Bed of Roses

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So. That's where the story begins. With Fanny Flynn and her ghosts, and Brute the dog, and an ancient Morris Minor half-filled with all their belongings, pulling up outside number 2 Old Alms Cottages, in the village of Fiddleford, near the market town of Lamsbury, deep in the heart of England's south-west.

Fanny's new home is in the centre of the village, beside the post office/shop and opposite Fiddleford's fourteenth-century church. It is a few minutes' walk from the pub and the primary school where she will be teaching, and within shouting distance of the excellent Gatehouse Restaurant. From the Alms Cottage front door, if she cranes her neck, Fanny can see not only the restaurant but, right beside it, the notorious, grand old iron gates of the Fiddleford Manor Retreat, behind which so many disgraced public figures have withdrawn to lick wounds and rebuild images.

It is April, bright and warm; the first morning in many for the sun to shine and the year's first believable indication that winter is moving on. Fanny and Brute scramble down from the van. They stretch, dog and mistress, as engagingly compact, vital and untidy as each other. Fanny breathes in

the spring-like air, glances across at the press people lolling beneath the famous gates, and waves. They gaze morosely back, having long ago made it a sort of Cool Club rule to be disdainful with the villagers.

'Bit rude, eh Brute?' she says vaguely. 'Go and bite.'

Brute, moronic but good-natured, sits on Fanny's feet in gay confusion, and dribbles.

Number 2 Old Alms Cottages is a minuscule affair. It's in the middle of a row of three two-hundred-year-old red stone terraced cottages, all of them empty. It has a single room and a bathroom upstairs, a single room with a kitchen downstairs and ceilings so low that the landlord has waited two years to find a tenant small enough to fit in. Fanny, at five foot three inches, fits the house as well as any modern human could hope to.

She stands in front of it now, jingling her new keys, pausing for a brief, thoughtful moment before launching on to this next new chapter of her many-chaptered life. She notices the faint, sour smell of old urine (old paparazzi hacks' urine, as it happens; with the pub being a few minutes' walk away, and the cottages empty, they often pee against her garden fence). She notices the paint-chipped, dirty-brown front door; the missing roof tiles; the sprawling ivy all but obscuring the single window upstairs – and feels a familiar rush of excitement.

New house. New job. New challenges. Another beginning. There is nothing quite like a new beginning, Fanny thinks – and she should know. This time, she tells herself (she mutters to Brute, still sitting on her feet), this time she is going to stick around to make it work. She is going to make roots. This small house and this fine spring day are to mark the beginning of Fanny Flynn's new life. Her real life.

She laughs out loud. *As if*. And immediately resents herself

for it. 'Not bloody funny,' she says aloud, shunting Brute off her feet as if it were all his fault. 'Thirty-four years old next month. Thirty-four. Thirty-bloody-*four*. At this rate I'm going to wind up old and alone, and I'll be dead and rotting for a fortnight before anyone even notices the stink. Got to stop farting around.'

Truth is, Fanny is growing jaded. After eleven years of wandering from place to place, picking up jobs and boyfriends on passionate whims and then passionately dropping them again, she is in danger of running out of mojo, or worse still, of becoming a caricature of her ebullient, spontaneous younger self. She longs to find a job or a man – or an unquenchable passion for woodcarving (but preferably a man). She longs to find something which might give her a little meaning, or at the very least might persuade her to stay still.

Last November she was once again focusing her search for meaning on the very large Jobs section of the *Times Educational Supplement*, when her eye fell upon the advertisement for Fiddleford Church of England Primary School. It had, she thought, an engagingly desperate ring to it:

TO START AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

Successful applicants should ideally have some previous experience as a Head or Deputy (although this is not essential) . . .

Perfect, she thought. Why not? A tiny village school, a challenge, a small and friendly community, a place where old-fashioned rural values might mean something, to someone – or something. Anything. Besides which Fanny had lived in many places before, but she had never lived in a village. And she had never been a head teacher. Perhaps,

she explained to herself last November, perhaps those are the anchors which have been missing from my life . . .

Fiddleford Church of England Primary School opened its gates in 1854 with over a hundred pupils and has been shrinking steadily ever since. Now it has only thirty-eight pupils, and thanks to a damning report from OFSTED has been put into 'Special Measures'; promised a dollop of extra money by the LEA (Local Education Authority) and been given two years in which to improve itself, or else.

Mrs Thomas, the outgoing head, never had any intention of rising to such a challenge. Having called in sick with sneezes almost every day for the best part of three years, she immediately applied for early retirement on the grounds of stress-related ill health. By the time Fanny's application arrived she was killing time, waiting for a replacement so she could sidle away from the problem for ever.

But running a Special Measures school, in a small village deep in the middle of nowhere, is not an occupation very high on many people's Must-Do lists. By the time Fanny's application arrived, Mrs Thomas was growing impatient; there had only been one other applicant for the job. And that was the school's deputy head, the pathologically idle Robert White.

When Robert threw his hat into the ring, the remaining six governors called an urgent, secret meeting, during which they unanimously agreed to pretend the application had never been received, which was clearly impossible, since he had hand delivered it to them himself. They had hoped he might take enough umbrage to resign. He did not. Not quite. Lazy sod. He knew which side his bread was buttered, how hard it would be for them to get rid of him, and how hard it would be, as the long-standing deputy head of a newly 'failing' school, for him to get a job in the same salary band elsewhere.

Besides which, he'd taken a great shine to the school's very young new dinner lady/caretaker, Tracey Guppy, the thought of whose white-fleshed, wide-eyed innocence kept him awake for at least three delirious minutes every night.

The situation of head had remained vacant for yet another month. The school had staggered along. Governors began to wonder whether Robert White might have to be appointed after all. And then along came the letter from Fanny.

Fanny is, in fact, a very good teacher; intelligent and kind and instinctive – and reasonably industrious, if never yet quite truly dedicated. Children love her. And so do her numerous referees. She got the job.

When the summer term starts tomorrow morning, thirty-three-year-old Fanny Flynn will be the youngest and possibly the least experienced headmistress in the history of the south-west. There are plenty at the Lamsford Education Authority who sincerely hope she may also be its least successful. At which point, of course, and with minimum loss of face, they could save a lot of money and close the wretched school down for good.