

Home from Home

Chris said it was unnatural to spend so much time in close proximity to the dead, making up stories about the poor souls whose remains were buried under buttercups and dandelions.

‘They’re laid to *rest*,’ he said. ‘They don’t want to be disturbed – especially not by a complete stranger.’

‘How do you know?’ she said. ‘Anyway, I’m not a stranger. I come to speak to Dad.’

‘Dad’s dead, Mum. He can’t hear you. It’s been 10 years . . .’

Eliza loved the Garden of Remembrance. Tucked away off the path from the shops to the library, it was a sanctuary of peace, a place to think. Her secret garden.

Every season had its distinctive smells. Elderflower, cherry blossom, winter jasmine; the first cut of the grass in the spring and the after taste of autumn rain. There were three convenient benches, just right for getting your breath back and having a chat. Small brass plates revealed they had been given in memory of ‘*William Burridge, who loved this spot*’, ‘*Jane Harrison, forever in our hearts*’ and ‘*Godfrey Trickey, Church Warden*.’ Two or three times a week, after she’d listened to the Archers, she would tuck her wispy hair under her Miss Marple felt hat, put on her raincoat and walk to the Church – slowly. The strap of her canvas handbag went right over her head and across her body, safe and secure – just like the Community Police Officer had said when she’d come to Knit and Natter. She had never seen a potential assailant but you never knew who might be waiting for an unsuspecting, elderly woman to come along with a bag carelessly dangling from one shoulder.

She would choose a bench – William’s, Jane’s or Godfrey’s, depending on the position of the sun. From *Godfrey Trickey, Church Warden’s* bench, she could enjoy the changing colours of the huge oak tree and watch everybody rushing down the path: children on scooters, old people arm in arm, women with library book bags. Seemed the whole world came out after lunch - but not many had time to stop and look and enjoy the smells and sounds.

From William’s bench, she had a direct view of Joe’s memorial stone which reminded her, as if she could forget, that he had *died 17th May, 2000* and was *beloved husband to Eliza and loving father to Christopher*. She would pull off dead leaves, brush off the spiders’ webs and trace the letters with her finger before chatting to him about this and that.

If she sat on Jane’s seat, she could talk directly to *Sara Eliza. Born 14th October 1939. Died 15th October 1939*. Eighty years on and she still had to blow her nose as she whispered ‘Hallo, little one.’ Funny to think that Joe and Sara lay so close together but had never met. Not in this life, anyway.

She sighed, content that they were close by. Of course, she loved Chris, too and he was very much alive and kicking. He wanted to put her in a Home. He hadn’t said that, not in so many words, but he kept talking about his friends’ parents and how happy they were in Bishop’s Place with their own front door and microwave. He left brochures lying around, told her money was no object, he’d done the sums. House prices were booming. If she sold the bungalow, she could live in comfort for the next fifteen years. After all, she wasn’t getting any younger.

Deep down, she knew it made sense. It wasn’t moving into a Home that worried her, not really - as long as she had her privacy and could make it her own. But she wasn’t playing bingo or gluing tissue paper flowers or pretending to like

people when she had nothing in common with them. It had been fine when Joe had been there to help with the chores but things were looking jaded and down at heel now and that wasn't fair. A home should be loved and enjoyed – not left to its own devices. A large bedsit with its own facilities would suit her down to the ground; but Bishop's Place was on the edge of town – too far to walk. She couldn't leave the Garden of Remembrance - and she couldn't tell Chris why.

It had been hard enough telling Joe all those years ago but she knew she couldn't marry him harbouring such a secret. It wasn't as though she'd been disloyal to him. She hadn't met Joe until her 22nd birthday – 5 long years after she'd buried her baby. Would he be horrified and walk away? She had taken his arm and walked him down the path into the Memorial Garden. There was no 'Jane's bench' then but she had guided him to the stone, still clean and fresh. He was hoping for a quick kiss but she held him at arm's length and said 'This is Sara Eliza. My daughter.' She paused. 'If you want your ring back, I'll understand.'

He didn't raise his voice or push her away. Barely flinched, though she could see the tiny muscles in his jaws working. She could hear his breathing – in, out, in, out – as though he were playing for time.

'Tell me about her,' he said, looking her straight in the eye, and she had known it would all be all right.

'I was in service at the Big House. Billy was on his way from Greenwich to join his ship in Portsmouth and was billeted with his mates. He helped me carry the dishes to the kitchen, bought me sweets – such a treat - and . . .'

'He forced himself on you,' said Joe, gripping her hand.

'No! It wasn't like that. We were young and there was a War on. *I might be dead this time next week*, he said, and we just . . . well . . . you know.'

Joe did know. He knew all too well.

'It was all over in three weeks. Billy joined his ship and I never heard from him again. I assumed he'd been killed. He never even knew about the baby.'

Joe pulled her close towards him. Smoothed her hair.

'Mrs Bartram, the Housekeeper, helped me. I thought I was going to die. Sara was so tiny and blue and she sounded more like an abandoned kitten than a baby. I spent all night trying to feed her but she was dead by morning.'

Joe gave her his handkerchief and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. They were married on 14th October, 1946. They had 8 black and white photographs in an album with silver writing on the front, and one was of Eliza standing beside the little memorial stone with the oak tree in the background. Their secret.

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Now she had to work out what to tell Chris. That's what she'd wanted to chat to Joe about - but as she got closer, she saw that all three benches were in use. Clusters of children with clipboards were gathered around two of them, looks of concentration on their young faces. Seemed like only yesterday Chris was that small. She could picture him pulling up his grey socks, his thin legs dangling out of his shorts like drainpipes, his stripy tie halfway down his shirt.

On Jane's bench was a woman wearing a trench coat and a red beret. Eliza stopped in her tracks, unused to company, fiddled with her buttons while she decided what to do. She couldn't go home, not without a rest. Could she sit inside the Church? In the old days, you could have sat there for a week and barely seen a soul. Now there were all kinds of goings on. Alpha Courses, Messy Church, Missional Lunches – whatever they were - and a big TV screen just inside the new, glass door with pictures going round and round. Made her head ache.

She would have to be brave and join Red Beret. It was a big enough bench, after all. The woman sensed her hovering and moved along. They exchanged shy, embarrassed glances.

‘Sorry,’ said Eliza. ‘I had to sit down. And the children . . .’

‘Don’t apologise,’ said Red Beret. ‘I’m glad of the company. I’m Elizabeth.’

‘Mrs Bennett,’ said Eliza. ‘Eliza. You look vaguely familiar but I don’t remember seeing you here before.’

‘I drop in sometimes. When I get time. You’ll think I’m daft but I like to talk to Mum.’

She nodded towards the edge of the Memorial Garden and a small stone with what looked like fresh writing. It was too far away for Eliza to read the words.

‘We moved down here when Don, my husband, was transferred to Portsmouth – left Mum and Dad behind. Then when Mum died, we decided to move Dad into a retirement home nearer to us – Bishop’s Place. Do you know it?’

Eliza nodded.

‘He said he’d only come if we promised to bury her ashes here and bring him once a month on a Sunday afternoon. There’s space for him when the time comes.’

Eliza nodded. ‘My Joe’s over there. I talk to him, too.’

‘I even think about the lives of the people on the gravestones,’ said Elizabeth. *Clara died 1930 aged 69. Edwin died 1950 aged 90. Poor old Edwin. Twenty years on his own.*

‘Or maybe it was lucky old Edwin,’ said Eliza. ‘Perhaps Clara nagged him. Maybe he put something in her tea.’

‘And what about *Ethel, 1894 – 1934 loving mother of Mary, Fred, Jim, Bill, Jane, Jessica and Pete*. Seven children! No wonder she was dead by the time she was 40.’

‘And this one always has me in tears. Sara Eliza. Just a day old.’

She was kind, this woman with her red beret and long brown boots, expensive haircut, peppery highlights.

‘She’s mine,’ said Eliza. ‘Sara Eliza. She’s my daughter.’

Red Beret took a deep breath, gasped, began to stutter.’

‘It’s fine,’ said Eliza. She felt like she’d known this stranger for years. ‘I’m glad to tell somebody. Makes me feel like she was a real person – even though she only lived for a few hours.’

Laughter erupted from William’s bench. One of the boys had slipped off the bench – was pushed more like. That would have been Chris, larking about with his mates. On Godfrey’s bench, they were packing up their folders, hoisting rucksacks onto their backs.

‘You’re the only living soul who knows,’ said Eliza. ‘My son, Chris, thinks I’m barmy coming here to talk to his Dad. Don’t know what he’d say if he knew he had a half-sister and I talked to her as well.’

Red Beret pulled her coat around her, crossed her legs, waited.

‘He wants me to go into a Home. He means well but . . . he’s a pharmaceutical research scientist.’ She said it as though that explained everything.

‘What about you? What do you want to do?’

Eliza sighed, looked down at the tiny memorial. ‘I don’t really mind.’

‘But you can’t leave Sara. Or Joe.’ It was more of a statement than a question.

Eliza nodded, blew her nose, shifted about on the bench. Offered her new friend a sweet from the bag crumpled in her pocket.

‘Ooh, lemon sherberts. My Dad loves these. Eats them all the time. Says they were his favourite wartime sweets.’

Eliza paused, paper bag in hand, blinked rapidly.

‘Do you have other children?’ said Elizabeth.

‘No. We wanted more but nothing happened – and in our day, you just had to get on with it.’

‘I’m an only child, too,’ said Elizabeth. ‘I always wanted a brother but that never happened either.’

As they walked back to the path, Elizabeth paused at the memorial stone.

‘Bye for now Mum,’ she said, blowing a kiss. Eliza read the script. *Keziah Anne Sillence born June 1925, died June 2008, beloved wife of William and mother to Elizabeth.* She gripped the walking frame. Elizabeth clung on to her arm.

‘Steady. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘It’s such an unusual name,’ she muttered. ‘Sillence. I knew somebody with that name. What a coincidence. Anyway, he was called Billy.’

‘That’s what everybody calls Dad. Billy.’

Eliza struggled to her secret garden on the next two Sundays, persuading herself that she needed the exercise, that it had nothing to do with the slim chance of bumping into Elizabeth and her father. Just in case it was him. Not that she cared

one way or the other. He'd probably forgotten her the minute his boat sailed. She brushed her hair carefully and chose a scarf which Joe had told her brought out the silvery-blue of her eyes. Weekends were busier. There were people in and out of the Church and Dads with children on their way to the playground. She was exhausted by the time she got home. On the third Sunday, she couldn't go because Jack and Amanda came for lunch bringing a glossy brochure advertising the newly built suites at Bishop's House. 'A real Home from Home' was emblazoned across photos of smiling women with very white teeth and a man wearing a cardigan with a trowel in his hand.

'Before you say anything, Chris, I've been thinking and you're right. It's time to sell up and move into a Home. Just as long as you're sure to let the Queen know so's I get the telegram.'

There were conditions, though. Chris was so shocked that he nodded like a lucky Chinese cat and said how sensible she was and it was what Dad would have wanted and he only had her best interests at heart.

The next Sunday, she gave herself a talking-to as she shut the front door behind her and adjusted her bag.

'You are not a teenager. Eliza Bennett, so stop behaving like one. You loved your husband very much and you've had a long and happy life. You don't even know if it's the same Billy or how he turned out . . .'

As she rounded the bend, she recognised Red Beret waving to her across the grass.

'Mrs Bennett. Eliza. Over here.' She was sitting on Jane's bench. Two men were with her – Don, it must be, was bending down with a small brush – and the

other, in the wheelchair, was slight and hunched, wrapped in a thick overcoat and knitted scarf.

Eliza waved back and walked slowly over, trying to recognise the young man of her dreams in the small, elderly figure.

'What a nice surprise,' said Eliza.

'Dad – Don – this is Mrs Bennett – Eliza – we met in the garden a few weeks ago.'

Don stood up and shook hands, brushing cobwebs from his trousers. Billy half turned his head. She could see the metal, Navy badge on his lapel.

'Scuse me if I don't get up,' he said. 'Not so steady nowadays.'

'Me neither, Billy,' said Eliza. 'Fancy a sherbert lemon?'

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