

I Would Rather be Happy than Dignified

by Sue Hitchcock

For those with status, dignity goes with the job. For a traveller there is no status, but they'd rather be happy than dignified. Self respect is part of the code, the secret which makes them special. Itinerant, they have no vote, but they see through the vain assertion that land can belong to people, it belongs to all creatures, plants, trees, and the earth itself knows the truth.

For Roma it included the sea, the stars, the tides and the mud. Maybe that is why she was giving herself to repairing her shell, her den, her access to the world she possessed. The adoring Margie believed in the mission because Roma did, and still remembered how her father was received in small towns, like a long-lost uncle, returning with gifts – gifts of fun and excitement, for a week at least. He knew every village, every lane around Kent. He was both a man of Kent and a Kentish man, living on the boundary dividing the nomenclatures, the Medway river. The population of the country had trebled since he set up the travelling funfair and the government had domesticated lots of travellers, but the proud spirit of independence remained, calling them away. The possibility of leaving and trusting to fate supported their feisty spirit. Conforming was just a pretence.

Margie set her alarm for six, the morning after getting Ted's advice. She was hoping to catch her mother before she set out for breakfast duty at the nursing home. If she were on the night shift the day would be wasted. Margie wanted the key to the warehouse and Declan wouldn't be back till Friday or Saturday. If their caravan was locked they wouldn't be able to get on with the repairs.

“Morning, Lovie. Give us a hug!”

Margie enjoyed the comforting smell of her mother, whom she had seen little of recently, and hugged her off the ground. When did she get so small?

“Can we have the warehouse keys? We need to find some wood for the boat repairs.”

“Shouldn't you wait for Declan? He knows what's what.”

“We can find stuff ready for when he gets back. We’ve given up digging out mud. It’s a waste of time.”

“Hang on.” And she dived back in, rattling about in the kitchen drawer. “I think it’s these, but I’ve got to go. The bus is in ten minutes.”

Margie examined a bunch of half a dozen keys, “Thanks, Mum. Love you! Bye.”

After breakfast Roma followed Margie to the mysterious warehouse and watched as the keys were tried. Finally the padlock clicked and the double doors were pulled back. She squinted into the darkness, while Margie searched for the light switch. Sudden brightness startled her. She was face to face with a skeleton inviting her through an old wooden door with ornate hinges. Her scream turned to laughter, the Haunted House had worked its trick.

“Go through, it’s just Uncle Terry’s joke. You’ll find everything inside.”

Behind the door no house existed, but a wonderland of multicoloured awnings, an arch on its side with painted clowns, in the corner the kiddy roundabout with its miniature buses, motor bikes and open top cars.

“I must have a ride,” Roma ran over and slung a leg over a motor bike.

“I used to run that ride sometimes”

“Really? Can you make it work now?”

“It has to be connected. Everything runs on generators, diesel powered. With the cost of petrol we probably couldn’t make it pay any more.” The thought made Margie gloomy. Where had her old life gone?

“Where are your trampolines?”

The trailer was still packed as they had left it so long ago. But the desire to bounce was overwhelming. Between them the two girls managed to extricate one frame and drag it outside. Margie checked the tension and declared it safe, forgot the barge project and started to jump.

“Take off your shoes, Roma! Live for the moment.”

When their puff was gone, they remembered and returned to the warehouse. There was plenty of wood kept for essential repairs to the funfair equipment, but Margie was keen to find fabric for sails, finding only waterproof awnings. The bungee harnesses used to be attached to a mast – they did call it a mast – and it seemed to her this would be useful for attaching the canvas to the outside of the hole, which would have to be done whatever the state of the tide. The pile of stuff to take to Conyer was frighteningly large.