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Memory Believes

by Rosalyn Hurst

She drove into the town dithering between parking in the supermarket carpark, free but entailing a fair walk to the cafe, or face the town carpark and the probability of failing the test of getting a ticket using her mobile, for that demanded a level of skill, patience and good eyesight, none of which she had.

Reminding herself, as she more frequently had to do these days, that she was called after Freya Stark that intrepid explorer, she forced herself to walk cursing the infliction of a name that made it impossible to take easy routes, and yet recalling that the famous Freya travelled in warm climates, with servants. This modern Freya found it impossible to avoid the last remnants of puddles or the careless ending of water falling from over head gutters to arrive at the cafe not wet but at that point where being wet and being very damp meet.

Last week Susan had rung to invite her to tea at the Cosy Teapot. She had been pleased to be invited out, a rare occasion even at the end of the pandemic. Unlike many of her friends she had resented being locked down or locked in. "Ridiculous at my age," she had said to many unsympathetic acquaintances, "I don't want to live forever, and certainly not in an old folks home, lost and bewildered, rather go now."

Susan had said, in way of preparation, "I've gathered together some old friends, all jabbed just a get together, nothing very special, I'm sure you will know them all... I think." Freya noticed the hesitation and wondered just who else would be there, and what the occasion was for.

Freya approached the Cosy Teapot with infinite sadness. She remembered when she was a teenager, it had been the first coffee bar in town, the first with a Jukebox, the first with hamburgers, a centre for the new generation of the sixties, all short skirts, long hair and loads of eyeliner. Now it had turned into something her mother or even her grandmother might have visited, all in hats and gloves and rigid, almost silent conversations for fear of being overheard.

What false nostalgia, what ridiculous rituals of cake and tea, what pretence of middle class grandeur. At least, thought Freya, it will be warm and dry, she could even recall the thick cigarette smoke of the coffee bar days and the misted up windows.

Susan was huddled in a corner, strangely wearing a woolly hat and gloves. The cafe was chilled, windows open, a back door open.

“They say we have to have air circulating,” Susan said as a way of greeting, then added quickly, seeing Freya about to draw breath, “please dear don’t make a fuss.”

Two old ladies walked in and to Freya’s astonishment, smiled and said, “Susan, Freya, how lovely see you both.” A shock, a hesitation, she knew them but how could they have aged so quickly?

“It must be nearly two years since we all met.” Two years of lockdown, enforced or voluntary, and in that time hair turned to white, wrinkles appeared, eyesights failed, knees ached. No wonder they looked at each other, slow in recognition.

A spare chair, who else was expected?

While a strange and clumsy dance commenced as the group found places for coats, umbrellas and bags, the door again opened and the chill autumn air was driven in before a tall woman, who turned to wave to a departing taxi before surveying the room.

Freya felt a spasm of pure hatred course through her, an emotion she had not felt for years. ‘Dear God,’ she thought, ‘is this the beginning of dementia?’ Then was surprised as the woman walked confidently towards them,

“Susan darling, how lovely to see you after all this time.”

She was elegant, a short expensive jacket, soft leather boots, no need for her to be laden with raincoats and umbrellas, no suggestion of a shopping bag. As she sat down, she looked around, “Christine, how lovely, to see you,” Christine beamed and said, almost humbly, “I read you were returning to town, must seem very strange after all your time in Paris. The headlines, Jay and Macron, Jay and Jill Biden, what fun you must have over there!”

Freya looked on, silent, who was this woman? she didn’t know any Jays, but then.

There was laugh, there was a way of touching the elegant hair, there was a gesture of the hands and then she noticed it, the ring, just like her ring. She met the eyes of this Jay, this imposter and Freya said,

“Well Joyce you’ve changed over the years,” A pause a choke, “ did he give you that ring? I could have murdered you back in the day.”

Christine turned to Susan, “I told you not to invite her,” and Susan replied, “oh my goodness I completely forgot.”

Jay echoed, a voice coming from the depths of forgotten history, "Oh the ring, what was his name? That loser, that charlatan, don't tell me he had you fooled, not you Freya of all people. Oh the ring, tawdry isn't it? I keep it as a memento of a lucky escape. You know he gave the same one to all his girl friends. Told me so that he could remember if he had ever screwed them."

Freya felt her dreams splintering, like one of those china cups, crashing to the floor in irreparable splinters. She thought of her ring, nurtured, polished never worn though handled often, the memory of her blissful nights with him, the tragedy when he had vanished without a farewell without an explanation, rumoured to have followed Joyce abroad, and who now in this chilly cafe in a matter of minutes had been reduced to a skeletal phantom without substance.

Susan filled the silence with orders for tea and cream cakes, while Christine who was jolly and plump commented that a little bit of cake never did any much harm.

Then Jay laughed, "What was his name?" And Freya with some hesitation was stunned that she could not recall it either. "And I was going to murder you? Why I wonder?"

Outside, the autumn leaves blew along the High Street, memories of a glorious spring, still showing some colour and grandeur as they came to rest on the sodden street.