

Weekly Read week 19B. This is an extract from the opening of Vera Brittain's autobiography 'Testament of Youth'. She gave up her place at Oxford University in 1915 when she was 21, to become a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse. Both her fiancé Roland and brother Edward were killed in action. In this extract, Brittain writes about her memories of receiving a telegram announcing her brother's death

I had just announced to my father, as we sat over tea in the dining room, that I really must do up Edward's papers and take them to the post office before it closed for the weekend, when there came the sudden loud clattering at the front-door knocker that always meant a telegram.

For a moment I thought that my legs would not carry me, but they behaved quite normally as I got up and went to the door. I knew what was in the telegram — I had known for a week — but because the persistent hopefulness of the human heart refuses to allow intuitive certainty to persuade the reason of that which it knows, I opened and read it in a tearing anguish of suspense.

'Regret to inform you Captain E H Brittain M.C. killed in action Italy June 15th.'

'No answer,' I told the boy mechanically, and handed the telegram to my father, who had followed me into the hall. As we went back into the dining room I saw, as though I had never seen them before, the bowl of blue delphiniums on the table; their intense colour, vivid, ethereal, seemed too radiant for earthly flowers.

Then I remembered that we should have to go down to Purley and tell the news to my mother.

Late that evening, my uncle brought us all back to an empty flat. Edward's death and our sudden departure had offered the maid — at that time the amateur prostitute — an agreeable opportunity for a few hours' freedom of which she had taken immediate advantage. She had not even finished the household handkerchiefs, which I had washed that morning and intended to iron after tea; when I went into the kitchen I found them still hanging, stiff as boards, over the clothes-horse near the fire where I had left them to dry.

Long after the family had gone to bed and the world had grown silent, I crept into the dining room to be alone with Edward's portrait. Carefully closing the door, I turned on the light and looked at the pale, pictured face, so dignified, so steadfast, so tragically mature. He had been through so much — far, far more than those beloved friends who had died at an earlier stage of the interminable War, leaving him alone to mourn their loss. Fate might have allowed him the little, sorry compensation of survival, the chance to make his lovely music in honour of their memory. It seemed indeed the last irony that he should have been killed by the countrymen of Fritz Kreisler, the violinist whom of all others he had most greatly admired.

And suddenly, as I remembered all the dear afternoons and evenings when I had followed him on the piano as he played his violin, the sad, searching eyes of the portrait were more than I could bear, and falling on my knees before it I began to

cry, 'Edward? Oh, Edward!' in dazed repetition, as though my persistent crying and calling would somehow bring him back.

- What do you understand by the sentence 'the persistent hopefulness of the human heart refuses to allow intuitive certainty to persuade the reason of that which it knows'? What does it tell you about Vera Brittain's emotions?
- What **adverb** does Brittain use to describe her reaction after she first reads the telegraph? What does this tell you about how she feels?
- List **6 adjectives** that Brittain uses in her description of the delphiniums. Why do you think she includes this description in her autobiography?
- How does Brittain use **language and sentence forms** to express her opinions about the maid?
- In the paragraph that begins 'Long after the family had gone to bed', what does Brittain **personify**? Why do you think she uses personification here?