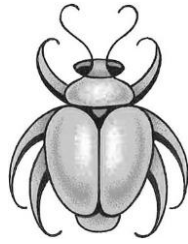


**RACHEL
JOYCE**



**Miss Benson's
Beetle**



doubleday

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England, Early September 1950

ADVENTURE!

What Are You Doing with My New Boots?

MISS Benson had begun to notice that a funny note was going around her classroom. It had started at the back and was now heading towards the middle.

The laughter had been quiet at first, but now it was all the more obvious for being stifled: one girl had hiccups and another was practically purple. But she didn't stop her lesson. She dealt with the note the way she always dealt with them, and that was by pretending it wasn't there. If anything, she spoke louder. The girls carried on passing the note from one to the next, and she carried on telling them how to make a cake in wartime.

In fact, the Second World War was over – it had been over for five years – but rationing wasn't. Meat was rationed, butter was rationed; so were lard and margarine. Sugar was rationed. Tea was rationed. Cheese, coal, soap, sweets. All still rationed. The cuffs of her jacket were worn to thread and her only pair of shoes was so old they squelched in rain. If she took them to be mended, she'd have no choice but to sit there in her stockings, waiting for them to be ready, so she just kept wearing them and they kept falling apart. Streets were lined

with broken buildings – rooms with whole walls gone, sometimes a light bulb left hanging or even a lavatory chain – and gardens were still turned over to useful British vegetables. Old newspapers were piled in bombsites. Men hung around on street corners in demob suits that had once belonged to someone else, while women queued for hours to get a fatty bit of bacon. You could go miles on the bus and not see a flower. Or blue sky. What she wouldn't give for blue sky – even that seemed rationed. People kept saying this was a new beginning but every day was more of the same. Queues. Cold. Smog. Sometimes she felt she'd lived her entire life on scraps.

By now the note had reached the second row. Splutters. Titters. Much shaking of shoulders. She was explaining how to line a cake tin, when someone nudged a girl in the front row and the note was pushed into the hands of Wendy Thompson. Wendy was a sickly girl, who had the constant look of someone expecting the worst – even if you were nice to her, she still looked terrified – so it came as a shock when she opened the note and honked. That was it. The girls were off, and this time they weren't even trying not to. If they carried on, the whole school would hear.

Margery put down her chalk. The laughter fell away, bit by bit, as they realized she was watching. It was sink or swim, she'd been told once. Don't try to be their friend. These girls are not your friends. There was an art teacher who'd given up after a week. 'They hum,' she'd wept in the staff room, 'and when I ask who is humming, they look straight at me and say, "No one is humming, Miss." You have to be half dead to work here.'

Margery stepped down from the wooden platform. She held out her hand. 'Give me the note, please, Wendy.'

Wendy sat with her head bowed, like a frightened rabbit. Girls on the back row exchanged a glance. Other than that, no one moved.

‘I just want to know what is so funny, Wendy. Maybe we can all enjoy the joke.’

At this point Margery had no intention of reading the note. She certainly had no intention of enjoying the joke. She was just going to open it, drop it into the bin, and after that she was going to clamber back on to the platform and finish her lesson. It was almost break time. There would be hot tea in the staff room, and a selection of biscuits.

‘The note?’ she said.

Wendy handed it over so slowly it would have been quicker to send it by post. ‘Oh, I wouldn’t, Miss,’ she said quietly.

Margery took the paper. She opened it. Silence unspooled itself like ribbon.

What she had in her hand was not the usual. It wasn’t a joke. It wasn’t even a few words about how dull the lesson was. It was a sketch. It was a carefully executed cartoon sketch of a lumpy old woman, and this lumpy old woman was clearly Margery. The baggy suit was hers, and there was no mistaking the shoes. They were planks on the ends of two large legs – you could even see a toe poking out. Her nose the girls had done as a potato, while her hair was a mad bird’s nest. The girls had also given her a moustache – and not a stylish moustache but a short, stubby one like Hitler’s. At the top, someone had written, *The Virgin Margery!*

Margery’s breathing reversed itself. There seemed not to be enough room for the mix of hurt and anger swelling inside her. She wanted to say, she actually wanted to shout, ‘How dare you? I am not this woman.’

I am not.’ But she couldn’t. Instead she kept very still, hoping for one irrational moment that the whole business would go away and never come back, if she just stayed where she was, doing absolutely nothing. Then someone giggled. Another coughed.

‘Who did this?’ she said. In her distress, her voice came out oddly thin. It was difficult to shape air into those exact sounds.

No reply.

But she was in this now. She threatened the class with extra homework. She said they’d miss afternoon break. She even warned she’d fetch the deputy, and everyone was terrified of the woman. One of the few times she’d been seen to laugh was when Margery once shut her own skirt in the door, and got stuck. (‘I’ve never seen anything so hilarious,’ the deputy said afterwards. ‘You looked like a bear in a trap.’) None of it worked. The girls sat there, resolutely silent, eyes lowered, a bit pink in the face, as the bell went for afternoon break and outside the corridors began to swell, like a river, with feet and noise. And the fact they refused to apologize or name who was responsible – not even Wendy Thompson buckled – left Margery feeling even more alone, and even more absurd. She dropped the note into the bin but it was still there. It seemed to be part of the air itself.

‘This lesson is over,’ she said, in what she hoped was a dignified tone. Then she picked up her handbag and left.

She was barely the other side of the door when the laughter came. ‘Wendy, you champion!’ the girls roared. She made her way past the physics lab and the history department and she didn’t even know where she was going any more. She just had to breathe. Girls crowded her path, barking like gulls. All she could hear was laughter. She tried the exit to the playing field but it was locked, and she couldn’t use the

main door because that was for visitors only, strictly not to be used by staff. The assembly hall? No. It was filled with girls in vests and knickers, doing a wafy sort of dance with flags. She was beginning to fear she'd be stuck there for ever. She passed the display of school trophies, bumped into a box of sports bibs, and almost went flying over a fire extinguisher. The staff room, she said to herself. I will be safe in the staff room.

Margery was a big woman. She knew that. And she'd let herself go over the years. She knew that, too. She'd been tall and thin when she was a girl, just like her brothers, and she also had their bright blue eyes. She'd even worn their hand-me-downs. It had been a source of pain – not so much the hand-me-downs, but definitely the height – and she'd learnt to stoop at an early age. But being *big*, actually *A Big Person*, had only happened when her monthlies stopped. The weight piled on, the same as her mother, causing a pain in her hip that took her by surprise sometimes and made her limp. What she hadn't realized was that she'd become the school joke.

The staff room was too hot and smelt of gravy and old cardigans. No one said hello or smiled as she entered; they were mostly snoring. The deputy stood in the corner, a wry, spry woman in a pleated skirt, with a box of drawing pins in her hand as she checked the staff notice board. Margery couldn't get round the feeling that everyone knew about the sketch and that they, too, were laughing – even in their sleep. She poured a cup of not quite warm tea from the urn, took what was left of the biscuits and made her way to a chair. Someone had left a pair of new lacrosse boots on the seat so she put them on the floor, and flumped down.

'Those boots are mine,' called the deputy, not looking over.

Outside, the fog made smudges of the trees, sucking them to nothing; the grass was more brown than green. Twenty years she'd lost, doing this job, and she didn't even like cookery. She'd only applied as a last resort. 'Single women only,' the advertisement had said. She thought again of the cartoon sketch. The care the girls had taken to poke fun at her terrible hair, broken shoes, her threadbare old suit. It hurt. And the reason it hurt so much was that they were right. The girls were right. Even to herself, most of all to herself, Margery was a joke.

After school she would go home to her flat, which – despite her aunts' heavy furniture – was empty and cold. She would wait for the cage-lift that never came because people were always forgetting to close the door properly and, in the end, she would plod up the stairs to the fourth floor. She would make a meal with whatever she could find, she would wash up and put things away, then later take an aspirin and read herself to sleep, and no one would know, that was the truth – she could skip a few chapters, or eat everything in her flat in one sitting – and not only would no one notice, but it would make no difference to the world if they did. Weekends and school holidays were even worse. Whole days could pass with barely a word spoken to another human being. She spread out her chores but there was a limit to how many times you could change a library book, without beginning to look homeless. A picture came to her of a beetle in a killing jar, dying slowly.

Margery's hand reached to the floor. It put down the teacup and was round the deputy's lacrosse boots before her head knew anything about it. They were large and black. Solid too. With thick ridges on the sole for extra grip. She got up.

'Miss Benson,' called the deputy. 'Excuse me? What are you doing with my new boots?'

It was a fair question and Margery had no idea of the answer. Her body seemed to have taken charge. She walked past the deputy and the tea urn and the other members of staff – who, she knew even without turning round, had all stirred from sleep and were watching, bewildered, open-mouthed – and she left the staff room with the boots under one arm and her handbag under the other. She pushed her way through a crowd of girls, and found herself hurrying towards the main vestibule.

‘Miss Benson?’ she heard. ‘Miss Benson?’

But what was she doing now? It was bad enough to pick up someone else’s boots and walk off, but her hands had decided to take things a whole stage further. As if to compensate for the deadliness she felt inside, they were grabbing items indiscriminately. A silver trophy, the bundle of sports bibs, even the fire extinguisher. She was in something terrible and instead of saying sorry and putting it all back, she was making the whole business a thousand times worse. She passed the headmistress’s study. The locked door to the playing field. She marched right into the main vestibule – which she knew, *everybody* knew, was strictly not to be used by staff and was hung with portraits of old headmistresses, all of whom were definitely virgins.

The deputy was on her trail and getting closer by the second. ‘Miss Benson? Miss Benson!’

It took three goes to open the main door, and she could barely keep hold of everything. The fire extinguisher, for instance, was far heavier than she’d expected. Like carting off a small child.

‘Miss Benson. How dare you?’

Swinging back the door, she lumbered through in time to turn and glimpse the deputy’s face, white and rigid, so close the woman could

have grabbed Margery by the hair. She slammed the door. The deputy screamed. She had a terrible feeling she'd hurt the deputy's hand. She also had a feeling it would be good to accelerate, but her body had done enough already and wanted to lie down. Worse, there were more people on her heels. A few teachers, even a cluster of excited girls. She had no choice but to keep running. Her lungs were burning, her legs felt wonky, her hip was beginning to throb. As she staggered past the tennis courts, she found the world had begun to revolve. She ditched the fire extinguisher, netball trophy and sports bibs, and got to the main gate. As the number seven rose smoothly over the brow of the hill, she hobbled towards the bus stop as fast as her great big legs would carry her, the boots clamped beneath her arm like an unwilling pet.

'Don't think you'll get away with this!' she heard. The bus stopped ahead of Margery. Freedom was in sight.

But just at the moment she should have launched herself to safety, shock set in and her body froze. Nothing would work. The conductor rang the bell; the bus began to roll away and would have left her behind, were it not for the quick thinking of two passengers who grabbed her by the lapels and yanked upwards. Margery clung to the pole, unable to speak, barely able to see, as the bus carried her away from the school. She had never done a wrong thing in her life. She'd never stolen anything, apart from – once – a man's handkerchief. And yet her head was buzzing, her heart was kicking, and the hairs were standing up on the back of her neck. All she could think of was a place called New Caledonia.

Next morning, she placed an advert in *The Times: Wanted. French-speaking assistant for expedition to other side of the world. All expenses paid.*

