

Disconnected

by Cassie Hamer

A cup of tea. Oh, yes! A lovely cup of tea would set her to rights. Stop her mooning like a love-struck teen.

But her hand wouldn't stop clutching the telephone receiver. The dial tone had long since been replaced by the long, flat, beeps that spoke of failure. Of no one there, at the other end of the line.

But a cup of tea. Yes, yes. That would do nicely. And a generous wedge of the fruit cake, knobbly and dark as a forest floor, but all encased in that glorious sheet of thick, white icing. She'd eaten half of the 'A' in Jean. The 'good-bye' had been gobbled up at the farewell morning tea.

'Closest you'll ever get to your own wedding cake, eh Jeanie!'

Why did the little comments always hurt the most? Like papercuts they were - the hurt far outweighed the wound. But Jean had made her bed, many years ago; there was no point tossing and turning in it.

She put the receiver back in its cradle, and filled the kettle. The gas took off with a whoosh and settled into its comforting hiss.

Jean sat at the kitchen table with her hands clasped, watching the clock on the mantelpiece. Its face, facing her face. A few seconds to the top of the hour.

At the third stroke it'll be ten o'clock, she murmured to herself.

The tick on the new clock was very loud. Quite a clever farewell gift, really.

So you'll always have something to read, said the card. Written by Mr Timms most likely. Was it really 17,000 times that she'd made his morning cup of tea? On her last day, she'd tallied it up, for a lark. 31 years multiplied by 250 days a year – making tea and reading out the time. Most girls only lasted a few months. A year at most. The

flashing light did them in. Dizzying – to have to watch it so closely. Mr Timms always had smelling salts at the ready. But not for Jean. Never for her. She could read, and read until the cows came home. The thrill of it! People ringing *her*! People listening to *her*! Relying on *her* to tell them the exact time, to the second!

What was that new-fangled machine called? The one that had taken all their jobs and an entire room at Telecom?

A computer. Ah, yes. The computer. Just boxes and boxes of metal and whirring cogs.

A flash in the pan, they'd all scoffed. They'll come on bended knee in a week, begging you to come back. You can't replace people with a machine!

But the only time the phone rang was when mother telephoned to tell her that lamb chops were on special at Mr Woolnough's. Never mind that Mr Woolnough had been dead ten years. She must speak with the nursing home. Mother was now quite demented. A plan was required. Yes, a plan to keep her safe. Stop her wandering the streets.

She took her to-do list from next to the phone.

Make plan for mother

Who would do this for *her*, when she was old and alone?

It certainly wouldn't be *George*, as she now called him.

Oh, how she wished she could call him!

'At the third stroke, it'll be ten-eighteen and twenty seconds. Beep. Beep. Beep.'

He didn't sound like a robot. He sounded like a man. A man with a lovely, plummy voice. Rich and sonorous. For that first phone call, she'd stayed on the line for half an hour, hearing him recite the time every ten seconds. And she'd rung him every

day since. Usually around morning tea time, after she'd complete all the items on her to-do list, and the day yawned before her with worrying emptiness.

Some days, his was the only other human voice she heard.

The kettle was whistling.

Jean snapped out of her reverie and busied about making the tea.

10am – that would mean the news. The news, ah yes. Must become informed.

Must keep one's mind active in retirement.

She tuned the wireless to the ABC.

I say to you that the Government is pledged to make war upon Communism.

The voice was familiar. Posh but a little bit thin – not like her George.

Mr Menzies. Yes. Mr Menzies owned that thin voice. But he sounded angry.

Furious, in fact. She pictured him. Satiny white hair, and bushy, black eyebrows twitching like pained caterpillars.

Communism is debased, treasonable, utterly undemocratic; in form a subversive conspiracy; in practice opposed to high standards of living and real prosperity; destructive, if it succeeds, of all human freedom.

She shivered and switched off the radio.

Silence reached into every corner of the room, eerie as the quiet after a gunshot.

The clock sounded like a bomb about to detonate.

Jean picked up the phone and started dialling.