

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

June Jamboree

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An old woman wakes early. Old age is cruel at best, she has had to suffer a horrific skin condition resulting in massive black warts, tough facial hair, sunken cheeks, to become the very epitome of childhood nightmares of evil witches, spells and curses. No cure can be now offered at this final stage of her life, and she cannot withstand any further plastic surgery or botox that disguised the onset of such disfiguration. And so it is that she is hidden from public sight.

She is unaware these days of the advance of her condition, though occasional touches to her face give her little reassurance, and so she is encouraged to wear silk gloves that at least glide over her skin. Mirrors are banned by her carers, who seem to change so frequently these days. She is lonely, but still has a strong instinct to live just one more day, to see this time of year again, but does not understand why.

There is just something that hovers on the edge of her mind, a thought she cannot put words to. The bright morning sun blazes into her bedroom, but the world is so silent. The scent of early roses, cut grass stir memories and she feels this is an important time, but cannot recall why; cannot remember why a birthday, an anniversary? In frustration she waves the thought away, but it gives her strength to move from her bed. She peers through the louvred blinds that cover the window, eventually managing to manoeuvre the slats to allow a very restricted view of the remote estate hidden in Ashdown Forest.

She looks up at the sky, a solitary plane leaves Gatwick this early morning, its engines throb and roar overhead. And yet that sound, she is sure there must be more but the skies are strangely empty.

The door opens.

'My goodness darling you're up already?' said with little comfort, as the carer closes the slats of the blind. 'Now Joyce, back to bed and we'll have a nice cuppa together.'

She is led or rather pushed back to her bed as the carer leaves grumbling but she does not choose to respond to the question following her along the corridor...

‘Who is Joyce?’

‘Morning Natasha, and how is she this morning?’

Upstairs the old woman recognises the male voice, a son, no, what was it? Footman? Police? Maybe? Security? She sits, she picks at her nightie, she moves her foot to and fro. She is not frightened but very puzzled.

Downstairs the man sits at the table in the large kitchen.

Brusque questions, ‘Everything alright, quiet night, still alive?’

‘Bloody confused again. Doesn’t recognise her name, poor old Joyce. But she was up, surprised me and kept going on about planes.’

He thinks, ‘Bloody hell, time for yet another new carer, can’t trust them to keep calling her darling and avoid that name, what a mistake to choose that one.’

These unending days, not what he had joined up for. Everybody in his world knew that regular work was only another name for being robbed and dying of boredom and yet here he was far from the real action and if not actually dying of boredom was well on the way to that sad end.

Natasha knowing the ways of the police offers coffee, laces with a vodka. She knows he is police, she knows there is something unsaid about this imprisoned old lady and Natasha is certain Joyce is not her client’s name. Silently she waits for more information. She’s been a carer before to that old Duke, so there might a story for the press later. Sadly Natasha does not know her days in this house or even on this earth are limited.

A sound outside, two ponies being ridden along the drive outside the Manor. Upstairs a peel of laughter, the man and carer race up and open the door to see the old woman has not only opened the louvres but lifted the screen and is waving to the astonished girls below. She turns, saddened,

‘Why Justin, only two horses and one plane in the fly past? I hear there is trouble at the airport is that the hold up?’

Within minutes, Justin is on the secure line.

‘Sir, we have trouble this end. She regaining some marbles, knew my name and that bloody carer must’ve told her about the bloody airports!’

A strangled panicked voice screams downtime line, ‘You have trouble? You don’t know what’s happening here!’

With a sob the voice continues, ‘The best of all bloody stand-ins just died the day before the Derby, dropped down stone dead, seems there was some infection from the plastic surgery, and now the next one is in a panic, wouldn’t go to St Paul’s, you saw that farce of everyone trooping in as if She was there. Then the bloody woman wouldn’t stand on the balcony at Buckingham Palace for more the five minutes. At least we’ve managed the row between the brothers to divert attention and up to now the photo-shops are been accepted...more or less. It’s bloody mayhem.’

Justin does not panic.

‘Only a few more days Sir, weeks at the most. I was never in favour of these celebrations and once they were started we had to keep her alive. Downing Street hoping it would result in “an outpouring of tributes,” if only they knew.’

‘For god’s take don’t tell me Downing Street knows about our arrangement?’

Justin grits his teeth to answers as diplomatically as possible,

‘No Sir, they don’t and too bloody self centred to notice or perhaps scared to mention.’

There is a grunt of agreement,

‘They are all ready for it, they are all now waiting. Black hats, outfits even the bloody shoes all ordered last week for the women, parades in rehearsal down at Salisbury.’

Justin continues smoothly, ‘Let’s agree early August. After the recent airport debacle most families will be away on holiday. The knighted quack is on hand to do the deed. Ship the body up to London, DNA confirmed etc etc, closed coffin of course, cannot risk the stand-in’s scar might be noticed.’

In the kitchen sipping the now cooling coffee Justin gives a fleeting thought to planning the disappearance of Natasha and the stand-ins, the latter so much easier to dispose of. And then his thoughts turn to succession and the need arrange a further rapid turnover of the head of the current firm.
