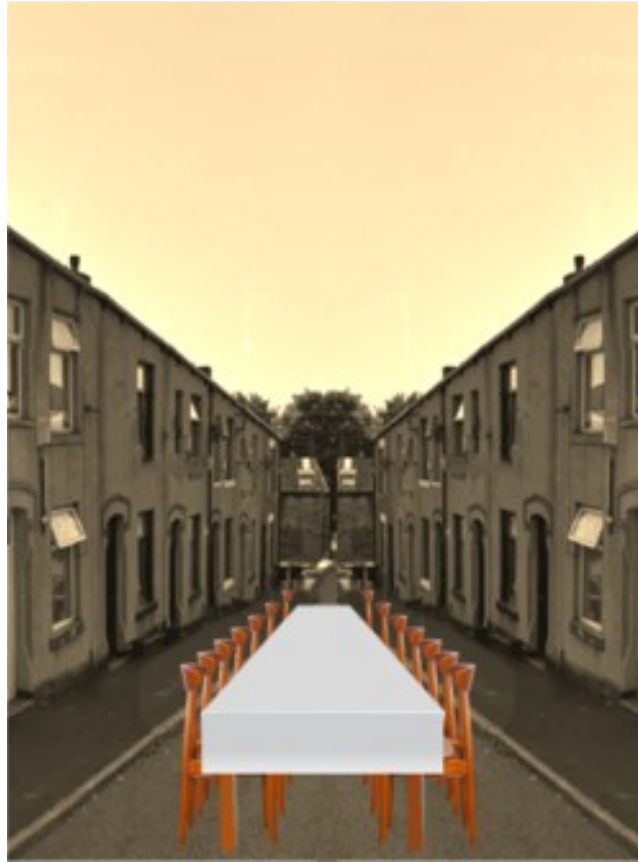


SAVING OF CINNAMON STREET



The banquet table ran the length of Cinnamon Street up to Nugent's Newsagents and Groceries, which wrapped around the corner into Tarragon Street.

Arrangements were well in hand for street party to celebrate the coronation of young Princess Elizabeth. Mr Thackeray, the local postmaster from Number 3, had appointed himself organiser and set up a planning committee.

Mr Thackeray was a stickler for protocol and had applied to the local council for a permit to close both ends of Cinnamon Street, even though only one household currently owned a motor vehicle. The permit was delivered together with two road signs which had a tone of authority that made Mr Thackeray's heart soar.

**NO ADMITTANCE TO MOTOR VEHICLES
BY ORDER OF THE TOWN COUNCIL**

With only one day left, all the stops were pulled. By late afternoon the banquet table was bedecked with crisp white table cloths. Red, white and blue bunting fluttered from street light to street light, Union Jacks flapped from upstairs windows and Princess Elizabeth smiled enchantingly from the downstairs one. The table would seat thirty-seven and there would be plenty of food, tea and squash for everyone. There were actually forty residents living in Cinnamon Street. But more about that later.

In the days preceding the party, the womenfolk had been busy baking. Sugar was still rationed but, for the occasion, the government had allowed each household an additional pound as well as an additional quarter pound of butter. Every old, battered biscuit tin was brought into service and filled with scones and fairy cakes, the latter topped with icing and hundreds and thousands.

Late afternoon was a frenzy of sandwich making, with fillings of meat and fish paste. Dozens of flaky sausage rolls were baked, eggs were hard boiled and bowls of jelly were topped with creamy custard. Finally, everything was wrapped in greaseproof paper.

Before nightfall, a procession carried the food to Nugent's. Mr Nugent had a new cold store in the yard behind the shop and had allowed the food to be kept there overnight. He was also donating thirty-seven bags of crisps, three boxes of Ritz crackers and six of Dairylea cheese triangles.

Once everything was deposited, Mr Thackeray walked home with the other householders, a swagger in his gait. With him at the helm, the party would be one that everyone would remember.

His assumption was correct, although not quite in the way he thought.

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Inside Number 10 Tarragon Street, Penny sighed as she watched her brother push up from the sofa, throw out a loud yawn and rub his knuckles into bleary eyes. Teddy was seven, trailing Penny by four years. He was small for his age

with a little round face, a mop of black hair and a cow lick that persisted in curling around one eyebrow. Penny was small too and a typical English rose, with golden hair and bright blue eyes. She was a beauty in the making.

“Pen, I’m hungry.” Teddy’s voice was as thin as his body.

She folded their blankets over the back of the sofa and scratched herself sleepily. “I’ll make breakfast. It’s a good thing there’s no school today, else we’d be late.”

He grinned up at her. “No school. Yippee!”

Penny walked into the scullery and peered into the cupboard. “That’s right. Princess Elizabeth is being crowned queen today and she’s given everybody a holiday.”

Teddy sighed. “Everyone in school’s having street parties. Except us. What’s for breakfast?” He followed her but the expectant look on his face withered when she brought a pot of jam down.

She turned and smiled. “Bread and jam.”

“Again.” He dug his hands into his pockets and pushed out his lower lip.

“You like bread and jam.”

“Not every day.”

Penny bit back a terse reply. He was still a baby. He didn’t understand why there was nothing else. Or that this jam was special. It had a history but not one of which she was proud. Two weeks ago she had nipped next door to Mr Nugent’s, to ask if he had any stale bread. When she reached the door a beautiful Indian lady in a long flowing dress emerged, a wicker basket over her arm. Amidst the groceries was a jar of rich red jam. When the lady turned to return her purse to her handbag, Penny reached forward and grabbed the jam. The lady felt the basket bounce and turned back quickly.

Penny froze and stared at her with wide frightened eyes. The lady’s gaze dropped to the basket, moved to Penny’s hand then up to her stricken face. To her astonishment the lady gave her the sweetest smile she had ever seen and

walked off down the street. For a moment Penny stared at her in disbelief then turned on her heels and sprinted the short distance home.

It was a lovely jam, a special jam. Full of strawberries and kindness. Now, each morning, she carefully removed dots of mould before spreading it sparingly on their bread.

“We have egg and bacon sometimes when Mum’s here.”

It was three weeks since she had left. In the heart of a child it was a lifetime. Sometimes she would disappear for days on end but never this long. “Well, when she comes home, you can have some. Until then, it’s bread and jam. Now, sit down and eat.”

“When is Mum coming home, Pen?”

Penny swivelled her eyes. Would he ever stop asking and would he ever stop calling her Mum? Penny always called her by her name, Doris, because she was a name, not a mother. It was Penny who looked after Teddy, who kept him clean, read him stories, put him to bed, fed him, kissed him better when he was hurt and took him to and from their school every day. Penny did it because Doris wouldn’t.

Once a week Doris sent Penny to the Post Office for their child benefit. Penny treasured that errand. It meant she could squirrel away some coppers so that she and Teddy could sneak out of school every dinnertime and buy two twopenn'orth of chips, of which he always got the lion’s share. The money Penny handed Doris would be squandered on beer and cigarettes.

When the money was gone and before the next payment was due, Doris would bring a man home from the pub. He would touch Doris’s lady bits and look at Penny in a funny way that knotted her insides. Then he would manhandle the giggling, drunken woman upstairs and Penny would take Teddy out in the yard where they would stay until the man stopped making noises and the front door slammed.

The day after, Doris always had money. She would send Penny to Mr Nugent’s for half a dozen eggs and three thick slices of bacon and the sizzling

and mouth watering smells would make the children's empty stomachs grumble and growl. Afterwards, Doris would buy beer, cigarettes and, if anything was left over, new clothes for herself. Once the beer was drunk and the fags smoked she would pace the house, gathering rage around her like dark swollen clouds. When the storm broke, she would leave with her high heels and her painted face and her tight dress with its plunging neckline that barely covered her heavy, veined breasts. Hours later she would return with a different man and they would go upstairs and the bedroom door would slam and he would make noises and he would leave and the cycle started all over again. Penny felt nothing but relief that Doris was gone.

Then, a few days ago, when she was searching for stray coins in Doris's bedroom, she found the benefit book under the bed. It was like all her birthdays and Christmases had come at once. She was astonished that Doris hadn't taken it. Now she had money to feed Teddy and the meters and herself. But it was only natural to muse about Doris's whereabouts. Maybe she was dead, seen off by one of the men in a back alley, too impatient to get her home, too mean to pump her body with drink before he pumped it with his lust. Or was she alive somewhere, doing favours for gin and Woodbines? Penny didn't care. Doris had left her space empty and Penny had filled it with herself and Teddy.

That first week the men turned up, hammering and clamouring, wanting their piece of Doris. Penny felt compelled to let them in, knowing next morning she could buy eggs and bacon and a little something to drown self-loathing. But the door stayed shut and the men went away and never came back.

The terraces in Tarragon street were early Victorian, no longer fit for human habitation and earmarked for demolition. The houses were nothing like the smart Edwardian terraces in Cinnamon Street, which had bathrooms and inside toilets and three bright airy bedrooms. In stark contrast, upstairs in Penny and Teddy's house was uninhabitable. The two

bedrooms were black with mould and had made Teddy ill. Now they slept downstairs, top to tail, on the sofa. In the past week, the people who had given Tarragon Street its heart were sucked up and spat out into a brand new high-rise block of flats across town. Because Penny never answered the door, the men from the Council with their grey suits and bowler hats and clipboards ticked the house as empty, too busy and uncaring to feel the pulse still beating inside.

So no-one bothered them any more. No one knocked on the door. No-one asked questions. But Penny knew that when the Greys turned off the water and the gas and the electricity and the bulldozers arrived and the wrecking balls started swinging like giant toys, they would have to go too. She didn't know where but it had to be somewhere they wouldn't be noticed. Otherwise she and Teddy would be pulled apart, scattered in different directions and never find each other again.

Penny ached inside. Her ways were adult but her heart was still a child and it needed a mum. A proper mum, like the girls in her class had. A mum who was clean and smart and pretty and kind and funny. A mum that smelled of Chanel no 5, like the adverts in Doris's magazines. A mum who didn't have a belly full of booze, who didn't have her lady bits defiled, who never had strangers making noises upstairs. A mum who would give them egg and bacon all the time, if they wanted. A mum who would let a hungry child steal a pot of jam.

She curled her mouth upwards and tried to lift the smile to her eyes. "Soon, Teddy. Now, eat up."

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No one knew much about Mr Pickering, apart from the fact that he was very old and had lived in Cinnamon Street longer than anyone. Nobody bothered with him either. He was invisible, sewn into the fabric of street life, like street

lamps and donkey stoned steps. For that reason, with no malice intended, he hadn't been invited to the party.

Early each morning, he would wash and dress and leave his house, then lean heavily on his walking frame and make his way slowly up the road to Nugent's. He bought the same things from there every day. An ounce of butter for morning toast, a tin of Heinz tomato soup for dinner and two slices of ham for a sandwich at teatime. On Mondays and Fridays he bought a pint of milk and on Wednesdays, a large Hovis.

Mr Pickering walked in the road because he couldn't navigate his frame along the pavement. The cracked flags overlapped like tectonic plates, creating a hostile terrain that snagged the ends of his frame and stubbed his toes, pressed up against the thin leather of his shoes. More than once his frame tilted and he had teetered. If he fell, he knew he wouldn't get up. He felt safe on the road. It was straight and level and afforded him safe passage to and from Nugent's.

This morning, Mr Pickering carefully lowered his frame, then himself, from the doorstep. When he settled on the pavement, his eyebrows bunched. To his left, the street had a lengthily worded no entry sign. To the right, leading up to Nugent's, was the banquet table for the coronation party. But now there were chairs along it, jutting out towards the kerb.

He muttered under his breath, then looked across the road. Mr and Mrs Singh were standing outside their house, looking towards the shop. Mrs Singh spotted Mr Pickering, nudged her husband and they smiled and waved. They did this every time they saw him. He liked that - it made him feel visible - and he would wave back cheerily, as he did now. He often saw them leaving for work each morning, in their nice clothes and their nice motor car but he never saw any children. Sometimes, at the weekend, if she was attending to the pots of flowers by her front door and a woman passed with a pram, he would see, from his parlour window, the sadness in her eyes as she followed their progress.

Mr Pickering's brow gathered into deeper lines as he stared up the road again. There was nothing else for it but to walk across and ask his neighbours if they wouldn't mind moving the chairs so that he could reach Mr Nugent's.

He dropped himself gingerly off the kerb and skirted the edge of the table. When he reached the other side, he settled his breath and raised his hat. "Good morning Mrs Singh, Mr Singh. Sorry to bother you but I can't get to the shop." Mr Pickering waved the hat towards the end of the street before replacing it on his head. "I'd be ever so grateful if you would help me move the chairs. It's my walking frame, you see." He nodded to it, in case they hadn't noticed. "It's too wide to get past them"

Mrs Singh's smile was an explosion of sunshine. "Of course. We'd be delighted."

He blinked. "Thank you, Mrs Singh."

She answered as her husband stepped forward to help George turn his frame. "Oh, please call me Divya."

He rolled the name around in his mouth before repeating it. "Divya. What a beautiful name."

"Why, thank you. It's Hindu. It means divine brilliance."

"It matches your smile." Mr Pickering realised he was grinning. Was he flirting with her? He blushed and fumbled with his frame as they approached the first chair.

She indicated her husband. "This is Hemil."

"Delighted to meet you. I'm George Pickering."

Mr Singh was very handsome, so handsome in fact, that the women in Cinnamon Street couldn't fathom why they were childless. There had been many confessions shared amongst them to the effect that, if they were lucky enough to be married to Mr Singh, they'd be popping one out every nine months.

Hemil moved his wife gently to one side and moved the first chair away. He replaced it once George shuffled past. "I see your name is that of our late beloved King."

George looked surprised. "You admire the Royal Family?"

Divya walked ahead and moved the next chair. She gave him a surprised look, "Of course we do." She waited until he passed and pushed the second chair back. "Hemil was in the Indian army. He fought alongside the British during the war."

George looked up at Hemil and dropped his head every so slightly. "Thank you for your service, sir."

Hemil nodded back with equal solemnity. "My willing duty, George."

As they continued their journey, George looked ahead at a crowd gathering around Mr Nugent's doorway. "What's going on here, then?"

Hemil answered. "Our next door neighbour, Mr Thackeray, was summoned earlier. The food for the street party was left in Mr Nugent's cold store last night and it was found ransacked this morning. Apparently much of it is ruined."

George knitted his brows. "Oh dear. That's dreadful. Simply dreadful. Your food as well?"

Hemil's nostrils flared. "No. We offered to contribute but we were told it wasn't necessary."

George waited for him to move the next chair and noticed the look he exchanged with his wife. Hemil continued, flattening his voice to control his anger. "Divya spent many evenings cooking for it."

George waited for the next chair. He glanced at Divya. She pressed her lips together and kept her eyes lowered. He asked hesitantly, "What happened?"

Hemil replied. "Mr Thackeray told my wife that they didn't want foreign food on the table for the Queen's Coronation party. That it wasn't appropriate."

This greatly upset Divya, as you can imagine. We decided that if our food wasn't welcome then neither were we."

"That's disgraceful behaviour from Mr Thackeray. There's no excuse for such rudeness and ignorance. You fought for King and country." George hung his head sadly. "I'm saddened and ashamed of my own countryman."

There were only three more chairs to traverse. They were already within earshot of angry voices.

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"You offered to put all the food in your fancy new cold store. All of it. Now you're telling us half of it's ruined?"

"I know and I'm sorry. The phone rang straight after you left. I went to answer it. Then with one thing and another," Mr Nugent looked around, eyes pleading. His voice sagged. His shoulders followed. "I forgot to go and lock it."

One of the women shouted angrily, "What are we supposed to do now? It's half past eight. The party's supposed to start at one o'clock. We've no sodding sandwiches, no sausage rolls, no hard boiled eggs and no trifle. This is all your fault, you stupid man."

Mr Nugent's face folded into itself. Up until then, the aggression had been verbal but now he could feel the situation escalating. Any minute he'd be chased down the street with pitchforks and burning torches. In desperation, he raised his hands and his voice. "I can't do anything. The damage is done. I can't apologise enough."

"Damn right you can't." This was from Mr Thackeray. "I asked you to do one simple thing. Just for one night. Keep our food safe. That's all. You couldn't even do that without bugging it up. You useless sod."

Mr Nugent deflated like a burst balloon. This couldn't have happened at a worse time. Today was the anniversary of the day in 1943 when a stray bomb, meant for the munitions factory, had scored a direct hit on the house belonging to his wife's family. Hilda, his wife, had been visiting with their

little rescue dog, Mitzy. Everyone was killed instantly. In that second, when the bomb detonated, time stood still. When the next second ticked, the world changed forever. You see, Hilda had found out she was pregnant and was there to share the exciting news. Mr Nugent had been too busy in the shop to accompany her.

He nearly didn't survive the shock, the grief and the guilt. He contemplated suicide but threw that thought down and stamped on it hard because the greatest thing he could do for Hilda, for their unborn child, for Mitzy, was to stay alive and live the life they wouldn't. But on each anniversary he allowed himself time to grieve. He looked at the angry crowd now and felt his heart being trampled over.

At this juncture George cleared the final chair and carried on until he arrived at the back of the crowd. Divya stopped too but Hemil continued through until he was standing behind Mr Thackeray. Everyone turned to face him and a sigh rippled softly through the women.

Mr Thackeray spun round. Mr Singh slipped his hands casually into the pockets of his smart slacks and bent until his nose was almost touching Mr Thackeray's. "What seems to be the problem, Mr Thackeray?"

"This idiot," He took a step back and jabbed his thumb in Mr Nugent's direction, "Forgot to lock the door of the cold store last night. Now everything's ruined. The day's ruined."

Mr Singh tutted and straightened. "It'll only be ruined if you let it. You're wasting time, standing here castigating Mr Nugent."

Everyone eyed each other and shrugged. A few heads bobbed in agreement. Mr Thackeray drew himself up to his full height but he still only reached Hemil's chin. He glowered. "Oh, very profound, I must say. Thank you for your valuable input. If you've nothing else to offer, perhaps you'd like to go home."

"I have actually." Mr Singh turned to Mr Nugent. "Would you mind showing me what's happened, so I can perhaps offer a solution?"

Mr Nugent nodded vigorously, grateful for the chance to escape. He stepped back and extended his hand “Please, come through the shop.”

“Thank you.” Mr Singh turned to his wife. “Will you be alright here for a moment?”

Divya placed a hand gently on George’s arm. “Yes, thank you Hemil. Mr Pickering will look after me.”

George grew in stature. “You carry on, Sir. I shan't leave your good lady’s side.”

Mr Thackeray twitched, looked furtively around the crowd then rolled his shoulders back. “Excuse me. I should go too. As party organiser.”

Someone muttered, “No show without Punch.”

Laughter followed Mr Thackeray as he followed the two men inside.

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Teddy scurried through the back door. He was hugging a biscuit tin to his hollow chest. Penny turned and nearly dropped the plate she was washing in the sink. “Teddy, what’ve you got there?”

She reached over and pulled the lid off. Her eyes widened. “Golly. It’s full of scones. Where did you find it?”

“Next door. The shop. I heard noises this morning when I went to the privy. I looked over the wall and I saw a big yellow dog at that new shed of Mr Nugent’s and there was food all over the ground and she was eating it. I think it was Goldie, you know, from Number seven? I called her but she got scared and ran off.” He looked at Penny for approval, pride on his face. “So I climbed over and went inside and got this for us.”

Penny’s voice fractured. “Teddy, you can’t take things that don’t belong to you. It’s stealing.”

“But...”

“Teddy, you have to put them back. D’you hear?” Penny sighed as his face crumpled. She gathered him in her arms, guilt nudging her as she remembered the jam. She lay her cheek on his head, ignoring the tears and snot soaking into her top. “Tell you what, shall we just take one each from the tin and put it back? I’m sure they won’t miss them. How does that sound?”

A protracted sniff and a little voice reverberated against her tummy. “Alright.”

In the yard, Penny stood on a chair and helped Teddy over the wall. There were gaps between the bricks where the pointing had come away, that provided a foothold for little feet. When he landed on the other side, Penny raised herself on tiptoe and peered over. She gasped in horror at the sight that met her. Spread around the ground was ripped greaseproof paper, the shredded remains of sandwiches, sausage rolls and hard-boiled eggs, together with an inedible landscape of jelly hills and custard valleys. Poor Goldie. She must have been starving. Penny dropped the container to Teddy and waited anxiously while he ran inside the store and returned it to a shelf.

“Got you, you little tea-leaf!”

Teddy stepped out in time to see Mr Thackeray bearing down on him. He screamed then burst into tears.

Penny shouted from the top of the wall. “Leave him alone. He’s putting them back.”

Mr Thackeray loomed over Teddy, grabbed his shoulders and shook him hard. “You dirty little tyke. You’re going to get a bloody good hiding.”

Mr Nugent and Hemil appeared. Hemil called angrily. “What are you doing? Let him go!”

Mr Thackeray ignored him. He grabbed hold of one of Teddy’s ears, dragged him from the shed and marched him between the two men and through the shop. Mr Nugent and Hemil strode after him. He emerged and shoved the boy ahead, still holding his ear. Teddy was wailing by this time. Mr Thackeray looked triumphantly around the sea of faces. “Here’s your culprit.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Hemil arrived at his side. “There’s no evidence to suggest he’s responsible for the mess and, from what I could see, the tins are intact.”

“Course he is. Caught him in the act coming back for more. Look at him. Scruffy little git. Wanton vandalism, that’s what it is. The sandwiches, the sausage rolls, the trifle, the eggs. All destroyed.”

“Let that boy go, this instant.”

Everyone turned surprised eyes to Mrs Singh. She steepled her hands towards them, then spread her arms. The crowd parted like the Red Sea. She moved gracefully between them to where Mr Thackeray stood. “Remove your hand from this boy’s ear immediately. If you do not, I will telephone the police and have you arrested for child cruelty.”

Mr Thackeray stared at Mrs Singh and jutted his jaw. “We caught him stealing. He’s no good. Neither is his sister. Look at them. Two dirty, shabby feral kids sneaking round, robbing and thieving. Need locking up, the pair of them.”

At that moment, Penny careered round the corner of Tarragon Street crying hysterically, her face streaked with tears. She raced up to Teddy and tried to free him. Teddy screamed as he was pulled to and fro, his ear still in Mr Thackeray’s vice-like grip.

Mrs Singh took a step nearer and kept Mr Thackeray in her sights. “If you don’t let him go, I will personally see to it that you are charged with assault.”

Mr Thackeray hesitated for a moment, then reluctantly released him. Penny dragged her brother away and he huddled inside her arms. She turned to Mrs Singh and spoke through her tears. “Thank you. He didn’t mean any harm. He’s only a little boy.” She hiccuped between each word.

Divya rested a hand on the shoulder of each child. “Come with me, both of you. We will have a cup of tea and talk without all these people staring.”

Everyone looked away in different directions, then someone threw out a question that none else had thought to ask. “What about the party? What’re we going to do?”

Mrs Singh looked into the crowd as she walked the children through and smiled when she spotted the woman who had spoken. “It’s not the end of the world. My husband has said that the tins are fine. All you have to do is make more sandwiches, boil more eggs. It really is that simple. It’s still early. You’ll have plenty of time if you hurry. Mr Nugent, please will you serve these good people with what they need?” She cast her eyes around the rest of the residents. “The children are expecting a party. Don’t disappoint them.”

The crowd soaked up her positivity and determination. One by one they peeled away into Mr Nugent's shop.

“The bread’s just been delivered too. Thanks, Mrs Singh.” He smiled gratefully at Divya and politely pushed his way inside.

Divya turned to Mr Pickering. “Would you like us to walk you home? I think you’ll be queuing a long time for your shopping, and you’ve been standing for quite a while now. You must be tired. Why don’t you come in for a cup of tea as well?”

George’s face lit up. “That’s very kind of you, Divya. I’d love to.”

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Fred Nugent put the closed sign on the door. It was only half past eleven but he had served the last of the residents and he was in need of a rest and a cup of tea. He walked quickly through to the kitchen and filled the kettle. He set it on the gas burner and blew out a long, heavy breath. It had been a strange time, while the shop was filling. A whisper had started, like the wind rustling through autumn leaves. When he announced that there would be no charge because he’d been at fault, everyone had shaken their heads and batted his

words away. One by one, they paid for their purchases, shook his hand and left.

It was only later he discovered the reason. Mr Pickering knew about Mr Nugent's family and that today was the tenth anniversary. He had quietly imparted this to a few of the crowd next to where he was standing and suggested they let the others know and perhaps show Mr Nugent some charity on such a difficult day.

Fred picked up the whistling kettle and carried it over to the teapot. He found he was smiling. If he lived to be a hundred he would never understand people but he was overwhelmingly grateful and touched by what the residents had done.

The spout hovered over the pot as he tipped his head to one side. There were noises coming from the yard. He opened the back door and recognised the intruder immediately. It was Goldie, the labrador from Number 7 Tarragon Street. Her owner, Mrs Baldwin, had moved to the new flats and she'd told him before she left that her sister, over in Saffron Street, had offered to take Goldie. Fred assumed the dog must have escaped. He stepped into the yard, approached her cautiously and spoke gently to her. Goldie recognised him and her tail began to wag. Before long she was in the kitchen, lapping thirstily at a bowl of water.

Fred found a length of rope in one of the drawers and tied it to her collar. "Come on, Goldie. Let's take you back."

A block away, on Saffron Street, he smiled at the woman who opened the door to him. "Hello. I think this is your dog."

She glanced down and up. "No."

He tilted his head. "You're Mrs Baldwin's sister?"

"Yes?"

"She told me you were taking Goldie when she moved to her new flat."

"Yes?"

"Did you let her out?"



“No. I threw her out. Last week. Told my sister she escaped.”

Fred’s breath fractured. “You threw her out? To fend for herself?”

She shrugged and shut the door in his face.

He raised his fist to pound on it and tell her exactly what he thought of her. He lowered it. What was the point? He looked at Goldie. She was sitting by his side, regarding him with trusting eyes, her tail swishing over the ground. Fred’s rage evaporated. He smiled. The smile widened. It became a chuckle. The chuckle became a laugh. “Come on, Goldie. Let’s go home.”

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Mr Pickering was sitting on the sofa, eyes closed, head resting against a plump cushion. He had finished the hot, sweet milky tea Divya had made him and his shirt, speckled with toast crumbs, was rising and falling as he snored gently.

Over at the table, legs swinging back and forth, Penny and Teddy were devouring hot buttered toast. Between bites, Penny answered questions delicately put to her by Divya. Her dad had died in the war when she was a baby. Doris took up with a GI called Sam who was stationed nearby. He was really nice and looked after her and Doris, but when the war ended he went back to America. Soon after, Doris found out she was pregnant. Teddy was born the following year.

Divya concealed her shock when Penny, her voice hidden inside a whisper, told her about the drinking, the men, Doris’s comings and goings. She shot a quick glance at her brother and leaned closer to Divya. “She went off again three weeks ago and not been back since.”

“Three weeks? You’ve been on your own for three weeks? Has no-one been to visit you? A teacher from your school? Someone from children’s services?”

“Nobody knows. We’re still going to school. I try to make sure we’re clean and tidy but it’s not easy and this year I start big school but I don’t know what I’m supposed to do about that and what will happen to Teddy.” Penny’s voice wobbled and two fat tears escaped.

Divya produced a handkerchief. “That’s enough for now. Here, blow your nose and wipe your eyes. Not in that order, though.”

Penny managed a wan smile. She opened her mouth, closed it then opened it again. “I’m sorry I took your jam.”

Divya’s face softened. “Your need was greater. Did you like it?”

“It was the best thing I’ve ever eaten.”

“Good.” Divya ruffled her hair and looked across at Teddy. He was in his own little world, hands clutching his toast, head lowering every now and again to lick the butter that dripped down his fingers. Hemil had been silent, letting his wife take control, knowing she had the compassion, empathy and diplomacy to deal with these children. Now, he sat forward, leaned on the table and laced his fingers under his chin. “Divya?”

She looked at him with a smile.

“Can I have a word?”

She nodded, patted Penny’s hand and followed Hemil into the front parlour. He closed the door behind them and let his thoughts continue to tumble round in his head. An illness in Divya’s youth had rendered her unable to bear children. Here, in this very house, were two fatherless children who had also been deserted by their mother. They needed a safe environment where they would be properly looked after. Hemil took her hands, pressed them to his lips then against his heart. “What would you say if I suggested making some enquiries about fostering Penny and Teddy?”

Divya stared at him, her eyes wide. Her mouth dropped open.

“It’s up to you - I know that you enjoy working with me in the pharmacy...”

She shook her head, a little laugh escaped and she threw her arms around his neck. “Oh, my darling, you read my mind. I would love to foster them. I’m sure you will soon find someone to replace me. Bringing up children is the most important job in the world, to raise them to be good people who will make the world a better place and...”

Hemil kissed her.

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Penny watched them go with trepidation. Were they going to hand them over to the Greys? She looked at Teddy and her thoughts cleared. If they were put into care, he would be looked after far better than she ever could. He would grow big and strong and forget the bad days and the sister who couldn’t give him what he needed. She pressed her hands between her knees and waited. Her head jerked up when Divya and Hemil’s returned.

Divya’s honey brown eyes were twinkling. “Right, children. First of all, you are both staying here tonight.”

Hemil’s eyes were as bright. Penny’s heart began to quicken. Divya spoke again, looking at each child in turn. “You are far too young to be without a responsible adult and there is no way we are letting you return to that dreadful house in Tarragon Street. Now, because your mother has left you on your own and you don’t know when, or even if, she will come back, Hemil and I want you to stay with us for a while. Would you like that?”

Teddy fixed her with saucer eyes. His mouth fell open, half chewed toast inside.

Penny’s eyes shot from Divya to Hemil to Teddy to Divya. “Stay here? With you? Do you mean it?”

“Yes, we do and what’s more, to ensure you have a proper home in which to grow up, we are going to apply to the authorities to foster you. Would you like that too?”

“What’s foster?” Teddy looked around, not understanding this grown up talk. His bottom lip quivered.

Hemil leaned forward, gathered him up, sat back and rocked him gently. “It means, Teddy, that we will look after you, like a Mummy and Daddy would.”

Penny looked joyful. She burst into emotional tears and pressed the handkerchief to her eyes. Divya pulled her onto her knee and hugged her.

The door bell sounded.

Hemil pushed his chair away. “I’ll go.” He walked into the hall, Teddy clinging to him like a limpet. A moment later there were voices and he returned. Behind them was Mr Thackeray’s wife and behind her, rolling his cap nervously in his hands, was Mr Thackeray. Mrs Thackeray was holding a bundle of clothes in her arms. She nodded pleasantly at Divya. “Hello, Mrs Singh. I hope you won’t think me presumptuous but I noticed, at Mr Nugent’s, that the children’s clothes were rather...” She paused then added carefully, “worn. So I wondered if they would like these? Mine had outgrown them. They’re washed and pressed.”

Divya moved Penny gently and stood to accept them. “Thank you.” She bowed her head graciously. “You are very kind, Mrs Thackeray.”

“Glad to help a neighbour. Now,” Mrs Thackeray turned to her husband, still hovering behind her, his hat spinning faster, “My husband has something to say. Come, Theodore. Quickly now, we’ve got lots to do before the party.”

Theodore Thackeray? Penny and Teddy, their mood greatly cheered, sniggered behind their hands. Divya gave them a stern look, her lips compressed to stop herself joining them. Hemil turned away for a moment.

Mr Thackeray pulled his shoulders down and harrumphed. “Right. I owe you an apology for being so rude when I turned down your kind offer of food for the party. I didn’t mean to insult you, Mrs Singh...”

“And?” Mrs Thackeray reinforced her prompt with a sharp elbow in his ribs.

“...And I’m very sorry for the horrible things I said about the children. I understand they are experiencing somewhat trying circumstances. I am also deeply sorry for being somewhat rough with the boy’s ear.”

Mrs Thackeray gave him a brisk nod of approval. “Well said, Theodore. Now, there’s just one more thing, isn’t there?”

Mr Thackeray’s face relaxed into a smile. It was a nice smile. A smile that made his cheeks round and rosy like an apple. He spoke again, his voice both humble and conciliatory. “I hope you will attend the party today, as valued members of our community.” He looked at the children’s upturned and expectant faces. “With the children, of course,” His gaze wandered to Mr Pickering, still dozing on the sofa, “And not forgetting Mr Pickering.”

Divya nodded. “Thank you. Mr Thackeray. We will be delighted to attend.”

Mrs Thackeray patted Theodore’s arm and turned to her. “Just one more thing. Do you, by any chance, still have the food you so generously prepared for the party?”

One of Divya’s eyebrows lifted delicately. “Have you not got enough, even with all the fresh food?”

Mrs Thackeray chuckled and rolled her eyes. “Enough? We’re swimming in sandwiches. Everyone’s trying to outdo everyone else.”

“Then why...?”

“Because, dear lady, I think Indian food deserves a special place at the party. It would be very apt because they said on the radio that the special dish on the menu for the Royal Luncheon today contains curry...” She stared up at the ceiling for a moment, a finger tapping her mouth. “No. I can’t remember the posh name but they’re calling it Coronation Chicken. So, have you?”

“I have.” Divya nodded. “I’ll be more than happy to bring it with me. I’m sure everyone will enjoy it.”

“Perfect. Thank you. We do appreciate it.” Mrs Thackeray gave her a delighted smile then turned to her husband. “Theodore, over to you as Party Organiser, to explain the logistics.”

“Oh. Right.” Mr Thackeray assumed an authoritative air. “The party starts promptly at one o’clock. Please bring your chairs, cups, plates and cutlery. I’ll be delighted to show you where you’ll be sitting. Is that alright?”

Hemil nodded. “Thank you both, very much. We are looking forward to it and will be there on time.”

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At 3.50pm, Penny and Teddy were standing excitedly in the hall, dressed in the smart clothes Mrs Thackeray had given them. Divya had shown them to a room upstairs that had a bath and a sink and hot running water from taps. She bathed them and washed their hair and brushed it for them when it was dry. There was a little room next to the bathroom that had a sparkling white toilet and soft toilet paper. As they waited for Divya and Hemil, they admired themselves in the long mirror on the wall and preened themselves as they turned this way and that, bowing and curtsying to each other, giddy with happiness.

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The party was a resounding success. Mr Thackeray brought his new gramophone into the street and entertained everyone by playing his impressive collection of 78s. To Divya and Hemil’s delight, everyone loved her onion bhajis, samosas and delicious sweetmeats. Divya was touched when requests were made for the recipes.

During the afternoon she mentioned to Mr Pickering, who was sitting next to her, that she was planning to stay at home from now on to look after the children. She wondered, if he was free, if he would like to pop across for

lunch a few days a week and she could walk with him to Mr Nugent's for his shopping. Also, she and Hemil would like to take the children to the seaside from time to time and would he care to accompany them on these trips? George was overwhelmed and blinked several times in succession before saying there was nothing he'd like better.

Mr Thackeray basked in the accolades for his leadership and remembered to thank everyone who had worked so hard.

Mr Nugent locked the shop at one o'clock and he and Goldie joined the festivities. It suddenly occurred to him that he had hardly thought about his deceased family all day. He was busy enjoying the present. He thought the future was looking rosy too. Goldie wandered up and down the tables, being fussed by everyone and spent the afternoon getting treats and tummy rubs until, tired, full and happy, she lay out under Fred's chair and fell fast asleep.

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The kindness shown that day, the friendships made, the compassion shown, the forgiveness given, had come out of misfortune. They made the street a fine place to live.

In fact, you could say that the changes in the hearts and minds of the residents had been the saving of Cinnamon Street.