

The Magic of the Matinee

by Andrew Preskey

I must have looked a right mess. I'd had a shower at the pithead, of course, but we were working unusual shifts to get the new equipment bedded in, which meant I didn't have time to go home and change. Not that we had many different outfits to change into in those days – work clothes, overalls, one set of casuals and Sunday best.

Well, I turned up straight from a day at the coal face, empty snap tin and flask in hand. I can tell you, she was not impressed! I still remember the course she was running, 'The Poetry and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins'. Mind you, while she may not have been best pleased to have folk coming to her Adult Ed class looking like rejects from the local pit, she was quick enough to react when one of the other students commented about Miners 'knowing their place'.

I can recall it now as if it were yesterday; she didn't reply as such, just calmly recited Wilfred Owen's poem – you know the one I mean, 'Miners'. The room went quiet; you couldn't even hear the sound of breathing. When she'd finished, we simply sat there gawping until this old fellow at the back started clapping and then the chap who'd made the remark joined him and then the whole room was applauding.

That's what makes it so sad. Some say she was the best English Teacher St. Martin's Secondary ever had; now she can't write her name. She can read a little – though, again, I'm not sure what the words mean to her anymore. Still, I wouldn't change a moment. Marrying Beth was the best thing I ever did, the most wonderful day of my life.

Our youngest, Ruth, keeps talking to me about care, "You know, Dad, you can't go on like this for ever – we all love Mum but it's not getting any easier." The lass means well, of course. Over to our place every other day to lend a hand, she always has us round for Sunday tea. It gives Beth a change of scenery – *and* me a rest from cooking duties! Still, there's no way Beth is going to live anywhere but home. She guaranteed that on our third date. We'd gone to the matinee showing, probably because it was cheaper – 'Calamity Jane'. I was a big, hardy Coal Miner in those days but, when Doris Day started singing 'Secret Love', I quite welled up. Beth laughed; she squeezed my hand and whispered, "I *do* love you, Mike Lister."

Well, best press on, no time for reminiscing this morning. It's shower day today; I need to be getting her up and ready to face the world. It's funny, we had a shower put in about eight years ago when my arthritis started getting bad – too many rough tackles

playing for the pit football team, I reckon. Anyway, it must be the best part of a decade since we had a bath in the house and yet the shower is always a surprise for Beth. She simply adores it, just like a little girl. I suppose, in that sense, this disease isn't all bad but I can't say it's been easy for either of us. It's not what you'd think; the practical stuff, household chores and the like, isn't a problem. No, what I miss most is her conversation – you know, being able to talk.

“Come on, love, through here. My, you do look smart after that shower. There's a cup of tea for you on the table and I'll have your breakfast ready in no time.”

“For me?”

“Yes, you sit there on the yellow stool – your usual place.”

And she does, for a minute, but after a sip of tea she is up again. She'll have noticed a bit of muck I've missed on the carpet or perhaps seen a brightly coloured bird in the garden and she's off, breakfast not even a memory.

“Come and sit down, love. Fruit salad and a slice of toast with that lovely local honey – deee-licious,” I say.

She turns and looks at the carefully prepared fresh fruit, always her favourite.

“For me?”

“Yes, and is there honey still for breakfast?” I ask, smiling at her.

Five years ago, perhaps even three, my mangling of Rupert Brooke's fine words would have met with a sharp riposte. Beth laughs tentatively. Despite the illness, she remains socially aware. I guess, some things are just so deeply ingrained. I remember the first time I noticed that about her. I'd chased her for weeks before she'd even consider a date with me; I'm not a big-headed sort but I couldn't understand why. She wasn't seeing anyone else.

“I could *never* go out with a man called Lister – think about it,” she teased.

“Why ever not? It's a great old name – been in the family for years!”

“It's not that but, if we ever did get together, what kind of nickname do you think the kids would invent for an English Teacher called B. Lister?”

It had never occurred to me. Still, like they say, 'opposites attract'. Even now, as I gently rib her about breakfast, though Beth doesn't understand my quip, she's sensed that I'm joking. I smile at her and grab a spoonful of my porridge but, before I have swallowed it, the doorbell chimes.

“Who's that?”

“Don’t worry, love. You finish your breakfast, I’ll get the door,” I reassure her.

It’s Maggie, the special Nurse. There are so many different medical folk these days, I forget her proper title – she does the photographs. It’s like a cross between a memory box and a photo album, I guess, but it brings Beth a lot of pleasure. They seem to have unearthed all sorts of snapshots, scenes I’d long since forgotten – like when her friend, Sylvia, got married on that windy day in Calow and the wedding dress blew up over the bride’s head. Funny, it’s always the old pictures that seem to hold most meaning.

I leave them to it. Back in the kitchen, I bin my cold porridge, put the kettle on to make a cuppa and begin to wash up.

“Mr Lister?”

“Mike.”

“I’m sorry, Mike, Beth has become a little agitated and I can’t make out what is wrong.”

I follow the Nurse through to the lounge but I fear I already know the problem.

“It’s OK, Beth, I’m here now,” I say, placing my hand over hers.

She is clutching the picture as though her life depended upon it. And, in one sense, it may. Certainly, mine does.

“Come on, love. It’s alright.”

Beth looks at me, tears in her eyes. “Norman,” she says, “But I think he’s dead now.”

She’s right. He was on the coal face with me. That’s what men did in our part of Derbyshire. It was one of those fluke accidents you get in pits. We’d done everything by the book, no skimping, no bodging. Norman, ‘Big Norm’, as we called him, wouldn’t have stood for anything else. Simple thing, a prop failed. He hit me so hard barging me out of the way that it cracked two of my ribs. The roof fall broke his neck. Of course, we got him out. Dug through the mess with anything we could lay our hands on. But he died the next month, three weeks before his nephew was born, Norman Michael Lister.

“That’s right, love. He was your big brother – my best man. Do you remember?”

“Best man?”

“When we got married. *What* a day,” I say, slipping a snap of the happy occasion into her other hand.

Beth stares at the picture, recognition and joy replacing the sadness in her face. Maggie looks on with a mixture of relief and understanding. Yes, it hasn't been a chocolate-box life we've had but then who gets that?

After the shower and the Nurse's visit, we have a pretty routine day planned. There's a bit of chicken breast with some boiled pots and veg for lunch; then I grab us a couple of ice-creams from the freezer. I've already set up the DVD, while Beth was finishing her first course. So, here we are, two old folk with their choc ices just waiting for the matinee showing. I press the remote and immediately the titles scroll up, 'Seven Brides for Seven Brothers'.

Then, "Bless your beautiful hide..." Beth is singing along in perfect harmony and, again, I gratefully accept the miracle that somehow music has succeeded where words have failed. Gently, I take her hand.

It must be the third time we've watched this film together this month. I don't know whether they had better songs in those days or if it is simply the magic of the matinee but some things I never seem to tire of hearing.

"I *do* love you, Mike Lister," she says.

Yes, some things I simply never tire of hearing.

1492 Words