

Audrey's Pickle

by Heledd Bianchi

Phase 1

Uncle Jac and Aunt Betty's visit

They're coming - must tidy, must hurry, must quickly. Right, kitchen done, floors done, bedrooms tidied. Aargh, dishes! Back I go. "Get out of the way Trixy" screeched Audrey as she scuttled across the kitchen tiles. "Alright, alright, meaty balls coming" she vexed as she filled the dog bowl three quarters full. Trixy chomped greedily, polishing her food off in a jiffy. "You're not having any mor", Audrey argued with the perky Jack Russell. "For goodness sake, you now too!" she piped at Chelsea and Mildred, the shorthaired white and tan guinea pigs. "Stop your squeaking". The guinea pigs were so ravenous that they clung on with all fours to the gate of their cage in protest. "You had your pellets this morning and you'll have your greens later. Now be patient. You'll blow up one of these days, I'm telling you. Now stop your moithering". *I really hope little Max likes his veg now, she mulled. I can't bear to see any waste. Oh well, if there's any veg left, I'll cook up some rissoles tomorrow. The kids can have some with chips.* "Ah, yes the kids will love that," she whispered reassuringly, feeling at ease now. On that note, Audrey quickly turned the carrots, peas and cabbage down low on the cooker for fear of boiling them to a pulp and draining them of all their vital vitamins. They'd be far tastier and crunchier in the rissoles too and that was how her children enjoyed them the most, with plenty of ketchup of course, the master in jazzing up all meals for her children's palates.

As Audrey dashed through the passageway she caught a frightful reflection of herself in the mirror. "Aargh", she gasped, having caught sight of her chocolate brown hair. It had coagulated into the form of a sea urchin. She hadn't time to fettle with it since her bed head that morning and after the steam shower from the Sunday dinner cooking, it looked a right sorry state.

Audrey was so eager to please Aunt Betty and Uncle Jack as they had been very supportive to Audrey over the years, helping her out with her three children: Peter, aged nine, Jenny, aged seven and Paul, aged four. Auntie Betty and Uncle Jack made a big effort when the family visited them so Audrey felt they deserved the same treatment in return.

Audrey had felt quite isolated on many occasions, particularly when the children were very small and too young to have a conversation with. Her husband Andrew worked away a lot. She wasn't sure what he did exactly. She knew that he had urgent business meetings to attend to and matters which required a great deal of overtime which entailed him sitting at the computer in the study until late evening; well past the children's bedtime, at least. Audrey had questioned him on half a dozen occasions but was so bamboozled by his longwinded explanations that she came to the firm decision that she would never ask again. Was he deliberately confusing her to silence her. The children never asked. They weren't interested as they saw very little of him and the time they did spend with him was so brief that all they wanted to do with him was play. He did enjoy kicking a ball about with them and playing hide-and-seek whilst out in the park on special occasions, but soon got tired. He had been in a sedentary job as long as she'd known him; over fourteen years now. His income was enough to contribute towards the household bills, their hobbies which included swimming for all, ballet and gymnastic classes for Jenny, football and cricket for Peter and play centre activity and rhyme time for Paul. More importantly, his income also paid for two holidays abroad each year, which was Audrey's sanctuary from her domestic chores, which she had to admit had become rather mundane and monotonous. She was relieved that Paul would be starting school full time that September as she was now finding juggling home life and school activities quite a strain. She had become exhausted with the constant demands of school homework, school trips, extra - curricular activities and to top it all, the umpteen school and nursery concerts and services she had to attend, of which there seemed to be at least one per school term. She would now have a few more hours in the day to see to the chores in peace and perhaps slip a cheeky film in between: what bliss.

"Yap, yap, yap" yapped Trixy. She often yapped throughout the day, at passers-by, at the sound of the wind blowing through the trees, even at the sound of a crisp packet skimming across the floor. She was ever such a neurotic terrier! "Stop your yapping!" Audrey bellowed. "There's nobody there." She could never be quite sure of this however as the batteries in her door chime were always running flat and many a time she had missed someone calling through the dog yapping wolf.

"Right, off I go," Audrey muttered. *Better get these toilet bowls squeaky clean.* She half-wondered why she should bother as Uncle Jack would only trickle right down them again for certain. One of the pleasures of Andrew being away was that Audrey only had to clean the toilet bowls once a week: although Peter and Jack trickled a little, they didn't leave such a pungent stench as Andrew. Must have been a sign of all that fine red wine he drank in the evenings.

Audrey decided she'd better clean the toilets anyway as Aunt Betty didn't miss a drip. Once she finished scrubbing them so clean that she could lick them, she rushed to her bedroom to fetch her toiletry bag which contained the essentials of moisturising cream, hair brush, mascara and small tin of Vaseline for her cracked lips. Beginning to detangle the sea urchin on her head, she shrieked as she spotted the anxiety rash returning on her neck. She quickly reached into her bedside drawer for the bottle of rescue remedy. A few drops of that would help the rash subside for a while at least. She should have only administered a couple of drops to her tongue but on this occasion felt that six drops would hopefully do the trick.

Downstairs in the lounge, Peter sat in his Bart Simpson's beanbag glued to the playstation while Jenny, a bright-eyed, energetic young girl read 'Mr Tickle' from the Mr Men series to her lively younger brother, Paul. She was very efficient at entertaining Paul while her Mam was busy with the household duties; she had the patience of a saint

"Yap, yap" Trixy yapped again but this time she was well within her right this time as Peter could hear the front gate creaking too.

"They're here. I'll get it", shouted Peter, to Audrey's surprise, as he shot up from his beanbag and darted to the front door. Peter wasn't usually so keen to answer the door, especially when he was glued to his playstation. Perhaps there was an ulterior motive. Audrey urgently dipped her finger into the tin of Vaseline and picked a pea-sized blob to apply to her dry, cracked lips, massaging them together to moisten them thoroughly.

"Coming! Jenny, pop the kettle on" she called from the bedroom as she quickly showered vanilla musk, her protective scent bubble, above her head, and sprang chirpily from the bedroom. "Let me take your coats. You're early. I was expecting you far later than this. I've just turned the veg off as I wasn't sure when you'd be arriving and am sure you'd like a cuppa first?"

"Oh yes, one sugar and milk please" answered Uncle Jack, a sprightly, stick thin man, without any hesitation. "Will go nicely with the cream buns we just bought from Tesco in Port Talbot. We stopped on the way just to get a few extra supplies. Should see you right for a while, you know."

"Nothing for me" - just goes straight through me. "I'll have one later" added Aunt Betty, a colourful, curvaceous woman, as she beamed across the living room to embrace the children. "Come here Jenny, come Paul. Come give your Aunt Betty a kiss and a cwtch. Peter and Jenny flung their arms 'round her excitedly, while Peter remained seated. "Peter has no time for cwtching me anymore. Too preoccupied with his playstation, aren't you love?" Peter's eyes remain transfixed on his playstation screen. "Oh gosh you've grown. You'll be needing those cream buns, won't you?" Paul and Jenny's eyes lit up up and Peter sprung from his beanbag too at the

mention of cake. "Yes, you're the best" he squealed merrily as he flung his arms 'round Aunt Betty. "There, there, that's better now isn't it. You're never too old to give you're Aunt Betty a cwtch you know." It had been a while since the children had been given cake as a treat.

"Where's Andrew?" asked Aunt Betty, wearily.

"He'll be home later," replied Audrey. "I'll plate up for him and he can warm it up again in the microwave".

Phase 2

Push and Glide

Audrey pushed and glided her head forwards in prone position as she sprung her feet away from the side of the pool wall for her next set of swim strokes; this time fifty lengths in front crawl. She focused only on her leg and arm co-ordination which was in a beat of six, with each leg executing three downbeats per arm cycle, creating a vast propulsion. She always opted for the Unilateral breathing technique; breathing to one side only. Her in-breath took place as her arm on her breathing side completed an upsweep while her opposite arm was at catch and beginning the downsweep. She did not allow any distractive thoughts of family life to cloud over her, whether it be a vital or a pointless thought. She was determined to remain disciplined for a minimum of forty lengths. She would then allow her mind to wander in the remaining ten lengths of the cool-down phase when she would slow down her

leg and arm co-ordination to a two beat cycle with each leg executing one downbeat per arm cycle, just to keep her balance, without creating much propulsion.

It may be the opinion of many non-swimmers that the exercise of swimming up and down, down and up, repetitively, is excruciatingly monotonous, symptomatically resulting in the mind wandering somewhat, but Audrey thrived on it. It helped her focus and most definitely helped clear her mind once she'd finished. Audrey knew that she wasn't travelling anywhere of interest and that the scenery was pretty dismal but that did not discourage her. On the contrary, it fuelled her to focus. The repetitive sea of bobbing heads passing by and the view of the lifeguard sitting in his high chair looking bored senseless did not discourage her either. She was, however convinced

that the lifeguard was counting her lengths which exacerbated her addiction, resulting in more lengths swum. One thing she was relieved about was that at least with her head and face submerged under water for most of the duration of her workout, she would not be subjected to the idle chit chat of the non-swimming adults stood against the pool walls. This was predominantly the reason why she opted out of sessions at the gym. She had battled religiously with both aerobics and the gym during her teens and twenties but got sick of the sight of her tomato face at the end of each gruelling, sweaty session. Not that she'd escaped that look by opting for swimming, but her fellow exercisers would only catch a very quick glimpse as she exited the pool and as she jogged out of the leisure centre to the car park. She felt little pressure from eyeballing in the changing room after her swim as all the other ladies were too busy drying and dressing themselves to notice.

Audrey had also felt she'd not got enough headspace training as part of a group, especially as the other ladies, all shapes and sizes, would gas and giggle during the warm-ups and cool-downs, or worse still, would groan with each stretch. She'd taken up running for a while as she felt that would give her the headspace she was yearning for, but as her stamina increased, so did the distance and her competitive streak struck her like a disease, urging her to keep going, to keep on training, regardless of aches and pains, pushing her body to the ultimate; but she pushed too far, damaging her lower back, resulting in a degenerative disc. So Audrey had decided in her forties that swimming was definitely a safer choice of workout; far less painful on her joints, a much calmer and quieter sport. Once her head was submerged in the water she was encapsulated by her Aqua bubble, with only the whirring sound of the water bubbling round her and the crashing sound of the water splashing with each arm stroke and leg kick.

Audrey's mind had wandered to many exotic places on her Aqua Encounters, particularly during the breaststroke as this was the swim stroke where she had to concentrate least on technique. She had swum this stroke the most, particularly

whilst pregnant. It was the least stressful stroke to her body and mind. She had imagined living in a grand mansion on a beautiful, tropical island with an outdoor and indoor swimming pool and several acres of equestrian land for her to keep a herd of horses, varying in temperament to suit each one of her children. She dreamt that Dennis enjoyed riding too. In reality, he had very little interest in horses. He enjoyed the odd game of darts at his local and that was eventful enough for him. He didn't like the feeling of being out of control.

Phase 3

Budgeting

Audrey had carefully calculated her monthly household budget after paying all the bills so as to save for a nice gift for herself such as a new bottle of perfume or a new pair of shoes. Although her husband Andrew provided well for the family's necessities, there was very little housekeeping left to spend on luxuries, so she had to be quite frugal. She concocted many ways to save a penny here, a penny there; on the phone bill, chatting a little less to her sister Betty. She also had a good eye for a bargain, opting quite often to have a good rummage in the charity shops, instead of the High Street stores. She would try to shop in the supermarket during off-peak times to save on the food budget too so that she could slowly, but very surely save enough money to treat herself to a little something. She didn't dare ask Andrew for more money as she didn't feel it was her place to. He was the breadwinner in the family; therefore he was in charge. However, saving a little here and there gave Audrey a feeling of financial independence, and when Andrew had asked her to work out the household budget she felt empowered. She had some control in the decision making which was a pleasant feeling; after all she wasn't twp. She had to keep reminding herself that. Audrey was an educated woman. Prior to having children she had graduated with a first class honours degree in Psychology.

Audrey took to the accounting like a duck to water. She carefully calculated, making sure that she based the budget on a worst case scenario so that there would be a little left over for extras. She was determined to stay within the lines of a best case scenario. She quickly became a mistress of bargain shopping and penny saving in all areas, utility, clothes, food and toileteries.

Phase 4

Awakening

The doorbell chimed again. This time, no dog yapped. Audrey shot up out of her armchair and shuffled across the brown-flecked carpet to the large bay window in her living room. She reached out her quivering left hand to hold on to the window sill and drew back the mauve curtains desperately trying to catch a glimpse of who had come to visit this time. She had just missed them. She couldn't get to the window quick enough. The front door banged shut with a great thud. It rang deafeningly into her ear drums.

Audrey shuffled glumly back to her armchair. Once her eardrums had balanced out she could hear voices surrounding her. There was so much chatter. She lifted her head slowly as she could feel the presence of people approaching her.

"Up you get now Mrs Davies, you have visitors. Look who's come to see you," squeaked Lucy, one of the chirpy carers at the Blue Lagoon Care Home for Dementia Sufferers.

Audrey stood upright as she regained consciousness for the first time in a long time. In front of her stood her beautiful three children, all grown up and sophisticated and Andrew too; much slimmer than she remembered.

"Hello there my darling." Andrew reached out his arms to embrace her.

"We've missed you Mam". Jenny, Paul and Peter flung their arms in unison round her.

"Never mind, never mind," Audrey whispered softly. "We're all here now and that's all that matters".