

SILVERTOWN

The garbardine coat

Jenny Page lives in Altmore Avenue in East Ham. She is married to Len Page and they have two children. Len has started a café called the Cosy Corner on Silvertown Way by the docks. The café is doing very well but Jenny knows that her husband has a fancy woman. Her name is June and she's the wife of a friend of Len's. Jenny knows this but she doesn't say anything. Jenny is forty nine.

One day in early September 1952 Len hurries into the house with a parcel.

'Morning,' he says.

Jenny looks up. The years have treated Len well. He is heavier than he once was but still upright. Jenny on the other hand has shrunk so much she looks like a whippet. Her hair is thinning and her face has become beaky. For an instant, looking at him standing there, she remembers how much she once liked him, loved him even.

'Morning,' she says a little nervously.

Len holds out the parcel 'Unwrap it,' he says.

She unwraps the parcel carefully, expecting she doesn't know what. She lays the paper to one side and parts the tissue to reveal a beige garbardine raincoat. She looks at him in disbelief.

'Get it out then,' he says.

She shakes the coat free from the paper, and then holds the fabric to her body. The coat is a beauty: three-quarters lined with bone buttons, patch pockets and top stitching around the collar. A practical coat and a handsome coat. She has never seen such a gorgeous thing.

'So what d'yer think?' he says.

'Its.....its....' she loses the thread 'Who is it for?'

'Who d'yer bleedn think?'

She feels confused now. She wishes she had a lemon bon bon in her mouth.

'June?' she says.

'No,' he says angrily 'Its for you, you daft idiot.'

Later on that evening she drapes the coat around her shoulders, scared to put it on properly in case he changes his mind and takes it away. She admires herself in the hallway mirror, twirls around to see it move. The fabric swishes about. What can Len be cooking up?

She doesn't have to wait long to find out. 'The thing is,' he says 'The thing is the East End ain't like it used to be.'

'No,' she says.

'Do you remember when we were courtin', how it was? We knew where we were, old girl. We didn't have much but we knew what was what.'

She doesn't say anything.

'The thing is, this bleedn place is going to the dogs. So I've decided,' he says 'I've decided we're getting out the East End, old girl. We're goin' to the country.'

Jenny still doesn't say anything.

'I know we got our differences,' Len says 'But some things a man does and some things he don't and a man don't quit his family. You see, if *she* came it might be different. I can't promise anything but maybe..'

'*She*?'

'Yes. June of course.'

After they've talked and closed up the café, Jenny doesn't feel like going straight home. She wanders down Silvertown Way towards Lyle Park and finds a spot on a bench. She sits sucking lemon bon bons in her new coat and thinking. On the other side, she catches sight of the massive frame of Bill Walter coming towards her.

'How you doin' pet?' Bill sits besides her and pulls out a rubber ball from his pocket and throws it for the dog. 'What brings you down this way?'

'Oh,' she says 'Thinking.'

He shakes his head and tuts 'Well that won't do.'

The dog bounds back with the ball in its mouth, its tail wagging.

'Cheery fella isn't he?' says Jenny.

Bill laughs then notices her coat. 'Ere,' he says 'What a get up! You off to see the Queen?'

'Don't be daft!'

They smile and look in opposite directions.

'It was a present from Len,' she says 'The raincoat.'

'Oh,' says Bill and picks up a stick. There is a gust of wind and the thick smell of molasses from Tate's. Jenny loves the smell of Silvertown, the sheer weight and history of sugar.

'Len's selling the caff, moving out west to the country,' she says 'He's taking the boy.....' She feels her eyes filling with tears. 'And he's taking June.'

There is a silence then Bill says 'You going too, I s'pose?'

'He says he wants me to.'

'Ah then.'

'Only,' begins Jenny 'I dunno if I will.'

A young couple are wandering beside the flowerbeds at the entrance to the park. The man is wearing docker's garb and the woman is wearing a beige raincoat.

'Best get back,' Jenny says.

'I'll walk yer to the bus stop,' Bill says.

Ten minutes later she is standing beside the bus stop alone. The bus to Canning Town draws up and half a dozen people get off. A woman in a beige gabardine coat joins her at the stop and starts powdering her nose. Another bus pulls up and moves away. And another woman in a gabardine coat crosses the road and begins to make her way towards Plaistow Wharf. Jenny watches and suddenly it hits her. Of course, the gabardine coats. A job lot fallen off a lorry. Cheap, they are, and second rate. She rushes onto the bus, jangling her change and thinking, 'Oh Len Page, you've really gone and done it now.'

That is the moment when Jenny decides she won't go with Len to the country. She'll stay in her beloved East End.