

SOLDIER BLUE

By

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Woods and boys were born to be together; born to share each other's unquestionable beauty. A woods is that special place where a boy's quest to be spiritually free is born, a place of magic and mystery, a wonderful place to fall in love. A good place to die?

It was the wrong time of year for a carpet of blue to greet Tommy when he entered the delightful Bluebell Wood. It mattered little. When you loved the woods as much as Tommy did it would be impossible not to be in awe of its splendour, whatever the season.

Tommy took himself off the narrow path, through tangled branches and bramble, into the depths of the undergrowth. Retracing long gone footprints he soon found himself standing beside the winding stream, the far bank crowned by an impressive hedgerow of hawthorn, hazel, bramble and elder.

Tommy loved this special clearing in an otherwise thickened wood. It was a small haven where shafts of sunlight plunged through branches onto grassy soil, before exploding into a sunbathing savannah. For most of his childhood, this secret spot had been his refuge, a place of play, a place to laugh and cry, and much, much more. It was only known to beaters, badgers, gamekeepers, and other true brethren of the woods. And, of course, by boys like Tommy once used to be - still was at heart.

Tommy kicked off his trainers and plunged his feet into the stream's refreshing flow, stirring boyhood memories. He'd walked its waters many times before, mostly in wellingtons, sometimes barefoot. He'd been Sinbad the Sailor when he'd found pebbles of coloured glass tumbled smooth by time - jewels and precious gems from far off places. On other days he'd been Robin Hood's devoted son, makeshift bow to hand as he fought the Sheriff's men. On one exhausting summer's eve Tommy even found the Golden Fleece - hair from a horse's mane - tangled in an enormous bramble which pricked him ruthlessly when he excitedly claimed the prize as his own.

But then there were the not so happy days, days Tommy spent huddled against the grandfather oak: The death of his favourite chicken; the bully who had beaten him because Tommy was gay; his broken arm when he couldn't climb trees for two whole months; and other times when tears replaced treasure.

With thoughts on memories past, Tommy made tracks toward the New Forest Common and Lover's Gate, trekking through the undergrowth rather than

taking the footpath, birdsong and playful squirrels accompanying him. As a boy, he liked to venture to the Common and chase the wild ponies. On one occasion, he'd lassoed a stallion with a miraculous piece of rope work. When the noose pulled taut around the stallion's neck, Tommy was plucked clean from the gate and dragged deep into the gorse and bracken. Funny how you don't let go even though it would be the most sensible thing to do.

Tommy failed to find the tree he'd secretly carved two names upon as he climbed the leafmould slope. He'd purposely chosen an inconspicuous one. He was sure it was close by. Didn't matter really, it was common knowledge trees could wander across the woods if the notion took them. He'd lost many a good tree that way. He knew it would find him when the time was right.

He'd enclosed a youth's name in that loving heart, interwoven with his own, both speared by Cupid's arrow. It was a declaration of his secret love. Pip never knew Tommy's love for him had been given a life of its very own. Free to grow as they would surely grow.

Pip. Beautiful Pip. The ever-smiling, gentle Pip.

It had truly surprised Tommy when Pip made his sexual move as they sat on Lover's Gate, brought about by becoming aroused by a couple of mating horses. Pip began by kissing Tommy before his true intentions were revealed, before he took away his innocence, before they made love. The day hadn't quite ended in tears when Pip casually revealed that he was joining the Army the coming weekend, and Tommy wouldn't see him again for a very long time. Truth was Tommy was hurting like never before. To be married and divorced in a single afternoon takes some stomaching for a youth that was crazily in love. Tommy applied to join the Royal Navy shortly after.

It was now almost three years since that day of sexual bliss and bereavement. Tommy hadn't seen Pip since. He doubted he ever would now his folks no longer lived in the area and he rarely visited - this his first since becoming a sailor.

Tommy hadn't exited the woods where he'd expected, his tracker skills deserting him. Turning left, he headed toward Lover's Gate. As he drew near, he spotted a face peering from behind a bush. The young man appeared to be sitting upon the gate. Stooping to pluck a ripened berry from a bramble, Tommy took the opportunity to have a closer look whilst popping the fruit into his mouth. He'd no idea why his heart danced so excitedly, but it did.

Although it was where he'd been heading Tommy thought it might be somewhat rude to join the stranger on the gate. Instead, he chose to stroll on by bidding him "Good day" while sending the briefest glance of acknowledgement in his direction.

"Tommy boy!" The unexpected call caused Tommy to stop in his tracks and swing about. The stranger waved his arms. "Don't you recognise me?"

Tommy didn't, or the awful scar that travelled from cheekbone to dimpled cheek, then back to the corner of the mouth, like the flap on an envelope. "Do I know you?" he asked, not daring to move closer.

The young man thumped his fists into a broad chest. Tommy was relieved a tribe of gorillas didn't rush from the woods and join him. "It's me... Pip!" he declared. "Friggin' hell, Tommy. You must remember me."

'Course Tommy remembered Pip. He'd been thinking about him since his arrival in Bluebell Wood. Surely this couldn't be him? Tommy could fit two Pips inside the body of this beefcake.

Pip leapt from the gate. Tommy stepped back apace when strong arms wrapped about his body and crushed the air from his lungs. "You son-of-a-bitch. What the hell you doing here?" Pip hollered somewhat crazily. "Blow me, Tommy. Who'd have thought?"

Tommy had blown him, good and proper on that special day. He doubted he would again. Pip wasn't his type any more. It had nothing to do with the appearance of his otherwise handsome face, more to do with his overpowering manner. He said nothing, nervously patting the powerful back.

Pip lifted a flap on his combats and pulled a partly drunk bottle of scotch from the baggy pocket. "We've gotta drink to this," he enthused. He thought for a moment. "The queen!" he suddenly hollered, taking a hefty gulp.

It was far too military a toast for his liking. Tommy was relieved Pip hadn't saluted. There was a possibility he could have been toasting him. "Old pals," Tommy reciprocated, taking a sip. Pip sent another slug down his neck when Tommy returned the bottle.

Pip removed his regimental T-shirt, revealing a gallery of tattoos panned into a muscular and tanned chest: Union Jack, bulldog and other military looking designs. His arm went about Tommy's shoulders, pulling him roughly into his body. Both slumped to the ground. "Heard you joined the Navy," he sniggered. "Tell old Pippy boy what you been up to then."

'Old Pippy boy' screeched in his brain like a jammed drill. Tommy rubbed his forehead nervously. "Not much to tell."

For two hours they talked about this and that, *that* being the Army, Pip, Pip taking regular gulps of scotch.

Pip had been in action - twice. His scar was from shrapnel. He was given a medical discharge because of it. He'd won a medal, got married, had a kid, and got divorced, all in three years. The only thing Tommy had done was get bounced around in storm force seas and had sex with every sailor he could lay his disgusting little hands upon.

"The Army was my lifeblood," Pip finished detailing his extraordinary life, his solemn expression and alcohol intake speaking volumes.

The randy stallion strutting behind a mare dramatically changed the mood. “Remember those horses, Pip? Boy, did we have some horny fun after that,” Tommy had innocently remarked, attempting to lift Pip’s spirit.

The expression on Pip’s face was bayonet sharp. “Holy shit! Don’t tell me you’re a friggin’ faggot?”

Tommy was stunned. Was this really his beautiful Pip he was sitting beside? “Pardon?”

“I asked if you were a friggin’ faggot?” Pip snarled. There was even more venom in his tone.

Tommy jumped to his feet. He was fuming. “I’m a faggot all right. So bloody what.”

Pip shot a hefty measure of scotch down his neck, stood, and squared up to Tommy. He coughed when the scotch hit the back of his throat. “Friggin’ hell. Never thought you’d turn into a friggin’ perv.”

Anger exploded Tommy’s face red. He knew Pip could snap him like a twig, probably kill him with a strategically placed finger, but didn’t care. Tommy prodded Pip’s chest. “What’s your damn problem?”

Pip took another gulp of scotch. “My problem! You’re the one with the friggin’ problem.” His expression oozed disgust. “The one who takes it up the rear.”

Tommy’s fist clenched. If Pip said another word, he was sure as hell going to smack him. “Don’t suppose there’s any faggots in the good old army, eh, Pippy boy? All macho men, aren’t we?”

Pip began to walk away, like he was afraid of catching Tommy’s queerness. “You’re friggin’ disgusting,” he spat.

Tommy went for his jugular. “Really! And who was going up whose damn rear when we were last here? Tell me that Mister ‘I’m so bloody straight’ soldier boy.”

The rest of the scotch vanished in a single gulp. Tommy ducked when Pip hurled the empty bottle. Thankfully, it missed his head and struck Lover’s Gate; the shards shimmering in the sunlight as it shattered.

“Well?” Tommy pushed as Pip continued to march away. Pip didn’t answer, moving behind a gorse bush, two fingers pointing skyward.

Tommy remained silent and shaking. Moments later a revving bike flashed by, Pip’s eyes focussed on the track ahead. For several minutes Tommy waited for the sound of it returning, for Pip to rush back and give him a friendly hug as he apologised. It never happened. Tommy knew he’d never see him again.

Deeply saddened, Tommy re-entered the darkness and solitude of the wood. His eyes became watery as he trudged through the undergrowth. He began to search his mind for excuses, to explain Pip’s brutal behaviour. He couldn’t accept he’d turned into a homophobic sod so readily. Tommy

suspected it had to be the army, the endless days of training, the brutal regime of bullying in order to create a fighting machine. Seeing his mates blown to bits and being wounded couldn't have helped, or pumping a few rounds into guys of his age. Being discharged most surely hadn't. The drink hadn't been of assistance either.

Tommy dried his watery eyes and smiled, thinking, perhaps the drink had done just the opposite, reminded Pip that deep inside he was more than capable of loving a guy. His problem was guilt. He'd been riddled with guilt knowing he'd rather be making love to guys than killing them. The reunion had reminded him of this, reminded him of their love.

The tall beech tree with their names carved upon it suddenly appeared. Tommy smiled suspecting it was a good omen. He stroked a finger affectionately over Pip's name. As he pressed his palm lovingly upon the heart, a loud crack ricocheted through the wood. The blood splattering over the back of his hand was the last thing Tommy would witness. He would never know it was his own.