**Garibaldi’s Men, 1943**

Barbara Boyle

Two of the soldiers were already settled, murmuring contentedly, bellies distended from polenta and wine, when Emma’s parents helped the third up the ladder to the hay loft. This one was different, thought Emma, merely a boy, as she pulled off the mud-caked boots and led their newest visitor to his bed of hay and flannel blankets. She opened the small window to the valley outside, a thin crescent moon on the horizon, and a shiver of air blew in. She prepared the hot water and bandages, long strips of clean sheets, then knelt at the foot of the bed sponging the stranger’s blistered, bloodied feet, gently wrapping them. The young partisan looked down at her and she felt a rolling wave through her body, unlike anything she had known before. Startled, she averted her eyes and turned to busy herself with his supper. She took a long breath, and returned with the hot, creamy cornmeal and a glass jar filled with Dolcetto. Taking the bowl from her hands, he smiled at her, and, for the first time in her 17 years, she felt complete. Emma stayed by his bedside well into the night, and they talked about everything and nothing.

Then, at the first hint of light, against the backdrop of birdsong, they heard a gunshot ring from the gully below.

Then another. And another.

More executions.

He sat up, stuffed his bandaged feet into his boots and slipped off into the weary fog.