

the Antique Chef

Cover artist: Lynda Bell, 'The Guardians'

the
ANTIQUÉ
Chef

————— a novella by —————
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*Art is a safe place where we may non-violently
come to terms with disorienting situations
and adjudicate their public and private relevance.*

—David Hickey

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ONE

Louise

1992

A KID OF about five came to her doorstep on a scooter. ‘Have you seen Rashid?’ he asked. It was nearly dark and the boy’s sixteen-year-old brother had gone missing after school the night before. A few minutes later a policeman arrived. The headmaster had suggested Louise Hammond be paid a visit. Yes, she was a friend of the Indian couple who ran the corner grocery store, but she didn’t buy the explanation.

This fine spring day had started with choir practice at the community hall. Choristers met every second Friday, except at Easter. Sessions with the choirmaster and pianist ran between nine and ten-thirty, followed by a morning tea. Louise never missed it. The girls at her shop had hastened their manageress away, saying how fabulous she looked. Louise was the first local to

wear vintage fashions and took extra care on choir days. Frocks unearthed from their mothers' era tickled the older women.

'Come in, Sergeant,' she said, stepping back. 'And here is me in my pink dressing gown and fluffy slippers about to wash my hair.'

There were no knickers or hosiery hanging on the clothes horse beside the bay window. She had checked. Yet, Sergeant Ronald Winfield still looked uncomfortable standing in her living room. The man wasn't very broad-minded.

It wasn't the first time the teen had crept away from his family to be with his mates. As the officer droned on about the worried parents, asking who would pick up the potatoes and cabbages for the pub, Louise drifted into thoughts about her new life.

Two years ago she had moved to 9 Shepherds Lane in Limetree. The estate agent had been right. It *was* a 'picturesque country town'. Here she could find peace among the pastured fields, the vacant scrubland and forested hills. She'd heard rural people were more accepting. Frankly, she was tired of the city flimflam and prejudice. She had made mistakes. The antique shop she'd purchased in the village generated poor returns. Few customers were interested in its stock of old furniture

and bric-a-brac—glass vases, china teacups, porcelain figurines, painted miniatures and pre-loved jewellery. But by adding a range of vintage clothes, she had started to turn things around.

The sopranos and altos got behind her, bringing their out-of-date frocks into the shop, rather than taking them to the flea markets. Florals, pleats, polka dots and stripes. *Harper's Bazaar* panache. Treasures that made customers shriek when they found them.

She tossed off a little laugh. 'So we are on another hunt for the naughty Rashid, Sergeant?'

The policeman did a quick recce of the room. Majeed studied her with large black eyes and smiled when he heard the word 'naughty'.

'What about you, Majeed?' she asked. 'Any idea where your brother is?'

He dolefully shook his head.

'Did Mum ask you to fetch me?'

The boy nodded.

Winfield seemed impatient to get home to his dinner. A member of the choir himself, he would turn up on occasions to exercise his baritone vocal cords.

'I didn't see you at the hall this morning,' Louise said.

'Didn't I tell you? I was out looking for a lost teenager.'

'Sorry, he's not here. Would you like me to talk to Mr and Mrs Bashi? Take this one back to his parents?' She

tilted her head towards the child.

‘I can drive you, if you like. You okay with walking home?’

‘Main Street is well lit,’ she answered.

‘By the way, where were you today?’

‘After choir I went to the shop. Where else would I be?’

‘Anyone see you?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Ronny. Of course they did.’

‘Just doing my job ... Don’t leave town without telling me.’

She lifted her shoulders in a sigh. ‘Why would I leave? I have a business to run.’

Some months earlier her assistants, Jenny and Gail, had concocted the idea of a boutique café. A tearoom with a bric-a-brac ambience. Louise liked the idea. Home cooking with Mum had filled many happy hours of childhood. There was enough money to install a modest kitchen and she let the eatery flow through the shop.

The old standbys of bangers and mash, sausage rolls, pie and peas, and fish and chips were put on the menu for any stray men, but the main attractions for women were the finger sandwiches, smoked fish savouries, devilled eggs and a selection of ‘Grandma’s sweet treats’. High teas were back in vogue.

A TV special showcased Louise’s Vintage Café and

overnight Limetree became ‘charming’. Friends came to exchange recipes and to share tiny versions of melting moments, chocolate Afghans, Madeira cake and scones with strawberry jam and cream. In keeping with the theme, a few ladies wore fifties twinsets with flared skirts and rayon scarves. Tourists who stopped in for the new eating experience went on to explore the local shops. It had been good for the whole town and the sergeant knew it.

Louise tightened her dressing gown and edged towards the hall. ‘Give me a minute to dress.’

‘I’ll meet you at the car. Come on, kid. How would you like a ride in a police car?’

She raked through her bedroom closet. Parents of a lost child required something sedate and she settled on the dark-blue linen. A Betty Carol fold-over with large buttons. She adjusted her wig in the long mirror and ran her hands over her slim hips. At forty-two she wasn’t frumpy. She drew on her coat, hesitating before discarding the pearl brooch.

During the drive she told the policeman which songs the choir had practised that morning, neither adult wanting to discuss their worst fears in front of an anxious little boy.

‘We did a bit of scat. Listened to a tape of Ella Fitzgerald and Mel Tormé. It was fun.’

Ronny shook his head. ‘I’m sorry I missed that.’

Boy and scooter were dismounted on the pavement outside Bashi’s Groceries.

‘Thanks for the lift,’ Louise said. ‘I’ll let you know if I learn anything.’ Immigrant families were not keen on talking to the police, even about misplaced relatives.

A lady in a blue sari and white apron, looking all of her fortyish years, came to the front step. She appeared relieved to see them but presented a stern face. ‘Majeed, I asked you to bring me Louise, not to bother the policeman for a ride home.’

‘That was my fault,’ Louise said. ‘Majeed and Sergeant Winfield arrived at my house about the same time. He offered us a ride and I accepted. Hope you don’t mind.’

The woman shrugged. ‘Dinner is in the kitchen, Majeed. Hurry now, Dad will need your help.’ She waved them inside, then asked Louise, ‘Why was the policeman visiting?’

‘He’s been making enquiries. I’m sure he thinks I’m hiding Rashid in my back room ... Silly man.’

‘Well, we don’t think you are. Come in, dear. We must talk.’

‘Have you heard anything yet?’

‘Nothing.’ Mrs Bashi lifted her apron to wipe her eyes.