

DANDELIONS



George Kenway straightened his shoulders and sat upright to ease the pang of heartburn. He breathed deeply until the pain began to fade, its sharpness settling into a dull ache in his teeth on the left side. He took the bottle of aspirins from the centre drawer of the desk and shook a couple out onto his palm. When the pains had first started he had thought he was suffering heart attacks.

It was probably lack of exercise. That, and sitting hunched over the desk. When the spring came again he would really try to get himself into shape. He pulled his stomach in and looked down, but the grey cardigan Mary had knitted him still bulged. Tennis might do the trick. He stared down at the mother-of-pearl buttons. Or walking. Walking was quite pleasant. He pushed his spectacles higher on the bridge of his nose.

On both sides of the central aisle, the shelves stretched down the length of the narrow shop. There were no customers. In the silence, he could hear the sounds of the old beams and floorboards. On the desk lay *Imprint* and *Book News*; he had not yet read them. The paperback order forms, too, were waiting to be completed. The pencil in his hand doodled over the yellow pad drawing tiny, interlocking circles in endless repetitions.

The bell above the door jangled. A woman with a child came in. He looked at her over his glasses and inclined his head in welcome. He never approached customers now. He did not want to say *Can I help you?* and hear the ritual *I'm just looking, thank you.*

"A book for a boy, madam? This boy? Over in the far corner."

Over in the far corner with all the trains and planes, the fire engines and the spaceships, the brown bunnies and the cuddly bears; with all the fat, pink pigs in trousers, the winsome pups and patient horses. He glanced at his pocket watch. The glass was scratched and yellowed. It had belonged to his father. Mary had made a shammy-leather pocket for it in the waistband of his trousers.

Business was slow, even for a Monday. Twenty-odd paperbacks, a book about the care of budgies, two copies of *Middlemarch* because they were doing it on TV and an enquiry:

*I can order it for you.*

And the traditional lie:

*I especially wanted it for today.*

He wrapped the book in brown paper, sticking down the flaps with tape. So much more sensible than string. *Farm Friends*. And change from the tin cash box in his drawer. He walked towards the door with the woman but stopped to straighten the Penguins and Pelicans. He would have to re-order, too, on the new gardening books. A very popular line.

He moved back past Gardening and Cookery, Religion (Common Prayers in white leatherette and Presentation Bibles), Modern Literature (low again on the Cronins and Shutes), Hobbies, Travel, and Adventure, towards his desk.

He had put his sandwiches in the desk drawer. He wondered what they were today. Cheese and tomato, perhaps? He hoped they weren't fish-paste or luncheon-meat. Those always left him so thirsty. She'd promised shepherd's pie tonight. He'd always liked that. It was an attractive name, too. Shepherd's pie. As he put his hand down to open the drawer, he noticed the sticking plaster across the back of his thumb. He thought, as he always did, what an unpleasant colour it was; that unnatural flesh colour, almost salmon, that children produced in their paintings. A nasty scrape on one of the wing nuts of Roy's bicycle. And the wheel still wasn't straight. That would be another job for tonight. He'd probably have to take off the brake blocks. And the front hedge

couldn't go much longer. It was silly, though, how upset she got about things like that. He would have to buy a bottle of machine oil for the clippers on the way home.

The sandwiches were wrapped in grease-proof paper and secured with an elastic band. He looked at his watch again and decided to wait until one o'clock. Another ten minutes. Perhaps he could lose weight if, every day, he left one sandwich. But then, he knew that he would eat it with his afternoon cup of tea.

Sometimes, in the long afternoons, after the day had been divided by the sandwiches, he saw the shelves as he had always imagined them, the rows of calf-bound volumes, gilt titles, gilt decoration on the spines, the light hinting on the mahogany richness of the old leather. Standing along the bottom shelves, the massive folios—Heraldry, County Visitations, Voyages, Theological Disputations, and Chronicles. The air would be heavy with the must of old paper. Lying open on his desk, or perhaps propped against his works of reference, would be a sixteenth-century German black-letter with quaint woodcuts of vigorous tortures and martyrdoms, and in the glass-fronted cases behind him a few incunabula and the Aldines and Elzevirs and the volumes with the fore-edge paintings. In the heavy portfolio beside the desk there would be the Speed and Bartholomew maps, single leaves from Caxton, a few autographs, and pages of medieval manuscript brilliant with gold, blue, and scarlet illumination. And to his few customers—for most of his trade would be through his scholarly catalogues—he would say:

“Well, the title's foxed and there's some worming in the last signature, but it's a rare volume. Not recorded in Wing, I believe.”

Or he'd say:

“It's a pleasing book. A very representative binding.”

He still bought catalogues of the sales and read the report from Sotheby's every week in the *Literary Supplement*. It was Friday's chief pleasure.

He unwrapped the sandwiches, leaving them out of sight in the open drawer in case a customer came in. They were egg and lettuce. The coffee in his thermos flask was the kind without caffeine. She was always worrying about his health. On winter mornings, when he stooped to kiss her goodbye, she always tucked his muffler more firmly inside the old mac.

The afternoon sun was quite strong for September and the narrow room was becoming uncomfortably warm. He got up from his desk and walked down to the window where he lowered the Venetian blind. He checked to see that the sign on the door said Open and then went back to his desk.

He took out his fountain pen, a gift from Mary eleven years ago, and unscrewed the cap. He took the bottle of Permanent Black from its place in the left-hand drawer and filled the pen, wiping it clean on a piece of rag he kept with the ink bottle. He placed the pen beside his memo pad on the blotter and then started to work his way through *Book News* but it was difficult to concentrate; his eyes jumped lines of print and he had to keep on going back to grasp what he was reading. He did not like to admit it, but he often felt quite sleepy after lunch. It would have been most refreshing to stretch out, just for a few minutes.

With the blind down, the room was rather dim, except for a single patch of sunlight where a slat in the blind was buckled. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. The bridge of his nose, too, was sore from the pressure.

He raised his head and stared down the warm gloom towards the window. His eyes were caught and dazzled in the burst of light. As he stared, the light seemed to grow brighter like a climbing candle flame, and larger, until he saw nothing else. Then, slowly, in the white centre of the light, a picture grew.

He saw a small boy standing in a familiar room looking towards the window. The boy was himself. He was standing alone in the big stone-flagged kitchen. He could feel the coolness of the stone

through his stocking-*feet*. Behind him, on the mantelpiece, the black clock was ticking.

On the red-tiled windowsill stood a jam jar full of dandelions. The window burned. Between the lace curtains, sunlight, sunshine glittering off the silver tap, gleaming in the white sink, glowing on the crowded yellow heads.

He had picked them in the orchard.

The details of the picture faded, faded until he saw only the burning flowers in the jam jar, and then, blinking, he found that he was staring at the sunpatch, the Venetian blind with its buckled slat, the shelves of books, and his desk in front of him with his glasses lying on the green blotter. For a few moments, he stared at the glasses as though he did not know what they were for. Then he reached out and picked them up, settling them cautiously on his nose. He sat motionless in his chair and the afternoon ebbed quietly away.

The bell above the door jangled. A young man, an untidy young man in jeans and a sweater, a student, walked up the shop towards him and stood in front of the desk.

*“Economic Theory* by Woodall? I don’t believe I have . . . no, I’m sure . . . I beg your pardon? Order it for you? Oh, yes. *Order* it. Certainly, sir. Certainly.”

When the young man had gone, he took out his watch and, looking at it, shook his head. He felt rather fuzzy; a cold coming on perhaps, or possibly the aspirins. He put the thermos flask into his briefcase and snapped shut the clasp. His raincoat was in the cupboard behind the desk and he took it out and shrugged his shoulders into it. He pulled the belt tighter and stood looking round the shop.

He was surprised to see his fountain pen still lying on the blotter. He put it in the right-hand drawer in its proper place in the Castañeda cigar box.

He put the lock down on the door and turned the Open sign around. He pulled the door shut after him and shook the handle to

make sure, as he always did. And as he always did, he looked up at the sign above the door: Geo. Kenway: Bookseller.

Because he was earlier than usual, there was not such a long queue at the bus stop and when the bus came he managed the luxury of a seat to himself. The familiar landmarks passed in their usual order and he got automatically to his feet just before his stop.

The fresh air seemed to clear his head as he walked down Cherril Avenue and turned into The Grove. Down at the far end, by the bowling green, a group of boys were straddling their bikes and talking. He recognized Roy, and Peter from next door.

He had forgotten to empty the tin cash box.

The painters were at work at number fifty-three. He hoped the green they were using was an undercoat. Mr. Glover waved to him.

"How are you keeping, Mr. Glover?"

"Sprightly for an old one. Keeping busy, you know. And yourself?"

"Oh, very well, thank you," he called.

"Yes, it's been a beautiful afternoon."

He turned in at number forty-seven. The front door was ajar. As he hung up his raincoat and pushed his briefcase under the hall table, he called, "Hello? Mary?"

She came out from the kitchen and as he bent to kiss her she said, "Is anything wrong, George?"

"Wrong?"

"You're so early."

"Oh, no. I had a bit of a headache and things were quiet. I just thought I'd come home."

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, that'd be nice."

"It was so lovely this afternoon," she said, "just like summer, so I made a salad for you. With salmon. And Roy's off somewhere playing speedbike."

“Speedway,” he said.

He had forgotten the oil for the clippers.

“Whatever he calls it,” she said.

“I think I’ll do the hedge before supper,” he said, as he followed her into the kitchen.

It was still warm, although, as the sun set, a breeze was springing up. He moved gradually into the rhythm of the work. It became enjoyable and he frequently stepped back to see if the line was straight. The higher sprigs would have to be tackled from the other side. But he had managed a smooth curve towards the crown of the hedge. Very smooth, in fact. He stepped back to look again and then moved in to trim a straggling spray.

His hands were hot and sweaty and a heavy pulse beat in his neck. Leaning on the front gate, he rested for a few minutes before starting on the other side.

The light was thickening and the houses opposite were becoming shapes against the flushed sky. Shepherd’s delight. Shepherd’s pie. Another fine day tomorrow. He could hear the distant whirr and clack of a lawnmower, and across the road the Romilly girl was practising scales on the piano, the notes falling softly into the evening.

There was a light, sharp scent in the air, a faintly acid smell. The smell of sap and bruised privet leaves. It seemed to move a memory in him . . . a recollection . . . but he could not remember what it was.