

Becoming JOY

She was crossing the Atlantic to meet a pen pal she'd never seen...

AUGUST 1952

*Begin again, must I begin again
Who have begun so many loves in fire.
'Sonnet I,' Joy Davidman*

There are so many ways to fall in love, and I'd begun each ash-destined affair in myriad ways. And there I was beginning again in that August of 1952.

'Ma'am.' The porter in a crisp white uniform motioned to me, startling me from my reverie. I'd been staring at the Manhattan skyline, skyscrapers like cardboard cut-outs against a stormy sky. Behind me the grand ocean liner waited, a mountain of a ship I would soon board.

'I'm sorry, what's that?' I shielded my eyes with the palm of my hand to glance at him.

'I only wondered if you would like me to take your trunk and valise to your cabin?' His efficient English accent made him sound older than his smooth, young face revealed.

'Yes, please.' I tilted my straw bucket hat, the one I'd chosen not because I thought it made me look glamorous, but at least less dowdy. I smiled and straightened my shoulders. Sometimes I imagined writing my own life: This is a peril of being a novelist. She walked the gangway, her chin held high against expectations.

'Are you traveling alone?' The porter glanced around as if I had a family he hadn't yet seen. I almost tasted the disdain in his voice. All around me, chic women boarded the *SS United States* for London, and they gathered loved ones – children, husbands, and mothers.

'Yes, I'm alone.'
He placed his hands on his hips and bent to check the labels. 'Helen Joy Davidman Gresham,' he said. 'Correct?'

I liked the way all of my names rounded

out in his accent, and for a moment I indulged my imagination – hearing Jack say my name in this same way, but softer. I shook off the absurdity of it. I had no idea how my pen-friend Jack's voice sounded. I'd not once heard it in anything other than the cadence of his letters.

'Yes, I'm Joy Davidman.' I waited. Maybe he'd heard of me. Sometimes my name jogged a memory or recognition. 'How do I know your name?' they'd ask with a furrowed brow. 'Oh, my latest novel, *Weeping Bay*, came out last year. Or maybe it's my poetry collection you've read,' I'd say. But the young man only nodded as I reached into my purse and handed him a tip. He grabbed the straps of my trunk and dragged it toward the trolley that would usher my bags into the bowels of the great ship.

And who was I fooling, anyway? 1932 was the last year of grand reviews. Since then...

I was boarding the ship to London – I felt nervous and guilty, but excited

I strode toward the plankway, my hand holding my hat against the wind.

A small, third-class cabin was all I could afford, but still, I'd bought passage with money I'd made from my writing. Now, as the world recovered from the illness and fever of World War II, the grand ocean liner dominating New York Harbor was a sign of renewed elegance and hope in all things good. At almost one thousand feet long, with a dark blue hull and two towering red smoke stacks, she was a sign of salvation to me. With me, 900 passengers would fill her belly, and she had been nicknamed – as are all things when loved – the Big U.

The crowded docks wreaked of smoke and gasoline, of old whiskey and fermenting

trash. Men shouted for their wives, and children clung to their parents' hands, awestruck by the sheer enormity of the brand-new ocean liner. Young girls in various military uniforms and young girls in flirty dresses dragged suitcases and kissed goodbye in dramatic fashion as if they were going off to war because, although the war was over, its echoes lingered still.

If my sons, Davy and Douglas had been with me, they would have already run up the gangplank, pushing and stumbling to beat the other to the top. From my heart, a visceral ache in the shape of their absence burrowed into my chest. A small whimper escaped from my throat. No longer able to bear the loneliness that signs of family and love evoked in me, I lifted my gaze from the crowds, again to the ocean liner. She held firm to the docks with ropes as thick as trees, and she didn't move in the choppy waters, although all around her the water swayed, danced, and slapped against her hull. Tall white letters along her smooth ribs declared: *SS United States*.

Under my tortoiseshell glasses, I pressed my fingers into the corners of my eyes to stay the tears and marched on. My heels



During all those months of friendship, I'd never laid eyes on Jack

clicked on the metal stairwell leading onto the promenade. Heat wavered from the docks, as if a saucepan boiled below me, fluffing my pleated navy blue skirt upward and bringing sweat to drip down my back. I didn't care if my dress flew over my head and revealed my girdle, or if I stained the underarms of my favourite white shirt; I was boarding the ship to London. With each step I took, New York and my battered life faded, breath by step by breath.

I had my reasons for going – or was it leaving? I'd lined up my excuses like proper school children dressed and ready for exams: Primarily it was the doctor who sent me on my way – he'd demanded I rest and heal from the lung and kidney infections before jaundice, exhaustion and fevers killed me. There was also my writing – for

two years I'd been working on articles about the Ten Commandments and I wanted to finish, ask the theological author, Jack, for advice, and collect the articles into a book. Then there was the research that needed doing for the book on King Charles II. But reasons don't offer reprieve from emotions. I felt nervous and guilty, but also resolute and excited. Because beneath all those well lit reasons flickered the brightest of all: to meet Jack.

I stepped into the world's fastest ship. She'd only been crossing the Atlantic for a few months by then, and everything inside

her felt as new as if she had been born yesterday. On board the rooms sparkled with metal and spun-glass fibre – no wood to be seen. The smell of glue and the acrid aroma of lemon-scented cleaner saturated the air. Red was splashed everywhere – the chairs and bar stools, the carpets and artwork. My eyes absorbed every detail, as if one day I'd be asked to write about it, and in my hand I held the heavy key to my cabin.

The grind of engines and a slight lurching and I rushed to the railing to witness the New York harbour fading. On deck, the wind was warm, but I tasted the sweet-salt middle of the ocean, where the heat would dissipate and the water would be all that remained. I sat on the aft deck, my dress flapping like a bird that couldn't get off the ground, and watched the Statue of Liberty become as small as a toy in a gift shop until the last of the land was gone and sea was all that existed.

So many had told me not to come on this trip; so many criticised. I told myself it was strong women who were most often criticised and vilified, and I took the smallest comfort in that. Weak and acquiescing women were not called terrible names or ridiculed, and yet must not their souls die inside? Did they not feel the anxiety that comes when the inner light rises and cries out, 'Let me live?'

Perhaps our Maker had stitched us each together in a way that this was not true of all women. I could have kept on the way I was going, empty and jaundiced, sick and desolate of soul. I could have tried harder to erase the stench of whiskey from my alcoholic husband, to be a good housewife, to quiet my troubled heart. Of course I could have, but what would it have cost me?

How had this started? With a letter Jack had written to me. Or maybe that's not right at all. Maybe it had begun years before when I'd set my God-starved eyes on one of his books – *Mere Christianity* or *The Screwtape Letters* or, possibly, *The Great Divorce*. And then came the letters between us – ones sent and ones received over a span of 30 months. Either way, my heart had begun to beat again with words, our words, and the very power of them.

During all those months of friendship, I'd never laid eyes on Jack – CS Lewis, as he was known to the world – other than in *LIFE Magazine* photos, or on the dust jackets of his books. I would soon, though, very soon, for on that sweltering August day in 1952, I left New York for London to meet him. With me I carried a little money, my well ordered excuses for travel, a dizzying guilt, and a hope for a new kind of life, one I didn't yet know or understand, but one that burned with longing. My head spun with questions, all without answers. All I knew was that I couldn't keep living the way I had been.

Something new must begin. ■

PICTURES: ALAMY.