

PAPER ROSE

Standedge Tunnel was opened in 1811 and the canal became a through route. To keep costs down, the canal was built without a towpath. While the horses were led over the hill, the boatmen had to "leg" the boat through the tunnel, by lying on boards across the front of the boat and walking along the walls or roof of the tunnel, which took up to four hours.

The Canal Company decided that boats could only be propelled through the tunnel by its own official "leggers," and to operate a traffic control system. This involved only westbound traffic using the tunnel for a four hour period, then only eastbound during the next four hours. The tunnel thus became a bottleneck with boats having to queue to use the locks. The leggers were accommodated in Tunnel End Cottages and were paid a shilling a trip.

(<http://www.penninewaterways.co.uk/huddersfield/standedge3.htm>)

Tom looked at his feet which were exactly the same as Francis' feet next to them.

They had soaked them in a bowl of scalding water and were drying them in front of the fire, after a day of treading the moor, Tom from above and Francis from below.

Tom had a hard sore patch on the bone below his right big toe. He rubbed at it, hoping it wouldn't turn into a bunion. Francis touch his own left foot in the same place.

"Maybe we should swap boots tomorrow," he said.

Tom nodded.

Their Mam came into the room with four plates.

"Move your feet and make space for these," she said. "They need to warm before we eat and she'll be here soon."

Tom didn't look up. He knew if he did his anxiety would snag on Francis, and Francis would look at him, and then he would know. If he didn't know already. Tom hadn't seen Rose except for at church for four years, not since they were still children and Master George at the big house used to make them come to his 'school'. Now she was going to be a laundrymaid like their Mam, and she was coming to tea.

Rose could always tell them apart in the blink of an eye.

Not everyone could, even folks who'd known them since they were children. Master George couldn't. It had a distancing effect. You'd be chatting to someone and you could tell that part of their brain was gnawing over the question, is it Tom or is it Francis? Their eyes would flick across your face looking for clues, and when they left they were still chasing the answer around their head. Anything you'd talked about became secondary.

Rose looked you in the face, and then she blinked, and then she knew. Tom wondered sometimes what was going on in her head during that second that her eyes were closed. Was she using a different sense? Maybe he smelled different to Francis, what with him spending all his days tramping across the moors in the fresh air and Francis being beneath the ground in the damp and the dark. But she never sniffed. He thought it was something else. Maybe the look on their faces as she opened her eyes again, Francis smiling and Tom waiting expectantly.

Sometimes he wondered if Francis might be in love with her too, but he didn't really think so. He was too relaxed with her, teasing her as though she was his sister, pulling faces at her in church when the sermon went on too long. He couldn't imagine a girl who would have the effect on Francis that Rose did on him, making his stomach grow tight and his face muscles stiffen so a smile felt like a grimace. Making him sing the hymns too loud, kneel to prayer as self-conscious as a marionette.

Their Mam was laying the table with the Sunday knives and forks instead of the weekday spoons. They must be having roast rather than the usual stew. She'd spread the embroidered table cloth too, which they didn't normally use even on Sundays, only at Easter and Christmas.

“Have you killed the fatted calf then?” Francis asked her.

“Well, I thought I’d make an effort, it being the first time,” she said. “It’s been a long while.”

She placed a white tea cup in the middle of the table and filled it with a small posy of harebells.

“Mind you, she won’t have to expect this every week. After this time it will be a regular working lunch when she’s here.”

Tom was still standing by the fireplace and Francis was helping their Mam lift the roast from the oven when there was a tap at the door.

“That’ll be her,” said their Mam. “Tom, could you let her in?”

But Tom slipped through the door into the bedroom pretending he hadn’t heard. There was no way he was going to open the door to Rose in his bare feet.

He’d tried to write her a letter. That morning up on the tops, he’d sat down near the second air shaft to eat his lunch and let the horse graze. He didn’t see how else he could let her know how he felt. He couldn’t exactly come out with it at the tea table in front of Francis and their Mam, and when would they have another chance to talk? She was coming to work everyday in the laundry, but she’d have gone by the time he and Francis got home.

He thought she would like a letter. Most people they knew couldn’t read, or not much. But Master George had done a good job in the school in the big barn, passing on the knowledge he got from his tutor to the three of them. Francis always pretended he didn’t want to learn, pretended to be the naughty one in the class. But Tom knew he was actually better than him or Rose. He’d picked up reading and writing almost against his will. It was a useless skill in their line of work, like an

expensive hat he'd never have occasion to wear, and Francis didn't see the point of it. Tom didn't see it like that. He thought it would be nice to have an expensive hat, even if he only wore it occasionally in private. Even if he only wore it for Rose.

If he sent her a letter, it would be like that. Something that no one else could share. Except Francis.

It was a beautiful morning and the sky shone blue above the moor, the air shimmering as though full of crystals. He listened for the sound of the curlew as it rose up high above the skylarks, its harsh squawk shaking the cotton grass. He loved it up here. He looked across the valley, at the uneven hillocks of spoil from when they dug the tunnel, grassed and grazed now into the landscape, and behind them, the line of the airshafts. Tom followed them with his eyes, imagining Francis underground, his feet pushing against the rock, the same rock which pushed up here through the surface, breaking out past peat and heather, to feel the elements with its bare edges. Sometimes he jumped, landing as hard as he could with his two feet, wanting Francis to feel the vibrations like a message. But that was just silly, he knew. And anyway Francis never mentioned feeling anything at all.

He pulled a piece of paper from his jacket pocket. He had bought it last week from the post office, along with an envelope and a pencil. What should he say to her?

The horse lifted its head, attracted by his movements and hoping for peppermints, but when he didn't move again, it lowered its nose to the ground and continued to graze. Tom could feel the warmth of the sun on his head and he took off his cap and laid it next to him on the ground.

They usually reached Diggle at more or less the same time, him and the leggers, so he thought they moved at about the same speed, though they went in a straighter line than he could overground. They might be right beneath him now,

pushing their silent way through the dark tunnel. He flattened his feet flat against the ground, pressed down hard on the earth.

Tom had been born first, rushing out into the world and light, leaving Francis in the warm wetness of their mother's womb. Or was it Francis that pushed him out, pressing hard against him with those strong legs which now propelled the boat on its underground journey.

He looked up at the sky. He wanted poetic words, something beautiful. He would tell her that to him she was like a ... what? A bird, flower, a rose? You are my cottongrass. It didn't sound right. You make me think of tiny white clouds scudding across the blue sky, of the larks singing, the sun warming my shoulders, of the tearing sound of the horse grazing. Of all that is clean and blown fresh up here on a summer's day when everyone else is at work. No none of that was right. He thought of the works of literature which Master George had got them to read. Words by people with long and clever names like Alexander Pope, William Shakespeare, Oliver Goldsmith. None of them wrote about cottongrass, did they?

He was lucky to have this job, though days like this were rare. More often there was a cold wind, and likely rain too. He and the horse flattening their ears and bending their heads against the sharpness of it. But even then, he'd rather be up here than underground.

Dear Rose, he wrote.

I have missed you and always look forward to seeing you at church. I wonder, would you like to walk home with me after church on Sunday. I think you are beautiful.

Tom

He stared at the paper aghast. He couldn't send her that. It was the letter of a peasant not a poet. He only had the one piece of paper and he'd ruined it. And it was time to move on if he was to get to the Diggle end in time to meet the leggers. He screwed the paper up into a ball, and called to the horse. As they walked past, he flung the letter into the top of the airshaft. He imagined it falling down and down until it reached the water of the canal, floating for a few moments before being dragged under into the blackness.

In the bedroom he quickly put on socks and his Sunday shoes. He peered into the mirror which hung next to the small window and dragged a comb through his hair. It had lightened in the sun and his skin glowed from days spent walking into the wind. It wasn't the refined look of a gentleman. He didn't look like a poet. He could hear Rose in the other room as she chatted to their Mam. He couldn't hear the words, just the tone, and the way her voice went up and down in a sing-song way reminded him of a blackbird. He smiled, and then he felt a dragging feeling inside. Why would she be interested in him? He couldn't string two words together.

Francis put his head round the door.

“Mam's serving up,” he said.

Tom turned away from the mirror without looking at it again. He walked through to the other room and sat down in his normal place at the table. He stared at the tablecloth, then at the harebells, then lifted his eyes to look at Rose who was sitting opposite him.

“Hello Tom,” she said. She didn't blink, she knew straight away.

“Hello Rose,” he said. His voice sounded like a strangled cat but she didn’t seem to notice.

Their Mam was laying slices of meat onto the warmed plates.

“What’s this?” Rose asked.

Next to her place at the table was a paper flower. Paper folding was a skill of Francis’ which he had picked up from one of Master George’s tutors. He could make all sorts of things – little boxes, frogs, birds. If he ever had reason to handle paper, his fingers started to twitch and before long they were folding and turning and flattening and something small and marvellous would appear. He made up his own designs. He could make a whole garden of different sorts of flowers. Tom had tried once or twice, but his folds were too thick and he could never remember the sequences.

This flower was a rose. Tom felt a spark of anger rise in his chest. How could Francis have done this? They had never spoken about it, but Francis knew, surely, that Tom was in love with Rose, just as surely as Tom knew that Francis wasn’t. She was smiling with delight.

“This is beautiful,” she said, turning it round and round in her fingers. “Did you make it Tom?”

He opened his mouth, but Francis spoke over the top of him.

“Potatoes, Rose?” He passed the dish towards her and she put the flower down in order to take it from him.

The paper rose was next to Tom’s place now, as she had left space in front of hers for the potato dish. There was writing on the paper, and when he looked again he could see it was his own writing. The paper was the sort they sold in the post office, and it was covered in tiny creases as though it had been screwed up and then flattened out.

He looked quickly at Francis, but Francis was serving himself carrots and wasn't looking at Tom. Rose had picked up the flower again.

"There's something written on it," she said. And before anyone could say anything her fingers had unfolded the paper and laid it out flat on the table beside her. The heat moved from Tom's chest to his face and he stared at the meat on his plate.

"Would you like some carrots Rose, dear?" asked their mother.

Rose looked up from the paper and straight at Tom. He felt her gaze and raised his eyes to meet it. She was smiling.

"Yes please," she said. "That would be lovely."