

The Beauty

by Richard Lewis

Jake's thoughts twisted like tumbleweed as he wandered Bristol's windblown streets. It was the winter of '63 and he was ruminating about the endless monotony of his life. Something told him to enter the arcade, little knowing things were about to change forever.

He was an only child who'd grown up in an isolated world. His mother had died when he was two, abandoning him to the mercy of his father Gabriel, a depressed ex-sergeant major, who'd been dishonourably discharged from the army due to alcohol addiction. He missed army life and never recovered from the loss of his wife.

Gabriel provided the basics but ignored his son other than to bark out orders, making Jake endure weekly bedroom inspections. Jake being made to stand to attention at his bedside like a hapless recruit.

"You don't do it that way boy, call that a shoe shine, you'd never pass muster in the army," Gabriel would roar, delivering a clip across Jake's ear if he didn't jump to a task in double quick time.

Due to the trauma of losing of his mother at such a tender age a part of Jake seemed to be missing. School had little to offer as no allowance was made for his learning difficulties, it was just a place where people thought him strange. He had no friends and feeling trapped, moved slowly, his head lowered as if carrying a dead weight on his shoulders, eyes glued to the ground like metal detectors searching for treasure.

Jake saw people as alien beings and not important. He would wait until the school bell released him so he could return home to be with his prized possessions. Riding his Raleigh Roadster bike or listening to radio Caroline on his transistor radio. He lived in a cut off world, like a lonely satellite roaming space.

That Saturday morning Jake entered the shop as if drawn by magnetic force. As the door closed behind him he turned and noticed her standing in the corner, a beauty beyond anything he'd ever seen before. He felt a strange heat in his throat as he watched her standing perfectly still and wanted to take a closer look, when an

assistant called out, “can I help you sir?” Stuck for words and feeling embarrassed, Jake lowered his head and was about to leave when the assistant said, “she’s beautiful isn’t she, would you like to hold her?”

Jake’s grandparents had given him a hundred pounds for his eighteenth birthday, which was handy as that was just how much the Yamaha cost. Tentatively he picked her up, gently caressing the rich walnut and spruce body, gazing in delight at the perfection of the detailed inlay. He softly strummed the strings which rang out in sweet vibration, as if the guitar were speaking to him.

The assistant threw in a case and copy of Bert Weedon’s ‘Play in a Day’ book. Jake knew Bert was a liar and that it would be many months before he’d manage to squeeze out a decent tune, but that was OK.

He called her Mae after his long lost mother Mary and thought, ‘I’m in love with you and you don’t want anything to do with me so I think we can make this work.’

Mae took pride of place in his bedroom where every day he practiced for hours. The tips of his fingers bled at first but it didn’t matter, she was more real to him than any person and soon they became inseparable. The Yamaha opened him up and before long she was getting him to sing along to the chord progressions he was learning.

Having left school, Jake now worked as a night watchman for a security firm. His father had backed off, knowing the days of being able to bully his son were over and like all old soldiers, just faded away, leaving his son to his new passion.

Jake liked to go to folk clubs and listen to local musicians perform. He felt at home in the half lit, dingy rooms above saloon bars where he was able to blend in.

Two years later, there he was putting his name down to perform folk ballads of the time, singing out in a way that would amaze anyone who’d known him before.

He still rarely spoke but with Mae at his side he didn’t need anyone in his life. It was enough just holding her, knowing those strings could make his heart sing, that she would never leave and would get him through even the darkest of times.