

A NICE CUP OF TEA

If Harry hadn't gone into the garden, he might have heard what the man was saying on the radio. He had laid the tray at half past ten, just the way Bess used to do it and, last of all, he put on the cup, the special cup, that Bess had given him for their last anniversary. Then he'd carried the tray to the table by the pear tree, and sat in the browner chair, opposite the greener one that had been hers. Having the tray all neat like that made him feel that Bess was only out of sight, somewhere near him still, in the house or garden. Like, maybe, if she had just slipped indoors for a moment to fetch a drop of milk. Or one of those chocolate biscuits. Or like anything, so long as he could play these vital games he'd learned to play without her.

He was sitting under the pear tree, with his cup of tea, while some damn fool kept knocking on his front door. Too many people had knocked on his front door since Bess died. First it had been the vicar with his flood of crushing sympathy. Then came hordes of neighbours, though none of them would have dreamed of talking to Harry while Bess was alive. Some even peered in through the letter box as Harry dithered in the hall. Bess would have hated that.

'Well, really!' the invaders exclaimed as they flounced back down the path. 'You'd think he'd be grateful to have friends, to care for him.'

Next, social workers came in droves to pester him, asking stupid questions like if he was all right. All right, they called it. All right? Well, how did they expect him to be with Bess now dead and gone? But, he'd found how

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to get away from them, even when they came to the back door. Now he just went down to his shed, and hid behind the lawn mower. They never thought of looking for him there and it had been quite cosy in there once he'd put a cushion in the grass box. Nice cushion it was. Bess had embroidered it with pink daisies that summer when it rained so much. She'd be pleased to know he used it..

Today's lot of nosey parkers poked round so long that Harry fell asleep before they left. He must have slept awkwardly because he had quite a nasty headache when he woke, and Harry never got head pains usually. A touch of indigestion, now and then, but never headaches. That was why he forgot to take in the tray when he went indoors to doze some more beside the kitchen radio. He would have remembered it otherwise. He'd never been the forgetful type, especially about that tray. It had been a wedding present forty seven years ago last March, but even after all those years there was hardly a scratch on the varnish. Bess knew how to take care of things. Funny the way that wedding seemed like only yesterday, and her dress still hung proudly in the cupboard. His Bess had been a real beauty, no matter what her age.

The headache was much worse when Harry woke again, but a cup of tea would make it go away. The cup that cheers, Bess had called it, though he didn't feel too chipper now with his head like that. And dizzy with it. So by the time Harry had stumbled down the garden to fetch the tray, the news flash on the radio was over, and some band was playing music.

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Harry put the tray beside the growing pile of junk mail on the table. Burgers and pizza leaflets mostly and some shop's special offers for the week. They hadn't wasted paper like that when Harry was a boy. They'd understood the value of things then. Today there had been more nonsense stuck through the letter box. Printed on pink paper, but Harry left it there. No point in even looking at it. Besides, he'd lost his reading glasses. Bess would have known where they were, of course. He'd have another look for them tomorrow.

Harry roused himself enough to swirl his cup beneath the tap and rinse the tealeaves down the drain. Bess would have said he was washing his future away, but she'd been a great one for reading the leaves. She'd learned how to do it from her mother, and swore her mother never got it wrong. Well, there was no way of telling even if she had. Nothing much had happened in Bess or Harry's life. Contented day had followed each contented day in peaceful uniformity until the morning Bess had died.

He had known she wasn't very well, of course, but she never told him she'd been seeing the doctor for months. She'd just gone a bit quieter, slower than she'd been before, but that was normal at her age, and Harry had no cause to think it might be serious. He wished he'd known. If she'd only said she was ill he might have been able to look after her better; buy her little treats to make her smile. Right till that last morning she'd acted like her normal self. How like his Bess! She'd hated any fuss.

That final day he had left off planting pansies in the rain, and gone in for

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his cup of tea. He and Bess had sat in their places at the table, ginger biscuits on the light blue plate between them. Ginger snaps had always been his favourites. Bess had peered into his cup the way she always did, and then she just slumped over. And stayed down. She was dead before the ambulance arrived.

The doctor told Harry that Bess had a bad heart. Endocarditis, he'd called it, but that was nonsense, too. There'd been nothing wrong with Bess' heart. It was solid gold all through. His Bess was the kindest woman he'd known. They'd been happy, just the two of them.

Did no one understand about quietness nowadays? A van was going up and down the street with someone yelling out of great big speakers on the top. Wasn't there a law against too much noise? There was no point in all that yelling, anyway, as the din was bouncing off the house fronts so you couldn't understand a word the man was saying. It was also drowning out the speaker on the radio, but Harry was too tired to care. His headache was getting worse, so he covered up his ears and thought of Bess.

He was starting to remember something. What with the ambulance and doctors, the funeral and things, there had been precious little time to think about it, but what was it Bess had said before she died? She'd seemed quite pleased about something as she'd peered into his cup. She'd looked up, smiled and given his hand a quick pat and then, next moment, she was gone. It's odd the way people make a fuss about the last words people say. Surely it's what

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they've said throughout their lives that matters. It's the small remarks that build the fabric of a love.

Till now, Harry hadn't thought about what Bess's last words had been. He'd been content with what she'd said before, not that she'd said anything spectacular in all her tranquil years. She'd asked small questions, checking all was well, or asking would he buy a bag of sugar, some eggs or maybe a bit of cheese on his way home from work.

But suddenly, it mattered to know what she'd found among the tea leaves. It was his cup she'd been looking at, so maybe it was something he should know. Perhaps he could think more clearly now it had gone silent and the van had moved away.

Harry unplugged the radio to put the kettle on instead. A fuse had blown in the other socket and with Bess not needing it, he hadn't got round to the repair. One plug was good enough for him. He got out the milk and sugar, and then he laid a cup for Bess. After all, with no one watching, who could call him daft? And today Bess felt so close she might have been with him in the kitchen. It was easy to believe she was.

There were no biscuits. Bess had liked a biscuit with her tea, but Harry never seemed to get to the shops nowadays to buy them, and the milkman left the other oddments that he needed on the doorstep. But Harry needed very little now. Or anything at all, now he came to think of it. Things which used to

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be important didn't seem to matter any more. Like that radio. He used to listen to it a lot, but today he needed peace and quiet while he tried to remember what Bess had said about his cup.

Harry could almost see her, sitting opposite again to where he sat. It had rained hard that morning he'd planted out the pansies. He'd forgotten about the rain till this morning, but he saw it clearly now, and saw again how light coming in through the window had made the twisting streams of rain shine like tears on Bess' cheeks. But his Bess would never cry!

She looked up from his cup and said,

'It's all right, my lovey. You won't have to wait alone too long before I come and fetch you.' And again he saw her smiling, this time with no tears of rain. It was good to have her back.

Bess stayed there with him throughout the searing moments as the street exploded, flinging shattered road and houses through the flames. And she stayed throughout the age of peace that followed, as she always would.

A mile away, amid the dust, rescue workers stared in horror at the devastation where the streets had been.

That morning when the juggernaut had crashed off the bypass, its huge cargo of illegal barrels had burst and spilled long before anyone suspected the

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horror they contained. The driver was long gone by the time water supplies had become contaminated and heavy gasses spread for half a mile along the drains. So much poison had seeped between the cracked old paving stones that it was impossible to assess the situation and, by the time the authorities had realized the danger of explosion, it was too late to prevent it.

Naturally the police had been alerted. News flashed every quarter of an hour on local radio and half hourly on the other bands. T.V. programmes were interrupted while an expert and a well known actor held a phone-in to explain the situation. They had stressed that the first symptoms of exposure to the toxin were mainly headache, drowsiness. Hallucinations are also noted from that range of chemicals and they said that anyone affected in these ways must seek immediate help. Brave men in loudspeaker vans had toured the area, while a special emergency force had knocked on doors and posted leaflets warning householders to leave their homes and report immediately to one of several cleansing stations.

It's odd the way you get the feeling that still there might have been someone who didn't know the danger. Like someone who, for some trivial reason, hadn't heard the warnings, some old person living on his own. With only ash and rubble left, you'd never know for sure.

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