

Breakfast Jam

By Ali Miremadi

“Nicholas,” called Jane as she pulled the door of the vicarage shut behind her with an unintended show of force. She had just returned from a visit to their daughter, Flora, who was at the beginning of her second year at Oxford. “Nicholas, do come here. I have the most astonishing story to relate.”

Jane dropped her patchwork overnight bag on the doormat and threw her old tweed coat across it. After a moment of hesitation her black hat was dropped on top. ‘Now that the veil has come off there is no need to be quite so precious about that hat,’ thought Jane as she marched through the hallway, through the kitchen into the back porch.

“I might have known,” she said, stooping to kiss her husband on the top of his head, “that I would find you kneeling over your blessed tobacco plants.”

“Welcome back darling,” said Nicholas mildly, looking up at her above his half-moon spectacles. His faded delphinium-blue eyes, naked and vague without their lenses, seemed somehow even more clerical to Jane than they did when he declaimed Mass on Sundays, notwithstanding that he was then glorious in his vestments, rather than dressed humbly in beige corduroy gardening trousers and a woollen cardigan which had been knitted for him by one of the excellent women of their former parish.

“How was your trip? Is Flora enjoying herself with her young man? Did you find time to look in on Miss Berkinshaw, or were you too busy?”

Nicholas blinked, as though conscious that he had not helped himself by asking three questions at once. Jane exhaled through her nose with the exasperation of a person who has more important matters to discuss.

“Come into the kitchen, Nicholas. I’ll make coffee and tell you everything.”

“I’m afraid there isn’t any coffee, darling. Miss Doggett brought her new companion around yesterday and I used it up trying to entertain the two of them. The appetite of elderly women for coffee is a fearsome thing to behold. Will you be able to subsist on tea alone?”

Jane had already left him in her wake and was filling the kettle from the kitchen sink.

“I hardly know where to start,” she began.

“The last I know you were going to Oxford to visit our daughter. Why don’t you start there?”

“Indeed.”

Jane put the kettle on the stove and collapsed into a kitchen chair across the table from her husband.

“You remember that I had arranged to stay at a different boarding house this time? Old Miss Perkins who ran the boarding house that Prudence and I liked to visit has gone the way of all flesh, so I chose a place advertised in the *Church Times* just at the bottom of the Iffley Road.”

“Very convenient for visiting Flora,” Nicholas interjected.

“I had hoped to see Flora and her young man in the evening when I arrived, but she left me a note saying that she had been invited to dinner with her tutor. I didn’t want to interfere so I had an early night ahead of going to see her the next morning. The lady who keeps the boarding house seemed very strict, not at all like Miss Perkins. Mrs Didercup is a tiny, wizened little thing with blue hair and a colourful housecoat. She told me as soon as I arrived that I must remember the constraints of rationing and asked me to choose my breakfast before going to bed.”

“What did you choose, darling?”

“Bread, eggs and tea - I didn’t want her to think I expected special treatment. The next morning I went into the breakfast room and found there was already another guest. He was a handsome man, in his mid-to-late thirties. He reminded me of Fabian Driver, only fifteen years younger and less beaten-up by the world. He was wearing a lovely casual tweed suit and leapt to his feet as I entered the room with a kind of military bearing. You know how it is when you stay at somebody else’s house - everything feels a bit odd, halfway between the formality of an hotel and the domesticity of a friend’s house. I never quite know how to act. But this gentleman had no such doubts. He wished me good morning and introduced himself. He had an unusual name - Rockingham Napier. If I were any younger I might have blushed but as it was I wished him good morning and sat down to my tea.”

“Was this Mr Napier also breakfasting alone?”

“That is precisely the point, Nicholas. No he was not. I had just poured myself a cup of tea when I heard somebody else walking into the room. Before I could look up I heard myself addressed by name. ‘Mrs Cleveland,’ said the newcomer, ‘what a pleasant surprise.’” Jane paused in her narration, looking hard at her husband to see if he was paying attention.

“Don’t leave me in suspense, darling. Who on earth was it?”

“None other than Mildred Lathbury.”

“Miss Lathbury - most excellent of all women - other than you of course Jane.”

“None other. But Mildred Lathbury is no longer as you remember her.”

“I couldn’t forget Miss Lathbury. She was indefatigable at Harvest Festival and there was nobody I could more rely upon than her when it came to jumble sales and organising a tea urn for the annual whist drive at our London parish.”

“That’s the woman. When I tell you that she arrived dressed for breakfast in a blue velvet dress, an expertly applied rouge and lipstick she went out of her way to inform me is called *Hawaiian Fire* you will begin to appreciate the transformation which she has undergone.”

“You astonish me, Jane. But who on earth is this Napier fellow?”

At this point the kettle began to whistle on its hob, and Jane, recalling perhaps the dramatic techniques of her

beloved golden age dramatists, took her time pouring out the boiling water and arranging the paraphernalia of tea things.

“You will remember, Nicholas, how we took over St Mary’s rather abruptly after Julian Malory and his sister suddenly trooped off to Africa in the wake of that alarming Theodore Grote.”

“Of course I remember. A lovely parish. We were fortunate to find it. Miss Lathbury was a pillar of the congregation when we arrived.”

“You might not have known that there had been some talk about Julian Malory and Mildred Lathbury. Some people thought that the two of them would make a good couple, but apparently Malory made a fool of himself with a widow instead and then rather lost his nerve. Mildred was delighted to fill me in on everything that had happened subsequently. She walked straight over to me and kissed me on both cheeks, quite as though we were French or Italian, and insisted on introducing me to her ‘darling Rocky’. I could see that the poor chap was rather embarrassed, and explained that we had already met. I was agog to learn about how the two of them had ended up having breakfast together in a boarding house in Oxford but at that very moment the colourful housecoat made an appearance with breakfast. Not to get off the point, dear, but what do you think she brought?”

“Bread, eggs and tea I should think.”

“For Mildred and me. But Mr Napier received two rashers and two eggs! I was on the verge of pointing out that they had not been listed on the menu when our hostess said to her favourite guest with a stage whisper, ‘There you are dear. We women know that men need feeding up’. At least Mr Napier had the good grace to look ashamed of the whole affair. It reminded me of the way you are treated by the women at the Spinning Wheel!”

“This mortal life will never be entirely equitable,” murmured Nicholas.

“Anyway, Mildred explained everything. You might remember that we occasionally saw her at midweek services with a young man who was an anthropologist. His name was Everard Bone.”

“Oh yes. Mr Bone of the Prehistoric Society.” Nicholas laughed to himself. “I always feared we were a little too high for him.”

“It sounds as though Everard Bone may no longer be quite the Puritan he first appeared. Mildred was delighted to tell me that shortly after she and Everard themselves had surprised everybody by walking down the aisle, Everard and Rockingham’s wife, Helena, ran off together to Africa.”

“In search of Julian Malory and his sister?”

“Don’t be deliberately obtuse, Nicholas. The two of them - Everard and Helena that is - are both anthropologists and had spent years together working on their tribe, or something like that. It seems that passion had been building up as they exchanged notes, or spoke at the Society, or whatever it is that anthropologists do together.”

“I think they often exchange their interpretation of African languages,” began Nicholas, “I remember smiling once at the sound of a Miss Lydgate and a certain Father Gemini...”

“Be quiet, Nicholas! I’m trying to tell you a story. At this point Rockingham Napier was applying himself to his bacon and eggs and I could swear he was coming out in a blush, though whether over Mildred’s story or his special treatment over breakfast I have no idea. Mildred kept fussing over him, buttering him a slice of her toast and even reaching across to adjust the fringe of his unnecessarily long dark hair. She could not wait to unburden herself of her story.

“Apparently Rockingham and Helena Napier had been neighbours of hers, and had been the couple who first introduced Mildred to Everard, so she had them all under close observation. There was an initial temporary separation between Rockingham and Helena, which was then followed by the great smash when the two anthropologists headed for foreign climes. Then Mildred explained to me that things came to a crisis for her. She knew that Rockingham was sitting alone in his kitchen, doubtless comforting himself with a strong drink. Mildred said to me, ‘The thing is that virtue is an excellent thing, and I have strived for it, but ultimately I decided that sin is much less depressing. I decided it was no longer sufficient to be simply an observer of life so I slapped on some mascara, wriggled my way into a maroon velvet dress I had snaffled up in the jumble sale, and paid him a call’.”

“Goodness me, Jane. What did Rockingham Napier have to say about all of this talk over the breakfast tables?”

“He was in no hurry to finish off his bacon and eggs, I can tell you. At this point he sat back in his chair, smiled at Mildred in what I can best describe as an uxorious manner, and said to me, ‘The fact is, Mrs Cleveland, I simply can’t bear anthropology. All the impossible languages, endless questions and statistics, and writing up of notes. Life with Mildred is so much more satisfying. We agree about the importance of civilised eating. Helena, bless her, was a slut in the kitchen. And she never appreciated my painting.’ Then Mildred said to me, ‘Men love messing about with paint and distemper - wouldn’t you agree Jane?’”

Nicholas laughed and said, “What is it that Mrs Doggett says is the one thing a man wants?”

“Mrs Doggett can never remember my dear but I can tell you if you like. It turns out that all my husband wants is to grow his own tobacco plants, whereas Mr Napier seeks to collect Victoriana.”

“Does Mildred Lathbury have a collection of Victorian Knick-knacks to attract him?”

“She is certainly happy to indulge him, which must be the next best thing. They were in Oxford to go bric-a-brac hunting.”

“What of our lovely Flora- did you find time to visit our daughter, or was it all scandal over the breakfast table on your trip?”

“Oh yes. Flora and her young man Paul and I had a lovely time in the Botanical Gardens and then I took them out for lunch. Flora seems very settled. There is no doubt that she is in love.”

“Will she turn into more of a Jane or a Prudence, I wonder?”

“I think rather a Mildred, if anyone. She has Paul firmly under control.”

“And what is the one thing that Paul wants, I wonder?”

“I’m not sure if I should be happy or sad to report that Paul’s great love in life is the barren, unexciting world of Geography:

*So must pure lovers’ souls descend
T’affections and to faculties.”*

“Never give up your dreams, darling,” said Nicholas. “If Mildred Lathbury can breakfast at a boarding house in a velvet dress with another woman’s husband then anything is possible.”

“I just hope the poor woman gets a bathroom of her own at last,” said Jane.