

The ninth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize
for Food & Drink Writing 2021

‘Mrs Esslemont’s Tea’

by Lorna Fergusson

Short List Runner Up

The judges for 2021...

Mick Herron & Lemn Sissay MBE



‘Mrs Esslemont’s Tea’

Ken grunted when she told him. Well, what else could she expect? Ken grunted a lot: he grunted dismissively at news, however enthusiastic her delivery of said news. He grunted when he stood up from the table or when he bent over in the garden to pluck vegetables from the soil. He grunted when he straightened up, shaking the muck off the onions, carrots or leeks he had grown.

She should be grateful, she supposed, for his vegetable-growing skills. And when he won rosettes at the local show, it did please him. After the trophies had been awarded, the solid, gleaming onions extracted from their paper skins would be chopped, the leeks sliced into rings, the carrots into circles, for soups and casseroles. They'd sit in peace in the dining-room, spoons going *ching* against the Royal Worcester bowls, knives and forks chiming amidst the cubes of steak. It was all very nourishing, to be sure. She could have done with his gardening skills twenty-odd years ago, in the plot by the Anderson shelter,

only he'd been in Burma, sweltering away and trying not to get captured. She was lucky he'd come home to her. Not many from his battalion made it back.

It was shortly after breakfast – toast and Keiller's marmalade, nippy on the tongue – that the letter arrived, addressed in a rounded hand to Mr and Mrs Kenneth Esslemont. She was so taken aback by its contents she went into the garden to tell him straight away, only he was tying up the broad beans and she wasn't sure he'd actually heard her.

When she brought him a cup of tea an hour later, out to where he sat on the bench by the shed, his pipe ready-filled by his side and his eyes closed as he tilted his head towards the sun, she reminded him. 'So it's next Wednesday, then,' she said.

'What's next Wednesday, Phyllis?'

'I knew it! In one ear and out the other it goes. I told you. The letter – from Shirley. About tea.'

He lowered his head and opened his eyes, squinting at her as she smoothed her apron down and waited for him to take a sip (more like slurp) of the tea. Assam. No delicate fragrant infusion for Ken. He liked to taste his tea.

'Shirley.'

Mrs Esslemont sighed. 'Ken, dear, I wonder sometimes if you left part of your brain back in the Far East. Shirley Bainbridge. My sister's daughter.'

Ken pondered. Shook his head. 'I can't picture her.'

'Of course you can't! You've never met her.' She paused.

Truth be told, she couldn't be said to have met the girl either. Not that she was a girl, not really. She must be, what, twenty-five or so by now? They'd said it was best to put her up for adoption, after what happened. It wasn't as if Phyllis herself could take her on, not in the state she was in at the time, and Shirley was just a baby, so she would have no memory of her mother. How extraordinary to hear from her, after all this time. She wondered if she would look like Lillian. At that her stomach gave a strange sort of lurch, which was not the kind of thing you wanted your constitution to be disturbed by on a Monday morning.

'So what's this about tea?' Ken said.

Phyllis sat down beside him on the bench, hoping, a moment too late, that he hadn't dropped any muck on it that would come off on her beige Crimplene skirt. 'She said that she was coming to Witherington to take us out to tea. At the Royal George.'

'Why?'

'Why! Because the lady who adopted her has died and she's learned we're her only relatives. Because she wants to treat us to tea and get to know us.' Phyllis could hear a robin starting up in the next-door garden. Cheering, even though the little blighter was only warning off other little blighters from his patch. 'I think we shouldn't try reading this or that into it, just take it as it comes. It's quite exciting.'

Ken's eye was on her now. 'You *are* reading things into it, though, aren't you?'

‘No! Not at all. Now, finish your tea and I can take it back in with me.’

The second letter arrived the following Monday. ‘Change of plan,’ Mrs Esslemont announced. ‘Shirley says the George won’t be open – they’ve had a burst water-main that flooded the lobby and kitchen, so can she come here instead?’

‘That’s a bit of a nerve, isn’t it?’ Ken was trimming off the outer leaves of some cabbages before putting them in a basket. ‘She turns up out of the blue and we have to feed her?’

‘Well, goodness me, it’s hardly an imposition, is it? I’d be perfectly happy to feed my niece, the niece I’ve never had the chance to know! Ken, I am disappointed in you.’ She paused to relish his momentary shamefaced expression. ‘Anyway, you’ll be glad to know you can save your pennies and you can keep your precious prize veg for the Witherington show, because Shirley is bringing the tea to us!’

‘Eh?’

‘She’s bringing it. In a hamper, she says. Like a picnic.’

‘That’s nothing but daft.’

Privately, Mrs Esslemont was inclined to agree, but she wasn’t going to let Ken know that. She tossed her head, making a mental note to have a shampoo and set at Clarice’s Hair Salon. ‘It’s an adventure, dear! I know you’ve not been keen on adventures since Burma, but it could be fun. She isn’t telling us what she’s bringing.’

‘Well, if it’s cucumber sandwiches, she won’t do better than

the cucumbers in my cold frame. Or my tomatoes, for that matter.’

‘We can take her on a guided tour, Kenneth. Show her the little Eden you’ve created here.’

He looked at her. Grunted.

Her hair was a little too set, Phyllis feared. Rather too helmet-like. Clarice said that extra Amami setting lotion would hold the look until Wednesday, but the result was hair that didn’t budge at all and had that peculiarly crisp texture the lotion gave it. Still, it wasn’t as if Shirley would be touching her hair, was it?

In honour of the occasion, Phyllis opted for a lavender checked skirt (part of a costume). The tweed was a little too warm for a summer’s day, but struck the right balance between formal and informal. She had a cream blouse on and a string of cultured pearls round her neck. No earrings. She’d never held with the notion of ear-piercing and those clip-on things hurt like billy-o on the few occasions she’d tried them. Maybe she just had tender lobes.

As soon as the clock struck three, the metal gate to the front garden clanged and footsteps came up the path. There was a moment’s pause. No doubt the girl was feeling nervous. Only natural.

When the knock came and Phyllis opened the door, it was to a fragile waif. The kind of girl who could compete with that model, Twiglet. No, Twiggy. All big eyes, spiky lashes, skinny knock knees and an Empire-waisted frock that was too short.

Of course it was. That was how they all dressed these days. Phyllis was glad that her mature years meant her plump knees could stay well covered.

The girl, all of a sudden, was in her arms. Yes, just like that. She had dumped the wicker hamper (how did a twig of a girl carry a thing like that?) and come into Phyllis' embrace as naturally as if she had been Phyllis' own daughter. And Phyllis' arms had come round her automatically, feeling the bird-bones of her and a gasp of breath against her cheek, against her rigid hair, so that a waft of Amami scent drifted up, renewed.

Then it was all talk and chatter, all nonsense, all activity. Ken did his best, but radiated awkwardness, which was not surprising, given indoors was not his preferred habitat. So they went out into the garden and took their places at the table she had set up there, with folding chairs and a bit of an awning against the sun.

Sunlight still managed to catch the glints in the girl's long strands of hair as she bent to the hamper on the ground beside her and unstrapped it. She smiled up at them as she rooted in its contents. 'I wanted to bring something special,' she said. 'In honour of the occasion.' She extracted three Tupperware boxes and a squat glass flask: a bottle of Mateus Rosé. 'It's a favourite of the Queen's,' she informed them.

'We're honoured, then!' answered Mrs Esslemont. 'Ken, can you nip into the kitchen and get a corkscrew? And wine glasses.'

As he lumbered off, his glance at the bottle having said everything about his preference for beer (wine being for Christmas only), Mrs Esslemont said, 'This is really so kind, dear. But what I've wanted to ask, since you first wrote to us is why you ...'

Shirley had straightened her box in front of her and had draped a napkin over her lap. When she smiled, Phyllis had that cramping sensation in her stomach again, though maybe it was just that she was peckish.

'It took me a while,' her niece said, 'to pluck up the courage to come here.'

Phyllis reached forward and put her hand over Shirley's. The girl's fingers were cold. 'Of course it did. Never having met us.'

'All those years and we were only ten miles apart!' Shirley exclaimed. 'We might have passed in the street in Biglow or Witherington for all I know! It seems so peculiar.'

'Well, you've found us now. That's what matters.'

Ken returned, having taken longer than he should, so she suspected he'd had a sly swig of his beer behind the larder door. 'Here we are, then,' he said, picking up the bottle and doing the necessary. 'I think this occasion deserves a toast.'

The wine was a pretty salmon-pink colour (why hide it inside dark glass?) and tasted of cherries and early summer strawberries. They opened their boxes. It had to be said that the moment was a bit of an anti-climax: nice enough, the contents, but not Fanny Cradock. Not even Marguerite

Patten, really. A salad of ham and Scotch egg, draped with a mayonnaise that gleamed thickly in a shade that didn't strike one as altogether natural. Phyllis was relieved, though, that it hadn't been a prawn cocktail in the Marie-Rose sauce Fanny Cradock advocated. Not on a warm summer's day. Not with her stomach. The ham was nice, though. Shirley said she bought it at the grocer's in Biglow: he boiled it himself with peppercorns and a few juniper berries, and sliced it very thinly, which, she said, made her shudder a little. That tilted slicing machine and the ease of the slices coming off the main bulk and the thought that it would be easy to slice a bit off yourself as you reached for the slices curling towards you.

Neither Ken nor Phyllis had much to say to that. Phyllis found herself looking at the ornate stuccoed villa on the label of the wine- bottle, wondering what it would be like to visit Portugal. What did Portuguese people eat? Not shiny ham and a Scotch egg wearing a peppery overcoat of rusked sausagemeat over the bouncy white and the claggy yolk, that's for sure. She was relieved when Shirley brought out three new containers, round this time, and a pot of cream.

Ken laughed. 'My wife does like her puddings,' he said. 'I often think she couldn't care less about a main course, as long as there's a good pudding.'

Mrs Esslemont wished he would say 'dessert' instead. But he never would. He was beyond redemption.

She took hold of the corner of the box, pulled it up and away. Clever material, Tupperware. Both bendy and somehow

brittle. An instant later all thoughts fell away. Or peeled away, like the plastic lid.

'Oh, I say,' exclaimed Ken. 'That looks very nice, Shirley.'

Shirley said nothing. Phyllis, looking into her box, was aware the girl's eyes were on her. At the same time her stomach was doing that roiling thing again, as the scent of it rose from within and she dimly heard Ken offering to pass her a spoon. Silent, she reached for her wine glass and knocked back some more Mateus, the slight fizz of it making her feel a layer of tooth enamel had been lost as the stuff swilled around her mouth.

Ken spoke. 'Aren't you going to dig in, love?'

She stood up, her fingertips resting for a moment on the tabletop. 'I think ... I think something as special as this deserves our best plates, Ken.'

In the kitchen she looked around as if the room belonged to someone else. Out in the garden, she heard Shirley prattling to Ken about the adoptive mother who had died. Yet in the gaps of that prattle, she sensed that silence. Alert. Shirley waiting for Phyllis to catch her hand in the slicing machine.

The scent of it had come with her. And smell always triggered memory, didn't it? Bygone days. Places. Scenes. Feelings. And she could see it now: the path down past the rose bushes to the bottom of the garden. The shelter with its corrugated roof. The broad umbrellas of the leaves and the ridged stems, thick, pink and green, all at angles. And something else at angles. Her sister's legs. Sticking out.

Phyllis took deep breaths. She opened the cabinet door and took out the gold-edged plates. Made her way back to the table. 'I was about to send out a search-party,' said Ken, with a wink. 'Shirley here has been showing me a letter.'

'Oh?' Phyllis passed the plates around.

'From my adopted mother, Cynthia Bainbridge,' Shirley said, voice as smooth as the cream she was pouring over her dessert. 'I wasn't to open it until she passed away, so I didn't. She described how she came to adopt me. How my real mother died.'

Phyllis sat down. Looked again at what lay in the box. An exquisite, individual rhubarb tart, its centre blush-pink and dusted with icing sugar, its crisp folds of pastry slightly damp where the juices had seeped. The scent of it, sweet and acid all at once, filled her nostrils. But she was remembering when the rhubarb scent was mixed with the smells of ripped green vegetation and dark burnt soil, where the bomb had hit and the girl she had shut out of the shelter had taken the blast.

The sister who had made eyes at Ken, months previously, when he'd been home for that one precious night, before he left for Burma.

The sister whose daughter had eyes just the same.

