

Bourne
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Mud

by Sue Hitchcock

Since Roma had left his employment at the inn, Toby had gone to her room every morning, when Jean was otherwise occupied. She was busy now that Roma was no longer cleaning and filling the shelves behind the bar. Someone had to keep an eye on the barge in Roma's absence, at least that is what he told himself. The small creek, an offshoot of the main Conyer Creek, was a good half mile away and difficult to see, even with the binoculars he had lent Roma for the purpose.

His heart beat suddenly faster on that Saturday, when the three turned up with spades and started to excavate the bank in which the Adele was embedded. Toby sniggered. It would take more than a bit of digging to release the barge, but he would enjoy watching. Roma looked scruffy. What on earth did he see in her?

"Toby, what are you doing? I need some help, here. It's almost opening time."

Toby dragged himself away, wondering if they would have the nerve to come for lunch. He would serve them himself, the model of politeness, showing how generous he was. Still, the soft, roundnesses of her body stopped him in his tracks every now and then. Imagining tactile sensations seemed to take all of his brain power. His knees might lose their strength to hold him and he might even vomit, if he couldn't break free. He'd shake his head and try to remember what drinks the customer had ordered.

"Where's your pretty barmaid today?"

"If you look down the river, you'll see her. She's chosen mud in preference to my cosy corner." He shrugged.

To Toby's disappointment, the muddy trio did not dare, or maybe could not be bothered with the embarrassment of facing the old problem again, but Toby could not be discarded so easily.

As the lunchtime rush dwindled, Toby squinted upstream to where the Adele was moored, when he found spare moments. His distraction was noticed by his wife, but also by Ted, the former chandler, who was one of the cronies Roma's dad used to drink with. Such regulars were the bread and butter of Toby's business but were, at the same time, as invisible as the old oak table where they regularly sat.

"They're wasting their time. It's too far gone. Roma hasn't got any money to get the heavy equipment it needs."

Toby was glad to hear this, "Yeah, that's what I suspected. Can I get you anything, Ted?"

"I'll have a pint, thanks Landlord."

How surprising was the beautiful Spring morning to Toby, who hardly ever rose early after the late glass washing which followed closing time for a publican. It was his plan to see how much progress Roma and her friends had made with their excavation, before their arrival to continue. He was wide awake on the way down the path and the ebbing tide showed the barge was still stuck as before. He sniggered to himself and walked back, now muzzy-headed from the lack of sleep.

As the days passed, his complacency waned. Each day progress was made, with other workmen adding to the crew. Then they seemed to be attaching chains and cables to the prow and along the far side. The creek was far too shallow for a tugboat, even if they could afford to hire one. What might they be planning?

Finally it was obvious. A lorry appeared on the far bank of the Conyer. It must have driven the long way round to the north of the marina. Surely it must be illegal to block the exit for the yacht owners? Fuming, Toby picked up the phone and dialled the quay master.