Meat

by

Kate Venables

She worked the latch quietly and looked over the chain and through the slit made by the part-open front door. Good. Nobody about. She closed the door and slid the heavy chain free, then left the house, locking the deadbolt behind her. She did her routine check of the wire mesh over the front windows and door. Good. No attempts for a month now. Maybe things really were getting back to normal. Normal, though. What's normal? She looked through the hedge into the street. The fuchsia had flowered abundantly this year and buds lay crushed on the path like drops of blood, sticky. They'd rot away. Or dry and peel like scabs. No point in brushing the paving.

She unlocked the padlock on the garden gate, then re-locked it and squared her shoulders for the walk to the shops: basket over her arm, hand in her coat pocket on the handle of her knife. That birch tree that had taken root in the pothole in the tarmac was doing well. Almost as tall as the houses. The fallen telephone lines had tangled in its crown. She'd been lucky – to have stayed in her house. Even those people who'd survived – a lot of them had moved, tried to find family or a clean zone. And some were killed in the insurrection. *Revolution*, she reminded herself. Revolution. Yes, she'd been lucky, she thought again, pushing through drifts of leaves, tearing at the Virginia creeper that billowed across the street from number seventeen. And it hadn't been easy. The things she'd had to do after she'd exhausted her money and most of the items in the house worth bartering. She pushed those thoughts away. Lots of women had to do those things. Good women. And say what you like about the new regime, at least they were clamping down on those gangs who lived wild on the Common and raided the surrounding streets.

It was so good that Singh's had re-opened. And there was electric power on now between three p.m. and five p.m., Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays. It made all the difference. And people had started to bring in food and other things to sell. It was amazing the range Singh's had managed to find: cotton reels, emery boards, turnips, pop-socks. Somebody's goat's cheese – though she couldn't afford the prices on that. Meat.

It was meat that mattered anyway. Right through The Episode, there'd been people selling meat – handwritten notes in pub windows, cardboard flyers tied to lamp-posts. You didn't ask the source, of course. But there was always meat. And nobody ever questioned her credentials – she was skinny enough, she supposed, looking at her wrist in the coat sleeve.

***

Ting – Singh's shop bell was comforting, so normal. She held out her bag of beads, chess-pieces, paper-clips, coins, buttons.

"I can take those, Mrs M, they're OK," said the oldest Singh boy. Though he wasn't a boy now. He'd grown up during The Episode, of course. Didn't know anything different, really. "But not those – hang on to them – they're bound to go up in value. So – what can I do you for today Mrs M? Meat, is it, again?"

She nodded and held out her basket.

"Some nice onions? A few carrots?"

She shook her head.

“Growing them at home, Mrs M? Wise woman, my dad says you are.”

She nodded at old Mr Singh, sitting on a stool in the shadows.

“Give her a bit extra, Sandeep,” said the old man. “She lost a great love.”

She shuffled. The old man always said that. It was embarrassing. She never knew where to look.

Her meat safe in her basket, she lingered and walked along the shelves, running her finger through the dust. They had some seed packets. She read the backs – expiry dates more than fifteen years ago. “Can I have these runner beans, please?”

Sandeep looked hurt. “Not without another swap, Mrs M. Too valuable. Tell you what though. I’ll throw in these nasturtiums for nothing because my dad likes you.”

She clutched the packet to her chest, smiling.

The bell went again and the two women from the flats came in. “Have you heard? We’re going to be a clean zone! They’re surveying on Sunday!”

Everyone turned. “That’s wonderful,” said old Mr Singh. “Street lights. Petrol. The hospital.”

One woman turned to him. “But the buggers’ll be all over our houses, won’t they? With their flame-throwers and their disinfectants. My gran said they set her curtains on fire and there was no compensation. And the dog had to be put down – he might have been eating – you know… And my gran said they were everywhere. She hadn’t… They were into the loft, the cellar, the kitchen cupboards, the shed, all over the garden.”

***

Her face was aching from smiling as she went back up the road and into the house. First, she went out to the back garden and sowed the nasturtium seeds at intervals at the base of the wall, rolling each mottled seed between her finger tips before placing it in the soil. Then, slowly, she walked into the kitchen and got down a bowl for the meat. Then she opened the door to the cellar stairs and sat down on the kitchen chair she left there. It had been so hard, keeping things going all this time. The barred door at the top of the cellar steps had helped. He’d put it in himself, in the old days. They’d found a small girl in the kitchen once – wriggled down the coal hole and up the cellar steps and into the house, the little tyke. No harm done. But it showed they were vulnerable, he’d said. He’d enjoyed the DIY project. Off to B&Q for a solid gate, sunk huge Rawlplugs into the brickwork for the metal frame. After it became clear that he’d… In The Episode… After that awful day… After… She’d managed to push him down the stairs and slam the gate closed. Then she’d run to the front of the house and dragged a paving slab over the manhole cover. He’d looked through the bars, eyes dull but with just a glimmer of memory. How else would he have known to go to the coal hole and rattle the iron cover? How else, in the state he was in?

He’d been very strong at first. Lively. He’d banged the gate, paced. More than once, he’d grasped her hand when she got too close and she’d had to use the knife. He had the marks. Three fingers gone from his right hand. A jagged wound in his chest. The edges of the wound hardly changed in all these years – blackened, retracted, that was all. White bone gleamed in the depths of the wound. That smell. That hadn’t changed. Maybe less sweet. Maybe mustier, more like mice, or rotting mushrooms. She couldn’t let anyone in the house. They’d smell it. They’d know.

She sat on the chair, out of reach, knife in hand. “What are we going to do then, love? We’re going to be a clean zone. They’ll find us. What’ll we do?”

He looked through the gate at her.

“You want some meat?” She picked up the barbecue tongs from their place by the door and selected a piece of meat to extend to him.

He grabbed it and ate.

Another.

He’d got thinner over the years. Stooped. Drier. Greyer. Slower. She hadn’t realised this would happen. She supposed she must be starving him, and tears came into her eyes. Not quite enough sustenance. “But I can’t give you more, sweetheart,” she said, passing another chunk of meat through the bars. She’d have been found out. It would have been obvious it wasn’t just her in the house. “What are we going to do?” A fourth chunk of meat.

He looked at her, blood oozing over his chin. In the half-light his profile was almost the same as when they’d first met at the Freshers’ Fair. Lean, prominent nose, jutting elbows, slight stoop, big hands. She put her face in her hands as he scuffed closer, reaching through the bars, nails yellow, thickened and curved in the twilight.

Reaching up to the back of the kitchen door, she retrieved the key, then fumbled through the cobwebs to find the lock. “I’m coming in, love,” she said. “I’m coming.”