

Residual Optimism

She'd quickly realised a spoon wasn't necessary for eating peanut butter out the jar. Neither was washing your face if you had no plans to leave the house.

But she did. She had to climb into that flamboyant monstrosity from the 1950s, manoeuvre it without scraping the double row of parked cars that lined the street, and earn enough to pay for next week's jar.

The neighbours' dogs were barking, their erratic excitement drifting through the gaping window, which meant it was past nine am. The sun seeped – thick as honey, warm as gravy – between the curtains. A glorious day that promised her a small fortune. Pity she'd rather have stayed in bed.

The tiled kitchen floor was cool beneath her feet – deliciously firm and steady. Soon she'd be rocking, shuddering, bumping; driving round in circles. Story of her life.

When she stepped outside, the heat thumped her in the face. Air quivered above the gaudy bonnet, blurring the houses opposite.

"Number 17?"

She turned. The postman was approaching, shiny-faced, left hand wiping sweat from his brow. The other clutched a brown envelope.

"Yes, good morn—" she began. He handed her the letter without looking up, then marched to the next house. She swallowed her greeting. *FINAL DEMAND* was stamped in red above the address, sending her stomach plummeting. She folded it over and stuffed it in her back pocket before clambering into the van's stifling cabin.

The sun was climbing the aquamarine sky as she rumbled along her usual route. Her forehead perspired from the rising temperature and the pressures of an inherited role. Her father was the sort of person you'd expect to drive a singing van, with perpetually rosy cheeks and an infectious laugh. Children swarmed at the sound, like sweet-starved rats after the Pied Piper. They'd look up, eyes aglitter, as they awaited their lurid cherry screwballs – but she couldn't be the female Willy Wonka, a conjurer of sugar-laden dreams. Her smiles were not freely given, at least not to those who kicked at the balding tyres or snatched from her saucy hands. Such easy contentment had not been passed down; that was a tune she still chased.

She rounded a tight bend to the fifth rendition of *Greensleeves*. From a distance, floating on sultry air infused with the mingled scents of honeysuckle and BBQ, the van's chimes were enchanting: an ethereal promise of freshly whipped ice cream, the anthem of summer. But blaring from above the driver's seat, competing with the engine, the music was harsh and tinny – less a melody than a crude, mechanical glitch.

She stopped outside the park and ducked through to the back, pulling on her dad's old apron – forever stained with blood, sweat and fluorescent toppings. The noise pollution had stopped, but the engine stayed running – a constant grumble of noxious fumes beneath the joyful shrieks of frolicking families. She slid back the glass and leant forward. A group of young women lounged on a checkered blanket spread out across the parched grass, foolish faces turned up towards the sun. Couples strolled hand-in-hand sharing sleepy smiles. She gazed through the narrow window – from her tedious, oppressive world to the foreign one outside.

A man approached carrying a wailing toddler. She peeled her forearms from the sticky sill and rearranged her face.

"Hello, how are we doing today?"

Searching his pockets for a payment method while trying to placate his squirming child, he didn't look up. "A Mint Cornetto and an Orange Calippo, plea– Yes, Oscar, I know it's hot!"

It didn't take long for others to notice and a queue to appear, snaking across the baking pavement. She should have been thrilled; as the brown envelope burned against her buttock, these slaving customers were her salvation. Delicate sorbets, creamy gelatos, icy slushies – she had it all, and they couldn't get enough. But for every waffle cone exchanged for coin – every transactional encounter through the small, square aperture, as the sun beat down and she willed their eyes to meet hers – she felt a tiny bit of herself melting along with the ice.

After selling her ninth strawberry split, she was grateful for a lull in demand and turned her back to the empty hatch. She sunk to the floor – warm, vibrating – and pressed her forehead against her knees.

A fly buzzed along the floor – drunk on spilt sauce, mad with the heat. At least she wasn't alone in this oven-cum-van.

"Hello? Ice cream lady?"

A new line had formed while she squatted between the freezers, mind and body trapped in equal measure. She clenched the apron as though wringing it out, squeezing for any residual optimism her dad may have left behind.

The wall juddered as a ball bounced off one of the wheels.

Someone yelled, "D'you do raspberry palaver flavour?"

She inhaled, eyes closed, and struggled to her feet.

"Hi, how can I help?"

Hours passed, customers came and went, and the shadows lengthened as she remained bent under a low ceiling. When the sky had paled from vivid turquoise to powder blue, she closed the window and returned to the front.

There was ample time for a few more stops – the season was generous, the days were long – but rather than turning down the same residential streets, music blaring, she chose a different route in motored silence. Red-brick semis and corner shops fell away to wooden gates and hedgerows, the latter growing taller and wilder by the mile. Despite the lush greenery and frothing cow parsley smudging a scene of bucolic bliss across her window, her moist palms tightened round the wheel; she would be walled in no longer.

The curve of an open hillock rose beyond the distant treeline. Its open prospect was irresistible, and she chased it along dusty lanes, round sharp bends, over hidden potholes – surrendering to whim, eager to escape. As the way steepened, the engine faltered in clunks and groans, as though it sensed her intention and was fighting back.

Minutes later, the van emerged from the trees, like a swimmer surfacing for air. The sky was huge, and she slowed to embrace it. The worn tyres crunched onto a gravel layby barely five metres from the summit. She leant her head back and exhaled, watching the dazzling sun skim a watercolour horizon.

As the day ended, so would this thankless life. Enough of striving to fill shoes that weren't hers; of stooping and serving behind a pane of glass – peripheral, never quite seen; of chugging, lurching from one day to the next, trapped in a glorified tin can.

She pushed through to the back, grabbing her rag for a final wipe-down – the least her dad deserved as she abandoned his van for freedom. She crouched to unstick the bluebottle's tissue-paper wings from the tacky floor; smothered in raspberry, there were worse ways to go.

A sharp rap, knuckle against metal, startled her upright. As she stood, her back pocket crackled; perhaps the postman had brought her more. When she slid open the window, cool air poured in, and a hearty laugh erupted from beneath a broad-rimmed hat.

"Fancy that!" the voice wheezed. "I can't... believe my luck..." Breath came thick and heavy. "That climb... was steeper than I thought..."

The twilit figure, chest heaving from the ascent, stood in dirt-scuffed boots and leant on a gnarled stick like a wizard's staff.

"Could I... trouble you..." A dry cough. "...for a Lemon Zinger, please?"

With apron swung over one shoulder, she was about to decline. This was no longer her role but a relic from the past – a conveyor of seasonal payouts and zero joy. Her feet were itching to stand upon stable ground; her ears, to enjoy the delicate sounds of rain and birdsong; her hands, to be clean of dried milk and gelatinous syrup... But the

combination of polite request and excessive panting softened her reluctance, and she placed an ice lolly on the counter. Doing so, she noticed each of the hiker's boots were tied in a different colour, as though laced with liquorice.

"Ah..." A few deep inhalations, and words came more easily. "Thank you... What was your name?"

She blinked, surprised by the rare question, and glanced beneath the floppy straw rim. A pair of hazelnut eyes were looking straight into hers.

"Oh, erm... Gwen. It's Gwen."

"Well." The stranger's face crinkled in a smile. "Thank goodness for you, Gwen."