

Susannah Rickards – The Partners of the Periphery

The lad and I went walking on the beach, as we did most days for air and company.

I was out of sorts: Marie-Jeanne, the lad's ma, was in a ripe old temper at the pair of us. Etienne had skipped his chores and was fiddling away with the cat's whisker on his pa's old crystal set radio, trying to find a connection. I egged him on, boasting how his pa and I built that set from a tin of flageolet beans and slivers of foil from a chocolate bar.

'The foil's worn through now,' Etienne said.

Well, chocolate's not to be had these days, so I told the lad I wasn't sure he could fix it. Meanwhile the wet washing turned sour in its basket and the root soup scorched on the stove. Then Marie-Jeanne came in from the yard, smelling dog-tired, dragging the log basket over the tiles. When she found us at leisure, she set off cursing that with all the men gone...

I said, 'I'm not gone.'

She went, 'You're not a man, Deverel, God save you. Etienne, hide that tin pot radio before I stamp on it. Fetch a pail for mussels and take that useless article with you.'

The lad fixed my boots on me, guided me to my feet and out we went. There was a breeze but not strong enough to blow away the reek of the Alboche.

Ouireham town once smelled of our men, of their brown Gitanes and sweet pastis but they were all locked in the war camp two miles away. Every one of them bar me, who the Boche declared was just a wasted mouth to feed. I don't doubt Marie-Jeanne thought the same. The Boche honked the streets out with their farty beer and smoke-wurst, so me and the lad always took to the beach.

I fought at Ypres, that's why I can't abide the smell. I got buried alive. Two days I lay before they dug me out, metal stars in my eyes, the stench of gunsmoke and flesh in my lungs. No-one but the Alboche would want to catch

Susannah Rickards – The Partners of the Periphery

that stink and put it in a sausage. When I got out they said my hair'd turned white. I had to take their word. The stars dimmed but my eyes were done for.

We passed the Picture House as he walked me down. Typists rat-tat-tattooing Boche plans through its open windows. They took it as their HQ. Etienne asked if they would ever show films there again, even Boche ones - he wouldn't mind. He was too young before the war. Marie-Jeanne forbade him, and he feared he'd never see a moving picture now. So I said maybe they'd play one of their leader and asked again what he looked like. 'He has a slice of *boudin* stuck to his lip,' said Etienne but there was no laughter in his voice. He's bright enough to fear ahead.

I squeezed his hand. You don't need to see a face to read someone's heart, it spills out their fingertips. Barely seven years old, just started in school and already the man of the house, with me fit only for blunders.

On the beach I asked if he wanted to park me and go off musselling but he said the tide was still too high. He plodded along, little sighs coming out, so I said, 'Etienne, aren't you up for building a castle on the beach?'

'If you like, Pepere,' he went, but he led me back up the sand. I felt it, dry and soft, under my boots.

'Not here,' I said, 'You want damp sand for a good formation.'

'No,' he said back. 'Fritz build them on the dunes.'

Well. All my blood went chill and stopped.

'Fritz does what?' I asked.

'They do good castles on the dunes. Right dens they are, with doors.'

'Ah, *bon*,' I said, nice and casual, though inside my heart skittered roum-a-doum like a runaway goat. 'Are they working on them now?'

'They are.'

'Close by us?'

Susannah Rickards – The Partners of the Periphery

‘Up the beach.’

‘And they’re good, you say?’

The lad hesitated, worried I’d taken it the wrong way.

‘If we’re to build better, we need a full specification on theirs,’ I said.

‘Specification,’ the lad said, grandly. He liked new words.

‘Let’s stroll along and have a snoop, eh? Like detectives.’

He led me back down onto the firm sand.

‘You watching them?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Well don’t.’

That was when I taught him peripheral vision, as I learned it in my war: how to look in one direction but spot what’s on the outskirts of his eyes. All the while making it out as a game.

‘What you staring at Etienne?’

‘At the beach ahead.’

‘Good. What you seeing in your periphery?’

‘Fritz’s castles. Three...four...five, out and round into the *Baie de Lion*. Maybe more. There’s grey squidges all along the coast, like new rocks. He don’t use sand for them. It’s grey stuff, like cement. They’re enormous. Fritz is a right idle-arse, isn’t he Pepere? Building dens when he should be marching about.’

‘Shush. Voice down. Maybe we can get him in trouble,’ I said to the lad. My heart had slipped up into my throat. I had a hard time breathing. ‘Let’s spy on him. Maybe we can snitch to old Charlie Chaplin, their leader, get Fritz into trouble.’

‘Fantastic!’ said Etienne.

‘Can we get closer?’

Susannah Rickards – The Partners of the Periphery

‘Hmm...’ The lad considered it. ‘Fritz is still building up by *Baie de Lion*, but there’s a den on the dune above us. No one’s playing in there.’

‘Can we get in? If we do, d’you think the Boche will see?’

‘No.’ He sounded sure. ‘They got their backs to us. They seen us earlier and they looked like they don’t care.’

‘Good lad. We are fine detectives, eh Etienne? Like Maigret.’

‘Like Holmes and Watson,’ he replied.

His pa, Gilbert, who’s my own lad, read those English books before they carted him off, and used to tell Etienne the tales at night. The hounds in the fog, the felony of the bellboy and blue carbuncle. I liked a listen meself.

‘So, Monsieur Sherlock,’ I said.

‘I’m Watson,’ the lad replied, ‘He’s the eyes, and you,’ he pressed my hand, ‘can be the brains.’

‘Ah, *bon*,’ I said again. ‘Shall we capture Fritz’s castle?’

‘Oh yes!’

‘Let’s go, partner. Keep Fritz in your periphery.’

‘Periphery,’ the boy tried out the new word. ‘Partners of the Periphery.’ He pulled me up the beach.

I knew when we were inside. The air felt darker, stiller, danker. The boy had me duck, though I was already stooped to the ground, to avoid stumbling on the barbed wire in the grass. The first chamber was low, I went on my knees, but the boy stood tall. So I made that one metre twenty, maximum. The next chamber was high enough for a man to stand upright, and it was big. We played swing-the-cat side by side without touching. I made that a shade off four metres. I edged to the snipers’ lookout. It pressed against my forehead and chin, so it was narrow, no more than twenty centimetres. The sea air came pushing at my dead eyeballs and for a moment I stood with my nose out to sea, listening to the

Susannah Rickards – The Partners of the Periphery

vroush-vroush of the breakers, feeling alive. Then I reached for the boy to measure some more –

My hand found wool and metal buttons. A gloved fist gripped my smallest finger, bent it back, till my eyes did what they still could and watered.

‘Etienne!’ I called. I got no reply. That was the worst of it. Then that Alboche rammed my head into the lookout till I thought it would lodge there.

‘*Was guck’ du, Opa?*’ he asked. I understood that much. ‘I can’t see a thing you stupid goat,’ I said. He hauled me back. The raw cement scraped my skull and chin half off. There was a rotten smell of wurst coming off him that I would’ve got straightaway if I hadn’t been sniffing merrily out to sea. Fine detective I am. I was going: ‘Where’s Etienne? What you done with the lad?’ over and over. The Fritz set to poking my eyes with his leather gloves, going, ‘*Blinder, eh? Blinder nah?*’ laughing away. Then he pulls my lids apart and spits right in. I had it in me to knuckle him then. I had, but I wouldn’t. Because of Etienne. Because this was the only card I had left to play. So I just said, all squeaky old fool: ‘*Ja, blinder. From the old war, Fritz. You got me then and you got me now.*’ And Fritz liked that, just as I’d intended. Dragged me by my collar, cracking my head on the door and hoisted me back out onto the dune, where I’m sorry to say, I threw up.

I heard thuds behind me, one heavy, one light. Boots landing on the dune. Then Eti’s hand found mine. He’d only been up on the roof with Fritz Two. Told him he’d gone inside Fritz’s den cos he thought it looked a good place to spot for birds. He was watching out for marsh harriers, he said and I was just tagging along. Turned out Fritz Two was eighteen and liked a spot of ornithology himself. But that’s not all. He’d gone and given Etienne a gift. A square of his chocolate, wrapped in precious silver foil.

Susannah Rickards – The Partners of the Periphery

Marie-Jeanne snapped we'd not brought mussels back.

'We played detectives and we beat the Boche,' Eti said, his voice all bright.

'Ah *bon*, and me? I play fairy godmother and magic our dinner from one egg?'

I found my way across the flagstones to where she was sitting. The scent of the dandelion leaves she'd gathered for our salad rose to my nostrils, fresh green hope. My hands were full of pride as I lay them on her shoulders.

'We picked up better than mussels,' I told her and I stooped and kissed that woman on the head. 'When are you next walking out to the camp to visit Gilbert?'

When she got back, I knew it had gone well from her feet. They were light as a dancer's across the flagstones.

She'd stood at the chicken wire fence, she one side, Gilbert the other, and told him she was bringing him some tinned flageolets to eke out his food. Fritz allows tidbits from home because it cuts back on complaints. As Gilbert well knew, that woman's never opened a tin of beans in her life. Food's all hand done with Marie-Jeanne. There was only ever one tin of beans in our family: Gilbert's radio. Then she told him the boy had started learning Verlaine by heart just as he used to do.

Le bonheur a marche cote a cote avec moi. Happiness walked side by side with me. That was our code to tell Gilbert a new Resistance operated in our town.

'How's that possible?' he whispered to her through the chicken wire.

Susannah Rickards – The Partners of the Periphery

‘Deverel and Etienne,’ she said.

A blind man and a child.

‘The Boche haven’t the wits to suspect them.’

Oh, she told me, how hard it was for Gilbert to suppress a laugh. And I knew her eyes were shining because her voice was shining.

‘The beans,’ he said to her. ‘They, um, they weren’t so good, the last time I had them.’

‘Oh,’ Marie-Jeanne returned, ‘They’re much improved. Etienne got a bit of chocolate off Fritz, all wrapped in lovely foil, that flavoured them up just nicely.’

Etienne and me, we hid out in the woodshed, listening to the explosions. We didn’t know for certain if it was Fritz or the Allies storming our beach. But we had a pretty good idea. The door flung open and I lifted my face. It was Marie-Jeanne. She’d come out to sit with us, and, from some place she’d squirreled it, she brought out pastis. She poured me one and my fingers found the glass, the fine aniseed smell.

I said, ‘One for you Marie and one for my partner, why not?’

We toasted Verlaine and we toasted Gilbert. We toasted Sherlock and Watson and Fritz Two. Then Marie-Jeanne toasted Deverel and Etienne, the Partners of the Periphery. And I lit my Gitane so the air was full of the smell of our men once again.