

The White Cliffs - by David Hampton

"These mountains are indeed grand, but nothing melts my heart like the white cliffs of Dover," she sighed.

Mom's eyes glittered in the waning light of a leisurely day spent at Rocky Mountain National Park as we sat on a rough-hewn log bench gazing at the splendor surrounding us. We were there on a brief sojourn hoping the trip would ease the heartbreak of recently losing my father, and her husband of 50 years.

She turned to me and smiled. "Are you familiar with the song 'The White Cliffs of Dover'?"

A life-long music buff working at KWTO radio in Springfield at the time, I was very familiar with the wartime classic and told her so.

Mom's focus turned back to the mountains as her lightly accented voice murmured, "There'll be blue birds over the white cliffs of Dover tomorrow, just you wait and see. That beautiful lyric filled us with such hope at the time."

My mother was the first "war bride" to arrive in the Ozarks following World War Two. Ironically, her 15 minutes of fame included a stint with George Earle, a popular KWTO personality at the time who was famous for his "Man on the Street Interviews." However, Mom was more than just a British girl who fell for an American serviceman, she was a member of the Royal Air Force during the war serving as a radio specialist in one of the many radar towers lining the coasts of Great Britain. She recalled listening to the anxious banter of the "Spit" pilots dog fighting in the skies from her precarious communications lair. Fortunately for my siblings and me, the Germans never figured out the towers were radar installations until it was too late.

Mom fell in love with my father while both were stationed at Duxford Fighter Base in Cambridge, England. An Army Air Corps armorer, Dad worked on Thunderbolt fighter planes and was eventually awarded four bronze stars among other decorations. Like so many humble servicemen from the greatest generation he rarely discussed the war and I was never aware of his medals until after he passed.

"He was a beautiful man you know," mom whispered as her gaze remained fixed on the distant mountains. "Unlike many Yankees who my girl friends used to say were over-sexed, overpaid and over here, your dad was understated and kind. That's what drew me to him."

Trying desperately to keep tears at bay, I silently nodded agreement.

"We were so young, in dangerous circumstances, but optimistically planning our life together while bombs were literally pounding around us. I think now the tenuous times that defined our early moments in love was the cement that kept us together all those years."

All I could do was keep nodding. She laid a weathered hand on my arm and turned to me. Unable to meet her gaze, I just stared into the distance.

"Thank you David for taking the time to bring me to this beautiful place and humoring an old lady full of distant memories." She lowered her head and sobbed faintly, "I miss your father so very much."

Time has passed and I find myself back here, alone this time, sitting on the rough bench trying my best to deal with another life altering loss. The distant mountains are on fire with reflected sunlight in a valiant, but unsuccessful attempt to recast my mood. Suddenly a brief chirp interrupts somber thoughts and I turn to locate the source. A female bluebird is sitting on a branch of the small pine sprout to my left. A few seconds later a brightly colored male joins her. They were so close I wondered if they even saw me, so I became stock-still and watched with fascination. Seemingly unafraid they remained on the branch for several moments twittering and preening each other. Then they stopped, and I swear the lady bluebird smiled at me. I realize of course that birds can't smile, and in my fragile emotional state it was most likely my imagination, but it really looked like she was...happy. I couldn't help but smile back. It seemed like that's what they were waiting for because in a flash of blue feathers they were gone.