***“M”***

“Jane?”

I am using the landline. Some things – family dramas, for instance, real or imagined – do not lend themselves to FaceTime.

“Yes.”

“Have you been to the grave lately?”

“No.” A pause. “Why?”

“When were you there last?”

“Hmmm. Let me think. About a month ago. Late May. I had lunch with Philippa and Dan at *Brat´s*, and then I got a bunch of sweetpeas from the florist, and I stopped there on the way home. Why?”

“Well, I went yesterday. And someone had been there.”

“What do you mean, *Someone had been there*? It must have been Lonnie. Mum never goes.”

“I know.”

“It’s been over a year now, and she’s been once. That I know of. *Once*. OK, maybe twice. And only then because I was at the house, and I was going on my way home, and she could hardly say, Sorry, Jane, but I’m not interested in coming with you to visit your father’s grave, the man I was married to for fifty years, who gave me three kids and took me to see The Taj Mahal and The Acropolis and The Grand Canyon, because I’d rather stay home and watch *Countdown*.”

“I know. I know.” I try to pacify her. This has always bothered Jane, just as it has always, for the most part, *not* bothered me. “She doesn’t think it’s important. It never enters her head. He’s dead. He’s gone. That’s it. She doesn’t want to stand there in the rain looking at the grave and thinking of him rotting away down there. You can see her point, in a way.”

“Do you think we should have done the cremation thing?”

“No, of course not. We did the right thing. We all agreed. It’s just the way she is.”

“How did you know? Someone had been there.”

“They left flowers.”

“They did?”

That ruled out Lonnie. He never left flowers. He’d drop in on the way home from work or the pub and stand there looking at the grave for a while, then he would walk around the perimeter, on and off the footpath, as though checking to make sure no land had been siphoned off since the last time, and then he’d roar off on his motorbike. But, as Jane would say, at least he went.

“What kind of flowers?”

“Roses, columbine, gladioli. A mixture. In a nice pewter pot.”

It’s rare that I can silence my younger sister and, because of this, I guess, have always been somewhat awed by her. And she looks like me. That complicates it. When she walked onto the terrace last summer at the hotel in Mallorca, I had a brief and bizarre sensation that it was me walking briskly toward the table, that I was sitting there with a glass of merlot watching *me* arrive, a young, tennis-playing me, with Dad’s olive skin and his soft brown eyes, one who could carry off that particular shade of lime.

“There was a note with the flowers.”

“What do you mean, a note?”

“There was a note. The woman had left a note.”

“Good Lord! Who was it from?”

“I don’t know. It was signed ´M.´

“*M*?”

“Yes. M.” I pause while she absorbs this. “I’m assuming that ´M´ is a woman.”

“How odd. Who would that be?”

“I haven’t any idea. I thought you might know. I’ve been in the States so long I don’t know who his friends are. Who they were. Other than the ones at the funeral. The golfers. Giles, Peter, Claire. And the couples they played Bridge with. But I can’t come up with anyone starting with M.”

“Didn’t it get wet? The note. It’s been raining on and off most of the week.”

“They have those little metal containers by the headstones, and you can put notes or little items in them. I never noticed them before. I just get there, put my flowers out, and don’t really stay too long, unless it’s a lovely day. Then I walk around a little and look at the other graves, see if there’s anyone I know who’s died. But I couldn’t figure out where the flowers were from, there was no card, and I didn’t think they were yours, so I opened it, the little box, and there was a note in there.”

“To Dad?”

“Yes. To Dad. It was a kind of love letter.”

“A *what*?”

“A note from a woman, obviously, who seems to have … loved …. Dad.”

“Bloody hell!”

“We’ll, it’s not that horrifying, is it? I mean, he was a good man, Dad. Good husband, good father.”

“I know. I know. Of course he was! But he was 77.”

“Well, he may have been 77, but he had an admirer. Of sorts. Other than Mum.”

“Did you take it?”

“*No!* Of course not. That would be grave-robbing, wouldn’t it?”

“What did it say?”

“How much she misses him, how empty her life is now he’s gone, how much she loved him. It was short. That was it.”

“Are you *serious*?

“Yes, I’m serious. Of course I’m serious. Do you think I would make this up? I’m as shocked as you are.”

There is silence as we both try to get our minds around this. I picture her standing in the darkened hallway looking at her reflection in the mirror above the mantle, baffled.

“She must have made a mistake! It’s on the wrong grave. She put the flowers on the wrong grave! Did she use his name? In the note?”

“No. She – the note – calls him *My Love*. And his name’s right there on the headstone. She can’t have made a mistake. It’s got the year he was born, the year he died. People don’t just walk into a graveyard and plonk their flowers down on the wrong grave. And Mum’s message is there on the headstone.” This probably isn’t the time to ruminate on past mistakes but I do it anyway. I want to lighten things, bring us together. “I never thought we got that right. Every time I read it, I think we should have written something more appropriate for Mum, more *her*. But her heart wasn’t in it. She just wanted to get it done.”

“I don’t believe it.” We are silent for a moment. “Have you told Lonnie?”

“I wanted to talk to you first. He’ll think it’s some kind of joke.”

“We’ll, maybe he’ll be right this once. Maybe it is some kind of a joke.”

And an odd thing happens. I find myself stopping by the grave more often, not out of an increase in devotion to Dad, but to see if ´M´ has been there again, if there is a new arrangement of flowers in the pewter vase. Sometimes I stop at Mum’s on the way, to see how she’s doing, but she doesn’t need me these days. She doesn’t need anyone these days. After the initial shock – though we shouldn’t have been, we’d had warnings he’d had two minor heart attacks – she has coped well with widowhood.

Summer is gone. It’s a two-hour drive for me, and the days are getting short. Sometimes I can see that Jane has been there. There are sprays of lavender or oleander or late-blooming roses. Dad loved roses. I have a photograph of me, grinning madly, standing by him in the back garden in Vancouver. I would have been about five, and I’m wearing a corduroy smock Mum made for me. The two of us are holding a prizewinning rose. Red, probably, although I can’t be sure as the photograph is black and white.

These days the grave looks bereft and forsaken, as graves do in the end, abandoned by the living, left to fend for themselves in the wind and the rain, the crows bickering on high in the sycamore trees. Most of the time ´M´ hasn’t been there, and I tell myself that a mistake has been made and corrected, I’ve imagined it all, there is no ´M,´ and Lonnie is right. It is all some kind of joke.

And then there it is, the pewter vase. I can see it from the parking lot when I pull in, the bright metal catching the late sun if the day has been fine, with a burst of roses and dahlias and lupins – *I’m here! I’m here!* – waiting for me as I hurry across the damp grass toward the soft green mound.

At least she has a garden, I think, ungenerously. She’s not some desperate widow in a flat above a pet shop or a travel agent’s.

Has she *just* left? Did she watch me pull in and park over there on the gravel lot, reach for my shoulder bag from the passenger seat, and gather up my own humble offering? Is that her walking away from me on the narrow footpath with the mass of dark hair, dressed in black and red?

“It’s probably the barmaid at *The Three Tuns,”* Lonnie says, as I drive him to the train station*.* He is off to The Pyrenees for three weeks. “She’s *Margaret*, and she’s been there for years. She always had a soft spot for Dad. She’s black, from Jamaica, part of the Windrush Generation. He nods. “Nice going, Dad. She’s a beauty.”

“Why didn’t he tell us?”

“Why should he?”

“Because we’re his daughters – and son – his children.”

“Oh, come on, Babette. Did you tell *us* everything that happened to you over the years? People don’t.” He paused. “And were we paying attention? Margaret is a notion, that’s all. She’s an “M.” Dad liked her. Her brother died two years ago in London, in a horrible car crash, and Dad was a rock. He seemed to understand her. It was nice to see.”

I am silent. Lonnie is taking on a new dimension. Do we do this with those we love? Imagine we know them, have them down, so to speak. Then something happens, and we see there are chunks of their lives, the ones most contingent to us, that we’ve missed, not been paying attention to. I think of Mum at home watching telly.

“Anyway, I’ll hire a PI when I get back.” He reaches around the gear shift lever and pats me on the knee. “Do they have them in these parts, or am I showing my Dashiell Hammett? He can stand around in the rain in a Fedora watching out for ‘M.’ But they don’t come cheap, Babette. They don’t come cheap.”

It’s while he’s gone that I stop by *The Three Tuns* on my way home from the graveyard one day and open the latched oak door into the large saloon. I need to pee before heading onto the bypass, and it’s crap outside, a typical English October. I’ll nip to the loo, be on the road and home in two hours, depending on traffic.

She’s facing the mirror behind the bar, pulling a pint of lager for a man with a red beard in a dark blue windbreaker. I’ll get a glass of Malbec, if she has one, something with a little heft, and some chips.

*Is Margaret our lady of the graveyard?*

“You’re going back?” The man is talking to her back, aghast.

She finishes the pint of lager and turns back, smiling at us both. “Yes, I am.” she smiles.

“But you can’t do that,” he says. “You’ve lived here all your life. This is your home.”

“What do you mean, I can’t do that?” She hands him the pint and looks at him with humor and contempt. “And is it my home*?”* She raises her eyebrows. “Sure I’ve lived here all my life. Southampton, 1965, it was. I was eight, and my brother was ten, when we came with Mum. I still remember the crowds on the docks. Pissing with rain. No Dad, of course. No sign of him. And they’re gone now, all of them. I’m on my own. I’m alone. What’s to stay for? You’ve seen how this Government is treating us now.”

He makes no reply, and she turns away. We stare wordlessly at the chiseled beauty of her back in a strapless red dress that seems too elegant for a bar like this one. I change my mind and decide on the Rioja. She must be Jane´s age, I am thinking. Tall, sturdily built, her thick black hair greying a little at the temples, held back by tortoiseshell clips. Her lipstick matches the dress.

It is the kind of pub Dad could never resist, being a Manitoba boy. The thatched roof, lately redone by the looks of it, the low ceilings and heavy furniture, the fireplace – lit now and glowing – the copper pots over the bar, the horse brasses, the trio of men playing darts, that peculiar smell of country pubs. Stale beer, fried food, damp. The sign hanging outside calls it an *award-winning traditional 17th Century Inn.* What for? Beers and ale? Décor? Bar food?

I was here last summer for a birthday celebration. There were six of us, all women, noisy, hennish, demanding. She had served us then, getting us drinks – wine, shandy, gin and tonic; someone didn’t like the Pinot Grigio so that was replaced – ploughmen’s, chicken salads, prawn curries, desserts.

Her style was not to smile a lot, but nor was she abrupt. There was a level humor and a sense that whatever was thrown her way she would manage. Women are trying when they’re in party mode, they get loud quickly. And when did we get so fussy about MSG and gluten-free and whether they’ve used extra virgin olive oil? It seems – it was – a lifetime ago that Mum and Dad would bring the three of us here for fish and chips on a Saturday in summer, and we’d tear around in the back garden with its picnic tables and plastic slides and swings – swings! – while they drank Babycham and Guinness.

But she got it right, all of it. I tip well – a hangover from all those years in the States – twenty percent, unless the service has been bad. Not that she cared. I doubt that tables of women are of interest to Margaret.

“How are you?” she looks at me with a broad smile. Does she remember that day? Does she know who I am? She has an emerald ring on the middle finger of her right hand. Her nails are unvarnished, plain. “Can I get you something to eat?”

Sitting there with my Rioja, I wish I’d brought Jane with me as sibling ballast. *Don’t beat about the bush, Babette!* I can hear her saying as she sits on the barstool and eyes the whites on the chalkboard. Boar’s Kloof Chenin Blanc, Mr. Goose Chardonnay, all over six quid a glass. When did country pubs become so expensive? *Mum didn’t give you that ridiculous French name so you could dither. What are we here for? Be bold! ‘Are you M?’*

But it is no good. It’s impossible. What was I thinking? I feel foolish, ashamed, policing my father. I should have come here with Lonnie one evening and let things develop casually. Or not come at all. It’s none of my business. There are always going to be mysteries and secrets around the ones we love. Why shouldn’t Dad have had his?

And Lonnie was right: She is a beauty, with that sweep of black hair, the quiet radiance, the laconic smile.

I chat a little with Red Beard, but he may be on the make, and I’m not right now, haven’t been in a while, so I keep it distant. It’s busy, she’s back and forth, taking orders, bringing meals from the kitchen.

“Come in again,” she says, as I get ready to leave. “Now lockdown’s over, we’re open longer.”

*Is it you?* I want to say. *Is it you?*

“Why are you always so ready to see the worst in people? He loved Mum. Always. *Always*.”

“Of course he loved Mum. But what if he loved ‘M’ too. In some way we can’t understand, can’t imagine. Do we have to just love one person? What if we can love two? Especially later in life? We don’t know what it’s like to be there.”

“That’s true. I just can’t imagine it. I keep thinking there’s some mistake. That she left the flowers on the wrong grave. Maybe she’s a little infirm. Some of their friends were, you know. They’re old too.”

I am silent. She knows this isn’t the case. But she will hang on to it, as we do.

Driving home, I think about Margaret. Will she go back? Does she have family there still after so many years? An ancient aunt or uncle perhaps, someone barely remembering her, a childhood friend, someone she went to school with? And if not? What kind of loneliness is in store for her?

When she is alone of an evening, walking along the promenade by the sea, and it is warm and all is well. Does something – a coolness in the air? Jamaica can’t be hot all the time – remind her of the odd little seaside town where she lived most of her life– and there in her mind’s eye is the grave with the name of my father carved into the headstone, and his years of living, and the pewter vase that she would bring with her every time, that she is today filling with icy water from the tap by the little shed and then with dahlias – purple and red, *her* colours, when she can find them– and roses, lighter in tone, more varied, carnations, sweetpeas.

But the grave is abandoned now. No one visits these days. Just the crows up there in the sycamores. Cawing, yelling, reminding.

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