

SILVERTOWN

The Date

Jenny Fulcher lives in the East End. She is twenty nine now and still living with her parents. The rest of her brothers and sisters have married and moved away. Her best friend Dora Trelling is also married. Jenny works as a seamstress. The year is 1932. A dozen years have passed since she had all her teeth pulled out.

It is a Saturday night and the young people from Barking, West Ham, Silvertown, Tidal Basin, Plaistow, Canning Town, Custom House, Beckton, Manor Park, Upton Park and Forest Gate are milling around the Premier Picturehouse in East Ham. Standing among the dandyish boys and dolled up girls is Jenny Fulcher in a blue dress she made herself and a pair of brown leather shoes that are pinching her feet.

Suddenly there he is in front of her: Len Page. Her suitor. Her beau. Her knight in shining armour. Well, to be precise he's in a brown wool suit. But how la-di-da he is, not handsome exactly, but strong and purposeful in his white shirt with collar and tie. He is, it seems, the essence of respectability.

'Lo' she says shyly, inspecting her shoes.

'Well you look a picture,' he says.

'Oh,' she says. For a moment she thinks he has said 'you'll look at a picture' which is what they have come to do, then realising her mistake she adds 'I mean, do I?'

'Yes,' he says.

'Oh,' she says.

Jenny is twenty nine and still living with her parents. Home is no longer 4 Ullin Street but Caulfield road in the more prosperous East Ham. Len lives in Kempton Road just two streets down.

'I brung you these,' says Len outside the Premier handing Jenny a paper twist. They raise their eyes to meet each other's. Jenny pokes open the bag and inspects the iced gems lying inside.

'Want one?' she says

'Nah.'

She pops a gem into her mouth and floats off into sugar heaven. They reach the head of the queue and the cashier says 'Fourpence balcony seats or thru'penny stalls?'

'Two balcony,' says Len.

Jenny stops sucking on her gem for a moment. 'Why waste tuppence?' she says removing two pennies from the pile on the counter. 'Yer backside don't know the difference. We could sit in the thru'pennies and make a tanner of it.'

Len smiles and squeezes her elbow with his hand 'Jenny Fulcher,' he says 'You are a woman after me own heart.'

Inside Jenny keeps eating her iced gems, trying to open the bag without making a noise.

'Shhhh,' hisses a woman beside them.

Len turns and frowns. For a while Jenny withdraws her hand but after half an hour she can't help but have another go. Digging in the bag for another and holding it to the screen she whispers 'Now, is this blackcurrant or strawberry?'

Len's voice is raised just above a whisper 'If you don't like strawberry spit it out.'

‘I do like strawberry.’

Then the woman beside them says ‘Oh shhh why don’t yer?’

‘Gawd and bleedn Bennett,’ says Len ‘Will the bleedn saints preserve us from the bleedn moans of bleedn women.’

After the film Len walks Jenny back to Caulfield Road.

‘Well then Jenny,’ he says as they reach her door. ‘You got any objections to the Dogs? Cos if you ‘ave then I won’t take you, save you moaning about it.’

‘Well,’ she says.

‘Dogs it is then,’ he says definitively, backing off down the road.

She waits for him to leave, then rings the bell. Her father Frenchie opens the door.

‘You’ve been your time out here. What you been doing?’ He eyes her from the side ‘You know you have to be in by nine. That’s the rule’

With that her father pulls her roughly into the house and slams the door.