

Going to Elaine's

by Sue Hitchcock

Roma's phone call to Elaine failed. She tried three times, finally leaving a message in the hope of an answer in time for them to visit straight away. It was eleven before Elaine called back.

"Sorry, sweetheart, you should have guessed I'd be working."

Roma realised that Elaine was still modelling at the Art school, where they had met. Nude modelling didn't allow for mobile phones. Even had she had put it nearby on the floor, she wouldn't have been free to move and answer it.

"Oh, stupid me! I should have remembered. I really want to talk to you. What time do you finish?"

"I have to collect my kids from school, but we'll get home at about five. You know where I live, don't you?"

"You mean the boat?"

"No, we do have a house, you know."

"Is there a day when you'll be at the boat? We have a problem with the barge and I need your advice."

"We? Have you got a new boyfriend?"

"No, I'm talking about my friend, Margie. We want to live in the Adele, but it is too damp at the moment and we're living in her caravan."

"Let me think. What about tomorrow? I'll get Roy to collect the kids and I could meet you at about six. Is that too late? You didn't say where the caravan is."

"No, that's fine. We're coming from Rainham, so we could get the train. The station isn't far from the marina, is it?"

“Great, see you tomorrow!”

Elaine was unlike most models, the elastic of their underwear leaving grooves and folds in their flesh. She was like a tree, suntanned all over and gently curved, without the damage of clothing. Her family were nudists, naturists, belonging to a north Kent club, but more often enjoying their freedom on their boat, out of sight of the shore. She had claimed once that a squirrel ran up her body, by mistake. Roma had become a friend when they went swimming at the local pool in their lunch break from the life class.

Margie was disappointed, with her usual impatience. She wanted to know all the details, arguing for an early start the following day. There was no point, but the fine weather could turn it into a jolly trip, not something they would afford as a rule. They packed a picnic for lunch and walked down to Rainham station. London trains were frequent and quiet after the commuters had made their early departures. They had their choice of seats, and Margie was switching sides to see if their caravan site could be seen, almost missing it, though she ought to have known the railway didn't pass between them and the main road. It was all a novelty to her, having always been ferried about by car or lorry. After crossing the Medway, where the castle and cathedral seemed like a fairy tale come true, the short trip across the open country soon brought them to Gravesend.

The route from the station went through the shopping centre and Margie got shopping madness.

“We haven't got any money to spare. We've already spent quite a lot on the train fare.”

“Just let's look in the charity shops.”

Though Roma was treating Margie like a child, it was she who was tempted to buy a flowery frock, encouraged by Margie's flattery. Then it was time for lunch.

“I think I've been here before, with the fair when we were touring.”

“Really? It's nice, isn't it?”

“Yes, I had my trampolines over there.”

They were sitting under a tree, by the lake in the Riverside Leisure area. After their picnic Roma had stretched out on the grass, while Margie sat next to her, absent-mindedly stroking the soft skin of Roma's inner arm. It wasn't long before Margie lay her head in Roma's waist sleepily enjoying the cool shade, along with the scent of elderflowers, mingled with Roma's smell which she loved.

Greedy, squabbling gulls woke them from their reverie, Roma tipping Margie off, she sat up cross-legged and reached her arms up to stare up at the branches and take a deep breath.

“What time is it?”

“About four. Can we get an ice cream?”

“Good idea. Let's walk along by the river and find somewhere.”

The view of Tilbury across the Thames surprised Margie. The Medway joined the Thames at the Medway Towns to make a wide estuary, with no view of Essex at all. Perhaps it had never been explained on her previous visit, and she couldn't remember how long ago it was. They licked their ice cream cones overlooking the riverbank, where the tide was rising. The warmth melted the ice cream till it started to drip through the point into the water and they tried to catch as much as they could.

"Oh, you greedy pig!" Roma laughed as Margie stuffed the final rather large cone into her mouth. "I'm sticky, now. Are you?"

After a quick wash and brush up in the rather smelly public toilet on the promenade, it was time to find the canal basin.