

Brew Me A Dream

by Bridget Lowery

I visited Tom almost every day, partly to check on his well-being and partly to listen to his stories. He would ply me with strong tea and talk. As he pushed a cup, always a richly patterned cup, towards me, I could see depths of colour swirling in ever decreasing circles, drawing me in. The fragrance arose from the tea in a haze, delighting the senses and preparing the way for one more tale. “One day, you’ll own these tales” he’d say to me.

I knew all about his childhood in the town where the family rented rooms; filled with noisy siblings and tired parents. It was a household where the only true escape was through imagination. That’s when Tom first realised, he could transcend turmoil by creating dreams; weaving threads of fancy through the tangle of his life, he withdrew from the reality of it all, to a safer and altogether less threatening place.

His mother was perpetually weary, yet remained good-natured, working in the Tearoom of Raby Castle, as well as keeping house for her rowdy family of boys. She recognised, in Tom, her eldest child, sensitivity and imagination and she encouraged him to be open to his talents. Some days, after school, Tom was allowed to meet his mother in the Tearoom as her shift was finishing. He was well-known to the other staff and they would keep a sweet treat for him: a scone, a piece of sponge cake, an angel cake. The tea was strong, dark and hot, and it came in a very pretty china cup with a saucer; “so posh” said Tom. As the initial strong tang of the tea faded down to subtle undertones, Tom’s thoughts turned to stories of Kings, Earls and Barons; they fought battles, waved flags and married Princesses.

His mother collected and pressed odds bits of paper on which he would write ideas for stories. For months she squirreled away spare change but could never actually afford to buy a writing book for her son. During one of the annual clear-outs of old stock, the kindly owner of the Castle had given to her a hard-backed writing book, beautifully embossed on the front cover. He had recalled their conversation, from long ago, in which she confided her desire to, one day, buy such a book for Tom.

Tom treasured his book; he kept it hidden from his brothers – suspecting they would laugh at him. God forbid that they should ever read his words!

At school he pleased his teachers by excelling in English. One teacher told his parents that Tom had a talent to write and, if possible, this should be encouraged. Tom’s mother smiled at this but remained dutifully silent. Without meaning to be dismissive, just burdened by trying to support a big, hungry family, his Dad had replied to the teacher “Ooh, our Tom needs to help look after the kids, not start scribbling. He can do that at school!”

Late at night, having finished his family chores, Tom would write in his book; he wrote tales of adventure, inspired by the books he read in the Castle library. He kept his precious writings in a wooden box pushed underneath his bed. His heroes and heroines were typically brave and beautiful, enacting feats of great daring and always ending happily.

The night that Tom's youngest brother found the box of stories and shared them with his Dad, was the night that Tom stopped writing. For many years after, he could summon up that awful, humiliating night; his brother read the stories aloud using ridiculous voices and laughing uncontrollably. His Dad, through his own laughter, told Tom "Well, our Albert does a fair job with your corny stories! Mind you, I don't think we've got Charles Dickens living here! It's a good job you leave school this year ... instead of wasting time!"

Tom gathered his pitiful manuscripts and his precious book and bundled them back into the box. The next day, he sneaked past his mother in the Tea Room and quickly found the Castle Library. It was a mysterious place with alcoves and nooks secret enough to hide a box of treasures. It was into one of these hiding places that he put his box of stories, planning one day to retrieve and rewrite them.

As years went by, the family grew up and went their separate ways. Tom left his box hidden in the fabric of the Castle; I asked the owners if I may be allowed to search for Tom's written treasures. One day, I will share them with you.

Tom started work at the local Railway Station as soon as he left school, training to become a Signalman; a job he enjoyed enough to keep him there for thirty years. Although he never wrote again, he developed a story telling style that his work colleagues found compelling and they encouraged him ~ he made lunchtimes entertaining. "Give Tom a good, strong tea" they'd say, "and he'll keep you amused for hours."

The time arrived when Tom could afford to buy a small house. It was a wrench to leave home but independence, and privacy, beckoned. With such a large family, he was never short of visitors: parents, brothers, sisters-in-law, nieces, nephews. Where did they all go? By the time I entered Tom's life, the only visitors were Carers coming to check on his wellbeing. I'd long had an interest in trains and a friend told me about an old man who had worked on the signals for many years and who loved to share stories about the Railways ... and so began our wonderful friendship. We made an odd grouping, an old man and a young man and copious stories!

Tom never married but was not saddened by his solitary status. He had his storytelling; anchored in reality but woven with dreams. Of all the stories he told me, the one that stirred me most was about a girl.

Cecile.

His girl, so he said, although I never actually met her. With his words he could evoke in my mind an image so vivid that I almost believed she was in the room.

"Oh yes" he began, "I remember that night. Long ago now, you see. But I remember it. Always will. Well, I don't want to ever forget it. Neither would you ..."

"And she just appeared, then, Tom?" I said, following our usual pattern; ever hungry for more, yet knowing what was coming.

"Hmmm" he mused, "she just appeared. A beautiful apparition. A tender, fragile vision of a girl."

I knew his words by heart.

He closed his eyes, recalling their first night as if he wanted it to last forever, to capture that moment in time.

Although not usually given to prosaic speech, Tom's tapestry of tenderness and passion enthralled me when he recounted his evenings with Cecile. He once again became the young, vibrant, virile, youth of days gone by. The years were shed as he embarked on his voyage.

When I asked her age he just chuckled and tapped his temple, which I took to mean she was a figment of imagination, and he said, "young and beautiful".

"She's everything you could want in a woman ... and then some. And still she comes to me. Yes, even now, tonight ... my Cecile." His eyes shone with anticipation.

"It's time you went. She'll be here soon."

My signal to leave as he motioned to the door.

"But Tom, why have I never seen her? I mean, I come here nearly every day and I have never, ever seen her. Come on, Tom, she doesn't exist, does she? It's ok to fantasise you now, but really, you must know when to stop. When reality starts."

Tom just smiled gently and said, "Whose reality?"

It was an argument I could never win ... nor understand.

I dearly wanted to meet Cecile and for Tom's sake I prayed she was real. But deep down inside I knew it was just another of his stories. However, it was the one story that never changed, which intrigued me. Every time in its telling the details remained the same. Perhaps its consistency was symptomatic of Tom's encroaching dotage. Cecile remained as beautiful and devoted to him then as she had been for so long, while he aged and became frailer and less able to look after himself. I knew that Cecile was an enigmatic fantasy, a wished-for love.

As a means of corroborating his story, I'm ashamed to say, I once betrayed his trust by asking neighbours if they knew of Cecile. Their reaction was predictable, I suppose; to them Tom was a nice but confused old man. He lived in a dream world of his own making. Obviously, they would be prepared to help him in time of need, but other than that they preferred not to associate themselves too closely with him.

"No, there's no such person as Cecile. Well ... he's a bit senile ... you know. He never married or anything. So ... you know ..."

Then, one morning I called at Tom's house, only to find it in darkness and with no sign of life. The door was locked, the curtains drawn. A sinking dread wormed its awful way into the pit of my stomach. I banged on the door.

"Come on Tom! Get up! Let me in!"

Tom did not let me in. I kicked down the door and ran inside to find Tom sitting in his favourite chair by the fire, his tea still warm, a smile hovering on his lips.

The funeral was simple; I was a solitary mourner. As I stood by his graveside, listening to the monotone platitudes of the duty Vicar, it occurred to me that now I too was alone. In Tom's Will, I inherited his house. Initial trepidation turned to calm as I entered through the front

door to be engulfed by memories of time spent in Tom's company. I lit the fire, made a pot of his favourite dark leaf tea and I sat back in his chair. As I sipped the tea, I let the aroma lift me and the colour entrance me as I re-lived happy days.

I closed my eyes for a moment to enjoy the story that was shaping in my mind.

An almost imperceptible sigh and a rustle of silk aroused me from my reverie and as I slowly opened my eyes I was entranced by a beautiful apparition. A tender, fragile vision of a girl.

She held out her hand to me and gently led me through the best years of life, fulfilling every dream and desire.

Forty years have passed since then and I now count myself as one of life's contented people, although I'm sure my neighbours would raise their eyebrows and put it down to senility. Some of my stories stray a little from the truth in their telling – but what the hell! I have a young friend who comes to visit me and help around the house and he doesn't mind listening to the confused wanderings of an old man while he drinks my tea; he has an ear for a good story.

Anyway, it's been good talking to you but now I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave. It's time you went.

She'll be here soon. She's everything you could want in a woman ... and then some. And still she comes to me. Yes, even now, tonight ... my Cecile.