

A winter landscape photograph showing a snow-covered hillside in the foreground. Several bare trees with snow on their branches are scattered across the scene. In the background, a valley is visible, partially obscured by a light mist or haze. The sky is a pale, overcast blue with soft, wispy clouds. The overall mood is serene and quiet.

SNOW PICNIC

a short story

Susan Leona Fisher

Snow Picnic

Aunt Bea was the original agony aunt, always coming up with solutions to everyone else's problems. Thus it was no surprise to Emma to find herself on the receiving end of the same, when she made her regular weekly call to Aunt Bea.

"Any luck with all those job applications?" Aunt Bea had asked, after the usual pleasantries.

"Well...er...not so far, Aunt Bea, but I live in hope that something will turn up," Emma could hear the hesitancy in her own voice. I can't lie, she thought, except "hoping something will turn up" is something of a fib, given that I've not even got as far as an interview for the simplest roles I could perform standing on my head.

"Oh dear...and you've been trying so hard."

Aunt Bea sounded concerned. Sympathy was not helpful, for it brought on the vulnerable feelings Emma was trying to suppress. When she didn't respond at once, Aunt Bea continued, sounding very bright and practical as she came up with her solution.

"Tell you what, why not come here? It would give you time to take stock, and I'm sure you could find some work locally to tide you over."

"That's so kind, Aunt Bea, but I've still got one or two applications in the pipeline this end," even though they are highly unlikely to come to anything, she added in her head. And if I can't get work in London, she considered, what chance is there I'll do better in a small country town? There's no way I'm going to sponge off Aunt Bea. I do have my pride.

"It's not an easy time," Aunt Bea concluded ... too right, Emma agreed, without voicing it. "Good luck and let me know how you get on. At least come for Christmas."

"Thanks Aunt Bea. I will. Something to look forward to." That was three months away. Surely I'll be sorted by then, she thought.

Emma clicked off her Blackberry, something else that would soon require action. No way can I afford the contract now. She put down the phone and went over to the fridge to think of preparing something for tea, not that she felt like it. Aunt Bea spoke of taking stock. Well, thought Emma, I've done quite a lot of that already and the reality is I'm stuck in a hole and sinking fast. Her employer, a local authority, had "let her go" from her clerical post in the last round of cuts. Honestly, that expression was so silly. It implied she'd asked permission to quit

and they'd said okay. The redundancy settlement had been useful as far as it went, but was now dwindling fast.

Ten job applications had yielded just one interview. I know I'm well capable of the roles I'm applying for, she thought, as she tried to decide whether she could face a cheese omelette for the second day running. There wasn't much else. She sighed. Not being a graduate and competing with applicants who were, she was beginning to realise, meant she didn't stand a chance.

To cap it all she was so alone, except for Aunt Bea. Two months ago, her parents had done something they'd talked of for years—sold up and emigrated to Australia—and her brother and his family had gone too. Shortly after that, her boyfriend of two years had ended their relationship. Emma had not seen it coming, but she *had* spotted the engagement announcement in the paper last week. How long had that been going on?

The week after that conversation with Aunt Bea, things came to a head. Her flat-mate announced she wanted to leave in order to move in with her boyfriend, but she would pay her share of next month's rent to help out. Emma wouldn't be able to keep it on by herself and soon she'd not even be able to afford her own half. Try as she would, there didn't seem to be another female friend she could get to take it on. They were all pairing off.

Within a matter of weeks the flatmate departed, taking with her Emma's internet capability, as Emma's own lap-top had packed up some months ago and she'd relied on her friend's. "You could use the public computers at the library," her friend suggested. "I think it's free if you're a member. So Emma took to spending considerable hours there, a good way to avoid heating the flat in the day. One day, on impulse, she clicked onto a North Yorkshire job site just to see what might be available.

Emma moved to Aunt Bea's in November, driving her brother's old diesel car. It had over one hundred and fifty thousand on the clock, but he'd given it a good service, paid the road tax and insured it for a year, so all she had to find was the cost of the fuel. She hardly needed it in London, but it would be essential in the Yorkshire Dales.

Beatrice was really her Dad's aunt and was in her seventies. Twenty years ago she'd used her teacher's voluntary redundancy to buy a tiny terraced two-up/two-down place in a pretty village of limestone cottages and cobbled pavements. Emma had been at primary school then and she and her brother visited every summer and for the occasional family Christmas.

Aunt Bea was looking out for her. "Lovely to see you, darling girl. Good journey?"

Emma gave her a hug. “Not bad.” She didn’t mention getting lost round Bradford and again at Skipton. “It’s good to be here.”

“Let’s have some tea, then I’ll help you unpack. And you’ve a couple of messages ... I think you might have an interview or two.”

Within days Emma had not only been interviewed but to her amazement was offered both the positions she’d applied for. So little confidence did she have in herself by now that she decided it must be due to her connection with Aunt Bea, who seemed to know nearly everyone. Both roles were part-time and incredibly low paid, but beggars couldn’t be choosers and Emma accepted both jobs. So, starting in the New Year she’d be doing clerical work for two and a half days a week at a local estate agency. The other post was cleaning one day a week for a cottage letting agency and this had to start immediately, as they had bookings all over Christmas at the two places for which she’d be responsible. “Isolated rural retreats” was an apt description, as she soon found out.

Just getting there was a challenge. The seven mile route, to the “tops” above Aunt Bea’s village, took her up narrow, bumpy country lanes, through numerous puddles of uncertain depth, over wonky cattle grids, past three farms and finally, for the last two hundred metres, up a rocky farm track which involved opening and shutting two farm gates. The car was quite low-slung so she went very carefully.

“How did it go?” Aunt Bea asked her after the first Friday. “You look quite done in.”

“Yes, I am. It’s a challenge to finish everything in five hours, though I’m sure I’ll get better at it. Just changing the beds and packing up the laundry takes an hour ... I have to count and record every item. The van can’t get up the track, so a local farm helps out, and I have to drive there to drop the laundry off and collect the new stuff. Then all the floors need doing and you wouldn’t believe the amount of dust. I thought country air was clean.”

“Ah, yes, but we have local quarries and quite strong winds.”

“All the furniture’s old oak, so as soon as you’ve done it all, it looks as though you haven’t. The bathroom and kitchen need a good going over, and once I’ve done the cottage out I have to do it all over again for the converted barn.”

“As your grandfather, my dear brother, used to say, sounds like it’s no picnic. Give it a few weeks, Emma, then see how you feel.”

“By the way, Aunt Bea, I hope it’s all right, I gave your number for tenants to call if they have any trouble. The agency’s so far away, I’m the contact for any problems. I don’t run a mobile any more.”

“Of course, that’s fine dear ... let’s hope nothing goes wrong at two in the morning. I thought we’d get the Saturday bus to Malham tomorrow, have a walk and a pub lunch?”

“Lovely idea. I’ve not been there for years.”

The phone rang at ten on Monday evening, fortunately before Aunt Bea had gone to bed. Emma was making cocoa in the kitchen and heard her answer.

“Hello, Clematis Cottage, Beatrice Philipson speaking I beg your pardon ... oh, Emma Philipson ... yes ... of course, I’ll get her.”

Emma came back into the little living room and Aunt Bea handed her the phone. “Some chap with a foreign accent, from a payphone,” she whispered, “quite hard to understand.” Emma’s heart sank. It must be the people who came to stay in the barn on Friday.

“Hello, is that Herr Schmidt?”

“Ya. Vee av zee problem in zee house. Zee ceiling as ... come down.”

“What? Oh dear. Are you and your wife all right?” She spoke slowly to be understood, while her heartbeat was thumping rapidly in her chest. What am I to do?

“My vife vas a leetle ... shocked, but vee are unharmed. Vee ’ad not gone to zee bed at zat time.”

“The bedroom ... the bedroom ceiling has fallen down?”

“Zat is correct.”

“I’m very sorry. Look, Her Schmidt, there is another house nearby, the cottage. It is all prepared for visitors and is not locked. Could you go and stay in the cottage instead. No one else is due to arrive. I will inform the agency. I’m so very sorry this has happened.”

She ended the call and looked at Aunt Bea. They both started giggling at once and it was some time before either of them was in a state to drink their cocoa.

The next Friday, Emma returned from her caretaking duties with a smile on her face.

“You look pleased with yourself,” Aunt Bea commented. “Did you meet that couple?”

“No they’d already gone, but they left me a nice box of chocs to thank me for my help.” She placed them on the table. “And for the next few weeks I’ll have five hours to do just the one cottage. The barn has to be re-roofed. It was the build-up of rain getting through that caused the ceiling to fall.”

“These old properties,” Aunt Bea said, glancing upwards. “This had to be re-roofed, one of the first priorities when I moved in.”

Emma had thought it would be lonely caretaking an isolated cottage, but the following Friday proved her wrong. The roofers were at work, so she made them coffee and had a chat. Then the Rentokil man arrived. She'd spotted the evidence of mice droppings around the little bait boxes under both kitchen sinks. After the departure of the pest controller, the water quality man came to test for nasties, as the supply was from some spring or bore hole—nice juxtaposition. Finally Emma's manager appeared.

“Hi Emma, busy day today, I see. I came to tell you about the annual deep clean.”

“Right.” Emma vaguely remembered this being referred to at her interview.

“The roof job will soon be finished and given there's no booking in the cottage next week, it's a good opportunity to get both properties done. Here's a checklist for you.”

“Not such a good day?” Aunt Bea commented as Emma flopped into a chair and dropped the bundle of papers her manager had given her on the coffee table.

“Remember I thought I'd have it easy till the New Year. Well apparently I have to do a deep clean. I ask you ... what do they think I've been doing every Friday?”

“What does that involve?”

Emma indicated the pile of papers. “What doesn't it involve ... dust and wipe all open beams and lamp fittings, defrost freezer, have bedspreads and duvets cleaned, do full check of furniture and equipment inventory, check and re-stock first aid kit...”

Henry Marshall was not one to day-dream. His demanding role in a large legal firm wouldn't allow it, especially since his promotion and the move to Bristol. But for a moment he pondered the weekend he'd just booked. His move had coincided with Veronica's transfer to Leeds and these weekends had become the way they kept their relationship going, though sometimes he wondered just where it was going. A couple of days in an isolated cottage in the Yorkshire Dales in the middle of winter was a bit of a make or break opportunity. We'll be stuck with each other, no TV and, he guessed, no internet reception. Unlike those other recent city breaks, with shows and meals out, each sneaking the occasional work-related moment, this would be an opportunity to have a good talk—and other things—they both still enjoyed that side of their relationship.

The winter weekend would not happen until mid-February. Before that, they planned to meet up for a show in London, just an overnighter. Then, as usual, they'd go to their respective families for Christmas, he to his sister, where his parents always went, to be with

the grandchildren. For some reason, they'd never taken to Veronica. Nothing had been said, but he knew. They avoided the issue and he'd only met her folks a couple of times.

Emma surveyed her hard work, hands on hips, trying to see where anyone could find fault. The place was spotless. Now for the barn. She was getting some overtime for the big clean, which would be useful. Sending Christmas presents to Australia had not come cheap.

New Year began and with it Emma's second job. Life became busier, but it was good to be fully occupied—and, she considered, as she caught her reflection in the full-length mirror in the barn's main bedroom, fully fit. She'd lost that stone of extra weight. It was not that she'd set out to trim down and build her muscle tone, it seemed to have happened quite naturally. And Aunt Bea was a very good cook—no pizzas or fish and chip suppers in her house. And she often walked down to town for her office job. The car was essential to the other, but she'd not given much thought to the potential obstacle of Dales winter weather.

“Will you be all right going up there today?” Aunt Bea asked, glancing anxiously out of the front window this February day. “You know its forecast to snow.”

“Yes, I'd heard. Don't worry, I'm planning to get there early. Hopefully this week's lot will have left before the deadline for the same reason. If I can't get back for any reason I'll ring you. The booking's only one couple coming for a weekend in the cottage, so I should finish in good time.”

It had indeed begun to snow by the time she got there and Emma parked on the road, in case she couldn't get back down the track later. She donned her wellies, fastened up her jacket, put up the hood and set out, trying to keep the visitors' welcome bunch of flowers from catching the snow as she trudged up the track. Normally she loved snow, but this was not helpful.

Henry Marshall had calculated, as was his fashion, that he needed to leave at ten that Friday morning to reach the Yorkshire Dales by between three and four in the afternoon, the time he and Veronica had agreed to aim at arriving. For some reason she hadn't wanted him to go to Leeds the night before so they could travel together. It would have meant a lot more driving for him, but he wouldn't have minded. He had to pop into the office first, and it was as he was driving there that he picked up the weather warning on the morning news. So he collected the files he needed and set out straight away. He didn't for one minute question his

ability to get there. An off-roader might be a gas-guzzler, but it could go anywhere, as he had already proved on his daily treks to and from the farm cottage he was currently renting outside Bristol.

Emma went into the barn first, thinking it made sense to at least change the beds in case this weather set in during the coming week. It was possible she might have difficulty getting up next Friday, so she made sure there was loo paper in both toilets and put out the guest towels in their usual artistic arrangement on the beds. Then it was tog up in her coat and boots for a trek up to the cottage.

Emma sighed. Just my luck. She found the outgoing guests had not even emptied the bins, let alone stripped the beds. It took two hours solid to prepare the bedrooms. After that it was downstairs to prepare the welcome tray with the tea things and lay a fire, which necessitated clearing the grate first, of course. They'd not bothered with that either. Finally she donned coat and boots again to go outside and fill the coal bucket and the log basket. Goodness, the snow had got heavy now! Everything was white and picture postcard pretty. How to get home, that was the question. Fuel duly standing sentry either side of a pristine stone fireplace, Emma bundled up the used sheets and towels from the cottage and took them down to the barn where she packed them all up in the laundry's sacks ready to take for collection, though who knew when that would be. Now I'd better go and assess the situation with my car, she decided.

What car? That must be it, virtually disappeared under about four or five inches of the white stuff. At least I've no decision to make, she realised. It would be too hazardous to drive back down those steep hills. Nothing for it but to spend the night in the barn. What about the cottage guests? Would they be able to get through? Back at the barn her first priority was to use the pay-phone to ring Aunt Bea, who wasn't surprised. After that, she rang her manager.

"Not to worry, Emma," the woman said. "It's not the first time. It will be interesting to get your customer feedback. And I hope the bedroom ceiling stays in place!"

By three in the afternoon, Emma noticed it had stopped snowing. She dressed up again, located the snow shovel and went to clear the entrance as much as she could. It took her over half an hour and she walked back up, feeling well-warmed and quite self-righteous—definitely above and beyond. On the way back she decided to leave the two gates open. From what she remembered they were from a city and probably wouldn't know what a Wellington boot was.

Back inside she made herself a big mug of tea from the “welcome” supplies provided for guests, and selected a little packet of custard creams to ward off the hunger pangs. Would that I’d had more than a banana for my lunch, she thought. The bookshelf in the living room was amply supplied with paperbacks from years of holiday trade, so she selected one and lay full length on the enormous and very comfy sofa. Aunt Bea’s place was rather small. This was luxury, the living room filling most of the downstairs. It was also very quiet, so she heard the engine at once. It was coming up to half-four when a vehicle passed up the track. Amazing—they’d actually got here. She took a peek through the curtains in time to catch the tail lights of a large four-by-four—all right for some. She went back to her book.

Henry checked his watch again. Five-thirty and no sign of Veronica. He couldn’t get a signal on his phone so tried the pay-phone, but the damn thing was dead as a dodo. Really, this wasn’t good—suppose there was an emergency. They must know people’s mobiles didn’t work up here. He looked out of the front window. Yes, there was a light on in the next property; he’d noticed it as he drove up. Perhaps their phone was functioning.

He wrapped up and walked down.

When the door bell went, Emma knew it must be the people from the cottage. Her immediate thought was what did I forget? Reluctantly, she put down her book and went to find out.

A man was standing there lit by the security light. He was tall, wearing a padded anorak, such as used by mountaineers, and was also gloved and booted. He must have listened to a weather forecast.

“Hello, you must be Mr Marshall. Is everything all right?”

“Good evening. I didn’t realise the letting agency gave out names of tenants to other tenants. I’ve not enjoyed that privilege.” If he’d already been annoyed by something being wrong in the cottage, Emma thought, he was now doubly annoyed because she knew his name. Really, some people.

“Miss Philipson,” she said and extended her hand.

He shook her bare hand with his gloved one, which made her shiver. “Look, do step inside for a minute. It’s rather cold.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry to bother you, but I wonder if your phone’s working? Mine isn’t and I need to make quite an urgent call.”

“That’s odd, they’re both on the same line and I used mine a short while ago.” She picked up the receiver. “Yes, it’s fine. Do use it.”

“... the thing is I’ve not got any change with me ... I don’t suppose ...”

“Oh ... just a minute.”

Henry felt quite an idiot. This rather lovely young woman had opened the door to him and the first thing he’d done was be rude, then he’d neglected to remove his glove to shake hands. Now she’d gone to fetch some change. He felt doubly stupid for not thinking to bring some with him on the trip. Even if the cottage phone had been in working order I couldn’t have made use of it, he realised. The woman returned and set to attacking the pay-phone with something. It seemed to be a special key.

“Got it,” she said, and held out a tray full of pound coins, fifty pence pieces and other silver. “How much do you think you’ll need?”

“Are you allowed ... isn’t that stealing from ...”

“Take it or leave it ... I don’t have any change either. I always do it this way. Anyway, if the phone’s not working in the cottage, it’s the least the agency can do to pay for your calls. Look, the phone won’t work if we don’t put the tray back in place and lock it. Could you take out what you need. If you’re really that bothered you can pay for what you’ve used later.”

“Right ... thank you.” It was she who seemed quite irritated now. He grabbed a couple of pounds and made the call.

Emma went back in the living room and tried to get on with her book. She’d shut the door, but he had quite a deep voice, so she couldn’t help hearing. It sounded like his companion for the weekend wasn’t coming. What an idiot she must be. He was, despite his tendency to rudeness, quite gorgeous, dark brown curly hair it would be lovely to run your fingers through and sexy blue eyes, even when below a furrowed brow. It was only when he knocked on the door and popped his head round to say thank you, that she remembered she’d emptied the money tray of the cottage phone this morning. Did I lock it back in position properly, she wondered? Quite possibly not and that would be why it’s not working. I’ll have to own up, she decided.

“Look, Mr Marshall ... I think I better explain, in case you ... I’m the caretaker here, but I don’t normally live here. Because of the snow, I can’t get back home.”

“You’ve no car?”

“Not so as you’d notice. It’s that thing passing for a recumbent snowman you will have passed when you drove up the track.”

“Oh, I see.” He sounded quite serious but she could see he was trying not to smile.

“I think I may be responsible for your pay-phone not working.” She held up the key.

“May I pop up and put that right?”

“Yes, of course, thank you.”

They walked up the track together.

“So it was you who cleared the snow and opened the gates?”

She nodded. “All part of the service.”

“Thank you.”

He left her in the lobby removing her boots, while he went to put another log on the fire, and to compose a suitable form of words for what he was going to suggest. She was back in a moment, holding up the key.

“All fixed—I’m really sorry about that.”

“Thank you. No worries. I was wondering, if you’re stuck up here for the night I presume you won’t have any food in the place. I’ve got a spag bol for two on the go and a nice bottle of red warming up. Would you like to join me? You’ll probably have gathered my ... friend can’t make it.” Of course, it would have been just as easy to offer to run her to wherever home was in his car; it couldn’t be that far away. But he wasn’t going to suggest that. She was quite lovely, which most probably meant she was spoken for and would not think it appropriate to spend time alone with another man. To his astonishment she accepted.

“Well it smells fantastic and I’ve had nothing much since breakfast, so thanks, I will.”

So it was that Henry spent what might possibly be the most relaxing evening he’d had in years. She was very easy company and quite funny. She regaled him with what she called caretaker’s woes.

“I’ve only been doing this job for three months and already I could write a book.”

“What’s the worst thing that happened?”

“Apart from the bedroom ceiling falling down just before the tenants went to bed? Let’s see ... finding boiling water coming out of the hot taps and not being able to get hold of the plumber. I had to post warning notes everywhere. Then there was the case of the wasted postage, not to mention wasted time. I had a series of three weeks of finding things tenants

had left and had to post them back. They got bigger by the week. First it was a small control box for some child's electronic toy, then a child's book, then a folded item which I didn't recognise and took to be some kind of ground sheet. When I rang to check about the arrival of the item the dad of this young family informed me: *I wondered why you'd sent it, it's the fire blanket from the kitchen, I think one of the kids pulled it out.* I just about managed to resist thanking him so much for putting it back or at least leaving me a note. I guess I should have worked it out—they did leave it on the kitchen table."

"You've little experience of extinguishing kitchen fires then?"

"None whatsoever." She gave him that lovely smile again, before continuing her anecdotes. "Then there's the laundry ... those bags in the barn lobby you almost tripped over. Some tenants once left a note saying *left all the towels in the bath.* What they failed to tell me was they also left the hot tap dripping at the rate of one drop every ten seconds and I came to do changeover several days after their departure! You'll have noticed some period pieces around the place ... unfortunately they don't include a mangle."

"You don't appreciate being left notes, then?"

"Their length is usually in direct proportion to the effort required by me to get things ready for the next guests."

"Why do you do it? You don't seem the usual type of ..."

"Landlady? No ... it's a long story and one I won't bore you with. I best go over to my place. Thanks so much, Mr Marshall."

"My pleasure ... is it against the rules to ask you to call me Henry?"

"Not at all ... and I'm Emma. Goodnight."

Next morning Emma saw another six inches of snow had fallen. She rang Aunt Bea to say she'd probably not be home today. The sun was sparkling on the snow and she couldn't resist it—she went out to play. It was partly missing her family, and the first Christmas having just passed without seeing them; but it was also the magic pull of that snow. She set to work, first stamping out a flat area of white for her tableau, then she began to model.

After working for over half an hour, Emma sensed she was being observed. "Is that you, Pitch?" she asked, without turning round. "You're just a trouble maker, go trot off somewhere else."

A man's laugh, definitely not a horse's neigh, made her turn round.

"Oh, sorry, I thought it was one of the horses."

“The fell ponies mentioned in the visitors’ book, with a reputation for kicking?”

“That would be the guilty parties. I call them Pitch and Toss for that very reason. I don’t think they have names really.” She stood and surveyed her creation.

Henry walked over to admire it. “Is this your version of an ice city?”

“No, it’s ... well, can’t you work it out?” She named the various constituent parts, “This is a table and these are the chairs, with food and drink, people sitting round ... I know they all look like snowballs.”

“A kind of winter picnic?”

“It’s a family tradition. Whenever things were difficult or challenging my old Grandpa had a favourite saying, it’s no picnic. My brother and I thought he was saying—”

“Snow picnic—I get it.”

“I remember the first time we dragged him out of his comfy chair by the fire to show him, he laughed for weeks. Never cured him of using the expression though.”

“Not around any more?”

“No, sadly—he died a few years ago.”

“I’ve made some porridge ... would you like a proper snow picnic. I’ll go and fetch you a bowl.”

The woman was delightful, Henry thought. She must be nearer thirty than twenty, but she was reliving her childhood. He’d like to have invited her in again, but didn’t want to embarrass her. After taking the empty porridge bowls inside, he went for a walk. When he returned she was no-where to be seen. He walked down the track. Where her car had been was an oblong patch of asphalt. Oh, well.

“Shall I run you a hot bath, Emma? I hope you’ve not caught a chill.”

“I’m fine, Aunt Bea. Not sure I’ll get the car started again though.”

“It was good of Jim to fetch you like that, and tow the car.”

“Yes ... I don’t know when I’ll next be using it. I doubt I can get up to the cottages for a while, and I think it might be safer to trudge through the snow down to town for work tomorrow.

Emma heard from the agency that both properties would be shut down for a few weeks and open again for the busy Easter period. As she'd suspected, she couldn't get up there anyway, at least until the snow melted. When at last she was able to go and clean she found Henry Marshall had left the cottage spotless—no note though. Has he worked it out with his ... friend, she couldn't help wondering.

Easter came and went, and Emma loved her Friday outings, the hedgerows splashed with yellow, the fields full of lambs. It would go quieter now until summer half term, but she still had to go up to check everything was all right and let in the central heating engineer and receive a coal delivery. She was in the cottage when the phone rang. It was the booking office. *Glad I've caught you ... last minute booking for the cottage for this weekend. Just so you know to leave a welcome tray.*

In place of the fresh milk which she hadn't brought, not expecting a booking, Emma put out a supply of the little long-life cartons. For welcome flowers she picked some daffs and wild flowers and arranged those in the large pottery jug. She was admiring them when she heard a car arriving and glanced at the clock. It was coming up to two and guests weren't supposed to check in before three, but it doesn't matter, everything is ready, she thought, with a satisfied glance around the living room. I better get going .

Outside she found her car had been blocked in, and Henry Marshall was pulling a rucksack from his monstrous car.

"Hello," he greeted her. "I hoped you'd still be here. I know how much you like short notes—here, I've written you one." He handed it over, with a smile.

Emma opened the scrap of paper, *Dear Emma, Please have dinner with me tonight, Henry,* she read. He was back at the car carrying out a cold box now.

"Well?" he asked as he passed her.

"What's on the menu?" she asked, returning his grin.

"Not quite decided, but I've a few ingredients with me. Perhaps we could concoct something together."

"I better phone Aunt Bea," she said. "Do you suppose the phone's working?"

When Emma departed at half-nine, Henry went to the pay-phone and pressed the redial button.

Aunt Bea had the cocoa ready when Emma stepped through the door.

“Your very nice friend Henry rang a few minutes ago to invite us to go on a picnic in Malham Cove tomorrow. He’ll pick us up. I gave him directions. Isn’t that lovely?”

Emma suspected her great aunt had added matchmaking to her other line in running people’s lives. By the end of the following afternoon, she realised one of them had fallen in love with Henry. About her own feelings she remained cautious. She liked him a lot. Perhaps she needed more time with him, so she surreptitiously left a note in the car when he dropped them home.

Henry wondered if Emma was merely being polite and the feelings were only on his side. It was only back at the cottage that he spotted the scrap of paper on the back seat. *Dear Henry, Can I invite myself to dinner again tonight? I’ll bring dessert, Emma.* A quick call on the pay-phone confirmed it and he set to in preparation. He did pan-fried steak, new potatoes and salad and opened some red wine.

When she arrived she was wearing a dress, and a little make-up. The signs were good. She seemed to have forgotten to bring the promised pudding, but never mind. This time they talked more about him, until there came a point when the conversation dried up and they were looking at each other over their coffee cups. She broke the silence.

“You know, I can’t work out whether you’re lonely, practising for “Come Dine with Me”, or enjoying a bit of mild flirtation.”

“All of the above,” he replied, with a grin. “And I can’t work out whether you’re feeling sorry for me and just aren’t interested, or are fed up with Aunt Bea’s cooking.” She was smiling back at him.

“None of the above. Now about dessert—Aunt Bea sent one of her famous apple and blackberry crumbles. I left it defrosting on the back seat of the car.”

“That was nice of her,” he said, but food was the last thing on his mind, for she was leaning towards him across the table till she gently touched her lips to his.

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