

I WANT,' CHARLENE SAID TO TRUDI, 'TO BUY MY mother a birthday present.'

'OK,' Trudi said.

'Something I can put in the post. Something that won't break.'

Trudi thought about some of the things you could put in the post that might break:

A crystal decanter.

A fingernail.

An egg.

A heart.

A Crown Derby teapot.

A promise.

A mirrored-glass globe in which nothing but the sky is reflected.

'How about a scarf?' she suggested. 'In velvet d8Evor8E. I love that word. D8Evor8E.'

Charlene and Trudi were in a food hall as vast as a small city. It smelt of chocolate and ripe cheese and raw meaty bacon but most of the food was too expensive to buy and some of it didn't look real. They wandered along an avenue of honey.

'I could buy a jar of honey,' Trudi said.

'You could,' Charlene agreed.

There was plenty of honey to choose from. There was lavender honey and rosemary honey, acacia and orange blossom and mysterious manuka. Butter-yellow honey from Tuscan sunflowers and thick, anaemic honey from English clover. There were huge jars like ancient amphorae and neat spinster-sized pots. There were jars of cut-comb honey that looked like seeded amber. There was organic honey from lush South American rainforests and there was honey squeezed from parsimonious Scottish heather on windswept moorlands. Bees the world over had been bamboozled out of their bounty so that Trudi could have a choice, but she had already lost interest.

'You could buy her soap,' Trudi said. 'Soap wouldn't break. Expensive soap. Made from oatmeal and buttermilk or goat's milk and vanilla pods from . . . wherever vanilla pods come from.'

'Mauritius. Mainly,' Charlene said.

'If you say so. Soap for which ten thousand violet petals have been crushed and distilled to provide one drop of oil. Or soap scented with the zest of a hundred bittersweet oranges.'

'I'm hungry. I could buy an orange,' Charlene said.

'You could. Seville or Moroccan?'

'Moorish,' Charlene said dreamily. 'I would like to visit a Moorish palace. The Alhambra. That's an exotic word. That's the most exotic word I can think of, offhand. Alhambra.'

'Xanadu,' Trudi said. 'That's exotic. A pleasure dome. Imagine having your own

pleasure dome. You could call it Pleasureland. Isn't there a Pleasureland in Scarborough?'

'Arbroath,' Charlene said gloomily.

'With shady walks through cool gardens,' Trudi said, 'where the air is perfumed with attar of roses.'

'And fountains and courtyards,' Charlene said. 'Fountains that run with nectar. And courtyards full of peacocks and nightingales and larks. And swans. And gold and silver fish swimming in the fountains. And huge blue and white marbled carp.'

They were walking down a street of teas. They were lost.

'Who would think there were so many different teas in the world?' Trudi mused. 'Chrysanthemum tea, White Peony, Jade Peak, Oriental Beauty Oolong, Green Gunpowder, Golden Needle, Hubei Silver Tip, Drum Mountain White Cloud, Dragon's Breath tea – do you think it tastes of dragon's breath? What do you think dragon's breath tastes like?'

'Foul, I expect,' Charlene said. 'And all day long,' she continued, 'in the pleasure dome—'

'Pleasureland,' Trudi corrected.

'Pleasureland. We would eat melon and figs and scented white peaches and Turkish Delight and candied rose petals.'

'And drink raspberry sherbet and tequila and Canadian ice wine,' Trudi enthused.

'I should go,' Charlene said. She had failed to recover her spirits since the mention of Arbroath. 'I've got an article to write.' Charlene was a journalist with a bridal magazine. 'Ten Things To Consider Before You Say "I Do".'

'Saying "I Don't"?' Trudi suggested.

'Abracadabra,' Charlene murmured to herself as she crossed against the traffic in the rain, 'that's an exotic word.' Somewhere in the distance a bomb exploded softly.

It had been raining for weeks. There were no taxis outside the radio station. Charlene was worried that she was developing a crush on the man who searched her handbag in the reception at the radio station.

'I know he's quite short,' she said to Trudi, 'but he's sort of manly.'

'I once went out with a short man,' Trudi said. 'I never realized just how short he was until after I'd left him.' There were no taxis at the rank. There were no taxis dropping anyone off at the radio station.

Trudi frowned. 'When did you last see a taxi?'

Charlene and Trudi ran from the radio station, ran from the rain, past the sandbags lining the streets, into the warm, dispassionate space of the nearest hotel and sat in the smoky lounge and ordered tea.

'I think he's ex-military or something.'

'Who?'

'The man who searches the bags at the radio station.'

A waitress brought them weak green tea. They sipped their tea daintily – an adverb dictated by the awkward handles of the cups.

'I've always wanted to go out with a man in a uniform,' Trudi said.

'A fireman,' Charlene suggested.

'Mm,' Trudi said thoughtfully.

'Or a policeman,' Charlene said.

'But not a constable.'

'No, not a constable,' Charlene agreed. 'An inspector.'

'An army captain,' Trudi said, 'or maybe a naval helicopter pilot.'

The weak green tea was bitter.

'This could be Dragon's Breath tea, for all we know,' Trudi said. 'Do you think it is? Dragon's breath?'

There was no air in the hotel. Two large, middle-aged women were eating scones with quiet determination. A well-known journalist was seducing a girl who was too young. Two very old men were speaking in low pleasant tones to each other about music and ancient wars.

'Thermopylae,' the men murmured. 'Aegospotami, Cumae. The "Dissonant Quartet".'

'I really want a cat,' Trudi said.

'You can't keep a cat in town,' Charlene said.

'You can't keep a cat down?'

'You can't keep a cat in town.'

'You can.'

'You need something small like a rodent,' Charlene said.

'A capybara's a rodent, it's not small.'

'A hamster,' Charlene said, 'a gerbil, a small white mouse.'

'I don't want a rodent. Of any size. I want a cat. Kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty. If you say something five times you always get it.'

'You made that up,' Charlene said.

'True,' Trudi admitted.

'I'd like something more unusual,' Charlene said. 'A kangaroo. A reindeer or an otter. A talking bird or a singing fish.'

'A singing fish?'

'A singing fish. A fish that sings and has a magic ring in its stomach. A huge carp that is caught in a fishpond – usually at a royal court somewhere – and cooked and served at the table and when you bite into the fish you find a magic ring. And the magic ring will lead you to the man who will love you. Or the small white mouse which is the disguise of the man who will love you.'

'That would be a rodent then.'

'Failing that,' Charlene continued, ignoring Trudi, 'I would like a cat as big as a man.'

'A cat as big as a man?' Trudi frowned, trying to picture a man-sized cat.

'Yes. Imagine if men had fur.'

'I think I'd rather not.'

The waitress asked them if they wanted more of the weak green tea.

'For myself,' the waitress said, uninvited, 'I prefer dogs.' Charlene and Trudi swooned with delight at the idea of dogs.

'Oh God,' Trudi said, overcome by all the breeds of dog in the world, 'a German Shepherd, a Golden Retriever, a Great Dane, a Borzoi – what a great word – a St Bernard, a Scottie, a Westie, a Yorkie. An Austrian Pinscher, a Belgian Griffon, a Kromfohrlanders. The Glen of Imaal Terrier, the Manchester, Norwich, English Toy, Staffordshire, Bedlington – all terriers also. The Kai, the Podengo Portugueso Medio, the Porcelaine and the Spanish Greyhound. The Bloodhound, the Lurcher, the Dunker, the Catahoula Leopard Dog, the Hungarian Vizsla, the Lancashire Heeler and the Giant German Spitz!'

'Or a mongrel called Buster or Spike,' Charlene said.

The waitress cleared away their tea things. 'Money, money, money, money, money,' she whispered to herself as she bumped open the door to the kitchen with her hip. The electricity failed and everyone was suddenly very quiet. No one had realized how dark the rain had made the afternoon.

In the reception at the television station there was a tank of fish so big that it covered a whole wall. Trudi noted that they were mostly African freshwater fish. She wondered if they had flown here in a plane and if that had felt strange for them. No one else was taking any notice of the wall of fish. The receptionist had strawberry-blond hair, coiffed extravagantly. She appeared to have a Heckler and Koch MP5A3 9mm sub-machine gun under her desk. Trudi felt a wave of jealousy.

Trudi was a publicist for a small imprint in a large publishing house. She had a twin sister called Heidi and neither Trudi nor Heidi liked their names. They were the names (in the opinion of Heidi and Trudi) of goat-herding girls and American hookers, of girls who wore their hair in plaits and drank milk or had sex dressed as French maids and nurses. Of girls who never grew up. Trudi and Heidi had no idea why they were so called. Their parents had died in a bizarre accident not long after they were born and the kind strangers who stood in for them, Mr and Mrs Marshall, had no insight into their dead parents' thoughts.

Charlene and Trudi ordered gin slings and picked at a small dish of black olives that tasted more bitter than weak green tea.

There were boisterous men in suits perched at the bar. They were wondering how drunk they could get in the pre-curfew swill.

'I need a new haircut,' Charlene said.

'I need new hair,' Trudi said.

'And thinner ankles,' Charlene said.

'And bigger breasts,' Trudi said. 'Or maybe I want smaller breasts.'

'Your breasts are perfect.'

'Thank you.'

They could smell the perfume of the women sitting at the adjacent table, peppery and spicy with a top note of deodorant. The women were dressed in very fashionable, very ugly clothes. People stared at them because their clothes were so fashionable and so ugly. They smoked incessantly and drank Martinis. There was an oily film on top of their drinks. They looked like high-class whores but they were rock stars' ex-wives.

A waiter dropped a tray of glasses. The boisterous men in suits dangled their cigarettes from their mouths while they applauded.

'And,' Trudi said, 'I would like to ride on a horse-drawn sleigh through forests in the snow with dogs – Borzois – running alongside and I want to be wearing silks and velvets and a cloak lined with the fur of Arctic foxes and bears and wolfkins—'

'You mean wolf skins?'

'No, wolfkins – they're very rare – but only ones that have died of natural causes, not ones that have been killed for their fur.'

'Of course not.'

'And diamonds, old rose-cut diamonds like dark, melting ice, at my throat and ears,

and on my fingers, rubies and opals like larks' eggs, and on my feet red leather seven-league boots—'

'Flat or with a heel?'

'A modest heel. And I want to drink a liqueur made from ripe purple plums from a silver hip flask and—' One of the boisterous men in suits fell off his bar stool. The barman pronounced his time of death as 9.42 p.m.

'Time to go home, ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'time to go home.'

Later, Charlene wished she had asked Trudi what a wolfkin was.

Charlene worried that she would never have a baby. A baby would love her. A baby would exactly fit the round hollow space inside her. That might be a problem when it grew, of course. 'Baby, baby, baby, baby, baby,' she said to the mirror before she went to bed.

First, of course, she had to get someone to father the baby and after the humiliating ordeal with the dead solicitor last year she couldn't imagine ever having sex again. This worried her less than she would have imagined. Before. And Charlene would call the baby Smiler. A boy. As fat as a porker, as big as a bomb.

In the hours between curfew and dawn Charlene listened to the sirens wailing through the night and planned an article on 'Great Tips For Spring Weddings'. She fell asleep with her hand on the Sig Sauer semi-automatic she kept under her pillow and didn't wake until Eosphorus, the morning star, rose and heralded the coming of his mother, Eos, the dawn.

Trudi was looking for black trousers. Something simple by Joseph or perhaps Nicole Farhi. Charlene took trousers from the racks in the department store and displayed them with a sales assistant's flourish for Trudi to view. All the genuine sales assistants seemed to have disappeared. Trudi didn't like any of the trousers Charlene showed her.

'Perhaps you could take the trousers from an Armani suit and leave the jacket?' Charlene suggested. 'Or MaxMara – they have a lot of black suits this season. Well cut. I think I'm quite good at this, don't you? Perhaps I could do this for a living.'

All the black clothes were sprinkled with plaster dust like dandruff.

'From the earthquake, probably,' Charlene said. 'They really should be on sale, not full price.'

Trudi tried on a Moschino dress and a Prada jacket and a Kenzo cardigan and a Gucci skirt but all the clothes were made for tiny, whippet-thin Japanese girls.

'I'll never go to the ball,' Trudi said sadly.

'The balls were all cancelled long ago, as you well know,' Charlene said briskly. 'Try this Betty Jackson wrap.'

In the end, Trudi decided to buy a rhinestone belt but there were no sales assistants to buy it from and unlike nearly everyone else in the city she wasn't a thief.

'We should make clothes,' Charlene said as they passed through the haberdashery floor of the department store.

'What a wonderful word,' Trudi said.

'What a wonderful world?' Charlene said doubtfully.