

Shooting Pheasants

Autumn Nature Notes by Elizabeth Green Class 9

Beech nuts: Prise open their thorny heads, bite the sweet kernels out of their sharp suitcases. Chestnuts: more substantial, sometimes a mouthful but pick off the hairy strands that cling to the shell and taste disgusting. Squash them out of their spiky green nests with heel of a shoe. Horse chestnuts: they're poisonous, everyone knows that. Acorns: for pigs.

Not that she'd ever fed a pig.

1

The low afternoon November sun illuminated the tall sycamores that fringed St Michel's park. Mist was gathering over the bowling greens and the home going traffic was gathering pace along Cliddesden Road.

Elizabeth swung down, kicked her satchel far across the grit of the playground and jumped off the swing. Her bare knees, hands and nose were frozen, her dark hair damp. At least it was Friday.

Fish.

'Uncle George is coming down tomorrow, won't that be nice?'

Her mother was laying the lemon Formica table with fish knives and forks. They spun like crazy compasses. She weaved in and out, ducking the washing strung across the kitchen ceiling.

‘The news,’ announced her father, leaning towards the Pye radio on the sideboard. Her hamster stared at her through the bars of his metal cage. He yawned magnificently, exposing long yellow incisors.

‘Elizabeth, call your brother, the bream’s ready’

2

Uncle George arrived early, his midnight blue Jaguar Mark 2 slithering down the drive. She was still in her candlewick dressing gown, eating her Saturday Sugar- Puffs.

‘I thought I’d take Elizabeth out with me this afternoon, she’s got a sharp eye.’ He grinned and patted her head.

‘And hello, young Christopher. How’s that Airfix kit getting on? Finished it yet? I got you some extra green paint.’

Christopher kicked her under the table. All his ten angry years as a younger brother, condensed into the tip of a Batman slipper.

‘Oh George,’ said her mother, ‘could you take me into town first? John’s got to go into work and sort his men out, haven’t you love?’

Her father grabbed his overcoat from the hallstand, setting it swaying with its overload of hats, scarves, umbrellas, duffels and anoraks.

‘No rest for the wicked, eh George? See you at teatime, we’re due at The Conservative Club at 7.15 sharp.’

‘You’d like to spot some pheasants for me today, wouldn’t you Lizzie?’ Uncle George bent down and folded his hot tweedy arm around her, squeezing too hard.

‘I’ve got homework for Miss Burge’

‘ Oh, we’ll be back in time for that. I want to try out that the gun I got from Jeffries and I need a young girl like you.’ He winked at her mother. Elizabeth could smell aftershave and cigarettes. He drank whisky. And he’d been to public school. He owned his own garage with petrol pumps. And wasn’t married but had a girlfriend called Sonia. Her mother had told her a lot about her father’s younger cousin from Norfolk.

3

Mum and George came back from town with a Swiss roll from Marks, a frock from Tindells, a copy of *Honey* for her and *The Beano* for her brother.

‘Look, Lizzy, isn’t it lovely? And it’s only a size 14’ Her mother stood at the top of the stairs, hot and pink. The dress was tight and red. ‘Tart’ muttered her brother under his breath.

‘It’s an early birthday present from Uncle George. Isn’t that kind?’

4

The Hampshire countryside was closing down for winter. Autumn gales had stripped the trees and the ploughed fields folded their arms inwards to the earth, covering the September planting. Bramble hedges had blackened and in the still air, smoke rose straight and undisturbed.

‘Bet you like the Beatles, Lizzie, especially Paul McCartney, he’s a pretty boy. Bet you’d like to go out with him, wouldn’t you?’

Uncle George leant towards her and turned on the car radio. The walnut dashboard gleamed like an ocean liner. On the radio Tom Jones was telling her it wasn’t unusual.

‘Can do 120 this one, you know, shall we give her a go?’

The caramel leather seats made her feel like an actress in a Hollywood film. George put his foot down and a podgy hand on her knee. She concentrated on staring out the window, moving her knees together and pulling her raincoat to cover them.

‘There’s one, there’s two, more! In that field, by the top hedge. Look, up there!’ She pointed across him, to the right.

Two cock pheasants and their wives were working their way methodically across the corn stubble about 50 yards in the distance.

George pulled the car to a stop, up on a rough grass verge.

‘Well done, Lizzie. Pass me that gun, little lady. It’s on the back seat. It’s got a silencer, we’ll be all right, don’t worry. Turn that blessed radio off.’

The road was deserted. They hadn’t seen another car in miles.

George slipped two cartridges into the 12 gauge and rolled down his side window.

‘Get your head down, Lizzie. Just in case.’

He grabbed her neck and pushed her down on his lap. He rested one elbow on her head, trapping her face against him.

‘Just steadying my aim.’

The cold air from open window had reached her bare legs.

He cocked the trigger.

‘Hold it, hold it. Nearly got him. Nearly, come here my beauty, come here.’

She could feel him growing, pressing against her cheek.

‘Yes, yes. That’s it.’ He sighed and stroked her hair for a very long time

'Let's go and pick him up for Audrey,' he decided, 'She can cook him up tomorrow.'

5

It was dark by the time they got home. On the way back George had found some mint imperials in the glove compartment and the inside of her cheek was rough where the sweet had laid, unsucked but slowly dissolving.

'Gosh, you two are late,' exclaimed her mother, 'Dad's been back for ages. Get yourselves clean for tea. I've got to do my hair yet. Christopher, go and turn that television off.'

'We've got a surprise for you, Audrey, haven't we Lizzie?' announced George, 'Go and get it out the car.'

The seats in the Jaguar were still warm, the windows misted up against the cold, black night sky. On the back seat lay the shotgun and beside it on a copy of the *Daily Mail*, the dead bird. Elizabeth moved the gun out of the way and reached over.

In the blue-carpeted foot well behind the driver's seat was a small white bundle. She leant down and unrolled a pair of her mother's pants.

'They're the ones she keeps for special occasions.' Christopher was standing behind her, illuminated in the porch light.