

# A TIME TO KEEP

By Florrie Stout

Clack, clack, clack, the tram seats rattled to face the other way and I sat down ready for the clippie and for us to set off back the way we'd come, all the way from the Orkney Islands. We had a train to catch on the other side of town, then from Scrabster in the far north of Scotland the steamer would take us across the infamous Pentland Firth. A sense of great achievement raised my spirits already. Although a long journey lay ahead. I was truly thankful the baby was good, he slept peacefully in my arms.

Surely he had inherited his mothers carefree happy nature. His warm little body close to me, soothed some of the pain from my heart, and the ghosts of yesterdays, long gone, passed gently through my mind. In my minds eye I could see us all, my two sisters and I, playing around the croft, and I thought of how different we all were. I, Bethan, was the eldest, Jane two years younger than me, she was quiet, clever and kind. Annie was pretty, funny and so full of life. Although we were poor, we had such a healthy happy life. Mum and Dad worked hard on the croft almost every waking hour. The special years came and went too quickly, with all their joy and heartaches.

There is one who lives in a special place in the heart forever, and for me that one was Robbie. He lived on the neighbouring farm. We started school on the same day, we held hands as we walked two miles over the hill, sharing play pieces and troubles. He was my soul mate and friend. We enjoyed music, winter evenings were spent playing his dads old accordian. As I watched him play and his gaze held mine new feelings crept into my heart. We fell so much in love, and planned to spend our lives together, we spoke of what we'd buy and where we would live. Annie was growing up, she was beautiful and popular at the country dances. She flirted aplenty with all the boys and had them under her spell, Robbie included. At every opportunity she tried to be near him. He could not resist her charms and soon his love for me faded away, just as surely as the spring flowers slowly die, their wonder and beauty gone forever. I thought my heart would break, watching them together. Then they announced that they were going away to live in England and in spite of all the hurt she caused me, I missed her so much.

It was 1940 and soon Robbie was called up to serve his country in WWII. Annie wrote to mother often, she was only 17 and far from home and family. She was also pregnant. Robbie wrote to me, just once. He told me he was sorry for all that had happened, and how I was never far from his thoughts, I did not reply, and so we lost touch.

He was taken prisoner of war and poor Annie was all alone in England. Mothers face turned white as she read the telegram from the hospital. There had been nothing anyone could have done, our beautiful Annie was gone. She had died suddenly shortly after Eric was born. Our grief

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was overwhelming. We could hardly speak without crying, but then I thought of that tiny baby, he was our own family too.

So I was determined to bring him home to the land of his ancestors, where he truly belonged. I planned how I would travel. Sleepless nights were spent thinking and worrying about the journey. Mother had a letter from the hospital. They would keep the baby until we came for him. I had never even been to the mainland before. As with most trials, thinking about it was the worst bit. People had been so helpful and kind at the hospital. Tears ran down my cheeks as I looked down at the tiny sweet face crowned by a mop of dark hair. I knew I would love him forever and always be there for him.

Annie's remains were sent home by boat. Now on the train my thoughts were interrupted as Eric stirred in my arms. I looked up to see an old lady smiling. "He's a bonnie baby, and so good", she remarked. "He's been wonderful, but he'll be hungry now", I replied as I took a bottle of milk from my bag. "Here, let me get that warmed for you", she reached over and took the bottle and quickly vanished down the corridor. I had just finished changing his nappy when she returned. "That should be ok now". She lowered her ample frame back into the seat and picked up her knitting again. "That is so kind, thank you", I said as the baby started to suck.

Tears filled my eyes as he gazed up at me. Those familiar blue eyes searching my face. Where was he now, his dad, my soul mate and first love. The one who had broken my heart in two? I smiled through my tears and in the silence only broken by the click of knitting pins and Eric's comforted sighs, I said a silent prayer. "Please, God, keep Robbie safe". It was a blessing that the weather was fair, now in April, it could change quickly in an hour. I had been fine on the sea crossing coming over. Now we were back on the Ola again. How I hated boats. The sounds, smells and motion made my stomach churn, even before it set sail.

Thankfully, Eric was sound asleep, so I lay down in an attempt to avoid being seasick. I awoke as the steamer dived through the waves, I looked out the porthole to see a wave, then nothing but sky. The wind had risen, and now as I saw Hoy's high cliffs come into view, the boat dived and rolled even more. A passenger was thrown across the room and landed in a heap against the wall. I prayed that Eric would sleep on, and he did. Not far now, I thought, just as the Old Man of Hoy came into view. I stood up to see it. I realized later that was a big mistake, my legs turned to jelly and I was so sick until we berthed at Stromness. I peeped into the basket, he was awake, I managed to gather enough strength to get myself and Eric off the steamer. What a relief to be on dry land again.

Robbie's parents now had a car. They waved from the pier and came to help carry my luggage, mother had come with them. "It's so good to have you safely home Bethan", said mum, "How

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on earth did you manage all that way?”. “He’s a lovely little baby”, never hardly cried at all”, I said. “Where is Annie’s body?”. “She is lying in the Kirk, the funeral is tomorrow”, Mum replied quietly as tears filled her eyes and a silence fell. Few words were said on the way back to the farm. I gazed out the car window, the daffodils were in bloom along the road verges, some lambs had been born since I left. How wonderful to be home again and in the first of the Spring, my favourite time of year.

Now we had a new little person in our family. I would make sure he was well cared for. We laid Annie to rest next day in the Kirkyard. The Ministers words were a great comfort. We cried until there were no tears left, but the terrible pain of grief was a bitter companion. Only time would make it fade away.

Another year passed quickly, Eric was an angel, so easy to care for and always smiling. The hens were kept away from the house and he would walk taking my hand as we strolled across the field to feed them every day. Now he said, “man, man,” and pointed to the track up over the hill. Someone was walking, slowly down the heather track towards the house.

Disbelief and then joy made me cry out, “it’s Robbie, it’s Robbie!!”. I waved and waved, and we ran to meet each other. How gaunt and poorly he looked, but he was safely home now. He reached out and held me and begged my forgiveness. For me there could never have been anyone like him ever. I would never look back. There were more tears when we went to his home, this time of joy. Robbie’s granny put her arms around us and Eric, and said “Oh Bethan, bless you, this is a great day for the Lord”, then she kissed us all, then sat beside the fire with Eric on her knee.