**Laying a Few Ghosts**

Elanor regretted drinking quite so much alcohol combined with several cups of coffee. Now her thoughts were racing, her head was spinning and it was difficult to get to sleep. It wasn’t that she was drunk, just overtired and wide awake. Her conversation with Luke about her husband’s death had sent her on an emotional roller coaster.

Maybe if she had gone to the anti war protest all those years ago she might have been able to prevent the cops arresting him, beating him unconscious and leaving him to die in the cells. She was heavily pregnant at the time, and Luke didn’t think she could have helped, and thought it more likely she would have been arrested and beaten as well.

During her conversation she had realised that she still carried a lot of unresolved anger about what happened. She was angry with the cops of course. They had never been identified let alone punished; they had removed anything from their uniforms that could have identified them, and all Abe's friends could say was they were white cops.

She was angry with Abe for going and doing something to get himself arrested. If he hadn’t been arrested he’d still be alive today, would have seen his three children grow up, seen his grand-daughter born. She had not even said a proper good-bye to him, she’d been changing the baby when he’d kissed her on the cheek and left. The next time she saw him was to identify his badly beaten body in the morgue.

And she was angry with herself that she hadn’t done something to stop him - kept him home, gone with him, something, anything.

The tears were flowing now, but this time she gave herself over to body wrenching sobs. She had managed to control herself in front of Luke, but during her discussion with him she had realised she had never really dealt with Abe’s death. Her excuse was she was always too busy with the children, and the day to day busyness of life.

Eventually she felt all cried out, hollow and empty like an old bottle. Her nose was blocked, her eyes puffy. She went into the bathroom to wash her face, ended by having a very long hot shower. Finally she collapsed into bed, tired and emotionally exhausted.

She kept thinking of Abe, and her discussion with Luke. Their faces spun about her along with flashes of cities. As soon as she focused on anything it flowed and changed into something else. Nothing was fixed. She lost track of time, and realised that some features did seem to be fixed, while other ones flowed and then became fixed.

She had no idea of where she was or how she got here, and only vague memories of the Elanor who had gone to bed. The sky was pale, almost white. She was in the garden near a house made of bricks so dark they might have been coal. Trees and shrubs had very dark trunks and branches and dark green leaves. Here and there were bright red flowers she did not recognise - large trumpet shaped things with pale yellow throats. Everything was crystal clear - she could see every blade of grass, every leaf and twig, every insect no matter how tiny, every minor blemish in the brickwork.

Looking around she seemed to be in a farming village because there was some distance to nearby houses and she could see fields with crops behind each house. Off to her right there were three large columns about three meters high, one coal black, the other two gun metal grey. They were floating about a hand span above the grass.

“Elanor! El!”

She turned to see a figure approaching from the corner of the house. She recognised him instantly, he looked much the same as when they married. “Abe!” They both hurried to each other, hugged and kissed. “I’ve missed you Abe.” There was something wrong with this picture, but she could not put her finger on it. “You’re looking well.”

“So are you El, you’re still as beautiful as when we married.” He led her around the side of the house and into a sunlit English cottage garden. There were birds chirping and a profusion of flowers everywhere.

“Where have you been Abe? How come you never wrote?”

Abe looked at her with sadness. “They told me this would happen. I’m dead El, been dead for years. I couldn’t write, there’s no postal service.”

Elanor knew she should be surprised. Instead she remarked “You're looking well for someone that’s dead. Does this mean I’m dead? Where are we?”

Abe sighed “You’re not dead, least ways not yet. This is one of the places we come when we die. You’re just visiting.”

“Oh. Then how did I get here? I don't remember being here before.”

“I don’t think you have been. Do you remember Luke?” Elanor nodded, surprised. “He said he’d bring you, I don’t think you can come here when you’re alive unless someone brings you.”

“What do you do here? Are there other people here? Can you show me around?”

Abe looked over at the three columns that had followed them into the garden. “Does she have time?”

“There is time for a brief tour.” a voice replied, a light masculine voice speaking with an upper class English accent.

“Who was that? What was that?” Elanor was genuinely puzzled.

Abe nodded at the three columns. “One of them. We see them all over the place, they can answer questions. People I know call them guides.” Elanor was curious, but at this point Abe got to his feet and led her through the garden to the street. They turned left.

The street seemed to run on forever, with no cross streets. It was sprinkled with houses spaced apart, and behind each house was a garden, farm area with crops, or orchards, vineyards and so on. From time to time she could hear roosters crow, and the occasional house had a few hens in the front yard. The houses ranged in style from super modern mansions to quaint little wooden houses that looked like they had stepped from the Hansel and Gretel fable. From time to time villagers nodded or waved to Abe. What ever else this was, the place was multicultural. Elanor spotted Europeans, Africans, Indians and Asians as they walked. Abe seemed to be living the life of a villager. He had his vegetable patch, his vineyard, and some chickens and a few pigs. This was a side of him she wasn’t aware of.

Abe pointed into the distance. “See that hill? That’s where the university is, the schools and the town centre. Let’s go there.”

Elanor was still staring into the distance trying to make out what he was pointing at when he grabbed her arm and pulled. Next moment the scenery blurred around her. There was no sense of movement, but they were standing on some grass looking at stone buildings. Elanor was not good at architecture, but she tagged the buildings as something you’d see in an old European city.

“That’s the university, there are classes in everything. Anything you can think of!” Abe enthused. “We don’t have time to visit there, let’s go this way.” He led across the grass to a paved street lined with shops and cafes. They sat down at a table, and Abe ordered coffee and cake for both of them from a waiter who materialised beside their table. He returned a moment later with their order.

“That was fast!” Elanor remarked. Abe nodded.

They talked for a while about what she had been doing, and a little about his flower garden, vineyard and vegetable patch. “That doesn’t seem like you.” Elanor remarked. “You never liked gardening.”

“Things are different here, there’s time to smell the roses, time to study things. I’m preparing for my next life, most people study things to improve themselves for their next life.”

“Really? When will that happen?”

“Oh soon, I hope. I’ve made arrangements to be born as our grandson.”

“Aren’t you going to wait for me?”

Abe shook his head. “No, it’s time for me to move on. But El, you have to let me go. You’re holding me here, you never moved on, you never grieved properly. I can’t move on until you grieve and let me go. If you don’t I can’t be reborn, and I’ll have to wait until you die. And then I’ll be stuck here helping you, and I’ll miss my chance. I’m bored. El, I’m dead, please let me go. I’ll be back as your grandson then.”

Elanor looked at him, uncertain what to say, but some part of her was aware he was telling the truth. She focused on something negative “What do you mean if you wait until I die you’ll be stuck here helping me?”

“Oh. Erm, when you die, someone comes and collects your soul. It’s usually a family member or friend, but not always. My grandparents were still alive when I died; I helped them when they passed on. Luke collected me, and then we went to a hospital, or something like that, where there are people who look after you and heal you after the trauma of death, and what ever else was bad in your life. Then you come some place like this where you can study and prepare for your next life. My chance is to be born as my own grandson. If I miss that, I don’t know how long I’ll have to wait, or I’ll be born among strangers. And I can’t leave here because you’re holding onto me. So if you won’t let go, I have to wait until you die, and I might as well help you get through the transition.”

“Where are your grandparents?” Elanor realised she was stalling for time, thinking over what he said.

“Oh, they’re around the village somewhere. They’ll be reborn in a few years, and they’d like to come back amongst family members. If I’m born as our grandson they could become my children, or some sort of relative.”

Elanor looked at Abe. “How do I let you go?” As she asked the question she realised she already knew the answer.

“What people normally do. They grieve for a time, and they get over it and get on with their lives. That’s what the funeral is for – to give the living a chance to say farewell. I know I was young; it was unexpected, but there is it. Death happens to all of us, and we all get reborn. If you love me El, you can do this for me. You can say good bye and release me to be reborn.”

Elanor’s eyes were stinging. She leaned forward and hugged Abe, kissed him. Her tears were making his face wet. “I love you Abe, but deep inside I know this is what I have to do. I know I’ll see you again, but we won’t be husband and wife.” She sat back, blew her nose. “Good bye Abe. And may God be with you.”

“Thanks El. When I’m reborn, you’ll know it’s me. Good bye. I’ll see you soon.”

There was a sudden feeling of falling, and Elanor woke with a start. She lay there feeling both happy and sad, and trying to remember as much as she could. Abe was right, she had to let him go; she didn’t have the heart to tell him she’d be dead in a few months herself from cancer. Or would she? She felt emotionally drained, but relieved. She knew she had done the right thing. But what had he said? Luke came to collect him when he died? She would have to ask Luke about that.