

LEAVING HOME

Celia took a deep breath as the front door clicked firmly shut behind her and the cool, dark, morning air refreshed her trembling body. Pale moonlight clothed her nervous features as she stepped from the doorstep onto the worn and uneven pavement before pausing again. Despite intermittent shafts of moonlight, it was darker than she expected it would be. It was still several hours before dawn.

The ricochet of her heels on the flags echoing down the drab, unbroken, rows of houses startled her. She paused yet again and found a pair of sandals in her holdall, thrusting aside the court shoes. Despite her frequent vow, she turned and looked at the house of her childhood, the house of virtually all her life. She did not see it with longing, or regret, or love. Instead, hardened by what was, to her, years of deprivation, hardship and misery, she sighed with relief to see that the house maintained its cloak of darkness in common with its companions. Now they stood, prison walls, steeped with the black conspiracy of silence, hiding from the questioning light of day, the tormented and unfulfilled lives that dwelt within. This, then, was the gauntlet she must run in following her escape route to the railway station, and beyond.

The darkness pressed in as she advanced stealthily. A dark shape shot out from a doorway and, as the cat vanished across the road, a dislodged milk bottle rolled towards her with a sound of earthquake proportion. She fought the panic that engulfed her as the bottle came uneasily to rest, and looked sharply around, but the mantle of darkness stood undisturbed. Eyes were closed, dreams were flowing; in far off places, in fantasies, in ecstasies of nightmares, her former inmates jealously lived and guarded their other existence, their only escape. But when she, like they, awoke life was always as it had been the day before. Sleep, refreshing and welcomed as it might be, was only a brief parole. It held none of the permanency of the freedom that Celia sought.

She did not know when the decision had been taken. Over many months she had thought about it, obsessively. She had dreamed about it, where she would go, what she would do. She yearned for it, but freedom was denied and she found herself with her term extended, committed, interred, sentence for her youth and, it seemed, her life. Then one day, one molecular grain of straw, borne upon the stringent wind of misfortune, fell upon her delicately balanced scales and the equilibrium was no more. In her mind, a collapse of devastating proportions ensued, sweeping before it all preconceptions, bonds, loyalties, and love itself.

She did not permit the flood of bitterness and intolerance to reach out and touch those around her. No, knowing that they would only build further walls to encase her, she diverted it inwards, purging her soul of all colour. From that day on, she had worked with a new conviction, planning, saving, resolutely preparing. They had noticed. They had said that she had "come through it at last". She had, if they had only known. Indeed she had!

Celia quickened her pace. She had passed the end of her road and turned into one adjacent. Another two or three roads and she would feel safe. She would be still in enemy territory, but she would be beyond the immediate risk of detection. The night was still and, despite seductive appeals from the moon, the houses all remained dark and silent, as silent as the grave. The sentries all slept.

She passed and crossed further roads, safe, uninterrupted, always drawing nearer to her objective, until she came at last to the final obstacle. This was the one section of her route that she had debated the most. Before her, the vast municipal cemetery stretched across her path like a gigantic moribund desert. To circumvent it would mean a long, unacceptable, detour. Celia paused before the gates. They were large and ornate, once functionable, clearly erected at a time when the needs of society demanded that the dead be kept in and the living out. Now, neglected

by profanity, she stood open, a little askew, encased by weeds. She knew the path through the cemetery well. She had used it often enough, once.

She started, passing grave upon grave, headstone by headstone. Angels watched her pass, neutrally silent, not approving of her action, not censuring. The air hung still and heavy and nothing, but she, moved, except above her Suddenly the moon had gone. An offensive belt of cloud was spreading itself across the sky and Celia found herself pitched into total darkness. A tingle of nervous excitement stirred her as she paused to decide her bearings. Holding her counsel, she agreed that she must go on, reckless as it might seem to be in the cemetery in the small hours of the morning and in pitch blackness. She was that close - she must go on! She could not retreat.

Stealthily she picked her way along the invisible path with the caution of a mountaineer traversing a ridge. It was as if the bordering graves were open and bottomless. One false step, one little slip, and she would be lost. Gravel crunched under foot and she sat down heavily. Cold marble greeted her outstretched hand and she recoiled. In the darkness she had left the pathway at a bend and was now sitting, in the graveyard, on a tomb. Even so, she maintained her equanimity and groped for her few possessions. Then, whilst she was still crouching there, on her haunches, the moon broke through and sent a white, virginal shaft which struck the gravestone before her, picking out, letter by letter, the inscription. As Celia read the name she was submerged with an obscene horror. The realisation broke upon her. Below her, incarcerated, lay the mortal remains of

A denial parted her lips. Tormented by illusions, she backed away, still crouching, but the inscription remained before her, stark, unavoidably reproaching. She was about to turn and run when the ground opened up beneath her and she fell into impenetrable darkness.

Celia did not know exactly how long she lay there in the ground. When she opened her eyes she could see the stars and, dazed, she rose unsteadily to her feet. The graveyard was bathed again in moonlight but now it seemed unfamiliar. The unwelcomed memories of the recent incident flooded into her mind and she forgot the station, the train, her mission. Now only one thing was essential - to escape from the cemetery, to reach the outside. If she did not, she would end up imprisoned there amongst the dead instead of the living.

She broke into a jerky run and soon found the path along which she had come. A soft breeze fell across her face, growing stronger with each stride. She ignored it, but as she neared the entrance the strength of the wind grew, always against her, always aiming to force her back. A fresh gasp of horror broke from her lips. It was impossible! The gates were shut against her. Barred, bolted, padlocked, insurmountable, the gates were shut and there was no way out.

A small whirlwind pitched itself before her. Dust and leaves danced in the air and cried out with the voices of souls departed. Then it was upon her. With the scream for mercy trapped in her throat, Celia found herself running before the wind. With legendary strides she passed over urns, flowers, offerings, across the cemetery until something caught her outstretched ankle, tripping her, and she fell.

She was lying across a grave that had been neglected. She could see that clearly. All around the graves were neat and loved, remembered and cared for, but this one, wild to nature, was overgrown, forgotten. Compassion touched her heart for the first time in years. Here, isolated, was this small patch of ground about which no-one cared, no-one. Unbelieving she read and re-read the inscription on the headstone. It was not possible! It could not be! With mistrust she reached out and traced the letters with her finger. It must be some kind of mistake! It simply could not be! Oh, God, do not let it be!

She read the words aloud, as clearly as the stonemason had carved them in the plain headstone. Two children

“Here lie the mortal remains of
Mary Celia Baxter
aged six years and three months
and her brother
Joseph Arnold Baxter
aged four years and nine months

Loved by none, they are mourned by none.”

The night was still again. Around the dead lay silent and reproachful as Celia fell prostrate amongst the thistles. “How?” she asked herself between sobs. “How could it be?” Then, as she lay, forlorn, something brushed her shoulder and she seemed to hear a voice murmur “Mummy”. Fresh panic and horror gripped her as she retreated away from the spectacle and fell, backwards, down again into darkness.

The stars were still there, overhead, when Celia opened her eyes again, but the sky had changed its hue, signifying the coming of dawn. She lay motionless for several minutes, morbidly reliving the horrors of the night. In the half light she could see that she appeared to be lying in a rectangular hole and gradually she realised that she had tumbled into a half dug grave. Tentatively she sat up and in the grey morning light recognised her location.

For the first time in five years she found herself praying as she knelt by her husband's grave. “I'm sorry, Joe,” she exclaimed out loud. “I am sorry for the neglect, for tonight. I didn't mean to stray, but you drift, so gradually, into lazy, selfish, and thoughtless habits, sink into apathy until all you can do is think only of yourself and not others. I was wrong. I won't do it again. Please, forgive me.”

Dishevelled but determined she retraced her steps. The gates stood open to the dawn now, as they had for decades, and with her spiritual fortitude renewed, Celia passed through them, back to the living, back into the featureless streets, back among the slated roofs and soot smoked chimneys. Inside the house she recovered the note from the mat and tiptoed upstairs. She paused outside the bedroom of her parents but all was still. They slept on, oblivious in their short-sighted geriatricity of the crisis of the night. Inside her room she undressed and slipped into the double bed beside the two small creatures snuggled there. One turned and, deep from slumber, murmured, “Mummy.”

It's all right, darling,” Celia whispered, pressing her lips to the child's brow. “Mummy's here. Mummy's home, to stay!”

THE END

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