

A Country Appointment
by
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Being late for an interview isn't an auspicious start to any career. And I was nervous enough as it was. But I'd prepared my prospective employers for what to expect—and surely country folk saw life so much in the raw that they'd accept me more readily than city dwellers? Besides, wasn't being granted an interview a good sign? Only I hadn't bargained on getting lost ...

I halted the car on sighting a small house whose garden was a chaos of colour, clearly tended by someone not too fussy about the occasional weed. The effect, however, was oddly charming. Probably owned by an equally charming elderly couple.

Well, here's my chance to learn what country folk will make of me.

Before I could change my mind I was knocking on the cottage door. I barely had time to nervously straighten my tie before I found myself staring into the huge, anxious eyes of the loveliest woman I'd ever seen. I stepped back a pace, my carefully worded enquiry dying in my throat: beautiful women positively intimidate me. But my subconscious couldn't help noticing that her face registered no revulsion—only the anxiety I'd already observed and, after she'd stared for slightly longer than was strictly polite,

extreme disappointment.

“Oh! I’m sorry. I was expecting someone else.”

Even this didn’t help me find my voice. She cocked her head slightly, frowning as though puzzled by my silence. The somewhat coquettish effect was strangely electrifying, making me step back another pace.

Her anxious frown deepened. “Is there something wrong? Can I help?”

“I’m—I’m sorry to disturb you. I have an appointment for a position at the veterinary clinic and ... I think I must have missed a turning. Could you direct me please?” Why did nervousness always make me babble?

She looked astonished. “You’re a *vet*?”

I flushed. The fact that at first sight people think me stupid always hurts. But that this woman, who looked around my own age, should judge me so hurt more than usual for some reason.

“I haven’t practised yet, but I qualified with honours,” I replied stiffly.

It was her turn to blush and stammer. “Oh, I didn’t mean ... It was just that ... I’m waiting for one of the local vets to examine my dog. Brian said no-one could come till this evening, but when you knocked I thought it was him—or Joyce.”

Her discomfiture emboldened me. “Brian’s the fellow I have an appointment with. If it’s safe to move your dog and you’d care to direct me—”

She interrupted. “You couldn’t look at her yourself could you? Although she scoffed her breakfast and seems alert enough, she didn’t want to go out—and she’s always enjoyed our little outings. But today it’s been as much as I can do to get her outside when she needs to go.”

“I’m sorry: since you’re already expecting a vet to call, it wouldn’t be ethical for me to examine her.”

“Please! Just to advise on how to make her more comfortable until Brian calls. I promise I’ll not make you late for your appointment.”

How could I resist such pleading? We introduced ourselves, I retrieved the tools of my profession from the car, and seconds later I was in a living room whose stark comfort was in startling contrast to the wilderness-style garden. A very friendly German Shepherd lay apathetically in a dog basket beside a pair of French doors. My examination didn’t take long.

“No wonder she’s reluctant to go walking; she’s blind.”

As soon as I spoke I knew I shouldn’t have been so blunt: preparing

people for grim news is as much part of a vet's training as it is a doctor's. And Arabella Dewhurst took the diagnosis as badly as if I'd told her Ginny had to be euthanased: she went positively white and sat down suddenly, clearly fighting tears.

I found as many comforting things to say as I could: the condition might not be irreversible; maybe Ginny wasn't totally blind—only a more detailed examination would reveal this; and animals were more adjustable than humans. But I was painfully aware I was babbling again. In the end we agreed to take Ginny to the surgery in my car. With Arabella keeping a reassuring hand on her head, I carried her to the back seat.

It was a very upset Arabella who was waiting for me after my interview with Brian Corbet: Joyce Corbet had told her Ginny would quickly lose what little sight she still had and there was nothing that could be done.

But even in her distress Arabella politely asked, on the way back to her cottage, about my interview and seemed genuinely pleased that I thought I had a chance. It wasn't until I turned to leave after settling Ginny in her basket that I realised if I didn't get the job I wouldn't see Arabella again. There was only one way to make sure that wouldn't happen.

Clenching my hands tightly so they wouldn't shake, I drew in a deep breath to steady my voice—but failed miserably. “Would—would you have dinner with me tonight?”

She smiled. And my heart—already thumping hard—started hammering so furiously she could surely hear it.

“That would be nice—but I'd rather not leave Ginny alone,” she said gently. It was the kindest refusal I'd ever had. But it made me realise I'd been hoping she'd accept if only because she felt sorry for me. After a brief, awkward silence she continued, rather shyly, “If you don't have to get home till tomorrow why not have dinner here with me?”

So she did feel sorry for me. The part of me that couldn't help feeling offended wanted to refuse. But the part that longed to stay at any cost urged, *Go on: accept before she realises what an idiot she is inviting a strange man to dinner.*

“Thank you. That's very kind of you.”

She smiled again. “And now I need a cup of tea. Or would you prefer coffee?”

“Tea, please.”

While waiting for Arabella to return from the kitchen I made a fuss of Ginny, who was very appreciative of the attention. When Arabella returned, carrying a rather heavily laden tray, her smooth, unhurried grace—such a contrast to the way city women moved—so entranced me that it was some seconds before, remembering my manners, I jumped up to take the tray.

As she filled the first cup I couldn't help remembering how my grandmother had delighted in creating a positive ceremony from the task of making and pouring tea for guests. These days it's all teabags in mugs.

I was so busy admiring Arabella's thick long lashes, glossy dark hair and flawless skin that it was some time before the unusual movements of her slender hands arrested my attention—movements totally unlike those of my grandmother. And it was several long seconds before those movements clicked into place with other things—things I'd noticed but whose meaning I had missed: the garden's haphazard charm; Arabella's greeting on opening the door; the arrangement of the furniture; the dog; the hand on Ginny's head to and from the car ...

Watching her fill the second cup, I knew my suspicion was correct.

“Arabella, are you blind?” There: I’d blurted it out with as little sensitivity as I had my diagnosis on Ginny. At this rate I’d never make a good vet.

Her face clouding with dismay, Arabella put down the cup she’d been about to hand me with a suddenness that slopped tea into the saucer. “You mean ... you didn’t notice?”

I flushed. “It isn’t immediately obvious,” I said stiffly, defensively. “You move nearly as well as a sighted person; your eyes don’t focus past people the way most blind eyes do.”

“I was born blind.” With her head now bent over her folded hands, her attitude was almost as defensive as mine.

“Well, at least that solves something that’s been puzzling me: why a sensitive woman who obviously cares about her dog had no idea what the problem was.”

“Ginny hasn’t worked properly as a guide dog since my husband died. He preferred the German shepherd to the Labrador because of its reputation as a good guard dog.”

I blinked in surprise. “Oh! I’m sorry.”

Arabella sighed. “Thank you. But it’s two years now. Also, he wasn’t

young—strangers took him for my grandfather.” While I pondered the idea of a young and lovely woman married to an old man she turned her attention back to the tea. “You don’t have to stay for dinner if you’d rather not.”

So this remarkable woman was as insecure as I was. I could think of only one course of action. Only did I have the courage? If I didn’t, I berated myself, I would deserve the lonely life ahead of me. I took a deep breath. “But I would, Arabella—if you’re sure you’d like me to. Only ... there’s something you must know about me first.” It was her turn to look astonished as I stood up and walked to her side. “I was born with one leg shorter than the other.”

She smiled. “Yes: I can hear it in your walk. And you have a slight speech impediment.”

I winced. “But that’s not all.” She waited in puzzled silence as, trembling violently, I knelt at her feet, careful not to touch her. “Feel my face, Arabella.”

Slowly her hands unerringly found the scar that pulled one side of my mouth awry where my cheek had been rebuilt after a horrendous accident

in my teens. The silence dragged out as, eyes closed as though to stop me reading her expression, she explored every hideous bump. Only the jerking of her throat as she swallowed gave me any indication that she was moved by what she felt.

It seemed an eternity before she spoke, very quietly. “What sort of bribe d’you think Brian would need to give you that job?”

My tension instantly dissolved into helpless laughter.

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Now a successful veterinary surgeon, I’ve been married to Arabella for ten years—and her gift of finding the right words to ease awkward situations has only strengthened.