

## A Suitable Detachment

By Carol Novis

“District Nurse Blatt! Wait!”

Eunice heaved her broad posterior from the motorcycle seat and stood patiently as Winifred Malory, red-faced and eager, lolloped up.

“New outfit?” she asked gruffly. Winifred was wearing a baggy fawn skirt and not-quite-matching twin set that Eunice hadn’t seen before.

“Yes.” Winifred smiled. “At least for me. I got it at the Oxfam shop.” She fingered the pilled cardigan awkwardly. “There’s lots of wear in it yet. The girl called it ‘vintage.’” More like grunge, thought Eunice, thinking back nostalgically to church bazaars.

Winifred’s eyes shone. “I wanted to ask if you could you come to dinner with us tomorrow and meet Denbigh.”

Sir Denbigh Grote was Winifred’s new ‘boyfriend’, if you wanted to call him that, although the term hardly applied to a retired diplomat of advanced age. Who would have thought it? Now in her 50s, Winifred had met him through, if you could believe the gossip, an internet site! Hope he lives long enough for the wedding, Eunice thought grimly.

But then she felt guilty about her cattiness. After all, she was a church deaconess and as such, should be charitable. Why should she begrudge Winifred happiness?

“Certainly, I’ll come,” she said firmly, revving up the motorcycle.

The truth was, Eunice admitted to herself, that she was feeling left out because all her acquaintances seemed to have paired off, leaving her playing gooseberry. It had started when that sensible pillar of the church, Mildred Lathbury, had surprised everyone by marrying Everard Bone. No one had predicted that; if anything, the gossips had thought she might end up with the vicar. Then Dora Caldicote had left her teaching job and latched onto a school inspector. To top it off, Eunice’s good friend Nurse Dew was now living with an aged gentleman from a retirement home – without even being married! Even old Mrs Bone, who believed in the Dominion of the Birds, had married the local butcher after they found a mutual interest in eating chicken.

Eunice’s eyes welled up. She might be a successful district nurse and invaluable in the parish, but in the end, what mattered was that ring on your left hand and she didn’t have one. A lot of women seemed to find it easy to find a man, or even more than one, but she herself had never acquired the knack. She was left on the shelf with all the other excellent women whom nobody wanted.



But District Nurse Blatt wasn’t one for self-pity.

“Enough of that!” she admonished herself. A good cup of tea was what she needed, and she pulled her motor scooter to a stop outside a Starbucks cafe.

Inside, she scanned the lengthy list of coffees and dismissed them all. “A cup of tea, if you have such a thing, please,” she said to the skinny barista, whose name tag proclaimed him to be “Wilfred.”

“Certainly, dear,” he minced. “Jasmine orange or hibiscus? Chamomile? Chai? And would you like a granola bar to go with that?”

Eunice sighed. “Just plain tea.”

The coffee bar was full. Eunice carried her mug to the only vacant seat, next to a long-haired academic type in corduroy trousers and a plaid shirt, busy at his laptop. He seemed to be looking at some kind of internet dating site. Good grief, was he pursuing true love on the internet too? Quickly she glanced away, but not before the man, who seemed far too old for that kind of nonsense, caught her look.

Amazingly, he wasn’t in the least abashed. On the contrary, he seemed inclined to chat. “Pretty, isn’t she?” he said, indicating a photo. I think I’ll send her a SMS.” Eunice peered dubiously at a picture of a woman with fluffy, blond hair and a mauve sweater. “She’s a divorcee and a bit young for you,” she said bluntly.

“I can but try,” he smiled. “Ever tried online dating yourself?” He cast a sideways glance at her ringless finger.

No, of course not,” she said gruffly.

“Why not? Lots of men out there! Here, I’ll show you how it’s done. Tell me about yourself.”

In spite of herself, Eunice was intrigued. “Well, I’m a district nurse and a deaconess on our Parochial Church Council. *Not high.*”

“OK, we’ll try a Christian site. Plenty of those. How about ‘Christian Love Search?’ Let’s see. We’ll say *‘Attractive, shapely church-goer, sensible, plain-spoken, nurse, seeks gentleman, regular communicant over 50.’* How does that sound?”

“It sounds ridiculous. I’m not shapely, I’m fat – and I’m not attractive!” she snorted. “Who would reply to someone with a description like that?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. But let’s see what men are available. Here’s one: *‘Retired anthropologist with a research interest in pygmies...’* No good. He’s an atheist.”

Who would have imagined that such a wealth of opportunity existed on the internet? What treasure! Eunice pulled the laptop towards her and gazed, rapt, at the screen. Some of the men looked quite handsome and by no means unrespectable. There even seemed to be a Member of Parliament, looking for someone to share his “burden.”

She scanned the entries.

*“Professor and editor, enjoys study of Georgian architecture.”*

*“Food critic, wine lover, with charming country cottage. Former C of E clergyman, now Roman Catholic.”*

*“London antique dealer, specializing in objets d’art and de vertu, widower, seeks charming, cultivated partner.”*

*“Vet, separated. Would like fellow animal lover to help run cattery.”*

*“Croyden-based librarian loves beautiful things. Seeks wife who owns them.”*

Eunice dismissed them all. “None of these are right.”

“Well, here’s one that sounds just your cup of tea. *“Retired widower in Clapham Common, on Parochial Church*

*Council (PCC) enjoys ecclesiastical research.*” He’s tall and not bad looking, if you don’t mind that fashionably bald look. “Or, what about this vicar of Crompton Hodnett? Sounds just the job.”

But Eunice was peering in horror at another picture and description.

*“Former ambassador to the Balkans, cultivated, cultured, seeks well-established young woman for mutual enjoyment.”*

“Why, that’s Sir Denbigh Grote! ‘Well-established.’ He means rich! Well! And ‘young’ – what a nerve. He must be 80 if he’s a day. Such wickedness.”

Eunice was conscious, though, that she didn’t feel quite as disgusted as she might have. In fact, she was experiencing a curious lightness of heart as she thought of how it would be when she revealed all to poor Winifred. For of course, she was going to have to tell her.

Much of her time, she thought with some complacency, was going to have to be devoted to taking Winifred’s mind off her disappointment. She would have to be a *tower* of strength.

Eunice pushed back the laptop and jumped off the stool with a new vigour. Life, even without a husband, still held infinite possibilities.

*Carol Novis is Canadian by birth but has lived in Israel for many years. She worked as a journalist on the Jerusalem Post newspaper and since retiring has written a children’s book and a cozy mystery called Long in the Sleuth.*

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## More to Love

By Eliza Langhans

Belinda arrived home to find wet boots strewn across the carpet and a mackintosh left dripping carelessly on the banister. It was like living with a child. Or what she imagined living with a child might be like, not herself having had any experience in the matter. She rather pointedly shook own jacket off on the porch and placed her boots neatly in the closet, then stood for a moment in the dim, having found limited satisfaction in these small tasks which, after all, would be recognized by nobody. She listened for some sign of her sister, but the rain drowned out any noise. Would this be what it was like if she lived alone, coming home every night to an empty house?

Of course, it was not that she never arrived home to find herself alone. Harriet was often out in the evenings, having a drink with friends, or meeting Ricardo for one of those bubble-gum movies that Belinda refused to go see. But even when absent, Harriet made her presence known.

Despite herself, Belinda picked up Harriet’s boots and lined them neatly beside her own. The pounding rain and dim light gave the house a cocooned, unearthly feel, as if the world outside had disappeared. Or perhaps it was she who was otherworldly, flickering in and out of her own life like a ghost. Some days it felt like she was barely there at all. A wave of sadness passed through her: sadness for the world, which had seemed to offer so much; and for herself, who had so little to show for her small existence.

But it was no good feeling melancholy. With a practiced motion, she stepped into her well-worn slippers and padded off down the hall in search of her sister.

Harriet was comfortably ensconced on the sofa with her laptop, her knees drawn up in a manner more appropriate to a teenager, and her brassiere—an item of clothing she always loved to remove with a flourish as soon as she came home from work—strewn in an undignified manner across the ottoman.

Still feeling ghostlike, Belinda padded quietly around the side of the couch to where she could see over Harriet’s shoulder . . . and was jolted back into reality to discover her sister was on a dating website.

“Harriet? What are you doing?”

Harriet tilted her head back and looked up, so that Belinda found herself staring down at her sister’s face, her eyes mischievous. “Oh, B. Don’t act like you’ve never seen a dating site before. I’m putting myself out there! Come on, tell me how you disapprove.”

“I don’t disapprove.”

Though of course things hadn’t worked out so well the last time Harriet had put herself out there. Almost a decade earlier, Harriet’s one attempt at marriage had ended in Divorce—in her head Belinda always pronounced the word with an ominous capital letter, though Harriet insisted it was quite the usual thing these days and everyone should try it at least once. Of course, Harriet hadn’t been quite so sanguine at the time. It was then that she’d moved in with Belinda, and somehow never left. Belinda had come to think of their arrangement as permanent. Could it be that Harriet didn’t feel the same? She’d married once, after all. There was no reason she might not do it again. After all these years, could she be preparing to launch herself back out into the world? And where would Belinda be if she was gone?

Cautiously, Belinda leaned close over the back of the sofa to see the screen. Harriet was in the process of filling out an array of little bubbles to describe herself—gender, age, hair color, eye color—but had become stuck on one labeled, with the unnerving frankness of modern life, body type.

In her innocence, Belinda had wandered through life thinking of people as either fat or thin, or maybe somewhere in between. Now she discovered that there were in fact a dizzying array of options from which to choose. “What’s the difference between slim and slender?” she said, frowning.

“No idea,” said Harriet, though Belinda could tell she wasn’t really listening. Being neither slim nor slender, she had let her mouse float down towards the bottom of list, where the heavier options were clustered. Curvy. Voluptuous. Big-boned. And then, last of all, “more to love.”

The phrase struck Belinda with the force of insight; a hint at something she had always sensed, but never fully understood. Could it be true that thin people somehow had less in them to love? By rejecting the pleasures of food and drink for a grim abstemiousness, were they also inoculating themselves from the pleasures of the heart? Clearly there were exceptions to this rule. And yet, even so—it would explain so

much. It was certainly true that she'd often felt unlovable compared to her more amply proportioned sister.

But she could hardly share these thoughts with Harriet, who, after a moment's reflection, chose the box for "curvy." I would be average, thought Belinda. It would be convenient if there was one button you could click for average all the way through.

Harriet had now finished the multiple choice portion of her profile and was presented with a small white box requesting her to write about herself. They both stared at the blinking cursor.

"What are you going to write?"

"Oh . . . I'll think of something later," said Harriet carelessly. "Come on, let's have a look at the men."

She clicked something and suddenly they were presented with a page full of male faces: row after row of forced smiles and scruffy chins. The men stared out intently from the screen, bright-eyed and needy, all clearly wanting something Belinda was sure she was not ready to give.

"You'd think they would shave, at least, before getting their photo taken," she said.

"That's the style, B. All the movie stars look like that these days."

But these men didn't look like movie stars. Harriet too must have felt dissatisfied because she kept scrolling, down and down, until at last she clicked on a boy who looked about twenty, with white teeth and curly hair.

"See, here's a cutie!"

They both stared at his profile.

"It says his hobby is rock-climbing."

"Yes, but they all say that. No one actually climbs rocks."

They stared for another moment.

"Also..." Belinda sought after an appropriately delicate phrase. "Don't you think he looks a bit... young?"

"What? Nonsense." But Harriet closed the profile abruptly. "Not my type."

She continued to scroll further down in silence, not opening any more profiles.

"Did you start dinner?" asked Belinda.

"Oh, no. I was waiting for you."

With a sigh, Belinda moved into the kitchen, putting the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher and pulling a package of chicken breast out of the fridge. "Should I make some salad?"

"What?" said Harriet from the sofa.

"Salad? To go with our chicken?"

"Oh. That's fine." She was still at her laptop, though she'd stopped scrolling and seemed to be staring into space.

"What about Ricardo?" said Belinda.

Harriet's movie buddy, Ricardo, was widely known to be quietly in love with her, though so far Harriet had kept their relationship from progressing beyond the occasional sharing of popcorn.

"Oh, Ricardo. Such a sweetie. But he'll understand. I'm simply keeping my options open."

She closed the laptop and came over to lean on the countertop while Belinda worked.

"It'll be so much fun, B. You should do one too."

Belinda imagined meeting some strange man for coffee. Making awkward conversation over a crumbling scone. Forcing a smile at some joke or anecdote she didn't understand. Harriet would be fine—she always found something to say, and was able to laugh at anything really. But Belinda knew she'd be miserable.

And it wasn't just that. The whole idea felt humiliating somehow. What would Henry think, if he found out? Or God forbid, Agatha? Belinda imagined her stern delight upon hearing the news. How common, she'd say. Or, perhaps worse, it would be something patronizingly encouraging. Good for Belinda. Good for her, putting herself out there after all these years.

Belinda pictured again all those eager, needy faces. None had the clear, intelligent gaze of Henry. It was impossible to imagine him on a dating site. Even if he were to somehow leave Agatha.

Not that that would happen. He had his political career to think of, and Belinda understood. Marrying Agatha had provided him with the connections he needed, not to mention the money. And if she'd turned out to be not quite the right wife for him; if she'd aged rather more poorly than he had—well, that was one of the risks that came with marriage. And it was so nice that they could all still be friends. If Belinda were to date, that might change everything.

With a start, she realized Harriet was watching her intently as she washed the chicken.

"Might be good for you, B. You haven't dated anyone since..."

But Harriet couldn't think of anyone, and Belinda couldn't either. The last person she remembered loving was Henry, and, perhaps out of habit, she seemed to be in love with him still. There had been other men, and other disappointing forays into romance, but all were lost to the fog of memory. Only Henry remained. Henry, who'd held her hand and quoted poetry to her and debated free will and metaphysics far into the night. Henry, who she'd loved loyally and, some might say, pointlessly. But surely there was always some purpose to love? And, having experienced the real thing, she knew she could never settle for some more diluted version.

"I don't think online dating is the best way to meet men, in any case," she told Harriet with sudden confidence. "The girls at the office say it's better to get out and do things. Join a club, say, or take a class." She put the chicken on to poach and pulled out the lettuce, picking through wilted leaves to find enough for a salad. "Chop a carrot, will you?"

"In a minute. I think I'll open some wine. Would you like a glass?"

"Yes, please."

She deserved a little something, after the trauma of the dating website. And weren't they saying now that wine was healthy, even on a weeknight? Assuming you didn't drink too much. Like so many things, it was acceptable in moderation

only. Perhaps she had been wise, in her way, to keep her expectations low. A little bit of love had been enough, at least for her.

Belinda moved to set the table, comforted by the familiar sight of the plates laid out across from each other, each with a fork and knife on either side, the salt and pepper lined up neatly between them.

“What kind of class?” asked Harriet.

“Dancing?” Belinda said as moved back into kitchen, her mind half on the salad. Then she realized with horror what she’d said. If there had ever been a time for her to dance, it was long past. “Or cooking?” she amended hastily.

As she said it, she moved to the stove to check the chicken, and Harriet moved beside her, both of them peered doubtfully down at the pale breasts.

“A cooking class!” said Harriet decisively. “We could learn something foreign, and exotic. Thai curry!”

“Thai curry?” said Belinda, poking at the chicken with a fork and determining it was still pink inside.

“Or Japanese! We could make sushi.”

“Hmm.” Belinda could not help feeling, as she so often did, that Harriet was taking things too far. She accepted her glass of wine with a small frown and took a sip before moving to get a carrot out of the fridge. “What about Italian?” she said at last. “I always thought it might be fun to try making pasta.”

“Ooo, yes! We could get one of those machines.” Excited by the idea, Harriet moved back into the sitting room to retrieve her laptop. “I’ll just take a look online to see what’s there.”

Belinda glanced up from chopping her carrot to see that, in order to make room at the table, Harriet had pushed aside the plates and silverware, leaving Belinda’s neat table settings askew and nearly upsetting the salt. And yet, as she watched her sister typing eagerly at the laptop, Belinda found she did not mind so very much after all. Belinda might have little in her to love. Henry, certainly, had not found her sufficient. But Harriet—Harriet with her silly enthusiasms and her sloppy housekeeping—somehow she had plenty. Plenty of her to love, and plenty of love to give. Enough to share. Enough, even, for Belinda.

*Eliza Langhans is a librarian and writer, who was introduced to Barbara Pym by her mother. She lives in Western Massachusetts with her husband and two young children.*

## All of Me

By Betsy Hanson

“A man must have homely food,” Miss Maude Doggett said as she slipped the platter of cauliflower cheese in front of Wyatt Tweed. Wyatt looked at Jessie Morrow, who was perched on a chair on the opposite side of his formica-topped dining table. Maybe she would signal how he should reply to this declaration. The dish certainly was *homely*, the smothering of cheese sauce not adding to the eye appeal of pale cauliflower on a white crockery plate.

“Good plain English cooking,” Jessie suggested. “Miss

Doggett wanted to fix lunch for you, to thank you for your hospitality.”

“With your many responsibilities, teaching piano and performing, you have no time to prepare a nutritious meal.” Miss Doggett added some gray lamb chops and a bowl of overcooked peas to the table.

“No need to apologize for the appearance,” Wyatt said. “I’m sure it tastes fine. Nothing parsley wouldn’t help, to add some color.”

Miss Doggett silently plopped a scoop of cauliflower cheese on Wyatt’s plate. “It is the nature of cauliflower cheese to be of a pale hue,” Miss Doggett sniffed.

“Now I understand!” Jessie laughed loudly but didn’t care if this earned her a scolding from Miss Doggett. They were in the freewheeling West Coast city of Seattle, and didn’t American women talk in loud voices and guffaw as they pleased? “It’s the word *homely*. For us it means pleasant and comfortable, as if from one’s own home.”

“Ah!” Wyatt Tweed laughed too, showing prominent teeth. “In American English, *homely* means unattractive.”

“I still say, a man must have homely food,” Miss Doggett persisted. “And surely we must stop discussing the meaning of words and eat our cauliflower cheese before it becomes tepid.”

If *homely* means unattractive, perhaps that is how an American would describe Wyatt Tweed, Jessie thought: a forty-ish man with large stick-out ears, thinning red hair, spindly long legs, and those large teeth.

But his brown eyes twinkled. So often one read in novels of a character’s twinkling eyes, Jessie thought, but Wyatt Tweed has the first real-life pair I have ever experienced.

The lamb chops proved to be tough, requiring determined chewing that stifled conversation. In fact Jessie found she had little appetite, distracted by the excitement of her first days in far-flung Seattle. British tourists chose New York or Boston or Washington DC, maybe even Miami. She knew no one who had traveled to the Pacific Northwest.

Of course she and Miss Doggett had not crossed an ocean and a continent because they were inventive travelers. Lucille Harbinger, Miss Doggett’s second cousin who had moved to Seattle as a war bride, had died in June. Wyatt Tweed was Lucille’s nephew by marriage and her only surviving relative. To receive her inheritance from Lucille, Miss Doggett was required to visit Wyatt in Seattle to “comfort him in his grief.”

“It is my duty,” Miss Doggett had declared. “I would journey across the world to comfort her bereaved nephew in any case. I am not concerned about an inheritance.”

Yet in the Leamington Lodge library, tidying up before their departure, Jessie had found a memo with the words, in Miss Doggett’s hand, “5,000 American dollars! A tidy sum from Lucille!”

“A delicious *homely* meal,” Wyatt said, clearing the plates, though he’d decided he would not seek out another chance to experience “good plain English cooking.”

“Miss Morrow often does the washing up,” Miss Doggett

said. "She'd best continue with her typical duties, even when we are in foreign lands."

"No, I insist. Go relax in the living room, Maude," Wyatt said. "You too, Jessie."

Jessie flinched at Wyatt's use of their given names. This was the American custom, but she and Miss Doggett barely knew Wyatt Tweed. And even after all these years living together at Leamington Lodge, I would not presume call my employer Maude, Jessie thought.

But jet lag was more insistent than Miss Doggett's need to feel affront.

"If you will excuse me," she said, yawning, "I shall rest in my room. Miss Morrow, I would advise you to do the same."

"I'm not wasting a single hour of my first week in America taking a nap," Jessie said, aware of her cheeky tone. "I shall explore the neighborhood instead."

"As you wish." Miss Doggett yawned again and tramped down the hallway to the guest room.

Wyatt washed the dishes, swiping a sponge vaguely over the plates and silverware, and Jessie dried.

"Nice of you ladies to come to my gig tonight. I hope the cacophony of jazz isn't too much for Maude," Wyatt said.

"I tune in to the jazz station on the radio on my bedside stand, nearly every night," Jessie said. "Miss Doggett allows only classical music in the main rooms."

"Well, let's see if we can convert her. Jazz is America's classical music." He twinkled a smile. "Hey, I just realized—Wyatt Earp and Jessie James! We're a couple of Wild West hombres!"

Jessie smiled as he laughed, though she had not the slightest idea what he was talking about and didn't want to ask and show her ignorance.

Putting on her oversized cloth coat, Jessie headed out into the unseasonably warm November sunshine. Red and yellow fallen leaves brightened the sidewalk as she ambled past the tidy but modest American houses. Perhaps these were the homes of professors who taught at the nearby University of Washington. None had the protective fences or walls that guarded the houses in North Oxford. Instead carpets of green lawn stretched a welcome down to the sidewalk—a metaphor, Jessie thought, for the openness of Americans compared to the closed-in attitude of the British.

Her walk took her to a small shopping center with a thrift store, a sign in the window advertising "All Clothing, Half Off!"

Jessie laughed out loud—did the owners realize the double-entendre? In the window display sat a pair of red cowboy boots.

As if an invisible hand had given her a push, Jessie marched into the shop and asked to try on the boots, which fit her—though she had to admit that "fit" was a relative term, the pointed toes and chunky heels as unlike her usual soft-soled oxfords as a rodeo horse was from a Clydesdale.

I am, after all, a "Wild West hombre," Jessie thought, as she pulled some small green American bills from her wallet

and boldly bought the secondhand red cowboy boots.



"Miss Morrow, wherever have you been?" Miss Doggett sat on the lumpy sofa near Wyatt's baby grand piano, dunking a tea bag into a mug. "It's been dark for nearly an hour."

"Out for a walk. The streetlamps brightened my path." Jessie was surprised at these poetic words, as the "streetlamps" were not in fact lamps at all, but tall metal poles with glaring flat fixtures.

"I offered Maude a 'cuppa,'" Wyatt said from where he sat on the piano bench. "One for you, too?" A couple of hours away from the ol' Maudie Doggett did you good, he thought, as he admired the color in Jessie's cheeks and her springy curls, set loose from whatever had held them into a tight bun.

"No thank you," Jessie said. "I think we're leaving for the jazz club at six? I need to change."

"I'll run through this chart one more time, and we'll head out," he said.

"I told Wyatt that as his grateful guests, we would provide him with an audience." Miss Doggett grimaced as she sipped the tea-bag-dunked cuppa.

Wyatt began to play and sing the jazz standard "All of Me." Jessie paused to listen: *Take my lips, I'll never use them / Take my arms, I want to lose them.*

His long fingers chased chords up and down the octaves and embellished the melody line, his voice channeling a feeling for the melody as well as the lyrics. You look so happy, Jessie thought, with no need at all for comfort in your grief.

Why do I like this song so much? Jessie wondered. I've never been in love and then scorned to the degree that I wouldn't need my lips or arms. Maybe it's the message about giving too much of yourself to another person and not caring if he takes whatever is left.

"I hope you sing that one at the club," Jessie said.

"I'll dedicate it to you." Wyatt was even more convinced that this was appropriate when Jessie appeared fifteen minutes later in her going-out-to-a-club outfit.

He nearly dropped the sheaf of sheet music he'd collected to take to the gig.

"Wow! Quite the transformation!" And about time! he could have added. Why should you dress as dowdily as Miss Doggett? Jessie's blue velvet dress was perfect with her pale skin and soft curly hair. Her legs in the sheer stockings were slender and nicely formed. She had even put on some lipstick.

And a pair of red cowboy boots.

"Miss Morrow, whatever are you thinking?" Miss Doggett bore down on her paid companion like a schoolmarm on a naughty child. "We have been invited by Mr. Tweed to an evening of musical performance, *not* a low-life masquerade ball! As your employer, I insist that you change your footwear. I cannot allow you to make a fool of yourself."

"No time for her to change, Maude," Wyatt said. "We're going to be late if we don't leave right this instant!"

Wyatt Tweed twinkled a smile at Jessie and opened the door for his two British guests.

"I am a Wild West hombre," Jessie whispered.

He laughed. "And a brave one, at that."



"Drinks are on me," Wyatt offered when Jessie and Miss Doggett were settled at a small table near the piano at the Jazz Bistro.

"We shall have orange juice," Miss Doggett said.

"I will have a martini, please," Jessie announced, crossing her legs to better display her red boots.

Wyatt ordered a plate of cheese and crackers, one orange juice, and one martini.

From his seat at the piano, he could see Jessie leaning forward and smiling—no, *grinning*. Well, of course this prim and proper woman, who had only heard jazz trickling from a radio on a bedside table, would grin, if not swoon, at hearing the music live.

Miss Doggett, her mouth set in a dutiful line, sat back in her chair, as if to get as far away as possible from the sounds emanating from the piano.

"Miss Morrow," Miss Doggett whispered loudly, "compose yourself! It is not seemly for a single woman to have such an expression of . . ."

". . . of pleasure?" Jessie said. "Of delight?" She drained her martini glass. "Of *desire*?"

"Oh my, oh my, what have I done? I have traveled all this way to offer succor to poor Wyatt Tweed, and by bringing you with me, I have allowed you to fall into an unsavory infatuation!"

Miss Doggett clasped her hands and looked up at the dingy ceiling of the club.

If it's God you're looking for, you won't find him up there, Jessie wanted to say.

He's in that music coming out of that piano.

"We shall return to Wyatt's home, right now," Miss Doggett said. "Surely he will understand that we are still suffering jet lag. And one needs a solid meal, not just some crackers and cold cheese."

Wyatt was speaking into the microphone.

"One more number and I'll take a short break. I'm dedicating this song to a new friend, Jessie Morrow, a jazz lover from England."

Jessie closed her eyes while she listened to "All of Me." I'm not going to risk catching a glimpse of Miss Doggett's disapproving expression while I enjoy this, she thought.

When he was finished, Wyatt came over to their table. Miss Doggett was standing up with her coat on, her felt hat with its garnish of wax grapes slightly askew on her head. A waiter delivered a second martini to Jessie.

"We do beg your pardon, but we must excuse ourselves. We are quite exhausted," Miss Doggett said to Wyatt. "And we do *not* need any additional beverages."

"That must be the royal 'we' you are using," Jessie heard herself say, standing up and looking directly at Miss Maude Doggett. "You may excuse yourself. I shall stay and enjoy an additional beverage."

"Miss Morrow, this is the martini speaking! You will put on your coat and come with me, right now!" Miss Doggett

barked.

"No, *Maude*, I won't. I am your paid companion, which means you may have *some* of me. You are not permitted to have *all* of me. No, you aren't."

Miss Doggett started to sputter something but Wyatt held out his arm and said, "So kind of you to be part of my audience. Come with me now, and I'll call you a taxi."

And he twinkled at Jessie, whispering, "Atta girl!" and escorted Miss Doggett to the door.

*Betsy Hanson is the coeditor and translator of This Kind of Woman: Ten Stories by Japanese Women Writers, 1970–1976. She wrote for The New York Times Book Review for ten years and has created and directed a dozen short plays. Her novel, Always Gardenia, written in homage to Barbara Pym, was published in March 2018.*

## Breaking Out

By Judith Evans

Wilmet Forsyth stood back and examined her floral arrangement. She had been concentrating on a new style but something was not quite right. She looked down frowningly at the illustration which she had been trying to follow and it was a relief when the phone rang and interrupted her endeavours. It was her old friend Rowena Talbot. But this was a Rowena she could scarcely recognise.

"Wilmet," she sobbed, "can you come and see me? Now!" she wailed.

"What on earth is the matter? Is it one of the children?"

"Harry," gasped Rowena.

A dread flooded through Wilmet. "Is he... has he ...?" she stammered.

"Nothing like that," shot back Rowena angrily. "He's left me."

"Left you?" echoed Wilmet in shocked astonishment. "But why?" she asked uncomprehendingly, for were Harry and Rowena not a well matched pair? It's true that Harry liked his little flirtations, but he loved Rowena surely?

"He has met someone else; some other woman," she wept.

"But who?"

"A Miss Bates."

"Oh!" said Wilmet weakly, for the name was not unknown to her.

"Oh Wilmet, I cannot be alone this evening, please come." And she cried afresh.

"I'll need to wait until Rodney returns from work," she demurred. "Don't worry Rowena." And, rebuking herself thought that was that's a silly thing to have said.

"Of course I'll come," she said decisively, reflecting that perhaps after all she had become less selfish than she used to be. The Wilmet of a year ago would not have troubled herself about the trials of even close friend.

Wilmet, who normally took such care over her clothes, hastily and unthinkingly packed a bag, her thoughts in turmoil. Miss Prudence Bates. Why, her own husband Rodney had conducted a flirtation with that very woman only last year. But he had not taken the step of leaving their home. At

last she heard his key in the door and waited until he entered the drawing room. Rodney made to pour them both a gin as usual but Wilmet stopped him.

"Harry has left Rowena," she blurted out. "For Miss Prudence Bates," she said pointedly.

Rodney paled and said, feebly, "Oh dear, I didn't think it would come to this."

"You knew?" she asked aghast.

"No," he denied. And after a pause, said, "That is, I may have suspected."

"How? Why?"

Rodney, looking abashed, reached for a whisky before replying, "Once, when I had lunch with Prudence, Miss Bates," he amended seeing Wilmet's expression, "Harry came to the same restaurant. I introduced them and a few weeks later Harry rang and asked me for her phone number. I saw no reason not to give it to him." He paused, "Our... relationship, if that's the term for something which didn't really happen, was over by then," he added lamely.

Wilmet, who had been harbouring romantic thoughts about Rowena's brother Piers Longridge at around the same time as Rodney's flirtation, had little to say on that score. And she had lunched with Harry on one occasion she remembered. But for Rodney to have given Miss Bates' number to Harry! Surely he was aware of the danger?

After an uncomfortable silence she said that she had promised Rowena she would go to stay with her.

"But what about dinner?" said Rodney.

"Oh go out somewhere," she snapped, blaming him. "Go to your mother's, make a sandwich."

Resignedly he said, "I'll call a taxi," and went into the hallway.

"Have you checked the train times? What about dinner?" he asked awkwardly on his return.

"There's one at 8.05. And I am not hungry," she flung at him as she made her way to the door to wait for the taxi.

Wilmet arrived at Rowena's home to find her friend pale, but composed. Rowena poured her a glass of wine and pressed on her a light supper of smoked salmon and thin slices of brown bread. "You must be hungry," she said. And Wilmet spared a brief thought for Rodney, wondering whether or not he had some dinner.

"Now," said Wilmet, getting down to business, "where exactly is Harry tonight?"

"He's at his Club. He felt that it would be indelicate to move in immediately with ... Miss Bates," said Rowena despairingly, her voice breaking as she said her name.

Wilmet asked, anxiously, "How did he meet this.. woman?"

"He said that Rodney introduced them," replied Rowena, looking intently at her friend.

"At least you know that," she replied grimly.

"Did Rodney...?" Rowena broke off.

"Oh yes, but it amounted only to a few lunches and dinners," said Wilmet, adding, "I believe that, Rodney is very

transparent."

She knew that Rowena thought Rodney was little dull and unlikely to 'break out'. And Harry Grinners, as they'd called him, was rather dashing. For had he not suggested an affair with Wilmet herself? But perhaps now Rowena would have preferred Rodney's dullness?

"What will you do?" Wilmet asked Rowena.

"I don't know Wilmet," she wailed. "There's this house, the children, their school fees. Everything. And what can I do? Since leaving the Wrens and marriage and children I have never worked. I have nothing - no skills, nor profession."

"Much like me," responded Wilmet despondently, knowing she was quite unlike the formidable career women with whom Rodney worked at the Ministry. "Why even Miss Bates has a career." Rowena looked at her enquiringly. Wilmet elaborated, "She's an Oxford graduate, she works in some vague way for a famous economist."

"Why isn't her career enough for her?" said Rowena venomously. "Why need she break up a man's marriage?"

"I've heard that she had once been engaged to an MP, but broke it off," reported Wilmet.

"She cannot be a reliable person," judged Rowena resentfully.

"Let's try to get some sleep and see what the morning brings," Wilmet suggested, quietly hoping that Rodney would round up Harry and bring him home.

But the morning brought not Rodney and Harry, but Piers, Rowena's brother, and his companion Keith who arrived early, all concern.

"How did you hear?" demanded Rowena.

"I ran into Rodney last evening in a restaurant," replied Piers and he told me. "He's very upset," he added, glancing at Wilmet, whose expression told him nothing.

"We've come to see what we can do," put in Keith chirpily. "I'll look after the children and see to meals. And he bustled off to the kitchen where he could hear Sara, Patience and Bertram squabbling over cereal. In no time at all he had them seated, and he summoned the others to a carefully prepared breakfast of orange juice, a little scrambled egg, the remains of last night's smoked salmon, and toast.

The children having finished their breakfast were hustled off to the playroom where he organised puzzles and a seemingly complicated game.

"Right, he said, "that's got them settled, now I'll get us a pot of coffee and we can have a council of war."

Rowena squeezed his arm, "Keith, you are a tower of strength," she said. Piers looked at him affectionately and Wilmet was struck with admiration. She reflected that he had developed - there was little trace of the arch young man of last year. He's acquired authority and confidence, why, Piers and Keith are good for each other, thought Wilmet, relieved that she had recovered from her infatuation for Piers, recalling, with chagrin, how jealous she'd been on first meeting Keith. Piers too seemed changed, being less mercurial and restless, a calmer person altogether.

Pondering the present dilemma, they all agreed that there should be no confrontation with Harry for the moment, but that sooner or later, he would need to be asked what arrangements he would make for Rowena and the children.

“Miss Bates is quite capable of earning her own living,” put in Wilmet bluntly. Piers and Keith looked surprised. Glancing at Rowena, she avoided saying too much but merely explained that she was a close friend of one of Rodney’s colleagues. Piers, suspecting more, let it pass.

It was decided that the next morning - Sunday - Wilmet should return home and that Piers would return to London the same evening as he needed to be at work on Monday. Wilmet noticed that he no longer produced excuses to avoid work as he once had done. Keith, whose hours of attendance at the coffee bar where he worked were flexible, to fit in with his engagements for modelling knitting patterns, agreed to stay at Rowena’s to help with the house and the children.

The rest of Saturday passed quietly, if not cheerfully, with Keith doing everything he could to keep the children entertained while managing to prepare sustaining meals.

On Wilmet’s return home she interrogated Rodney and found that Harry had met Rodney for a drink on Saturday evening and that he intended meeting Prudence Bates today to “make plans”. Wilmet, with a grim smile, left it there, refraining from pointing out that Harry should be considering plans for his family.

The following morning Wilmet was shocked to receive a phone call from Harry himself.

“Wilmet, can we meet? Will you have lunch with me?” he ventured.

“Talk to Miss Bates,” she snapped.

There was a silence.

“Wilmet, everything has gone terribly wrong,” said Harry sounding beleaguered.

She unbent a little. After all, were they not old friends and perhaps Harry needed her support as much as Rowena did? “All right, I’ll meet you.” And he named a place and time.

“How does one dress to meet the man who has left one’s best friend for one’s husband’s former... But former what, exactly?” thought Wilmet. She was fleetingly amused to think that this was like a scene from a novel or a tortured new modern play. She settled on black, to show that this was serious matter, but so to avoid any suggestion of mourning, she added touches of cream and wore understated pearl earrings. The ensemble gave the air of a legal person which Wilmet found pleasing.

Harry was waiting for her at the restaurant which was not the one where she had lunched with him all that carefree time ago.

He looked sheepish. “As well he might,” thought Wilmet almost pityingly.

They began by ordering the food and drinks. This was not a celebratory meal, so Wilmet opted for no hors d’oeuvre and selected an omelette and an undressed green salad. She accepted a glass of sherry, but settled for water to drink with her meal. She did not wish to give Harry any ideas

Harry, who had ordered soup to begin, began to crumble his bread roll, hardly daring to look at Wilmet.

“Oh Wilmet, everything has gone wrong,” he despaired. “Prudence, Miss Bates, has called everything off.”

Wilmet was startled. “What do you mean, called everything off?” she asked with asperity. “Harry what was there to call off? Was she your ... ?” she broke off not quite knowing how to phrase the question.

“My mistress?” said Harry loudly, flushing, to the amusement of two young girls lunching at a nearby table. On hearing their sniggers he lowered his voice saying stiffly, “Nothing like that has happened. Nothing improper. That’s not to say that I...” he paused.

“That you hoped?” demanded Wilmet barely disguising her contempt. She began toying with her omelette and Harry made a poor attempt at eating his steak.

“But she has put an end to it,” he said miserably. “I saw her yesterday and told her that I had left Rowena. I thought we could make plans for the future.”

“And what of Rowena and your children in that... future?” snapped Wilmet, “Shouldn’t you have thought of their future?”

As if he hadn’t heard her Harry went on, “But she said that I had taken it all too seriously, that all she wanted was friendship and company and a few good lunches and dinners. ‘Romantic flirtation’ was how she expressed it” he said bleakly.

“And then I realised what a big mistake I had made. It was all an infatuation. Wilmet, you know how it is. Prudence and Rodney...”

“We have no need to speak of that,” she interrupted.

“And Piers?”

Wilmet flushed hotly. So Harry had guessed at her attempt to flirt and conduct ... what exactly with Piers last year. But that had come to nothing when Piers had introduced her to Keith.

She softened a little. “So you want to go home, is that what you are trying to say?”

“Yes.” And he looked at her with rounded pleading eyes. “Please Wilmet, will you get in touch with Rowena?”

He could not be denied and Wilmet took herself home, and made the phone call.

Rowena was incoherent with relief and delight. “Oh Wilmet, I knew you would do things,” she said.

So, Harry was to be forgiven and taken back into the marital home. A satisfactory end to his escapade surely? For had not she and Rodney been happier since their own unfruitful attempts to ‘break out’ last year. On hearing Rodney’s key in the lock, happily she ran to tell him the good news, throwing herself into his arms with an uncharacteristic display of emotion.