

CHANCE ENCOUNTER

'Oh hello, haven't seen you lately.' Mrs. Barker's thin angular face creased into her familiar smile as I reached the bus stop. She wore a long dark coat, her neat brown hair curling on her collar.

'I've been busy - work, you know,' I replied, returning her grin. 'Have we just missed one?' I peered down a suburban street devoid of large red doubledeckers.

'Probably. They never come when you want them, do they? Bit like men really.' Her middle-aged face twinkled in unexpected mischief. She had a whimsical, almost eccentric air about her, an impish sense of humour lurking beneath a schoolmarm's exterior. I had known her for years, since her daughter had been my best friend at senior school.

But she should not have been at that bus stop. Mrs. Barker had been crippled by severe arthritis for over twenty years and could scarcely walk. Yet somehow I accepted the miraculous evidence before me of apparent health, and refrained from comment.

I saw her again, a few days later. This time I was in my GP's waiting room and she was the only other patient there.

'Oh, there you are again,' she beamed, her light educated voice rising a cadence with pleasure. 'Keep bumping into each other, don't we?'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'It's not very busy today, is it?'

'No, we won't have to wait long. We'll soon be done,' she nodded. She sat opposite on one of the doctor's comfier leather chairs, small handbag clutched in both hands. Curiously, her hands were as I remembered, knotted and bent with the arthritis, yet seemed to give her no pain.

At first, I saw the thing beside her without registering it. Then I looked again. Why had she brought a statue with her? It was white as alabaster, female, naked, and ethereally young. It occurred to me that it looked much as the amiable Mrs. B. must once have looked herself, in younger, healthier days.

Then it struck me. That was not a statue. It was a corpse. White, beautiful, oddly unmarked, yet still ... a corpse. A dead thing, right there beside the unconcerned Mrs. Barker. Surely she must have noticed it? Yet she seemed not to care, humming a merry little tune as she paused to polish her glasses. Should I tell her? How, for God's sake? Excuse me, Mrs. Barker, but is that your body beside you? Oh Lord! I was still debating the issue, quite rationally it seemed to me, when the bizarre scene vanished and ... I woke up.

It was 7.30 on a Monday morning and I was home in bed. All was quiet in my little flat. Even my tabby had not yet stirred his furry self from the foot of the bed. I yawned, stretched, trying to shake off the oppressive sense of doom left by Mrs. Barker and her body. *Weird*, I thought. Before the chance meeting at the bus stop, I hadn't seen the woman for months. Why should I suddenly dream about her? I rose and went to shower, determined to put it out of my mind. After all, it was only a dream, and I had to get to work. Even sculptors have to sculpt, and a half-emergent angel awaited me at my studio.

The following Saturday, I was pottering about at home trying to dust and tidy without falling over Tabby, when my phone rang. I picked up the receiver, duster still clutched in reluctant hand, and sighed my number. It was Mary Barker, my old school friend and the daughter of the ubiquitous Mrs. B. If spines really do chill, mine did.

'Mary! How are you?' I chirruped, hoping she just wanted to chat.

'I'm fine,' she replied, but her voice sounded fraught. 'I'm sorry to call out of the blue, but I thought you'd want to know.' She hesitated. Icy invisible fingers danced down my back.

'What's wrong?' I prompted. 'You sound peculiar.'

'I'm so sorry, I know you'll be upset -' Oh my God. No. 'It's my mother,' she added.

'Oh no.' Here it comes. She's dead, and I foresaw it!

'You remember that little nymph you gave her, just after you graduated from art college?' My mind blanked, thrown off course.

'N-nymph?' I stuttered.

'About two feet tall, painted to look like alabaster. We kept it in the conservatory.'

The penny dropped. The Grecian nymph had been one of my prize graduation pieces and I had given it to Mrs. Barker in thanks for putting up with me during my final year when - for reasons of penury - I had found myself flatless.

'Of course I remember!' I trilled in relief. 'What about it?'

'Well, Mother doesn't move too easily these days, as you know, and she had a bit of an accident. She lost her balance and knocked the nymph right through the conservatory window. She's lost her head, I'm afraid.'

'Eh?' I had idiotic visions of Mrs. B. doing an Anne Boleyn round her living room.

'Not Mother, silly - the nymph! Her head came right off. Mother's awfully upset.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake, it's not the end of the world. Tell her I'll come over one day and fix it. I'll make her good as new.'

After some more reminiscences, we hung up. I returned to my dusting, secure in the knowledge that I had not after all had a premonition of doom.

END

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