

**Bourne**  
**toWrite...**  
creative writing  
workshops

## Bad Times

by Sue Hitchcock

We broke fast, saying grace to our beneficent lord, then enjoyed some bacon with the last of yesterday's bread, still soft and tasty. My wife sat at the far end of the table, the benches empty now our children are grown.

Ruth, my wife is a plain woman and she waited till I was finished,

"Husband, what thinkest thou of our new king, Charles?"

"I do not think about him. It is not my place."

"In the market there is talk that he is a Papist, that he hates the Parliamentarians, that he is extravagant in his household. I say nothing for fear of listeners."

"Neither the smith nor I can have opinions. We are servant to farmers and lords, alike. The gentleman for whom I am making a fine pair of riding boots is to come this morning. You may listen, but say nothing."

"I would not dare. I fear the times we live in will be like King James's time again."

Late in the morning the lord arrived, annoyed and muddy,

"Damned horse needed shoeing before me! If he did not serve me so well, I would whip him for his vanity!"

Ruth fetched a cloth to wipe away the mud, giving her good reason to hover in the workshop.

"What occasion requires you to have these boots, Sir? Those you have are strong and will last another year?"

"Why, man, you will talk yourself out of the fee? Do you not need the work?"

“Forgive me, I was just curious if we might be expecting a royal visitor?”

“The King might pass this way. There is much unrest in London, what with Parliamentarians and Puritans all fretting and threatening. These boots must be fit for riding to battle, should it be required. Woman, why are you hovering, be about your business!”

“My Lord, I thought a drink might be required by thee?”

“A goblet of ale, would be welcome, thank you.”

Later that evening we sat by the fire. Staring at the burning logs I noticed a tear in Ruth’s eye. She would cry sometimes without reason, no cause that I could fathom, but she has her secrets.

“Why do you weep, Ruth? We have a life, and we have so many blessings, so many children, well and living.”

Ruth began to sob, more than even when our first baby died. I fell on my knees in front of her and with my head on her breast, I hugged her like a child. Her breast was heaving like the sea and she howled, making me fear a neighbour might intrude. At last the storm subsided and she wiped her face.

“It was the burning logs. It is always there, but I could not think on it when there were children nearby and there was always some work awaiting, but tonight, with the news of unrest the memory was strong, like yesterday.”

“What memory is it thee have not already spoken of?”

“Thou knowest nought of my family.”

“Art thou no orphan, then?”

“That I am, now. My father went mad and hung himself in the woods. It was because of King James and the dread witchfinder. My mother, a devout and loving woman, gave help to any woman seeking it in childbirth or distress, but she was only blessed with one child, herself. That child was me. The hated Matthew Hopkins came to our village and every woman was fearful. He threatened and tested each one, but it was my mother who was convicted. My father held me tight and tried to cover my eyes, but I saw it, the fire leaping around my mother, as she screamed with pain and sudden silence. My father entrusted me to the puritan family, as a servant, far from where I was born, and there thee found me and made me thy wife.”