

Brown Sugar

Sometimes he tasted sweet when he came home. Alice would lick the sticky white powder from his neck and shoulders as Tommy stood before the sink to wash. Her mother caught her at it once, her tongue tip stretched like a kitten's towards the cream.

"Children'll change things," Mum said. But children never came and Tommy still came home dusted with sugar. He thought it was him all along, him and her a slut for him, married or not. But it was that skim of sweetness she had never gotten over since that first surprising kiss.

He worked as a maintenance fitter in the refinery, sat on his arse most days, waiting, playing cards. Those days he smelled of sweat and shag tobacco.

But when something would break (in the early days she used to pray for it to break), when some pump or valve somewhere in the dark convolution of the plant broke down, well, you see, sugar is meant to flow syrupy slow. Stopped for more than minutes, the syrup in the pipe-work crystallised into a three-dimensional sugarolly stick. And that was when it was best.

He would be tired of course and late, but a man is never that tired and not her Tommy. Earned good money too: double time on shifts like that. Those were the times they had to take the plant to pieces, flange by flange, spool by spool, and drill out and steam clean the sherbet that had packed-out end to end, from dock to crystallising pans. He'd be sticky as a toffee apple and Alice would have to change the sheets afterwards. But the taste upon her

tongue, and the sticky roughness, tacky beneath her fingers, on her tongue and sparkling in his short black hair.

They made love sometimes until the 11.08 stopped at the station outside their house and then he would fall asleep, regular as clockwork. Two goes and that was him. The doors on the railway carriages would slam journey's end and she would lie there once full of him, the sweetness still on her lips and on her fingertips. He snored.

Alice sipped her tea and watched for him at the factory gate. It was a bright day for October. The buddleia beside the railway-line had passed their best. The spikes of blossom were rusted by traffic and time and the last tatters of the summer butterflies lingered beyond the chain-link fence like drunks locked in a benighted pub.

At 08.30 a pulse of activity burst from the factory gate and slid towards the railway bridge. She could see Tommy's big head bobbing above the others. Time to go.

She pulled-to the front door and clipped across Albert Road. A jet swooped low towards City Airport, its white belly slow and smooth like a big fish sudden strange surreal against the same old city sky. Her footsteps chopped up the stairs of the bridge and there she waited for him, with the gritty wind hustling her clothes. The blokes bundled past nodding smiles.

"Morning," she said.

"Hi," Tommy grinned. "Payday."

“Ooh. A wealthy man. I may reconsider.”

“You’ll be lucky girl.”

“Your breakfast’s on. Here’s the key. Remember your working tonight. Bye love.”

“Bye.”

She pecked him on the cheek. He smelled of mineral oil and swarfega. He groped her bum in case his mates were looking.

The long brick walls of the refinery sealed the right hand side of Factory Rd. as the chain-link fence of the railway defined the left. The vagrant bushes crammed against the wires. Wrappers and fag packets drifted in around the concrete fence posts. A big blue molasses tanker chugged through the gears, accelerating clumsily away from the factory gates and towards the Woolwich Ferry Pier. Escaping steam bundled up in turbulent white plumes above the grey corrugated sheds. Alice joined the short queue at the gate, clocked in and meandered through IT and dispatch towards the production offices.

Roddy Parks was already at his desk. She could see him through the beveled -glass partition of their little cubicle. He had logged on and “fired up” his spreadsheet. By the time she brought him his coffee in ten minutes he would have dropped last night’s data into their allotted cells like captured beetles in a display case.

“Trends you see,” he would say. “There must be trends.”

Alice could never see them. The data points were scattered across his acetates like stars in the milky way. “Ooh yes,” she would say, “the Big Dipper.” But they were just stars, weren’t they? They weren’t even close to each other.

Milk and no sugars, Roddy takes, in a big pottery mug his wife bought for him. She stirred his tea and pushed the door open with her hip.

Roddy was all shy and gangly and fair, quite cute and far too young.

“Tea.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Looks like a better month.”

“Does it?”

“Yes. If we’re lucky we can get through a whole month without that wear out problem on train A. Something seems to trip it around every 28-30 days.”

“Maybe it has a period,” she said.

Roddy looked abashed and Alice was amused.

They had sent them both on a course. Reliability centred maintenance. Rational strategies to maximize plant up time and optimize total cost of ownership. God knows why they thought she should go on the course. Kept up their professional development statistics, she supposed. Not that she felt much developed. It had been in a big hotel near Crawley. Roddy got drunk and chased her around the furniture for an hour before she wore him out and made her get away.

“Reliability centred maintenance,” Tommy sneered. “Why teach you about maintenance? It’s all about lubrication,” he smirked. “Get the right lubrication and everything is smooth and sweet as a nut.”

Tommy showed her on one of the pumps. He pointed out where they added the oil and the little tanks some of them had to store the oil so that it dripped continuously into the moving parts, keeping them slick and safe and quiet.

So now they had these graphs and this spreadsheet that she had built. Each morning Roddy filled it with readings the nightshift recorded on a sheaf of forms. The graphs went upstairs at 09.15 to the daily management meeting. Not much came back down.

Alice printed out the graphs for Roddy and put them in a manila folder on his desk.

Her mother got her a start on the plant. Her mother worked in packing. Her father worked the docks before they were filled in. She had been to college though and her dad didn’t approve of her starting on the refinery instead of looking for a proper job up in the city.

“You could have a mobile phone and wear a suit,” he said. “If you won’t go all the way to the City, you could work at Canary Wharf.”

Instead, as Alice liked to say, she took Manhattan : Manhattan Wharf in Woolwich that is. Just like her mother and grandmother before her. And Tommy’s dad and Tommy’s dad’s dad.

“It can’t last,” Dad said.

And that is what the management said:

- constraints on access for road transport,
- iniquitous E.U. subsidies on sugar beet,
- ageing plant,
- high labour cost-base.

They introduced initiatives with champions and task forces. They upgraded the IT systems, introduced quality circles and reliability centred maintenance. They developed a balanced business scorecard.

The plant remained. The ships came in from Mauritius as they always had and the raw cane sugar stacked in the dockside warehouse like sweet tawny dunes on a fairytale beach. The team (they were told they were a team) shoveled it up and melted it down and refined it and re-crystalised it and bagged it white and pure and sparkling for the shops.

At least she didn’t go to packing. She got an office job and wore a suit. She had to get her own mobile phone.

It rang.

“Hi lover.”

“How d’you know it was me?” Tommy asked.

“It comes up on the phone, stupid.”

“Oh. Where’s the marmalade?”

“There isn’t any. I forgot.”

“Time of the month?”

“No. Just forgot.”

“I’ll go to the shop.”

“Good boy.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Who’s that?” Roddy asked as he came back in with a bundle of papers from the production meeting.

”Tommy,” she said. “Can’t find the marmalade.”

“The wonders of modern technology. Well. It’s that time again.”

“What time?”

”Christmas is coming.”

“Christmas is coming. Got it.”

“Can you take this revised production schedule down to the site. It’s not urgent.”

“So I guess we’re not closing,” she said.

“Not before Christmas. But don’t quote me on that.”

“I won’t,” she smiled.

Now there was one trend you could rely upon. Every year at Christmas time the demand for brown sugar increases. All those festive tables with their little bowl of proper demerara sugar for coffee and for cakes, soft and sweet and closer to the cane.

It had always amused her that the public didn't realize that they had to put the colour back. All that Caribbean softness was just the molasses they had carefully extracted to make the sugar pure and white squirted back and mixed in again to make the sugar darker and more expensive. So they paid to take the colour out then paid again to put it back. Still, it was nice to have something a little bit different from the purity of the everyday. Darker like sin and somehow sweeter.

Alice left the trip down to the site office until after lunch. She cleared most of her week's backlog by twelve so she could afford a long leisurely stroll around the plant, safe in her hard hat and her thick Perspex spectacles.

Steam flared and welding torches sizzled in the dark Victorian vaults above her head. Condensation dripped into puddles on the unsealed concrete floor. She knew many routes through the pipe-work and vessels to the site production office. Men she had known in primary school nodded and waved as she passed or stopped to ask after Tommy or her mum. Sometimes she would just stand still as though to wonder at all this steel pipe routed through the space according to some clever plan and all of it pulsing with the sugar syrup. She paused for a moment to close the needle-valve on PX-1265-A.

When she reached the production shack she knocked and went straight in. Bert Appleton, the supervisor, was lounging back in the old swivel chair, his boots off and overalls unbuttoned, flicking through the Financial Times.

“Christmas coming,” Alice said. “Brown sugar.”

“Brown sugar eh?”

“Yep. “

“I guess that means we won’t be closing down,” Bert said.

“I couldn’t possibly comment.”

“That’ll be the improved productivity from all that rational maintenance you and young Mr. Parks have been giving us.”

“Oh, almost certainly,” she said, and smiled.

Alice hung the new production schedule on the clipboard.

“Cup of tea?” Bert said.

“Quick one. Early closing Friday. Flexitime.”

“Office staff.”

“Sorry...Milk. Three sugars.”

“Sweet tooth, eh?”

“Yeah. Sugar in the morning, sugar in the evening.”

“Sugar all through the night. Yeah. You’d think you’d be fuckin’ sick of it working here. You don’t put on weight then?”

“Exercise.”

“Sitting up there in the office?”

“I come to see you, Albert.” Alice glanced at her watch. Ten minutes.

“Haven’t seen Tommy of late,” Albert said.

“Constant nightshift.”

“That’s hard.”

“Well, it’s not as though we’re newly weds and it’s better money.”

”Still. Is he on tonight?”

“Yeah. But he’s off the weekend. Our anniversary. Twelve years.”

“Christ. That long? That’s good going these days.”

“Yes. Twelve,” she glances up at the calendar and the clock, checks it against her watch.

Fifteen minutes, she notes. “And now I need to go back,” she said. “See you later.”

It was still sunny outside. She could tell by the light that filtered through the grimy skylight windows. The passage way was quiet. Twenty minutes was usually enough. Already the pump had begun to make a quirky grinding noise. She re-opened the lube oil supply to the pump and headed back to the office block humming.