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## Degrees of Silence

by Rosalyn Hurst

I sit beside my mother, holding her hand. We are quiet, the hospital machines hum gently as she \sleeps. When did she become my child, often needy, sometimes playful but increasingly frail? As the grey emerges from my hair she often fails to recognise me. She searches for a young girl and I look on her lined face and I search for the mother I once knew.

A nurse enters; the routine of turning, checking machines, a kindly word brings sounds. My mother's eyes open. She searches for words, and with effort gasps, 'Listen to me. It is nearly time. You must go, you must find her.' She whispers, 'Where's my little girl? My ...' she coughs weakly '...daughter. Bring her home. So little time.'

I turn to the nurse, I say, 'It's so sad, she's so confused these days. She doesn't know me.'

The nurse says, 'Perhaps.'

I need peace, an evening walk past the village graveyard. The evening emerges secretively, hushed. The birds have finished their evening display, only the odd chirrup from a nest, a whirring of moment as a bat flies low over the hedge, a late bee hums on the hollyhock, a breeze rustles the tall grasses.

A man moves noiselessly between the graves. He stops from time to time to collect the dying flowers or to pick a weed from some newly dug plot or to gently wipe cobweb or moss from a headstone. He approaches me, as in the far distance we hear the train whistle calling across the fields. He takes my hand and gently says, 'Listen it calls. It is time. You know you must go, you must find her. Bring her back.'

I say, 'Perhaps.'

I have reserved a seat in the Quiet Carriage as the train careers northward. The train does not recognise the quest for silence and as leaps the points, screams at every bend, and whose brakes curse at the driver who tries to slow the onward charge.

The passengers do not speak to each other, immersed as they are in the digital world from where there is glimpses of a voice, some music. But rules are broken with one-liners such as 'Bloody Hell' and 'bastard' as, I assume, the written message on their screen is challenged. Mobile phones vibrate and throb forcing the recipient to leave the quiet zone with pomposity intended to demonstrate the importance of the call.

I too receive a text: *Are you near? All arranged. It is time. Do not delay. Take courage.*

I approach a door. Behind me, no breeze stirs the heathers on the high moor, no birds call, no traffic races in the valley below. I cannot disturb this silence. Before me a black house soars into a black starless night. No bell, no gnarled door knocker, and yet the door opens with a sigh and I enter.

For a long time, I do not move from the dark, wood-panelled hall. I turn my head slowly from side to side to catch to a voice, to hear some movement. Silence surrounds me, so powerful, it deletes my cough, it obliterates the tap of my impatient shoes on the polished floor. My senses are blurred with the opiate of bees wax polish that seeps from the wooden panels, that rises from a hall table.

A door opens. A woman emerges, her long robes sweep the ground, a nun, a muslim in traditional dress I cannot tell, mist of incense or is it sandalwood surrounds her. She speaks, her voice so gentle,

'So you are here and you have found her. She tried to leave you, she blamed you, she cursed you. But now she is on the good path, she wants to return. She may destroy the peace you seek, she will disrupt your preferred path, but she will give you love, a precious gift.'

And from the room comes my daughter, I gasp, not the teenager that I had lost so many years ago. Is it she whom my mother longs to see? I take her hand and we walk together into a large room, full of young people, full of noise and colour and light.

A new beginning? Perhaps.

I.