THE DEATH LESSON

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To Judith Butler

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Pippa placed her anxiety medication in the top of the chest of drawers, jamming a pile of knickers on top of the box to hide its hateful presence. She had no idea how secure her room would be. The door had a sturdy-looking lock on it but she'd been told that the space plus the en-suite bathroom would be cleaned once a week by Mrs Jones, the staff cleaner. Perhaps Mrs Jones would be the non-curious type, loath to rifle through the belongings of teaching colleagues. Then again, perhaps she was exactly the sort to do that. Pippa winced at the thought of her medical condition becoming the topic of conversation in this hothouse setting. She pulled her emergency ration from the bottom of her suitcase and looked for a place to stash it. A bottle of brandy probably wasn't top of most teachers' essential supplies list, but Pippa had long learnt that things could be made more palatable with a nip of the strong stuff. In the end, she decided to leave it on the table by the bed. If someone complained, she could always say she'd brought it as a present for someone.

Pippa turned to survey the room, which was sparse but tastefully furnished. Everything about the decor suggested discreet wealth. The single oak-framed bed was covered in thick white sheets topped with a woollen Welsh blanket, the type she'd seen in vintage shops going for around two hundred quid. There was a narrow wardrobe to match

the chest of drawers and a large desk with an office-style chair improbably covered in William Morris fabric. Someone had thought to put a bowl of fruit on the table in the corner. The room was charming but completely unfamiliar, and Pippa experienced a pang of longing for her old digs in the attic of a Victorian terrace in Cardiff. She suspected she would never ever feel at home here.

She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of girls singing the evening prayer across the frosty quadrangle. The music was unfamiliar but moving. On her arrival, Dr Rhys had told her that staff were expected to attend Sunday services, but given she had just arrived Pippa could miss choral evensong just this once. She now wished she'd gone along as a means of orientating herself in her new workplace, which was a world away from the Cardiff comprehensive where she'd been temping as a maths and geography teacher. When her agency had called to say a job had suddenly come up in a private boarding school, she'd assumed they'd called the wrong person. There was nothing on her CV that would catch the eye of a place as exclusive as Penbryn Hall, but she'd been told that Dr Rhys had seen her résumé and wanted to interview her.

Pippa glanced down at the bed and contemplated the pile of clothes she'd bought herself once she'd secured the position. Dr Rhys – Pippa couldn't yet bring herself to call her new boss Lowri – had said she preferred her staff to wear navy, black or brown, which more or less corresponded to Pippa's own preferences, but she'd still gone to Marks and Spencer in town to buy some thick jumpers and lined trousers ready for the draughty days ahead. She saw now she'd be sweltering in the classrooms if this heated room was anything to go by. Penbryn Hall, it seemed, liked its students to be cosseted from the wild

winds that swept across the Cors Caron nature reserve to the north.

The interview to get this position had gone well, but the only morsel of information Pippa had managed to glean about her presence here was that her predecessor had been taken ill suddenly and an immediate replacement was needed. Dr Rhys had given this information willingly at the interview, almost as an aside, but Pippa was convinced that if a better teacher of mathematics had been available, then they would have been a preferred choice. But Dr Rhys had assured her that Pippa, with her first-class degree from Cardiff University and willingness to live in the wilds of West Wales among predominantly female staff and students, had been by far the best candidate. When it came down to it, Lowri Rhys preferred academic achievement over any other accomplishments or social advantages.

After depositing her clothes in the wardrobe, Pippa was at a loss for what to do. She grabbed her quilted coat and decided to explore the grounds until the service finished. Aware that she'd be plunged into the cold once she left the stifling heat of the building, she pushed her wool beret into the coat pocket and wound a scarf around her neck. Her footsteps echoed along the wooden floor as she made her way along the corridor and down the steps to the staff accommodation. She could hear hushed voices in the distance – not everyone, it appeared, was required to go to chapel. Perhaps it was catering staff preparing supper for the girls. Pippa had been told she'd be eating in the staff dining room that evening and she'd memorised directions to the place in readiness for her meal.

At the bottom of the staircase, she pulled open the huge arched door and stepped out into the night. The moon was nearly full and shone brightly above the horizon. A

perfect late autumn evening with a hint of winter still to come. This far from the city, the stars lit up the sky, leaving Pippa to stare for a moment in wonder. Only the cold made her push onwards and she walked across the grass, with just a touch of frost glistening on its stems. In the centre of the quadrangle was a fountain, well kept with its marble nymph unblemished by age. In the basin, the pool of water was beginning to freeze. She would need to come down in the morning to see if it was turned on in winter.

Pippa turned her back on the marbled nymph and glanced up at the Edwardian mansion that housed the girls' school. Once she'd received the offer of the job, she'd done some research into the history of the institution. The house had once belonged to the Cadwallader family, who had made their money from slate quarries to the north, but the house and land had been sold off in the 1950s, the first buyer turning it into an upmarket hotel before finally selling the property to the trustees of Penbryn Hall school. It was a bleak-looking building in this light, its grey stone glittering in the sparse landscape. When she'd arrived earlier in the day, the low autumn sun had made it feel more welcoming. Not now.

A gust of wind swept across the lawn taking Pippa by surprise. She pulled her coat around her and made her way back towards the main building. Her room held no attraction, and although Dr Rhys had told her to relax after dinner, Pippa had no intention of fretting in her room all evening. She watched as the chapel door swung open and a gaggle of girls streamed out, their voices kept low as they hurried across the courtyard to the warmth of the building opposite. There were lots of them, all identically dressed in grey coats and skirts with felt hats. The website

had emphasised a relaxed approach to school uniform, so perhaps this was their Sunday garb worn to attend chapel. Among the girls, two adults came out under the light, teachers clearly talking to a group of girls and laughing. Pippa felt some of the tension inside her dissipate. Perhaps it would be all right. There was a sense of bonhomie and shared purpose in their laughter. Surely it couldn't be too hard for her to join in with that.

She was about to step forward and join the gathering when she saw a figure emerge from the chapel porch. There was something about the way she stooped before lifting up the hood of her coat that felt familiar and Pippa was surprised to feel a knot of fear in her stomach. What did her body recognise before her brain caught up? She hesitated, caution keeping her rooted to the spot as she watched the woman straighten and pull on her gloves. The porch light shone onto her partially hidden face, and one glance at the profile was enough for Pippa to freeze.

'Christ. Oh, no. Christ.'

The terror that had started in her abdomen rushed through the rest of her and she felt her legs begin to tremble. What was this monster doing here? Pippa glanced around, hoping that someone else recognised the danger they were in, but the girls carried on streaming out, glad to be away from the church and hurrying towards a warm meal. The woman glanced briefly across the courtyard in Pippa's direction, perhaps aware that she was being scrutinised. Pippa withdrew into the shadows, breathing deeply and wondering what the hell she was going to do. Because it was imperative that she got as far away from this place as possible.