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## The Last Game

by Richard Lewis

Three months had passed since my sister and I relocated mother, along with an acute sense of guilt, into the welcoming arms of the Melrose Nursing Home. Although it felt wrong, we knew it would never work having her living with either of us. She was no exception to the rule that all mothers are insane. Mind you, I must also be a little crazy as she is so much a part of me. I see her face at every turn of the road and feel her imprint, etched on my soul.

She was difficult but then she'd had a difficult life. As a child suffering attacks from a disturbed, older step-brother and a harsh, unforgiving father, which led to the habit of locking herself away in the bathroom with a good book to keep out of harm's way.

Later when the horrors of war came calling, her beloved boyfriend Jimmy was killed in an air raid. Wartime deprivations left an indelible mark on mother, giving her an undying appreciation for food. "There's no such thing as bad food," she'd say, "not when you've had to go without."

After she passed, on writing the eulogy I asked her sister, my aunt, about mother's early life and she said that from the age of five, all she wanted on her birthday was to be taken into the countryside in search of wild flowers, which she would collect and press between the pages of books. Wild orchids, cornflower, columbine, she loved them all. I think she preferred plants to people, they never did her any harm. She went on to study botany and horticulture and knew the Latin names for any plant you'd care to mention.

She also built up an arsenal of obscure words for doing battle at the scrabble board. Two letter words, three letter words, words no one had ever heard of. Being a lightweight at the game I'd ask, "what does that word mean?" and she'd say, "I don't know but it's in the dictionary and that's all that matters." I remember the last game we had, she was drugged up on morphine and unable to form a sentence but still managed to thrash me at scrabble.

We shared a love of music, whereas I was into songwriting and played by ear, she would only play when the music was in front of her. She could play anything and did so until a few months before she died, even if it was rather lacking in feeling. She would say, "I like to play, it keeps my fingers flexible."

Mother was practical to a fault, those clever hands having spent unnumbered hours tending her garden, grafting apple trees, spinning her own wool, knitting and dressmaking or cutting an impossibly thin slice of Hovis. Those hands however, were shy when it came to touching people. The only memory I have of her touch as a child was during bath-time or when she patched me up after a fall; expertly tending to my wounds in an unemotional manner. I became accident prone, perhaps as an unconscious way of getting her attention and was her mistake in need of correction, though later in life we seemed to develop a more healthy relationship.

Religion had played a vital role in mother's life but close to the end she seemed to question her faith and asked for a visit from the minister, which reassured her. She asked him something I thought spoke volumes. "Which is better, a long life or a happy one?"

As her strength failed, she made it clear she was ready to go and had no intention of hanging around, choosing a way out borrowed from her father, who, after a stroke had refused food and drink. This seemed ironic as food had always been so important to her.

For weeks, she drifted in and out of consciousness, until one day I had a call from my sister to say that she had gone. I arrived at the home to see her lying peacefully in bed. As I looked out of the window into the uncaring night, the moon was breaking free from behind the clouds and seemed to reflect the pale satisfaction on mother's face, that seemed to say, "I've finally escaped the world that's held me captive for over ninety years."