

'Know to live'

By the time she got back from the shops, Violet had seen everyone she was likely to encounter that day. When she had agreed to house sit for Flossie, she had expected to see more life. After all, her friend lived just beyond Cambridge's city centre, therefore further into town than she did.

There was a chance a neighbour might knock on the door. As for her family, they weren't due to visit until the weekend, so she couldn't count on them. If she ventured into the garden, she might see Mr Brown from next door digging up vegetables for his supper, or Mrs Bennet, who lived on the other side, but the snarky woman was a creature of habit and only hung out her washing on a Monday.

Violet carried her shopping bags through to the kitchen and, with only the radio for company, set about making herself some lunch.

The front of the house was still haunted by Flossie's grandfather, who had left his mark – he had been master decorator by trade and had painted the surfaces with designs which might be mistaken for those produced by William Morris's hand. Whereas the back of the house was still haunted by Flossie's grandmother – the two small spaces serving as a kitchen, one leading to another, and what toffs call a utility, which had been the outhouse and had been altered so that it could be accessed without having to go outside. Most of her pots, pans and utensils were still going strong.

As guests wouldn't venture as far as the kitchen, the surfaces hadn't warranted the grandfather's skills and attention, so the products cluttering Flossie's shelves provided much needed colour with their bold labelling: a bottle of Camp coffee, a tub of Bird's custard powder as well as tins of Ambrosia custard, Oxo gravy, packets of Angel Delight, tins of fruit cocktail, Spam and corned beef, jars of Robinson's jam and marmalade, and boxes of safety matches. Quality Street tins now housed her sewing paraphernalia, including the zips and buttons Flossie had cut from worn out clothes. In another, she kept shoe polishes, brushes and cloths for buffing.

Even though her husband had passed away some years ago, his Brylcreem and Germolene still sat on the window ledge, the side that was closest to the mounted cupboard with the mirrored front. Before she had set off, Flossie had told her to be on her guard as her daughters might use her absence to bin them along with the tins at the back of her cupboards, which Flossie kept in case she had to rustle up a feast at no notice or there was another war and she needed to supplement her rations.

Violet had been taught to cook by her grandmother, just as Flossie had by hers, and the recipes she had picked-up had served her well for years but, now she lived alone, it was a lot of effort for one person and

two days of eating the same leftovers was as much as she could stand. Often a cheese and salad sandwich with lashings of salad cream sufficed. Her daughters insisted her Sunday lunches were the best so there was no getting out of cooking altogether. Furthermore, they expected her to bake at Christmas and Easter, which she didn't mind as she liked to be appreciated.

Remembering what day of the week it was, she checked the kitchen clock. Flossie's friend Queenie rang on a Wednesday. In previous years, she called round but since her hip began playing up, she preferred to phone instead. It didn't bother Queenie that Violet wasn't Flossie. As for Violet, she welcomed any break from her self-imposed isolation. The trick was to have eaten and had a nap, followed by restorative cuppa, before they exchanged their news, another reason why a cold lunch was to her advantage: it gave her more time to snooze. The walk back from the shops had really taken it out of her.

Violet was roused by a knock on the door. She got up and hobbled on her reluctant legs into the hallway and opened the door. It was the lady from across the road, Mrs Taylor.

"I've got Mrs Johnson on the phone for you," she said.

Flossie and her husband had never got round to getting a phone installed. Fortunately, she had an understanding neighbour, who was also on her own and seemed to welcome the disturbance as she was always quick to put the kettle on.

There was no key to be grabbed. It was dangling on the end of a long piece of string, which she wore about her neck as though she were a latchkey child who can't be trusted not to lose it, which was partially true. And, as it was warm and sunny, no coat was needed. She simply closed the door behind her, followed Mrs Taylor across the road and into her house, and picked up the receiver.

"Hello," she said, making it sound like a question.

"Violet, it's Queenie. I've got exciting news. Do you remember me telling you about the man who knocked on my door last year canvassing for votes, the one who asked what he could do for me and I told him I wanted a day out? Well, he's Cambridge's new mayor. He's arranged for ten coaches to take the city's pensioners to the seaside and we've got seats."

"I don't know," Violet replied. "What if I get lost or hold up the coach?"

"Oh," Queenie said, with every spark of joy rung from her voice, unable to hide her disappointment.

Recovering, she said, brightly, "You won't get lost or hold up the coach. You'll have me."

"My bus into town could be delayed," Violet said. "And, some days I really struggle to get about on my pins."

“The coaches have pick up points throughout the city. The nearest one to you is just round the corner on Mill Road, so you won’t have to walk any further than if you were going to the shops.

“When my daughter got the tickets, the lady told her they were selling like hot cakes. It seems Great Yarmouth is quite the draw. Did I mention that entertainment and lunch are provided? We even get to see a show.

“My daughter doesn’t like the idea of me going on my own, so you have to come. She said that, if we went together, we could keep an eye out for each other and that it would put her mind at rest.”

Violet wished Queenie had asked her first. She really didn’t like it when other people made decisions for her without checking. What if she took ill or overslept, or the other day-trippers took a dislike to her because she wasn’t hoity-toity enough for them?

“It’s nice Karen organised the tickets and you want me to join you, but I’m really not sure it’s for me.”

“Nonsense!” said Queenie. “The whole point of the day out is to give people like us, who are trapped in our homes, a change of scenery and the chance to be with people our own age.”

“Can’t you ask another friend?”

“You know Flossie is the only real friend I have left and she’s away,” Queenie retorted. “Why do you suppose her grandfather painted the words ‘Know to live’ on his living room wall?”

Flossie’s grandfather had painted quotes from Shakespeare and the Bible in neat gothic script along two trompe-l’œil scrolls, which served to break up his William Morris-style frieze - a complex floral design incorporating a tangle of rose stems interwoven with tulips and acanthus leaves - in the section above the dado rail.

“Flossie would want you to go,” Queenie urged. “Afterall, what have we got to look forward to at our age?”

What did she have to look forward to? Her life revolved around shopping, cleaning, cooking, washing and knitting. If the BBC were rebroadcasting episodes of ‘Paul Temple’ on the radio, at least his daring-do made her chores more bearable.

‘Paul Temple’s wife, who often got caught up in the plot, wasn’t afraid of adventure,’ she reminded herself.

As for Flossie’s grandfather, he had been a religious man. Seemingly, his devotion to God had equalled that which he had applied to his work and shown to his family.

Flossie had once shared her fondest memories of him. He had taken her to buy a bar of Cadbury’s chocolate. It was one of the rare occasions he had focussed on her, asking her questions and telling her

about art.

After her children had left home and her husband had passed away, Flossie had begun to use her grandpa's living room every day. Indeed, her knitting wools and needles were in a bag that she had pushed under a small table. Under her grandparent's regime, the room had been strictly out of bounds, unless it was a high day or a holiday.

Queenie citing 'Know to live' was a masterstroke. It had been years since she had been to the seaside. Moreover, unless she agreed to join her friend's friend, Violet couldn't imagine the opportunity would come up again for quite some time. Besides, who doesn't like a day out at the seaside?

She glanced through the open door at Flossie's house. Her friend kept her souvenirs from trips to the coast in her grandpa's living room, so they might evoke happy memories.

"Alright, I'll come," she conceded.

"We'll have such fun," said Queenie.

"But what am I going to wear?" Violet asked.

"You daft brush! Flossie told me how nice the dress was you wore to the wedding last year and that the one with the purple never fails to get a compliment."

"I'll get my daughter to bring both and I'll see what the weather forecast is like nearer the time," Violet agreed.

As Queenie prattled on, Violet could see the neighbour was unable to settle so, as soon as everything was agreed, she brought the conversation to a close.

It turned out, Mrs Taylor hadn't been eager for her to end the call but had been itching to tell her she was also going on the same trip and they could walk to the bus stop together.

Walking back across the road, Violet was suddenly seized by panic. 'What have I done? What on earth possessed me to agree to go?' she thought. She went into Flossie's living room and found the words 'Know to live' painted on the wall by her friend's grandpa and stared at it. In her heart she knew he was right, but it didn't stop her from being nervous about meeting a coach-load of strangers and anxious about everything else.

When Mrs Taylor knocked on the door, Violet opened it straightaway.

"Ready for the big day?" Mrs Taylor asked.

"I'm just going to have sip of water. I won't be a moment," Violet said and scuttled off towards the kitchen.

"I've remembered to bring some mint imperials," Mrs Taylor called after her.

In truth, Violet had forgotten to check whether all the knobs were off on the cooker, but she didn't want Mrs Taylor telling Flossie how she nearly burnt the house down.

As it turned out, all the knobs were in the up-right position and, while she was there, she checked the back door was locked for the third, if not the fourth, time.

Returning to the front door, she began to rummage in her handbag.

"I don't know what I've done with the key," she said. "You might have to go on ahead without me."

"It's around your neck," Mrs Taylor said, giving the string a yank.

"Of course! How silly of me," Violet said, with an embarrassed laugh.

She was convinced Queenie had said something to Mrs Taylor about not letting her wriggle out of going, as the neighbour had reminded her about the trip the previous day and, even though they had agreed she should knock on the door at eight, Mrs Taylor had arrived ten minutes early as though she had allowed for any last minute set-backs.

When they had stepped outside and she had locked the front door, Violet checked again she hadn't forgotten anything.

"I've got the door key, I've got my umbrella, I've got my coat, I've got my sunglasses, I've got a hat in my bag, I've some spending money," she said.

"Come on," Mrs Taylor complained. "The bus will go without us."

Violet lurched into motion. Once her circulation got going, she became steadier on her legs.

There were a handful of people already waiting at the bus stop. Mrs Taylor wished them a 'good morning' and Violet followed her lead, drawing surprisingly enthusiastic responses. Although they could have guessed from the attire and ages of the other early birds, it was quickly established they were all off to the seaside together.

Violet was already secretly pleased Queenie had got her to change her mind, suspecting she had been fretting over nothing.

One of the men noticed Violet's umbrella and laughed.

"You won't be needing that today," he said, pointing to it.

His comment led to talk about the weather. It was already bright and sunny and, forecast to get hotter.

The other man said he was pleased the council were finally doing something for older people and embarked on a rant.

"Why do you have to spoil it for everyone?" his wife said, patting him on the arm.

"I'm not spoiling anything for anyone. I'm speaking the truth," he retorted.

"That may be, but no one wants to hear it today," his wife said between gritted teeth. "Look! I think that's our coach now."

The small group glanced down the road in the direction of Parkside Swimming Pool and the sorting office, sure enough a gleaming coach was headed towards them. It pulled up beside them.

As soon as the door opened a keen gentleman, who was half their age, sprang out.

"Is this the coach for Great Yarmouth?" one of the men asked.

"It certainly is," their young escort answered.

Violet found herself nearest the door and looked at the others. Convention dictated one boarded in order of who had been waiting at the bus stop the longest.

"It's alright, you get on," the escort encouraged her. "No one is going to be left behind today."

The others smiled or nodded their consent.

"Need assistance or can you manage?" the escort asked.

"I can manage," she answered. "I took some painkillers as a precaution. My legs can complain all they want I won't feel a thing."

"Someone's got the right idea. You take your time," the man said. "Do you know what else works a treat?"

"What?" asked Violet.

"A large whiskey but a sweet sherry also does the trick."

"If you're paying, make mine a double," one of the men said behind her.

At the top of the steps, Violet could see down the length of the coach – it was already three-quarters full – and hear the hum of conversation. As she made her way down the aisle, albeit unsteadily, she caught the gaze of her fellow passengers. Given that British reserve dictated they exchange an embarrassed half-hearted smile, she did well to be greeted by so many smiling faces.

As to be expected, there were more women than men. Those who were closest to her in age all sported short, white hair, which had either been permed or set.

There were many things Violet didn't like about herself, but she was thankful that she could still wear her hair to just above her shoulders and have it cut into a straight bob. The strands at the front were swept to one side and pinned back with a hairgrip.

She was pleased she had made an effort. All the other ladies looked as though they had been to the hairdressers and were wearing their Sunday best.

Finally, she spotted Queenie, who had got to her feet and was waving enthusiastically.

“You made it!” Queenie said, as Violet sat down next to her. “I’m pleased you settled for the dress with the purple, it really suits you.”

“You look lovely too,” said Violet, smiling back.

She heard the door closing and the coach set off.

As soon as the last pick up had been completed and they were finally on their way, their escort took to the microphone and whipped up interest in a game of bingo by holding up various prizes.

Both Violet and Queenie played.

With so many passengers suffering from hearing loss, whatever the escort called out was repeated several times up and down the coach, giving them an excuse to speak to their neighbours.

The next time Violet looked to see how their journey was progressing they were already passing through Thetford Forest. And, by the time the first people shouted, ‘I can see the sea!’, the excitement on the coach had ratcheted up. Heads strained to look, the chatter had got louder, and passengers pointed to various landmarks as they recounted previous visits.

Violet saw the sea in the same instant as Queenie, who gave her a nudge. Even through the coach’s tinted windows, she could see the sun was glinting off every surface.

Yarmouth, as the locals called it, didn’t have a backdrop of grand Regency houses like Brighton, or a distinctive tower like Black Pool, but it boasted a golden sandy beach, two piers, fun fair rides and all the trappings of a seaside resort.

Their escort asked them to remain seated once the coach had parked up as they were going to get a surprise visit. Sure enough, as soon as the engine was cut, Cambridge’s Mayor jumped on board and grabbed the microphone. He needed no introduction. His chain of office gave him away.

“Welcome to Great Yarmouth on such a beautiful day,” he said, with a broad smile. “Hope you’ve all got your sun hats and sunglasses. It’s hot out there. What I want to know is: is everybody happy?”

The passengers on the coach gave a polite cheer.

“Are you sure? Let’s try that again,” said the Mayor. “Is everybody happy?” he boomed.

Violet quickly covered her ears as Queenie wasn’t the type of person to hold back.

The passengers on the coach cheered even louder.

“I hope you all have a fantastic day. As for the show, I can tell you this much: you’re in for a real treat.”

The Mayor gave a wave and handed the microphone back to their escort, who reminded them of the

schedule, locations of facilities and meeting points.

People were already getting to their feet and gathering their things as he went on to say they had plenty of free-time, in which they could eat their lunch and wander about the town or sit on the beach before going to the show.

“What shall we do first?” asked Queenie.

Before Violet could answer, one of the men opposite them leaned across and said, “I have it on good authority that the Cambridge Evening News has sent along a journalist and a photographer. They’re hoping to take pictures of the Mayor paddling in the sea. We’re going along to watch the spectacle in case he falls in.”

His friend added, “And, if his chain comes off as he falls in, it’s finders, keepers. I’d be prepared to get soaked for that much gold. It’s got to be worth a bob or two.”

“You’re welcome to tag along,” the first man added.

Queenie, who didn’t need to be asked twice, had answered ‘yes’ before Violet had had time to process what the man had said.

“I’m Stan,” said the man, who had his hair slicked down and was directly opposite Violet. “And, this is my friend Jack.”

“I’m Queenie and this is Violet,” Queenie said, leaning forward.

“Pleased to meet you, ladies,” Jack said, as he put a light-coloured, flat cap on his head.

The gentlemen let Violet and Queenie get off the coach ahead of them.

Violet was helped down by the coach driver, who extended his hand, and their escort handed her a packed lunch in a carrier bag. She then stood to the side and waited for Queenie and the two men.

She heard the escort commenting to the two men, “You won’t be needing those,” as he nodded at the umbrellas hooked over their arms.

“It might not be forecast to rain, but, if we leave them on the coach, we’re sure to get caught in a downpour,” said Jack.

“In that case, Sirs, I tip my hat to you both,” said the escort.

“Tell you what, ladies,” said Stan, “you take our umbrellas and follow the Mayor and we’ll get us all ice creams from that booth over there. You can either use them as parasols or just hold them up so we can spot you in the crowd.”

Finding each other again was a genuine concern. Ahead of them, coach loads of Cambridge’s OAPs were moving like a swarm towards the town and the beach, with more coming up from the rear.

Within minutes of hitting the beach, Violet and Queenie were eating 99 Flakes, which were melting as fast as they could lick up any runs.

They were approached by the Cambridge Evening News's photographer, who had taken lots of pictures of the Mayor standing in the shallows with his trouser legs rolled up, linking arms with a few brave day-trippers

"No, they don't mind having their photo taken," Stan answered for them with a cheeky grin.

Violet could feel why he found it so amusing. The icky sensation above her top lip suggested she was sporting an ice cream moustache, mirroring Queenie's.

Their escort also took a picture of them, then invited their two new friends to join them for a group shot. As he moved the film in his camera forward to the next frame, their escort said, "I hope you'll join me for your picnic lunch on the beach."

How could they refuse?

"If I sit down on the sand, I'll never get up again," Violet said.

"Getting people back on their feet again is all part of the service," said their escort. He pointed to a gaggle of ladies in the opposite direction of the fun fair. "See that group over there? They were on our coach. Go ahead and join them. Tell them Tim sent you. I'm just going to gather up some more of our fellow passengers and I'll be right over."

"Race you!" said Jack, with a look of mischief on his face.

Violet and Queenie ignored the challenge.

"Let me help you," Stan said, opening the umbrella Violet was carrying. "Don't want you getting sun burnt."

Jack followed suit and opened the one Queenie was carrying and handed it back. Then the men offered their hooked arms.

Violet sneaked a peek at Queenie. She was beaming with delight. Violet was reminded of 'Singin' in the Rain' and 'My fair lady' as both films used umbrellas and parasols as props. For one enjoyable moment, she allowed herself to feel like the actress Audrey Hepburn as 'Eliza Doolittle' at the races.

"I don't know about you, but the sand is already getting into my shoes," complained Queenie.

"We can tip the sand out of our shoes but try getting it out of a sandwich," responded Jack.

Tim managed to gather up quite a crowd, so they found themselves chatting to all sorts of people. Most had lived in Cambridge all their lives, therefore, it wasn't long before someone expressed outrage at the city's planners for having had the Red Lion Hotel and the surrounding buildings demolished to make room

for a modern shopping centre.

They talked about the city's tea rooms, dance halls, cinemas and theatres which they had frequented, and other landmarks which had disappeared; not that anyone in the party missed the public toilets which used to be located directly under the market square, but expressed a pang of regret that the public library had been moved out of the Guild Hall building.

Someone reminded them of the good-natured drunks who had gathered on the steps around fountain in the middle of the market square, whom the police no longer tolerated. The group went on to talk about Cambridge's eccentrics, of whom the city seemed to attract more than its fair share, ensuring much laughter.

The conversation never faltered as everyone had memories to contribute but, eventually, Tim told them they had to make a move as they had to give themselves plenty of time to get to the show.

Violet was helped to her feet in such a way that she wasn't made to look undignified, a concern that had preyed on her mind.

Producing a black bin bag, Tim gathered up their litter, so, they were only burdened with handbags and umbrellas, allowing Violet and Queenie and their two new gentleman friends to set off.

Violet suspected Tim and the coach driver were hoping the day-trippers would have a sleep on the journey back, having missed out on an afternoon nap, but they were out of luck.

She observed all the stretched-out hands taking sheets and pens from Tim as he moved down the coach, so they could join in with his general knowledge quiz. He had explained that there would be several rounds covering different topics: sports, politics, music, literature, film and television, but had failed to put anyone off.

Violet and Queenie worked as a team with Jack and Stan, passing notes with proposed answers back and forth. Without the men's knowledge of sports and politics they wouldn't have done well as a pair. For their part, Violet and Queenie knew the answers to questions such as 'How many times has Elizabeth Taylor been married?', 'What year did Grace Kelly get married? And 'Grace Kelly acted alongside two leading Hollywood actors with the initials 'CG' and one with the initials 'GC' can you name them?

By pooling their knowledge, they came third. Jack and Stan were given a bottle of beer each and Violet and Queenie were given a small box covered in seashells and a stick of rock.

"You take the box," said Violet "I've already got one."

"Are you sure?" asked Queenie. "I've always wanted one."

"I insist," Flossie said, handing her the box.

The quiz and the prize-giving were only just concluded before the first drop off.

Tim took to the microphone.

"Well, I trust everyone has had a great day and made new friends. I certainly have." The passengers cheered. "We are hoping to run another trip next year, so, keep an eye out for any announcements. Today was only made possible by the generous support from our sponsors and volunteers so we have them to thank."

"What did he say?" asked Queenie. "I didn't catch the last bit."

Violet struggled to be heard over the applause as she repeated his words.

Tim continued, "We're just coming up to our first stop. As you prepare to leave, check you've got all your belongings and we hope to see you all again next year."

When the coach came to a halt, the first few passengers to disembark turned and called 'Goodbye' as they gave a quick wave, setting the pattern for the other stops.

When it was Violet's turn to leave, she gave Jack her hand. She meant for him to shake it, but he planted a kiss and Stan followed suit. Their gallantry made her feel as giddy as a schoolgirl, but she did her best to appear composed. She thanked them for helping to make it the best day she'd had in quite some time.

"I'll phone you later," Queenie said. "Here don't forget your stick of rock!" she said, handing it to her.

As she made her way down the coach, the other passengers said 'Goodbye' or 'Take care!' or 'Mind how you go!'.

Tim was waiting on the pavement. The last step was quite a drop but, with Tim's assistance, she managed it.

"I really hope we get to do it again next year," Violet said.

"Yes, it's been great," Tim said, patting her arm.

Violet joined the gaggle of people who had waited at the same bus stop in the morning and were now standing back from the road. As the coach drove off, they waved. They then toddled up the road together.

When Violet opened Flossie's front door and stepped inside it was as quiet as a monk's cell. Yet, her head buzzed as though her eardrums were still being buffeted by the sound of laughter and the loud applause generated by the show and the constant chatter on the coach. And, she could feel the after-effects of the fierce midday sun and, running her fingers through her hair, it felt slightly rough, suggesting it was coated with salt carried by the sea breeze.

She put the kettle on and, as she waited for it to boil, Violet went back through the house to the living room to look at Flossie's souvenirs. She went straight for her trinket box, the one covered in seashells. The glue holding them in place had yellowed over time. Opening the lid released a fusty smell mingled with the scent of wood. Flossie used it for keeping postage stamps, paperclips, buttons and foreign coins. She rummaged through the collection of oddities with her finger, revealing a folded piece of paper right at the bottom. She placed the box down, took it out and unfolded it. When she saw what was written on it, she had to sit down.

She looked up at the version of '*Know to live*' Flossie's grandpa had painted on the wall, then back at the version of '*Know to live*' written on the piece of paper held in her trembling fingers.

Where had it come from?

Violet could only think that one of Flossie's daughters had written it, trying to copy grandpa Willis's gothic script. Even if there was a perfectly rational explanation for the piece of paper, what were the chances of her discovering those three words on that day of all days?

The kettle started to whistle, reminding Violet she was in the process of making a cuppa.

"You know what?" she said out loud, "I'm going to have a small glass of sweet sherry with my tea. Flossie did say I could help myself. And, a thick slice of cake will do nicely after a ham sandwich. It might not be Christmas, but I'm taking you at your word grandpa Willis," she said as she headed back to the kitchen to assemble a celebratory supper.