

Underground

Like some great, one-eyed subterranean beast of prey, the train rushed, panting, out of its burrow, gobbled up the figures waiting in the dim light and, replete for the moment, bustled away into the darkness of the northbound tunnel.

Sitting on her suitcase, chin in hand, the girl hardly acknowledged its passing. Forlorn and still, she brushed absently at a smut on her white-clad thigh, succeeding only in smearing the fragile wisp into the material. Newly bobbed and fussed in the style of the time, her blonde hair had sagged in the humidity since she'd been there, but there was none to tell her, so she'd believed it would still catch his eye when he came.

There was no doubt that he would come He'd promised, after all. Promised with those steady eyes fixed on hers – the way he did when he was serious about something. Not often, but enough to convince her on that gusty, drear Autumn day, with dying leaves stirring around their feet and the scent of rain borne on the wind.

There'd been the money. Or, rather the evidence of it. In the car or in the love-nest (his phrase) with its artfully contrived roof garden where the bonsai in their illuminated niches cast weird, deformed shadows on the tiled surrounds of the pool. Where they'd made love in summer under night skies infused with the neon colours below.

The kitchen below where his friends had laughed and sipped and laughed and talked and talked about things and places she'd never seen - and complimented her on her mother's recipes that came alive with unlimited access to the shops far below in the fashionable streets with their fashionable crowds. For those brief, delirious weeks, she'd been part of all this, lulled by acknowledgement of her pale beauty and her eager acceptance of the recognition she'd craved.

How long had it been? She tried to remember the date when they'd met for the first time and was surprised to find that this simple thing eluded her. It seemed strange when she considered the heights of the passion that had brought them to this point. She marvelled that, locked into the drudgery of the bakery shop, she must not have noticed him at first. He, whose every pore she now knew and worshipped.

Her mother had insisted on the flour being double-sifted, regardless of how pure it was, and the butter had to be rubbed in by hand. It was the only way, she said. Cooking with your heart, she called it. Whatever it was, the recipe brought out a smooth richness that melted on your tongue. Something that tempted one to have just one more – after the craving had been satisfied.

Flushed from the heat of the ovens, her hair damp and curling against her cheek, she'd slid the contents of the baking pan into the display case, enticing wisps of fragrance escaping the cloudy glass cabinet so that customers ummed and oohed and jostled for attention. And he'd seen her. In his immaculately tailored suit with that endearing cowlick that he affected against all her later protests.

When the ebb and flow of bodies brought him, belly to counter, he leaned forward pointing, and murmured something that she didn't catch. Her quizzical look told him as much, and he leaned further, almost to her ear, as though to be heard above the buzz in the shop.

"I'm sure those are as smooth as the skin on your thighs"

His breath was warm and clean, but she jerked back, almost dropping the tongs and packet. Her voice sounded tight and unnatural as she answered, not meeting his eyes.

"How many would you like, sir?"

"Both of them"

"Both....? Oh! Oh...I mean, how many of *these*? Waving the tongs across the freshly baked confections.

"For the moment, I'll have to settle for a half dozen."

It seemed an impossible task to get the last into the packet, and he reached out to steady her right hand, his palm warm and dry. As he took the packet, he squeezed her now empty hand. And she was lost.

It was a week before she would acknowledge his cheery greetings from the passing car, timed to coincide with her locking up. Had the unexpected rain not arrived in sudden, irritable squalls to send her scurrying, coatless, for shelter on that Saturday midday, she might never have accepted it in the sleek, grey car that whispered into the kerb with the passenger door invitingly ajar.

She slid into the front seat and closed the door. The mechanism was smooth, almost silent as it engaged. She was conscious that she was dripping all over the leather interior and burrowed distractedly in her bag for a tissue, as though this ineffectual means would suffice.

He chuckled in genuine amusement and passed her a large, snowy handkerchief, watching her as she mopped furiously, free hand plucking at the sodden tendrils that framed her face. Taking it from her, he dabbed gently at her face and neck, then took her hands and dried slowly and sensuously between her limp fingers. Then he leaned forward and kissed her gently, quite chastely, on the forehead.

“No walking and no bus for you today. First we need to dry your things – you can’t travel like that. Come on.”

It was with a sense of surprise that she found herself in the apartment, staring out over the grey city spread out below, distorted by the smoked glass.

Barefoot, tingling from a hot shower, and wearing one of his shirts she cradled an untouched cognac while her clothes rotated audibly in the huge kitchen where he busied himself. “Don’t worry, I checked the labels and set it for the most delicate...” he grinned when he looked in from his labours.

Afterwards, she could not have said, whether it was good or whether she enjoyed it, sitting there in two armchairs, facing each other, rain teeming against the French doors and bouncing off the balcony tiles. A heaped plate on her lap, the cognac made her suddenly hungry and less detached, and she ate. When she was finished, he took her plate and glass and padded through to the kitchen. Returning, he bent over her, kissed her forehead, and scooped her up without effort. In surprise, she flung an arm around his neck and then left it there on the way to the bedroom.

The afternoon passed, as these afternoons do, in a series of explosions, some fleeting and beyond recall and others more leisurely and yet more sensual. They slept in between. Short naps, limbs entwined as though the other might flee during the nothingness that exhaustion brought on.

That was four months ago. Four months during which her mother observed, but said nothing. Simply went on with her washing and ironing and ate her meals alone as though there was nothing unusual when her daughter returned in the early hours or not at all to the little apartment they shared. She did once say, to break the silence, “You’re up to your neck in it.”

There was a wife. She knew it instinctively, as women do, even without the band of pale skin around his ring finger. It was something they never discussed, wrapped up in each other through those fleeting months, until her joy became mixed with a sense of impending sadness. When the sadness became more than the joy, she knew that it was over – that it could not go on as if all was normal and they could be together forever.

“I’m going away. Alone.” She said, watching his naked back.

“Alone....? What do you mean – alone?”. He rolled over to face her.

“I’ve got money saved. I think I should go away.”

“Money? Why...? I mean, why would you need that is, where are you going?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere quite far away, perhaps to the sea. I think I must.”

He reached for her as though relieved that she had no definite plan in mind. She pushed his hand away, her resolve growing now that she'd said it.

"How will you travel? Airfares cost the earth...."

"I'll start by train, by underground - it joins up with the main line."

"Don't leave me, my darling. Let me come with you....". There was something in his voice that made her believe him again.

"You must do what you think is best" she said" I'm leaving on Tuesday – at two. From King's Cross."

She couldn't see his face, because he hugged her to him and whispered in her ear. "Look out for me, I'll be there. I **did** promise."

Sitting on her suitcase, chin in hand, the girl watched the station clock, as the long hand approached twelve, the other on three. She stood up and walked to the platform edge, stepped out of her new shoes and then into space as the three o'clock express thundered out of the darkness, swept up the billowing white shape across the tracks and vanished into the blackness of the northbound tunnel.

Mike Job