

## How Wonderful to be Alive

by Miriam Silver

How had we all squeezed into this house? I asked myself as I sat at what was my mother called her work area. It was in fact her kitchen table, under the shelves displaying unused plates. From here she could reach the drawer to her right in which she kept an assortment of bills, clips, photos, nails and screws which belonged somewhere, firmly believing one day she'd sort it all out.

Now it was up to me, her son, who, having returned too late was left with the plans for the funeral and my guilt. At the very least I should have been here, at her end, but no, my family and business were paramount. Now of course my conscience is overwhelming me, making me feel unable to tackle anything, least of all mother's drawer.

The cremation, was what she wanted, no fuss, no flowers and it went smoothly. The local tearoom provided refreshments for relations and friends. Just what she would have liked, quiet, unassuming, just as she had led her life.

My sister Janice arrived in time for the funeral, the journey from Scotland being problematical. We were not close, hadn't seen each other or visited for some time, both making the same excuses, geography and family. Neither of us having had much if anything, to do with any of the folk we'd just met.

The house where we'd grown up and left so long ago was an empty unwelcoming place, not the home we knew, we both reluctantly went in while wishing silently we were back with our own family, anywhere but here.

“Come on, make yourself a drink, how long can you stay?” I asked my sister in an effort to cover the moment.

“I’ve booked the sleeper, two nights, ” she replied while looking round.

“Don’t fancy staying here, I’ll book us into the Premier Inn, I suppose we’ll need time to deal with death certificates, this house, is there a Will?”

“Don’t know much about their affairs, ” Janice said sounding at a loss.

“Neither do I, that’s why I’ll start here, with this drawer, see what I can find, Mum wasn’t one to share, seemed independent to me whenever I spoke to her, never wanted to bother us.”

“I’ve found the drink,” Janice said putting a large whiskey at my right hand.

“Thanks, helps a lot,” I said pulling the drawer out.

“You start upstairs, must be some black bags somewhere.”

Feeling like an intruder and a stickler for order I started by sorting the contents the mother’s drawer into piles. Bills, council tax, services, family photos, all the categories without which we cannot live, I even found a Will together with the deeds to the house.

By the time it was nearly empty only a large unlabelled envelope was left with an assortment of elastic bands, scissors, sticky tape and sweets.

“Jan better come here,” I called urgently, “better do this together.”

In silence, passing the letters between us we gradually realised that our mother had conducted a friendship at a distance, with, we supposed it was a man, who wrote lovingly in clear writing that when his disabled wife didn’t need him, he would join her and continue ‘those outings’ and eventually living together.

No photos were included, the letters went back to after their Dad died, the last one dated recently.

“I wonder if he knows?”

I didn't comment.

"Well, at least she had some dreams, good for her, those letters make it clear she was very involved with him."

"No wonder she didn't need us," I said.

"Didn't notice anyone strange at the funeral, perhaps we'd better look for his address and tell him," Janice suggested.

"Let's get some food and rest, tomorrow is another day."

Neither of us expressed any criticism, perhaps we were even envious.

'How wonderful to be alive,' I thought, 'but why does it always hurt?'

"Let's go to the pub and celebrate her life."