

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

My Arms About You

by MaryPat Campbell

The bell rings for end of lessons, it's getting dark, I'm tired and hungry. Clattering down the back stairs, most of the other girls are in the refectory before me. The room is cavernous, brightly lit and smells of damp cloths and washing up. The big urn spouts steam as an older girl makes a pot of tea, while another pours milk from a tall jug into a smaller one and carries it to our table under the window overlooking the tennis courts. The tables are set for six as they always are, with plates, cups and saucers, platters of bread and slabs of butter.

My friend Lily's name is called out. I can see the teacher holding a parcel for her. I know the shape of this parcel by now, like a shoebox but soft to the touch, well wrapped and labelled in her mother's hand.

If we are lucky enough to have food parcels, the rule is, they must be shared at tea time at our tables of six. Half-grown girls, some older, some boisterous, some younger giggly ones, come from all over the country. Most of us are trying to survive in our uniforms and indoor shoes, doing our best to make do and pretend it's alright.

Lily collects her parcel proudly, knowing the six at our table look forward to what's inside – a loaf cake with dried fruit, a perfectly brown sweet treat. The smell makes its way to our hungry nostrils, and we feel loved for a moment.

Lily opens the sweet parcel, layers of aluminium foil followed by layers of greaseproof paper underneath. Inside the first layer is an envelope with her name on it. She opens the parcel eagerly, dropping the letter on the table and gets busy, slicing her mother's cake to share with us. I struggle to read the letter upside down from my side of the table.

'My dear Lily,' it begins, 'this is not a letter but my arms about you for a brief moment'.

How lucky she is, to have delicious cake and a letter and her mother's arms about her, all at once. She is wrapped in a sweet, deliciously flavoured embrace. Tears gather in my eyes as I sit and spread butter on a slice of this sweetness. I've never tasted anything so good.

Suddenly I can't manage any more. I stand up from the table quickly. Running from the refectory, I pass the other girls as they chatter and eat. Some of them glance up to witness my going. Get out fast. Run along the silent corridor, turn right by the library, out the side gate and down the street. I don't know where I'm headed. Keep going, don't look back.