

Wild Flower by John Wyndham

Not Miss Fray. Not Felicity Fray.

Let others jerk awake to an alarm, scramble from bed, scrub away the clinging patina of sleep with a face-flannel. Hunt out the day's clothes, watch the percolator impatiently, urge the toast to pop up more quickly. Let them chew briskly, swallow gulpily, and hurry, arms and legs reciprocating briskly, on their ways. Let these automata, with batteries regenerated, respond with spry efficiency to the insistent eye of the new day's sun, and let them greet the morning with resolution in heel and toe, a high-tensile gleam in the eye, and set off to make their new deals, new conquests...

But not Felicity Fray.

For today is part of yesterday. And yesterday and today are parts of being alive. And being alive is not just an affair of the days going clonk-clonk-clonk like the pendulum of a grandfather clock: being alive is something continuous, that does not repeat; something that one should be aware of all the time, sleeping and waking...

It may not last much longer.

There is no savour in hurry; so Miss Fray did not hurry; she did not jerk or bounce into the beginning of her day. About dawn she started to drift from dream through half-dream to day-dream, and lay unmoving, listening to the birds, watching the sky lighten, becoming aware of the day as it became aware of itself.

For more than an hour she lay hovering this and that side of the misty edge of sleep. Sometimes the sounds in her ears were real birds singing, sometimes they were remembered voices speaking. She enjoyed them both, smiling in her half-sleep.

By the time the day began to win her certainly from the night the birds were almost silent. They had done with the greeting, and started on the business of looking for food.

She was quite abruptly aware that the world was almost noiseless. There was an alarming feeling of unreality. She held her breath to listen for some reassuring sound. Supposing it had all stopped, now? - As it might do one day.

Perhaps, even at this moment, there were in some parts of the world great columns of smoke writhing upwards in Medusan coils, swelling out at the top into cerebral convolutions that pulsed with a kind of sub-life, marking the beginning of

the silence that meant the end of everything.

For years now, when she was off her guard, those pillars of smoke had been likely to start up in her mind. She hated and feared them. They were the triumphant symbol of Science.

Science was, perhaps, wonderful, but, for Miss Fray, it was a wonder of the left hand. Science was the enemy of the world that lived and breathed; it was a crystalline formation on the harsh naked rock of brain, mindless, insensitive, barren, yet actively a threat, an alien threat that she feared as un-understandingly as an animal fears fire.

Science, the great antibiotic.

So Felicity listened unhappily.

A bird called and was answered.

That was not enough.

She went on listening for more reassurance.

In the farmyard several fields away, a tractor coughed, stuttered, and then ran more steadily, warming up.

She relaxed, relieved to be sure that the world was still alive. Then she faintly frowned her ungrateful contempt for the tractor, and pushed it out of her consciousness.

It, too, was a manifestation of science, and unwelcome. She withdrew among her thoughts. She resurrected stored moments and magical glimpses, and remembered golden words. She landscaped her own Arcady which knew no Science.

The tractor throbbed more briskly as it trundled out of the yard, the sound of it diminished to a purr as it crossed the fields, unheard by Felicity.

There was plenty of time. Enough to take the field-path way to school, and not to hurry over it. The sun was climbing, a medallion pinned on a deepening blue cloak. Later on, the day would be hot, but now it was fresh, with a touch like a cool, white-fingered hand. Refractile gems still trembled on the leaves and stalks. Beads from the shaken grass ran down her legs, showered on the white canvas shoes, fell like kisses on her feet. Cows, coming out from the sheds with their udders relieved, but still slow and patient, stared at her with incurious curiosity, and then turned away to tear the grass and munch in thoughtless rumination.

A lark, high up, trilled to mislead her from its nest. A young blackbird, looking puffy and overfed, eyed her cautiously from the hedge.

A light draught of summer wind blew through her cotton frock, caressing her with cobweb fingers.

Then there was a muttering in the sky; then a roaring that rumbled back and forth in the vault; then a shrieking over her head, a battering at the ears and the senses, not to be shut out. The present assaulting her, bawling unignobly, frighteningly through its jet-mouths; Science on the wing.

Felicity put her hands to her ears and rocked her head.

The outrage hurtled close above, sound-waves clashing together, buffeting, and reeling back.

It passed, and she uncovered her ears again. With tears in her eyes she shook her fist at the feeing shriek of the jets and all they represented, while the air still shuddered about her.

The cows continued to graze.

How comfortable to be a cow. Neither expecting nor regretting; having no sense of guilt, nor need for it. Making no distinctions between the desirable and undesirable works of men; able to flick them, like the flies, aside with the swish of a tow-ended tail.

The shriek and the rumble died in the distance. The shattered scene began to re-integrate behind it, still for a while bloom-brushed and bruised, but slowly healing.

One day there would be too much bruising; too much to recover from.

'Imitations of mortality', said Miss Fray, to herself. 'So many little deaths before the big one. How silly I am to suffer. Why should I feel all these pangs of guilt for other people? I am not responsible for this - I am not even much afraid for myself. Why do I have to be so hurt by fear for all and everything?'

A thrush sang in the spinney beyond the hedge.

She paused to listen.

Unguent, sweet notes.

She walked on, becoming aware again of the silk-fringed zephyrs on her cheeks, the sun on her arms, the dew on her feet.

As Felicity opened the door the hive-murmur beyond sank into silence. The rows

of pink-cheeked faces framed in long hair, short hair, plaits, some of it morning-tidy, some of it already waywardly awry, were all turned towards her. The bright eyes were all fixed on her face.

'Good morning, Miss Fray', they all said, in unison, and silence fell as completely as before.

She could feel the suppressed expectation in the air as they watched her. There was something she must respond to. She looked for it. Her glance went round the familiar room until it reached her desk. There it stopped, where a small glass vase held a single flower.

The rows of eyes switched from her to the desk, and then back again.

She walked slowly across and sat down in her chair, her gaze never leaving the flower.

It was something she had never seen before; she was quite unable to classify it, and she looked at it for a long time.

It was more complex than the simpler field flowers, yet not sophisticated. The colours were clear, but not primaries. The shape was comely, but without garden-bred formality. The ground-colour of the petals was a pale pink, flushing a little at the over-rolled edges, paling to cream further back. Then there was the flush-colour again, powder-stippled at first, then reticulated, then solid as it narrowed like a trumpet but split by white spurs of the centre veins. There was just a suggestion of orchis about it, perhaps, but it was no kind of orchis she had ever seen, alive or pictured, The petal curves were sweet natural roundings, like limbs, or water cascading, or saplings bent in the wind. The texture was depthlessly soft.

Felicity leaned closer, gazing into the velvet throat.

Little crescent-shaped stamens faintly dusted with pollen trembled on green, hair-like stalks. She caught the scent of it. A little sweetness, a little sharpness, a little earthiness, blended with a subtlety to make a perfumer's art vulgar and banal.

She breathed in the scent again, and looked into the flower hypnotized, unable to take her eyes from it, loving it in its brave delicacy with a sweet, longing compassion.

She had forgotten the room, the eyes that watched her, everything but the flower itself.

A fidgeting somewhere brought her back. She lifted her head, and looked unhurriedly along the rows of faces.

'Thank you,' she said. 'It's a beautiful flower. What is it?'

Seemingly, no one knew.

'Who brought it?' Felicity asked them.

A small, golden-headed child in the middle of the second row pinked a little.

"I did' Miss Fray.

'And you don't know what it is, Marielle?'

'No, Miss Fray, I just found it, and I thought it was pretty, and I thought you'd like it,' she explained, a trifle anxiously.

Felicity looked back to the flower again.

'I do like it, Marielle. It's lovely. It was very kind of you to think of bringing it for me.'

She loitered over the flower a few seconds more, and then moved the vase decisively to the left of the desk. With an effort she turned her eyes away from it, back to the rows of faces.

'One day' she said, 'I'll read you some William Blake -"To see a World in a Grain of Sand, And a Heaven in a Wild Flower..." But now we must get on, we've wasted too much time already. I want you to copy out what I write on the board, in your best handwriting'.

She picked up the chalk and thought for a moment, looking at the flower. Then she went over to the board, and wrote: 'Their colours and their forms were then to me an appetite; a feeling and a love...'

'Marielle. Just a moment,' Felicity said.

The child paused and turned back as the others streamed out of the room.

'Thank you very much for bringing it. Was it the only one?' Felicity asked her.

'Oh, no, Miss Fray. There were three or four clumps of them'.

'Where, Marielle? I'd like to get a root of it, if I can'.

'On Mr Hawkes's farm. In the top corner of the big field, where the aeroplane crashed,' the child told her.

'Where the aeroplane crashed,' Felicity repeated.

'Yes, Miss Fray.'

Felicity sat down slowly, staring at the flower. The child waited, and shifted from

one foot to the other.

'Please, may I go now, Miss Fray?'

'Yes', said Felicity, without looking up. 'Yes, of course'.

Feet scuttered out of the room.

Felicity went on looking at the flower.

'Where the aeroplane crashed.' That had been almost a year ago - on a summer's evening when all the world was quietening and settling down for the night. 'Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight, and all the air a solemn stillness holds.' Then the aeroplane, wheeling its droning flight, destroying the peace. It was a silver-paper cross up in the sky where the sunlight was still bright.

Unusually, Felicity looked up. She tried to ignore the noise and her prejudices, for the craft had, undeniably, a silver-moth beauty of its own. She watched it turn, the sunset glistening the undersides of the wings as it tilted. Then, suddenly, amid the silver there had been a flash of rose-red fire, and the silver moth ceased to exist.

Pieces of glittering foil were

spreading apart and falling. The largest piece trailed smoke above it, like a black funeral plume.

A great crack slapped at her ears.

The pieces twisted and flashed in the sky as they came, some fast, some slower.

The biggest of all seemed to be falling straight towards her. Perhaps she screamed.

She threw herself on the ground, arms clutched over her head and ears, willing to sink herself into the earth itself.

There were interminable second-fractions of waiting while the silver wreckage came hurtling down the sky, and Felicity and all the world about her held their breath.

The solid ground bounced under her; then came the crash, and the shrieking of metal.

Felicity looked up, biting fearfully on her hand.

She saw the silver body, a crumpled fish-shape, less than a hundred yards away, and in that moment petals of flame blossomed round it.

Something else fell close by.

She cringed close to the earth again.

Something in the main body blew up. Bits of metal whirred like pheasants over her, and plopped around.

Presently she risked raising her head again. The wreck was a cone of flame with black smoke above. She could feel the warmth on her face. She did not dare to stand up lest something else should explode and send jagged metal fragments slicing into her.

She had been still there, clinging to the earth and crying, when the crash-parties arrived and found her.

Shock, they had said, shock and fright. They had treated her for that, and then sent her home.

She had cried for the destruction, for the fire and smoke, the noise and confusion of it; and, too, for the people who had died in it, for the wanton futility of it, for the harsh, mindless, silliness of a world that did these things and kept on doing them and would keep on doing them until the

last two sub-critical masses were brought together for the last time.

They kept her in bed a few days, with instructions to rest and relax; but in was difficult to relax when things kept goin round and round in one's head.

'Oh God', she prayed, 'won't You stop them? It isn't their world to do as they like with. It's Your world, and mine - the heart's world that they are destroying with their brain's world. Please, God, while there is still time -You destroyed their presumption at Babel, won't You do it again, before it's too late?'

Felicity remembered the prayer as she sat at her desk, looking at the beautiful flower.

They had put a fence round the place where the aeroplane had crashed, and set guards, too, to keep people away. Inside it, men in overall suits prowled and prowled, searching, listening, watching counters.

Cobalt was the trouble, they said. She had wondered how that could be. But it was not the artist's cobalt they wanted: the scientists had taken even the deep blue colour of the sea, and had done something deadly to that, too, it appeared.

Though not altogether, not necessarily deadly, Miss Simpson who taught science at the High School had explained to her. The aeroplane had been carrying some radio-active cobalt intended for a hospital somewhere in the Middle East. In the crash, or perhaps in the first explosion, the lead box that kept it safe had been broken open.

It was extremely dangerous, and had to be recovered.

'How? Dangerous?' Felicity had wanted to know.

And Miss Simpson had told her something of the effects of gamma rays on living matter.

Several weeks had passed before the searching men were completely satisfied, and went away. They had left the fence, no longer guarded, simply as a mark to indicate the piece of ground that was not to be ploughed this season.

The ground had been left free to grow what it would.

And out of the noise, the destruction, the fire, the deadly radiations had sprung the lovely flower.

Felicity went on looking at it for a long time in the silent room. Then she raised her eyes, and glanced along the rows of desks where the bright faces had been.

'I see,' she said, to the emptiness and the unseen. 'I'm weak. I have had too little faith.'

She had a disinclination to revisit the site of the crash alone. She asked Marielle to come with her on Saturday and show her where the flowers grew. They climbed by a cool path through the woods, crossed a stile and the pasture beyond it. When they came to the enclosure, its fence already pushed flat in several places, they found a man already within it. He wore a shirt and blue jeans, and was engaged in unslinging a heavy cylinder from his back. He laid the thing carefully on the ground and pulled out a large spotted handkerchief to wipe his face and neck. He turned as they approached, and grinned amiably. Felicity recognized him as the farmer's second son.

'Hot work carrying three or four gallons on your back this weather,' he explained apologetically, wiping the handkerchief down his arms so that the golden hairs stood up and glinted in the sunlight.

Felicity looked at the ground. There were five or six small clumps of the flowers growing in the weeds and grass, one of them half crushed under the cylinder.

'Oh,' said Marielle, in distress. 'You've been killing them- killing the flowers.'

They're what we came for'.

'You can pick 'em, and welcome,' he told her.

'But we wanted some roots, to grow them,' Marielle told him woefully. She turned to Felicity unhappily. 'They're such pretty flowers, too'.

'Pretty enough', agreed the man, looking down at them. 'But there it is. Can't have



this lot seeding all over the rest, you see.'

'You've poisoned them all- every one?' Marielle asked miserably.

The man nodded.

'Fraid they're done for now, for all they still look all right. 'F you'd've let me know ... but it's too late now. But they'll do you no harm to pick,' he explained. 'Tisn't poison in the old way, you see. Something to do with hormones, whatever they are. Doesn't knock 'em out, as you might say, just sends em all wrong in the growing so they give up. Wonderful what the scientific chaps get hold of these days. Never know what they'll bring out next, do you?'

Felicity and Marielle gathered little bunches of the doomed flowers. They still looked as delicately beautiful and still had their poignant scent. At the stile Marielle stopped and stood looking sadly at her little bunch. 'They're so lovely, she said mournfully, with tears in her eyes.

Felicity put an arm round her.

'They are lovely', she agreed. 'They're very lovely – and they've gone. But the important thing is that they came. That's the wonderful thing. There'll be some more - some-day –somewhere'.

A jet came shrieking suddenly, close over the hill-top. Marielle put her hands over her ears. Felicity stood watching the machine shrink among the scream and rumble of protesting air. She held up her little posy of flowers to the blast.

'This is your answer,' she said. 'This. You bullies, with your vast clubs of smoke - this is greater than all of you'.

Marielle took down her hands.

'I hate them- I hate them', she said, her eyes on the vanishing speck.

'I hate them too', agreed Felicity. 'But now I'm not afraid of them any more. I have found a remedy, an elixir:

*'It is a wine of virtuous powers;*

*My mother made it of wild flowers'.*