

Joan Aiken wrote “Searching for Summer” in the 1950’s, setting the story in the future eighties, perhaps 1980 or 2080. At the time of publication, the memory of the 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan remained fresh in the minds of many. People lived with the lurking threat of nuclear war. As a result of nuclear weapons testing, radioactive matter would rain down from the sky, polluting the environment. The weapons themselves were growing more advanced and powerful at the time, and no one knew exactly what would happen to the earth in the event of nuclear war.

Searching for Summer

by Joan Aiken

Lily wore yellow on her wedding day. In the eighties people put a lot of faith in omens and believed that if a bride’s dress was yellow her married life would be blessed with a bit of sunshine.

It was years since the bombs had been banned, but still the cloud never lifted. Whitish gray, day after day, sometimes darkening to a weeping slate color or at the end of an evening, turning to smoky copper, the sky endlessly, secretively brooded.

Old people began their stories with the classic, fairy-tale opening: “Long, long ago, when I was a liddle un, in the days when the sky was blue . . .” and children, listening, chuckled among themselves at the absurd thought, because, blue, imagine it! How could the sky ever have been blue? You might as well say, “In the days when the grass was pink.”

Stars, rainbows, and all other such heavenly sideshows had been permanently withdrawn, and if the radio announced that there was a blink of sunshine in such and such a place, where the cloud belt had thinned for half an hour, cars and buses would pour in that direction for days in an unavailing search for warmth and light.

After the wedding, when all the relations were standing on the church porch, with Lily shivering prettily in her buttercup nylon, her father prodded the dour’ and withered grass on a grave—although it was August, the leaves were hardly out yet—and said, “Well, Tom, what are you aiming to do now, eh?”

“Going to find a bit of sun and have our honeymoon in it,” said Tom. There was a general laugh from the wedding party.

“Don’t get sunburned,” shrilled Aunt Nancy.

“Better start off Bournemouth way. Paper said they had a half-hour of sun last Wednesday week,” Uncle Arthur weighed in heavily.

“We’ll come back brown as—as this grass,” said Tom, and ignoring the good-

Bournemouth: A British seaside resort.

natured teasing from their respective families, the two young people mounted on their scooter, which stood ready at the churchyard wall, and chugged away in a shower of golden confetti. When they were out of sight, and the yellow paper had subsided on the gray and gritty road, the Whitemores and the Hoskinses strolled off, sighing, to eat wedding cake and drink currant wine, and old Mrs. Hoskins spoiled everyone's pleasure by bursting into tears as she thought of her own wedding day when everything was so different.

Meanwhile Tom and Lily buzzed on hopefully across the gray countryside, with Lily's veil like a gilt banner floating behind. It was chilly going for her in her wedding things, but the sight of a bride was supposed to bring good luck, and so she stuck it out, although her fingers were blue to the knuckles. Every now and then they switched on their portable radio and listened to the forecast. Inverness had seen the sun for ten minutes yesterday, and South end for five minutes this morning, but that was all.

"Both those places are long way from here," said Tom cheerfully. "All the more reason we'd find a nice bit of sunshine in these parts somewhere. We'll keep on going south. Keep your eyes peeled, Lil, and tell me if you see a blink of sun on those hills ahead."

But they came to the hills and passed them, and a new range shouldered up ahead and then slid away behind, and still there was no flicker or patch of sunshine to be seen anywhere in the gray, winter-ridden landscape. Lily began to get discouraged, so they stopped for a cup of tea at a drive-in.

"Seen the sun lately, mate?" Tom asked the proprietor.

He laughed shortly. "Notice any buses or trucks around here? Last time I saw the sun was two years ago September; came out just in time for the wife's birthday."

"It's stars I'd like to see," Lily said, looking wistfully at her dust-colored tea. "Ever so pretty they must be."

"Well, better be getting on I suppose," said Tom, but he had lost some of his bounce and confidence. Every place they passed through looked nastier than the last, partly on account of the dismal light, partly because people had given up bothering to take a pride in their boroughs. And then, just as they were entering a village called Molesworth, the dimmest, drabest, most insignificant huddle of houses they had come to yet, the engine coughed and died on them.

"Can't see what's wrong," said Tom, after

Currant: a berry used to make jams, jellies, and wines.

Boroughs: towns or districts.

a prolonged and gloomy survey.

“Oh, Tom!” Lily was almost crying. “What’ll we do?”

“Have to stop here for the night, s’pose.” Tom was short-tempered with frustration. “Look, there’s a garage just up the road. We can push the bike there, and they’ll tell us if there’s a pub where we can stay. It’s nearly six anyway.”

They had taken the bike to the garage, and the man there was just telling them that the only pub in the village was the Rising Sun, where Mr. Noakes might be able to give them a bed, when a bus pulled up in front of the petrol pumps.

“Look,” the garage owner said, “there’s Mr. Noakes just getting out of the bus now. Sid!” he called.

But Mr. Noakes was not able to come to them at once. Two old people were climbing slowly out of the bus ahead of him: a blind man with a white stick, and a withered, frail old lady in a black satin dress and hat. “Careful now, George,” she was saying, “mind ee be careful with my son William.”

“I’m being careful, Mrs. Hatching,” the conductor said patiently, as he almost lifted the unsteady old pair off the bus platform. The driver had stopped his engine, and everyone on the bus was taking a mild and sympathetic interest, except for Mr. Noakes just behind who was cursing irritably at the delay. When the two old people were on the narrow pavement, the conductor saw that they were going to have trouble with a bicycle that was propped against the curb just ahead of them; he picked it up and stood holding it until they had passed the line of petrol pumps and were going slowly off along a path across the fields. Then, grinning, he put it back, jumped hurriedly into the bus, and rang his bell.

“Old nuisances,” Mr. Noakes said furiously. “Wasting public time. Every week that palaver goes on, taking the old man to Midwick Hospital Outpatients and back again. I know what I’d do with ‘em. Put to sleep, that sort ought to be.”

Mr. Noakes was a repulsive-looking individual, but when he heard that Tom and Lily wanted a room for the night, he changed completely and gave them a leer that was full false goodwill. He was a big, red-faced man with wet, full lips, bulging pale-gray bloodshot eyes, and a crop of stiff greasy black hair. He wore tennis shoes.

“Honeymooners, eh?” he said, looking sentimentally at Lily’s pale prettiness. “Want a bed for the night, eh?” and he laughed a disgusting laugh that sounded like thick oil coming out of a bottle, heh-heh-heh-heh, and gave Lily a tremendous pinch on her arm. Disengaging herself as politely as she could, she

<p>Pub: British term for small tavern. Pubs in small towns sometimes serve meals or rent rooms to travelers.</p>

stooped and picked up something from the pavement. They followed Mr. Noakes glumly up the street to the Rising Sun.

While they were eating their baked beans, Mr. Noakes stood over their table grimacing at them. Lily unwisely confided to him that they were looking for a bit of sunshine. Mr. Noakes's laughter nearly shook down the ramshackle building.

"Sunshine! Oh my gawd! That's a good 'un! Hear that, Mother?" he bawled to his wife. "They're looking for a bit of sunshine. Heh heh-heh-heh-heh! Why," he said, banging on the table till the baked beans leaped about, "If I could find a bit of sunshine near here, permanent bit that is, dja know what I'd do?"

The young people looked at him inquiringly across the bread and margarine.

"Lido, trailer site, country club, holiday camp—you wouldn't know the place. Land around here is dirt-cheap; I'd buy up the lot. Nothing but woods. I'd advertise—I'd have people flocking to this little dump from all over the country. But what a hope, what a hope, eh? Well, feeling better? Enjoyed your tea? Ready for bed? Heh-heh-heh-heh, bed's ready for you."

Avoiding one another's eyes, Tom and Lily stood up.

"I—I'd like to go for a bit of a walk first, Tom," Lily said in a small voice. "Look, I picked up that old lady's bag on the pavement; I didn't notice it till we'd done talking to Mr. Noakes, and by then she was out of sight. Should we take it back to her?"

"Good idea," said Tom, pouncing on the suggestion with relief. "Do you know where she lives, Mr. Noakes?"

"Who, old Ma Hatching? Sure I know. She lives in the wood. But you don't want to go taking her bag back, not this time o' the evening you don't. Let her worry. She'll come asking for it in the morning."

"She walked so slowly," said Lily, holding the bag gently in her hands. It was very old, made of black velvet on two ring handles, and embroidered with beaded roses. "I think we ought to take it to her, don't you, Tom?"

"Oh, very well, very well, have it your own way," Mr. Noakes said, winking at Tom. "Take that path by the garage; you can't go wrong. I've never been there meself, but they live somewhere in that wood back o' the village; you'll find it soon enough."

They found the path soon enough, but not the cottage. Under the lowering' sky they walked forward endlessly among trees that carried only tiny and

Lido: British term for a public outdoor swimming pool.

rudimentary leaves, wizened and poverty-stricken.’ Lily was still wearing her wedding sandals, which had begun to blister her. She held onto Tom’s arm, biting her lip with the pain, and he looked down miserably at her bent brown head; everything had turned out so differently from what he had planned.

By the time they reached the cottage Lily could hardly bear to put her left foot to the ground, and Tom was gentling her along: “It can’t be much farther now, and they’ll be sure to have a bandage. I’ll tie it up, and you can have a sit-down. Maybe they’ll give us a cup of tea. We could borrow an old pair of socks or something. . . .” Hardly noticing the cottage garden, beyond a vague impression of rows of runner beans, they made for the clematis grown porch and knocked: There was a brass lion’s head on the door, carefully polished.

“Eh, me dear!” It was the old lady, old Mrs. Hatching, who opened the door, and her exclamation was a long- drawn gasp of pleasure and astonishment. “Eh, me dear! ‘Tis the pretty bride. See’d ye s’arternoon when we was coming home from hospital.”

“Who be?” shouted a voice from inside.

“Come in, come in, me dears. My son William’ll be glad to hear company; he can’t see, poor soul, nor has this thirty year, ah, and a pretty sight he’s losing this minute—”

“We brought back your bag,” Tom said, putting it in her hands, “and we wondered if you’d have a bit of plaster’ you could kindly let us have. My wife’s hurt her foot—”

My wife. Even in the midst of Mrs. Hatching’s voluble welcome the strangeness of these words struck the two young people, and they fell quiet, each of them, pondering, while Mrs. Hatching thanked and commiserated, all in a breath, and asked them to take a seat on the sofa and fetched a basin of water from the scullery, and William from his seat in the chimney corner demanded to know what it was all about.

“Wot be doing? Wot be doing, Mother?”

‘Tis a bride, all in’s finery,” she shrilled back at him, “an’s blistered her foot, poor heart.” Keeping up a running commentary for William’s benefit she bound up the foot, every now and then exclaiming to herself in wonder over the fineness of Lily’s wedding dress, which lay in yellow nylon swathes around the chair. “There, me dear. Now us’ll have a cup of tea, eh? Proper thirsty you’m fare to be, walking all the way to here this hot day.”

<p>Clematis-grown: Covered with a flowering vine.</p> <p>Plaster: British term for an adhesive bandage.</p>

Hot day? Tom and Lily stared at each other and then around the room. Then it was true, it was not their imagination, that a great dusty golden square of sunshine lay on the fireplace wall, where the brass pendulum of the clock at every swing blinked into sudden brilliance? That the blazing geraniums on the windowsill housed a drove of murmuring bees? That, through the window, the gleam of linen hung in the sun to whiten suddenly dazzled their eyes?

“The sun? Is it really the sun?” Tom said, almost doubtfully.

“And why not?” Mrs. Hatching demanded. “How else’ll beans set, tell me that? Fine thing if sun were to stop shining.” Chuckling to herself she set out a Crown Derby tea set, gorgeously colored in red and gold, and a baking of saffron buns. Then she sat down and, drinking her own tea, began to question the two of them about where they had come from, where they were going. The tea was tawny and hot and sweet; the clock’s tick was like a bird chirping; every now and then a log settled in the grate; Lily looked sleepily around the little room, so rich and peaceful, and thought, I wish we were staying here. I wish we needn’t go back to that horrible pub. . . . She leaned against Tom’s comforting arm.

“Look at the sky,” she whispered to him. “Out there between the geraniums. Blue!”

“And ee’ll come up and see my spare bed room, won’t ee now?” Mrs. Hatching said, breaking off the thread of her questions—which indeed was not a thread, but merely a savoring’ of her pleasure and astonishment at this unlooked-for visit—”Bide here, why don’t ee? Mid as well. The lii un’s fair wore out. Us’ll do for ee better ‘n rangy old Noakes; proper old scoundrel ‘e be. Won’t us, William?”

“Ah,” William said appreciatively. “I’ll sing ee some o’ my songs.”

A sight of the spare room settled any doubts. The great white bed, huge as a prairie, built up with layer upon solid layer of mattress, blanket, and quilt, almost filled the little shadowy room in which it stood. Brass rails shone in the green dimness. “Isn’t it quiet,” Lily whispered. Mrs. Hatching, silent for the moment, stood looking at them proudly, her bright eyes slowly moving from face to face. Once her hand fondled, as if it might have been a baby’s downy head, the yellow brass knob.

And so, almost without any words, the matter was decided.

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Three days later they remember that they must go to the village and collect the scooter which must, surely, be mended by now.

They had been helping old William pick a basketful of beans. Tom had taken his shirt off and the sun gleamed on his brown back; Lily was wearing an old cotton print which Mrs. Hatching, with much chuckling, had shortened to fit her.

It was amazing how deftly, in spite of his blindness, William moved among the beans, feeling through the rough, rustling leaves for the stiffness of concealed pods. He found twice as many as Tom and Lily, but then they, even on the third day, were still stopping every other minute to exclaim over the blueness of the sky. At night they sat on the back doorstep while Mrs. Hatching clucked inside as she dished the supper, "Star struck ee'll be! Come along in, doee, before soup's cold; stars niver run away yet as I do know."

"Can we get anything for you in the village?" Lily asked, but Mrs. Hatching shook her head.

"Baker's bread and such like's no use but to cripple thee's innardses wi' colic. I been living here these eighty year wi'out troubling doctors, and I'm not faring to begin now." She waved to them and stood watching as they walked into the wood, thin and frail beyond belief, but wiry, indomitable her black eyes full of zest. Then she turned to scream menacingly at a couple of pullets' who had strayed and were scratching among the potatoes.

Almost at once they noticed, as they followed the path, that the sky was clouded over.

"It is only there on that one spot," Lily said in wonder. "All the time. And they've never even noticed that the sun doesn't shine in other places."

"That's how it must have been all over the world, once," Tom said.

At the garage they found their scooter ready and waiting. They were about to start back when they ran into Mr. Noakes.

"Well, well, well, well, well!" he shouted, glaring at them with ferocious good humor. "How many wells make a river, eh? And where did you slip off to? Here's me and the missus was just going to tell the police to have the rivers dragged. But hullo, hullo, what's this? Brown, eh? Suntan? Scrumptious," he said, looking meltingly at Lily and giving her another tremendous pinch. "Where'd you get it, eh? That wasn't all got in half an hour I know. Come on, this means money to you and me; tell us the big secret. Remember what I said; land around these parts is dirt cheap."

Tom and Lily looked at each other in horror. They thought of the cottage, the bees humming among the runner beans, the sunlight glinting in the red-and-

gold teacups. At night, when they had lain in the huge sagging bed, stars had shone through the window, and the whole wood was as quiet as the inside of a shell.

“Oh, we’ve been miles from here,” Tom lied hurriedly. “We ran into a friend, and he took us right away beyond Brinsley.” And as Mr. Noakes still looked suspicious and unsatisfied, he did the only thing possible. “We’re going back there now,” he said. “The sunbathing’s grand.” And opening the throttle, he let the scooter go. They waved at Mr. Noakes and chugged off toward the gray hills that lay to the north.

“My wedding dress,” Lily said sadly. “It’s on our bed.”

They wondered how long Mrs. Hatching would keep tea hot for them, who would eat all the pasties.

“Never mind, you won’t need it again,” Tom comforted her.

At least, he thought, they had left the golden place undisturbed. Mr. Noakes never went into the wood. And they had done what they intended; they had found the sun. Now they, too, would be able to tell their grandchildren, when beginning a story, “Long, long ago, when we were young, in the days when the sky was blue.”

Pullets: young hens.

Pasties: British term for meat pies.