. He’s whimpering with fear.

INT. GERMAN WARD - LATER

Hope is by the bed of a uniformed officer who’s bleeding profusely from the neck. Vera comes over to her side. Hope is trying to stem the bleed.

She sees Vera, pulls her briefly aside.

HOPE
It’s hopeless. Get the screen.

Hope stays with the man, who grabs her hand tight.

DYING OFFICER
Lieber Gott...Nicht so!

HOPE
Alright old boy...alright...

DYING OFFICER
(raw fear)
Nicht so! Nicht hier!

His eyes suddenly lose focus, a look of panic comes over him. Vera is pulling a screen on wheels round the bed.

DYING OFFICER
Meine augen! Ich sehe nichts!

He lashes out, flailing. Hope struggles to hold him down. Vera comes over to help, it takes both of them.

HOPE
Calm down old chap -

DYING OFFICER
(total panic)
Hilf mir!

Vera suddenly grips his hand, leans in close.

VERA
Sei still! Alles in ordnung.
Hope looks at her in surprise. Hearing his own language makes him stop and listen - Vera smooths his brow. He calms, starts to whimper like a frightened child, delirium fast engulfing him.

_DYING OFFICER_
Klara...? Klara, bist du’s?

A pause.

_VERA_
Ja...ja, ich bin da.

He calms right down, grips her hand tightly.

_VERA_
(a whisper)
Keine angst haben...

_DYING OFFICER_
Verzeihe mir Klara...verzeihe mir...

Vera can’t hold back the tears, She leans in and kisses him on the forehead.

_VERA_
Natürlich.

Hope has tears in her eyes too.

Vera watches the life leave him. Then focuses on the hand gripping hers, as it slackens....

Silence. She closes his eyes.

A noise rouses her - Hope is opening a small window above the man’s head.

_HOPE_
To let his soul escape.

Vera looks up, sees a tree branch right outside - she hears the peaceful twitter of a bird.

She freezes, then starts to shake - the utter, pointless horror of it pushing her close to the edge...

Hope sees. She comes over. Bends down, takes her hands, looks her straight in the eye.

_HOPE_
(calm, firm)
Control your mind. It’s the only way.

Vera nods, trying, trembling.
HOPE
Deep breaths. With me, come on.

They breathe deeply together.

HOPE
In...out....that’s it.

Vera gradually calms. Hope sees this, pats her hands.

HOPE
Good girl.

A gesture that says – time to get on.

VERA
(nodding, getting to her feet)
I’m fine now. Thank you.

FADE TO:

144 A MONTAGE –

1) GERMAN WARD. Vera picks up a pile of bloody, muddy khaki uniforms, sees something moving across them. She looks closer – a swarm of lice.

2) OUTSIDE GERMAN WARD. Vera dumps the uniforms in an enormous bin.

3) VERA’S DIGS/WASH AREA. A naked, shivering Vera sits in a BATH, pumping in a thin stream of hot water. The water runs out. She has barely an inch to bathe in. She looks at her fingers – red, puffy, broken-veined – the hands of someone thirty years older.

VERA’S VOICE
A whole year without seeing you, dear brother, and yet it feels like I’ve been in France my whole life.

4) GERMAN WARD. Vera breaks icicles from the inside of the window frame –

5) OUTSIDE. Vera is hanging sheets on a washing line. Further along, at the periphery of her vision, sheets flaps. The sun shines, a breeze blows. Suddenly, at this periphery, barely glimpsed, there’s a KITE –

And Roland’s hands – strong, brown, alive – his cheek, as he runs with the kite, his hair – his mouth, smiling –

She turns. But he’s gone. Just a row of sheets flapping. On Vera’s face – a soft smile –
VERA’S VOICE
Etaples has become a kingdom of
death and, strange to say, I’m a
contented dweller in it.

END MONTAGE.

OMMITTED.

INT. BRITISH WARD - NIGHT (AUTUMN)

Inside a dark ward full of wounded men, with the sound of a
deafening bombardment uncomfortably close. Vera and Hope
move from bed to bed with cups of water or tea, soothing
the men.

HOPE
(low, as she passes Vera)
The Germans are getting closer.

Their faces are tense, but they carry on. The ward is lit up
by flashes of hard, white light from the shell fire - the
strain showing on all the faces.

INT./EXT. BRITISH/GERMAN WARDS - DAWN

Vera emerges, exhausted, from the British ward, and walks
along a narrow path connecting it to the German ward -
She opens the door walks right through the German ward to
the other side, emerges to see, a large field -
Filled to the brim, with row upon row of wounded, dying or
dead men, lying on stretchers or on the bare ground -
hundreds of them - mud-covered, torn, bloodied men, their
groans and cries echoing.

On Vera - shocked at the sight of so much suffering. More
stretchers are being brought in by orderlies, while the dead
are being carried away.

EXT. FIELD OF WOUNDED, ETAPLES - SECONDS LATER

Vera walks among the men. Many of them are choking, in the
final stages of gas poisoning, great yellow blisters on
their skin. They’ve come straight from combat. Some of them
look straight at her, their expressions harrowing. Orderly
1 runs up to her.

ORDERLY 1
Mustard gas!

Vera takes this in. Voices call out, pleading.
VOICES OF MEN
There were so many of them,
Nurse!/The gas!/ Please Sister,
help me!/We’ve had it, nurse!

One, a young man nearby, claws at her skirt.
MUSTARD GAS VICTIM
Nurse...my throat...

A horrible gargling noise rises up from his throat. Vera turns to him, but she knows there’s nothing she can do.

VERA
I’ll get you some water....

Vera hurries over to a water tank, fills a cup, is heading back to the dying man when Orderly 1 approaches again.

ORDERLY 1
One of the boys was insisting he knew you, probably delirium, I’ve seen it before -

VERA
Where?

Some wounded tommies lying on the ground nearby listen.

ORDERLY 1
We had to take him round the back.

A grimace suggests this is not a good place to be.

ORDERLY 1
Said his name was Edward I think -

Vera starts - looks at him - then heads immediately off.

WOUNDED TOMMY
Oi, Miss, I’m Edward too, you know!

ANOTHER WOUNDED TOMMY
And me!

Vera disappears from view, the tommies grin at one another.

EXT. BACK OF TENTS - A MINUTE LATER

Vera is round the back of the tents, where the dying men have been taken. Most of them are either unconscious, or already dead. She passes among them, heart in her mouth, scanning their faces, searching...Dorothy, the young VAD, comes up to her.

DOROTHY
Nurse Brittain! This lot are done for, you’re needed in surgery.

Then she sees him - Edward, unconscious on a stretcher. He looks dead. She rushes to him.

DOROTHY
Nurse! They want you now!
Vera is oblivious. She falls to her knees, checks quickly - finds a pulse.

VERA
He’s alive -!

She checks him over -

VERA
It’s not gas...not gas...Edward!

No response. She finds a large, infected wound on his arm. She spots a few orderlies nearby.

VERA
Help me! Quickly!

They head over, help her lift the stretcher.

Vera has found a space for Edward in a hut, where the wounded are packed in like sardines. Flies buzz, the heat is stifling. She’s quickly cutting his jacket off him, as Hope administers him with an injection.

HOPE
(grim faced)
Vera, you have to face it...

VERA
(doesn’t want to hear it)
No! No...

She doesn’t take her eyes from Edward - every inch of her strength is concentrated on him. Hope realises - gives her a quick pat, and withdraws.

Vera finds something in his jacket pocket - a dirt-stained letter. She opens it, scans it quickly, sees the signature “Geoffrey” - puts it to one side.

Vera is intensely focused on Edward, nursing him as he tosses with a searing fever, his body wracked, muttering and groaning.

Vera is carrying a gramophone player across the ward, back to Edward’s bed, where he lies sleeping. She sets it up beside him, pulls the hand across to play a scratchy old record. The music swells through the hut, as she strokes his forehead.
An exhausted Vera is asleep, laid out across Edward. She starts awake, realises - looks up, to see his eyes are open. He’s looking at her with his gentle smile.

EDWARD
(weak)
I dreamt an angel played me music...

Vera is on her feet, ecstatic. She hugs him, kisses him, tears falling. She helps him sip some water -

VERA
Here....

- adjusts his pillows for him.

EDWARD
We were back at the lake together, all of us. Remember the day Victor dived in...?

Vera smiles at the memory.

EDWARD
I told him there were rats.

His expression transforms - at some horrible memory.

EDWARD
Oh God....

VERA
(soothing him)
Shhhh.

She picks Geoffrey’s letter up, from the side.

VERA
I found this in your jacket last night...from Geoffrey.

A pause -

VERA
I didn’t read it.
EDWARD
I’ll read it to you. I want you to hear his voice.

Vera nods. Edward opens the letter.

EDWARD
(reading)
We walked back to barracks last night, all of us thoroughly exhausted.

CUT TO:

155  EXT. THE WESTERN FRONT - EVENING

A vast expanse of mud. Geoffrey is one in a line of battle-weary men, trudging their way back from the front line.

GEOFFREY’S VOICE
It was a scene of devastation, and yet, as I looked at it, a strange feeling came over me...

Geoffrey turns. On the horizon, beyond the mud, are shell-torn trees with blackened, claw-like branches, lit by the brilliant gold of a setting sun. He stops to watch, as the other men carry on.

GEOFFREY’S VOICE
The setting sun had lit up the water in the shell holes so they looked like pools of gold, -

We see the field of mud through Geoffrey’s eyes now - dotted with little pools of bright gold water. His eyes move to a river, running along the bottom of the trees, also lit in gold.

GEOFFREY’S VOICE
- with a river of gold, and purple clouds fleeting in the sky-

MOVE CLOSE - on Geoffrey’s face.

GEOFFREY’S VOICE
And I felt a presence there, greater than all this...such peace, Edward.

CUT TO:
A male administrator hands Vera a telegram. She sees from the writing what kind of telegram it is - she looks stricken. Tears it open. Her hand goes to her mouth -

CUT BACK TO:

Geoffrey gives the scene one last look, then turns back to join his battalion.

GEOFFREY’S VOICE
I thought of you, dear friend, and I knew I’d see you again...

CUT TO:

Edward sits there, reading the letter to himself, smiling.

EDWARD’S VOICE
...either in this world, or the hereafter.

He finishes, looks up. He sees something that makes his face fall.

We see it too - Vera, standing there, red-eyed, a telegram in her hand. He knows what it means. She comes over to him, hands him the telegram. Puts her arms around him.

Edward weeps, as Vera comforts him.

Edward is leaving. He and Vera walk along a mud road together, the odd vehicle trundling past. A heaviness hangs over them.

VERA
I’m glad it’s Italy you’re going to, the fighting’s lighter there.
(Pause) When it’s over let’s travel together, exotic places. Where would you like to go?

EDWARD
I would’ve said Italy.

They smile.
EDWARD
(suddenly serious)
Go back to Oxford, Vera. Do what you always wanted to do.

VERA
If this War ever ends!

EDWARD
It will.

VERA
I can’t imagine that anymore.

EDWARD
Do it.

VERA
Only if you come too -

Edward suddenly hugs her, very tight.

EDWARD
You leave first, otherwise I won’t have the strength to.

Vera turns slowly, heads back towards the base. She turns one last time, to see Edward standing watching her. He raises a hand in farewell, gives her a cheerful smile and a nod, and climbs up into the bus.

160 EXT. CANVAS HUTS, ETAPLES - DAY (SPRING/SUMMER)

An exasperated Vera, clutching a telegram, marches between the tents of Etaples.

161 INT. GERMAN WARD - DAY

Vera marches up to Hope, sitting at one end of the ward making some notes, and puts the telegram down before her.

Hope glances over it, gives her a sympathetic look.

HOPE
Domestic duties beckon.

162 INT. HALLWAY, MELROSE - DAY

We’re inside the large, staid hallway. A grandfather clock ticks. The sudden domestic scene is a marked contrast to the noisy chaos of Etaples.

The front door is pushed open, Vera struggles in with her luggage. She stands there, still in her uniform, taking in the atmosphere. No servants, no signs of real life.
INT. LIVING ROOM, MELROSE - A MINUTE LATER

Vera walks in to find her mother lying on a chaise longue, reading a magazine like a convalescent.

MRS. BRITTAIN
Vera! What a relief!

She looks pale and strained, but not seriously ill. Vera looks at her in dismay.

VERA
Mother...?

MRS. BRITTAIN
I’ve had a terrible turn. Cook left, and you can’t get anything in the shops anymore! Butter, meat, eggs....what am I going to make for you and Edward?

VERA
I thought you’d had a breakdown...

MRS. BRITTAIN
Nothing’s been done in the house. It’s all quite dreadful.

Vera sinks into a seat.

MRS BRITTAIN (CONT’D)
I’m so glad you’re home!

Vera looks at her - understanding and exasperation combined.

CUT TO:

VERA -

1) SCULLERY YARD, MELROSE. Sleeves rolled up, furiously beating carpets -

2) HALLWAY, MELROSE. Vera vigorously dusts and polishes furniture.

INT. LIVING ROOM, MELROSE - EVENING

Vera and her mother and father are sitting at a dining table, having a light meal of soup. Vera picks up a spoonful, pours it back in the bowl. It’s thin like water.

VERA
Time to find a cook.
INT. UTILITY ROOM, MELROSE - DAY

Vera is instructing the new girl, a chubby teenager; she notices how heavily made up she is.

VERA
There’s household chores too, if you don’t mind, a mountain of ironing.

She indicates a full basket of ironing in a doorway.

NEW MAID
(reluctant)
I have to go at five. (Off Vera’s look) I’ve a dance.

Vera just looks at her -

VERA
(sharp)
They still have those, do they?

INT. STAIRCASE, MELROSE - DAY

Vera is carrying a vase of flowers up the stairs, she passes Mr. Brittain coming down, carrying a newspaper.

MR. BRITTAIIN
Beautiful, dear.

Vera smiles.

INT. VERA’S BEDROOM, MELROSE - SECONDS LATER

Vera is putting the flowers down when she glances up out of the window to see something in the distance -

On a visible stretch of the white winding road, a boy on a bike seems to be cycling towards them, a satchel slung across him -

Vera is frozen to the spot - almost stops breathing. Palms sweat, heart races. The boy disappears from view.

INT. UPSTAIRS LANDING, MELROSE - CONTINUOUS

Vera hurries out onto the landing, trying to keep sight of the boy, and into the front bedroom...
INT. FRONT BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Vera hurries to the window, looks out, trying to see...No boy. Was she imagining it? She steps back, almost letting herself feel some relief, when -

He bobs back into view, closer now to the house. Vera watches him through the glass, as he stops at the garden gate. Cycles up to the front door - disappears from view beneath the porch. She hears the clang of the doorbell.

Vera is frozen, waiting.

A figure steps out from beneath the porch.

Edward. In his khaki. He looks up at her. Vera puts her hands on the pane, as though to reach him -

She hears her father answer the door - a muffled exchange.

Below, Edward fades to nothing.

Then - the sound of a terrible, animal cry from her father.

Vera - seen from behind. Head bowed, hands against the glass pane.

INT. UTILITY ROOM, MELROSE - SECONDS LATER

Vera marches past the room to see the new maid calmly ironing socks. The sheer normality of the scene stuns her - how can life go on the same as before...? She storms in, her fury welling up, grabs the ironing basket, HURLS it against the wall.

VERA
You don’t iron socks!

The girl bursts into tears. Vera storms out of the back door, SLAMS the door shut.

EXT. HILLSIDE, OUTSIDE BUXTON - DAY

Vera is climbing a green hill, pushing herself to the limit, RAGING against fate -

CLOSE ON - her feet, striding across green grass, up higher, and higher -

- to the top of the hill. She stops, panting for breath, turns -

To see everything behind her is a field of MUD, right up to where she’s standing now -

Her life laid to waste.....
Her stricken face, as the mud engulfs her feet -

CUT TO:

171  AN EMPTY CORRIDOR, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - DAY (NOVEMBER 1918)

The same corridor Vera walked down at the start of her journey into nursing.

Vera’s figure appears at the far end, small, isolated. She stops. Folds her hands before her.

An image of complete aloneness.

172  INT. CORRIDOR, 1ST LONDON GENERAL - DAY

Vera is mopping the corridor floor when the loud boom of cannon fire sounds from outside. She doesn’t even flinch.

There’s a sound of shouting, peals of laughter, running footsteps. Vera looks up to see two young nurses, faces flushed, running towards her.

CELEBRATING NURSES
It’s over! The armistice is signed! It’s finally over!

Vera just watches with no reaction. There’s the sound of celebrations already kicking off in the street outside.

One of them turns back, looks directly at her.

CELEBRATING NURSE
(jubilation)
We won!

Vera’s face – as she takes this in. Then she returns to her tray, an automaton.

173  EXT. LONDON STREET, ARMISTICE DAY - DUSK

Vera, in civilian clothes now, is pushed along by the jostling crowd. People shout, cheer, wave rattles, but the sound cuts in and out, Vera can’t connect with it.

174  EXT. THE CROWD, ARMISTICE DAY - LATER

To muffled sound, Vera is being whirled round and round by the jubilant soldier –

- she breaks free -
EXT. LONDON STREET - A MINUTE LATER

Vera sees the church steps ahead of her, stumbles and pushes her way through the crowd towards them.

INT. CHURCH - MOMENTS LATER

Vera stumbles inside, her footsteps echoing on marble. Above her, the high-vaulted dome, ahead of her, row upon row of pews. It’s another world in here, silent and dark.

Vera walks down a side aisle. She hears - a faint, rhythmic whispering -

Francis Danby’s painting of a shipwreck in storm-ripped seas LOOMS ahead of her now -

As the whispering grows louder, and she sees the women taking shape in the darkness, their desperate prayers -

Vera puts her hands over her ears to block the sound - then sinks into a pew. After a moment, she clasps her hands together, as though in prayer.

VERA’S VOICE
They’ll want to forget you, they’ll want me to forget. But I can’t - I won’t...

CUT TO:

EXT. MAIN QUAD, SOMERVILLE - DAY (WINTER)


Muffled sound. Students walk past, smiling, chatting, laughing. As though nothing has changed.

Vera steps into frame, holding a small suitcase.

VERA’S VOICE
...I promise you, all of you.

INT. VERA’S OLD ROOM, SOMERVILLE - DAY

Vera is at the bed in her old room, unpacking.

She glances at the familiar view, then the familiar desk by the window. On it, a pen and a pad of writing paper. Open, blank, ready. But no one to write to.

OMMITTED.
Vera is among students heading for the dining hall doors. She sees Miss Lorimer.

**MISS LORIMER**
Miss Brittain! Back at last.

**VERA**
Yes.

A pause - Vera hopes for some acknowledgement of intervening experiences -

**MISS LORIMER**
(awkward)
So - it’s Chaucer this term. You’ve certainly got some catching up to do.

Vera just looks at her...as they move on with the crowd.

Vera sits silently, huddled in her drab clothes, in stark contrast to the rows of animated, brightly-dressed young women, eating and talking in high spirits.

Vera is walking through the gardens when she sees a group of female undergraduates enjoying a merry picnic on the lawn. One of them, Winifred, a flamboyantly dressed girl with an open, enthusiastic face and blonde hair that’s impossible to tame, roars with laughter. She looks up, notices Vera watching. She looks so isolated, like a shadow...

Winifred gets up to beckon her over, but Vera hurries away.

**WINIFRED**
The new girl’s a little strange.

**COMPANION**
She was at the front, for quite a while I hear.

Winifred watches Vera disappear, intrigued.

Vera is in the library, a book open before her, trying to concentrate, when suddenly -

**WINIFRED**
Hello!
She jumps slightly, turns to see Winifred’s beaming, friendly face.

WINIFRED
Winifred Holtby, I just found out we’re tutorial partners this term!

No response. Winifred ploughs on.

WINIFRED (CONT’D)
If there’s ever a book you can’t find here, just ask. It’ll probably be buried under the mess in my room!

Vera ignores her, irritated by her sunny cheer. Winifred has another go -

WINIFRED (CONT’D)
I heard you want to be a writer. Don’t be shy, me too! We could look at each other’s work if you like -

VERA
(cutting)
Look, I really must get on!

A pause. Winifred is taken aback - then graciously accepts this.

WINIFRED
Of course.

Vera tries to concentrate on her book.

181C  INT. VERA’S ROOM, SOMERVILLE - LATER  181C

Vera is sitting in her room, the curtains nearly drawn against the daylight, reading one of Roland’s stained poems. The other poems and the dried violets are spread out on the bed next to her.

Vera is rocking, reading the words intently, muttering them to herself. We notice her knuckles are white with gripping the paper.

Her hands start to shake.

She’s stuck on the same line, repeats it over and over...

VERA
(under her breath)
Down the long white road....down the long white road....

Her eyes fill with tears - her whole body starts to shudder -
Suddenly, she HITS her forehead repeatedly with the palm of her hand - over and over, trying to banish thoughts -
She tries the lines again - but she can’t move on -
She begins to cry - overwhelmed - cracking up -
The anguish of her inner state playing on her face -

OMMITTED.

INT. VERA’S ROOM, SOMERVILLE - EARLY MORNING

Vera is in bed, tossing with insomnia. She hears a scratching sound, like a rat. Turns in her bed, puts her hands over her ears - the sound is gone - it’s all in her head.

CUT TO:

VERA SEES - IN HER MIND -

ROLAND, in No Man’s Land, lying in a water-filled shellhole, one leg bloodied and broken, as a fellow-soldier holds him, the racket of War all around them -

BACK TO:

VERA -

Tossing and turning in bed - that scratching sound is back, she whimpers, frightened -

EXT. SOMERVILLE ARCHWAY - EARLY MORNING

Winifred is walking to breakfast, when she notices a figure slumped in an archway. It’s Vera, the books she was carrying scattered on the ground before her. She’s just passed out. Winifred hurries over, kneels next to her. Vera is out of it, panting, barely aware of her surroundings. Winifred sees her anguish.

WINIFRED

Vera? Goodness, are you alright?
Vera doesn’t respond – she’s trembling all over – she slips again, falling – Winifred tries to catch her, she hears her voice –

WINIFRED’S VOICE
Somebody give me a hand here?

The running footsteps of other women coming towards her –

INT. VERA’S ROOM – DAYS LATER

Vera is lying on her side, in bed. The crisis is over, but her expression is blank, pale, without hope. Behind her stands Winifred, holding books and some grapes.

WINIFRED
I brought some more books for you.

Vera remains with her back turned, saying nothing. Winifred decides to open the curtains, letting in a flood of sunlight. Then comes back and sits down.

WINIFRED (CONT’D)
Did you manage to read the last ones?

Winifred sees a pile of books on the floor, they look untouched. She sits down. Vera feels her patient, calm presence. After a moment – Vera turns to face her.

VERA
I saved my brother’s life over there. In France. (Pause) But the War still got him.

A beat –

WINIFRED
It made us all feel powerless.

VERA
Were you there too?

WINIFRED
For the last few months. I volunteered at a signals station near Abbeville.

Vera’s eyes just look at her –

WINIFRED (CONT’D)
We’re surrounded by ghosts. Our job now is to try and give a voice to them.

Her words resonate deeply with Vera.
WINIFRED
But you need to start at the
beginning. Get up, get dressed,
eat. Spring’s out there waiting.
I’m going to help you, whether you
like it or not.

She smiles her warm smile at Vera - a lifeline.

190  EXT. SOMERVILLE GARDENS - DAY (SPRING)
Vera and Winifred walk through the gardens together,
talking animatedly, smiling. Vera is much better.

191  INT. MISS LORIMER’S ROOM, SOMERVILLE - DAY
Miss Lorimer is sitting at her desk when there’s a knock at
the door. A framed portrait of her dead brother sits nearby.

MISS LORIMER
Not now, thank you!

She hears a noise, looks up in irritation to see Vera
standing there. She softens just slightly.

MISS LORIMER
Miss Brittain. What is it?

Vera approaches.

VERA
I’m sorry to disturb you -

A pause. Vera is nervous.

VERA (CONT’D)
I wanted to say thank you for
allowing me to come back again. I
do really appreciate it.

MISS LORIMER
I can’t tell you the bother it
caused.

A pause.

MISS LORIMER (CONT’D)
If that’s everything?

VERA
Actually, no - (deep breath) I’d
like to change courses to history.

Silence. Miss Lorimer looks at her, unreadable. Vera squirms.
VERA (CONT’D)
I feel I need to study real events, I mean, why things happen the way they do, between people and nations - and what, if anything, we can do to stop or change them.

Silence.

VERA (CONT’D)
I realise this looks like a reaction to the last four years, and possibly it’s a sign I’m a mess and it won’t solve anything - but I’ve given it a lot of thought and - it’s the only way I can try to make sense of things.

Miss Lorimer gets to her feet, walks round her desk, glances briefly at the photo of her dead brother. Vera has no idea which way this is going.

MISS LORIMER
I understand you were at the front?

Vera is surprised at this turn in the conversation - she nods.

MISS LORIMER (CONT’D)
I did wonder about you, as a matter of fact.

They hold each other’s gaze - much is unspoken.

MISS LORIMER
I’ll see what I can do.

Vera sees the sympathy and understanding in her face.

VERA
Thank you.

Miss Lorimer nods. Then -

MISS LORIMER
“There is some soul of goodness in things evil, would men observingly distill it out.” Henry the Fifth, Miss Brittain, one of my favourites. Both history, and great literature. They don’t have to be mutually exclusive.

VERA
(a smile)

No.
MISS LORIMER
Well off you go. You’ve given me yet another headache to deal with.

But this time, they share a warm smile.
Vera is walking along with some shopping when the sound of a speaker’s voice inside a hall attracts her attention.

MALE SPEAKER
There’s talk among our politicians of how to make Germany pay for the last four years...

Vera hears cheers, stops before a poster outside which reads: “War Reparations - Should Germany pay?”

MALE SPEAKER (CONT’D)
Only recently the German foreign minister dared suggest that we’re all responsible for the War and should jointly pay the price! To which we say to him, who started it?!

More cheers - Vera goes inside.

Vera is pushing her way to the front of a large, angry crowd, mainly of locals, roused by a middle-aged speaker on stage.

MALE SPEAKER
There’s nothing the Kaiser can do to compensate the men and women of this country, but still, the Germans must pay! In money, in goods and industry, and most of all, in humbled pride!
Vera looks at the faces in the crowd - most of them nodding in heartfelt support, muttering angrily to themselves.

One face arrests her for its familiarity - it’s GEORGE, the officer who told her of Roland’s death. He hasn’t seen her.

MALE SPEAKER (CONT’D)
History has proved the Huns can’t be trusted. Our chance is now, when we’ve got them on their knees! We need to pound them into the ground for what they did to us, so they’re incapable of rising again!

Cheers, shouts of “Hear hear!” “Get the bloody Huns!” from the audience.

GEORGE O.S.
There’s a flaw to your argument!

People turn, take in George.

MALE SPEAKER
Come up on stage, Sir, unlike the Kaiser’s lackeys, we British welcome dissent!

Laughs, cheers, as George leaps onto the stage.

GEORGE
The philosophy of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, is a dangerous one, surely. Germany will rise again one day, and if her pride is too damaged she’ll do so intent on revenge, and the whole cycle could be repeated!

MALE SPEAKER
Are you suggesting we let them walk all over us?

An angry MOTHER pushes her way to the front.

MALE SPEAKER (CONT’D)
We have mothers here whose sons gave their lives for the nation! This lady here - look her in the eye, Sir, and tell her to love the Germans!

Cries of support for this - the angry mother wants to get up on the stage - the speaker helps her up.
ANGRY MOTHER
They killed my eldest at the Somme!
Then my next one, Harry. (To George) And you stand there and defend them...!

GEORGE
I’m not defending what they did -

AUDIENCE MEMBERS
They’re war mongers! They bombed our cities first! And our ships!

GEORGE
We have to look to the future - to the world we want to create!

More shouts of outrage, boos! George looks cornered. This is too much for Vera - she pushes through to the front, holds out a hand. George helps her up. He recognises her, with a start.

GEORGE (CONT’D)
Miss Brittain!

VERA
Officer -

GEORGE
George, please....George Catlin.

They shake hands hastily, as Vera is bustled to the front.

MALE SPEAKER
The lady has something to say!

She realises all eyes are on her. She’s thrown suddenly - a pause, then -

VERA
I - I was a nurse at the front during the War.

A silence.

MALE SPEAKER
Good on you, little Miss! Is there anyone else who’d like to -

VERA
No! I haven’t finished.

Silence, everyone waits for her to carry on. Vera scrabbles to order her thoughts -

VERA
I - for a time I looked after a hut of German officers.
AUDIENCE MEMBER
Not too well, I hope, Miss!

Chuckles, murmurs. Vera looks directly at the angry mother.
VERA

As you were speaking, I was remembering one of them. I never knew his name, but he was a brave man, and somebody’s son. I held his hand as he was dying -

Murmurs - people don’t like this. Some get up and walk out.

VERA (CONT’D)

He cried out for a woman he loved, Klara. He faced the end of his life by asking her forgiveness!

Mutterings of disapproval swell louder - Vera looks at the angry mother.

VERA (CONT’D)

I lost a brother in the war, and my fiance! There was no final message for them, no hand to hold; just pain and a dirty, undignified death! I can’t make sense of it either, except - when I held the hand of that German, it was their hands too that I was holding - their pain was the same pain, their blood the same blood - our grief is the grief of hundreds and thousands of German women and men!

People now start to BOO loudly, the mother walks out, more follow her, until only a few are left.

VERA (CONT’D)

I speak to those of us who were left behind. The mothers, sisters, the women - we send our men to war! I fought my father to let my brother go. Because we think it’s the right thing, the honourable thing, but all I can do is stand here and ask you, is it? Was I right? Or can I find the courage to accept there might be another way? (Pause) Perhaps their deaths might have some meaning if we stand together now, and say no! No to fighting, no to war! No to the endless cycle of revenge. (Pause) I say no more of it!

The few remaining people are silent, as her words resonate.

VERA (CONT’D)

(soft)

No more.
She looks round, at GEORGE - their eyes meet.

EXT. STREET, OXFORD - LATER

George and Vera are walking home together in silence, the atmosphere around them delicate as glass. He stops, and turns to her.

GEORGE
I’ve often wondered how you were.
I never forgot our meeting.

Vera looks at him softly -

VERA
Neither did I.

Vera looks away - as a shadow crosses her face, at the memory.

CUT TO:

EXT. MELROSE, BUXTON - DAY

Vera stands on the garden path, gazing at Melrose. The house is shut down, the curtains closed, it has a neglected feel to it.

She starts walking towards the front door.

EXT./INT. FRONT DOOR/HALL, MELROSE - SECONDS LATER

Vera unlocks the creaky door, swings it open, and steps into the silent hallway. So many memories....

INT. LIVING ROOM, MELROSE - A MINUTE LATER

Vera stands in the living room. The large pieces of furniture are covered in dust sheets.

She sees her piano, with dusty sheaf music lying on top of it.

She goes over, lifts the lid. Tinkles a few notes. Then shuffles through the music, until she finds Edward’s piece.

She sits down and starts to play, hesitantly...the notes ringing out in the empty house.

EXT. THE LONG WHITE ROAD - DAY

Vera walks down the long white road, towards the lake. She sees it glittering through spindly trees.
ROLAND’S VOICE
The sunshine on the long white road
That ribboned down the hill,
The velvet clematis that clung
Around your window sill
Are waiting for you still....

199  EXT. LAKE - DAY
Vera stands gazing out at the peaceful water, by the old jetty. It’s still there, intact.

ROLAND’S VOICE
Again the shadowed pool shall break
In dimples at your feet...
And when the thrush sings in your wood
Unknowing, you may meet
Another stranger, sweet.

Vera starts to shed her clothes, one by one, until she’s down to her petticoat.

Then she walks into the water.

200  EXT. LAKE - LATER
Vera swims through the water, feeling the strength in her limbs.

ROLAND’S VOICE
And if he is not quite so old
As the boy you used to know,
And less proud, too, and worthier,
You may not let him go -

Their voices drift over to her - Roland, Edward, and Victor’s voices as they once were, laughing and chatting, carefree -

ROLAND’S VOICE
For daisies are truer than passion flowers,
It will be better so.

And it’s quiet again -

The water ripples out around her -
She moves through it, surrounded by the beauty of nature, immersed in it, at one -

201  EXT. LAKE - MOMENTS LATER
Vera walks out of the water, lifting her face to the warm sun.... Something in her transformed by this experience...
Vera sits in a train compartment, pen in hand, a notebook on her lap, making hasty notes. It’s as though a dam has burst — her hand can’t move quickly enough across the page.

She stops, as a memory of Roland’s voice suddenly fills her head —

**ROLAND’S VOICE**
I kept quiet because I was moved by it, I found it beautiful...and you seem an impossible person to say that to.

Vera gazes out of the window, as the past floods back....

**CUT TO:**

**EXT. GREEN GLADE, BUXTON - DAY, 1914, A MEMORY**

Vera is with Roland in the green glade.

**VERA**
You really - don’t think me ridiculous?

He smiles, shakes his head.

**VERA (CONT’D)**
What if I told you I want to be a writer - and - I even dream of earning a living by it?

Roland smiles gently at her.

**ROLAND**
Don’t you need some experience first?

**VERA**
Of course!

**CUT BACK TO:**

**INT. TRAIN COMPARTMENT - DAY**

Vera gazes at her page of writing, overwhelmed by the memory...
A porter carrying the post walks into the lodge, and over to the pigeon holes. He starts to distribute the letters.

CLOSE ON - his hand holding a letter addressed to “Vera Brittain”. He places it in her pigeon hole.

As a new, calmer Vera walks back towards College, Winifred joins her, wheeling her bike. They walk and chat together in easy companionship.

Vera and Winifred walk through the gates into college and into the porter’s lodge.

They check their pigeon holes for post - Vera’s surprised to see a note there. She opens it. It reads simply: “May I see you again? George.”

Vera looks up - catches Winifred’s eye, then looks away, smiling softly.

“Testament of Youth” was published in 1933, to immediate acclaim. The first print-run sold out in a day, and the book became the voice of a generation. It remains in print to this day, as one of the most powerful war memoirs ever written.

Vera became a life-long pacifist and campaigner for women’s rights, and a successful writer and journalist.

She and George married and had two children. Their daughter, Shirley Williams, became a leading force in British politics, and now sits in the House of Lords.

The End.