

Coffee and Hyacinths

By Deborah Robinson

Join me later for smooth classics at seven, but now, *The Lark Ascending*. It was 8.56am and Jane Morgan was making breakfast for her family. She moved smoothly and efficiently around her kitchen, opening drawers and cupboards, feeling her way around without looking or thinking, so sure was she of her command of and comfort in the space. She made light work of preparing scrambled eggs, bacon, fresh croissants and mounds of buttered toast, set on the table to be spread with one of any number of variations on her own homemade jam and marmalade. She listened to the radio, whistling, and when she had finished her preparations, and the meal was set, she sat down. She took a short moment to rest, and to overhear the voices in the next room. There were hyacinths on the table. There should always be flowers, Jane thought, even in the winter, especially in the winter.

She had often thought that she would have been very happy running a little bed and breakfast; fresh flowers in the rooms, and a little chat with the guests as they came and went. She would advise them on all the best ways to spend their time. She was sure that she would have been ideally suited to it. Jane was usually far too busy to daydream, but now she was waiting for her husband. The scent of new coffee was in the air, and soon she would be busy again, restocking the cupboards after Christmas, and visiting those who looked forward to seeing her. She was glad to be able to brighten their days. She would take fruitcake, she decided, and she would tidy up for Jean; Jane always felt better when things were in order. Satisfied with her plans, she called out to her husband.

The minutes ticked by on the antique clock. *The Lark Ascended*. Outside the sky was dark, the clouds heavy, and though she had not yet left the house that morning, she knew that a chill would greet her when she did. She could hear Tom, talking. He couldn't have heard her, she thought, because of the radio.

Jane stood up and began to scrub the pans. Then laughter, her husband's laughter, and Eleanor's. She flicked the taps and the water rushed and hissed. Now the pans and tools were cleaned and dried, and put away in their places. She stopped briefly, looking out into the garden, lifeless and waiting for spring to warm it, and make it grow. Should she call again? She wouldn't. She had spring-cleaned the house after Boxing Day, and the gardener was due this morning. She sat down, slightly put out by the unfamiliar and unwelcome sensation of having nothing concrete with which to occupy herself. The smell of the coffee was growing heavy; it would be stewed and bitter, and was drowning the sweet freshness of the hyacinths.

More minutes passed; wasted. She began to pour the coffee down the sink, wasted. A roar of laughter came from the closed door of the study and she turned. The black liquid burnt

her fingers and she cursed, using a word that she had heard on television, shortly before she would deftly switch the channel, and that she had overheard in town, employed by bickering couples in jeans and tracksuits, and by mothers at bus stops vainly trying to shepherd unruly children. The word echoed in her mind after it had gone, like the putrid stench of water left to stand too long in a vase of flowers, catching in the throat and lingering a while to remind her that it ought not to have been allowed to stand.

Jane made fresh coffee, and sat down. But she wouldn't call out, she would wait. With no other recourse left to her, she began to think about Eleanor. The girl who couldn't be a waitress, who wouldn't serve and smile, and was no more capable of running a bed and breakfast than becoming the next Archbishop of Canterbury, in fact she thought the latter probably more likely. Who had to be told when a surface needed wiping, or water freshening, because she wouldn't see it. Like a man, Jane thought, men didn't see things, but then she didn't expect them to. Eleanor didn't seem to know who she was- a young woman wearing men's pullovers and drinking pints of beer, reading *The Times* and criticising politicians, laughing helplessly at the crudest jokes imaginable, yet as brimming with starry-eyed nonsense as any old lady lost in a paperback romance.

Jane wondered what it meant, when a girl could captivate a dinner party with her own hypnotic cocktail of earnest glances and self-depreciating wit, with her brown eyes, open smiles and modest insights that made men and women stop and think and mentally raise her a notch in their estimation; and yet couldn't work the dishwasher. She could mix paint to the edge of perfection on the tip of a sable brush, but she couldn't keep it off her clothes. She might recite any number of poems at will, or instantly answer questions on television shows, the words tripping from her tongue like flicking away an irritating insect, effortless and final, but send her to the shops with a list and she would undoubtedly return shorthanded, and apologetic, as if saying sorry and meaning it would in some way compensate for an abundance of fresh parsley but a palpable lack of fish.

She was so much like Tom, Jane thought, and perhaps because of the inevitable regard that must arise from this fact of the girl's nature, if for nothing else, Jane was surprised to realise that in fact she feared for her. It was one thing for a safely married man to behave in such an erratic but charming manner, but for a woman it was another matter altogether, a more serious one; and though she knew her niece would never listen if she spoke of it, Jane had lived and seen a lot of young men and their peculiarities, and she could see that the course of her nieces dealings with them was unlikely to be as simple as Eleanor expected.

Jane felt infuriated by the girl; a frustration which was compounded by the fact that there was no one with whom she would unload and share it, and which troubled her because though it pained her to admit it to herself, she knew that it was based on jealousy. Eleanor had always been sweet to her, and polite, and grateful. That made it worse, made her feel all the more unreasonable. How could a rational person have felt anything but understanding for a girl who had come into their home a virtual stranger, only eleven years old, lost and silent in grief for her mother, with no other place to be?

She had watched her husband watching the girl. He had sat with her, scrutinising her homework and teaching her with finer skill and patience than she would ever experience in a classroom; reading comical stories to make her laugh, or sad tales to let her cry. He would talk to her for hours about history, events in the world, or novels, or any ideas that occurred to him, awakening her interest and confirming her thoughts, and she would listen, curled up in the old armchair, cradling a mug of tea and gradually learning to think beyond her grief, and to smile. When he saw the corners of her mouth turn he would pounce. Start to sing or do something foolish. She would be lost then, and would laugh until her chest ached and her cheeks were wet with tears, and he would sit back, knowing that another little piece of her was healed.

Jane would bring in tea and biscuits, and Eleanor would thank her automatically, like a child leaving a birthday party, knowing what must be said. Then she would turn back to Tom, and say whatever she happened to be thinking, and he would wink. Jane had never been a mother; and the role was not hers. That sweet girl had an edge now, she knew her own mind and wasn't afraid to use it. In this one attribute the two women were alike, but they were different animals; regarding each other with detachment, almost indifference. They wouldn't fight each other, but neither would they fight for each other. But then all animals will fight, if they must. And they both knew this, as they played their parts graciously. It was just a matter of timing.

Jane held her hand under the cold tap, and felt the rush of water soothe her hot, stinging skin. It was all about Tom. Everything seemed to centre on men, in the end.

He had been able to find a release for his long hidden paternal nature in his sister's child, but Jane would not bring herself to adopt in her heart the girl whose quick mind and soulful brown eyes she had seen before, and been equally confounded by. The memories were still vivid- how Tom had doted on his little sister, how he had sat with her, in that same chair- comforting her through all the ordinarily thorny problems of living which her susceptible intelligence would inevitably twist into catastrophes; while Jane faced the same problems, employing the philosophy of sound minded women up and down the land- that of just damn well getting on with it. And she had done- whilst her husband talked to his sister.

Frances had no decorum. She would start talking before she had decided what it was that she wanted to say, flitting back and forth from recent amusing domestic accidents to stroking the dog's ears and wondering out loud why it is that people say animals cannot see colours, why they think that beauty is only for humans to see, flicking her eyes at the distasteful arrogance inherent in the assumption. Then she would tell Tom about how she had met a man who could write poetry in Italian, and who was composing her a song. She would blush and Tom would throw something at her, crying 'What the hell kind of celibacy is this anyway?' before a rueful smile from Frances, and another change of subject.

Competing for attention from such a character was not something that Jane would consider; she was by no means naïve. She had known from the beginning that she had

taken a risk in marrying a man whose mind ranged so much further and wider than her own, and though she had known that she would perhaps never fully understand him, she knew that she loved him and that she could be of use to him- to look after him and be a good wife. And she had been, she knew that she had been.

For forty years she had made him go to the dentist when he had toothache, because he would never go without her insistence. She had pestered him into telephoning his mother, because he would forget, and she had received little thanks for it. She had put her confidence in his work, chatting with wives at endless conferences; he had been Thomas Morgan, as he would always have been. But she had smoothed his path, pressed his shirts, and given him a clean and comfortable home. For the most part she had enjoyed it, and had appreciated his appreciation of her, when it came, and it often did. Not always, but often.

But then there was that look of his; that particular, concentrated smile of appraisal, which could make old ladies giggle, young women blush and his students feel an unfamiliar glow of pride adding a few inches to their height; and which she could not get out of her mind however she distracted herself with cooking or gardening, or shopping for bright things.

She had first seen it when they met, when he had been charmed by her, a light hearted young nurse who sat with her friends at the next table while he worked alone, always writing, occasionally staring out of the window and drinking too much coffee. He was lean then, and tall, and he drummed the fingers of his left hand on the table, when they weren't holding a cigarette. His shirt hadn't been ironed and there was a hole in the right knee of his trousers. He was scruffier than most students are now, Jane often reminded him, and in that was in the days when students weren't scruffy. She remembered it clearly, the way he had looked at her.

They went to dances. She made him laugh, often unintentionally, though she never knew it. He wrote her a poem. She was touched. She mended the hole in his trousers and brought dishes of hot food to his cold little flat while he worked into the early hours, plotting and deciphering amid an ungovernable sea of paper. She had dictated passages for him with all the confident clarity of someone who knew their meaning without question, and he had looked at her, filled with admiration and humility before a woman of such abilities and benevolence. She had caught his eye and felt confirmed and proud. She hadn't understood, that she hadn't understood; though he soon did. But the contract had been made, with a look and a signature, and he would honour it, as would she. But while their lives grew in the same physical space, their minds skirted around each other, and Jane never saw that same look again.

One evening she had come home, laden with shining green Marks and Spencer's bags, gold inscripted and filled with quality and consolation. She had found them, Tom and Fran, eating burnt toast together, sitting on the kitchen draining board. They had been laughing, and as he turned from his beautiful little sister to his new wife she had seen the traces of that same look, that smile, disappear before her eyes. It hadn't returned for a

long time; until she had seen him look at Eleanor, and she had cleaned the oven, and the refrigerator, and the tiles, and the draining board.

But if Jane could not, or had no inclination to understand poetry or politics, she had one skill which outmatched and confounded even Tom's sharp eyed perception. Jane knew herself to be a fine actress. Her innate practical wisdom knew the futility of venting hurt pride in sulking or in anger, and in any case it was inconceivable to allow such weakness, such vulgarity. She wasn't a harassed mother at a bus stop. She didn't use those words, and she would stamp out the base sparks that kindled them. Her sense of fairness told her that her husband was a good man. He needed her, and she would take care of him.

She had done, even when his niece unwittingly threatened to purloin his attention and love, she hadn't once complained. She had taken care of them both, and they had been happy. If her husband could see into her thoughts he never showed it. In fact she hadn't thought about it much in recent times. Their lives, and Eleanor's had fallen into their own rhythms, separate and together.

As Eleanor had grown into her new home they had taken her out for long walks; along the bridle baths, over the heath and through the woods, and Jane had seen something in seeing the young girl's joy in the open fields and sky, which she had also loved ever since she could remember. What struck her most was how Eleanor seemed constantly thankful to live in such a beautiful place after her earlier life in the city... Jane had always loved her home but she accepted it without thinking, whereas to Eleanor it was like an unexpected gift that she marvelled at, and never took for granted that she deserved.

Jane fancied that the girl, with the sensitivity of her mother and the insight that most females have in these matters, caught glimpses of the antipathy that refused to disappear completely, but that she would never bring out in to the open, to be seen and felt and remarked upon. Tom rambled on as they walked; tales of the past and of Frances, of train rides to the coast, camping and riding and the flowers that Fran had pressed into a book, Bluebell. Foxglove, Cat's Eye under The Bed, Forget me Not. The knight on the riverbank, swept away but calling to his love, and leaving his gift of tiny light blue flowers, his own little piece of immortality. Tom gave her somewhere to live, and told her its stories, and Eleanor, in return, had accepted and trusted, but never taken her right to her uncle's love for granted anymore than his home.

Of course if she had, Jane might have found a target, a weak spot in the girl's invisible armour of honesty, a vice to greet her own and wrestle with it, until the older woman would force her down with no stab of guilt or shame. But Eleanor was quick too, and knew this as well as Jane did. She knew to remember that what was given to her was grace, and that she would return it.

When the time had come for Eleanor to leave, Jane knew that she would miss her. Not as a mother would, but in the same way that she missed sunshine in the winter. A bright, diverting presence in their lives would be gone, but her husband would be her own again, and that would be more than enough compensation. Until a few days ago, when she had

heard Tom swearing and stamping around in the loft, and had come upstairs to find him dressed in some old tweeds and riding boots and she had known he was up to something. So she let him get on with it, and went out to take some Christmas cake to one of her old ladies, who were spending the holiday alone. She had arrived home that night to start the supper and found Eleanor sitting on the kitchen worktop eating a raw carrot, Tom standing beside her; evidently now too old to hoist himself up, and he was smiling at her, that smile.

She had cooked the dinner, steak and kidney pie and carrots with honey and rosemary, and heard all about Eleanor's new future, the future that Tom had made a reality; a reality that meant that the girl would be back in their home, because though she could sing, she couldn't serve.

She remembered what she had told herself the last time she had found her husband with a pretty girl in a kitchen, that he was a good man. She was lucky to have him, privileged to care for him. He cared for the girl, so she would too. It was all about Tom, this feminine play acting; this silent stalking around each other like cats. While Tom watched them, neither would give vent to those sparks in the chest, neither would be the first to risk compromising his regard.

That was *The Lark Ascending*, by Ralph Vaughn Williams, now I hope that has put you in the right mood to face the day.

The fresh pot of coffee was ready, and she put the finishing touches to the breakfast table- freshly laundered cloth napkins, and warmed-up milk in a little ceramic jug. As her family at last joined her for breakfast, she began to wonder why the colour of envy was green. She thought that must be wrong- hers didn't feel green at all, it was grey- a dull mass of cloud blemishing the sky- and she wondered how long it would take to clear. If it didn't, there would be a storm.