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1

Pretty Sukey

When bitter gusts out of the north hammer London, the tightest window cannot keep the penetrating cold at bay. Most of the year, thick and murky overcasts seal out the sun and seal in the acrid smoke of a hundred thousand chimneys. Silent, clammy fog can, for days on end, hide the front door from the cobbled street hard before it. Then suddenly, when you least expect it, the sun slips out to burn the chill away.

If you pass the Bear Garden during an entertainment, when dogs are baiting bears and bulls, you can watch dust and the steamy breath of all those screaming people rise above the round arena in the smoky torchlight. Then it's over. The bulls and the bears and some of the dogs are dead; and the hot, sweaty patrons, laughing and shouting and drinking, come pouring out into the cold, rain-slick streets.

Weather happens inside, too. The vast, echoing sanctuary of St. Giles chills the marrow of your bones any day of the year. The walk-in hearth in Spital Fields manse, so richly warm, welcomes you with a crackling wood fire, or possibly the soft and gentle glow of burning peat. Hot and cold, sun and wind, fire and rain, and you never quite know which will come down upon you next.

Today was sun. It filtered through the tree leaves to weave dancing lace in the grass. It made more vivid the crisp green of the sweetbriers along the back fence and made still softer the quiet pink of their fragrant flowers. It sang for the joy of another English summer.

Out back in the courtyard, the upstairs maid had hung out the rug from the master bedroom. With loud and mighty *whops* she rhythmically slapped it with the broom. A little cloud of dust lifted away from each swat. The houseman was finally replacing those three broken sticks in the arching rose arbor. The two tame cats had cornered something small and squeaky in the pile of kindling outside the kitchen door. The chore girl turned her back on the cat-rodent brouhaha to polish the big brass dinner bell hanging by the back stoop. And over all poured that delicious yellow sunlight.

"Sukey, for pity sake! Throw that musty old book aside and come out in the sun. The weather's much too fine to hide from!"

Susanna didn't throw it aside; she laid it down carefully. She leaned out her upstairs casement window. There stood Elizabeth in the busy court-

yard below, her lovely face tipped up into the brightness, arms akimbo. Should Susanna be properly deferential toward her older sister, or should Susanna be as usual? As usual, of course.

She had to pause and think a moment. "*Deus deorum Dominus locutus est: et vocavit terram, a solis ortu usque ad occasum.*"

"Whaaat?"

"Psalm fifty, verse one. You see? You can study and improve your mind, or you can bask in the sun like a lizard. I choose study. Bask as you wish."

"You're much too saucy for your own good, little snippet. You think you know it all, but you're only thirteen, remember."

"Better thirteen than on the brink of marriage. Enjoy your sunshine, Elizabeth. Too soon you'll be confined to the house scrubbing floors and birthing babies." Susanna pulled her head back inside and let the not-so-polite language from below drift by unheeded. And Elizabeth the daughter of a rector, too! Smugly she settled back onto her bolster beside the window. She picked up the musty old book again.

Musty? Old? Good! Both words bespoke venerability, the wisdom of age. Susanna yearned for the wisdom of age. Blessed she was indeed to have a brilliant father with a huge library and smart sisters willing to help her learn.

Oh, true, the rest of London called the Annesley sisters pretty, as if pretty were the best thing a girl could be. They called Susanna, the youngest, the prettiest of all and constantly complimented

her silky dark hair, her deep blue eyes. Why didn't the people who visited the manse here ever notice that Susanna like her sisters could read Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, could cipher as well as any man, could discuss theology with any seminarian? Those were accomplishments worthy of pride, not an accident of birth, such as physical beauty.

Like a siren's soft fluting, warm summer air pushed aside the musty aroma of books to beckon and tease. The book melted into her lap. Perhaps Elizabeth had a point. Why waste all this fine weather? Susanna laid her study gently aside and walked downstairs. The long hallway ticked quietly in rhythm with her heels.

"Sukey? Have you a minute?"

"For you, Papa, many minutes," Susanna paused in the doorway of her father's study. She knew what the topic was going to be, and she wished it weren't. She crossed the cozy room and settled at her father's feet. His knees and his huge padded armchair like a throne towered above her.

He sat back and laced his thick fingers together in that way of his. "I was over in the City yesterday. St. Paul's is coming, but quite slowly. Some say it'll be many years more a-building, and I believe them."

"I wish I could have seen it before the fire. They say you could spy its steeple from fifty miles away, if the land lay right." Susanna squirmed. St. Paul's Cathedral wasn't the subject of this chat. "And the fire must have been interesting. Sammy and Benny tell me stories about it, but I never

know quite when to believe them, they tease so much. I was born three years too late."

"Ah. Now my littlest daughter is questioning God's sovereign timing."

"Very well then, Papa. Not questioning it. Regretting it."

"And what else do you regret about God's sovereignty?"

"That's not fair, Papa. I don't argue against His sovereignty, but I do have wishes. I wish girls could attend academies and seminaries as boys do. I wish people took me more seriously. I wish—I wish Elizabeth weren't marrying John Dunton. I see him as boastful and full of self; not altogether a man to God's liking."

Her father studied her from his throne. "This from a slip of a girl who's not yet seen fourteen winters? You know what God likes and doesn't like?"

"His Word is clear."

"And you think He likes the Church of England."

She'd been right. Here was the topic she dreaded. How should she phrase her arguments this time? She drew her knees up tight against her chest and folded her arms across them, a chin-rest.

"Papa—" She refolded her arms. They felt no more comfortable than before. "Papa—" she sighed "—I don't blame God that I can't attend Oxford or some such college; I blame men. They set those rules. And I don't blame God for the injuries you suffered at the hands of church officials."

That also is the work of men. Petty men, preying upon a great one."

"I've warned you against flattery, Sukey."

"Not flattery, Papa. Your life speaks for itself. The people you serve in your congregation, the way students and young men revere you. You are great among the unconformists, and I respect you for that. And for lots of other reasons. But I don't blame the Church of England, either, when some of its men are petty."

"They form the church. They are the church."

"In a way. But in another way the church is a thing herself. It's the thing herself I've pledged allegiance to." Susanna was warming to her topic now; words came easier. "Papa, religion like anything else must have a strong framework of law and order. Hard rules following God's precepts. Your unconformists lack that framework, and the church has it. I feel comfortable in it. I feel comfortable with rules and liturgy. With methodical, proper ways to do things."

Papa smiled down from up there. "You know, my friends tell me you're only a child who doesn't yet know her mind; that you'll come back into worship as we preach it. They think you're frivolous; that you don't understand. Hah! My friends don't know you. They don't take a thirteen-year-old seriously, as you mentioned in your list of wishes, but I do. If that's your choice—to leave my church and go back to the Anglican communion—I'll not condemn you."

"And no more discussion of the topic?"

"Not unless you bring it up."

She curled up against his hard knees, because that was the part of him easiest to reach. "Thank you, Papa. Now what shall we do about Elizabeth?"

Samuel Annesley roared. "That's exactly what Elizabeth says about you! She's always fussing about something you do, as you know. Most lately it's been your involvement with that sect, those Socinians. She's most concerned for your soul, just as you're concerned for her future."

"If the Socinian beliefs are so dangerous, why haven't you preached to me against them?"

"Because you wouldn't listen to me. You follow your own counsel. Always have. I'm trusting the Holy Spirit to bring you around in His good time. He's the teacher. You'll listen to Him eventually, though not to me."

Susanna knew a rebuke when she heard it, however gentle it might be. She dared not answer Papa as she might Elizabeth or brother Benny. So she answered nothing.

"So, Sukey, why aren't you out in this lovely sunshine? No more weighty discussions. Go be a child for a moment."

She sat erect. "I enjoy musty old books and talking religion better than basking. Very well, Papa, here I go. Out to turn brown and shrivel up."

He sat forward on his throne to give her a hug in leaving, and up close here she could see the sadness in his eyes. She hated to hurt this beloved giant so, to turn her back on his church and stray

from his beliefs. But she *did* know her own mind, and, certainly more than most her age, she could discern the mind of God. She would walk in the light she saw; after all, that's what her father preached from his pulpit.

She paused in the dining hall a moment to watch the kitchen maid set places for supper. She, being youngest, hardly knew those brothers and sisters who had grown and left the manse. And the brothers and sisters who died in infancy would meet her only in heaven. She measured by eye how long the table would have to be, were all Momma's twenty-five babies alive and still home.

How many babies would Elizabeth bear John Dunton? Susanna shuddered to think. He was so boastful he would probably want to produce babies by the twins and triplets, the better to populate the world with lots of John Duntons. Poor Elizabeth.

On the other hand, the Bible said children were a gift of God and the man who had a quiver full of them was blessed. Hannah, Rachel, Sarah, and a host of other Bible women bitterly bemoaned a lack of children. Her own mother didn't seem to mind giving birth twenty-five times. There might well be something to motherhood that most certainly was not visible from the outside.

Here was Elizabeth at the side gate haggling with the fishmonger. Elizabeth loved to haggle with anyone. Apparently, so did fishmongers. Susanna listened until the exchange started getting shrill and turned her back on the price of salt cod. There had to be more to life than dickering over a few pence for a loaf of barley or a slab of fish.

When she was grown she would never do that. She'd save her arguments for theology in learned circles.

Now there was something she hadn't thought of before. Were all twenty-five of Momma's babies alive and home, what would the food bills be! Talk about haggling over every penny. No, Susanna did not want to be burdened with a large family. Arrows in the quiver might be a blessing to the father of the house but certainly not to the one who did the work. Unless, of course, Susanna married well, as her own mother had.

The two tame cats were stretched out now across the cistern cover, draped in careless attitudes as cats do, as if their bones had melted. Had they caught that mouse? Likely not. The wild cats—the kitties who lived in the stable and tool shed and hid when you came near—they were the mousers.

Susanna stood in the middle of the courtyard and tipped her face up, letting the warmth pour over it. It would definitely have been a mistake to stay inside reading.

Here came Elizabeth with her slab of salt cod, looking quite smug. And there went the fishmonger, looking equally smug as she tucked some coins into the purse at her waist. The cats, so flaccid a moment ago, tensed as they lay there. Their tail tips twitched. With nose and eye and the subtlest turn of the head, they followed the salt cod to the kitchen every step of the way.

Susanna continued her walk. The apple tree would bear well this year. It was dropping tiny

green apples all over the path. She wished the manse garden contained a mulberry tree. Why? She didn't know. She simply liked mulberry trees with their rough, broad, no-nonsense leaves and sweet fruit.

She found herself out at the end of the courtyard along the back wall. It was either stop wandering or struggle through sweetbrier to climb a wall with nothing but alley on its other side. She stopped very close to the tangle of sweetbrier. She inhaled deeply and let the warm redolence penetrate her nose and lungs and from there her whole being. Fragrance. Ease and plenty. The good life.

Yes, Susanna Annesley had made up her mind about much more than just a choice of church and a theological doctrine. She also had determined to limit or possibly forgo her childbearing. She might even postpone marriage, maybe forever. Who needed conceited men, anyway? She knew widows and spinsters who did just fine. If she married at all she would marry well, someone highborn yet sensitive, someone with plenty of money. She would certainly never haggle over the price of bread.

Her nose sated with sweet perfume, she took one final deep breath and left the sweetbriers to toast in the sun. She had had sufficient sun and summer for one day. Indeed, she didn't need the sun to feel good. After all, how lucky can a young girl be? At thirteen she already had her theology well established and her life all worked out. Now there was nothing left but to play the orderly scenario to its end.

She clicked down the great hall and up the stairs to her first love, her musty old book.