



READER'S REPORT

Title: *ELECTROCUTION*

Format: Short Story

Genre: Dark/comic literary fiction

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Reader: Laura @ feedbackforwriters.co.uk

Author comments:

This is a first full draft, written to a theme and title for an anthology. Requires general feedback, what's working/what isn't.

STORY SUMMARY

In an English field on a blustery evening, middle aged WI-types June and Margery pack up their stall into their car and scan the surrounding area with binoculars. In a distant hedgerow they spot a “find” seemingly missed by the sinister vans that do a nightly circuit of the area. Closer inspection reveals it to be the body of an elderly male rambler, electrocuted by the fence that surrounds the fields. They decide, surreptitiously, to take the body for themselves, and pack it into their car.

Back at their shared cottage, Margery sips sherry in the front room and thinks with irritation about change and “outsiders”, while in the kitchen, June can be heard dealing with the body. It turns out she is cooking and canning it in order to add it to their secret stockpile of provisions. Margery then helps her clear up. Later, there is a knock on the front door; it is a man from the council with a clipboard, come to do the “weekly count.” With a superior manner, Margery lies and says there has been nothing, and the man from the council – not entirely taken in - checks they will be attending the obligatory town hall meeting the following morning.

On the way to the meeting the next day, the two women pass the local fields and barns, empty of all but tractors “ever since all the cows died off.” On



arriving at the village hall, they sit among the bony local villagers, to whom, once again, they seem to feel superior and who stare pointedly at Margery's ample belly. The meeting involves the sharing out of the village's spoils – the remains of hapless tourists and visitors – who have been electrocuted by various means by the villagers in order to be turned into food. Pickings are slim, however, and food is shared out according to a highly bureaucratic points system. The villagers also have a weary collective vote on an ever stricter penalty system for not following 'the rules'. On the way back to the cottage, Margery takes a good look at the surrounding countryside, and still feels a strong sense of pride and ownership. That night, however, the game appears to be up. The villagers and council inspection vans descend on the cottage; they have finally come for her.

PREMISE

With its darkly comic tone and use of wartime phrases, and British symbols such as the WI and bunting, the story is clearly taking a swipe at the perceived insularity of "traditional" English values – of particular relevance and resonance in the Brexit era - and is reminiscent in style of other fiction by, for example, Magnus Mills (*All Quiet on the Orient Express*) as well as British TV shows which have covered similar territory and share the sense of queasiness, (*The League of Gentlemen*). The "no nonsense" traditionalist protagonists – not unlike TV cooks *The Two Fat Ladies* – want to retain their traditions, but feel themselves up against not only the modern world and outsiders – hapless tourists and ramblers who fall into the traps set by the starving, cannibalistic villagers who are trying to get themselves food – but also the petty bureaucracies of the local council to whom they clearly consider themselves superior. In this, and the attitudes of the two women to the locals, the story also incorporates another intrinsically English aspect of life – the entrenchment of the class system and how it pervades attitudes towards others. For all the idyllic appearance of the English countryside and hedgerows, this, the story tells us, is a dog- eat-dog (or villager-eat-villager) world.

In essence, it is a tale about the dangers of insularity, with the cannibalism symbolising the harm and ultimate self-destruction created by being too inward- looking. The story's ending conveys the view that if this state of affairs continues, all will inevitably be lost. Margery's sense of superiority and splendid isolation will not save her in the end, although it is unclear in the story as it stands what will eventually become either of June or of the rest of the village inhabitants.



CHARACTER

Given the style and grotesquely comic genre of the story, the characters are drawn as parody which is appropriate, if veering into stereotype at times. We have the two women, symbolic of a peculiarly English upper-middle class tradition; the bureaucratic small-minded men from the council with their clipboards and rules and the eager “higher” villagers, competing with one another; as well as the nameless other locals who are described, rather creepily, as “identically-faced”, which gives a hint of insularity, incestuousness and menace and indicates that they too, have never been outside the village .

Although the story starts off with both June and Margery together as a pair, Margery is then the main character for most of the story and June has almost disappeared entirely by the last third. As such, it is not clear what June’s character and role in the story really is, particularly with regard to the end of the story and Margery’s eventual fate. This, and the relationship between herself and Margery, could perhaps be developed further to add more depth to the conflict and themes.

Nor do we learn as much as we might about the dead rambler and if his fate has anything to do with the villagers eventually turning on Margery. The motivations of the villagers for all this killing is not clear – we get that they are hungry but there isn’t much indication as to why and how this situation has developed over time, why it is happening to just them and not the outside world, or why Margery and June have decided to stockpile for themselves rather than share and have managed to get away with it. A little more detail on those situations may help to clarify some of those missing elements of the story.

The vans which appear to do their rounds at the beginning and the end of the story are a nice touch; almost characters in themselves –they just ‘appear’ and patrol, a force of antagonism that only adds to the menace.

STRUCTURE

The story is told here with a drip-drip-drip of information about the world it is inhabiting, which creates suspense and a darkly unsettling atmosphere. The strong opening scenes set the tone, getting us right into the set-up without unnecessary build-up, establishing the relationship between the two women, and giving rise to a number of intriguing questions. It is instantly clear which



country we are in, although it is a purposely skewed version, and also the type of characters with which we are dealing. But what are the women doing in the field? Why is the perimeter electrified and what are the vans for? Why do the two of them decide to break the rules? At the break of the first section, they decide to take Ray Duffy's body. But for what reason? Will they get caught, and what might the consequences be?

Some – but not all – of these questions are answered in the next section, where we find out what the pair are, rather gruesomely, doing with the body and understand a little about, if not why exactly, something about the attitude of Margery to life and tradition. We are then introduced to the weekly tally-count by the council, which adds an element of pressure and scrutiny to the pair and more of a danger that they will be found out. Margery's disdain, however, shows that she feels she is not really in danger; perhaps ultimately – “it'll never affect me personally” - is one of the points of the story.

The latter section gives us more information about the village as a whole and what they are doing, and although it has some good unnerving elements (shades of Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*) seems rather rushed and never really explains how Margery and June, despite all this scrutiny, have thus far managed not to be caught with their stockpile. Some of the story threads aren't quite given a payoff; for example, nobody comes to try to find the missing campers or rambler. There are hints about a terrible fate awaiting those who break the rules, and indeed, it will eventually seem that Margery herself is going to be subject to them, but the section is short on reveals, which I think would add a few more necessary details and better payoffs to the story. As mentioned previously, June seems to almost disappear in this last third, and although end-images like the lights of the vans through the dark outside the cottage are nice, shivery, touches, I can't help feeling that the ending would benefit from a few more “a-ha!” moments, and more detail.

VOICE & NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The story is written from a third person perspective from the start, outside of and observing the two women, but once we are deeper into the story, it is spent, although still in third person, almost entirely in Margery's perspective. It has a snippy, authorial tone which is entirely in keeping with the characters. It does need, perhaps, to be a little more consistent; either beginning with Margery's perspective, or keeping a little distance throughout, although the latter would have the disadvantage of not giving the reader access to Margery's thoughts or attitudes. The question here really is around deciding whose story this is at core – both women's, or just Margery's? Deciding on this may resolve the problem of June's role and avoid her later passivity in the story.



DIALOGUE & USE OF LANGUAGE

The style in general is one of short, matter-of-fact sentences and minimal, but precise, description that gives us just enough to picture the scenes. The dialogue is stylised but fits with the characters. Their use of particular phrases (“waste not, want not”) and the way they often talk in them, is in keeping with the themes of the story, the normalising of the abnormal under conventional language. There are a number of instances of “telling not showing”, however, more so towards the end of the story, and it would be worth looking a little more closely at that to see if there are better ways to get the point across.

IMAGERY

The imagery is in keeping with the themes of the story; the bunting, the sherry, the stopped clock on the cottage mantelpiece, the piles of tins and jars stockpiled in the cellar; comforting images that contrast with the underlying horror of what the characters are doing, although we never see the gruesomeness itself; it remains uncomfortably in the background. One point – I wasn’t sure about the logistics of the canning process and if it really would be over so quickly, even in this alternate universe.

PACE & STYLE

Generally speaking, the story keeps moving, keeps the reader engaged, and does not flag. The style is suspenseful, and the smattering of unanswered questions keeps the reader looking for answers and clues, all the way up to the end.

CONCLUSION

An enjoyably dark and menacing comic take on English insularity, with a gruesome premise that certainly won’t be everybody’s cup of tea, but fulfils the criteria of the title and remit. (note: the story was written in response to a title prompt about ‘casual electrocution’). The themes around Britishness in particular are likely to resonate in the current climate, although some of the tropes and style did perhaps seem a little familiar. The story is set up well with an unsettling and skewed atmosphere, but the plot and ending needs a little more work, particularly on ensuring significant loose ends aren’t left hanging. Although retaining an unsettling sense of mystery is a key part of the story’s success and impact, a few more clues and details could be given



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around the situation and thus the motivations of the characters that drive it at its core.