

Best of Bugged August 7th

Lurching

By Rebecca Audra Smith

Making our way home
We are train track riding, going
Further than our thoughts

The lady on the left says that:
'Where we live, we are
within lurching distance of the pub'

The cosiness of lurching
Her particular choice of word
Makes their conversation about
nothing, kind of special

you and I are smiling, riding
further than our thoughts
within lurching distance of
where we want to be;
where we are going.

It's me!

By Tim Woodhouse

Taking the short cut along the gravel path I often had to stop,
Avoiding dog dirt, syringes and discarded waste,
Before turning left towards the corner shop
For cigarettes, newspapers, bread and sandwich paste
And then back home to finish routine chores
As dull, oppressive backstreets blocked my pores.

A lady with a brightly coloured bag
Knocked upon a door and called "It's me!"
Before a gleeful child let out a laugh,
Welcoming her in so I could see
A sudden scene of warmth and real meaning

Which put things in a slightly clearer light,
Happy, glowing cheeks with cheerful greetings
Which made me just a little less uptight
And made me think that this is what life is:
Simple acts of love and faith and kindness,
Birthday parties, cakes and happy smiles
And presents for a small, excited child.

Vulnerable

By Angi Holden

‘The problem with Margaret is that she’s too open,’ says Janet, firing a St Luke’s Hospice price tag into the designer label of a neatly folded cotton blouse. £3.99. ‘It makes her vulnerable.’

Susan takes the blouse and slips it onto a hanger. It’s her size. She considers the colour, a pale shade of blue. She hasn’t worn blue since her ex told her it didn’t suit her. Maybe it’s time for a change.

‘I’m not sure...’ she says. ‘Really?’ Janet looks up from the next item, a pair of cream linen trousers. ‘I’m certain of it. Did you hear her talk about that man the other day? Whatever his name is.’

‘Robert,’ Susan supplies.

‘That’s the one. She doesn’t know him from Adam.’

Susan folds the trousers in half, and slips them onto a suit hanger. She is certain she saw a matching jacket in the same donation bag. She wonders absently who Adam is. She hasn’t heard Margaret talk about him, but she certainly seems to attract the gentlemen.

‘And she invited him home last week to help with some paperwork.’ Janet shakes her head in disbelief. ‘Financial stuff, she said it was. Well, I told her, you have to be careful these days. Not trust every Tom, Dick and Harry who turns up on your doorstep.’

Susan looks at the embroidered lace basque, which has come from the same bag of clothes. That would bring the Tom, Dick and Harrys to the doorstep, she thinks. It is midnight blue with pale pink top-stitching and it seems at odds with the floral blouses and linen suits. It's not the sort of thing she'd ever wear of course, and she dithers, uncertain whether to put it with the underwear or the evening clothes.

'She shouldn't be discussing financial matters with just anyone,' Janet continues. 'You hear such dreadful stories about people taking advantage of elderly widows. There was an article in the paper the other day....'

Susan's attention wanders. She is used to working with Janet and has heard her opinions on the subject before. Many times before. It's easy for Janet to say, of course. She has a husband in robust health, and a couple of married sons who both live locally. For widows like Margaret or divorcees like herself, both childless, both new to the area, life is different. A bill drops through the letterbox and you have to deal with it. And if you don't understand something, you look for someone who might be able to help. A friendly face, like Margaret's Robert.

'... And the police don't hold out much hope of catching the man, so he'll just go off and prey on some other poor, unsuspecting old lady.'

'I don't think Robert's like that,' says Susan, emerging from her reverie and suddenly aware that some response is required. 'He seems so nice.'

'Huh!' grunts Janet. 'I'm sure that's what they all say.' She passes across the soft pleated skirt she has just priced up - navy blue, Principles, a snip at £5.99 - and presses her hands into the small of her back. 'Time for a brew. Tea or coffee?'

'Coffee please,' replies Susan. She has worked alongside Janet every Friday for the last six months, and occasionally alongside Margaret over the past five weeks. Strange that Janet never remembers that she doesn't drink tea, whereas Margaret asked once and never forgets. 'White, no sugar,' she calls after the retreating back.

She looks at the clock. There is a light drizzle in the air, and there haven't been many customers today. It's not her usual day in the shop - she prefers the busier Friday duty - but she likes Margaret and is happy to fill in for her. A pity about the seafood

salad, she thinks, checking the time again on her watch. If she hurries after the shop closes, she'll be able to get some flowers from the Co-op on the corner and call in on her way home. See if Margaret needs anything.

'I expect Robert will be there,' she says, as Janet returns carrying a small tray.

'Be where?' asks Janet, putting a mug in front of Susan. 'You expect Robert will be where?'

'At Margaret's.' The steam spirals from the hot liquid. She can smell it is tea and she moves it carefully to one side, making room for the last few garments. She tips the bag onto the table, and passes a charcoal cardigan to Janet for pricing. The style is comfortable, familiar. There must be dozens of them about, she thinks.

'Probably,' says Janet. 'He's the type to take advantage when she's unwell.'

As they sort through the remaining clothes - nice things, barely worn - Susan thinks about her new friend. She wonders if she's as defenceless as Janet seems to think, wonders whether Robert could indeed pose a danger. He seems so polite and reassuring.

As if conjured by her thoughts, Robert pulls up opposite the small parade of shops and climbs out of his shiny blue Vectra. He looks weary as he walks across the carpark.

'Talk of the Devil,' Janet mutters under her breath.

The bell on the door chimes as Robert comes into the shop.

'Margaret's not in today,' says Janet, pre-empting the question. 'She rang in sick.'

Robert crumples into a chair by the bric-a-brac and books. He leans forward and rubs the heels of his hands against his eye sockets.

'She's gone,' he says.

Susan slides the cardigan onto a hanger, remembering Margaret wearing it the previous week.

'She's gone,' Robert repeats, his voice flat and matter of fact. 'And so has all my money.'

The thin spaces

By Philippa Barker

We always called them the thin spaces;
those places where you go
to sit in the stillness and listen,
to the twilight hum
of crickets in the long grass, and waves
as they brush the shore and whisper.
Those places where the sky is tracing paper thin,
fine like dragon fly wings, and you reckon
you could reach out and touch the heavens,
slip your fingers through the clouds
like soft folds of fabric, a veil
between this world and the next.