

A Suitable Detachment

By Carol Novis

“District Nurse Blatt! Wait!”

Eunice heaved her broad posterior from the motorcycle seat and stood patiently as Winifred Malory, red-faced and eager, lolloped up.

“New outfit?” she asked gruffly. Winifred was wearing a baggy fawn skirt and not-quite-matching twin set that Eunice hadn’t seen before.

“Yes.” Winifred smiled. “At least for me. I got it at the Oxfam shop.” She fingered the pilled cardigan awkwardly. “There’s lots of wear in it yet. The girl called it ‘vintage.’” More like grunge, thought Eunice, thinking back nostalgically to church bazaars.

Winifred’s eyes shone. “I wanted to ask if you could you come to dinner with us tomorrow and meet Denbigh.”

Sir Denbigh Grote was Winifred’s new ‘boyfriend’, if you wanted to call him that, although the term hardly applied to a retired diplomat of advanced age. Who would have thought it? Now in her 50s, Winifred had met him through, if you could believe the gossip, an internet site! Hope he lives long enough for the wedding, Eunice thought grimly.

But then she felt guilty about her cattiness. After all, she was a church deaconess and as such, should be charitable. Why should she begrudge Winifred happiness?

“Certainly, I’ll come,” she said firmly, revving up the motorcycle.

The truth was, Eunice admitted to herself, that she was feeling left out because all her acquaintances seemed to have paired off, leaving her playing gooseberry. It had started when that sensible pillar of the church, Mildred Lathbury, had surprised everyone by marrying Everard Bone. No one had predicted that; if anything, the gossips had thought she might end up with the vicar. Then Dora Caldicote had left her teaching job and latched onto a school inspector. To top it off, Eunice’s good friend Nurse Dew was now living with an aged gentleman from a retirement home – without even being married! Even old Mrs Bone, who believed in the Dominion of the Birds, had married the local butcher after they found a mutual interest in eating chicken.

Eunice’s eyes welled up. She might be a successful district nurse and invaluable in the parish, but in the end, what mattered was that ring on your left hand and she didn’t have one. A lot of women seemed to find it easy to find a man, or even more than one, but she herself had never acquired the knack. She was left on the shelf with all the other excellent women whom nobody wanted.



But District Nurse Blatt wasn’t one for self-pity.

“Enough of that!” she admonished herself. A good cup of tea was what she needed, and she pulled her motor scooter to a stop outside a Starbucks cafe.

Inside, she scanned the lengthy list of coffees and dismissed them all. “A cup of tea, if you have such a thing, please,” she said to the skinny barista, whose name tag proclaimed him to be “Wilfred.”

“Certainly, dear,” he minced. “Jasmine orange or hibiscus? Chamomile? Chai? And would you like a granola bar to go with that?”

Eunice sighed. “Just plain tea.”

The coffee bar was full. Eunice carried her mug to the only vacant seat, next to a long-haired academic type in corduroy trousers and a plaid shirt, busy at his laptop. He seemed to be looking at some kind of internet dating site. Good grief, was he pursuing true love on the internet too? Quickly she glanced away, but not before the man, who seemed far too old for that kind of nonsense, caught her look.

Amazingly, he wasn’t in the least abashed. On the contrary, he seemed inclined to chat. “Pretty, isn’t she?” he said, indicating a photo. I think I’ll send her a SMS.” Eunice peered dubiously at a picture of a woman with fluffy, blond hair and a mauve sweater. “She’s a divorcee and a bit young for you,” she said bluntly.

“I can but try,” he smiled. “Ever tried online dating yourself?” He cast a sideways glance at her ringless finger.

No, of course not,” she said gruffly.

“Why not? Lots of men out there! Here, I’ll show you how it’s done. Tell me about yourself.”

In spite of herself, Eunice was intrigued. “Well, I’m a district nurse and a deaconess on our Parochial Church Council. *Not* high.”

“OK, we’ll try a Christian site. Plenty of those. How about “Christian Love Search?” Let’s see. We’ll say *‘Attractive, shapely church-goer, sensible, plain-spoken, nurse, seeks gentleman, regular communicant over 50.’* How does that sound?”

“It sounds ridiculous. I’m not shapely, I’m fat – and I’m not attractive!” she snorted. “Who would reply to someone with a description like that?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. But let’s see what men are available. Here’s one: *‘Retired anthropologist with a research interest in pygmies...’* No good. He’s an atheist.”

Who would have imagined that such a wealth of opportunity existed on the internet? What treasure! Eunice pulled the laptop towards her and gazed, rapt, at the screen. Some of the men looked quite handsome and by no means unrespectable. There even seemed to be a Member of Parliament, looking for someone to share his “burden.”

She scanned the entries.

“Professor and editor, enjoys study of Georgian architecture.”

“Food critic, wine lover, with charming country cottage. Former C of E clergyman, now Roman Catholic.”

“London antique dealer, specializing in objets d’art and de vertu, widower, seeks charming, cultivated partner.”

“Vet, separated. Would like fellow animal lover to help run cattery.”

“Croyden-based librarian loves beautiful things. Seeks wife who owns them.”

Eunice dismissed them all. “None of these are right.”

“Well, here’s one that sounds just your cup of tea. *“Retired widower in Clapham Common, on Parochial Church Council (PCC) enjoys ecclesiastical research.”* He’s tall and not bad looking, if you don’t mind that fashionably bald look. “Or, what about this vicar of Crompton Hodnett? Sounds just the job.”

But Eunice was peering in horror at another picture and description.

“Former ambassador to the Balkans, cultivated, cultured, seeks well-established young woman for mutual enjoyment.”

“Why, that’s Sir Denbigh Grote! ‘Well-established.’ He means rich! Well! And ‘young’ – what a nerve. He must be 80 if he’s a day. Such wickedness.”

Eunice was conscious, though, that she didn’t feel quite as disgusted as she might have. In fact, she was experiencing a curious lightness of heart as she thought of how it would be when she revealed all to poor Winifred. For of course, she was going to have to tell her.

Much of her time, she thought with some complacency, was going to have to be devoted to taking Winifred’s mind off her disappointment. She would have to be a *tower* of strength.

Eunice pushed back the laptop and jumped off the stool with a new vigour. Life, even without a husband, still held infinite possibilities.