

Somewhere in England, 1952

A timid knock on the front door interrupted Edna's ironing. She pulled the plug from the wall socket and checked the kitchen clock. "That will be him," she told Tweetie Pie chirping in his cage.

She strode down the hall, her heart dancing the conga with relief. She desperately needed a handyman and it seemed she had found him. The day after her bank manager husband retired, he died in his sleep, blood clot to the brain, leaving Edna a widow these past six years. Finally emerging from her grief, she was mortified to find the home that used to be her pride and joy with its stained-glass bay windows and immaculate garden, had become, in her eyes, a run-down hovel.

She opened the door. A tall man stood on the doorstep, nervously shuffling his greasy cap round and round in his hands. His lined, careworn face made him look much older than the thirty-five years she understood him to be.

"Thank you for being prompt. Stanley, isn't it?"

The man nodded.

"Would you like a cup of tea before you start?"

"No, thanks, Mrs. Had breakfast wi' the nuns," he said gruffly. "Show me what you want and I'll get to it."

Edna's thoughts flew to the nearby nunnery where men queued every morning to get a free breakfast. It started when many of the men returning home from the war could no longer fit into their previous lives, men who were lost and damaged beyond repair, men who, most nights, slept in a cot in the Salvation Army hostel. Being a church-going, generous woman, Edna asked

Somewhere in England 1952

the nuns if any of the men were capable of doing repairs. As luck would have it, the nuns did give some of the ex-servicemen work to do around the nunnery. It helped the men feel useful.

The nuns introduced Edna to Stanley, who was eager to earn some money.

Edna stepped outside. “How are you with woodwork?”

“I can do a fair job wi’ the right tools.”

“Good. I’ll show you some rotten window frames.”

At the back of the house, she pointed to the bottom of her leaded windows. “As far as I know, the tops of the frames are fine. My husband had some tools. I think they’re in the garden shed. I’ll get the key.”

Edna left Stanley prodding the window frames. She returned to find him shaking the wobbly fence that looked as if it was about to fall down from the battering it took in the recent March gales.

“Yes, Stanley, that’s another job on the list for you. If you need to buy wood or nails or whatever, you can get what you need at Appleton’s Hardware on the High Street. I opened an account there and told them to expect you.” She handed him her list of tasks. “So, I’ll leave you to it,” she said and went indoors.

At twelve-thirty Edna placed a bowl of leek and potato soup and two thick slices of bread on a tray, alongside the large pot mug she bought specially for Stanley to use instead of her delicate china cups. She carried the tray outside, glowing with the pleasure that came from once again ministering to a man’s needs.

She found Stanley sanding the new frames. “These need a coat of primer, Mrs., before it rains.”

Somewhere in England 1952

“Like I told you, get whatever you need from the hardware store. Now take a break and eat your lunch.”

Living on a widow’s pension, Edna had little money to spare. However, her need for a handyman was greater than the need to eat three square meals a day. Edna employed Stanley Mondays and Thursdays. He arrived at nine, she handed him a list of jobs, and he got on with the work, fortified by Edna’s lunch of home-made soup and two chunks of homemade bread. After years of living with emptiness, her heart filled with excitement. Her home was returning to its former glory. Soon, only the front door and outside woodwork remained to be painted and the garden to tidy.

Edna got into the habit of joining Stanley and drinking a cup of tea while he ate his soup. She steered conversations to his war service even though he resisted. However, with gentle coaxing, she discovered he had spent years in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. He admitted, “I returned home a broken man.”

One day she blurted out, “My son, George, was taken captive at Singapore. Was he in the same camp as you?”

Stanley’s head jerked up. He looked at her, really looked at her with piercing eyes, before silently shaking his head.

At the end of this lunch break, noticing Stanley’s shaking hands and tight jawline, Edna said, “I hope I didn’t distress you with our little talk.”

Usually, Stanley remained silent, but this day he reached the end of his tether and the dam burst. “Now you listen, Mrs. I’m never talking about the war again. You’ve got all you’re going to get out of me.”

Somewhere in England 1952

Chastened and flushed with embarrassment by Stanley's anger, Edna touched his forearm. "I just believe it helps to share a heavy load."

"It doesn't help me," Stanley shouted, shaking off her hand. He slumped down on the doorstep.

Unnerved, Edna turned on her heels and returned indoors. *Oh dear, what have I done? Is he shaking from awakened rage? Despair? Painful memories of comrades viciously killed in the camp.* She wondered if he cried out in his sleep. She sat on the hall bottom stair and covered her face. *Would George be in this state if he had come home?*

Stanley didn't analyze himself so closely. He only wanted to keep upright, placing first one step then another to move the shell of himself from point A to point B. But now, with the money Edna paid him, he was able make a detour to the pub for a few beers to add a smidgeon of numbness to his life.

The day arrived when Stanley finished painting the house, leaving only the garden to tidy and vegetables to plant. Tension had been building inside him as his work moved nearer and nearer to completion. The unfairness of it all, an empty, unfulfilled life after fighting for king and country, fueled the flames of rage. No more soup lunches. No money to spend on beer. Life looked bleak, and it was her fault. She had no right to take it away from him. He bristled when she ordered him to lay out the garden a certain way. Too bossy. It reminded him of the Japanese guard's treatment of him. Not fair!

Somewhere in England 1952

Garden finished, Stanley returned the gardening tools to the shed, then knocked on Edna's back door to return the key and receive his pay. She came outside to inspect his work and pointed to a rake leaning against the wall. "You forgot to put the rake away, Stanley." She spoke more sharply than she meant to. A bad habit. Being annoyed or angry was her way of hiding sadness. And she was sad. Stanley's visits were at an end. She would miss him.

Stanley began shaking, his mind invaded by memories of Japanese guards' cruel treatment of their prisoners. In the camp, inspection of work was usually a prerequisite to finding fault, an excuse to amuse themselves by punishing prisoners. Vicious beatings were followed by tying prisoners to posts, hands strung high above their heads then leaving them for hours to suffer under the hot sun.

He grabbed the rake, swung it high, then brought it down on Edna's head again and again. Blood spurted everywhere. Her broken glasses flew off to land on the brick path. At first, she cried out, flailed her arms; then she crumpled to the floor.

Chest heaving, Stanley burst into tears. Disgusted with himself, he threw the weapon across the newly planted rows of onions. He found a dry corner of Edna's pinafore and wiped his face. He wanted to find oblivion in sleep, but no time. With awareness returning to the present, he needed to hide his crime.

Stanley dragged Edna's body into the kitchen. Casting about, he caught sight of her handbag on the table. A look inside revealed a folded ten-shilling note. He removed it, after all, he was due his wages. He stared at the body with its disfigured face and right eyeball hanging down on her cheek and shuddered. Was she watching him with her swollen left eye? Stanley turned his back on the almost unrecognizable body stretched out the green linoleum. He opened

Somewhere in England 1952

her purse, took out notes and coins and shoved them in his jacket pocket. Suddenly hungry, he opened the bread bin, took out the loaf, cut doorstep size slices and spread them with jam.

Tweetie-Pie's singing caught Stanley's attention. He opened the cage door to let the bird fly free then left the house, jam sandwich in hand.