

# THE CHERRY TREE

Jenny Kingsley

When I woke he was lying on his back, on top of the sheets but below the silky eiderdown. I raised the bedding as delicately as I could, so there'd be little chance that he would wake. I showered, dressed, applied a hint of make-up, patting and rubbing in rushed motions.

The bakery was two streets away from our house. I could forsake my coat and just take keys and purse, stuffed with coins, in hand. I reckoned I had just enough money, and time.

Mathilde was handling the takeaways. She moved swiftly, fluttering like a tiny caged bird; maybe because she was svelte and under five feet tall, so she didn't suffer the nuisance of bulk.

'Bonjour, Mathilde. Happy Valentine's Day.'

'Hello, hello. All well?'

'Mais, oui. Et...?'

'Oui.'

'Bon. Please, deux jus d'orange et quatre croissants, and a pot of raspberry jam.'

In the time it takes to quote Charlie Brown: 'nothing takes the taste out of peanut butter quite like unrequited love' the juice was squeezed. Mathilde was generous – she filled the cups right to the very top, so sometimes the liquid spurted out of the straw holes.

'Nine pounds eighty 'p', she pronounced staccato style as she typed the amount due on the till just after she'd finished preparing my order. I opened my purse. Alas, I wasn't sure I had enough.

'I must count; I'm sorry.'

To save fidgeting, I emptied the contents of the purse on to the wooden counter, by the sugar bowl for tips. This would be a better use of time than shovelling coins from one side to the other while I dug for the profitable. Tweezers would have helped; the five pence

pieces kept slipping from my fingers. I flashed back to when we used to make the Christmas cake. I'd try to pick and gobble up the glacé cherries quickly from the mixed dried fruit when my mother wasn't looking.

If I had to go home for more money, I could lose those moments stroking Andrew's cheeks and hairy chest to arouse him, surprise him with the breakfast tray of croissants, jam, the cafetière standing on the tile with the Edward Lear limerick, when he would smile at Granny's faded floral china and her frayed, slightly stained linen.

A middle-aged woman wearing a mink jacket slumped beside me. Her grey and blonde hair was greasy. She began tapping her keys and 'fang' nails on the counter.

'Madame, may I help you?'

'Ten pains au chocolat. I'm dreadfully pressed for time.' She sighed as if she needed all the air in the café to clear her lungs.

Just then I called 'nine pounds seventy one'. Mathilde heard me, and instantly took a ten pence piece out of the tipping bowl and added it to my pile. In exchange she plopped one of my one pence in the pot. The fur lady stretched her nostrils so she needn't waste her voice spluttering, 'so corrupt these foreigners'.

'On the house. Bonne la Saint-Valentin.'

I reached out to touch Mathilde's arm to signal thanks, then I scooped up the coins and stretched over the counter to place them in her hands. My parents believed it was rude not to literally hand people the money.

As I approached our gate, a stooping, elderly man, walking hesitantly with a wooden cane, stopped. He was wearing a shabby, navy blue fedora, like the one that Andrew's father used to wear. I spotted a paisley bowtie beneath his overcoat.

'Is that your cherry tree? Please excuse me,' he coughed.

'Yes, yes, it is.' I was struggling to hold my bundle.

'Every year I pass by your tree and I thank God for its glory. The blossom is so pretty. To me, a sign that winter is soon to pass and the birth of spring is imminent.'

‘What a lovely thing to say. Poetry, perhaps. I’m glad our tree gives you so much pleasure.’ If I didn’t face him, he would be less likely to continue talking. I’d be spared finding a tactful line or two to avoid conversation, losing time for preparing the tray and the gentle wakening.

‘The cherry blossom reminds me of when I lived in Washington. I was with the embassy. The city is famed for its cherry blossom. Did you know the trees were a gift from Japan? The Mayor of Tokyo gave them in 1912.’

‘Yes, yes, I did. I’ve been to Washington, several times.’

‘Ah, so you have experienced the joy of the city’s blossom.’

‘Washington is a wonderful city. One of my favourite spots is Dumbarton Oaks. The gardens are splendid – windy paths and Lovers’ Lane pool and...’

‘The forsythia, and the rose garden. It’s quite hilly. An historic site. It is where the seeds of the United Nations were sown, one could say.’

‘Yes, in 1944, Roosevelt and leaders from China, the then Soviet Union and Britain met to consider proposals for its establishment.’

‘You are a well informed young lady!’

I blushed. ‘Thank you.’

‘My wife, she liked the blossom.’ His eyes were weeping but there were no tears. ‘She liked Chopin, too.’

I was facing the lonely old man, although Andrew might be waking now, never to know that instant of surprise. But I couldn’t allow myself to bruise the gentleman’s tender sense of dignity, and mine. I felt so sorry for he who loved the blossom. No longer was there someone in the diplomat’s life with whom he could share fresh coffee and pastries, cherish the pink tree and the past, someone who had once caressed his cheek.

In several decades to come, Andrew might be wearing a fedora, walking with an uncertain step, with a stick for a companion. He might eye a young woman approaching her front garden in early

spring, a garden with pots of spindly geraniums and red cyclamen and bay trees and beds with lavender waiting their turn to bloom, and, resisting the nurtured instinct to remain reserved, proffer a line or two. Would I want Andrew to feel spurned by indifference?

My caring would touch Andrew. Decent, dependable but not dogged Andrew, handsome, but not too handsome Andrew (ah, the Mickey Mouse ears), funny, but slightly juvenile Andrew, sharp, but sometimes nakedly naïve Andrew. He too loved the sight of the blossom and the pavement speckled with pink petals. My words with the man were a present for Andrew.

‘I was especially taken by the cobbled streets of Georgetown and the Federalist houses,’ I added.

‘A village just near the centre of the city. Such a fine university, too, Georgetown. It was my most enjoyable post. After Washington, we went to Poland. And, well, I was the Polish Ambassador. But the post didn’t invite a knighthood. It doesn’t matter, now.’

‘Of course not. It must be very cold in Poland in February, though I think they have some cherry blossom, perhaps later in the year.’

‘Yes, yes, they do. Yours really is splendid. Thank you. I shall press on. Good day.’

‘Thank you.’ I smiled.

And with his left hand, the gentleman doffed his hat, and, gripping his stick, continued slowly but contentedly on his walk.