

Homecoming?

by Marion Umney

It was getting late as they entered the town and found their hotel, a grey stone building with a certain faded elegance, hidden from the road by a bank of trees. The reception area was cool and inviting however, and the receptionist ready to chat, eager to know their plans.

“We’re just doing a bit of research actually.” Emily had learned a long time ago not to mention she was a journalist. The response was usually either a stone wall of suspicion, or an overeager interest in who she might have interviewed and what they might have said – a presumption of celebrity which she could never identify with. Laura was less circumspect.

“We’re looking at a bit of family history actually, and we want to find out a bit more about the Carltons.”

“You’re related to the Carltons. I thought the family had died out.” She called across to a colleague sitting in the office behind her.

“Hey John. You know Miss Carlton who managed one of the mines before the coal board took it over? did she ever marry do you know?”

The man looked up and seeing the two women at the desk came out from the office. He was about Laura’s age, possibly slightly older, with a mop of grey hair and soft grey eyes.

“Mr Arkwright has lived here all his life.”

The receptionist introduced him. If you want to know anything about local history he’s your man aren’t you John?” she smiled across at him as he scrutinised the two women.

A frown crossed Laura’s face. She was sure she had come across that name before, but for the life of her she couldn’t remember where. Probably not. In this part of the world you couldn’t get a name more common than John Arkwright and yet.... She held her hand out “Laura Blackmoor, and this is my daughter Emily. Pleased to meet you Mr. Arkwright.”

And you, MRS Blackmoor?”

The questionmark at the end was palpable and Emily found herself bristling, although she couldn’t quite work out why. Laura, to her surprise, just laughed. “Please just call me Laura.” As Emily wondered how many more surprises she was going to get over these next few days.

The man gave a small smile.

“So Laura, you’re looking for the Carltons. Well that’s easy, The former home of the Carlton family has been turned into a museum. It features the history of mining in the area as well as housing documents and photos relating to the family itself. Not the most illustrious family round here I have to say, but it’s a nice little museum. Carlton House it’s called.” He reached across the desk to the rack containing flyers for local attractions. “Here you are. There’s a map as you can see. It’s just a short walk from here.” He marked in the location of the hotel as he was speaking, then handed the flyer to Laura. “Was there anyone you were particularly interested in?”

“Not really” Emily interjected, before Laura could open her mouth, “One of our ancestors came from here and we think she might have had connections to the Carltons, that’s all. We needed a holiday and have never been to this part of the world, so it just seemed a good idea to kill two birds with one stone.”

“Right” John Arkwright smiled at Emily and then at Laura, “Well if I can be of any help just let me know.” And with that he turned and withdrew to his cubbyhole behind the reception desk, leaving the two women to register and collect their keys.

As they moved towards the stairs Emily glanced over her shoulder at the desk and couldn’t help but notice Mr Arkwright still watching her mother.

A quick internet search revealed a dearth of eateries in the town apart from fast food outlets, so they decided to eat in the hotel restaurant and perhaps get a recommendation from the desk for the following evening.

The restaurant was surprisingly bright and modern in comparison to the faded elegance of the rest of the hotel. There were several other guests and, the couple at the next table, when they overheard them discussing what to choose from the small, but interesting menu were keen to recommend the duck. Laura took the recommendation, but Emily stuck to her vegetarian principles and ordered the roasted butternut squash. A good bottle of chianti rounded off the order, and they sipped this slowly, nibbling on some olives while they waited for their main course.

“Cheers Mum. Here’s to a successful trip.”

Emily raised her glass and Laura reciprocated, with a smile.

“I can’t believe I’m here Em. It feels really strange arriving at the place where my mother sprang from, or at least my grandmother. I know this sounds mad, or perhaps a bit over-romanticised, but I was hoping for a sort of homecoming feeling; almost as if I belong here more than I do at home, but,” she pulled a face, “nothing. It’s a bit bleak isn’t it?”

Emily couldn’t disagree. She too had felt the bleakness of the town as they arrived, as if it was disintegrating into a ghost town, a shadow of its former self.

“I guess it’s deteriorated a lot since your grandmother’s time and even since Grannie was last here. The closing of the mines must have changed everything. Cheer up. You never know, when we start to dig into this town and our connections to it anything might happen. Tomorrow after all is another day.”