

A short story: The Secrets of Mrs. B [C1]

Durante i miei anni da studente, ho lavorato come assistente domiciliare per gli anziani e ho conosciuto la signora B, una celebrità locale con storie affascinanti. Un misterioso regalo lasciatomi dopo la sua dipartita ha svelato i segreti della sua vita e ha lasciato un'impronta indelebile anche nella mia.



When I was a student, I had a summer job as a home help for the [elderly](#). It was nothing medical; I just provided a bit of [cheerful](#) conversation to keep them company. They loved to talk and I learned a lot of local history. Sometimes I made notes. It was my dream to write a novel one day, and I thought that all these anecdotes might provide useful material. I heard the best stories from Mrs. B. The widow of a magistrate, she had done a lot of charitable work. In fact, she was considered a local celebrity and I was quite nervous the first time I walked up the [drive](#) of her large old house. Her son, Hector, opened the door. Tall and [balding](#), with long melancholic [features](#), he [shook](#) my hand and [led](#) me to his mother's room. "There won't be much for you to do," he said. "Mother is quite near the end. You can read her some poems. My [late](#) father was a published poet, you know." Mrs. B was [fast asleep](#). She was a [tiny](#) creature, an [assortment](#) of bones loosely held together by a membrane of transparent skin. I'd never seen anyone alive

look so skeletal. "Shall I read to her, then?" Hector nodded and indicated an old book with a well-worn cover on the bedside table. "My father's first published collection." Feeling self-conscious, I began to read aloud. It was heavy, sombre stuff. Hector silently left the room; seconds later I saw him walking down the drive. "Has he gone?" I spun round, and the book fell to the floor. Mrs. B was peering at me with bright, bird-like eyes. "Yes, he has." "Thank the Lord. You haven't got a cigarette, have you?" Her voice sounded thick in her toothless mouth. When I realised what she wanted, I shook my head wordlessly. She rolled her eyes and ordered me to help her sit up; she was light as a child. "Pass my teeth, will you?" She pointed to a glass containing her dentures. I handed it to her then bent down to retrieve the book of poems. "Leave it there, dear. It's appalling rubbish." Her voice was much clearer with her teeth in. "What's your name?" I introduced myself and explained that I was from the agency. "Very good," she said. "Now fetch me the wooden box in the bottom of that drawer over there." The first box I found was quite large. It was antique and made beautifully-inlaid wood. "Is it this one? I think it's locked." "No, not that one," she said sharply. "That one's got my diaries in it. You hadn't better read those!" She giggled girlishly. "Look further back." A smaller box was hidden under some clothes. It contained a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. "The cleaner keeps me supplied," she confided. "Open the window, will you? If Hector smells smoke, he'll blame you! Now, shall we watch Love Island?" I enjoyed my chats with Mrs. B and I think she liked to shock me. Married to Hector's father for forty years, she had travelled all over the world, enjoying tempestuous love affairs along the way. And she remembered them all! She loved to reminisce about André, Paris 1948, Harvey, New York 1956 and Christos, summer in Crete, 1969, to mention just a few. Every time I replaced the box with cigarettes in the bottom drawer and caught sight of the larger inlaid box, I yearned to know what was in Mrs. B's diaries. Here indeed was material for a novel. Mrs. B snorted with laughter when I told her I wanted to be a novelist and I think she guessed why I encouraged her to talk about her past. She had a bird-like way of putting her head on one side, her eyes twinkling. On one of my last visits, she pressed a small brass key into my hand. "Keep that safe," she whispered, a conspiratorial gleam in her eye. "It's my little gift to you; something to remember me by." I guessed what the key was for and the

idea filled me with anticipation. After I returned to university that autumn, I received the sad news that Mrs. B had passed away. My mother sent me a link to an article in the local newspaper. The headline read: "Local Benefactress Dies". When I went home for Christmas, the agency called me in and handed me a package, which they said had been left to me by Mrs. B. I rushed home to open it and, sure enough, inside was the antique inlaid box. The small brass key she had given me fitted the lock perfectly. I opened the box slowly, savouring the moment. Now I would learn all about Mrs. B's fascinating life. A single book with a well-worn cover lay at the bottom. It was her husband's first collection of poems. The old girl had tricked me. At first I was bitterly disappointed, but then I smiled, thinking of her girlish laugh. Who was I to be the custodian of her deepest secrets? One thing was certain: I would never forget her.

Glossary

- **drive** = entrata
- **balding** = rimanendo calvo
- **self-conscious** = in imbarazzo
- **twinkling** = brillare, scintillare
- **thick** = spessa
- **guessed** = immaginarsi, indovinare
- **rushed** = affrettarsi
- **brass key** = chiave di ottone
- **passed away** = morire
- **tricked** = imbrogliare
- **features** = tratti
- **appalling rubbish** = spazzatura tremenda
- **drawer** = cassetto
- **locked** = chiusa a chiave
- **yearned** = bramare, anelare
- **snorted** = sbuffare
- **cheerful** = allegra
- **peering** = scrutare
- **supplied** = fornire
- **whispered** = sussurrare
- **tiny** = minuscola
- **giggled** = ridacchiare
- **bent down** = chinarsi
- **fetch** = portare
- **sharply** = bruscamente
- **elderly** = anziani
- **led** = condurre
- **sit up** = sedersi
- **late** = defunto
- **retrieve** = prendere, raccogliere
- **fitted** = entrare, essere adatta
- **well-worn** = consunta
- **wordlessly** = senza dire nulla

- **replaced** = rimettere a posto
- **toothless** = senza denti
- **lay** = giacere
- **blame** = dar la colpa, accusare
- **laughter** = risata
- **shook my hand** = stringere la mano
- **inlaid** = intarsiato
- **further back** = più in fondo
- **reminisce** = ricordare
- **fast asleep** = profondamente addormentata
- **shook** = scuotere
- **bitterly** = amaramente
- **nodded** = assentire
- **gleam** = bagliore, luce
- **spun round** = girarsi
- **rolled her eyes** = alzare gli occhi al cielo
- **confided** = confidare
- **along the way** = lungo il percorso
- **assortment** = assortimento
- **handed** = passare
- **indeed** = davvero