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Death Changes Everything

by Marion Umney

I landed in London on a wintry autumn evening and found myself shivering. The crisp sharp scent of the cold evening mist contrasted strangely with the earthy animal warmth, which had embraced me for the last month on the savannah. I had anticipated the drop in temperature and had already donned warmer clothing, but I hadn't accounted for the way the damp infiltrated my body and my mind, nor for the effects of the unavoidable emotional turmoil I knew was on the horizon.

The car appeared out of the mist and I felt the old familiar apprehension. It veered towards the kerb where I stood and came to a halt. I slid into the front seat by my mother and tossed my rucksack into the back, settling into the familiarity of the leather seats and the faint scent of Chanel mixed with stale tobacco. The car was twenty years old and had been part of my life for as long as I could remember. This was not a family that embraced change.

I leaned across and pecked my mother on the cheek before the car slid away from the kerb.

"Good journey, darling?"

"Yes, fine thanks. How's Dad?"

"Not good."

I registered the shock, the sense of dislocation. This was not the usual brushoff, the ritual “Oh, you know your father.”

But what had I expected? He was dying and even my mother could not pretend otherwise. It surprised me how scared I felt, not just for my darling father who I was about to lose, but for this woman, my mother, who in that moment I realised I didn't know at all.

The funeral was as awful as I had expected; the hymns no one knew, the vicar who clearly knew nothing about this man who had been my father, my mother's bright smile as she handed round sherry and sandwiches, the condolences from family friends, picking their words so as to appear sympathetic, while trying desperately to avoid anything which might provoke a display of emotion from me which would embarrass them; leave them feeling guilty and impotent in the face of grief.

Then it was over, and we were alone, my mother and I.

“So what are your plans?”

“I thought Thursday, there's a flight in the evening I could catch.”

“So soon.”

I caught sight of my mother's face, just for a second the mask fell and I saw her, full of loneliness and longing. Then the mask was back.

“Ok, well if that's what you want. What time? I'll take you to the airport shall I?”

“I don't have to go so soon, Mum. I could stay, if you want?”

What was I saying? I had fought so hard to escape the suffocation of this house, of her. I was myself in Africa. Could I ever be myself here?

But the words were out, and I saw a flash of hope on her face.

“Actually, that would be nice, darling. Just for a week or two maybe, if you wouldn't mind.”