

The End

Doris has found herself living yet another winter. Outside, the world is cleansed by the soft tread of snow which staggers and falls. Naked virgin feet, yet. She pulls on her boots, climbs inside her cuddly coat, and tumbles down the stairs towards a fairy tale world.

Ice crystal has transformed the squalid street and its deformed buildings into a Christmas card avenue, a facsimile of childhood memories. Doris, repulsed from the house, pauses to watch the flakes fall from the sky like silver coin and silver coin, wishing she could spend even a few of them, and buy a modicum of happiness. Doris, it seems, is finally doomed. She received a letter marked occupant, telling her so.

Up the street she falters, a thin line of grey on a sheet of fresh white paper. People lacking identity queue politely, awaiting the bus with its polite conductor, who will issue tickets with a polite smile. She joins the queue, merging with it, fixing to it. The bus arrives, sneakily, hushed by the snow. Like some strange unmythical beast, the line of people move as one, are eaten by the larger beast, disappear into its sideways mouth. Onward it goes, on well-worn tracks, stopping to vomit now and then, now and then.

Doris pays no attention to her fellow passengers. Once, not too long ago, she would survey the bus with hungry eyes, resting on just the right man to devour, to gorge. Her appetite now lost, she stares vacantly out the window,

watching children and old people. She is content. She is alone. Content and alone. Sadness has become a consummate controller whom she welcomes with arms agape, who shares her bed and offers her a certain life. Who cracks the whip—yet with a smile. The others pay no heed of Doris either, avoiding her with concentrated effort: She is the lady we have seen through a restaurant window, as we saunter on by. The lady reflected into herself. Sitting alone. Eating alone. The lady who stays with us, refuses to leave, holds on and will not let go, to haunt our happy moments.

The bus comes to a halt and Doris alights. Clapham has become Wimbledon, with its winter Common stretching out beside her, away from her, like a toy wilderness in a toy town. Somewhere out there, imaginary Wombles sleep in their imaginary warren, snug, hiding from the winter. Doris herself has retired to the black of eternal solitude where she too feels at home, warmed by its familiarity, comforted by acceptance, that this is all there can ever be, that there is no more need to venture forth into that outside snow-bound world of fleeting image and confrontation. With the dirt of Clapham still running through her veins, Wimbledon begins to transfuse a certain feeling of calmness. She feels the needle prick of a place where being alone evokes no introspective visions of great embarrassment, where solitude is in its element. She walks beside the Common, for once feeling a great comfort in her own company. The doomed lady begins to whistle a happy song.

The walk is long and soon the cold is seeping in, urging her to make haste, though Doris is of no mind to hurry; is

impelled to dilly-dally, and wanders about in that chasm of bleak thought, loving every minute of it. Despite all her efforts, the moment does arrive. She finally enters enemy territory. Swinging the gate open with care, Doris avoids unnecessary noise, knowing that just ahead the foe may lay in ambush. As doorbell is pushed, all vestige of happiness is reduced to a slimy sediment, pushed down to the depths of her soul. Inside she hears a shrill ring, and footsteps bubble and boil. The door swings open.

"Hello mother," she says.

"Doris, come on in. You look freezing."

"I am." Her parents were divorced when Doris was eight, were divorced to the sound of a solitary bell ringing in her young mind, offering the first hint of the gothic misery that lie ahead. She has not seen her father since then, though she still hears the bell from time to time to time, as it swings in the icy breeze of things passed. What a strange one he must be, though she remembers him as being quite nice, really.

"Come into the kitchen, I'm just making tea."

"I'd rather have coffee, if you have it."

"Oh, yes; I forgot." Doris removes her coat and hangs it by the neck on the stand in the hall.

"Now then, sit yourself down and get warmed up. It really is shocking, the weather out there." She now goes on to explain precisely how shocking it is.

"Yes," Doris agrees.

"I don't see you much these days. Are you still working in that horrid Fish 'n' Chip shop?"

"Yes, but....."

"I don't know, I really don't. Why. Why do you put yourself through such stuff 'n' nonsense." She was talking

to herself, her remarks rhetorical. "You know you don't need to."

"I like it. The people are nice," she said quietly, looking away.

"People," she scorned. "What do you know about people? Why don't you let me have Roger find you a nice job in one of his shops? You'd get much more money too. I keep telling you but you never listen."

"I..."

"I'm only thinking of you, Doris."

"I'm fine."

"I'd hardly call working in a Chip shop 'fine'."

The kettle calls out the end of round one. Mother busies herself pouring and stirring.

"You like it strong, don't you?"

"Yes please."

"And black?"

Silence says, and with great sarcasm, "Yes mother, I like it strong and black." Doris herself though merely offers a weak "Yes," and leaves it at that.

"There we are." Doris, doomed and distant, takes the cup, stares into the pool of despondency, and swallow its essence. In its darkness she sees her future, painted in water colours of contrasting shades of black.

"Tell me, are you still seeing, er, what's his name? Everard is it?"

"Yes, I am. We're just friends though, mother. Don't jump to the wrong conclusions."

And then the silence said, "Like you do Doris," but no one answered.

"Oh." Everard is a nice man she met in a bed of autumn leaves. He is shy, but not the way Doris is, outside, with

words, with people, but inside. At first glance, he seems extrovert, chatting easily with people, though there are certain traces, mannerisms, which give hint of his deeper nature. Perhaps he has something to be shy about. In his head there is a great timidity. He looks nice, he looks wantable, but fate, with four aces and two up his sleeve, will not play fair. Their relationship is platonic, without hint of desire on his part. He is another name in a short list of distant friends, who live too far to be ever close. Forlorn, Doris is at last finding rescue in a lifeboat of acceptance. In the last few weeks this feeling has become deep rooted, has changed the way she signs her name.

"It's a funny sort of name." But Doris continues to look into her cup. "What does he do, this Everard of yours?"

"He's not mine, mother, and he's a teacher. He teaches English."

"A teacher? What ever can he see in you? Working in a Fish 'n' Chip shop and all." For once, Doris agrees with her mother. It is another nail in her coffin. He is educated. He can see her for the fool she thinks she is. Doris stands, floats over to the counter for more sugar, and sees her reflection in a mirror. A death mask looks back. Doris is dying, and the strange thing is, it feels nice, all warm and cosy.

The snow is dirty now, slush returning Clapham to its normal state of bleak submission. The sun is slipping into its midwinter bed, and blankets of thick cloud hang over the city landscape of working class squalor. A world of forgotten desires, streets piled high with the corpses of dead ambition.

Doris arrives home. It is cold, drab. Cold and drab. The gas is turned on, and she huddles forever to its pitiful heat. The door comes to life. There is a knock knock knocking.

"Who can it be?" the silence mocks her.

"Who can it be?" Doris wonders. Doris glances quickly about, making sure the dust is all in place, and the damp patch on the wall is in order. Sometimes it moves, during the night, comes and cries its damp tears on her body; but always, by morning, it is back. Doris does not like this knock knock knocking on her door. It is her night off from work, and the world should not intrude without several years advance notice. The doomed lady, the lady without future, makes to the door. She will open it. Maybe it will be the Devil himself, come a calling, with an offer she cannot refuse. She will open it, and ask him in.

Doris opens the door.

"Hello, Everard." Doris is unsure whether to feel happy or sad. She looks to his hands, looking to see if he brings a hammer on this dark night visit, wondering if he comes to bang the final nail in her coffin.

"He is empty handed," the silence says. "You must bide your time. Death comes slowly to those who wait."

"Hello, Doris. Can I come in?" and he offers a deceptive smile.

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry, I was miles away."

"Where?" he enters, removes his coat.

"Miles away. I've been to my mother's."

"Oh."

"I was just about to make coffee. Would you like some?" He is the hang man, she knows it now, the executioner, and she will give him refreshment. It must be thirsty work, all that killing. Ah well, she is all but dead anyway. She will, probably, barely even notice the noose around her neck; and when it pulls tight, she will smile, for there will be no more pain.

"Yes, I'd love some." Everard is two years her senior. A man of words who rarely speaks. He's so nice too, she decides, but then that just makes the big fat joke that much bigger and that much fatter. They retire to the kitchen. Doris lights the oven and leaves the door open to warm the room. Soon, too soon, it becomes hot.

"Coffee is served," Doris says, feigning waitress.

"Thank you."

"I wasn't expecting you tonight. There's nothing wrong I hope."

"No, no. Actually I wanted to have a word with you."

"Only one?" Doris finds humour someplace she never knew existed.

"More than one," and he gives that deceptive half-hearted smile again. Doris knows what they will be. She has heard those words before. Knows them by heart. The executor will execute all chance of love, and only the lie of friendship will remain, rotting like a putrid carcass. There is silence.

"Well, it's rather delicate. I hardly know where to start."

"You'll manage." Doris feels the cold wind of endless winter blow in through her mouth. Everard fidgets. He has ten fingers too many, and hardly knows what to do with

them. She watches him stand, preparing to make the final move.

"Actually, I wanted to ask you to marry me. I love you. Will you marry me?" And he looks into her lovely blue eyes.

"Yes, yes, yes," she thinks, her heart beating a primeval beat. But what will she say? "Yes, yes, yes," she thinks. But what will she do? Can she now free herself from Sorrow, who has commanded her every move of her every day since since. Can she leave him and the home they have made, together, together, always together. "Yes, yes, yes," she thinks. But will she, can she, will she, can she, will she, will she, will she?

"Yes, I will," she says, and breathes life.

In Conclusion

And so Doris is with husband, happy at last, knowing all the years of loneliness have finally amounted to something tangible, something she can take home and keep for her own. Something she can sleep with. He is not perfect, but she will forgive him his weaknesses as he will forgive hers. She will search in her heart and find him there, forever, such is the essence of her love, whose meaning she can now understand as an assurance never more to be alone. No matter what.