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Richard's Retirement

by Zoe Carroll

There was nothing exceptional about Richard. He had been retired for three years and was finding retirement tedious and boring. His working life had been spent in the shadows working for the government in a secret capacity, and keeping himself to himself was as much habit as trained response. People often saw Richard around in the suburb where he lived, but nobody could really tell you anything of any importance about him.

His marriage to Celine had broken down because of his secrecy. He often missed dinner parties and other such social engagements that she insisted on dragging him along to despite his protestations. He wasn't one for small talk and preferred to tell people as little about himself as possible. She never understood that his work often involved unusual working hours, last minute emergencies, foreign travel at short notice or long periods of time when he was uncontactable by telephone.

"You're having an affair, I know it" she accused one night when he had failed to turn up to her brother's birthday party. His half-truths sounded fabricated, he knew he was losing her because he couldn't tell her the truth to counter her concerns. He could only reveal that he was a civil servant, not the secret operative he really was. He knew that if he had told her the truth, she wouldn't have been able to help herself but tell her friends and his cover would be blown, his safety risked and the lives of other agents also endangered. So he had given her their home and walked away from his marriage.

That was the price of the job, he had known that when he took it. He was lonely without her but she deserved better than he could give her, she deserved the whole truth and he couldn't give her that. He had moved into his sparsely furnished and unremarkable flat ten years ago. He had managed his loneliness when he had been working but now, he felt dreary. His life lacked excitement and he could feel himself aging daily.

He spent his days walking in the hills beyond his Surrey flat, his evenings reading paperbacks in his local pub, or watching television alone at home. He gave the impression of being unapproachable and while not entirely unfriendly, not in need of friendship. He succeeded in being considered totally uninteresting. This approach, he considered, was his safety, as, since his retirement, he was no longer offered any protection by those who had once asked the unaskable of him. He had served his country for his entire working life and although he had his pension, he felt lost without the structure of the organisation and the challenge of the working day. He had been considered a relic by the new order of spies though, he followed Moscow rules, not like the modern clowns who hid behind technology. They had respect for each other, those old school agents. Maybe even admiration.

Richard closed his book and stood to leave “Cheers Alan,” he called to the barman, raising his hand in a half wave as he turned for the door. The night air had a chill to it after the warm day and he turned his collar to the breeze as he walked away from the pub and around the corner towards the block in which his flat took up half of the second floor. A small stone had become stuck under the main door to the block, preventing it from closing properly. It made the door difficult to open so Richard kicked this out of the way so that the door closed firmly behind him.

A thought crossed his mind briefly but he dismissed it just as quickly as it had arrived. He slipped his key into his front door and opened it as he always did. He caught the scent on the air as soon as the door was wide enough to announce his arrival. He immediately recognised the combination of cologne and personality and his pulse quickened, adrenaline instantly heightening his senses. He had only been close enough to smell this twice before, and as his life was in danger on both occasions, the low, earthy scent made his reaction physical, his every nerve on edge as he swallowed, before speaking into the darkness of his flat, trying to sound in control.

“Yuri, my friend, to what do I owe the pleasure of your company this evening?”

“Comrade Richard, surely you have been expecting me?”

Richard felt the excitement of adrenaline course through him, at least, he considered, he was still of interest to someone.