

At the Setting of the Sun

Tom pulled the writing paper and pen out of his knapsack and sat down at one of the rough wooden tables that were nailed to the floor to save them moving when the boat lurched. He fingered the empty ginger beer bottle nestled in the inside pocket of his jacket then began writing, chewing the end of his pen.

“What you up to Tom?” said one of his friends sitting nearby. “A bit early for writing home isn’t it, we haven’t even got there yet chum.”

“Leave me be, it’s just something I want to do, alright.”

He stood up, folding the note into his pocket and stomped over to the door.

“I wouldn’t go out there, it’s blowing a gale.”

Tom pushed open the door of the boat against the force of the wind then let it slam behind him. Rain lashed his face as he forced his way to the railings at the edge of the deck. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the bottle. Moving so that his back was to the wind he took the note out of his pocket, folded it up small and stuffed it into the bottle screwing the rubber stopper closed as tight as he could. Turning round he paused for a moment, picturing Elizabeth’s face, trying to engrave it on his memory. It would be a year or more before he had any leave and could see her again. He flung the bottle overboard, watching with a lump in his throat as it hit the churning grey water below.

The net slowly cranked up above the fishing boat, the hauling mechanism groaning under the weight of the catch.

“A bit to the right Jim, easy with it.” Steve looked at his watch, he was overseeing the second catch of the day and it was getting late.

“OK, drop.” The net lowered to the deck and as its sides flopped open the fish, in a slithering cascade, tumbled into the open hold.

Steve peered down at the haul, some of the fish were still wriggling with their last gasps of life. On the top, among the grey and brown bodies he could see something dark green that didn’t look like marine life of any kind. Could he be bothered to go and investigate? Perhaps he should.

“Hang on Jim, I think there is something down there. Keep her steady, I’m going to take a look.”

He carefully descended the rough wooden ladder to the hold. Kicking some of the fish carcasses aside he reached across the twitching heap and retrieved the green object. It looked like some kind of old bottle. He tucked it in his jacket pocket and climbed back up to the deck.

The doorbell rang. Although she was expecting it Emily’s heart leapt. This was the moment she had been looking forward to yet dreading since she had received an email six weeks ago from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in England.

She pulled herself up from the armchair with the help of her walking stick and made her way to the door. There stood a smartly dressed man in his forties with cropped dark hair and a goatee beard. He held out his hand.

“Mrs Crowhurst I presume.”

“Yes and you must be Mr Gowan. Thank you very much for coming all this way to see me.”

“Not at all, it’s my pleasure. Please call me Steve.”

“Shall we go through and sit down then you can show me what you have.”

Once they were seated Steve opened his bag and took out something encased in layers of tissue paper which he carefully unwrapped and handed to Emily.

“Oh my goodness, so this is the bottle?”

The bottle was dark green, clearly weathered but with its screw top still in place.

Emily picked it up and turned it over.

“I can feel something embossed here on the side, would it have been some lettering?”

“Yes, we think it is a Bateys’ ginger beer bottle from the time of the First World War.”

Emily’s eyes began to mist.

“And inside it we found a covering note to the finder plus this, perfectly intact.”

He handed her a folded piece of cream coloured paper, a little curled at the edges.

Her hand trembled as she took the note.

September 9th 1914

Dear Elizabeth,

I am writing this note on the boat and dropping it into the sea in the hope that it will reach you. I love you so much and cannot bear that we will be apart for so long. If this reaches you please sign the bottom of the page where it says receipt, put the date and look after it well.

Give my love and kisses to Emily.

Your ever loving Tom.