

## A Champagne Celebration

*Veronica Swinburne*

It was less than £12 for real champagne! So I put a bottle in my shopping basket along with the usual eggs and baked beans and bananas and sliced loaf. But then I felt self-conscious. It must have been decades since I bought anything alcoholic. And it was heavy, pulling on my arm so that my shoulder and wrist started to ache before I reached the tills and I needed both hands to lift the basket up to unload it onto the conveyor belt.

It was one of the friendly checkout girls this time – Sunita, it said on her name badge – and usually I would be glad of a chance to have a little chat, but as she scanned the bar code on the bottle I felt myself blush.

“Ooh! What are you celebrating?” she said.

I should have just said “nothing in particular,” and then there would have been no more questions. We could have talked about the weather as usual, and I could have pretended to be the sort of person who might just keep a bottle of champagne in the fridge and open it on a whim. But I found myself saying:

“It’s my grand-daughter’s 21<sup>st</sup> coming up soon.”

“Are you having a party?”

“Not a party, as such,” I said, but I couldn’t stop myself now. “All the family are coming round to my house before we go out for a meal.”

“Lovely! Where are you going?”

I nearly panicked. I couldn’t come up with a name for the restaurant I was picturing.

“It’s near where my daughter lives,” I said, and felt more confident now, more as if this conversation was perfectly natural. “I think my son-in-law has arranged taxis.”

“Well you enjoy it,” said Sunita. “That’ll be £14.76.”

The next few times at the checkout I got the spotty boy who never speaks, or that plump woman who doesn’t stop speaking, but never listens, so it was nearly a month before I saw Sunita again. I was sure she would have forgotten all about it, and she has such a nice way with her, so I joined her queue.

“Oh, hello again,” she said “How did the celebration go? Did you enjoy the meal?”

What could I do? I had to tell her all about it.

“It was marvellous. There were ten of us for the meal, and we each had something different, and the restaurant provided a lovely birthday cake, and we sang happy birthday and everyone from all the other tables joined in.”

I could picture it so vividly; my grand-daughter’s glowing face in the light of the birthday candles, her proud mum and dad, her boyfriend giving her a kiss and everyone laughing because total strangers had sung along.

"And the champagne was excellent." I said. "My younger son said so and he knows a lot about wine."

"What does he do?"

"Oh, he's something in the City, you know, investments, that sort of thing, in London." If I spoke confidently enough I could get away with it, I thought. I had no idea about that sort of work, but it sounded impressive.

I had taken my gloves off to get the coins out of my purse and worried that Sunita would notice I wasn't wearing a ring. Would she assume I was divorced? Or that I'd had my family out of wedlock? Asians are very traditional, aren't they? I didn't want her to think badly of me.

"My fingers are so arthritic now, I find it really fiddly getting these little 5p coins out. And I can't wear my rings any more. They won't go over my knuckles."

It was true in a way. My knuckles have been a bit knobbly for years.

"Let me help you." And she took my purse and counted out the exact amount for me. I felt so guilty, but at least we'd got off the topic of the birthday party.

But on the way home I felt elated. It was the longest conversation I'd had for I don't know how long, and talking about happy things made me feel happy.

Then two weeks later for some reason I went down the wine and spirits aisle again, and there was another special offer on a different brand of champagne. Well, not exactly champagne. Prosecco this time. And I had a trolley, not a basket so there was no problem carrying it to the till.

"Another special occasion?" said Sunita.

This time I wasn't taken by surprise. I had my answer prepared. And it felt quite natural to be telling this open-hearted girl about my life. I felt like she was my friend.

"Well, my grand-daughter's boyfriend proposed. They're coming round at the weekend to show me the ring. So I thought a bit of bubbly would be appropriate."

"How exciting. Have they set a date?"

"It'll be sometime this summer. They don't want a long engagement."

Over the next few months, I told Sunita about the wedding plans, about going shopping with my daughter for an outfit, about choosing a wedding gift, about where the couple were going for their honeymoon. Sunita knew my grand-daughter and her fiancé as Emma and James by now. She seemed as excited about the big event as I was.

Then she asked if I had a photo of Emma on my phone.

"Oh no. I don't have that sort of phone. Mine just makes phone calls." But I decided to bring along an actual photograph next time. There was one in at home that would do, in a photoframe I'd bought as a Christmas present for my neighbour in case she gave me one, but she didn't.

When it was coming up to the date I'd mentioned to Sunita, I bought another bottle of champagne. It wasn't on special offer this time, and I had to buy the cheaper brands instead of my favourites for all the rest of my shopping. I bought a hat at the charity shop as well, creamy white with a broad brim, and feathery bits sticking up from the hatband. It would make the perfect finishing touch to a wedding outfit.

Now it's Saturday. This morning I had a shower and did my hair nicely, dressed in one of the suits I used to wear for work and put the hat on. I don't have any champagne glasses but I find a wine glass and wash the dust off. I get the first bottle of champagne, the £11.99 one, out from the fridge where it has been sitting alongside the other two. Then I swop it for the Prosecco. Fake champagne for a fake wedding. Then I put that back and get out the most expensive one. After all, this is almost certainly the only wedding I will ever experience.

I sit in my favourite chair and day-dream my way through the day, topping up my glass from time to time.

I picture the wedding I never had, my father walking me down the aisle at the church where I was christened, my mother hugging me and wiping away a tear, that girl I was friends with at junior school as the bridesmaid. Only the groom is hazy.

I picture the wedding of the daughter I never had. She would break with tradition and make a speech, thanking me, her mum, for everything I'd done for her. And after she and her new bridegroom had their first dance, I would take to the floor with my still hazy husband and wow them all with a foxtrot, or even a tango, and show everyone how much in love we still were after all those years.

And I picture the wedding of my new grand-daughter Emma. It's only been in the last few weeks that I have got to know her, and really only thanks to Sunita. But I am so proud. How lucky that the picture frame I bought in December came with a photo of a young couple in it, so I could put a face to the name.

I make a mental note of the menu, my ideal wedding menu, but with a 21<sup>st</sup> century twist to suit Emma, and a vegetarian option for Sunita, because of course I can't imagine any of it without her.

I can't think of a single modern day song for Emma and James to dance to, so they choose Moon River, the same song I had, in honour of me, and it almost makes me cry. I have a tape with it on, so I play it through a few times and whirl myself a bit unsteadily round the kitchen where there's no chance of a passer-by looking in and spotting me

At the end of the day I have almost finished the champagne and I'm extra careful not to scald myself when I make myself a cup of tea. As I go to bed I realise I still have the hat on. It's a bit lop-sided but it suits me like that, a bit daring, a bit like how I could have been if I hadn't always been so quiet and

scared. I don't want to take it off.

It's been a lovely day. I can't wait to tell Sunita all about it. And I did mention to her a few weeks ago that my grandson is courting too. After all, there are still two more bottles in the fridge and it would be a shame to waste them.

## WINNING ENTRY



**Veronica Swinburne**

Veronica Swinburne lives near Bolton and works in Central Manchester. Swinburne has been planning to write a novel for the last 50 years, and after writing lots of different versions for opening chapters, she has recently completed a first full draft for the book. *A Champagne Celebration* is the first short story she has submitted for publication.