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Margate

by Sue Hitchcock

The memory of Margate was rather rose-tinted and , no doubt, had tainted her relationship with Len. She could never quite feel it was enough, never feeling swept away, transported out of reality. The everyday comfort of having a lover, with whom she shared a lot of opinions just left Roma feeling a little uncertain. Was this the best she could expect for the rest of her life?

The Eastview Hotel wasn't large and had been managed by a Polish lady called Mrs Zelinsky. She had taught Roma all aspects of the job, even though she was supposed to be on the reception desk. With twenty or so rooms it required little work, so she became a factotum, clearing tables after breakfast, running the bar for the occasional drink or snack in the evening and attending to any room service, which the hotel provided.

The rose-tinted glasses had been provided by Mrs Zelinsky's son, Conrad, with whom she had fallen head-over-heels in love. Conrad was working on reception too, but additionally helping with cooking greasy, English breakfasts. He was blonde, with those slightly elongated eyes, which make Poles look slightly different from Germans, and entirely different from Roma's dark-lashed brown eyes. His eyes stared into hers and for the whole summer, they were joined to each other. They had watched the early sunrise over the sea from the parapet outside her window, they had lain in the sun on the beach, where the sand was the same colour as Roma's skin, Conrad had said. They had visited the Turner Museum, where Roma had first decided she wanted to study art, encouraged by Conrad, who was about to start a degree in Film and Theatre design in Wroclaw, where the Zelinskys came from.

Now Mrs Zelinsky was not there, nor was Conrad. The Eastview Hotel had changed hands, Brexit having seen the departure of the hard working woman .

“You worked here before?”

”Yes, two years ago.”

“It has all changed, but we can use another member of staff, so you’re in luck, but your duties may be different.”

The new manager was not old, but officious, asserting his dominance.

“Can you start in the morning, seven o’clock?”

“Sure thing.”

“The staff bedrooms are at the top, in the roof. Do you want me to show you the way?”

“Well, no. I suppose not.”

“Come down after and I’ll put you on the payroll.”

There were two staff bedrooms on the top floor, one for girls and one for men. The room she had occupied before was unchanged, except for the other girl’s clothes. It was irrelevant what the other girl was like- they would be working alternate shifts. The room which Conrad had occupied was next door, but she couldn’t interest herself in anyone else.

After giving her National Insurance number and details to Mr Trench, the manager, Roma went out to breathe the sea air, but was lured towards a fish and chip shop, bought her dinner and sat on the sea front to eat it, remembering doing so with Conrad. On return to the hotel to sleep, she wept at the loss she felt of her imagined paradise.

The summer slipped away, the lonely Roma trying to revive the experience, but the beach was closed, due to a sewage leak and the sun shone only sporadically. The Museum alone gave her any joy, and she bought a new sketchbook to console herself.

Roma’s loneliness was getting numbed by the routine, busy in the morning till all the departing guests had checked out, then somewhat bored until the other girl relieved her at three thirty. Sometimes she would take a nap, though daylight

hours were precious for drawing.

Towards the end of August, she was wakened from her nap by Mr Trench,

“There’s a phone call for you. They say it’s urgent.”

Roma staggered downstairs, still befuddled by sleep,

“Hello?”

“Roma, it’s Oliver.”

“Oliver?”

“From the Conyer Arms.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Look, it’s your Dad. He had a stroke last night. He’s OK.”

“What do you mean, ‘He’s O.K.’? Is he in hospital?”

“Yes, Maidstone, but he’s coming home tomorrow. Ted’s taken charge and he can drive him back.”

“Have you got Ted’s number?”

He dictated it to her but it was the hospital she had to ring first. The nurse told her that as long as that day’s tests were alright, her father would be sent home. He had a slight limp, but the main problem was speaking. It was difficult to understand his slurred speech.

Roma felt sick, but explained the situation to Mr Trench. He sounded sympathetic, but reminded her she had a day off later in the week. If she didn’t return, she would lose the bonus awarded for staying till the end of the season.

When Roma got home on the Thursday evening, the barge was dark, so she went along to the Conyer Arms. To her amazement, her father was sitting drinking with his mates as usual. He tried to stand when he saw her, but had to be steadied by Ted holding his elbow. He hugged her long and hard, then sat down with a bump. He was talking to her, but Roma couldn’t make out what he was saying and was mesmerised by the contortions his mouth was making. Her puzzlement made him turn to Ted and signal he should explain. While Ted told her about a nurse coming to help him every morning, Roma noticed her father trying to drink his beer with a

straw.

“What about food?”

“Well Oliver has kindly agreed to make something simple for him here and I’m collecting him. He’ll be alright until you get home.”

Talking to the nurse the next morning, she was informed that there was some doubt he would be able to manage long term in a leaky boat. They were discussing him needing to go into a nursing home, hearing which the old man started to bang on the table and shout a nasal, “No, No, No!”

“I’ll be home in a couple of weeks, I can help.”

But back in Margate a couple of weeks later, Oliver phoned again,

“I’m afraid your Dad died. I’m so sorry, Roma.”