

Keeping the Faith

'I've arranged for you to have supper...'crackle, hiss...'with'...crackle...'French evangelists. Flight's being called. I'll text their address...'

Eh? Who? French evangelists? What on earth was my brother playing at? Surely, during his six month sabbatical here in Victoria, he must have met more suitable dining companions to foist upon me? I pictured an awkward bout of verbal duelling between shiny-eyed zealots and me, all tarnished cynicism and rusty French. Not exactly what I'd envisaged for my last evening in British Columbia. I didn't have a contact number; good manners dictated I go.

Neither faith nor fervour was lacking in this corner of Vancouver Island, I reflected. Jennie Butchart, who'd established the world-renowned Butchart Gardens, was without doubt a visionary. When my sibling had rung I'd been dozing in a deck chair on a lawn that once upon a time, formed part of a limestone quarry. The vast site had been developed at the beginning of the last century by Jennie's husband Robert, a pioneering cement businessman.

After the limestone deposits were exhausted, his wife determined to heal the scar gouged on the landscape and set about creating a sunken garden. Rubble and boulders on the mine floor were pushed and dragged into mounds on which to plant terraced flower beds; tonnes of topsoil from nearby farmland was hauled in by horse and cart; Jennie herself dangled in a bosun's chair over the sides of the quarry walls tucking ivy cuttings into crevices, to soften the jagged rock face. No instant Eden this, but one fashioned from dust, sweat and an adamant belief that in that grim pit, beauty would take root and blossom.

I'd hoped to spend a few lazy hours there but my sunny day was now marred by the approaching clouds of an unwanted soiree. I trudged back towards the exit muttering a reminder to myself to pick up a little gift. What? Probably best to avoid alcohol. And had I got anything clean to wear? My current attire of cut-off denims didn't seem appropriate. I dredged up some French phrases, trying them out on a bank of ox-eye daisies. 'Je suis professeuse. J'aime beaucoup le Canada.' Hmm. I'd have to hope for something chewy for supper to fill in the conversational gaps. The daisies looked back at me insouciantly. Of course. Flowers. That's what I'd take, though nothing could compete with the blooms I was leaving behind.

I had to share Jennie's garden with thousands of others but ex-mariner Ned had allowed me a glimpse into his private paradise. I'd passed Ned each day on my jog around the harbour; sometimes he would be playing a tin whistle the same shade as his beard, sometimes just sitting, squinting against the glare which ricocheted off the sea. His warm grin encouraged me to stop and chat. For many years, Ned said, he'd skippered one of the boats taking tourists whale watching around the coast.

'Then I lost most of my sight in a hunting accident and had to quit the best job in the world. But I'm lucky,' he continued, tapping his temple, 'I got all the colours of the ocean stored up here. I bring them out whenever I want.'

He began to chant his blues' litany: 'Cyan, cerulean, lapis, azure...' A sudden squall whipped across the jetty; the gunmetal sky exploded in a squabble of peevish gulls. Ned didn't miss a beat.

'Duck-egg, aquamarine, turquoise, cobalt'.

I'd walked home with his paeon echoing in my head joyous as a church peal: 'Sapphire, arctic, peacock, navy. Powder, forget-me-not, cornflower, teal.'

It was time to harness the combined positivity of Jennie and Ned as I donned my virtual gauntlets in readiness for my dinner date. 'Bonsoir Madame, Monsieur. Comment allez-vous?'

My hosts regarded each other with raised eyebrows and turned to me with hesitant smiles. 'Hi. I'm Cassie and this here's Lou.' No trace of a Gallic accent, I noted.

'Sure is good to meet you. Let's go catch the last of the rays before we eat.' Lou handed me a chilled beer and led me into the yard as the sun, a glinting coin, slipped inch by miserly inch into its slot on the waiting horizon.

'So, tell us. How is Angie these days? You see much of her?'

What were they talking about? Angie who? The only person I knew called...

In that instant, the penny dropped. I realised my brother had done nothing more heinous than put me in touch with buddies of our cousin. Not 'French evangelists' but 'friends of Angela's.'