

Grief

by

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Grief

‘Would you like a tissue dear?’ the old lady asked Becky, as she sat beside her on the wooden bench.

‘No, it’s ok, I’ve got some in my bag,’ Becky sniffed.

There was a tentative silence as the two women sat at each end of the bench, gazing at the row of headstones in front of them. The bare trees swayed gently behind them as the Autumn wind blew through the graveyard.

‘I haven’t seen you here before, have I?’ asked the old lady as she leant on the arm of the bench and adjusted her coat.

‘This is the first time since the funeral. I couldn’t bring myself to come before. It was two weeks ago.’

‘And who is it you’re here to see, if you don’t mind me asking?’

Becky looked at the old lady. She seemed to be in her eighties at least, with a mustard colour coat and a purple hat. It was a strange combination, but Becky supposed at that age you could dress with abandon.

‘My husband. He’s just there, the grave with the roses on. He bought me roses on our first date.’

The old lady got up from the bench, slowly, and shuffled over to the grave to take a closer look. She pushed her glasses right up on her nose, as if she still couldn’t quite see the wooden cross which had been put in after the funeral.

‘Jonathan Bright,’ she read, turning her head back to Becky. ‘Is that his name?’

‘Yes, yes it is.’

The old lady carried on reading the plaque on the cross.

‘He was 35. So young. You poor dear.’ The old lady shuffled back to the bench and eased herself gently down, putting her hand out to Becky as she sat.

Becky tentatively put her hand out to touch the old lady's. It was stone cold, the poor woman wasn't wearing gloves, Becky thought.

'I'm Esther,' the old lady pronounced.

'I'm Becky, Becky Bright. It's nice to meet you.' Becky wondered why she had said that, she wasn't sure it was an appropriate thing to say in a graveyard.

The old lady clung onto Becky's hand for a little while, then released her grip.

'That's my husband there,' she pointed at the grave next to Jonathan's. 'Tom Jones. Now I know there's a singer of that name, but it's not him,' she giggled, a girlish, almost child-like laugh. 'Fancy meeting you here when our husbands are, well, next door neighbours.'

'Do you come here often?' Becky asked, again not sure of the appropriateness.

'Oh I'm here a lot. I don't have much else to do,' she giggled again.

'And how long has your husband...been here?'

'It's been two years now. Tom had lung cancer. They say the asbestos probably had something to do with it, he was a school caretaker.'

'I'm so sorry, that must have been hard.'

Esther nodded her head.

'We'd been together over sixty years. Two children, six grandchildren. He was a wonderful man.'

The women stayed on the bench, but lapsed into silence. Becky shivered, her thin coat not enough protection from the biting wind. She rooted around in her handbag for a tissue to wipe away the tears that had begun to stream down her cheeks, only partly due to the wind. After a few minutes, Becky got up and half turned to face Esther.

'I must go now. It was nice to meet you.'

'You too lovey. Take care now.'

Becky hurried down the path towards the entrance to the graveyard, checking how many people were waiting at the bus stop opposite. There were five people, which meant she hadn't missed the bus to get home.

A few days later, Becky plucked up the courage to return to the graveyard. Since Jon's death she felt sick whenever she tried to leave the house. In the house she could still smell him, his clothes hung in the wardrobe, his body wash stood at the bottom of the shower cubicle. Outside there were fewer signs of him, nothing to show that he had existed. But she wanted to talk to him and knew that, strange as it was, the graveyard was where he was now.

There was a mild frost still on the grass as she approached his grave, the morning temperature struggling to rise. She saw Esther stood by Tom's grave, stroking the flowers. She was again wearing the mustard coat and purple hat, but Becky felt reassured to see her. As she approached Jon's grave, Esther looked up.

'Hello there, I thought I'd see you again soon. How have you been doing?'

Becky took a deep breath. She didn't normally enjoy talking about her feelings, especially with strangers, but she felt at ease with this old lady.

'I'm, well, it's been hard, very hard. This is the first time I've been out of the house since my last visit. I don't really want to see people. I feel safer at home.'

'Everyone rushes round you for the first few weeks. They send cards and flowers, and bring meals, or ask if you need any shopping. But it starts to fall away, as they get on with their own lives.'

'But how can you get on with life?' Becky replied. 'How can you get dressed, or go to the supermarket? Because they're not there. He's not in the bed when I wake up in the morning. He's not sitting in the kitchen when I make a drink. People have even said that it's a good thing that I'm still young, that in time I'll meet someone else. As if Jon was a dog, a family pet that you love but when they die you get another one. And it was sudden, he was on his bike and he got crushed by a lorry driver who didn't see him. Even if the lorry driver goes to prison, at least he'll be alive, and his wife will get to visit him, and I'm visiting Jon here.'

Becky's shoulders shook as she sobbed at the graveside. Esther was only small, and couldn't reach up to Becky's shoulder to give reassurance, so she

patted her arm. They stood together, in between Tom and Jon's graves, an implicit understanding of what it was to be widowed.

'You come and sit down dear, you're probably not sleeping well either, are you?'

Becky shook her head as Esther guided her over to the bench. They sat together for a little while, then gradually began to talk about their husbands, what they were like, holidays they'd enjoyed, even their bad habits. Before Becky knew it, an hour had passed. No-one else had walked past them in all that time and where they were in the graveyard they were far enough away from the road to only hear the muffled sounds of cars. As Becky looked around the other graves, she saw that only about half of them had any kind of flowers or mementos on them. The rest were barren. She supposed the graves were so old that no-one alive remembered the people buried there. She hated the thought that one day, nobody would be around to put flowers on Jon's grave. She glanced at Esther, picking a stray leaf off her coat, and wondered what it would be like to be that old. She was grateful for her time, her understanding, and how in just two visits she had given Becky more emotional support than the rest of her family put together.

As the October wind turned to a November chill, Becky walked briskly through the gate of the graveyard and along the path towards Jon's grave. She saw a small gathering of mourners at the freshly dug grave next to Tom's. Not wanting to interrupt the committal, she walked around the edge of the graveyard for ten minutes, only coming back to Jon's grave as most of the mourners left. There was just one man at the graveside as she made her way to the bench. He didn't say anything at first, but then came and sat on the other end of the bench, where Esther had sat when they first met. Emboldened by Esther's care on that first visit, Becky decided to reach out to the man.

'It's hard isn't it? It was my husband's funeral a month ago.'

The man gave a deep sigh as he leant back on the bench. She could see the glistening of tears in the corners of his eyes.

'I've been to a fair few funerals, and it never gets any easier. Especially when it's your own parent.'

‘Oh I’m sorry to hear that. Was it your mum or your dad?’

‘My mum. Still, I’m pleased that we booked the plot next to dad after he died. At least now they’re together again.’

‘Next to your dad, what, Tom?’

‘Yes, Tom. My mum’s name was Esther. She had a massive stroke, the doctors couldn’t do anything. She was in her late eighties.’

Becky stared at the man, then at the grave with its mound of freshly moved earth. She walked over to the new grave in disbelief. She turned back to the man, still sat on the bench.

‘Not Esther, she couldn’t, I spoke to her just the other day. She’s been wonderful, so caring, so thoughtful, and I...’

‘She died three weeks ago.’

Becky shook her head.

‘No, I...’

She stared again at the grave, and the wooden cross newly planted into the earth. It had a brass plaque, proclaiming Esther’s name and her birth and death dates. How was that possible?

Becky almost tripped over as she started to run along the path. The man stood up from the bench to try and catch her, but she righted herself and kept running, towards the gate and the road beyond. When she reached the gate she glanced back down the path, and swore she could see a glimpse of a mustard coloured coat.
