

MOURNING TEA

A short story

By

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MOURNING TEA

I have decided to record everything that happens. For clarity's sake – so there is no argument later.

Writing is not easy for me these days. My hands are stiff, my eyesight variable. My grandson, Tom, bought me a machine for processing words, but I've never mastered the beast. It whirrs and hums and asks me to do things, then, when I press a key, it laughs at my stupidity and says 'try again'. It mocks me, mocks my old age – mocks my 'technological illiteracy' as Tom would call it. It says you don't belong in the same world as me, as Tom.

And maybe it's right.

So, now, I sit at the kitchen table with paper and pen and wait for the kettle to boil – for morning tea. Earl Grey for Emma, Darjeeling with a hint of Lapsang for me. Sugar for both, though the doctor says we shouldn't. It helps the medicine go down, we tell him – and it certainly will today.

The sun shines. The cat, Rosa, sleeps on the doormat. Pennine hills emerge from morning mist. The air is still apart from the cry of a curlew – mournful, sad, always in bereavement for something or someone. The milkman's left a note to say he will be away next week. In Majorca, on what he calls a 'package deal'. Sounds horrible. He's left milk, eggs and cheese and asked Mrs Minton at Dale Farm to do a shop for us on Monday. Dear Mrs Minton, what would we do without her? She drives us to town on market day. She drives us back again. She stokes the fire and does the wash – apart from underwear. She says it's no bother, but we're not so sure. We're not easy children, Emma and I. We have our ways, our rituals, and foibles, our carefully tuned testiness and our polite exclusion of outsiders – our own world, carefully constructed over forty years.

We must drive her mad.

The kettle is whistling, but I shall let it boil for another minute – to get rid of impurities. Our water comes from a spring, but you can't be too careful. Twenty years of acid rain will have seeped through by now, along with radioactivity from Russia and chemical fertiliser from farmers. Not a nice world. When we moved here twenty years ago, we thought we'd get away from it all. But it all comes with you – wherever you go. Nothing escapes the hand of man. Emma says that even the flowers smell differently and that the call of a crested grebe is quite different to what it was thirty years ago.

She should know. She's an expert on birds. She has a book her father gave her and, when she was a child, she roamed the countryside looking for migrating flamingos – 'I know you don't believe me, Simon, but they are occasionally to be seen, on their way south'.

I believe you, dear Emma.

She's stopped her roaming now. Scared she'll find another cormorant blown in from the Irish Sea. The last one had a beak like a corkscrew and one foot. It couldn't eat properly and was half-starved. She kept it in the kitchen, but it wouldn't take food – couldn't get it past the deformed mouth. One night, there was a terrible screech as though it had suddenly become aware of its deformities, of the pointlessness of its existence. The next morning, we found it dead, wings splayed out, beak broken off on the grey stone floor.

Emma hid her book after that.

Whistle at full blast now. Fifteen seconds to go then I'll make the tea. Of course, I won't be able to finish what I'm writing in the normal way that a story is finished, and I'm afraid there may be some frustration for the reader in not knowing how things turned out. But I'll write a bit more when I'm upstairs, so that you will be able to get a feeling of how the day went.

Rosa's woken and come in for food. That's a good sign. It means fine weather till midday. Long enough to dry the smalls that I hung up last night in the orchard. I always do the smalls and sock wash. Gives me a sense of renewal, a sense of excitement – especially Emma's underwear. Forty years on and I still find it erotic – before and after the wash. Perhaps I'll find her red silk camisole. She might like to wear it today. I'd like her to.

In bed, waiting for the tea to draw and scratching away on a pad of blue Basildon Bond. Sugar, milk and pills lain out on a tray beside me – Emma propped up on pillows, but with her eyes closed.

She asks what I am writing and I say it's a letter to Tom thanking him for the computer chess game that he sent me for my eighty-fifth birthday.

"You never use it," she sighs.

"I know. But I can still say thank you."

She smiles and says to send her love. He's not her real grandson and he calls her Granny Step, but sometimes I think he loves her more than me.

When I came upstairs with the tea tray, Emma was lying curled up under the blankets – a ball in a blue sea. I drew back the curtains and sunlight streamed onto the bed – mist lifting from fells, limestone ridges reaching for the sky and welcoming warmth on to their ancient cratered surfaces.

Emma stayed hidden.

"The days and I have nothing in common anymore," she said. "The night is my friend. It hides what I cannot see."

"Don't be such a gloom-bird", I cajoled.

I put down the tea tray and peeled away the blankets.

She sleeps naked even at the age of seventy – thumb in mouth, grey hair higgledy-piggledy over shoulders, chin on knees. I cupped her behind in my hand and squeezed; felt the silk in my dressing gown pocket, but left it there. She wouldn't want to go away in a red silk camisole.

She uncurled. I propped up pillows and helped her onto them.

She no longer has full use of her legs.

As a child in Denmark, she had cycled everywhere and developed strong thighs. When I met her forty years ago, on an academic exchange visit to Copenhagen, she had nearly crushed my head during oral sex.

I gazed at her now and felt tears in my eyes.

I still love her vagina, her cyclist's legs, her behind, her tummy, her breasts, her hands and neck; her black hair turned grey, her kind wise face that only occasionally sets harsh and hard; her mind and her insights, her dreams and nightmares. I love her when she speaks Danish, I love her when she speaks English and I love her when she sleeps in my arms or sucks at my wrinkled penis with her crinkly lips, sucking until the very last drop of semen gurgles into her mouth and she lies back with a contented smile and pushes my grey-stubble chin back down between her legs, where the bicycle seat held sway from home to school and back again – along the Danish lanes.

Well, used to push my grey-stubble chin back down there.

Now, she no longer feels anything between her legs. The paralysis, whatever it is – and doctors say there's nothing physically wrong – has crept upwards and, she has decided, she would rather stop and go away before numbness reaches her brain and she is too far gone to make decisions.

"Pick a day," she said a month ago. "But don't tell me which day you've picked. Pick a day and send me off to a place of your choice. When I reach where you've sent me, I'll wait for you to follow – when you're ready."

I wondered how I'd be able to exist with her in an old age home, her wrinkles wrapped forever in the linen of an institution, and me still here, alone.

So I agreed to do what she asked, but decided to go too. She asked me to choose the destination and I have. And I think, being Danish, from the land of Kierkegaard and Dreyer, she will appreciate it. She would have worried about the fees and the way I have arranged things costs will be low. I only hope Mrs Munton doesn't think it's her fault that we have gone.

The tea is drawn. Emma stares at the window willing clouds to cross the sun. The fell tops turn black with shadow; the curlew takes up its call. I could watch for eternity, but must pour the tea – a cup for her and a cup for me.

Emma sleeps. She has drunk two more cups and swallowed all the pills I laid out for her. She trusts me more than the doctors and knows I know which pills will help.

She said the second cup tasted bitter. I said Mrs Munton had bought a different sort of tea. The answer satisfied Emma and, just before she closed her eyes, she laughed, pointed to the sky above the fells, a look of triumph in her eyes. And there, silhouetted against the charcoal clouds, I could see a formation of birds with outstretched necks and drooping beaks.

"Flamingos" she whispered and her mouth stayed open with the last syllable.

I felt her hand, squeezed it and lent across to kiss her. Her tongue felt for mine then fell still. I laid her hand on her breast and watched as the birds flew away across the hills, southwards, towards the warmth of home.

Now, I sip my second cup of tea and begin to feel drowsy.

It is funny that going away should be connected with tea. Ever since childhood, drinking morning tea in bed has been the most secure time of the day. The moment before things have to happen, the moment between past and future – a moment for reflection on what has been and what is to come.

When I first met Emma, she could not understand why morning tea was so important to me and why I had to get up to make it myself.

"Surely," she observed, "the only nice thing about tea in bed is having it brought to you without having to get up."

"No," I replied. "It makes getting up the first time easier. Because you know you will soon be back in bed."

She found this so logical and convincing that, for a while, we argued over who should make tea. But, in the end, her natural tendency to sleep late meant that I was entered in the roster of our life as early morning tea maker.