

**Liver and Onions (Winner, Best Prose Fiction in Graham Green Birthplace Trusts  
Creative Writing Awards, 2014)**

Three doors opened off a dark passage. From behind one of them there seeped the smell of fried onions. The other two doors bore numbers: 1A and 1B; bedsits occupied by student nurses who chatted with Maisie when they passed her in the hallway or saw her at work in the hospital shop. But the third door, the one tucked under the stairs, had no number on it. She guessed it was a storeroom. Now she stared at it, breathing in the aroma, before starting to climb. By the time she reached her room on the third floor, the smell had faded, but the emptiness inside her was still there.

She'd cooked onions for Fred every Thursday of their married life. Fried onions, caramelised in the savoury butter left in the pan after she'd cooked the liver. Every week they went through the same performance when the door slammed at seven minutes past six.

"I'm home, lass, and I'm starving — what's for tea?"

He always pretended to be surprised, even though the cooking smells must have hit him as he walked through the door. He would eat rapidly, cleaning the remaining gravy off the plate with bread, wipe his mouth with his hankie, lean back in his chair and rub his belly contentedly.

"That was champion, lass. Can't beat a bit of liver and onions for tea!"

Fred loved everything she cooked, but Thursdays were his favourite. She really missed Thursday evenings.

That night, for the first time since she lost him, she dreamed of Fred. They were sitting across the table from each other, empty plates in front of them. He leaned across and took her hand.

"You know you've got to let me go, don't you?" he said.

"But I don't want to."

"I know, lass, but if you don't, I can't finish the journey."

"And that's what you want, isn't it Fred?"

He just smiled at her and pulling his hand away, slowly faded until she was quite alone. She woke with tears on her cheeks but feeling that the dull ache within her was a fraction lighter than the day before.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs on her way to work, she stopped, as the smell of fried onions hit her once more. Tiptoeing to the door, she put her ear against it. There was no sound and though she tapped gently, no-one answered.

*And why would they, you silly woman,* she thought, *this is only a storeroom.* So why the strong smell?

She reached for the door handle. Half-expecting it to be locked, she was surprised when it turned easily in her hand. As she pushed gently, the door opened. Light spilled in from a large picture window, illuminating an empty room. She took a step inside and heard a slight rustle below her feet as she stepped on a dried leaf. Bending, she picked it up.

“Maisie, what on earth are you doing in there?” The voice made her jump. It was Cary, who rented room 1A. Luckily, Maisie didn’t have to come up with an explanation, as the girl carried on speaking. “I’m so glad I saw you. I want you to come and join the Thursday crowd next week. It’s my birthday so we’re all meeting up in The King’s Head as usual, but then we’re coming back here for a bite to eat.”

“Oh, I don’t think...”

“Now, you always say you’re too busy to join our little get-togethers, but I know Thursday’s your day off. Do say yes. It’s about time you got to know some of the others.”

“Well...”

“And they’re not all youngsters, you know. There’s a couple around your age — not that I’m saying you’re old, just a bit more mature...”

Maisie burst out laughing at the look of confusion and embarrassment on the girl’s face.

“It’s alright, Cary, I know what you mean,” she said. “Can I think about it and let you know?”

“Sure, no problem; must dash. See you later at work.”

Maisie opened her palm to look at the dried leaf. But it wasn’t a leaf after all. It was a sliver of onion skin that curled gently in her palm before a draught from the slammed front door wafted it away from her. She thought of chasing after it, but changed her mind.

Closing the door on the empty room, she sniffed the air, but all she could smell was the hint of perfume Cary had left behind.

As she headed for the bus-stop, Maisie decided she would go to Cary’s birthday do and maybe some of the other get-togethers as well. It would be good to have something to look forward to on Thursdays again.