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Remembrance

by Marion Umney

He had been doing the job for a long time, but this year had been so different. Of course they were busier than he could remember them ever having been, but it was the quietness that struck him. There was still the constant flow of vehicles, but less people. He missed the people.

That day just seemed like a normal day. He arrived as usual and picked up the schedule, before checking everything was in working order. As usual, a small group started to gather a good quarter of an hour before the first proceedings were due to start. He checked the video equipment was all in order, something he still wasn't entirely used to. He tried to imagine what it must be like to watch this on an internet link, being that person who was close, but not close enough to be included in the allowed group of 10.

He didn't usually bother much now about the details of those on the list. When he had started the job he had let his imagination create the people to match the names, the dates of birth; created stories about them, their life their families. It helped to make them real, not just names on a list, disembodied numbers on a worksheet. This year there hadn't been time. The services were shorter, more perfunctory, less time to recreate what had been lost in this interim place, where they were no longer here yet were still so alive to those who queued to spend a few moments with what was left of them. That was why, whenever he could he went to the garden. There he could take a little time to read the names and recreate them a little in his mind. He really didn't want to become just an automaton, a cog in the wheel of the necessary and hygienic disposal of bodies.

His eye ran quickly over the list, then stopped on a name. Joseph Jenkins. Joey J, it couldn't be, could it? The date of birth was about right. Unlikely though, Joey had gone to Australia. They had had such good times he and Joey, the two of them more often in trouble than not, sailing pretty close to the wind.

"I'll do the video for the morning then shall I?" he casually suggested, much to the surprise of his colleagues.

"OK." And it was agreed.

The group was small as it had to be in these times. He didn't recognise anyone behind those masks, and the short service, with all the perfunctory eulogies delivered by the celebrant rather than the family gave him no clues as he sat, a voyeur on their grief.

He needed to get some air when it was over, and it was in the garden that he saw her.

"Do you mind?" he asked as he sat himself carefully at the opposite end of the bench.

"Help yourself," she barely glanced at him.

He waited, unsure how to start then turned to face her.

"It's Mrs Jenkins isn't it. I'm sorry for your loss. I hope you don't mind my asking, but I think I might have known your husband. Was he at South Minster Secondary School between 1970 and 1980?"

She turned to him with a flicker of interest in her eyes.

"He was, and you are?"

He was late back. They had talked for over an hour, in that garden of remembrance. Some stories she had heard and some she hadn't. They had laughed at the joy and energy of a man they had both loved in their own way. They had cried a little too and parted good friends.

'How wonderful to be alive,' he had thought as he hurried back to work, 'but why does it always hurt?'