

Celia's Shrine

by David Gardiner

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I'm glad you like the bungalow. I would like it to go to a happy young couple like you. We were always very happy here. Well, as happy as anybody ever is... you know what I mean. Why don't you sit down and I'll make the two of you a cup of tea?

This was out in the country when we first moved here you know. Fields and sheep and cows. You couldn't call it the country now, could you? Times change. The city grows. We still have the field at the back, of course. Well, we always called it a field. Just a bit of rough meadow, really. We never did very much with it. The idea was that we would have a pony when our boy got a bit bigger. We would build a stable at one end. We never did, of course.

No, it wasn't that. More that... our boy never did get big.

I don't mind talking about it. It's a very long time ago now. Emily and I married quite late in life. When Emily had Charlie she was forty-one years old. We were one of the unlucky ones. The one in twelve. Charlie was born with Down's Syndrome. They called it Mongolism back then. And they didn't have the treatments for it that they have nowadays. He had other complications as well. He didn't live very long. We always called it Charlie's Field. It sort of... kept his name alive.

The three rose bushes? Oh you noticed them did you? Yes, they do look a bit out of place. Just three rose bushes in a triangle in the middle of a field. Funny that you should call it a shrine. It is, in a manner of speaking, but it has nothing to do with Charlie. It's a much longer story, I won't waste your time with it.

Well, if you really want to hear it I suppose I could tell you while the kettle's boiling. You'll think it's very silly though. It was... oh, nearly thirty years ago.

It was late in the evening and somebody knocked at the door. He was an odd looking boy, long flowing robes, long golden blond hair with a little beard, a yellow band around his head, jewelry, open-toe sandals..... Very regular features. You know the first thing I thought? It's Jesus Christ, come looking for disciples! Although I suppose Jesus would have been dark-haired. Probably didn't wear medallions either, come to think of it.

Anyway, it turned out he was travelling with his girlfriend and their van had broken down right at the end of my driveway. I was a bit suspicious at first. Could have been a trick to get into the house. Could have been anybody. But he had such a... genuine face, I couldn't not trust him. Fancy dress or not, I liked the boy as soon as I set eyes on him. I went down to see the van, and it was incredible! All painted up with scenes out of Eastern mythology. Gods, demons, dancing-girls, men in chariots, soldiers turning into falling leaves, an old man teaching children under a tree..... And it was so colourful! I just couldn't describe it, really. You would need to have seen it.

I got another shock when I met his girlfriend. I could see why she hadn't come up the drive with him. Her name was Celia. She was a beautiful blonde girl, looked about fifteen but she was probably seventeen, and ready to give birth at any moment as far as I could see. She was a slight little thing apart from the bulge. Great big blue eyes. And you know the way that some pregnant women can almost radiate happiness and well-being? Well, she was like that. She sort of... lit up the inside of that little van with her own inner light, if you know what I mean. You couldn't take your eyes off her. It was like... a religious experience. I just wanted to sit there and stare at her. It seemed like such a privilege to be in her presence...

Sorry, I'm rambling now. Talking nonsense. She was just a teenage mum-to-be. That was why they had come back from India, it turned out, only the trip hadn't gone as smoothly as they had hoped, and frankly they were running out of time. Her folks lived in Bath - they still had a couple of hundred miles to go and anybody could see they weren't going to make it. She was in no condition for travelling. There was hardly room to sit down in the back of that van, it was crammed full of beads and wall-hangings and carved wood and bits of jewelry and clothes and God-knobs-what.

Well, to cut a long story short, I wouldn't let them go on. I thought the least we could do was let them use Charlie's room for a few days while they sorted themselves out. I wanted to phone the local hospital and put them on standby, but the girl wouldn't have it. Said that she had to give birth on the earth, facing a certain direction, while some kind of incantations were read out.... all kinds of stuff like that. But it was what she wanted, and this was her baby, so I did my best to go along with it. I said they could use the field at the back, but we would have to put up some kind of shelter of course. The boy said that was no problem, that he could make a teepee out of three pieces of wood and a couple of old sheets. Three pieces of wood and old sheets! Can you imagine it? It didn't look too bad actually, when they'd made it. I was quite impressed. Lucky it was spring and the weather wasn't too bad. Can you imagine giving birth on the ground in England in the winter?

I'm afraid Emily wasn't all that keen on having them in Charlie's room. I had to insist... to plead for the girl almost. It surprised me. Let me see a side of Emily that I hadn't seen before.

Yes, it seems crazy looking back on it now, but everything went quite well,

all things considered. I got to know the boy quite well. He talked about love and peace and non-violence and all the things that kids used to talk about back then, and about the community they'd lived in in India. How the world was going to change for ever, no more wars or cruelty or exploitation or private property or possessiveness. How they believed that the child they were going to have together was going to be one of the seeds. One source from which this wonderful new world was going to grow.

Emily didn't like it. She said he was just trying to say it was all right to sleep around. I must admit I found her a bit... unsympathetic. She and I were more different than I had realized, I suppose.

On the second day another couple arrived in another van, friends of theirs, to see them through the birth and to try to sort out the broken-down van. They were a pretty unusual pair as well, I can tell you. But good people, you know? You could tell just by looking at them. Good through and through.

The baby arrived on the third day after the van broke down. The two men did the chanting and the other woman looked after Celia and did the practical things. Emily and I didn't interfere, just watched from the back window and waited until it was all over. Emily thought I was completely crazy to go along with it all. She seemed hostile for no reason. Said I'd turned the bungalow into a tinker camp. Said I would find myself in the court if anything happened to the girl or her baby.... maybe she was right, I don't know. But it was what Celia wanted, and I couldn't see any harm in it.

When it was pretty obvious that she had had her baby, the chanting stopped and the two men came out of the tent. I thought they would be over the moon, breaking open the champagne and the cigars and all the rest of it, but they seemed a bit subdued. Her boyfriend, Martin, the one like Jesus, just stood there with his back to the tent and the other one walked up towards the van. I thought there must have been some tragedy, like Emily had said, and I lost no time in getting out there to see what was going on.

There was no tragedy, the baby was tiny and beautiful and Celia was sitting up and smiling and holding it to her breast. I think it was the most beautiful sight that I have ever seen in my life. But there was just one thing. That baby hadn't been fathered by Martin. It had light brown skin and a head of jet-black hair. When I saw that I understood everything.

I tucked back the flap of the tent and I put my hand on his shoulder. He didn't say a word, just stood there. I didn't say anything either. What was there to say? Congratulations? Bad luck? That's free love for you?

I don't think it had crossed his mind for an instant that it mightn't be his own kid. He had despised the whole notion of fidelity, attacked it in detail and at length: so what was he supposed to say now? I really felt for the boy. I suppose his whole world had just fallen to pieces. It's that whole thing about getting your heart and your head to agree. What can anybody say about it? I

just went inside and poured him a stiff drink and took it out to him. He downed it in one.

Talking about drinks, I think the kettle's boiling. I'll just go and make the tea. There isn't much more to tell you anyway.

The ending? Oh there isn't one really. Their friends in the other van loaded up all the stuff out of the broken-down one and took it away. Apparently they were going to sell it at stalls at pop-festivals or something. They never got the other van going. I had to phone up to get it taken away in the end.

I drove Celia and Martin and the new baby to the train station. She gave me her address in Bath but I never looked her up. I suppose I didn't want the spell to be broken. Didn't want to hear that she was a part-time bar-maid at the local pub and her daughter was up for shoplifting or something. I wanted to go on believing that that child was going to be special. That she was going to help to change the world. That I had witnessed some kind of miracle.

Martin? Yes, I think he stayed with her, at least for a while. But he was talking about going to London to look for work. I somehow doubt if they were together for very long after that. You could tell that something had died between them. Something... changed between Emily and me too I think. I've never been able to put my finger on it, but something did.

Oh, the three rose bushes? Yes, I planted them in the holes that were left when they took out the tent-poles. So right in the middle of that triangle was where the baby was born. I've always thought of it as sacred ground, somehow.

Yes, I suppose the birth of that little baby disrupted a lot of lives in one way or another. Not the first time that a teenager having a child has done that. I seem to remember something about it in the New Testament.

I wonder if that inn-keeper had a wife?

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