

THE SCORER

When I imagined 'Love' there was always plenty of talking, but that Saturday when Tony invited me into the shed where Mr. Hatherwood kept the mower there was no conversation. We had come face to face as he was on his way back from the pitch after delivering a cap to one of the on field batsmen. He had managed only a strangled inexplicit greeting, stopped long enough for his eyes to acknowledge my presence, his brain to calculate why I was there and his hormones to organise themselves sufficiently to usher me to the shady side of the pavilion

Oh I'd been here before. But never looking for love, and never on match day. It's funny how a place changes when people are about, because although the cricket pavilion looked the same it felt like somewhere new. For me it will be remembered as smelling of abandoned kit and old shadows, but it had a look of importance for today's match. Even Dai the post looked different, imposing even, in his bright white umpire's coat.

I loved the place. One year in the school summer holidays we'd spent long afternoons here at the Work's sports fields playing on the grass tennis court: past the cricket square and right on past the pavilion, enclosed in high wire netting and shaded by the tallest of trees, like protected specimens in a zoo.

Coming home that Friday, when curly Evans called down the school bus to ask my Tony -who probably still considered himself as his mother's Anthony - what he was doing on Saturday, I turned to look up the aisle and - I swear - my Tony looked straight at me when he shouted back " Cricket at the Works."

" Me too! " I exclaimed under my breath and that was it. Settled. I had a date! He had as good as asked me.

‘Love’ it was to be, then, and it was to be on Saturday. To make sure I had the next afternoon free all I had to do was get my hair washed and dried before bedtime: no mean feat when you have a plait as thick as a mooring rope reaching down to your waist and a mother with a fear of death by dampness.

So it’s Saturday and I am with my Tony, lolling against the silvered boards of the old building that wears a sweet and desperate layer of disinfectant, slowly evaporating into the hot sunny day. Who had attempted to sanitise the old wooden floor that met the clattering legions of whitened spiked boots as they marched in and out through the games and the years, shedding curls of dried grass and flakes of top dressing?

Tony placed his hand flat against the building, so that his arm hid me from the view of anyone more interested in brooding teenagers than a cricket match. Now he was close, now we were talking, but now our lips were so dry and jittery that not a word was spoken. That’s when we escaped to the shed.

It was just a few boards tacked on to the back of the pavilion, but it was dark and it was private and Mr. Hatherwood the grounds man was not likely to disturb us while the game was on. The floor was a mosaic of chippings and soil, and the loose chippings felt their way through the thin soles of my summer sandals as I shuffled close to Tony. Just an intake of breath held us apart.

I lifted my face, offered my lips. Tony kissed me. I reached up for more, linking my hands behind his neck to secure his undivided attention. More kisses. Stillness.

Silence. I felt the cool green air rest on my bare arms and rise up through my spine, right where the ribbon bowed and the loose hairs escaped the confines of my plait.

Suddenly dancing silhouettes appeared at the opening of the shed.

Oh! Who was this now?

Tony pulled me under a pair of voluminous waterproofs hanging from the shady back wall. It formed a convenient hide. The shadows advanced. There were two of them. I could just see them.

I could see them because the covers had folded to allow me a peephole. A shaft of sunlight, straight as the light from the cinema projector, picked out what appeared to be movie stars. He was tall and elegant and she was surely 'a doll he could carry.' In one movement they had taken the shelter of the old shed and the shelter of one another.

She reached up and kissed his cheek.

"Darling," was all that he said, two luscious syllables that could hardly bear to be separated.

He seemed to fold over her as if she were a flower he would breathe in, would consume. He took the perfume of her hair with a sigh, then lowered his lips to the pale neck revealed below her neat auburn pleat. Several kisses later the flower arced her head and offered her mouth. My wondering was never as romantic as this. He swallowed hard, and I could tell his mouth was dry and sensed something I had never rehearsed in all my long imaginings of love. I slipped my hand through the rubbery folds of the raincoats and searched for Tony. His hand was already reaching out for mine and we grasped one another in desperation. Our innocent kisses had been upstaged by the urgent and practised scene before us. I didn't know what could Tony see, but I wanted to see more. Who were these shadows seeking shelter in the shadows? The man with the shimmering badge on his chest pocket and the woman who barely reached to his chest even with her hair

arranged high on her head.

Oh I didn't want to know. I didn't want them to be real, to have a life outside of this shadow story world of love. But I wanted to see more.

Mr. Tall had wrapped his long arms about the flower and not a crack of light broke between them. As my eyes adjusted to the sun light reaching through the gaps and angles of the loosely constructed shed there was no mistaking the hand drawing the full flower strewn skirt up above the stocking top, revealing the pale skin above the dark band punctuated by the fastenings of the woman's suspender belt. I think she gasped as I gasped because neither of them were alerted by my exclamation. But

Tony

had heard me and his hand pressured a warning to me. The man's hand teased its way around the curve of her thigh, and then his finger looped inside the band and pulled it away from the flesh. His finger trailed slowly inward, toward the shadow formed by her thighs. But then he reached beyond my imaginings and I closed my eyes, pulling down the shutters, fast.

She muttered something, a name maybe.

"I said I didn't want to know names," I almost spoke aloud.

This was not my story. I had no vocabulary for this. In my bleak confusion I turned away from the scene and into the blankness of the rubber and held my breath for fear of blubbing.

Suddenly I wanted to be in my own garden on this hot afternoon, sitting sulky with boredom as my mother combed out my hair to dry in the sun. I screwed up my eyes and spinning lights formed in the darkness: I did not want to see more. Why were grown ups hiding in a stuffy shed with a lawnmower? What kind of game were they playing?

After what seemed like hours Tony pushed away the heavy covers. They were gone at last. I had stuffed my fingers hard in my ears and squeezed my eyes against the happenings in that shed in the hot afternoon, but the humid fog of Mr Hatherwood's waterproofs had entered my pores and camped around me.

Tony let go of my hand as soon as he saw me.

"Why, you're a funny colour. Kind of green."

He twisted his head to one side and took another look, puzzlement all over his face.

"Strange," he added and put his hand on my shoulder, "Say, what was that all about with those two? What could you make out? I couldn't see a thing. I was dying to move the coats but I didn't dare move at all."

He looked a little closer at the bilious vision before him and took my hand again, spreading my fingers apart as if that would bring back the roses.

"Look, I'm sorry, but I must check with my mother. Come with me?"

I nodded, picturing women buttering the bread for the men's tea.

Tony took one more concerned look at my face.

"Maybe it's just the light in here, eh?"

Now we were in the open but the heavy cloy of something I wish I had never seen or heard had set its trigger of nausea at my lips and nostrils, to taint every gulp of air I took. I set a smile on my face, trailing after Tony, and a tall man, smartly dressed in the uniform of blazer with badge and twill trousers, came striding from the white washed toilet block, and called out in our direction.

"Hello young Anthony! Not playing today?"

It was a luscious deep cherry of a voice inquiring of my companion.

Young Anthony dropped my hand and acknowledged the man with a half salute.

"Twelfth man, sir."

“ President,” he said to me in a sideways whisper as the tall man rounded the picket fence.

“ Darling,” I said to myself as the tall man headed for the shade of those tall trees that still watched over my grass tennis court.

I followed young Anthony’s steps between the narrow bench seats splattered with bird poo. We climbed over and over, right down to the front row, and there on a cushion like a queen on a throne sat the scorer. Before a small square table, facing away from us to the field of play, her pencil was poised above a book bound with buckram in racing green. I envied her the cardigan the colour of sunshine that she had draped nonchalantly around her shoulders.

When the last ball of the over had been bowled she shrugged off the pastel delight to reveal the primrose sprigged cotton of her full skirted dress, its low back revealing a scoop of pale skin with eddies of freckles that swirled up to cover her neck, above which an almost invisible line of Kirby grips held her auburn hair in a neat pleat.