

# **BRICKBURN**

**(INSPIRED BY A POSSIBLY TRUE STORY)**

**BY KARL MEADE**

*The sun never knew how great it was until it hit the side of a building.*

– Albert Kahn

The Love Song of Eleanora and Albert Alberti

By Jack Chagall

Albert ate nothing. Before each mission he threw up bile. After each, he collapsed into a state of semi-sleep, seeing nothing but his bombsight and the flak rising toward him in the perspexed bubble of the nose turret. Just him and the sky, sinking in a detonating roll of lost trajectory.

He awoke muttering:

*Flakvierling 38, Messerschmitt 109.*

*Who's that swimming in the sea.*

He lost weight. Re-read Eleanora's letters before sleeping, upon waking. Trying to insulate himself, cocoon himself in her words. She was in Halifax, Memphis, Winnipeg, entertaining troops about to ship out. Jealous to his bones: to be newly enlisted, or wounded again. It was worth the broken ribs and arm to be with her last year, to hobble down Stephen Avenue to the Alberta Hotel and share a song on what was said to be Albert's mother's, Maria's, first piano. In that Alberti-built sandstone resonance, Eleanora's voice, a gift he carried on

board each of the Lanc's sorties. Then she took him to the CPR ironshops where she sang her folk ballads during lunch shifts to the 2500 women and men who worked the munitions factory. Many of the women, having grown up in the now-dead town of Brickburn, approached Eleanora afterward to ask after that boy she knew – the orphan, Albert Alberti, who'd been shot down.

*He's my husband, she said. He's right over there.*

Later, she played the Alberta Hotel beneath the stars, where she gazed up through the open atrium of Brickburn brick and Paskapoo sandstone.

*Brunelleschi, she sang. Alberti.*

When Albert returned overseas, Eleanora toured the country, playing theatres, houses, mansions, parks. She made Filippo and Maria Alberti national icons of the assembly line. She no longer sang of the political debates over who did what to whom in Brickburn, of who killed who, or the police claims or the Bond of Brotherhood claims or the masons' – all this was immaterial. She made Albert's mother, Maria, the center of the story, serving silent lunch at the Sandrock café and perfect pitch at the Alberta-cum-Alberti Hotel. Brickburn was irrelevant, simply a catalyst, a mechanism whose influence was limited to timing.

In factories, men and women sang the ballads of Maria and Filippo with hardly a thought for the "big" story. They inserted their own tragedy into the song's lines, which they knew were really meant for them. Eleanora did the same, sang it thinking of Albert and her. She became Maria in the Sandrock café, serving Filippo-cum-Albert a cheese sandwich while he admired her long slender fingers, remarked on the sonorousness of her voice. She deserved such romantic indulgence. They all did.

During matinee performances in the open park amphitheatres, Eleanora would ask children in the audience to shout out names or places, anything important to them, and she would weave it into her signature song of Maria and Filippo Alberti, Who's That:

*Who's that coming up the river,  
Who's that swimming in the sea,  
Who's that walking down the mountain,  
Who's that coming for me.*

A child would shout *sky* or *heaven* and their own verse would appear magically – *who's that flying in the sky, who's that singing in the heavens* – and the children could see their fathers coming for them across the sea. *Tree, dog, loo* – she would sing anything they shouted. She made poetry from their everyday, she made afterlife as real as it needed to be.

In the roar of the nose turret, Albert would close his eyes and listen for her. He heard the bells of the Calgary Electric streetcars

converging at the Alberta Corner: Stephen and Scarth, now Eighth and First. He grasped the steel handrail and hobbled up the two steps and sat in a red vinyl seat. Eleanora squeezed in beside him, shoved him over with a bump of her hips that made him groan now with his eyes closed. Her leg against his. He ran his fingers along the carved mountain ash panels and they came to rest on her knee that rose and drew the air from his cracked solar plexus.

He hadn't seen it coming. You never do. You see everything but the one that gets you. The first time, he decided it was the wind that kept him alive. The shock of two hundred mile-an-hour air through the hole in his burst perspex. To breathe, he had to concentrate, turn his head from the wind into his jacket, and this is what saved him.

Breathing to the rhythm of Who's That.

But now, this second time, this last time, this one he felt he had dreamed into reality: a daytime sortie. The Lanc was breaking into pieces. In the cloud of flak he couldn't tell where it was coming from. It was everywhere hitting him and he thought of his father, Filippo, on that gem of stone tile he himself had laid in Wyle's Brickburn mansion, his final breaths erupting on his retina like that small explosion over there and there.

Now the son and his perspex were descending into the French countryside. He passed through the black of flak and the farmland came clear again, the dry stone fences, the fieldstone chateaux, the wonder of croppery. Up close the flat land became rolling hills and he felt the relief that brought the water down — topography so simple, so beautiful — the why of this brook running for the sea. It was the Bow

River making for the prairie, it was Paskapoo sandstone easing off a face. He was God descending. He heard a piano in the distance, saw the quarries and timbered cranes his father had laid his hands upon, a hockey stick on the Elbow River, skates of knives and pucks of cut stone. The silence came as the earth rose up to take him and he could hear Eleanora's voice, coming for him.

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