

Stars on the Train

by Mark Baillie

Gale Watson scratched and yawned as she clattered around the kitchen fixing breakfast for her sisters. It was a little after seven thirty and her dad was already out, helping the farmer on the estate. Since her mum died, Gale had the morning routine of getting her sisters up and off to school down to a fine art. Her boss at Haddington post office understood that things weren't easy at home and didn't mind her being a few minutes late each morning.

The thing that made her later than normal today was the letter that dropped through the door of the cottage. She wasn't surprised to see it was addressed to her and in the handwriting of Bob Slater, her fiance. Bob was in the middle of his national service and stationed in Dover, over four hundred miles south.

What was surprising was the postmark on the envelope from Maryhill detention barracks in Glasgow. She turned it over in her hand a couple of times, frowning at it.

Normally Bob's letters were full of romantic talk of fate and alignments of the stars. But today's letter was more factual and explained that he had run into a bit of trouble with his commanding officer. He hoped to be out soon but they might need to move the wedding date, which was booked for that summer. Detainees at Maryhill were allowed visits on the first Tuesday of every month and Bob promised that he would explain everything in person.

Gale had to read it a couple of times for it to sink in but once it had, her lips parted as if to speak, but she just sighed and rubbed her brow. Much worse news had visited Gale in her eighteen years.

Gale first set eyes on Bob Slater two years earlier when her uncle Jockey brought his young apprentice to pick up a lame horse from the farm.

Bob was giving the animal one last trot as Gale came round the corner of the stable yard. Gale's dad and Jockey were carefully watching the limping horse and grimly sucking their teeth in confirmation of its fate.

Gale admired how Bob handled the animal with a tender but sure hand. They smiled at each other and the winter air was musky with death and young lust.

That was January, nineteen forty one. Gale was in her last year at school and Bob was twenty and just about to be drafted into the army.

It was twelve months later that Jockey turned up on a freezing night with a surprise visitor.

Bob was on a week's leave and wearing his neat fitting King's Own Scottish Borderers uniform.

He wore his cap at a jaunty angle and told stories of how he was ready to defend the country against the German invasion. Her dad asked whether he was nervous at all about being sent to war. No, answered Bob - he was brave and determined by nature, on account of him being a Taurus. And besides, he explained, he checked his horoscope every week to see what fate had in store for him.

Her dad gave the nod for Gale and Bob to go out for a stroll after dinner. As they walked Bob gave her a cigarette, put his arm around her, and pointed out star constellations. He asked if she believed in destiny and told her that because she was a Virgo and he was a Taurus - both earth signs - that they were a good match.

Bob visited every few months, whenever he got leave from the army.

‘Seems like a decent lad,’ was all Gale's dad needed to say to let her know that he wouldn't stand in the way if Bob proposed. He popped the question at dinner, going down on one knee in front of her family. Gale said yes, her sisters giggled, and her dad gripped Bob's hand and told him to look after her.

Later, when they were out for a walk, Gale thought it was odd when Bob casually asked if she had access to ration books at the post office. When she asked why he wanted to know, he shrugged and said he just wondered. Impulsiveness, he reminded her, was a Taurus trait.

Bob had been on leave during his visits but not the kind of leave Gale thought. The army had marked him AWOL - absent without leave - nine months earlier, not long after his first visit to Gale's cottage.

He had put in for a week's leave and threw his kit bag off the train somewhere around Peterborough.

By the time he proposed, he had digs in Leith and was selling goods on the black market. The engagement ring, like everything else Bob bought, was paid for with money borrowed from dubious sources.

It may have been a sign that on the day his luck ran out Bob was selling manure. He was knocking doors in Granton, capitalising on the boom in people growing their own. At a house halfway along the street, a big man in a vest came to the door and asked to inspect the manure to make sure it was good quality.

Before stepping outside the man put on his jacket, fastened up the brass buttons, and put on his helmet. Bob had knocked at the door of an off duty policeman.

A few hours later he was being questioned by military police. They took him to Maryhill detention barracks the next day. Bob was facing two years.

On the Tuesday after Bob's letter from the detention barracks, which was the first week of March, Gale told her boss she was sick and caught the train to Glasgow.

At the station, she picked up a magazine for the journey and turned to the horoscope section. She had never taken much interest in Bob's talk about the stars and fate. The short paragraph for Virgo read: This week your honest and patient nature has brought you close to someone who aims to deceive you. Your sense of loyalty will be tested but rely on your intuition and have faith in your instincts to guide you to the right decision.


Maryhill detention barracks looked a lot like her school but with barbed wire along the walls. Once everyone was in, the visiting room was locked and the guards wandered slowly around the rickety tables, seeming to enjoy eyeing the women for a few minutes before their men were brought in. Bob was near the back of the line and went teary eyed when he saw her.

'I swear, Gale, nobody could have put up with it,' he said, clutching her hand tightly. His commanding officer had it in for him since day one. Bob went into great detail about how the bullying got worse and worse over months until he snapped and broke the bastard's jaw.

'I had to stand up for myself.' There was an earnest quiver of the brow and an honorable raising of the chin. The thing with Bob was he didn't see it as lies. To him, it was just the preferred reality.

Gale sat with her arms folded while he talked. She thought not very much about his predicament but only how much trouble she'd be in if her dad knew where she was.

'What I don't understand,' she finally said, 'is why you're up here if you got into trouble down in England.'



Bob's eyes danced around the room. He was on to his third cigarette and fiddled with the matches.

'Oh, after I punched him I ran away. But they were waiting for me up here when I stepped off the train.'

'And you'll be in here for how long?'

He shook a sorrowful head and grimaced. His case had to go through so many processes and boards, it was all too much for him to make any sense of it.

'Did you tell your dad?' he asked.

'Aye,' she lied.

'What did he say?'

Gale gave a troubled shrug as if to say - you know how these things are.

'Just promise me...,' Bob gulped the words out, '... you'll still be waiting when I get out.

Remember we're meant for each other.'

On the train home Gale crunched through a bag of cola cubes. The city's warehouses, tenements and factories quickly gave way to farms and fields. In the distance, purple heather streaked the hills. She had heard him say his piece and had consulted her horoscope. Gale Watson was ready to make a decision about Bob Slater.