

## ROSES

I can make one cup of coffee last an hour. Shameful, I know, but there's nothing wrong with economy: bred into my generation, and a very useful attribute too. They do cut-price lunches here: place is full of pensioners seeking company and saving on electricity. Suppose they're lonely, poor devils....no-one waiting at home, unlike some of us.

Always bring sandwiches myself (beef and mustard or cheese and pickle, none of your messy egg or tuna. ) Bit naughty, I suppose, but if the staff notice, they turn a blind eye. And to follow: one eccles-cake, two digestives, one piece of cheese, and, for later, an apple from Daphne's tree.

Poor old girl doesn't get out any more, but I keep her up to speed with what's new on the gardening-front: planters, trellises, water-features, and especially the roses. Always been her passion, roses, used to spend hours mulching and pruning and talking to 'em, and it seemed to work, too, damned colourful beds, and that splendid arbour with the mixed floribundae....I tend 'em all now, of course, while she watches from the window....

Expect I'm old-fashioned, but what *is* the dress-code for Retail Outlets? Always feel unkempt without a shirt and tie, personally, old habits die hard in more ways than one. The Bank would have frowned upon its clients, let alone its staff, wearing the sort of get-ups people go about in these days. Daphne and I often laugh about the sights I see: baggy shorts, teeshirts, tracksuits, baseball caps on people old enough to know better, trainers, and, worst of all, those dreadful flip-flop things. Even if they are there to load up with pots and barbecues and flat-packed garden furniture, wouldn't you think they'd make some kind of an effort?

After lunch (everything tidied into a napkin and disposed of in the appropriate bin) I go and survey the house-plants, a rather unimaginative selection, as I always tell Daphne. All the old favourites: *Ficus Elastica*, *Monstera Deliciosa*, *Chamaedorea*, *Tradescantia*....popular, but unexciting ....always rather fancied one of those Venus Fly-trap things myself, but Daphne wouldn't hear of it, said it was cruel to flies....come to that, she never did care for orchids, either, saying they looked evil, in the same way as those *Spotted Flyagaric* toadstools one comes upon in

forests....dammit, I'll treat her to one of these: *Asparagus Plumosus*, pretty little fern-thing, she'll like that, go nicely on the window-sill....

The Pet industry certainly is huge these days: can't just buy an animal, keep it in a box and feed it, oh no. There's a wealth of paraphernalia: collars, leads, beds, toys, scratching-posts, food, treats and titbits....there are small creatures for sale, too, rabbits, guinea-pigs and some little rodent things Daphne definitely wouldn't like, and a resident parrot, great big brute with a curved beak and a Look in its eye. Often thought I'd like a dog, but never got round to mentioning it, Daphne being red-hot on Hairs and Stains and Mess and all that.

Exotics and Fish, always enjoyable. Some rather handsome little lizards basking under the heat-lamps, couple of good-sized snakes, bloody expensive, though...daresay there's a big market for that sort of thing.

Tropical Fish, now...extremely relaxing, unhurried, predictable. Used to think I'd like a tank myself, but Daphne wasn't keen. Had to make do with the one at the Bank, massive thing, set into the main wall, something for the customers to stare at when the queues got too much....got smashed by a bullet during the raid of '66 though, and wasn't replaced. Never forget the hysterical customers, showered with water and broken glass, and those helpless, flapping, fish....have to say, it rather put me off the whole idea.

I recognise some of the species: Neons, Angel-fish, Zebras and so on, but they've got some new ones that I don't know: slim little jobs, like slivers of lemon-peel, flicking in and out of the bigger, slower-moving fish. There's a small school, purple with big lips and feathery gills, and one big, black one with bulgy eyes, looks like some sort of space-creature, and a boy, no, a *brat*, no mother in evidence, of course, right up against the tank, pulling faces....so glad Daphne and I never had children.

Must tell the old girl about the new Outdoors & Leisure bit: they've got *outside heaters* and hot-tubs, whatever they are, although judging by the brochures, they're akin to those vulgar Scandinavian steam-orgy things....pick up a leaflet though, bound to amuse her.

And there's a nice big carp-pond, alive with the things, thoughtfully-placed seats round the perimeter, glad of a breather, time to sit and savour the apple, even though it's raining, big soft drops plopping into the pond and disappearing without trace...

The apple's a Stretton Lady, pink and crisp and fresh on the palate, can't be doing with those soft, woolly varieties. Good crop this year, all from the one tree, should be enough to store over the winter, maybe even make jelly....before I can take a bite, though, the apple's snatched from my hand and thrown into the pond, where the carp fall upon it in a frenzy. Can't think what's happened, until I look up and see the *brat*, doubled up, sniggering. *Does he know what he's done? How dare he destroy the fruit of Daphne's tree?*

Don't stop to think, just one almighty shove and he's in, where, with luck, the fish will have him as well.

Great deal of unseemly fuss. Hysterical harpy mother, sullen, shivering child, interested crowd and stern police interview. Unexpectedly exciting day, although apparently banned from the premises... but then so is the *brat*...fortunately, sorted out before too long, tickings-off all round, lift home in police-car, clutching pot-plant, hoping Daphne won't have been too worried.

"Back again my love!" Always say it, always have. No reply: for a moment, I wonder if she's miffed because I'm late, but no, everything's as it should be, faint smell of yesterday's polish, Radio 4 playing in the kitchen, and there she sits, usual place, looking out of the window.

"Daphne, my love. So sorry...bit of a fracas at the Garden-Centre....bought you a present, though...."

With care, I position the *Asparagus Plumosus* on the window-sill, overlooking the rose-garden, and looking absolutely spot-on next to the small, polished urn.

