

Over the Rainbow

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a figure ducking behind the hedge and heard footsteps running along the other side ahead of me.

Johan, my St Bernard began to growl and I had to clasp his muzzle.

'No, no, no. Now behave or no bedtime story for you tonight, my boy.'

He stared back with his head cocked to one side as if to ask:

"What the hell is going on?"

We reached the clearing beyond the hedge and an apparition pranced into our path.

Dressed in a light-beige skin-tight leotard, at first glance I thought she was naked. With a fringe of dyed-blond hair and purple and yellow plaited pigtails, she raised herself on her tiptoes and formed a Y-shape by spreading her arms high and wide and throwing her head back. Her body was rake thin, with tiny, peach-sized breasts.

Involuntarily, my hands fluttered to tug down my tee-shirt, trying to make myself look thinner. Weight had piled on after my gender reassignment treatment and I was now frumpy.

Her face was startling, arresting: long, thin, gaunt with a large aquiline nose and piercing turquoise eyes. Make-up had been trowelled on in the fashion of a music hall artiste. At a head taller than me, I estimated her height at just over two metres, one of the tallest women I had ever been close to.

Then she spoke in a deep husky voice; very sexy.

'Well, hello, new neighbour! Welcome to cell block AC/DC, aka Abbot's Close. Have you settled in? I see the Amazon delivery vans have reduced from a flood to a trickle. So much cardboard to dispose of! The drivers should *collect* it as well as deliver it, don't you agree? And some of them, well, how shall I put it, zombies!'

Her delivery was forced, camp, as if she was trying too hard to project herself. She dipped her body forward from the waist and stretched her long neck upwards, peering at me as if short-sighted.

'You'd think they could read the difference between "Paula Wellbeck" at number 3, which is little *me*, the, as yet undiscovered, new talent.' Her hand stretched forward as she dipped to one knee, reaching out to take my hand gently and drop a tiny kiss on the back of it - before adding, 'And you, the world-famous impresario "Paulina Wellock" now

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living above me in the penthouse at number 5. Oh, you are an elusive girl, Paulina Wellock! As elusive as the Scarlet Pimpernel.'

Johan wagged his tail and whined for attention.

'My, you are a big boy, just like your Mummy. So, Paulina, do you like living here, in the salubrious hamlet of Honeybottom Lane, a rather dull place with the sole merit of being handy for a fast train to London?'

Pushing her chest out as she moved closer, I tasted her breath which hinted at rose hip syrup. She made her face into a moue, her lips a shiny, livid pink.

'I hear you are casting for a mime version of "Wizard of Oz". I want to be Dorothy, of course I do, but I'll settled for the Tin Man or even Scarecrow but *not*, please, please, please, *not* the Wicked Witch of the West!'

She knelt and grabbed Johan, play fighting with him, wrestling him to the ground and tickling his tummy, reading his dog tag in the process.

'Johan, will you be Toto, big boy? Eh? Will you? Will you?'

From her knees, her eyes pleaded, 'Well, dear, *dear* Paulina Wellock, will I do?'

'Eh, well, the problem is the concept is for the roles to be played by deaf people. So, eh, sorry. . . .'

'But I *am* deaf! Or rather I was, from childhood. A rare genetic defect, malformation of something technical to do with the stirrup thingy. Then five years ago, just as I started my re-assignment, I had a car accident and they say the airbags popped everything back into place. They think the hormone in the medication might have helped. So, once I was deaf and now I can hear! And a bonus is that I'm an expert lip-reader.'

She pointed and waved at an elderly man leaning on a Zimmer, a large black Labrador lying at his feet. The man was talking to a teenage boy in a smart school uniform. The boy waved and Johan barked, causing the old Lab to stand up and bark back. The trio were about fifty yards away, too far to hear what they were saying.

'That's the Reverend Nigel Caskie, *long* retired, with his grandson, Adam. Not a nice man is Nigel and rather free with his hands when visiting lady parishioners, back in the day, so my Mum told me. The lecherous Rev has just said to Adam - she mimicked a pompous voice:

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"Stay away from that pervert, Adam. And have nothing to do with the new woman. She's some sort of film producer. As you know, they are all pansies, the whole damned lot of them."

'Oh, poor Adam. Poor, poor Adam. I know his mother; Freda is one of us, in the Honeybottom Troubadours. She tells me Adam is conflicted, wants to be a girl but as he's only thirteen he can't be put on the programme. Poor thing, his life's a misery, as we both know, eh, Paulina?'

The man and his grandson turned away and walked around the corner out of sight.

'Now, Paulina, it's your big birthday tomorrow, right? You'll be forty, which makes you almost three years older than me. I follow your Twitter feed, you know.'

'So, are you registered as deaf, officially?'

'No. since my 'cure', I've lost my deaf status. But surely you could turn a blind eye, if that's not mixing metaphors too much? And I do have experience. I was "Bert" in the Honeybottom Troubadours production of "Mary Poppins" last year. Watch!'

I hadn't noticed she was wearing tap shoes or that she was holding a small speaker in her left hand. She switched it on, placed it in my hand and set her long face to a copy of Bert, singing along in perfect Cockney voice to the soundtrack of "Chim Chim Cheree".

<https://youtu.be/kG6O4N3wxf8>

Paula Wellbeck was very good. Most people would have wanted to play it straight, but she was doing it in a Fred Astaire meets Gene Kelly style, swinging herself from a lamp post then leaping onto a small wall before swooping down to waltz with an imaginary Ginger Rogers.

As she performed, she called out, 'I've been doing Choreography and Modern Dance at evening classes. I'm transgender, you know. For years I was a rather dull young man called Henry Traynor but when they released me, I chose the name Paula Wellbeck. It's a dream come true to have you living above me, you know. I think I've been in love with you from the minute I read you had trans-ed too.'

The speaker music changed to the opening bars of "Somewhere over the Rainbow" and Paula swooped forwards and grabbed me into her strong arms and in a perfect mimic of Judy Garland sang to me in a warm Alto voice as we waltzed around a bemused Johan:

<https://youtu.be/PSZxmZmBfnU>

We have set the date for our civil partnership for three months' hence to coincide with Paula's birthday. We intend to invite both families and everyone in Honeybottom

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Lane, even the Reverend Nigel Caskie. Freda will be our Maid of Honour, Adam our Page Boy and Johan will carry our rings in a little satchel on his back.

Everyone will be encouraged to come as a character from Wizard of Oz.