Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

Smoke and Mirrors

by Dave Appleby

The letter arrived three days after Juliet's funeral—written in her hand and warning me not to attend.

I held the crumpled page before my disbelieving eyes. The words squirmed out of focus. This was madness.

I had stood between her first and second husbands, black-clad, droning hymns. I'd drizzled soil onto her grave-plunged coffin. I had sipped her favourite Merlot and gnawed on sausage rolls while swapping small talk with the other mourners at the cacophonous after-party. Nothing bad had happened to me. Nothing worse than losing Juliet, my other self.

I dropped the letter on the stripped-pine table, one more piece of jetsam added to the chaos of my flat. The promised tidy-up would have to wait. Now was the time to search for reasons. As if there's ever any sense to death. Or living.

I studied myself in the bathroom mirror. Tried a smile. It warped. She always used so much make-up, spending ages contemplating her reflection. This made her late for everything. Including final letters, so it now appeared.

I scraped my face. Sometimes, as I shave, I hold a conversation with my personal antithesis, my left-right-perverted image. Not today. Nothing to say. How does life talk to the deceased?

Clothed, shrouded in a belted overcoat against the drizzle, I trudged through the Sunday-silent streets. The rain soon soaked my hair, and little streams of water trickled down my cheeks. I sheltered underneath the roof of the lychgate. But I knew I shouldn't linger at the threshold of the churchyard, so I steeled myself. Moved on to where the mound of freshly excavated earth marked her grave. Sat on the ground.

Unpocketing my hip flask, I poured a drop of her favourite Médoc on the ground, then used the rest to toast her.

From the start, because there'd been a mix-up with her birth certificate, she wasn't Juliet. That was a pseudonym, her nom de guerre. Her real name, her truth, had been lost in the system.

When she was seventeen, she'd been apprenticed to a conjuror, which made her sceptical of miracles. But when she told him she was with his child, he vanished, leaving her his rabbits. She was lucky. An ultrasound soon diagnosed it as a phantom pregnancy—she always was a hypochondriac—and she became an escapologist. What happened to the rabbits? No one knows. One moment they were hopping madly, here and there; the next…

Then came the marriages. They didn't last. She told me she felt trapped, not so much by her partners or their expectations but by the ruts of daily life. When she was on her own, she knew that she could be spontaneous. Nobody knew, or even cared, if she stayed out all night. She felt that freed her.

Some days she would set out walking, turning left or right at random, creating an entangled, labyrinthine path just for the sake of flouting plans, of going somewhere she had never been before.

I knew her as she withered, as her flesh sank beneath her bones. By then, she had acquired a ginger tom called Schrödinger, a right Macavity whose fiendish grin had lingered in the neighbourhood's collective memory long after he'd exhausted all nine lives.

She was bereaved but thoughtful. She told me that she knew a way to outwit death. "It isn't over till the fat lady sings," she said, "and I'm no longer fat." She had a puckish sense of fun.

I light my spliff and watch the smoke ascending. Grief evaporates. I stare between the headstones stretching up the hillside like a beginner's class in trompe-l'œil. Far in the distance flits an evanescent figure. I contemplate the possibilities.