

‘Yes. A cup of. If not more.’

If my accent was that of an outsider, then this lady’s was not one I was used to hearing either, and more like that of someone you might only ever hear on the wireless. It was a far cry from the clipped sing-song dialect of the coalfields I grew up hearing.

‘If it’s not any trouble.’

She shrugged. ‘It’s no trouble for me so long as you fetch the nettles.’

‘Nettles?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘We’re having nettle tea. Do you take it?’

I hesitated, then shook my head. ‘I always thought nettles were poisonous.’

‘Poisonous? Of course not. They might *sting*, but that comes only from the tiny hairs on the leaves and stems, which act like tiny needles. When boiled they soon become ineffective.’ She paused. ‘Your reticence is to be expected. Folklore has taught us to fear this weed; to me it is a friend. It began out of necessity, this nettle habit of mine, but I’ve found it’s as good a quencher as any, and you look like you’re spitting feathers.’

‘I am rather thirsty, missus.’

‘Well, then. But you’re not to call me “missus” if you’re going to linger.’ The woman stepped towards me and extended a gloved hand. ‘If you must call me anything, call me by my name: Dulcie. Dulcie Piper. This earthy formality is endearing but it’s not necessary.’

After weeks of rough sleeping, I was suddenly aware of my appearance, which despite following my mother’s

wishes was surely shabby. But if she noticed, Dulcie didn't remark upon it.

'Right,' I said, my face flushed.

'Now is when you tell me your name.'

I forced an awkward smile and took her hand. The gardening glove felt as dry and coarse as my throat. 'It's Robert, miss—'

At this she tutted and wagged a long finger. 'And what's your family name, Robert?'

'It's Appleyard.'

'Well, now. Listen, Robert, while I explain the simple procedure for the perfect brew of nettles. Simply take a generous fistful of this poor old *Urtica dioica*, the most maligned of all the indigenous weeds, and boil it in a pot of aqua vitae – and there is no water purer than that which gurgles up through the Yorkshire strata – then once mashed add either three squeezes or one thick slice of lemon until the tea turns a peony-pink in colour. Serve in a tin mess cup or fine Ming china, for it matters not.'

Embarrassment prevented me from admitting that I had neither seen nor tasted a lemon, and didn't fully understand what she was on about, but perhaps recognising this the old woman spared me further explanation.

'I know what you're thinking: how does one acquire lemons in a land bereft? Let's just say I have contacts. *Connections*. That impotent little Hun has destroyed many things but not this girl's tea habit. No. There are alternatives to lemon too. Thyme, basil, myrtle and verbena could all be seen to replicate the flavour

in some way, and of course there is lemon balm and lemongrass – though, unless you're a botanist hotfooting across the continents, I very much doubt you would be able to get your hands on those any time soon. As for limes: forget it. They're as rare as Hitler's left gland if the playground songs are to be believed. Even *I* can't get my hands on them. Limes, I mean.'

Wrong-footed by the scattergun thought process of this curious woman, I missed the joke entirely. 'Why lemon?' I asked cautiously.

'Well, for colour and flavour. One needs a little colour in life, even if it is illusory. And life without flavour is death. Nettle tea is a rather dull drink made tolerable by lemon. One thing in its favour: you don't need a coupon to purchase it. You just help yourself. The leaves are entirely free and anything free always tastes better. Wouldn't you agree?'

'I would,' I said, nodding. 'Yes, I would indeed. I've been living off the land myself a little of late.'

'And good for you. They say it's a panacea too, nettle tea. A boon for your skin, a tonic for your joints and an alarm clock for your movements. At my age you take all the help you can get. It eases the burden upon the meadow too, yanking it up.'

As she walked past me towards the house, the dog raised his head and the way in which he slowly unfolded his legs and rose to full height reminded me of the clothes horse on which my mother hung the starched household whites.

‘Don’t you get stung?’ I asked. ‘Picking it, I mean.’

She walked into the house and then appeared a moment later. ‘Not if you have the right technique. Use a finger and thumb to grasp the leaf with confidence and you’ll be alright. It’s the tentative pluckers that come off worst but the thing you *really* have to watch out for are the low-growing ones, for they’ll pepper your shins with welts given half a chance and then itch all night long. Worse things have happened at sea, but seeing as you don’t yet have the technique – ’

She took off the well-worn pair of gardening gloves and tossed them to me. ‘Try these. I’ll get the water on.’

I slipped on the gloves and felt a clammy warmth from this odd old lady’s palms that reminded me of cricket games on the rec back at home, and the one shared pair of batsman’s gloves, passed from boy to boy until they were nothing but threadbare shells of stale sweat and tattered rubber.

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Dulcie returned carrying a tea tray that she placed on the table, and then she poured the steaming pink drink into cups. ‘I had a few leaves left over from the last batch,’ she said.

There was a plate of raisin biscuits too that she offered to me. I placed the gloves on the table and took one. I held it in my hand and turned it for a long moment, savouring its appearance as tiny sugar crystals seemed

to hold within them the light of the sun, before taking a small and tentative bite.

‘Now then,’ she said, blowing on her cup. ‘A pot of tea for your story seems a fair trade. On your way down bay, are you?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘You don’t seem certain.’

‘No.’

I didn’t elaborate. I took a sip of tea and had my first ever taste of lemon: stringent but not unpleasant. I drank some more.

‘We live in a most shadowed present,’ said Dulcie. ‘These are uncertain times.’

‘I just decided to go for a wander. That was a few weeks back.’

She laughed into her tea at this, and a bit slopped out of her cup. ‘Oh, I like that. *That* shows spirit.’

We drank our tea looking out into the meadow beyond. I got a better look at the garden, a small area in otherwise wild surroundings, the meadow encroaching on this landscaped space in which Dulcie had built a small rockery and installed beds that were just starting to show the first shoots of flowers.

Only half an hour earlier I had been inspecting a badger sett, alone, overheated from the walk, looking for a fresh spring from which to fill my flask, yet here I was sitting at a table – something I had not done for weeks – having tea in the garden of a woman unlike any I knew back at home.

In the distance I could just make out the line of the North Sea, a faraway performance seen through binoculars in the Elysian afternoon haze.

‘No plan is a good plan,’ she said after some time had passed. ‘You never know what’s around the corner. A morning’s sunny spell can harbour an afternoon’s storm clouds. Life is long when you’re young and short when you’re old, but tenuous at any time.’

We fell silent for a moment, and the dog sighed.

‘Mind, they’re a rum bunch down there,’ she continued.

‘Who’s that?’

Dulcie put down her cup and nodded towards the sea. ‘That lot down bay. You have to watch them. Some are descended from smugglers. They’ve lived too long at sea. It has sent them funny. They’re as right as rain physically but their minds have turned to mush, you see. There’s a few laggards about the place.’

She took a sip and sniffed the air, then continued.

‘They’re not all bad, it’s just that the gene pool can be more like a rock pool at low tide, if you get what I mean.’

I didn’t. Instead I merely stared blankly back at her. I saw a woman in odd flowing clothes that were either extremely old-fashioned and of another era entirely, or the height of modern fashion; I was unequipped to judge either way. Even the swirling colours of the scarf she wore and her billowing trousers – *trousers* – seemed to be taken from a different palette. I noticed that her

hands were long and mapped with thick veins, and though her nails were painted they also showed signs of having been plunged in the soil.

‘And some of the old sea dogs sup like fish. You should see them: bellies like ale barrels. It’s a wonder they can see anything when the garden needs watering.’

I nodded as Dulcie watched me sideways. When I realised what it was she meant I blushed and then smiled.

‘Still, no harm in them. No harm in them *at all*. No doubt some of them think I’m an ageing ungodly slattern or Satan himself, but heck, they can go whistle.’

‘Do you not believe in God, then –’ Here once more my mouth faltered as I found myself unable to call her, an adult, by her first name: Dulcie.

She made a noise in response. ‘Hmmp. Buck and fuggor to that. We’ve got more than our fair share of Bible-thumpers round here as it is. The old joyless fire-and-brimstone-and-two-fucks-a-lifetime Christian lot.’

I flinched at the word that even most of the miners I knew reserved only for certain all-male company, and which even then was frowned upon. Shocked by this confident and intimidating lady, I felt myself flailing. I was out of my conversational depth. She was quite unlike my mother or most older women I knew, who certainly wouldn’t swear and blaspheme in the same sentence. I was used to a subdued and unquestioning reverence towards religion, especially from the elderly.

‘No,’ she continued, ‘I’m of the opinion that religion is nothing but end-of-the-pier hocus-pocus. You

might as well spend an hour with Gypsy Rose Lee as sit through a dull Sunday-morning service.'

I was shocked to hear an opinion of which Dulcie seemed so certain that to dispute it might make me appear ignorant. A strange prickling ripple of tension crept across my scalp at the thought. Quite casually she was turning those theological teachings drummed into me during banal daily assemblies upside down and giving them a good shake.

'Are you a believer?' she asked.

'I'm Church of England.'

'And what does that mean, exactly?'

I thought about this for a moment. 'Well, it means I went to a C of E school.'

Dulcie smiled. 'And what does that mean?'

Again I thought about her question. I smiled back. 'A lot of daydreaming.'

'Daydreaming is good.'

'The teachers didn't think so.'

'I'm sure they didn't, but from the dreams of children come the great empires of the future. You strike me as someone who spent as much time looking out the window as you did at the textbook page.'

'I was probably looking at the pit, where my dad works – and his dad before him.'

'Ah, a coalman.'

'Well, the coalman delivers. My dad works the seam. He's a miner.'

'Digging out the dusky diamonds, as they say. And what about you?'



‘What about me?’

‘Will you follow your forefathers underground?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, though it was of course a question I had been forced by circumstance and expectation to contemplate for years. ‘I thought I’d take a wander first. The pits aren’t going anywhere. There’ll always be mining. There’ll always be coal.’

‘That’s certainly true. What else did you do at this school of yours?’

‘I sat through long assemblies and lots of tuneless hymns.’

‘That’s it?’

‘Harvest festival in September and Christmas carol services. That’s about it.’

‘Well, harvest worship is a pagan practice for starters and many of the Christmas traditions are pre-Christian and have been synchronised and co-opted, but that’s by the by. Children aren’t to know. None of this has a thing to do with faith or what some might call spirituality, which is something else entirely. Butler doesn’t much care for religion either.’

‘No?’

‘He bit the last vicar that tried to pat him. They said he should be put down but just let the bastards try.’

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The sun stalked across the sky, lighting the meadow that once must have offered a clear vista of the open