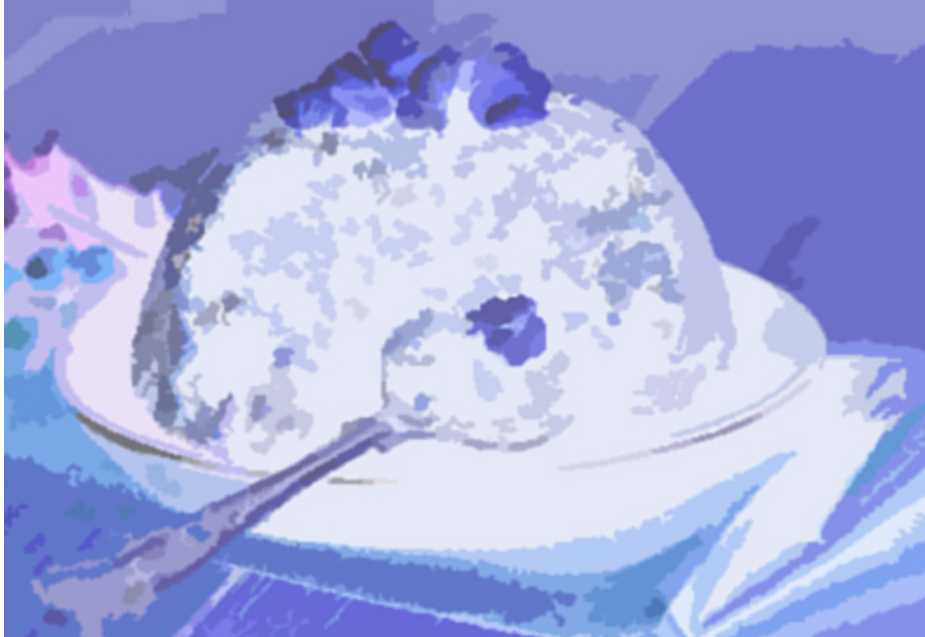


Bel Mooney

CHRISTMAS PUDDINGS





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CHRISTMAS PUDDINGS

Alys thought he was the ugliest man she had ever seen. She nudged her mother and pointed him out, suppressing a giggle. A mountain of a man with a huge beer belly, and fleshy arms tattooed with snakes and hearts, he stood at the hotel bar alone, drinking beer. This was his third large tankard. She watched fascinated, as he threw back his head to drain it, fleshy jowls quivering, throat jerking up and down like a freshly-killed chicken. Then he banged the glass on the bar and nodded at the barman.

'Same again, mate,' he said. The barman did not understand the words, but knew what was required.

'He is English, Mama,' whispered Alys, staring at the man's

denim jeans and the fancy, Western-style blue shirt stretched over his stomach.

'You should speak to him then, Alys,' said her mother. 'You can practice a little - and know one will see you here. It will be alright in Mamaia.'

But Alys just shook her head, sipping her sickly cherry juice, never removing her gaze from the fat Englishman - now wiping drops off the small moustache which fringed his lip, like a tiny hedge in the centre of a vast, bare, undulating landscape. He saw her looking, and winked one small piggy eye. Embarrassed, Alys looked down and talked to her mother about soap.

A few minutes later there was a sound of argument from the bar, and she looked across again. The Englishman was trying to protest about something, but the barman shrugged insolently. Alys's mother looked reproachfully at her. 'You should go and help, Alys,' she said. 'After all he is a guest in our country.'

'He's a tourist, Mama,' said Alys shortly; nevertheless she rose, went across to the bar and stood next to the man, who towered over her. 'Excuse me, can I help you?'

'Oh - someone who speaks English, thank God for that! Look, I had four beers, right? And I gave him 20,000 lei, and look what he gave us back!' He spread out the dirty, crumpled notes with contempt.

It was not the English Alys had learnt at school, then later from books and from her nightly tuning to the BBC World Service, nor that which she used from time to time in her work as a technical translator in a chemicals factory. She found his hard northern accent difficult to understand and, in any case, was distracted by the tiny emerald stud he wore in one ear. It was bizarre - by its smallness and prettiness emphasising the plainness of its wearer.

'You have overcharged him,' she said coldly to the barman.

'Why should you care?' asked the barman. 'He can afford it - look at him. He's a rich, fat tourist. Maybe you think you could be lucky there, get some presents. Give him a good time....' And he leered at her.

Alys glanced across at her mother, a small shabby figure who was watching her proudly, and knew she must not let her down. 'I'm sorry,' she said to the Englishman, 'he is not a very nice person, but not all Romanians are like him. Don't worry, I will speak to him again.' Then she turned back to the bar and told the young man she would report him unless he gave the tourist the correct money. 'I know the right people,' she added in a vaguely threatening tone, and was rewarded by seeing the slight shadow of fear across his eyes. Nobody knew anything about anybody. Nobody knew who might be told. You could at least make use of that fact.

Two minutes later the Englishman had crammed

himself into the plastic chair next to Alys's mother. The barman glowered at them.

'Trevor Bates.'

'I am Alys, and this is my mother, Madame ... er ... Meeses (she stumbled over this) Corianu.' He put out an enormous paw, and pumped her mother's tiny hand.

'My daughter taught herself English. She is a very clever girl,' said Alys's mother in Romanian, nodding at her daughter to translate. She did so, blushing.

'I'll say,' said Trevor, slapping his knee. 'Clever lass, and pretty with it! And I tell you, if I lived in a God-forsaken hole like this even I'd teach meself a language, and try and get out.'

Alys glanced around, but the barman had disappeared and the bar was empty. No one could see them. It was all right. Suddenly she felt exhilarated - actually talking to a forbidden foreigner, using her English gingerly as someone might walk for the first time on new artificial limbs

'But it is impossible for us to get out,' she said smiling at him with some pity for his ignorance. 'And if I can ask you something Mr Bates ... '

'Trev, call me Trev. That's easy to say, right?'

'... Why did you come to Romania? I think it is not a nice place for you.'

'Dunno really. I was wondering what to do, and all me mates at work, they was going to Spain, like. So I thought, let's

have a change. And I sees this package in the travel agent's and I thinks, where's that when it's about? It says Mamaia is the Romanians' 'oliday playground, or some such rubbish. Then they tells me the beer's dead cheap and so here I am!'

Alys understood little of this. He spoke rapidly, nodding his head so that the emerald stud twinkled.

'Ask him what he does Alys - his job,' said Mrs Corianu, gazing at Trevor Bates. Alys obeyed, although she was embarrassed by her mother's intensity.

'I work in a factory - making Christmas puddens. I mean puddings,' he responded, 'in Nottingham - that's up north in England.'

'Christmas ... puddings?'

'Aye. Don't you have them? Can't say I blame you, can't stand the things meself. See too much of them. It's a sort of cake thing, a pudden, you eat on Christmas Day, after the bird, like. You set fire to it then eat it. Waste of good brandy I always say.'

'Bird? Brandy?' repeated Alys faintly, imagining this strange conflagration at the table which groaned with food - her most precious fantasy. Unconsciously she slipped out her tongue for a second, feeling hungry. Trevor Bates read the look.

'Hey, would you like a bit of chocolate? You can't get that stuff, can you? I'll go and fetch some from me room.'

Chocolate! Alys felt suddenly that this was the most significant day of her whole life. 'But not here,' she said, glancing around. When she translated for her mother, a fixed expression settled on the old woman's face. 'Tell him you'll meet him outside, Alys. I shall go to our room. Better that you are alone with him.'

The beach was dark and empty. In the distance, to the north, a vivid light hung over the gigantic superphosphates factories of Navodari. The waves made a peaceful lapping sound as they walked along, Alys in reverent ecstasy, rolling the milk chocolate round her mouth, feeling it coat her teeth before letting it slip slowly down her throat. Trevor sat down, puffing as he lowered himself, and patted the sand beside him. Alys knelt warily, dreading the move she saw as inevitable, yet wondering (with that same fascination that had made her stare at him so avidly) what it would be like to feel that bulk upon her.

But he talked. He told her about Nottingham, pointing to Navodari and saying that it made him feel at home. He described Robinson's Christmas pudding factory, where tons of flour and sugar, nuts and flavourings were churned in huge vats, until the air itself seemed sticky, and the cloying smell

of Christmas pudding clung so tightly to your hair and clothes that no amount of soap could wash it out..

'Soap,' said Alys dreamily.

'Aye, what about it?'

She hesitated. 'I wonder if...it is a terrible thing to ask, but do you think...?'

'Come on lass, out with it!'

'If you have some soap with you, some English soap, then maybe you could give it to me when you go back?'

He threw back his head and laughed, and Alys fancied the ground vibrated beneath her. 'I'll do better than that, love. They told us to bring a bit of chocolate and mebbe a bit of soap, to give away like, or use to bribe folk, and so I've a whole pack of lavender soap in me bedroom. Smells right nice. I'll give it you in the morning...' (he nudged her in the ribs, and she waited for the inevitable suggestion, to which she knew she would agree, for soap, for chocolate, even for the forbidden delight of talking to this peculiar foreigner about Christmas puddings) '.. if you'll come for a swim with me tomorrow. Eh?'

Suddenly tears filled her eyes at his innocence and she nodded without speaking. 'That's that then! Enjoy the choccy, did you? I can't stand sweet things - me. Must be because of the puddens. Here, take some up to your owld mum.'

Next morning he detached himself from the rest of the tour and, indifferent to the curious looks from Romanian and English holidaymakers alike, sat at their table. After breakfasting dry bread and curling ham and cheese they went to the beach, Alys sprawling in her mother's ramshackle rented deckchair, very conscious of Trevor's gaze. She knew she looked pretty, despite her old-fashioned, shabby black costume and the freckles which joined in patches here and there on her face and chest, giving her a slightly blotched look. Her hair was long and sandy-brown, and, knowing he was looking, she tossed it over one shoulder, so that it hung in an elegant, curving question-mark.

'You're thin for a Romanian,' he said. It was a pity, thought Alys, that the same could not be said of him. Sitting, in his electric-blue swimming shorts, he was a terrible sight, his belly creased into countless pink folds so that the naval was lost completely or squinted out now and then, like a deformed eye. A little waterfall of hair trickled down from the quivering stomach, disappearing beneath the band of his shorts, and his hairy legs were so thin and white it was impossible to imagine them supporting his weight.

'Swim?' he asked, and for a moment Alys wanted to refuse, ashamed (even though there was no one familiar but her mother to see) to walk beside such a man. But she rose meekly and followed him to the waves, surprised to discover,

as his head rose streaming from the water and he flipped over onto his back, that within this other element he possessed some grace.

They spent each day together. Alys was aware of how often her mother left them alone and knew why. She resigned herself to the fact that she would, in the end, go to his room and let him do what he wished. It would be worth it for the presents and the cigarettes, and, in any case, he wasn't a bad man. She knew that.

When the moment came it was not as she had feared. He ran his hands over her body for ages, handling her delicately as if she were something precious, and then fumbled with a condom as if he were unused to the exercise. When at last he rolled on top, it was with an aching gentleness, as if he were afraid of breaking her. Soon, very soon, it was over and she felt him weeping quietly into her shoulder. She said, 'Please don't cry, I like you very much,' over and over again, as he sobbed incoherently, telling her that at home he could never get a woman, and that the girls in the factory all laughed at him, and his mates teased him for not being able to pull birds, and he had to go with toms from time to time...and so, 'Thanks, little Alys, thank you,' he mumbled, kissing her neck in a frenzy.

'Birds? Toms?' she wondered, her right leg dead beneath him.

At the end of the week Alys and her mother were due to take the bus and return to their village, 10 miles from Bucharest. With another week to go, Trevor was downcast, saying he would be lonely without them. He asked if he could hire a car for the day and drive them home, and they accepted. Alys felt reckless now. She knew she should not have been seen so much with this foreigner, and certainly should not allow him to visit her home, and yet she felt no fear. She knew it was all moving steadily towards a predestined end, with her mother's collusion. When Alys returned to their shared room very late after having sex, she pretended to be asleep. In the morning that fixed, determined look was more intense than ever. 'This is your chance, Alys,' she said, and although Alys shook her head vehemently and told her not to be absurd, she knew it too.

Trevor Bates drove them home. Alys felt ashamed of the dingy block and the small, mean apartment she shared with her mother and two older brothers. As soon as they arrived, Mrs Corianu went out to queue for bread, leaving them alone. Trevor asked if he could stay for a couple of days. 'But your hotel room?' Alys protested.

He shrugged. 'It's already paid for. Any road, I want to

stay here with you.'

Road? she thought.

Alys hesitated. 'But you see...it is very difficult, Trev. If you stay with us...well, there could be trouble.' He asked what sort of trouble and she felt impatient with him for not understanding, despite all she had told him on those beach walks. 'People are always watching,' she explained, 'and if we have a foreigner to stay...well...it is not permitted. He does not like that.'

'What, old Cowkeskoo, or whatever his name is? None of 'is bloody business, is it? Raving nutter, he is.'

Despite her anxiety Alys giggled, then put a finger on his lips. To her astonishment Trevor seized it and almost bent it backwards with the ferocity of his kisses. 'Alys, I want you to marry me,' he mumbled. 'I know I'm not a clever bloke, not so clever as you, love, but I'll look after you, and take you away from here, and you'll have everything you want, at home.' All this was said in a rush, and then he drew one of her fingers into his mouth, licking and sucking at it.

By the time Mrs Corianu returned, daughter was engaged to be married. The older woman stood on tiptoe to embrace her future son-in-law. Trevor stood there smiling foolishly, as Mrs Corianu turned to her daughter and said, 'This is what I wanted, Alys. You have a chance of freedom now - and he isn't a bad man.'

'No, Mother,' said Alys. Their eyes told each other everything they knew.

When her brothers came home from work they were amazed to find the fat Englishman filling the tiny sitting-room. Despite the Kent cigarettes the foreigner gave them, Mircea told his sister that she was crazy. But Daniel shook his head and agreed with their mother that this was her chance. 'If the bastards'll give you permission to marry,' he added, voicing, for the first time, the fear Alys had not dared acknowledge. 'It'll be hard, Alys - you know that.'

She nodded, and Trevor watched them all, not understanding, the foolish happy grin glued in place. They toasted their engagement in tuica, and that night Trevor slept in his car outside the flats. The following evening he returned to Mamaia, after a day spent planning. 'I'll come back at Christmas,' he promised, 'and I'll bring you the ring. And if you've got all the paperwork going, like, they won't make any trouble, will they?'

Alys shook her head, but dubiously. She wondered, in her heart, if she wanted the permission to marry refused. But the smell of lavender soap was on her hands, and he talked of a diamond ring, and the future shaped itself into a vast supermarket, stacked with chocolate and bananas. He cut a hole in a piece of paper to measure her finger and found out her size in clothes. So she promised to write to

him and reflected how easy it is to say 'I love you' in a foreign language.

'How did you meet the Englishman?'

Sweat trickled from her armpits, despite the freezing temperature of the room.

'Did he give you dollars?' The innuendo was unmistakable, and its effect on Alys was to replace fear by anger. 'I am not a prostitute,' she said coldly.

'Why do you want to marry a foreigner? Why do you not want to marry a Romanian?...'

And so it went on, time after time, until Alys despaired and wept in her mother's arms. Trevor's short letters seemed more and more precious to her, for she half-expected him to forget her. The engagement seemed like a dream, for her hand was bare and the soap had all been used up. She wrote back letters that were longer than his, for she had to tell him of the frustration and humiliation of those interviews with the officials. 'I think of you often, but it is hard for me to believe that we will be married,' she wrote.

As the autumn passed, and the winter settled on them, she even began to forget what he looked like, transforming him, in the haziness of memory, into someone

taller and less ugly. The women at work envied the glamour of her prospects and spoke to her less and less, as if she was set aside, isolated by her own good fortune. But Alys had always been solitary and it did not worry her. She began to long for Christmas.

Trevor arrived, on December 23, with an enormous suitcase, which even he could hardly carry. At first she gasped at his appearance: in the padded black anorak he looked fatter than ever, and his face was raw and cold. For a second she was dismayed and yet the smile was so tender in that shapeless, ugly face that suddenly she felt ashamed. After all, he was not a bad man, and he had come back. For her. They stood shyly, looking at each other, bumping awkwardly as they turned to go into the sitting-room.

The suitcase contained wonders Alys had not dreamt of. He brought scented soap, bubble bath, a whole range of cosmetics, fine tights and (best of all) three pairs of blue jeans for Alys and her brothers. There were tins of tuna-fish and ham, packets of biscuits and dozens of bars of chocolate. Those were not the Christmas presents, he said, they must save the wrapped parcels until the day. Then he gave her a tiny box, and for a long time Alys gazed at the

little diamond solitaire before slipping it onto her finger. 'It's beautiful,' she whispered.

'So are you, pet,' he murmured, shuffling his feet.

At last he pulled the carrier bag from the bottom of the case and thrust it into Mrs Corianu's arms. It contained a small turkey and a Robinson's Christmas pudding in cardboard box decorated with a coaching scene. Alys and her mother looked at each other and then both started to cry.

That night they lay in her small, ice cold bedroom, Alys conscious of the squeakiness of her single bed and the thinness of the walls. When he had finished, he rolled off her with a sigh and heaved himself onto the floor. 'I'm going to buy us a king-sized bed with a padded headboard,' he promised, before falling asleep. Alys lay awake, listening to the gentle, rhythmical sound of his snoring. Then, very quietly, she slipped from her bed, took the heavy blankets her mother had left folded in the corner, and covered him up.

Trevor's Christmas presents were magnificent. There was a heavy cardigan-jacket, trimmed with suede, for each of the brothers, a real leather handbag for Mrs Corianu, and for Alys a purple blouse, a necklace of freshwater pearls, a pink nylon nightie and negligee set (far too flimsy for their chilly flat, but that did not matter) and a set of scarlet underwear that made Daniel and Mircea grin and Alys blush.

Trevor stood, beaming that foolish grin, as they carefully unpeeled the shiny paper and exclaimed; and when they offered two small, plainly-wrapped gifts for him, he held up a little carved wooden box and a bottle of tuica with unfeigned delight. It was shame, Alys thought.

After the turkey, served simply with potatoes and cabbage, Trevor announced he was going to 'do the pud', and disappeared into the kitchen, carrying a half-bottle of brandy. He came back, holding a plate high. It seemed to Alys the most beautiful thing she had ever seen: blue flames licked the sticky brown mound, turning the plate into a sea of flickering light. They ate, and toasted each other in tuica. Trevor said he had never enjoyed a Christmas pudding before that moment.

'The thing about it,' he said thoughtfully, regarding his spoonful, 'is -like - it don't look much in the box, but then...it has its moment , see?'

Alys giggled, slightly drunk, and raised her glass. 'A toast to... Christmas puddings,' she said.

'Noroc!' chorused her brothers, without understanding.

Trevor went back to England, and the flat seemed colder and emptier than ever without his bulk.

'Next time I come, we'll be wed,' he had promised, but Alys did not believe him.'

'They'll never give me the permission,' she sighed, but he squashed her to him and told her not to be so daft.

'Daft?' she repeated. She liked the flat, foolish sound of that new word he had taught her.

He went back to Nottingham to more teasing from his friends at the factory. They had not believed in his pretty Romanian girl. ('What - Trev? He got drunk more like and screwed an old slag, and thought he'd got lucky!'), but when he came back they whistled at the photographs.

'Where's she live, Trev? Dracula's Castle?'

'Watch out for her teeth, mate!'

'Watch where she puts her mouth, you randy fat bugger!'

Trevor grinned amiably, proud of himself. And systematically he started to redecorate the maisonette he had lived in alone since his parents died. He imagined Alys in his kitchen, making a stew, and then watching television in the lounge, and then, in the bedroom, making love, and he shuddered with longing. It would happen, he knew it would, sure as Christmas.

Every two weeks he wrote to her, telling her about the new dining-room suite he had bought, and the settee, and the new TV - knowing that these ordinary things would seem miraculous, that she would translate his letters to her family

with cries of joy.

Yet in truth, the letters depressed Alys. She wrote back dutifully, but this man in the far-away country with all its supermarkets and fast cars and plentiful clothes shops, and where people could do and think and write as they liked, receded further and further as the weeks passed. It was terrifying, unreal, to imagine herself sitting on the velvet settee, pressing a button to make the pictures change. She found herself praying that 'they' would refuse her permission to marry a foreigner. Her mother, knowing all this, berated her for her foolishness, then wept.

'Alys, little Alys, this is your chance. Your father would have been so proud...'

Alys Corianu received her permission to marry in April, nine months after she had met Trevor. Nobody could believe it; in a day or two the news spread in and out of the flats on the sprawling estate which had replaced the demolished village, so that she was pointed out by strangers to their children as the woman who was going to live in England. Inexorably, like someone in a dream, Alys was drawn along - passive and vaguely sad. Sometimes in dreams she was imprisoned by Securitate, and then the interrogator turned into Trevor, huge, fat and ugly, bearing down on her. She quailed and tried to escape. But he was behind her too.... She would wake up crying. Still, the letter was sent to her

fiance and a date fixed. A June wedding. The women at her workplace were silent with rage.

Mrs Corianu sewed a dress of white cotton, trimmed with nylon lace, and Alys made her own veil. She was careful not to let her mother catch her weeping. 'I shall never see my family again,' she thought, but when once she tried to say this to Mircea, he shook his head warningly, looking at the kitchen, where Mrs Corianu was making tocana.

It grew hot. When Trevor arrived he looked grotesque in a cream summer suit - sweating under the weight of the suitcase. Again he had brought soaps, chocolates, tinned food, whisky and cigarettes. 'My God, my God, that my daughter should have been so, lucky to meet such a kind man!' exclaimed Mrs Corianu.

'It's only things, Mama, and he may not be so kind once he has me forever,' snapped Alys.

Trevor looked from one to the other, without understanding, puzzled by the contrast between the ecstasy on the face of his future mother-in-law, and his bride's evident irritation. But Mircea said something to her, softly, and she looked up at Trevor, making herself smile. 'I think I am a little nervous,' she explained.

'Don't worry pet, you'll soon be Mrs Bates,' he said.

The wedding passed in a haze of sweet 'champagne', fizzing red in the darker red of Mrs Corianu's best wine

glasses, followed by the inevitable tuica. The civil ceremony was short; Alys had schooled Trevor in what to do , so nothing went wrong. The neighbours and relatives crammed the tiny flat to eat sweet and savoury pastries, cold pork and tomatoes, and to drink and drink - until Alys, head swimming and face burning, thought she would die with the heat and the noise. And Trevor kept his arm draped hotly around her, calling her 'Mrs Bates'. It was terrible.

The lift broken, she slipped away down the seven flights of stairs to stand in her wedding dress at the door to their block, looking out over the rutted wasteland and away towards the factory chimneys smoking in the distance. Nearby, a small girl was playing with a battered, home-made cart, in which she had placed an plastic doll with a dirty face, wrapped lovingly in a scrap of cloth. She stared at Alys solemnly. 'Are you married?' she asked. Alys nodded. 'I want to be married,' said the child, 'and have a real baby.' Alys surveyed the pathetic toys and the wizened little face, dragged air into her lungs and ran upstairs. Back in the flat she tucked her arm in his.

'I wondered where you'd gone to, pet', he said tenderly.

Mrs Corianu, Mircea and Danial borrowed a car to drive them to the airport for the ceremonial farewell. 'La revedere, Mama - te iubesc,' whispered Alys, clinging to her language, 'Goodbye, Mama, I love you - te iubesc - I love

you.'

'I know we'll see you again, little Alys,' said Mrs Corianu, through tears, 'because one day all this will be over, and we will come to see you in England.'

'Yes Mama, of course,' sobbed Alys, thinking, 'it will never be over. And so I shall never see them again, Never be over....' The dead refrain thrummed in her head on the four-hour flight to Manchester, in the old, vibrating TAROM turbo-prop: '..Over...over...over...over...', again and again, until she felt dizzy. Trevor did not attempt to cheer her, except that every now and again he would say, 'Hallo Mrs Bates,' and squeeze her knee.

'She's not bad is she? Lucky bastard!'

'Who'd have thought old Trev could pull a bird like that!'

'Oh aye, but you know why she married him, don't you? They got nothing over there. She's laughing now. Got it made. Sticks out a mile.'

'An' I bet it does, too!'

'Bet she can 'ardly walk - randy fat bugger!'

That was the conversation when, the introductions done, Trevor and Alys left the pub.

Nottingham was terrifying; Alys felt dwarfed by its

roads and precincts, and by the crowds who wore trainers, jeans and T-shirts with slogans. She clutched Trevor as he led her into all the main stores, offering to buy her anything she wanted. Awed, Alys shook her head. But in the supermarket she heaped a trolley. She pictured her mother, a stooped, brown figure queuing for bread and trying to eke out the cooking-oil ration, and knew she must not let her down. The fruit bowl was always full of bananas, and gradually Alys became accustomed to having so much, and no longer had to rush down the road to buy a bar of chocolate the moment her taste buds instructed. She told Trevor she liked this new life, and even said 'I love you' often enough to convince him. The short English sentence rolled neatly off her tongue.

She began to put on weight, and Trevor said it suited her. She learned to make shepherd's pie and his favourite dishes, but yearned to work, to be independent. There were no office jobs for her, and so Alys, too, went to work in Robinson's Christmas puddings, donning a white overall and turban with the other women, and enjoying their easy acceptance. People talked openly, chatted and teased. It was nothing like Romania. It was, she sighed, better.

Sometimes, as she packed the puddings into those brightly-coloured boxes, Alys would think of Christmas, and grief would slice into her, almost making her cry aloud. But, as the boxes wobbled down the line, she remembered how

the blue flames had lit their tiny, dark flat - transforming it. And then her fingers would fly more deftly as she became accustomed to her duty. Those hands smelt now of food, always food; the fragrance of rose, lavender would not last, no matter how often she washed.

On autumn evenings Trevor and Alys would walk by the canal, watching golden leaves drift on dirty water. With him she felt safe: he was such a huge man that just strolling by his side she felt as enveloped as she did in the king-size double bed with the pale blue Dralon padded headboard. It was comforting. Sometimes, on the way home, they would buy fish and chips or a Chinese take-away, then eat, watching television, their slippered feet resting on the tiled coffee table. 'Are you happy, Mrs B?' he sometimes asked. And Alys would say yes, sometimes with a touch of impatience, because she thought the question absurd. Then Trevor would look thoughtful and rise to make a pot of tea.

They bought a small fir tree and he took decorations from the back of the cupboard and festooned the flat with glittering chains. Alys had seen nothing like it. She twined a short length of tinsel around the two framed photographs that stood on the mantelpiece - Alys and Trevor on their wedding day, and Alys with her mother and brothers - then stood for a long time, gazing at them, until the heat from the electric fire drove her away.

When the first news came from Romania she spilt her tea on the rug, oblivious to Trevor's fussing with a cloth, and was silent long after he had turned off the rest of the programme. Trevor slapped his knee, and turned towards her with enthusiasm.

'What d'you think then, love? Who'd have thought they'd have stood up to the old bugger at last,eh?'

Alys nodded. Even at this distance the thought of people standing in the open, where they could be seen - jeering at Ceausescu, so that he faltered and stopped speaking - made her stomach dip with horror.

During the next day or two she was avid for news, watching every television bulletin, and even making Trevor go out and buy the quality newspapers so that she could pore over the line-by-line analysis. Trevor grimaced, saying they were too intellectual for him.

He rubbed his hands together and chortled, 'Couldn't help it, could they? Once your Berlin Wall went down, then the CzechsPow! All of 'em want to be like us, and you can't blame 'em - can you, pet?' Alys shook her head. She didn't want his chatter. Then he too fell silent, looking at her with that hopeful, dog-like look she remembered from last summer. She wanted him to go away.

Late on Christmas morning Alys opened her presents in a trance, pausing at last with the blue jacket she had admired in a shop window draped across her knee. She had not responded to it as he expected. Trevor looked at her, pleasure fading from his face, as she gazed into space. 'They'll be all right, Ally', he whispered.

'Oh, I'm not worried' , she snapped, then reached for the holiday TV Guide to check the time of the next news. The new jacket fell to the floor in a crackle of shiny paper.

In the silence the gentle sound of their small turkey sizzling was like interference on a screen: irritating in its lack of meaning. Trevor walked out to the kitchen to top up the water in the pan containing the Christmas pudding, then called her to look at the roasting potatoes. His voice was high and false. Alys crunched through discarded paper, and went through the ritual of meal preparation, while he warbled carols in his oddly-sweet voice.

'Romania's going to be free.. It's all over, over, over.....', was the refrain which replaced the alleluias in her mind.

At last they sat down to their Christmas meal, but ate without speaking. Usually they chatted easily; there was always something to say, and she always laughed at his jokes. Alys looked at her plate, heaped with meat, stuffing, chipolotas, perfectly cooked carrots and sprouts, and roast potatoes that were slightly burned on one side. Normally she

would have eaten with enthusiasm, the years of deprivation still whetting her appetite. But today she pushed the food about with little enthusiasm.

Trevor made her pull a cracker and crowned her with a green paper hat, the colour of the stud he still wore in his ear. The plastic cracker gift - a little pink puzzle - fell into her gravy. But still she did not smile. Desperate, he pulled his own cracker - after flexing his muscles like a comic strongman, but his hands slipped so that there was a tearing sound, but no snap.

‘Bugger!’, he said.

She shrugged.

He rose to clear the plates, willing her to get up and help. But she sat still, immersed in her own thoughts, oblivious to the clatter in the kitchen. ‘Mama?’, she thought, as if asking for guidance.

‘Close the curtains, will you, love?’, Trevor called. Without understanding why, or caring, she rose obediently and banished the unseasonal sun from the room. Then he poked his head out of the door briefly, and said, ‘It’s time for the pudden, see?’ Suddenly she remembered his huge presence in their tiny shabby flat, and the flicker of light, and the expression on her mother’s face....

‘Oh Mama...’

Alys heard her husband moving around the kitchen of their

home, and waited, her hands folded resolutely on the table before her.

‘Here y’are then, lovey’, he called, kicking the door wide and holding the plate high. Blue flames lit his fat, moon face, illuminating the soft, expectant grin, as he put the plate down before her, and she felt the warmth on her cheeks. ‘Blow ‘em out!’ he said, but Alys stared down at the eerie, running flickers - purple-blue, green and yellow, so beautiful, so magical - until at last the little conflagration died of its own accord, leaving just a brown sticky mound in the middle of a cheap plate.

When she looked up at him at last her eyes were wet. He stared back, mouth open, looking small and shrivelled suddenly, like a child who has been told that he will not, after all, play the lead in the school pantomime. ‘Ally?’, he said, hesitantly, ‘I know I’m not the cleverest bloke in the world, like, but....I want you to know I....I get it’.

She said nothing, merely moved her head to one side, like a robin listening for danger. Her eyes widened as she waited. He sat down heavily and bowed his head for a moment, before continuing. ‘I want to tell you something, love....And it might as well be now. I want to say...er....Well, now you’ll be wanting to go back, won’t you? You’ll be wanting...I mean, you’ll not be

needingme. Not any more. And it's OK, love.....I mean, I'm not much to look at, and that...'

His voice faded helplessly. There was a peculiar twist to his mouth now, as he shrugged at her, unable to speak. Alys looked at him for a very long time. He knew. She had never guessed that he knew. But in that moment of her own knowledge came the new awareness, that what was known was no longer true. And as she stared at him it was as if blue flames still danced before his face, miraculous, transforming. As heady as the rich fruit and brandy smell that rose from the plate before her.

Calmly she reached for a spoon to serve the pudding, cutting into its depths without dropping the steady gaze of recognition. He stared back. And at last her mouth curved into a smile.

'You!' she said, 'You're daft, Trev. Don't you get it, like?.....te iubesc'.



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