

## And All Shall Winners Be

by Harriet Diller

There are various ways of mending a broken heart, but perhaps going to an Aging Better Together conference is one of the more unusual. When my mother-in-law Sybil found the notice for the conference in her email inbox, she was certain it was just the thing we both needed.

Our lives had taken a tragic turn in April. First, Professor Root, Sybil's new husband, had over-exerted himself while digging a test pit at an archeological site in Hampshire and suffered a fatal heart attack. Then, my husband Rodney had broken out of his mould as a somewhat stuffy civil servant and gone off to Cornwall on something called a Warrior Weekend. There he was to reclaim his masculinity by fasting, running naked on the moor, and beating an African drum. The climax of the weekend was a cliffside ceremony where each blindfolded candidate would find his way to a bonfire and be inducted into warriorhood. But somehow Rodney, poor dear, became confused, perhaps from dehydration and hunger. Instead of reaching the bonfire, he walked off a cliff.

At least I had my faith to console me; Sybil, agnostic that she was, did not even have that. But Sybil had other strengths to draw on-- her interest in archeology and her passion for taking classes, which had been ignited when the two of us joined the Portuguese class of Piers Longridge.

"Oh, let's do go to this conference," Sybil said enthusiastically.

I remained doubtful. "But Sybil, aging has never been one of your particular interests."

"I know, Wilmet, but I've done archeology and Portuguese. And I've sat on the board of the Settlement House for years. I've even taken up knitting, which is hitting rock bottom if I may say so."

"You don't think this Aging Better Together conference will be terribly dreary then?"

"Not at all!" Sybil exclaimed. "Why, look at this schedule. We are to hear an inspirational talk on Cohousing and the Power of Purpose. The following morning there will be networking and then a boxed lunch."

"Boxed lunch! I don't like the sound of that." I tried to imagine the safest foods that might be included in a boxed lunch. Packaged crackers and energy bars, hermetically sealed stewed fruit? Starbucks coffee in a sterilized plastic flask?

"Wilmet, you simply must get over your squeamishness about food. I'm sure the boxed lunch will be nutritious and filling. Look, they are even offering vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free options. Oh, and there will be a short video called "Home Modifications for Dummies" followed by a Breakout Session on aging gracefully. Whatever can a Breakout Session be?"

"I have no idea," I said. My own somewhat sheltered life had never included any such experience.

"Oh, this will be fun, I know it," said Sybil, clicking on the registration form.

With somewhat less enthusiasm than Sybil's, I accompanied her to the girls' boarding school in Derbyshire where the conference was to take place. The first scheduled event was dinner in the dining hall, where the participants in the conference took their places at three long tables of polished wood.

A tall woman with the air of a girls' school headmistress was ladling soup out of a large tureen. "Might as well get started," she said in a loud voice.

"Excuse me, but is that vegan?" a mousy-looking woman asked from the far end of the table.

"Should I know that?" the woman with the ladle answered.

"I checked the vegan option," said the other woman.

"Really!" the tall woman said and dropped the ladle back into the soup. "When did people start making such a business of eating?"

I myself had to agree that eating had become much more of a source of anguish and even resentment than it ever was in the days when everyone eagerly tucked into a shepherd's pie or gnawed on a joint of veal.

After our dinner, which was somewhat marred by a lecture from the mousy-looking vegan on the evils of eating both flesh and dairy, we filed into the conference hall for the opening presentation. When the conference moderator announced that the inspirational talk on Cohousing and the Power of Purpose was to be replaced, a general cry of disappointment passed over the crowd.

"However, we are most fortunate to have as our speaker tonight Dr. Ailwyn Forbes of the Forbes Institute of Relationship, who will speak to us on the topic of--" Here the moderator frowned through her reading glasses as if she was sure she had misread the title, and then went on, "The topic is 'Some Problems of a Certified Senior Adviser in the Era of #MeToo.'"

"That hardly seems appropriate," said Sybil in a loud voice that rang out through the auditorium.

When Ailwyn Forbes began to speak in a rather disjointed manner that reminded me of the current President of the United States, I began to silently agree with Sybil. Thankfully, we had not been subjected to his ramblings for long when a woman's voice rang out, "He's taken a nasty turn!"

Somewhere between the weekend's presentations by the Center for Conscious Eldering, Sybil's private session with a life coach from Purpose Incorporated, and the Breakout Session on Aging Gracefully, she came away from the conference with a firm plan for our future.

"Intergenerational cohousing," she announced as soon as we arrived back at Sybil's solid London house.

I prayed a silent prayer that Sybil would not announce she was going to invite defrocked priests or even indigent archeologists to live with us. I knew all too well that Sybil was a keen social worker.

"I thought about it on the train ride from Derbyshire. My house is much too big for just the two of us. And my life coach convinced me that aging better together is essential."

"Couldn't you just join a Facebook group?" I asked.

"Nonsense!" said Sybil.

"But you have me-- and Rhoda!" Rhoda had been Sybil's cook since Rodney was a child.

"Rhoda's given her notice, didn't I mention it? She's going to share a council house with her sister."

"But who will do the cooking?" I wailed, looking at my hands, still as soft and smooth as they had been before my marriage.

"I have saved the best part for last," said Sybil. "While you were napping on the train I sent a text and have already received a response."

It never ceased to amaze me how devoted Sybil was to her smart phone, though I knew that she had primarily gotten it so she could use the Archeology Britain app as a quick way to identify pottery fragments.

Her Amazon one-click ordering had also come in handy for buying obscure archeology textbooks and the occasional skein of wool.

"Who do you think our new cook is to be?" said Sybil. "Mr. Bason!"

"Mr. Bason!" I cried.

"My dear, you said yourself he was an excellent cook for the clergy house."

"Indeed he was. But have you forgotten the incident with the Faberge egg? And the reason he was let go from the Ministry?"

"There is nothing here among my things that he would want to pocket," Sybil said. "Unless he has taken to stealing pottery fragments." It was true that Sybil was hardly the type to collect the kind of objects Mr. Bason coveted.

"Though you may need to keep your bedroom locked, Wilmet. Mr. Bason may take a fancy to your Victorian mourning brooch or that little heart-shaped enamel box you were so secretive about one Christmas."

Once I was past the first shock of Sybil's announcement, I began to look forward to Mr. Bason's excellent cooking and his bottomless font of gossip.

"Oh, and I have also contacted Piers and his friend, Keith," Sybil said. "Keith answered immediately, but of course Piers hasn't yet responded."

"Piers!" I cried. "He will leave his galley proofs littering the house from top to bottom."

"Although these days the galley proofs are more likely to be on his computer," Sybil said. "Besides, who knows if Piers will even want to move here."

"Now that Piers and Keith are in a 'committed relationship,' as they say these days, Piers will be certain to come here if Keith has agreed to," I told Sybil.

"Just think," said Sybil enthusiastically, "Piers will always be available to engage in Portuguese conversation with us."

"And Keith will keep the house immaculate," I said. "He will scrub the woodwork with soda and water and soak the curtains in Tide."

"And between us, we shall keep poor Piers from the pubs," added Sybil.

For a brief moment I imagined throwing myself across the front door like a human barricade, keeping Piers from going to the pubs. But then I remembered I would not likely be called upon to take such extreme measures. Keith's influence on Piers had been such that Piers now drank tea like a proper Englishman and showed up on time for his work at the press more often than not.

"Wilmet, you are in favor of my plan?" Sybil asked with a touch more doubt than she usually showed in her schemes.

"It's such a surprise," I said. I had felt much the same way when Sybil announced that she and Professor Root were to be married and when I first learned that Keith was the one who had brought about the positive changes in Piers.

"A few days ago I didn't even know what intergenerational cohousing was," I said. "And now I shall be living it."

"But Wilmet, you of all people should be familiar with the concept. Haven't you always been fascinated with the clergy house, and what is it if not intergenerational?"

Now that Sybil mentioned it, I saw that she was right. "I never thought of it that way," I said, and we both laughed.

Sybil poured two glasses of sherry. "To intergenerational cohousing," she said, raising her glass.

I raised my glass, but I did not speak. I was already lost in thought imagining the richness of my new life. Keith chatting away about Tide and breakfast cereals and the best methods for cleaning spots from the carpet. Piers muttering over his galley proofs in an almost husbandly manner. Mr. Bason filling the house with the tantalizing aroma of coq au vin or shrimp scampi. He might even make the occasional visit to the clergy house, where he could listen in at doors and report back to me everything he had heard.

I smiled at Sybil. "To intergenerational cohousing." Perhaps that had always been the answer without my even realizing it.