**62.**The owl first appeared on a Friday morning. Reg came into the kitchen to put the kettle on for a cuppa. He had been awake for quite a while. He couldn’t remember how long – he hadn’t bothered to look at the clock. But with dawn breaking he felt he could make a move. It was a dank misty morning – God he hated the winters. He had never been a fan of the short winter days, but he hated them more now he was nearly 90. The damp made his joints ache and the cold made him breathless. He filled the kettle, and switched it on. Then something caught his eye out of the window, something white and shadowy. Bugger, he had left his glasses back in the bedroom and he couldn’t see what it was. He shuffled back to the bedroom.

“What’s up now?” Betty asked, muffled, from under the bedcovers

“Forgot my specs. I’m just making a cuppa, won’t be long”

Reg, made his way back to the kitchen and went to the window. The white shape was still there – he still couldn’t quite make out what it was. Then it came into sharp focus. It was an owl. Majestically sitting on the back of the garden seat. He felt he shouldn’t look at the owl as it had an eerie look about it and had come with a message. It didn’t appear to be afraid and sat very still, staring straight at Reg through the window. Reg leant forward and tapped the window. The owl lifted his wings very slightly and then repositioned them at his sides, almost in acknowledgement, and carried on staring at Reg who found the constant gaze a bit unnerving, so he decided to carry on with making the tea. He was sure the owl would fly away soon – perhaps he had spotted a mouse and was waiting for it to come out so he could have him for breakfast. Reg got the mugs out of the cupboard, poured milk in, and added the steaming tea. Before he went back to Betty, he had another look out of the window, the owl was still there, perhaps it was hurt. He went to the back door, and unlocked it, and slowly walked towards the garden seat. Reg’s breath was taken away by the magnificence of the bird, whose head inclined slightly and then straightened and then suddenly it spread its wings and flew away. But he had left something on the seat – a beautiful pure white feather – one of nature’s works of art. Reg picked it up and stared at it, then stroked it, and popped it into his dressing gown pocket. He would save it to show the grandchildren when they came over tomorrow.

He turned round and went back indoors. The cold air had made him a bit short of breath and he felt a bit dizzy, so he stopped for a minute, touched the feather in his pocket, and then headed again for the door.

“You’ve been ages – where have you been. I wondered if you’d gone to pick the tea leaves” Betty turned over in bed.

“There was a beautiful owl in the garden. It was sitting on the bench, staring into the kitchen window. I haven’t seen one like that before – well, not in the garden. Probably waiting for a mouse to catch, but not much chance of that with next door’s cat on the prowl. Do you know someone once said to me that if you found an unusual feather in your garden, that you had been visited by an angel”

Betty sat up in bed “Don’t talk rubbish – no such things as angels. Pass me over that tea before it gets cold”

Betty was now on her second mug of tea “Have you taken your pills?” This made Reg grumpy.

“What’s the point, I’m not going to live forever, I’ve had a good innings. Anyway, they make my tea taste all funny and then give me indigestion”, but grudgingly he removed the daily dose from it’s box and took them.

Their morning cuppa was a ritual, with them sitting in bed talking about how badly they had slept the night before, their aches and pains and the plans for the day. They had been married for over 60 years.

The following night, Reg woke with a start, he felt something brush over his face, a light gossamer touch. He tried to brush it away, but there was nothing there. He opened his eyes and there was a faint mist. He snapped them shut. He opened them again, and the mist had gone, but there was a faint perfume in the room, could it be lavender, like his mother used to wear. He shrugged it off, turned over, pulled the covers up round his shoulders and went back into a deep sleep. Vivid dreams took over, and he found himself walking across a field, it was summer, not hot, just warm and sunny. The mysterious owl returned, flying in the distance, coming nearer and nearer, eventually landing on a gate at the side of the field a few yards away. Reg could hear voices and saw people coming over a hill in the distance, walking towards him, some of them waving. He was sure he didn’t know any of them. But then they got nearer, and there was his older brother Fred who had passed away last year and his old Mum holding a baby that they had lost many years before. He looked towards the owl. It had gone and at that moment he knew what was happening.

“Wake up Reg, it’s time to get a cup of tea. We’ve slept in this morning.” Reg didn’t move. Betty reached over, touched Reg, and he felt very very cold. She felt his pulse and there was nothing there. “My lovely, lovely man, what will I do without you”.

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“Mum, I think this is Grandpa’s dressing gown, shall I put it in the charity bag?”

“Just ask Nanna is that’s OK, and don’t forget to check the pockets, you never know what he might have put in there”

“Wow, look at this” Ed was holding a white feather. “This is amazing. Look how white it is, and I haven’t seen many this big – awesome. Wait until I show Ben”

“It must have been special for Dad to put it in his pocket. Put it in the box with the old photos that we’re going to keep. It’ll be safe in there”