

COMMENDED: IRENE JOHNSON

JUST A BAD PATCH

“You will look her up when you are in the city, won’t you, Beth? I do worry about her!”

I did my best to put her mind at ease.

“She’s a very sensible girl Marion, you know that.”

But I promised. Debbie was always a favourite of mine and perhaps that is why when I reached the address given I was so shocked. It was in a badly rundown district with very shabby old rooming houses. A thin, worried-looking woman answered my knock.

“Debbie Smith? Oh I’m sorry. She left here last week, going to room with another girl. Be cheaper that way till her unemployment cheque arrives.”

“Unemployment? But she had a job!”

“Not any longer and no fault of hers. That small firm folded some weeks ago. I’m sorry, she was a lovely kid. Said to me, ‘Don’t worry Mrs. B. It’s just a bad patch.’ ”

On the way to the new address I remembered. Old Granddad Smith used to say just that when trouble hit. Debbie’s Dad, tragically killed in a tractor accident, always said it. And now Debbie.

The new address was shabbier still, near to squalor, but the bright face of the girl who opened the door to me was the old Debbie and her hug was genuine. We went inside. A big bare shabby room, peeling paint, two bunk beds and very little else.

“Oh Debbie!” I cried, shocked.

“Now Beth, none of that. It isn’t the end of the world.”

“Your mother will be horrified!”

“No she won’t because she won’t know. Now look Beth, tomorrow I get my first unemployment cheque so I won’t starve. But better still next week I may have a decent job. Always was handy with the needle. Well, this dame didn’t muck about — asked—‘You make what you’re wearing?’ When I said I had she twitched up the hem of my frock, then made me walk about.

Said, 'Hmm, not bad. Mind you'd be on high fashion stuff that needs perfect finish. Turn around again. Hmm, might even model a bit. Call again Monday.' So keep your fingers and toes crossed for me!" and she laughed.

"Debbie, have you eaten today?"

"Of course!"

"What?"

"Well, the bread was a bit stale so I toasted it. But the dripping was very tasty. Been frying onions!"

"Then where is this toaster?"

"Oh, I did it on Jessica's iron, upside down."

I'm learning, I thought. "Where is Jessica?"

"Out chasing a job."

"Well, when she comes back I'm taking you both out to lunch. What do you fancy?" Suddenly the girl dropped her guard, came and put her arms around me. "Oh Beth! Right now I could eat a horse and start on the rider! T-bone steaks?"

"Certainly."

"Oh Beth I was only joking. Here they cost the earth!"

"T-bone steaks it is. You're a growing girl."

Suddenly she crossed the room and came back with a damp wisp of pantie girdle on which she proceeded to train a hair drier gun.

"Jess might want it (still learning). Be in any minute. Ah here she is. Jess, meet my friend Beth."

She was quite lovely. Slim, big blue eyes and a long page-boy bob that dripped like honey.

"You fancy a T-bone steak, Jess?"

These battling kids! And the atmosphere warm, friendly, infectious. The girls dressed in their best. Debbie looked good enough to eat, brown curls tipping her shoulders, little black jersey frock on a figure that had made Madam think of modelling, and blonde Jessica was the perfect foil.

We set off for lunch. And shadowy beside us I felt those other Smiths, from a farm that in three generations had known fire, flood, drought, but was still viable, still working. Into my musings came a happy young voice.

"Penny for them, Beth!"

“Well, I was trying to remember—who wrote that oldtime book *The Breed Holds Good*? Was it Nat Gould?”

“Good gracious, I wouldn’t know. Why do you want to know?”

“Oh, just thinking. How would it be for a pop song –

*Don’t let it throw you
It’s just a bad patch?”*

“Jolly good Beth! What say we work on it later?”
Debbie went ahead a little, dancing backwards. She sang:

*Step up and enter
The door’s on the latch . . .*

But right now let’s EAT!”

