

Afterwards

It was the usual scene and the usual crowd. I had never been keen on funerals at the best of times, and had I not been gently coerced into going, I should never have attended. That morning I'd jammed my hand in the locking system of the step-ladder and nearly broken two fingers. No blood but amazing bruises. Blood would have been preferable, and as Connie said, there was no way I was going to get any writing done. I might as well go with her to the funeral. So I went.

As funerals go, it was difficult. Connie and Violet had been friends at college and afterwards. The two of them had shared a flat for nearly two years and then Connie had shifted to London and left Violet behind. There had been no involvement - ever - so far as I guessed; they'd liked one another but not in that particular way. All this information I'd gleaned on the drive to the church. I really had fucked up my fingers: driving was an impossibility. So I sat in the passenger seat and listened.

We didn't talk all the way; after a half-hour I slid in a CD and let myself day-dream. The painkillers I'd taken had left me a bit light-headed. The music cut through my thoughts, though. It's always come as a shock to me when anyone under the age of forty buys the farm, and from what I'd gathered, Violet hadn't abused any particular poison; she didn't drink much, she'd seldom smoked. She didn't have a particularly demanding job, but she was on the road more often than not. The smash that had taken her out had doubtless been a combination of all the usual dumb things: poor visibility, wet roads, failing light, and possible fatigue. Not a very dramatic or remarkable list: I'd heard it all before, but enough in this instance to end a life.

Connie was thirty-five, and Violet had been a year younger. Back in the house where the wake was taking place I was introduced to a variety of women I'd never remember, and a single one I would.

I was given a glass of truly awful white wine (later I saw the utilitarian box from which it had been drained) and managed to dispose of it without damaging my stomach lining. Then I got talking to an older woman who was had taken possession of a bottle of reasonable scotch and I had a spot of that instead. The pain-killers were fading, and the alcohol did a useful job of dulling the pain. The woman seemed curious to know how I'd come to injure myself, and then unimpressed when I explained that I'd been trimming the hedge. I wasn't so impressed with the fact myself. But the disappointment wasn't enough to kill off her interest in talking to me. She began to tell me about her job, as if we'd met at an ordinary party and had to pass off the first minutes in banal exchanges. Connie took a uneven pride in my apparent career as a writer of horror stories. Personally I never tell people what I do. I look like the gardener I spend most of my life being. It's good space in which to think, down in the vegetable patch, up to my elbows in soil, heavy Wellingtons fixing me to the earth.

The woman was still talking. I gathered that she was something in middle-management. I was frankly very bored, but as she was happy to pour me

another scotch, I was happy enough to drink it down. I saw Connie over on the other side of the room and pulled a face at her. She grinned and returned to her conversation.

“What did you think of the service?” I was pushed for a response on that front.

“It seemed ok.”

“You knew Violet?”

“I know Connie. She knew Violet.”

“Oh, Connie. Right. You’re with her?”

I looked squarely at her, taking in her face for the first time and deciding that there was no reason why I shouldn’t admit that much. “Yes,” I said, “I’m with Connie.”

“You’ve been together long?”

“Uh-huh.” What is it about formal settings that sets me off on a monosyllabic track?

“I’m Clara,” she confided. When the news failed to touch me she added, “Violet was living with me. She was my girlfriend.”

“She was?” That did surprise me. From what Connie had said, Violet was far too... ethereal for a meat-and-potatoes relationship with someone as solid and unimaginative as this. I’d seen the pictures: Violet had been a good-looking soul with a kind of simple delicacy. In the words of Connie’s forefathers, she’d looked almost *fey*. The woman across me from me had a strong, almost-ugly face and odd, light-coloured eyes. There was nothing *there* of the ethereal. Then it struck me that I’d produced the wrong reaction. I said, “I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“Well, yes.” She poured us both another drink. As I lifted my glass, the pain in my fingers bright and cold, another woman came over to join us. This one was tall and slim in that fine, not awkward style. Fair hair cut expensively short, and an equally pricey black suit. For me funereal dressing is not a problem: I always wear black. The darkness was only a little lifted by the pristine white shirt I’d taken the time to change into. She smiled at Clara.

I looked from my host to her friend and saw that they were lovers. Without even thinking about exactly what I was going to say I heard the words leave me: “So did Violet know about you two?”

Clara inhaled her drink and it went everywhere. When she’d finished coughing she said, “Excuse me,” and almost ran from the room.

I stood still, watching her exit. The other woman regarded me severely. “I

can't believe you said that," she told me.

"No. I can understand that. Whatever. But you are lovers, aren't you?" I watched her. "And I'm not going to be telling anyone, so what's your concern? It's been going on a while, hasn't it?"

"A few months."

"Uh-huh. And how long did Violet live here?"

"A few months." She wouldn't meet my eyes.

"The... same few months, right?"

Outside the rain had started. I watched the cold July day dim still further. We'd had far too much rain: crops were springing up but not producing much. The night before I'd been shelling peas to make soup, but half the pods had been flat and almost empty.

"Did she know? Was that what killed her?"

She didn't just turn pale; she went grey. Even her eyes got lighter. And her eyebrows locked together in a frown that was meant to make me back off. I didn't.

"I mean," I smiled vaguely around, "I'm assuming she didn't know when she moved in here that you were fucking Clara, right? Which makes me wonder why she moved in at all. What was the situation that you and Clara weren't an item in your own right?"

She continued to stare at me.

"So there was some reason why neither of you told her that you two were an item. I'm assuming said motive wasn't money, although it often is money. And what happened, then, did she come back some night to find the two of you in some kind of clinch? Having full-blown sex there on the living room floor, on the very attractive rug I can see beyond the doorway. That would about do it.

"And then she'd have just spun around - I don't think she would have said anything - and left you both there. And she'd be driving in one of these cold July evenings, with the rain coming down hard and the roads slippery, and her eyes maybe too full of tears to see the road ahead of her? Does that sound about right?"

"How the hell...?"

"And so she'd be going too fucking fast to slow down on the corner by the newsagent. She'd take a left and start to brake, but the traction would be gone. She'd start to skid, and she'd pull too hard on the wheel. Another moment and she'd smash into the wall. A pretty solid wall, too. Old stone.

Very fine. And it would do its job well enough. She'd be alive then but hopefully almost out of it. By the time the ambulance reached her it would be mostly over. She'd die in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, and she'd die without saying anything to indicate the little hell that had gone an hour or so before."

Her face was now the colour of dirty snow. I said, "I guess that that would about do it." I raised my eyebrows at her and smiled. "And then when the dust settles, you two can join up and fuck yourselves happy."

I saw her face change and I turned around to see Clara standing there. I didn't know whether or not she'd heard my little speech; I didn't honestly care; it didn't matter, anyway. She'd hear it all afterwards.

I included her in my grin, and then I turned again as Connie came over and put a hand on my arm. She said, "Would it be okay with you if we left now?"

"Now is good," I said. I handed Clara my glass and she took it numbly. I thanked her for the hospitality and Connie and I left. The funny thing about some guardian angels is that we aren't always very good at guarding people, especially the ones who need it most.

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