A Few Green Peas

by K. Blanton Brenner

"I should think it makes one much happier to be well-fed than well-loved." —Barbara Pym, *Some Tame Gazelle*

She was embarrassed to look directly at him. There was a large splotch of egg in the middle of his tie, an untidy memory of this morning's breakfast. He sifted through the travel brochures, making a sort of humming sound as he separated them, one pile beginning to totter dangerously on his desk.

"Now, Miss Pym, you mentioned you might like to try Switzerland as it is the off season. I'm sorry but I really don't think you can afford it. I mean to say…" In one glance he took a swift inventory of her clothes, her hat, even her shoes. "I believe you're a civil servant or a teacher did you say?"

She felt her pique rising and now dared to look the egg on his tie squarely in the yolk. She longed to say to this condescending man, *I was once a rising literary star who is now a forgotten novelist; a writer who needs to get away to find some inspiration, to discover a face that intrigues me, to laugh again at some absurdity.* "I did not mention my profession. I did say that I was thinking of Switzerland but I was not absolutely fixed on that destination."

"Ah now, here we are. This, I think this would be just the ticket for someone of your, um, your… yes. Indeed it would."

He handed her a brochure of Spain, the Costa del Sol and beamed at her, his brown, baked bean teeth flashing at her.

Egg and baked beans she thought.

"No, I don't want somewhere warm and indolent. I need a place where I can clear my head, go for long walks, find something or someone bizarre and amusing."

He looked at her in alarm. *Was she on the verge of a breakdown? She was certainly very odd, her eyes darting about, never meeting his eye.* He sifted through the pile of brochures again, scooting three in front of her. He watched her warily as she read the travel material, hoping that she wouldn't cause some sort of scene. She looked up at him and briefly smiled.

"This will do nicely." She pointed to a small hotel in Austria, in the city center of Linz. He nodded and returned her smile. She sighed, *Oh dear, here come the baked beans again.*

The tuneless humming noise started once more as he looked over the details of the hotel.

"I'm afraid Miss, er, Miss, that it is rather dear, even in the off season. I could look into finding you a nice hostel, not a *youth* hostel you understand."

She stood abruptly replying, "I understand perfectly, thank you. You've been most…"

What had he been? Most annoying, most condescending, most insulting. "most unhelpful. Goodbye."

A mousy little woman with blond, frizzy hair wearing a brightly flowered dress witnessed this little contretemps with delight. She recognized the author and found her treatment of this rude man not only properly done but thrilling. Jessie Morrow had been sent by her employer to gather brochures with information about the Provence. She marched boldly up to the desk of the recently vanquished travel agent and found a brochure for Linz with the hotel Miss Pym had pointed to displayed prominently on the front cover. Miss Doggett would be displeased at first but her clever companion would point out the savings that would be realized in choosing a less popular destination. And, as the piece de resistance, Jessie would remind Miss Doggett how much that lady enjoyed a really fine Linzer torte.

After her unhappy visit to the travel agent, Miss Pym felt very hungry and went in search of a café. She sat at a table by the window where she could more easily people watch, requesting a pot of tea, a poached egg and a serving of baked beans on toast. The waitress remarked,

"Oh, you want the beano."

"Beano?"

"That's what we call it when someone orders baked beans and a poached egg."

As the waitress walked away, Miss Pym smiled to herself,

Beano. I shall always think of that awful man as Beano. Suits him perfectly.

Sitting in an opposite corner of the cafe, watching Miss Pym as she observed the crowd on the pavement, Jessie Morrow bit into her cress and egg sandwich and thought, *I feel just like I'm in a spy novel. She's watching people and I'm watching her!*

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In the city center of Linz, Miss Pym perused the dinner menu at Zum Ecke restaurant reading about the freshly caught trout (*much too dear)* the Wiener schnitzel (*not again in this lifetime)* paprikash (*surely that was Hungarian).* She remembered having chicken paprikash when she visited Budapest so many years ago, before the war, before her failed love affairs, failed writing career. All was before her then and now she was sitting alone in a perfectly ghastly dining room festooned with dusty plastic grapevines, elderly waitresses lumbering to the kitchen and back, arms filled with plates, wearing dirndls not designed for aging bodies. A particularly pugnacious looking waitress approached her table and frightened her with a belligerent, "Was mochten Sie haben?" *Why does the German language lend itself so readily to bullying?* Miss Pym thought as she frantically searched the menu, found the cheapest entre (the pea salad) and ordered "*Deutscher erbsensalat, bitte*." Just then, to her astonishment, Miss Pym heard

something growling somewhere near her feet. She lifted a corner of the tablecloth to find a bright blue coat roaring at her. A young, pretty woman with short dark hair came shyly up to the table.

"I'm so sorry. That's my four year old son, Patrick under your table. "Patrick, you can come out now and when you finish your dinner you may have some dessert." The voice under the table replied in a broad Gloucestershire accent,

"Don't want no sprouts. Don't want no ruddy fish neither. I wants me pud."

The young woman tried smiling at Miss Pym again. "I apologize. I'll try to retrieve him now."

"Stay away, Mummy!"

Miss Pym raised a corner of the tablecloth once more and spoke to the bright blue coat,

"Patrick, don't be such a muggins. Come out from under my table at once!" There was some more growling but the coat began to slowly move to the edge of the table. Patrick's mother snatched up the squirming bundle and carried it back to a table where two young women waited for them, both trying not to laugh but overcome with giggles.

Jessie Morrow and Miss Doggett watched this little scene at a nearby table as Miss Doggett chewed her sauerbraten methodically and her companion took small bites of her *Thüringer rostbratwurst*. Miss Doggett shook her head and spoke sotto voce to her companion,

"Well really, Jessie. You could have chosen a much more respectable restaurant. How can we expect to be comfortable with children running wild and English ladies being accosted at their dinner!" Jessie thought, *And now I'm supposed to be at fault for the misbehavior of a child I've never seen before in my life. Miss Pym was hardly accosted. She seemed to think it all rather amusing.* She apologized to Miss Doggett *(*for what she wasn't sure*)* and redirected her to the sweets menu.

The little boy was placed firmly in his chair, his mother's hand nearby, ready to grab him if he made a break for it again. The boy glared at Miss Pym, picked up his butter knife, holding it like a gun, and pretended to shoot at her. She reached for her spoon, filled it with peas and shot the green missiles at the boy, some landing quite nicely in his fizzy drink and one right in the middle of his forehead. Witnessing the flying peas, Miss Doggett drew in her breath sharply causing her mighty bosom to heave, her corset to creak. Jessie ducked her head, covering her mouth with her napkin, trying desperately not to laugh, but it was no good, she had to laugh even as her employer glared at her. Miss Pym experienced a little glow inside. She'd never thrown food at anyone and was delighted to learn that she possessed quite an accurate aim. She wondered about the mother's American accent and the boy's heavy Gloucestershire dialect. These sorts of puzzles intrigued her. *Just what I asked for, something curious to ponder and something to make me laugh*.

The walk along the Danube had been pleasant but now it was mid-morning and Miss Pym was feeling a bit peckish. She found a bakery that was charming and almost filled to capacity. The only available table was next to one where sat her opponent from last night, Patrick, he of the growls and the Gloucestershire speech. She wondered at the relationships there. This was a favorite game she frequently played with her sister, trying to work out the connections in a group of strangers. A quick look confirmed her belief that the young women were sisters. *Oh, to once again be so pretty, so young, so happy.*

Jessie saw Miss Pym walking toward the bakery where Miss Doggett decided to try the Linzer torte. She stepped up her speed until the older woman cried out,

"Jessie, slow down! You know I don't like to be rushed. You've been behaving very oddly for this entire journey. Calm yourself. You're the companion of an English lady and you need to remember that!"

To Jessie's great delight the only availability was at the table where Miss Pym was sitting. The naughty little boy and his family were at the table right next to her. Jessie Morrow squeezed her hands together, *Oh, this is going to be fun!* As the two women introduced themselves to the novelist and took their seats they heard one of the girls at the next table say,

"Patrick, there isn't any ice cream here, only cakes and cookies and buns" The boy slumped in his chair, "Don't want no bloody cakes."

"Watch your language! That isn't nice to say." Patrick glared at his young aunt,

"Shut your pie hole!"

Miss Pym laughed out loud. Patrick gave her a wide grin and dashed over to her table.

"You can calls me anything you likes, but don't you never calls me bananas!"

Miss Pym smiled,

"Very well, then. I shall call you Mr. Bananas."

Patrick contemplated this for a moment and replied,

"And I shall call you Mrs. Peas!" When Patrick returned to his mother, Miss Doggett sniffed mightily and pronounced,

"What a perfectly horrid little boy!"

Barbara Pym replied,

"I think he's a most entertaining little chap." *You're the horrid one, you dominating virago and now you've put me right off my Linzer torte!* She rose from the table.

"Good day to you."

Jessie jumped up to follow her when Miss Doggett exclaimed,

“And just where do you think you’re off to? We’ve not ordered yet.”

Jessie Morrow looked squarely at her employer,

“The woman we just met is a novelist. I must tell her how much her books mean to me, how they’ve spoken to me.”

Miss Doggett harrumphed, “You obviously don’t have enough to do if you have time to lounge about reading books written by some obscure author.”

“Barbara Pym writes novels about women just like me, excellent women who do what needs to be done without complaint and somehow manage to find the absurdity and humor in it all.”

“Well really Jessie, this is most distressing.”

Jessie Morrow replied with unprecedented sharpness,

“Not to me. This is the most thrilling moment of my life!”

Jessie caught up with the novelist as she stood in the middle of the pavement deep in thought.

“Miss Pym, I had to tell you how much I enjoy your novels. I’ve read them over and over. I hope you’re still writing?”

“I never know what to say when I meet someone who’s read my work. You’re too kind.” The two women shook hands and then Miss Pym remarked,

“I like your dress very much, such a unique pattern and a lovely green.”

As she made her way through the cobbled stone streets of Linz she didn’t see the colorful shops and imposing Baroque buildings. Miss Pym was busy conjuring up a small, very English village that would be filled with vicars and curates, spinsters of a certain age, perhaps a precocious little boy or a small, mousy woman in a dress patterned with a few green leaves.