

FIRST 'DRAUGHT'

The canals become a much-needed refuge from the hustle and bustle of 21st-century life for the central character of this month's short story by *Alice Griffin*, from Pembrokeshire.

If you'd like to see your waterways-inspired tale in print, email s.henshaw@wwonline.co.uk or send it to *First 'Draught'*, Canal Boating Times, 151 Station Street, Burton-on-Trent DE14 1BG. Unfortunately, we cannot return submissions so please make sure you retain the original copy of your manuscript.

Quiet Space

Rain was coming down fast and heavy, wind blowing her umbrella inside out. Caroline tried to fight against it to no avail and, in a fit of frustration, turned into an alleyway, that led to another alleyway, and then another... until she found herself criss-crossing through her hometown on an altogether different journey.

Nestled between the high red-brick walls the umbrella settled and Caroline's heart slowed as she found herself lulled by the quiet and the memories. She had forgotten about this world within a world, this space where she could escape – without escaping – but now she was reminded how her seeking out of quiet spaces had begun.

As a teenager everyone walked the main road to school; each morning the pavements became thick with blazers, bubblegum, cigarette smoke and black-ringed eyes. Caroline remembered the noise: taunts, laughter, shouting, the rev of an engine, slam of a front door, flick of a lighter, kick of a ball, the spit of saliva. Every noise felt amplified and she'd suck them in, hold them there like an inflating ball until she felt she might explode, before silently slipping into her network of alleyways.

Sometimes Caroline could cross the ten roads to her school without seeing another person.

In these backstreets it was the tumbling of a dried leaf in the wind that caught her attention, or the near-silent pad of a cat jumping onto a garden gate, or perhaps the splash of a puddle, kick of a can. Here the sounds were still amplified but somehow they were kinder, and in this world they were hers. Sometimes Caroline would stop for a moment to feel the grinding of broken glass against concrete, twisting her foot into the ground, lost in the pleasure. Escaping the



overpowering noise of life felt like her secret. To Caroline these quiet slices of space were undiscovered lands to be explored and as she trundled her way through into adulthood, wherever she found herself, the quiet spaces remained.

When running in the city where Caroline lived and worked, she navigated serenely the fluid paths that formed for mere seconds between the ever-shifting mass of people, her mind focused only on the feel of hard concrete under foot. At lunchtime she would go to

the sandwich bar and find herself drowned in languages, office gossip, till rings, the fizz of a bottle opening or the clunk of the coffee machine mid-espresso. She would suck down the noise then walk her sandwich out of the shop, turn left along a side-street and emerge onto the towpath; a new undiscovered quiet space where she was able to expand and breathe again.

When her friend, Tom, joked that perhaps she should live down there on the towpath in a narrowboat, she waved off the idea with a laugh.

“A narrowboat? That’s ridiculous! I wouldn’t even know how to sail the thing.” But he had sown the seed and as she lay in her bedsit listening to the neighbours at it, or the death metal junkie on the floor above who kept her awake at all hours, thoughts of those serene faces on the towpath began to loom large in her mind’s eye. There was a much slower dimension, even in the centre of the city, to the lives they lived. As Caroline ate her daily sandwich on the bench she watched roll-ups made at leisure before

being smoked in slow motion up on deck. Ducks were fed, roofs were washed, guitars were played and infectious laughs were heard as banter leapt from open side-hatch to roof, to towpath, to tiller.

One day Caroline plucked up the courage to talk to a young guy painting a little red boat. He explained he was getting it finished so he could go off and explore life. “You see, this is my home – everything I own is in it... but I have the luxury of living wherever I want, whenever I want,” he

