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A House by the Sea

Elvi Rhodes

ONE

The afternoon surgery was almost over. It had been a particularly busy one, not only with those who really needed to see one of the three doctors but with individuals with the most minor of ailments who would have been much better off seeing the practice nurse. It was the duty of Caroline, or whichever receptionists were on duty, to politely try to keep such patients away from the doctors dealing with life and death and divert them to the nurse's kind, knowledgeable, even if sometimes brisk, ministrations.

Eventually the surgery slowly began to empty until the only patient left was Mrs Fawcett, one of Doctor Meadows's most faithful regulars.

The buzzer sounded.

'There you are, Mrs Fawcett,' Caroline said. 'Doctor Meadows is free.'

She hoped the lady wouldn't be too longwinded, but it was probably a vain hope. Caroline couldn't leave until the last patient was off the premises, and this afternoon she had shopping to do.

It was almost fifteen minutes before Mrs Fawcett emerged, smiling and satisfied. How could she possibly take so long, Caroline asked herself ? Staff were not encouraged to peruse patients' notes but Mrs Fawcett looked the picture of health. 'Goodbye, dear!' she said amicably to Caroline. 'Take care!'

'Goodbye, Mrs Fawcett,' Caroline said. She saw her to the door and locked it firmly behind her. She gathered her things together then picked up the phone and buzzed Doctor Meadows. 'Unless there's anything else,' she said, 'I'm just off.'

The heat hit her as she stepped out of the surgery. She turned the corner and walked along Great Pulteney Street, crossed the bridge, busy with visitors looking into the windows of the small shops which were built on it. There was never a month in the year when Bath didn't have visitors, but now, in September, they were thick on the ground. At the end of the Pulteney bridge she turned left into Grand Parade. The river, on her left, looked cool and inviting. She would have liked to have sat there, watching

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the world go by, or if Peter had been with her perhaps to have taken a boat out, but this afternoon she had more pressing things to do. And Peter was not with her, and never would be again. It was a year ago now, and it still hurt, she thought about him so often.

She walked the streets quickly, cutting through to Marks & Spencer's. She had persuaded herself she wanted a new dress. Wanted, rather than needed, she reminded herself. She had a wardrobe full of clothes, she wasn't going anywhere special, she didn't have a date on the horizon: in fact she wasn't going anywhere at all except to the Sales to buy a dress she didn't need.

She found the dress within the first few minutes in the store. She was a quick shopper, partly because she was usually able to make up her mind almost at once about what she didn't like, or what wasn't suitable. For instance, she never even looked at anything sleeveless; her arms were not her best point, being, to her way of thinking, too thin. She was too thin in most ways, she thought. She could eat like a horse, eat anything – cream cakes, fried potatoes, chocolate – and never put on an ounce, let alone the few pounds she would have welcomed. Peter, however, she thought sadly, had maintained that thin was elegant.

She wished, oh, so much, that Peter was with her right now, that he was here to help her to choose. Not that he would have been. On a Monday afternoon he would have been beavering away in the legal practice twelve miles away in Bristol, where he was a solicitor. And when, later, he'd arrived home she would have poured them both a gin and tonic with lots of ice and they would have sat down to drink it, and talk about how the day had gone. But, she reminded herself now, he had never taken much part in helping her to choose clothes. He appreciated what she wore, he liked her to be well dressed, but shopping for clothes, especially, as now, among crowds of women, he hated. On the rare occasions when he had accompanied her, he had always stood apart, as if not belonging to any of it. But he himself had always been well turned out. He had had a natural affinity with clothes, and with his height, an inch or two over six feet, and his slender figure, he had looked good in anything. Oh, Peter, she thought, why did you leave me?

She managed not to say the words out loud, though if she had been at home, she thought, she would have done so, and not for the first time in the year since he had died. She had been so full of anger, anger at what Peter had suffered as the cancer took over everything. Anger that he had died; left her alone. Anger, even, at her own anger, with which she didn't know how to deal and had found her, in the first few months, shouting at the walls. It was quite normal, Doctor Meadows had said. And better out than in.

The dress she had found on the rail was a pale lilac colour, of fine, soft cotton, with a deep V-neck. It was a colour she was fond of. It went well with her fair skin and her dark blond hair. 'I could turn you into a redhead,' her hairdresser had said. More than once. 'It would suit you!' She had so far refused his offer, but as a few grey hairs were now beginning to show through the dark blond, who knew? She was directed to a cubicle and put on the dress then surveyed herself in the long mirror. She was frowning

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slightly. Not a suitable expression for one buying new clothes, she thought, trying to look more pleased. There was no reason not to be pleased with the dress. It fitted well over her shoulders and breasts and the softness of the material, slightly draped, somehow camouflaged the fact that her waist wasn't as slim as the rest of her. The skirt flared gently to mid-calf length, which suited her long legs and slender ankles. Would Peter have liked it, she thought with a stab of pain? Probably he would. The colour certainly suited her, she thought.

She queued at the cash point to pay then, remembering that she'd not planned anything for her supper, she picked up some soup in the Food Hall. It would do very well: no cooking. She had fallen out with cooking since Peter had died; it was no fun cooking for one and she had actually lost her appetite for a while. Still, she knew it was high time to make an effort to start again. She promised herself she would do so when the weather cooled down.

She left the store and began the walk home. She never minded walking anywhere in Bath, it was such a pleasant city, in whatever direction one looked, and the pale stone of which much of the city had been built had now turned to gold in the afternoon sun. Less than fifteen minutes' walking brought her back to the house she had shared with Peter for more than twenty years. It held so many memories: of Peter playing the piano, which he did most evenings after they had had their gin and tonic, and before they ate; of Rosie's childhood. Rosie had been a rumbustious child, she had made the house come alive, but now that her daughter was grown-up and lived and worked in London – though she came to Bath when she could spare the time – all that was gone too. She had tried to get out of the habit of half-listening for Peter's key in the door, though she still sometimes found herself doing so. Now she went into the kitchen, made herself a mug of tea, no milk, no sugar, and sat at the kitchen table with it. Peter would not have done that. He was a china teapot man; Earl Grey tea left to brew for five minutes before being poured. I am turning into a slob, she thought as she ate and drank.

What would she do with the evening? It stretched before her endlessly. There was no housework to be done, and she didn't want to be alone with her thoughts.

I could ring Marion, she thought. Marion was a good friend. On the other hand, she was the half of Marion and Nicholas. That was the case with most of her friends. They had husbands or partners, or children still at home. She had developed a dislike of breaking in on them, though she knew that that was her fault, not theirs. They would have made her welcome. And of course if she were in any real trouble or difficulty, she would turn to them and they would help; but would any of them want to hear that she had just returned from buying a dress in Marks & Spencer's, together with a description of it?

She switched on the television, quickly grew tired of it, and turned it off again. Yet another programme on how to transform an entire garden in a matter of five hours while the lady of the house had gone to visit her mother

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in the next town. She knew exactly what would happen. The team would move in, they would spend an inordinate amount of money on mature plants, containers, garden furniture, trellising and ceramic slabs (decking seemed mercifully to have gone out of fashion). Towards the end there would be moments of panic because the wife was due to walk in at the door in precisely seven minutes' time. And indeed she would arrive on the dot, seconds after the last shrub had been planted. No late trains, no hold-ups of any kind, ever delayed her. She would take one look at the scene before her, then scream with surprise and delight – after which they would all have a glass of champagne.

She concluded that it would have to be an early night, and shortly afterwards – it was still light – went to bed. But bed, she decided, was even now where she missed Peter most of all. She still wanted his arms around her, his body against hers and to see his kind, smiling face first thing in the morning.

She chose a book from the small untidy heap on the bedside table, tried to read, and failed, then switched off the light and willed herself to go to sleep. It didn't work. Sleep eluded her. Even covered by a thin cotton sheet and with the window wide open, the room was too hot. She switched on the light again and turned on the television.

It was in the middle of a programme which featured Brighton. There, filling the screen, was the pier – now called Brighton Pier but to her it would always be Palace Pier, since she had known it as a small child, from the time when she had wondered if she might fall through the spaces between the wooden planks of which the pier was fashioned. And if she did, if the tide was high, she would fall straight into the sea and her father would have to jump over the side and rescue her because she couldn't swim. And of course he would have done so. She had no doubt at all about that. Her father would save her from anything.

Her memories of Brighton were all happy ones: collecting pebbles, paddling near the edge of the sea, visiting the mysteriously dark aquarium where strange-looking fishes swam in tanks. She had continued to live in Brighton, the only child of loving parents, until she had gone away to university, and there she had met Peter, whom, after they had both graduated, she had married in St Peter's church in Brighton. Peter had been her first serious boyfriend. And my last, she thought now. And if his job had not taken him to Bath, and from there to Bristol, they most likely would be in Brighton still.

They had gone back regularly to visit her parents until, two years ago, both her mother and her father died within a few months of each other. Caroline had inherited their house of which, over the last few years, and to augment their pensions, her parents had let the upper floor to students. There were always students in Brighton, looking for somewhere to live in term time. Her mother had enjoyed having them coming and going, and her father hadn't minded much except for their choice of music, played at full blast.

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When she had inherited the house Peter's idea had been to sell it, but she hadn't wanted to do that. It was not because of the house itself; it was not the one she had grown up in, her parents had moved since then. It was, she admitted to Peter, because it was in Brighton. It was a little bit of the place from which she had never quite torn herself away.

'Let's not sell it just yet,' she'd said. 'The rents from the students pay the expenses, and you and I have a place to go when we want a change. And Rosie might well like to use it from time to time. She could take her friends there.'

Peter had been persuaded, not only because he, too, liked Brighton, but because of George Clarke, a good neighbour to Caroline's parents, who kept an eye on the house, and on the students in term time.

They hadn't gone down to Brighton nearly as often as she'd wanted to and when Peter was ill it had become nigh on impossible. Since he had died Caroline had only been down twice. Perhaps now was the time to rectify that.

Caroline lay awake a long time, thinking about Brighton and her childhood there, thinking about Peter, thinking about her parents, whom she had loved, and still missed. The thoughts went round and round in her head and she fell asleep with all these things jumbled in her mind. When she awakened it was still dark. She looked at the clock. Half past four. She had slept little more than an hour and her head was as full of thoughts as it had been before she slept. The truth was, she was not happy. Her life was not working for her.

She got up, and went into the kitchen. She made herself a mug of tea, then sat at the kitchen table with it, watching the early light filtering through the blind. 'What am I going to do?' She was astonished to hear herself express it out loud. Am I going potty, she thought, talking to myself? And why am I feeling like this a year on, when I should at least be starting to get over things? But if there was an answer, she didn't know what it was.

She finished her tea, and told herself that she must go back to bed, try to get a little more sleep. She was on duty at the morning surgery and she must be there at eight for

an eight-thirty start. She went back to bed, set the alarm for seven, then slept fitfully for a while before falling into a deep sleep just fifteen minutes before the alarm woke her.

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