

TEA AT MATSY'S

Dougie, Nick the Greek and Danny LaGrue are with me. Dougie has got his knives out on the table. His voice rises triumphantly.

"When we get back, I'll show them. They can't keep messing me about. I can get a spaceship through the roof."

The waitresses look over. I catch the eye of one of them and she walks up to our table. She grips the edges of her order pad and the pencil dangles against Danny LaGrue's ear. But nothing gets through to Danny, not even a pencil in his ear. Nick the Greek looks up and smiles and the waitress tightens her lips. I say,

"Do you think we could have another pot of Earl Grey, and some more cinnamon toast, please?"

Dougie stops talking for a moment. He's got to the bit about the bomb, but we've lost the thread.

"I want lemon. Please." he says, and the waitress backs away, nodding. He begins again and we try to concentrate.

We are upstairs in Matsy's tea rooms. We've got the two centre tables pushed together. Dougie prefers to sit in the middle. All around us, at the edges of the room, are groups of old ladies taking tea. Most of them wear hats. Matsy's has been in the High Street since the beginning. Downstairs the shop sells chocolate and Sobranie tobacco. Behind the printed tea towels dark wooden stairs lead up to a panelled dining room. It's been a meeting place for generations.

The food comes in heavy silver dishes covered with battered silver domes. For lunch it's stiff orange crumbed fish, with tartar sauce, and for tea, cucumber sandwiches fronded with cress, tea cakes and cinnamon toast.

We've already eaten two lots of cucumber sandwiches and toasted tea cakes. Danny LaGrue's fat round face is shiny with butter. So are his fingers which pluck nervously at the bodice of the pink dress that he's wearing. The dress is mine. I think, I'll never get those butter marks out. I shall have to throw the dress away.

The table is littered with torn doyleys and heavy silver. Matsy's has never grown modern. Neither have it's customers. But we're different. I see it in the eyes watching us. I lean forwards, towards Dougie.

"Dougie! Shush!" He looks at me with wild startled eyes.

Dougie has acid psychosis. That's what they say. But I know he's mad because of his mother. It's simple. I'd been quite normal and then, suddenly, out of the blue, there I was, mad. Quite mad. In my case it was my father's fault. It's always one or the other. Sometimes both.

Dougie's mother is divorced. She's a big Scottish tyrant. Evenings, she goes out on her village round. She's a G.P. Then it's home, to sink her flat wide face close to Dougie's. She says to him in a hoarse whisper,

"Ye've bin smokin' pot agen! I ken smell it!"

Dougie never did smoke pot in his mother's house. He'd take her bottle of whisky out of the radiogram. She's an alcoholic.

I remember when they brought Dougie into the hospital. I was glad. I'd been lonely by myself for three days.

"We've got a friend of yours down in the corridor." they'd told me. I was surprised. Which corridor? And which friend? It seemed a strange coincidence. Obediently I followed the nurse. We left the ward through a double set of locked doors, his eyes on me all the time, though I wasn't going anywhere in the great brick warren I'd seen through the windows. We walked past the staff room, where two doctors or nurses were sitting drinking machine coffee with their feet up on the desk. They looked bored. The nurse I was with opened a door and a blast of loud rock music hit us. There was Dougie, sitting cross-legged on a pillow, wearing only his blue Y-fronts. Opposite him sat a doctor, also cross-legged on a pillow. He had a white coat on. He was staring at Dougie with a bemused expression. Dougie was swaying violently from side to side in time with the music. His arms were swaying in the opposite direction above his head and his head was swaying in between. His eyes were wide open but it didn't look to me as if he could see anything. The room was very small and there were no windows and a bright electric light hung from the ceiling.

"Is this a cupboard?" I said to the nurse. We were standing in the doorway.

"Talk to your friend," the nurse said, pushing me forward. I felt embarrassed. I knelt in front of Dougie. Suddenly, his eyes focused on me, and the swaying, which had been making me feel dizzy, stopped.

"Annie! What the fuck are you doing here? Did my mother send you? What is this place? I can't make it out at all."

He'd grown awfully thin since I'd last seen him, and his hair was longer and wilder than ever. "Dougie, it's a mental hospital. What have you done?"

It turns out he hadn't done anything. That was the trouble. He hadn't been doing anything. He wasn't eating or washing or going to college, just sitting in his room, swaying and listening to Jimi Hendrix. He wouldn't speak to his mother, except to tell her that the room was full of purple light and he was full of it too, so she said he had acid psychosis and she and her partner signed him into the hospital.

I knew if she knew I was in there too, she'd sign him out and I'd be alone again. She always said I was a bad influence. But she doesn't visit Dougie and we keep each other company. After the first fortnight they let us out for town visits, and Dougie starts making plans to take over the hospital. I say to him, Dougie, you could just run away,

but he says it's his mission to take it over. When he talks like that, I think perhaps he does have acid psychosis, because how could one person take over a hospital?

Next door to Matsy's there's a gunsmiths and that's a magnet to Dougie. Guns need licences but knives don't and now Dougie is armed to the teeth. I think the best idea for getting out of the mental hospital is to make them think I'm better and I lay awake at night working out how to behave normally. The trouble is that if you act too normally then they think you're completely insane, and the trick is to be just eccentric. That's acceptable.

It's eccentric of us, going to Matsy's for afternoon tea. We wouldn't have been tolerated in the Wimpy Bar, but Matsy's pride themselves on welcoming eccentrics. It's part of being old fashioned. Some of the ladies with mauve hair and tiny dogs are clearly barking mad, but Matsy's loves them. And they love Matsy's.

The waitress brings over the tea and toast. She's younger than the rest and I see Nick the Greek smile at her again. I hope he won't speak to her. She puts down her tray on the edge of the table and Nick jumps up, his clumsy body knocking back his chair. He begins to lift off the tea-pot and covered silver plate. She blushes and hesitates. It's her job to do the lifting but, because of Matsy's, she knows that the customer is always right. Even when he's not in his right mind. She's not to know Nick the Greek has never had a right mind. As she and Nick together load her tray with the crockery and tea cups we've already used, she sees Dougie's collection of knives carefully laid out among the crumpled table napkins. I see her quiver slightly.

"It's all right," I say in my brightest voice. "He's a collector. A connoisseur."

I know that will reassure her. On Matsy's front door it says TOBACCO FOR THE CONNOISSEUR. And they even sell a few knives themselves, next to the walking sticks, by the tobacco counter. Little ivory penknives, Swiss Army knives all splayed out like mechanical dolls, carved letter-openers. The waitress smiles tightly and picks up her tray and walks away. Nick the Greek watches wistfully as she goes into the little back room where they cut the bread and cucumber for sandwiches.

"My plan is this..." Dougie begins again but no-one is listening. That's one of the problems with being mad. No-one else can understand, not one mad person ever understands another. Everyone who is mad is mad in a different way. I'm not really mad at all. I'd just been a bit under the weather and then everything had gone wrong when I'd been given some tranquillisers. After that, I couldn't think at all clearly. Obviously it was the wrong drug for me.

Getting the drugs right is a problem for Danny LaGrue. He's a pyromaniac. Not a random pyromaniac. He only sets fire to his mother's house but understandably, after the third time she's had to have him certified. It gives her a bit of space to clean up the house and get back on an even keel. He's been in the hospital for five months and

since the first week he's been taking Nick the Greek's pills. Only the blue ones, not the pink and yellow ones. He reckons the pink and yellow ones give him a headache. The blue ones were for Nick's aggressive behaviour. He isn't really that aggressive but they diagnosed him as an aggressive schizophrenic after he strangled a nurse. He hadn't meant to do it at all, that's obvious. On his first night when he'd woken up with the raging thirst of Largactil, in the little locked room we all wake up in, no-one would answer the door. After an hour of banging, a nurse came. She was a tiny Japanese doll-woman and he'd accidentally strangled her. Just like that. His hands around her neck, he'd shaken the life out of her. He's waiting for a transfer to Broadmoor, but I don't think he deserves it. The blue pills are some kind of female hormone and the pink and yellow ones are supposed to counteract the side effects of the blue ones, only because Danny LaGrue, who isn't aggressive at all anyway, is only taking the blue ones, he's becoming a woman. Those pills and the hospital food, and the lack of exercise from being locked up are giving Danny LaGrue definite breasts. That's why he's wearing my dress and that's why he's growing his hair long. His hair is very black but it looks to me as if Danny LaGrue's chin is now as smooth as mine. He worries all the time, unsure if at any stage he is more woman than man. At Matsy's he comes to the Ladies with me.

"What do you think Annie?" he asks, peering anxiously into the mirror.

"What do I think about what?" I ask, washing my hands carefully.

"My face. My skin. The colour." says Danny, not taking his eyes off himself. He's been trying out a foundation cream he'd stolen from his mother's handbag the last time she'd visited him. It's a bit too light for him. His mother has pale milk skin but his father had been a Spaniard. He's never seen his father and that not seeing has something to do with the fires, his doctor says. I tell him it's a bit pale but as his eyes fill with tears I say, and anyway it suits you, being a bit pale, and he looks happier and we leave to go back to the tea-room. As we walk out two old ladies come towards us. One of them is carrying a tiny dog under her arm. It looks at Danny with black vicious eyes and barks like a cough.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, dear!" says the old lady. She's very small, smaller than Danny LaGrue's mother and she stands so close to him and smiles up at him, so friendly, I'm moved. Danny stands stock still.

"She won't hurt you, dear. She doesn't mean it." she says to Danny and taps the little dog on the nose. "Leave the poor lady alone. You naughty boy." She snaps. Then she's gone, into Matsy's green tiled cloakroom and Danny LaGrue is one step further towards woman-hood.

Dougie and Nick the Greek are drinking the last of the tea and the waitress is standing by the table, as we come back. She wants to know if we want anything else. An iced fancy perhaps? Matsy's iced fancies are famous. They come in little fluted cases with "MATSY'S PATISSIERS" written on the side, each one an intense pastel, violet or

rose or apricot. Before I'd gone mad I'd come to Matsy's with my mother for tea and we always had iced fancies. They remind me of her.

Dougie says abruptly,

"Do you have any Lapsang Souchong? I'm fed up with Earl Grey."

I look at my watch. It's four o'clock.

"Dougie," I say urgently, leaning across to him. "Dougie, we've been here two hours."

"Oh, OK," Dougie says "Can we have the bill then?"

The waitress picks up her little pad and begins to calculate, blushing at the absurdity of Nick the Greek's fawning eyes. She puts down the slip of paper in front of Danny LaGrue and stalks away. I wonder why she'd given the bill to Danny. Out of the four of us, Danny LaGrue is the most peculiar looking and the most unlikely to do anything with it. I pick it up and walk towards the little booth where the senior waitress sits on a kind of throne. I push money towards her. Then I go back to the table where Dougie is busy wrapping each one of his knives together with one of Matsy's silver tea knives in a used paper napkin. He has made several parcels. No-one seems to be taking any notice. I sigh. If we get caught stealing knives, that will be the end of our afternoon tea parties. In fact it will probably mean an extended group therapy session, and of all the boring things that happen in the hospital, group therapy is the most boring. It's an entirely wasted exercise for some of us. One old man has not talked for eighteen years: nevertheless he's always led on into our circle. Perhaps they think our revelations will spark him off. Even when someone smashes his fists through the high top windows of the partition, and spatters us all with blood the old man sits mute. Personally I find acts of public self mutilation quite upsetting, and have brought it up at group therapy.

"Why can't he do it in private?" I'd said. Most people do. Under the sheets. In the toilets.

We walk down Matsy's wooden panelled staircase, out into the afternoon High Street of family shopping. Danny LaGrue and I lead the way arm in arm. Dougie follows behind, his weaponry distributed amongst his clothing and Nick the Greek shambles along in his wake, smiling beautifully at everyone. Around the corner we wait for the bus to take us back to the hospital. It's nearly five o'clock when we get there and ring the bell. The curfew has not been exceeded.

A nurse opens the door and smiles welcomingly as if we are visitors to a youth hostel. In the ward they've laid the tables for supper. A smell of warm tinned tomatoes hangs in the air. Each time we come back I wonder why I haven't run away. This trust they place in us is touching. Our good behaviour and return are evidence of recovery, of being able eventually to be integrated back into society. It seems to me that only an insane person would return to this prison so willingly as we do each afternoon.

Dougie walks in without acknowledging the welcome. He walks over to one of the supper tables and picks up an apple from the fruit bowl. He's being watched. He has a reputation for being unpredictable and he also has a reputation for eating everyone's share of the fruit. He says his mother has told him that high doses of vitamin C cure his acid psychosis, but I think he wants to be a vegetarian.

A group of patients and nurses are sitting in the T.V. lounge staring up at a children's adventure story. The set is placed high up in the corner of the room and tilted downwards so that the only way to watch in comfort is to lie on the floor. However, when I'd tried this, some of the more disturbed patients had overreacted and I'd been told not to do it again. Now I have a permanent crick in my neck, like everyone else. Dougie takes his apple and walks over to the group. He reaches up and turns off the television. There's a stunned silence as the stupefied audience fails to react.

Dougie is a showman. Before the nurses can speak he announces that he is going to perform a magic trick, which is why he requires the apple. He explains that this is just a prelude to something bigger. It's just to demonstrate something. He has been in contact all last week with powerful forces, from outer space.

The nurses glance at each other in amusement and settle back down to watch. One of the patients is a little confused and wants to know why Dougie has come out of the television to do his trick, and when is he going back? No-one answers her except Nick the Greek who sits down beside her and whispers reassuringly in her ear. She smiles and reaches out her hand to his and he takes it and holds it between his two hands.

I wonder what Dougie is going to do. He places the apple on the low table and stands in front of it. Everyone stares at the apple. Dougie breathes in deeply.

"I am going to bring my hand down on this apple! The power of my spirit will cause it to break! There will be no physical contact. This is an act of my will. It is an indication to you all..." here Dougie glares at the nurses who sit calmly, watching him. He goes on,

"...by an act of will I can split apart the Physical world!"

It sounds to me like Dougie has been reading too many esoteric books. He reaches one arm high into the air and brings it down, his hand like a knife, onto the apple, which shatters into several mushed lumps. One of the lumps flies out and hits the girl who is holding Nick the Greek's hand. She looks horrified. No-one speaks. Dougie stares down at the apple. He drops to his knees and bends over it moaning. One of the nurses raises his eyebrows and gets up. He walks towards Dougie. Dougie looks up. His eyes are wet and I realise he is crying.

"Don't touch me!" he squeals. "Don't fucking try it!"

His hand reaches into his sleeve and pulls out a paper napkin parcel. Oh Dougie, I think. No more tea at Matsy's.

Three nurses hold Dougie, one kneels on his legs and one twists his arms up his back. Dougie is whining,

"Fuck off. . . . fuck off. . . . fuck off. . . ." The audience are quite bemused. Nick the Greek gets up and turns on the television. There is still half an hour before supper.