

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

On Misty Bridge

by Lou Beckerman

Joe, army penknife in hand, heart cut wide-open with affection and foreboding, continued to scratch and score into the cement rendering on Misty Bridge as if he had a talent for getting beneath the surface.

‘A summer’s day dreaming of Lisa. JM 1944’

The roughly hewn letter-shapes pleased him even if he was meant to be on lookout duties for enemy aircraft. It suited him here; keeping fit for an as yet undisclosed mission - long-distance running in full kit through the fields, by way of Lag Wood, along the Cinder Path and onto the bridge.

From one side of the redbrick arch he could look down the line, as if right through Clayton’s dark tunnel, then on towards Brighton, where his Canadian 3rd Infantry Division was stationed. From the other side, looking north towards London, forty-four miles of early-summer sun-baked metal linking town and city with soldiers and supplies.

He straightened for a moment and could hear a distant though ever louder rumbling. In no time the bellowing thunderous engine passed under the bridge in a tumultuous commotion of roaring and belching of smuts and sparks; steaming sooty smoke engulfing him, as it briefly eclipsed daylight.

...

Lisa’s mother would say ‘She’s a dreamer, that one’, as though her dreams were unlike the flights of fancy absorbing most seventeen year-old girls. And there was Joe to occupy her all-consuming reveries. Joe, dazzling in his uniform. She’d made her first proper dance dress for that party, hosted by the troops.

'Happy-Go-Lucky Joe' they called him. In his gaze she imagined he knew the whole depth and breadth of her. A lifetime together was précised into that gaze. In reality, what he saw was laid bare on the surface and more immediate.

On June the 5th the unit was informed they would be joining a large operation, and on the following day Joe found himself part of the Allied invasion of occupied Europe. After four days, exhausted and half-blinded, he was shipped back to Canada.

...

When the day starts like this over Misty Bridge you'd think autumn had set fire to the world. The sun has climbed above the early fog and, like a searchlight, one probing beam, silent witness that it is, locates and lights-up Lisa's vivid auburn hair.

She's wearing her flame-red dance dress which is becoming progressively difficult to fasten, and in her frustration and annoyance she's forced and ripped the wasted fabric. Unaware, she lingers alongside Joe's carving, too early for the shaft of light to catch it.

'Lisa'. It means 'God's promise'. Perhaps she had been. But what had Joe ever promised her. In his perfunctory note, wrapped around a maple leaf arm-badge and a pack of chewing gum, she read that he loved her but would be leaving for war and then home to his wife. She retched violently and the nausea hadn't stopped since.

Lisa hears the first clacking and hiss-shhhh of the rails preparing for the onslaught of tonnes of locomotive. It isn't a 'There-there-it'll-all-be-alright' sort of shhhh. There's no comfort to be found here. She coolly watches the engine emerge from the tunnel, hot-headed, huffing and puffing towards her as it greedily gorges. Lisa, on tip-toe, leans into the scolding vapour as it gushes, and foul steam momentarily envelopes the bridge. Three long whistles then, as the cloud clears, timeless Misty Bridge re-appears in the autumnal glow.

...

In Quebec City, Joe, at ninety-eight, feels sentimental just once in a while. With time on his hands thoughts return to a girl in Sussex, England, who had never responded to his letters. 'I stole her heart away', he thought, 'and put ice in its place', utterly unable to visualise what happens when an iced heart thaws into pain.