

JENNY

I wish. Oh how I wish! But there, it's no earthly use making wishes like that; no good trying to claw back the past in order to bite the cherry a second time. You can't go back. Not ever. The tape of life winds only one way, and having wound to the end, stops. If it breaks in the process, it stops sooner than expected, but that is the only variation permitted.

I was offered the moon once, but like a spoilt child - was I spoilt? - probably, would satisfy with nothing less than the stars. And now? Now I had the tiny patch of earth underneath my feet, a patch that changed constantly with my footsteps, and all of it second hand. Still, the beach gave a spurious sense of ownership, washed constantly as it was to a smooth uniformness that gave the impression of being new and unused. My feet sank into the soft, wet sand as I stared at the bottle drifting in with the tide. Retreating every now and then against the encroaching waters, I waited with what patience I could muster until the bottle was within reach, then stooped and picked it up, feeling slightly self conscious about the act. To be sure, there was nobody close enough to see, nobody even in sight at all, yet the feeling persisted just the same. Years ago I wouldn't have felt the same self consciousness, but then years ago I wouldn't have wandered along a deserted beach for company. Years ago I was a foreigner and did things differently.

I looked at the bottle with an artificial feeling of interest. It was green, a dark, deep colour that could only be described as bottle green. It was almost, but not quite opaque, though it was impossible to see what, if anything, might be inside. Without a label, there was only one way to find out. I removed the cork, half expecting a genie to swirl out and grant me my heart's desire, but of course no such thing happened. I would even have settled for one wish, and anyone else could have had the other two. The contents of the bottle, whatever they had been in the past, had long since gone, only a faint musty smell remaining, a smell that aroused a vague memory in the pathways of my mind. It wasn't apple, but that's the memory that came.

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I was just eighteen when I accompanied my mother on her retreat to the countryside. Not that I had any objection, as I had always liked rural life, so different from the busy, noisy, and above all, impersonal city we lived in. I never liked cities, but I

cannot go back to the countryside now. There are too many memories of things that never happened for it to be comfortable. I live by the sea instead, close by the shore, on the boundary, which is where my mind is situated.

But in those days, it was interesting to stay for several weeks that summer surrounded by farmland and sheep, moorland and forest. Boundaries of a different sort. We had taken a cottage for the whole summer, just my mother and I. There were only the two of us then. I had no brothers or sisters, and my father - well, my father was the reason we were there. With the resilience of youth, I had come to terms with his loss, but mother had taken it hard. There never really was anyone else except him. Even I was a sort of adjunct, an addition to their happiness together. Not that I was unwanted, or unloved. Far from it, but the truth of the matter was that my parents had been so wrapped up in each other that I was free to go my own way even as a small child. For the same reason, though my father was no longer with us, I was not missed when I took to exploring the district we had chosen to live in for those few weeks. I think my mother was only too glad to see that I was not fretting.

There was an intense pleasure in walking along the roadside and getting a mental map of the area, and in deciding where my next walk should be. The ditches were full of waist high grasses and other plants, some with white umbrellas on top, others showing off clusters of tiny yellow flowers. Reds and pinks and blues mixed with the greenery and dusted with scintillating diamonds of early morning dew made each walk a new adventure every time. Daisies abounded. Those I knew, as well as buttercups and dandelions. What the small, scarlet painted flowers that were dotted about here and there could have been I never knew, nor did it seem to be important to find out. They were just things to look at and to wonder about, just as the rapid movement of small creatures was something to ponder over without feeling the need to know more.

Insects for the most part, some sort of lizard perhaps, maybe mice. It didn't seem important to go past the perhaps. It was enough that they were there. To have given them names wouldn't have increased my understanding. I just knew what I liked.

It was on the third day that I found the neighbour. I say *the* neighbour, as he was the only one I ever really got to know. The house was set at the end of a narrow, overgrown lane, immediately after a sharp bend. Tall trees that I later learned were chestnuts grew in a somewhat straggly fashion, shadowing the entrance to the house, so that I came across it suddenly, and with a sense of surprise. There was a man in the garden, or what passed for a garden, since it wasn't cultivated in any way, merely

the taller weeds cut back roughly with a scythe in order to give light and air to an otherwise small and cramped area. I knew it was a scythe that had done the work, because the man was using it as I turned round the bend and came into view. I gave some sort of stammered apology.

‘I... I’m sorry. I didn’t know anyone lived here.’

He met my red cheeks with an amused smile, and stopped working, leaning on the tool with practised ease.

‘Not many people do,’ he said. ‘It’s a bit isolated, even for this area.’

He studied me with a sharp and penetrating eye.

‘You must be the new people. Or one of them, anyway. I heard someone had taken Rose Cottage. Two of you. Is that right?’

‘Yes. Just my mother and myself.’

‘That’s right,’ he said. ‘That’s what I heard. You can’t keep secrets round here very easily. Staying long?’

I shook my head. ‘A few weeks. Just for the summer really. Just until September.’

‘Then back to school I suppose?’

There was a question mark in his voice, but it wasn’t really a question at all.

‘Good heavens, no. I left school ages ago,’ I said with all the airy maturity I could muster. Three weeks ago to be precise, but it didn’t seem necessary to admit it. Such things take on an over inflated importance when you are just eighteen. There was a time when eight and a half, or even eight and three quarters had a much greater importance, but as an adult, I had long since put that sort of thing behind me.

Besides, what could be made of eighteen and almost a week?

His smile didn’t exactly express disbelief, but I had the uncomfortable feeling that my ploy had been seen through.

‘It must be dull for you in the countryside,’ he said. ‘Especially here. There’s not a lot of entertainment for a young girl.’

I stared at him frostily, in the hope that he might recognise his error. Girl indeed!

‘As it happens, I like it. I’m not a child to be entertained. When one has resources of one’s own - mental resources, you understand, then boredom isn’t a remote possibility.’

Looking back, I recognise the pomposity, but I thought my statement very mature at the time, a thought that crumbled slightly at the edges when the smile opposite simply broadened.

He shrugged. 'Well, you'll need all the resources you've got to live here for any length of time. Perhaps you'll manage for the summer. What brought you here anyway, if I may be curious?'

'That's a question that might be considered rude,' I said.

'So it might. Then I'll rephrase it. What brought you here anyway, if I may be rude? You don't need to tell me, of course. It's only idle interest on my part.'

'Oh, it's no great secret,' I said. 'Just about the whole world knows, I shouldn't wonder. My father died some time ago, fairly recently, in fact, and my mother wanted to get away for a while. I'm keeping her company.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, and he sounded as though he meant it. That was the first time he showed sensitivity.

'If I may be curious in turn, what brought you here?' I asked, preferring to change the subject. 'You don't need to tell, of course.'

'I won't, but I'll allow you to guess.'

'I'm not sure I like guessing games,' I said.

'Don't you? Oh, I love them. Anyway, you won't get to satisfy your nosiness without.'

There came a long silence as we stared at each other, while I considered whether my sense of curiosity was greater than my sophistication.

'I'm not nosy,' I said weakly, knowing I had lost the battle with myself already.

'All right, natural interest in a fellow being, if you prefer,' he said with a grin. 'While you are making your mind up, would you like a drink?'

'Sorry, I don't drink,' I replied a little more stiffly than I had intended.

'Nonsense. Everybody drinks.' He hesitated. 'I didn't mean alcohol, if that's what you're thinking. You're probably a bit young for that, even if you have left school. Apple juice is what I had in mind. Apple juice with a bit of ice floating on the top. Nothing more.'

'Oh, all right. Thank you. It is rather hot.'

It was hot, as it had been ever since arriving, a heat spell that showed no signs of disappearing. I sat on one of the two garden chairs underneath the spreading branches of a sweet smelling tree that buzzed with the sound of what I was sure were hundreds of busy bees in the branches. It felt a bit uncomfortable at first, but I soon realised that the insects were after more attractive things than myself. Not that I was considered unattractive, but a bee might well have another viewpoint, a viewpoint just

as valid as any human idea of beauty. To a bee at least.

My host came back with a tray on which were several containers.

‘When I used the words nothing more, I was referring to the alcohol content of the drinks,’ he said. ‘There are strawberries as well. Cream here. Sugar there. Help yourself. And when you’ve done that, you can start guessing.’

‘I’ve done so already,’ I said. ‘You’re an artist.’

‘Artist? Ah, you’ve seen the easel. Wrong, I’m afraid. I dabble a little in water colours, but not even my best friends would call me an artist. No. Try again.’

I helped myself to a bowlful of strawberries and ate them all before answering.

‘Holiday maker?’ I hazarded.

‘Not bad, but still wrong. I’m not on holiday. I rarely take a holiday. The last one was over five years ago.’

‘Oh, then I don’t know. It’s too hot to guess. Tell me.’

‘Certainly not. You must find out for yourself.’

‘Oh, if you insist. But not right now. I can’t think in this temperature,’ I said. I looked at my watch. ‘Anyway, I should really be getting back. My mother will have some food ready soon, and she doesn’t like to see it spoiled.’

‘Then you must certainly go. Mothers and meals must never be kept waiting. Come back another day if you like. I’m always at home. Any time you’re passing.’

As I walked the short distance back to our own cottage, I realised that I had never found the neighbour’s name. Still, I thought, he doesn’t know mine either.

It was almost a week before I went back again. For some reason which I found difficult to define, I hadn’t told my mother about our neighbour. It’s all part of a growing maturity to have little secrets from a parent, but at the time I didn’t think in that way. Besides, she was rather distracted, and clearly welcomed the fact that I found my own entertainment. So soon after my father’s death, she was still withdrawn, more than usually.

It was late morning and the dew diamonds had long since evaporated from the grass. No matter. There would be others another day. The neighbour was sitting in the garden underneath the bee tree, apparently painting a picture of the cottage. He looked up at my arrival, and waved me to the other seat, from where I could watch what he was doing. It didn’t look bad, but I was no expert in art. At least it looked like the cottage. I mean, it wasn’t just a representative daub which many paintings seem to be.

‘All right, I’m finished,’ he said, putting his brush in a jar of discoloured water.

‘Drink? Non alcoholic again, I’m afraid.’

I know when I’m being teased, so simply inclined my head and murmured a conventional thanks, getting a grin in return.

‘Right. Stay there, I’ll bring them out.’

It was pleasant to sit and look at his painting, comparing it with the original. It was really quite good, or so I thought, but I could see that his claim not to be an artist was justified. It was a copy, but nothing more. A pretty memory, that’s all.

‘Well? Do you approve?’ His voice brought me back to the real world.

‘It’s not for me to disapprove,’ I said. ‘I like it, if that’s what you mean. I don’t suppose my approval alters anything you may feel about it.’

He shouted with laughter. ‘You’re a little miss old fashioned. Good for you. With a mind of your own. That’s even better.’

‘And you must be a criminal on the run,’ I said.

‘On the run?’ he said, stressing the final word.

‘All right, a criminal in hiding. What have you been doing? Robbing a bank? Stealing the Crown Jewels?’

‘Possibly luring young girls into danger and doing away with them,’ he said. ‘But I forgot, you’re not a young girl, so you must be safe. You’re safe anyway. I’m no criminal, unless you count failing to stop at a halt sign once. I was never caught for it, so perhaps you’re right, and I’m in hiding from the local constabulary. Try again.’

‘Let me see. I know. You’re suffering from an incurable disease which drives you to lick your wounds in solitude.’

‘Never had a day’s illness in my life,’ he said equably. ‘Excluding the odd cold which is incurable, but hardly life threatening.’

‘What about cutting yourself off from society because of an unhappy love affair?’ I said.

‘Ah, the romantic approach. It’s a distinct possibility, if you can believe a person of my age can have romantic feelings.’

‘Wrong again I see,’ I said, with a total lack of tact. It didn’t occur to me that he wasn’t so old at all. It just seemed that way. To an eighteen year old who has hardly started in life, anyone over the age of thirty is ancient. He must be, I counted, about the same age as my mother, and I couldn’t see her as a creature of passion. That I wouldn’t have existed to have such a thought if she hadn’t been passionate at some

time in her life was something else that didn't occur to me. It does now. Not then. 'As you say, wrong again. But enough of that for now. More apple juice? Cream cake? Do help yourself. It goes off quickly in this weather, and I can't really eat so much cream myself.'

'No thank you,' I said. 'One piece is quite enough.'

'As you please, of course, but I'm a little disappointed. Tell me, do you have to work at keeping the shape you've got, or are you naturally good looking?'

I remember giving him a sharp glance to see if he was joking, but received only an innocent stare in return. At least, I thought it was innocent. I didn't have a great deal of experience to go by.

'I'm probably not the right person to say,' I replied.

He nodded gravely, as though I had just verified something, but passed no further comment.

After that, I visited almost every day. We became friends, joking and talking together in the way that friends often do. We even learned each other's names. Jenny and Peter respectively, although I expect he thought of us as Peter and Jenny. One day was wet, with threatening black thunderclouds building up for most of the morning. We spent that time inside his cottage, listening to music, Mozart for the most part. Pleasant enough, though I really preferred something a bit more modern. I appreciate it rather better now than I did at the time. If I close my eyes I can recapture the scene clearly, the painted walls in a rather ugly shade of brown, except in the kitchen which was an even uglier green. There were pictures on the walls, some of them his own, others belonging to the cottage. The floors were of slate, cold to the feet, but refreshing in that hot, hot summer. There was a single bed, which I could see through a half open door that led to the bedroom. I never went in there, so cannot say anything more about it, but the living room had a large table and three not very comfortable old armchairs, along with a dresser of some sort, which was where he kept his crockery and table linen. Another door was kept closed, and I had no idea where that led to, unless it was a store room. And always there was apple juice available. And hot buttered toast all that morning.

The weather cleared in the afternoon, and we went for a walk to clear away the cobwebs that came from sitting in a close atmosphere for too long. We walked along a forest path, and around a lake that the trees encircled. Well, when I say forest, I suppose I mean a small wood, little more than a copse, and the lake was small enough

to throw a stone over it clear to the other side without any great effort. Still, it was pretty. As we came back almost to our starting point, a powerful smell assailed our nostrils, pungent and unpleasant.

‘It’s a badger hole,’ he said. ‘Look, there it is. Not exactly the stuff you’d pay several pounds a bottle for, is it? Of course, it may smell better to another badger.’ I looked to where he pointed, and there was a hole in the ground, close to the trees, with smooth trails all around where the badger had been going about its day to day business.

‘Would you like to come back this way another day? We might catch sight of mister brock if we are very quiet. Have you ever seen a badger before?’

I shook my head. ‘No, never. Not even in a zoo.’

‘But you’d like to, wouldn’t you?’

His enthusiasm was infectious. ‘All right. When?’

‘What about tomorrow? It would need to be early in the morning. Very early. Just before daybreak in fact. Can you get out that early?’

‘Of course I can,’ I sighed. ‘I’m an adult woman, and can make my own decisions. What time?’

‘Come to the cottage at half past four, and we’ll see. No point coming any earlier. It won’t be light enough to see anything if the badger is astir.’

There is no need to go into the badger expedition, as the truth of the matter is that it never appeared, even though we stood perfectly still in the undergrowth, deep in a natural hollow from where we got a good line of sight of the badger hole. It was a bit disappointing, but we could accept the non arrival with equanimity. My muscles were complaining because of standing still for so long, and Peter stretched out his hand to give me the help I needed to climb out of the hollow. It was the first time he had touched me, and he released my hand as soon as I was on level ground again. That was the second time he showed sensitivity. I pushed my hand through his arm and we walked like that back to his cottage.

I left then, promising to return later in the day. Turning to wave goodbye at the bend in the track I saw that he was looking after me with a strange, rather intent expression on his face, before breaking out into its customary smile. I gave it no thought, but wouldn’t have known what to make of it anyway.

Later in the day arrived at its usual time. I walked slowly, enjoying the heat from the sun, all the fresher for the thunderstorm of the day before. Everything had dried, and

my sandals threw up tiny clouds of dust as I walked. There was a tablecloth spread on the ground underneath the bee tree, set already with the inevitable apple juice and strawberries. Peter came out of the house as I entered the garden.

‘Hello again,’ he said. ‘I’ve put the things out on the ground today. The table has developed arthritis or something equally mortifying, and I can’t rely on it staying upright. Not until I find a hammer and nails and get physical with it. Is that all right with you?’

In answer, I sank gratefully to the ground and reached out for a glass. And then it all went wrong. After quenching my thirst, I stretched out on the grass, revelling in the warmth, and gazing into the tree where the bees were so busy still. He came to kneel alongside me, then leaned over and kissed me gently on my lips. It wasn’t the first time I had been kissed, but this sent a frisson of excitement charging through my body, and I responded in the best way I knew how, inexpert, but willing, my arms going around his neck and pulling him closer. His hand came to my breast, not moving, just resting there, and that was for the first time ever. I closed my eyes and drifted off into a dream world of my own, where thoughts and emotions chased each other around, battling for notice, and wishing that this moment could be frozen in time to last forever. He spoke to me, bringing me back to reality.

‘I love you, Jenny,’ he said. ‘Would you marry me?’

I sat upright with a start, fantasy fleeing as a snowflake on a hotplate.

‘Oh no, Peter. No, I’m sorry, I couldn’t do that.’

He looked hurt at my rapid answer, and I hastened to explain.

‘Marry you? I like you, Peter. You’re nice to be with, and to do things with, but... well... you’re so much older than I am. And we have different tastes in music. And we don’t know each other so well. And... well... I never realised you thought of me in that way. I didn’t know.’

With hindsight, I might have been more tactful.

‘Well, you know now,’ he said with a queer laugh.

‘I wasn’t trying to lead you on,’ I said, still fumbling for something to say.

‘I know you weren’t. It doesn’t matter. I asked. You turned me down. I was a fool to think it might ever be different, but I had to ask. Otherwise I would never have known.’

I left shortly afterwards, and spent three miserable days before coming to the conclusion that even if he was so much older, there was no reason why we couldn’t

continue to be friends. There wasn't, of course, but I know now what I hadn't realised on that day, that there was no going back. Life is not that sort of game where you can start again and do things in a different way in the hope that you get what you really want. I went back just the same, and found the cottage empty, devoid of all life, as though it had never been occupied, and I knew we would never meet again. That was the third time he showed sensitivity.

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As I have grown older, I have learned many things I was ignorant of when only just eighteen. I know that our bee tree was a lime. I know the names of a good many wild flowers, including the small scarlet variety I had once wondered about. I also know that age differences are not as important as a young girl might think. Above all, I know that once you set your feet on a certain path, there is no going back. Words said cannot be unsaid. They stick in the memory. I closed my eyes as I had closed them so long ago, and tried to see the future, any future, any possible future engraved on the eyelids reddened by the light from the fading sun. There was nothing to be seen, but I knew that already. I pushed the cork back into the bottle and set it down in the sea, watching until the ebbing tide drew it away out of sight, then walked slowly back to my lonely flat for tea.

THE EGG

Global warming. Climate changes. Kyoto agreement. Environmental disasters. They're words on everybody's lips nowadays, aren't they? I even use them myself, though I don't really understand what it all means. Sandra does. Sandra knows everything. At least, she tells me she does, and I suppose she should know. It's all a bit worrying. Global warming, that is, not the fact that Sandra knows a lot. It's a bit hard for a man to know what to do. Luckily I've got Sandra. She knows. Well, her idea was to keep a few hens, so that we would always have fresh eggs, and when the hens get old enough, we can have chicken soup. Very nourishing, says Sandra. Good for you. And if we keep enough hens, we can sell off the surplus eggs for other foodstuffs. How it all affects our place during global warming I can't say,

but Sandra seems to think it would help.

I must admit I wasn't so sure. I mean, it sounded like a lot of hard work to me, but she persuaded me to see things her way. She has a gift in that direction, has Sandra. Mind, I wouldn't have said no to sharing a cigarette afterwards, but she said not on your nelly. Ciggies are bad for your health, to say nothing about the burnt holes in the sheets. Still, it's always nice to have a before not to be able to have a quiet smoke afterwards.

So we set to work. Ten hens and a cockerel to start with. Or rather to finish with, as even I could see we would need to start with a cage of some sort. So, chicken wire, lots of it. Wooden posts, about twenty of those. A hammer, a crowbar, a saw, nails, and a fair bit of bandage until we saw the sense in wearing work gloves. Then there were the nesting boxes. Very important were nesting boxes, said Sandra. She'd been reading all about it in a book she got from the library. It's another gift she has, and hardly moves her lips at all when she's doing it. More wood, a screwdriver or two, plenty of screws.

It all looked a bit lopsided to me when we finished the job, but Sandra said she was happy with it, and that hens are not too particular. I thought that maybe it was meant to look that way. Still, it did seem solid enough, and so we introduced the hens. And the cockerel. I did wonder about that, but Sandra said one cockerel could look after ten hens all on his own, and I could wipe that look off my face, since there's only one Sandra thank you very much and that's going to be her. She seemed quite definite about it.

Then we waited. And waited. And waited. Not a lot happened. I mean, there wasn't a great deal in the egg production line. In fact, there wasn't anything. Oh, the hens settled down very well, and the cockerel appeared to be happy. Well, he would, wouldn't he. A bit tired, but happy. It was a real treat to watch the birds scratching about in the soil, looking for worms. It started out as grass, but it didn't take a week before there was only dusty soil wherever the hens had been. And hen muck. Lots of that. Rather more than they ate, I thought. Apart from worms and insects, we fed them on food scraps from the kitchen, which Sandra said was quite all right. They always seemed to be hungry though, so we bought some ready made food from the local corn merchants, specially designed to keep hens healthy and happy.

Whatever we fed them with, the result was the same. No eggs. The days rolled by, turning into weeks, then months. Still no eggs. They were supposed to give well over

two hundred eggs in the year, according to the book, but maybe these hens were illiterate. Or maybe it was a misprint. For all I knew, that number should have been two eggs in the year. Who would know? In the meantime, we bought our morning eggs from the supermarket.

They need time to settle down, said Sandra. They're too young yet, she said. It's the wrong sort of food, she claimed. She said quite a lot, really, but the day came when even she ran out of excuses for them, and we simply stared at our purchases and wondered how to bring a bit of cooperation into their little lives. Sandra started looking reflectively at axes in the hardware store, and I could see she was getting a bit broody.

But all things come to an end, and at last the famine broke. After thirteen months and one and a half weeks - we didn't count the hours - we woke up one morning to a really horrible noise, almost as though World War Three had broken out. The hens were squawking, the cockerel was crowing and there were feathers flying everywhere. Sandra burst out of bed and ran across the garden without bothering to put anything over her nightie, really short with a fair bit of lace around the hem. Very nice too, except that I was a bit slow and never got more than a quick flash of her legs, which didn't matter as she was normally very generous in that area.

I caught up with her by the henhouse, and saw by the look on her face that she was happier than usual. You've guessed it, we had an egg. Only the one, mind, but an egg just the same. Our first, and as precious to us as though it had been our own baby.

Sandra put it in the fridge and said she would make us an omelette each when we got a few more. Well, there were no more that day, and there were no more the day after. In fact, there were no more at all. We only ever got the one egg, and considering what it cost us in the way of materials, tools, the birds themselves and the food we gave them, the one egg we got certainly reached a price of well over two hundred pounds. We couldn't bring ourselves to eat it at first, and when we did, it turned out to be rotten and stunk the house out for days.

Oh yes, a fox got in amongst the hens shortly afterwards and took the lot. Still, as I said to Sandra, there's one consolation. We'll not die of cholesterol poisoning. Considering how careful she is about our health, I thought she might have taken the comment with a bit better grace.

WENDY

Her name was Wendy. Bendy Wendy, a cruel nickname, since she was physically incapable of angling her body more than three or four degrees from the vertical, and even that slight movement was hidden under the rolls of excess adiposity which were her pride and joy. She was a big girl. Not portly, pudgy, overweight or obese. Just big. Big bones, as she was wont to explain. Glands. Puppy fat. Pleasantly rounded. Teenage problems, though it had been many years since she had said farewell to the years between irresponsible childhood and irresponsible adulthood. Such explanations fooled no-one, and Bendy Wendy she remained. She had a lovely complexion though, a smooth textured skin she would have exchanged for the spottiest of faces, preferably with testosterone as the cause.

Spinster Wendy. Too much for any one man. Too much for three or even four.

'Let me have men around me who are fat.'

Julius Caesar, Wendy considered, was a real man. Hamlet, on the other hand, was a wimp.

'O, that this too too solid flesh would melt.'

She didn't want her flesh to melt. She liked food. She liked bacon and eggs with sausages liberally doused in tomato ketchup. She liked a tablespoonful or two of jam on her cereal. She liked cream cakes, and butter, and chips in mayonnaise, ice cream, fizzy drinks and five generous helpings of sugar in her coffee. Then, after breakfast, a mid morning snack was always welcome, to stave off the powerful surges of near starvation until lunch time.

Men, thought Wendy to herself. They didn't know good stuff when they saw it.

Thank goodness there was a bigger selection nowadays, when large numbers of workmen were flooding in to the area as a result of the latest oil strike. Workmen. Highly paid workmen. Scores of construction gangs swarming all over mysterious looking buildings that rose higher and higher with the passing of each day. The same men walking the streets at night, spending their money as fast as they received it.

'That has to change,' said Wendy. 'If I have anything to do with it, they can spend it even faster than that.'

‘Well, time to go on the prowl,’ she murmured, as she levered her rotundity out of the specially strengthened chair she called her own, and stripping off totally, leaving what looked to be the unfolded tents of a Victorian Lancer regiment strewn across the floor. Going to the wardrobe, she selected a skirt with care, then a blouse, rejecting the idea of putting anything underneath either of them on the grounds that it was A too warm, B she was a perfectly satisfactory shape without any unnecessary support, and C any other reason that came to mind, sprayed a generous amount of perfume in all the usual places, as well as a few that were not, then set out on a short walk.

Her sandals skittered lightly over the pavement, making no sound that could be heard within arm’s reach, even arms as pudgy as her own. Not a leaf would have rustled, had there been leaves to brush aside. Not even Wendy’s skirt rustled, being the sort of fabric that gave no warning of her approach, a fact she well knew.

She passed the open door of one of the many well patronised pubs along the street, and glancing inside, caught sight of a human figure just on the way out.

‘Trousers. Moustache. He’ll do,’ she muttered, and with a powerful sweep of her right arm, caught the unsuspecting character by the waist and dragged him swiftly away to a patch of waste ground at the back of the licensed premises. He stumbled and fell full length on his back, looking up in horror as the stars were blotted out and a suffocating weight came across his body. A pounding in his ears grew louder and louder, a pounding that was overlaid in his heightened state of tension by a sound that resembled that of a scythe being sharpened. Perfume caught his nostrils, and his flailing hands encountered flesh of a smoothness that seemed somehow familiar, but of dimensions that were not.

‘Not fair,’ he spluttered as strange hands wandered in places that memory told him should have been pleasurable but somehow failed to be so. Strange lips pressed against his own with a wet sucking sound, and the light from his eyes faded and dulled. ‘Not fair. At least let me get a smile on my face.’

We seem to have a thing about eggs, me and Sandra. Apart from the ones we tried to get from our hens, and never even attempted with the goose, there are always shop bought ones, which is the way we get them as a rule. Sometimes we buy them from a small farm or smallholding out in the country, but mainly from the local supermarket.

Anyway, I'd bought some on my way home from work so that Sandra could do us a gigantic omelette. She's good at omelettes, is Sandra, and always puts plenty of filling in them, like ham or cheese, or mushrooms, or even ham *and* cheese *and* mushrooms, not to mention odds and ends we happen to have left over in the fridge, which wouldn't be left over, says Sandra, if it wasn't for the beer cans the rest of the food likes to hide behind when it's feeling a bit shy.

Brown eggs, they were. These are the ones I just bought. I thought I'd better mention that just in case you'd forgotten. I got brown, because they are supposed to be healthier than the usual white, only Sandra says that's a load of old cobblers, they're all the same, it's just an excuse to con idiots like myself into paying a bit over the odds. Well, to be honest, she didn't exactly say "load of old cobblers", the reason being that she's been properly brought up, but I know how her mind works by now, and I could tell that that's what she really meant.

The colour of the shell, she told me, depends on the type of bird. After all, if you go out in the wild nature, which I hardly ever do unless it's within easy reach of some pub or other, you can see birds nests with all sorts of eggs in them, including blue ones, green ones, and even mucky brown speckly ones, though not all in the same nest, of course. I must say I was a bit surprised at the the thought of green eggs, and privately I think they must have gone off, but it doesn't do to argue with Sandra in case she's in one of her moods. I wasn't too taken with the idea of speckly ones either, especially the mucky brown variety. I mean, it's almost as though the bird couldn't make its mind up, isn't it?

Anyway, Sandra said she wasn't going to do an omelette, as she had already cooked the dinner, which proved to something tasty without a single egg in sight. And what we had for afters was even tastier, but since we took that with the curtains closed and the doors firmly locked, I won't bother going into details.

I wondered what she intended using the eggs for, since I generally get a bit peckish after exercise, but the only answer I got was to be pulled into the kitchen, set before the stove and told to watch the eggs boiling for ten minutes, then take them off the

heat. Because, said Sandra, and this is a good bit, because tomorrow is Easter Sunday, and we are going out for a picnic, don't forget to dress yourself up a bit and I'll even put in a can or two of beer, she said.

Picnic. What a good idea. I haven't been on a picnic since I was a nipper in school, and we all got taken out for the day by the teachers. We went for a bus ride that was probably quite short, but which seemed long enough at the time. Our teacher ordered us to play delalo or something like that, which I couldn't do as I'd never heard of it, but that didn't matter as it turned out he was the only one who had. Probably invented the name on the spot so he could skive off for a quiet smoke or something. What we did then I can't remember, except that Herbie Jones fell down a well and got soaked to the skin, and nobody would sit next to him on the bus home as he had found some gungy stuff where there should have been water.

Our picnic promised to be a lot more interesting than that. It always is when Sandra's around. Well, we took the picnic basket together with our sandwiches and pies and drinks and stuff, not forgetting the eggs either. I was rather proud of the eggs as I'd stayed up half the night painting them with bonny patterns with my old water paints I'd had since I was still at school. Sandra said they were something da Vinci would have been proud of, but I couldn't understand why an ice cream seller should be so interested. Still, she gave me a nice cuddle which shows she liked them. I did point out that I'd painted quite a lot of them in the hope of getting more cuddles, but she said we'd better be going and she'd see about a bit more praise later on, which is Sandra's way of making a firm promise. It looked like being a good day.

It was a good day, at least to start with. I wanted to eat a few sandwiches first, followed by a couple of pies, but Sandra said no, if we're out on an Easter picnic, we might as well do it properly, so we rolled our eggs down a steep hill which fell away from where we had parked ourselves. As the eggs rolled away, I said to Sandra I had invented a little poem just for her. She went all sappy and asked me to recite it, so I did.

It's Easter Day,

The eggs are brown.

Skirts go up and... you're giving me a funny look, aren't you, Sandra?

Still, it wasn't one of those funny looks, if you know what I mean. No, this time I think she really liked the poem, even if she had to work out the last line for herself.

That's not a hard thing for her to do because she's really quite clever, and I don't

always have to tell her something even once for her to understand. She just gave me a push and I went rolling down the hill after the eggs, which was great fun such as I haven't had for years and years. Not that sort of fun at least.

Sandra followed me, rolling round and round, and I could see that my poem had a bit of truth in it. Well, she landed right against me, laughing and giggling, and I grabbed her to stop her going any further, which is when she started giving me a bit more praise for my eggs. It was at that point that things got a bit out of hand, but that's more or less normal for me and Sandra. The only thing was, that just as things were getting interesting, or more interesting than usual, we got a bit of a nasty shock.

We got wet. Very wet. In fact, we got wetter than Herbie Jones after he fell down the well, only there wasn't any well anywhere near us. What it was, was some country bumpkin or other, who stood there with an empty bucket in his hand, though it wasn't hard to guess that it had been full only seconds before, and mouthing off at us in terms which weren't fit for my ears, let alone Sandra's.

I stood up, of course, ready to give him what for, until I noticed he was accompanied by a set of teeth that all too clearly had a large dog attached to them, and even the tail end looked distinctly unfriendly.

That wasn't the end of the picnic though, as we just gathered everything together, drove off to a quiet spot - not a pub for miles - and ate our sandwiches in the car, while Sandra hung her dress outside the window to dry in the sun, which meant that the day ended pretty well after all.

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