

SILVERTOWN

Butlins

Jenny Page lives in Altmore Avenue in East Ham. She is married to Len Page but Len has moved to the country with a fancy woman called June and their son. Jenny has become good friends with Bill Walter and his sister Olive. She is sixty five now. Her two loves are still the East End and sweets.

'I ain't even took me rollers out yet,' says Olive Walter opening the door to Jenny. 'But never mind, come in and have a cuppa, pet. I got them fig biscuits you like.'

Jenny steps into the hallway of the tiny house in Parker street. Since that evening long ago in Lyle Park, Jenny has become friends with the Walters, first Bill and then his sister Olive. Bill and Olive live in a small house with a small bit of money and a parrot. Jenny never went to the country with Len. She is now sixty-five.

'So how are you Jenny?' Olive shouts from the kitchen.

'Been better.' Jenny says taking a barley sugar from a dish before Olive comes back.

'Oh, haven't we all pet?' shouts Olive 'Still never mind eh?' She bustles in minus her rollers, carrying a tray with tea and biscuits.

Jenny is chewing on a fig biscuit as Bill Walter bounds in through the front door.

'Ah,' he cries 'if it ain't me second favourite bird. How are you, Jenny pet?'

'Hello,' shrieks the pet parrot and Bill runs his fingers along its head.

'Did Olive mention our holiday?' he says 'We're reckoning to go down to Butlins at Bognor for a week. Thought you might swing along, pet.'

Jenny thinks about Butlins: the cooked meals, the Old Time dance halls, the Entertainers, Arthur English, Tommy Steele, the Pig and Whistle bars, the home from home atmosphere.

'I'll take that as a yes then,' he says helping himself to another cup of tea.

In May 1968 Bill and Olive Walter and Jenny sit on a bus to Butlins Holiday Camp eating paste sandwiches and singing the Butlins song.

Come all you scholars now and put away your studies
Come and join the happy band, known as the Butlins Buddies.

By the time the bus pulls into the holiday camp it is beginning to rain. Jenny and Olive put on their plastic hats to protect their newly-rolled hair. A redcoat appears to show them to their chalets.

'Hoorah,' says Bill 'Ain't this something?'

The chalets are in a row of about twenty. Bizzy lizzies and geraniums bloom beside the litter bins. Inside each chalet is a bed, a desk and chair, a basin and a cupboard, the whole decorated in jolly colours with pictures of yachts on the walls. A map of the camp is stapled to the back of the door and says 'You are Here' in red lettering.

'This is nice,' Olive says 'Different. But not too different.'

'Righty-ho. I'll leave you to it,' beams the redcoat. 'Don't forget there's trampoline practice and bingo at half past two, Hi-de-hi.'

'Very dainty,' Jenny says 'What are we supposed to do, again?'

‘Have fun,’ says Bill.

Jenny wakes the next morning to the sound of the camp tannoy requesting campers to roll out of bed with a great big smile. After breakfast in the Golden Grill they join in a beetle drive and after a post-lunch nap they are at the bingo. The Walters get stuck right in, frantically marking the numbers as they are called: two fat ladies, eighty-eight, snake eyes, eleven, three-oh, thirty. Suddenly the scent of Bill’s hair tonic hits Jenny. Twenty-two, me and you. Twenty-three, you and me.

They pass their final evening at Butlins at the Old Time dance in the ballroom. Jenny wears a homemade crimplene dress with pearls around her neck. She puts on raspberry lipstick.

‘Look at you,’ whistles Bill ‘A right picture.’

‘Ah now, Bill Walter, keep a hold on yerself,’ she says, embarrassed.

He winks at her and taking both her and Olive by the arm, says ‘Let’s go then ladies.’

As they walk along the concrete path to the ballroom they feel as though they are floating in a bubble. They sit at the tropical bar with plastic pineapples and sip on sherries. A twelve-piece band begins a swing number and to Jenny Page it seems that some other life is opening up.

‘Come on, old girl, let’s have a dance,’ says Bill.

‘Oh no Bill, I can’t’

‘Yes you can Jenny Page,’ says Bill pulling her out of her chair ‘And you’re just about to.’

She stands with her arms at her side while the band strikes up the ‘Chattanooga Choo Choo.’

‘C’mon,’ says Bill pushing her towards the dance floor and she suddenly feels herself smiling and a moment after that Bill’s arm snakes around her waist and they are off.

‘This is the life pet, ain’t it?’

She feels herself stiff as a board, swaying in his arms.

‘You know,’ he says ‘We could have done this years ago. What ninnies we are!’

‘I ain’t much of a dancer,’ she says stepping on Bill’s toe.

‘Never too late to learn.’

They dance their way around the room again, gazing out into the middle distance.

But all too soon the holiday is over and they are trundling back to London on the coach. They are dropped off at Victoria Station and take a bus to Bow Road where they have to change. As they stand at the bus stop outside Kelly’s, the smell of fried fish finally overcomes them.

They go inside and immerse themselves in the pleasure of softly flaking cod with its crisp oily jacket and salted chips. It was nice to go to Butlins but it was even nicer to be back home and eat fish and chips in the East End.