

## STRAWBERRY FOOL

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Stephen lets me do some of the gardening. It's all first names here. I have my own beds. They help me out with the big bags of compost. As long as I show him my receipts they let me buy whatever plants I want. My favourites are peonies. They remind me of her.

I arrive at half past eight in the morning every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I take a break for my elevens' and then I pack up at a quarter to one. I'm home for the one o'clock news. When Stephen arrives, he always salutes me. Must think I'd been a military man. I've never bothered to correct him. I was never called up on account of the accident.

It's pretty miserable weather today. They'd let me inside to have my tea and digestives I'm sure. The woman on reception has even offered in the past. But as I said to her, a little rain never did anyone any harm. She laughed and said as long as you weren't the wicked Witch of the West. She's a card that one. I'm happy perching on the upturned wheel-barrow. She shouts out the window, 'We'll have to get you a fishing rod and a gnome's hat.' I smile. I told you she was funny.

The joints are playing up today. Mustn't grumble. At eighty-seven I'm only too pleased to be alive. Many of the residents here are younger than me. It's the wet weather. Sets off my rheumatism. I know many people think autumn is a depressing time of year. I just see it as Mother Nature recharging her batteries.

I'd go conkering as a lad. I had one that just kept on winning. I must have won twenty matches with it. Then it started to crack. That was the year her family moved into the village. There were three daughters but I'd only eyes for Ellen.

Her family caused quite a stir. Their father liked his drink and was arrested a couple of times. Never seemed to be able to hold down a job. Their mother took in mending and washing and somehow kept food on the table for them. We only had two classes at our school. A husband and wife ran it in those days. She was in charge of the little ones where they just played and he taught the other class and tried to prepare us for secondary school. The male teacher gave extra lessons and homework to the ones he reckoned had a chance of getting into the grammar school. They didn't bother with me. I was bigger than all the others, even the older ones. He'd get me moving furniture and when he spotted I had a talent for growing things he let me weed the school gardens. That was until my mother found out. She marched me down to the school and tore a strip off him. I can still remember now her voice as she said at him, "I send my Thomas to school so that you can knock some sense into him. God knows I've tried. He's a kind soul but God never doled out his share of brains. If I wanted him to pull up dandelions I've plenty at home on the farm." She feared nobody. From that day the teacher tried extra hard with me but for some reason the letters made no sense to me. They were all a jumble to my eyes.

Ellen was smart. When she joined our class the teacher never had enough books for her. Her sisters were clever too, but she was the brightest. Even I could tell that. She finished everything

he set her. She'd wait by his desk while he marked her sums. She never got one wrong. My numbers book was like a one-sided game of noughts and crosses.

He used to give her jobs to do in the classroom. Ellen picked some peonies out of somebody's front garden and gave them to the teacher on his birthday. He blushed. She would count the dinner money and if he ever needed a messenger she was asked. I was struggling with my work one morning and he told Ellen to sit with me.

'Can't you do this? A big lad like you!'

I blushed.

'I could do this when I was four. How old are you? Twelve, thirteen? Have they kept you back because you're simple?'

'I'm nine. Just big for my age'

'What does your mother feed you? Whatever it is, it does the trick.' I loved the way she laughed, even if it was at my expense.

I couldn't follow when she explained how to do the sums. In the end she just told me the answers. It was strange to see ticks in my book the next day.