

Billie D

By Vivian French

At ten in the morning I leave my front door behind me.
Have I got my key?
What a foolish woman you are, Billie D.
The door always shuts with the same sound.
Sometimes I think my house despises me.
The mocking dust settles on all the things I hold dear
And the windows never look shiny and clear.
My windows do not twinkle at me they only sneer.

I walk tactfully down the hard grey road
Being aware of the life that is heaving beneath the paving stones.
Stones are like bones they lie without soft flesh.
I rather hope that when it all bursts out from underground
I will not be around.
There will be life in such excess
That my dry brittle mind will be embarrassed by the blood filled fruitfulness.

At the baker's I buy bread.
Man does not live by bread alone
Is what my mother always said
But it can go a long way towards preventing starvation and emaciation.
I am particularly fond of toast and jam.
When you live on your own
There is a good deal of comfort to be found in jam.
Once a great nephew came
And we had toast and tea.
Strawberry jam for him and raspberry for me.

It is still only seventeen minutes past ten.
Perhaps if I walk slowly to the papershop and back
It will take thirteen minutes more.

Time sits sullenly in the trees.
I count as I walk.
One.
Two.
Three.
Four.

The papershop is filled with fluttering words.
Side by side
Children are jittering.
Sometimes I think they don't see me at all.
Am I really Billie D
Or just a dusty shadow on the wall?
My head is not used to all the chattering
And rattles. A woman smiles at me.
I cannot reach the smile inside my head
And so she moves away.

**My name is Stanley Baldwin.
I am quite used to people laughing if you wish to laugh.
My father told me that my mother had a lovely sense of humour which I failed to inherit.
I was born late into the night
And my mother said, "Call him Stanley" and then laughed and died.
Personally I have never seen the joke.**

**There was a hatstand in the office where I worked.
The only other hatstand was in the office of the manager
So you can see I was a man of some importance.
Even so there was no further need for my services.
This is something I fail to understand.
Mr George had green lino and no hatstand but his services were still required.
This is a fact I do not comprehend.**

**I shall place my hat firmly upon my head and go to read The Times.
The quality of editing is no longer what it was
And so I do not subscribe myself.**

**I read the paper in the library.
I could wish that the corners were a little less thumbed.**

**There are cracks in the paving stones.
I do not understand why they are not filled.
Walking every day as I do one has time to observe these things.
I do not keep a car.
On occasion Mr George has offered me a lift
But I have, in every instance, declined.
Walking, I told him, one has time to observe.**

I am a young person of style
I sit behind the library desk and smile
You may admire my smile when the clock strikes half past ten.
We open then.
Wet or dry the first in is the old lady
And what I say is people like that should be put away.
She's one of the ones that comes in every day
Like the other batty one, the old man.

How beautiful are my long red nails and my fingers white
Elegantly I check the books from morning to night
And watch from under my long mascaraed lashes to see what is going on.
I'm very quick to notice if a book has gone.

There must be something in the weather.
When I tossed back my black shining hair I saw the two old things sitting together
Or at least there was no empty chair in between.
There is no copy of The Times to be seen
Although I am sure I put it out.

Well I never. I do declare without a doubt
The grubby old thing has invited him to tea
And if my delicate ear-studded hearing did not deceive me
I heard the old man agree.

Oh Billie D whatever have you done?
There is a man coming to tea at a quarter to four
And there is dust and you have never spoken to him before.

“Would you like a cup of tea with me?”
How could I have said the words
Inside my head were the frantic featherings of caged birds
Did he agree?
Oh yes he did he did he did oh should I buy more bread?
Oh we will have toast and jam and a buttered bun
And we will talk while we drink our tea.
There is a great deal that can be said.

**This is a day not like other days
Although I still do not understand why there was not a copy of The Times.
I have been asked out to tea at a quarter to four.
If Mr George should offer me a lift
It might be that I will take a little ride.
It will be pleasant to see what there is to see.
It would make a pleasant line of conversation
When we are talking over tea.**

Oh Billie D
I have heard the church clock strike half past three
Oh whatever shall I do!
I have been glancing out of the window since half past two
And I have already sliced the bread.
He will be here at a quarter to four
And there is nothing but a hollow in my head.
I have already sliced the bread.

**I put my hat firmly upon my head
At precisely half past three.
It will not take me long to reach the road in question.**

There is a man walking down the road and he is coming here to my door
There has never been anyone here before

Except my great nephew. The one who came to tea.
I have put the kettle on.
He is knocking at the door.
There is jam in a little glass jar.
I have dropped a cup.
There are little pieces of pink china all over the floor
My hands will not pick them up.

He is knocking once more.
When will he go away?

Now I come to look
There is only jam enough for one.

**I will walk slowly home
And on the way I will observe the appalling state of the roads.
I shall refuse any offer of a lift.
I will return home
And hang my hat upon the hatstand at the entrance of my room.**

*How the young lady with style would smile
If she could see Billie D where she sits
Picking a copy of The Times into very little bits.*

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