

A Wonderful Man

When the curtains closed over the coffin, Michelle listened and tried to control her tears as the notes of *In The Mood* floated around the small chapel, dispersing such goodness that memories bloomed like roses. She remembered herself and John drifting across dance floors like a galleon, drawing admiring looks from neighbouring crews as they sailed into the safe harbour of the final bars.

John had introduced her to the delights of ballroom dancing, something which she would never have dreamed of attempting before she met him. Not that either of them were brilliant but now, every time she heard a suitable melody, she imagined them both swirling around the floor like majestic marionettes. This particular tune would now never be the same again. Death had purloined these immaculate notes and trampled them underfoot and moulded them into misery and sadness.

She closed her eyes and lowered her head, allowing the stinging tears to drip on to her coat and remain there as a momentary reminder that, like all things, John had only been temporary, too.

He had been so indescribably wonderful. He had lit up her life and repelled the darkness. He had transported her to another life where problems were solved and where she could shelter beneath the shield of his kindness. He had made her feel like a child in anticipation of a glorious gift every day.

Looking around at all these grieving people, suddenly stunned by the mystery of death, Michelle caught a subliminal memory of John, like a torch being switched on and quickly off again. It had been in York, in the Minster, in fact – perhaps these hallowed surroundings here had recalled it to her. As their footsteps had echoed around the ancient stones, John had said something about not wanting a big funeral when he died; big funerals brought sadness to more people. Maybe his mortality had

been nudged by the permanence of their environment and, considering that his departure was anything but imminent, Michelle had thought no more about his whimsical desire.

He had not had his wish, though. This was a big funeral. All these people with holes in their lives; pieces missing as tangible as arms, but with no John to hug arms were unnecessary today.

The final notes of the tune hung in the air before evaporating into silence, to be replaced by sniffles and sobs and the occasional coughs which punctuate the quiet.

Outside, Michelle buttoned up her coat to the collar and raised her umbrella. The weather had been fine for two weeks but today February had decayed into a granite sky without a blemish. The rain did not hammer relentlessly on to her, however, but rather stroked her finely and gently with a caring drizzle knowing, it seemed, that she could not withstand the anger of a downpour.

She had wondered for a time what might be the suitable thing to wear today but had finally decided upon things which John had bought her: a sky-blue, knee-length coat and the elegant black shoes he had bought her in Paris. Even her black underwear and stockings had been his choices. He would certainly have approved of his “little princess” today.

Three years ago John had had to go to Edinburgh – he had to finalize the details of a contract, if she remembered correctly- and he had asked her if she would like to go with him. It had been two weeks after his fortieth birthday and he had said they would make it a belated birthday weekend.

They had stayed at the Jedburgh Hotel, just off Princes Street and enjoyed luxuries she had only read about. The weather had been perfect, too. Spring buds burst from trees and daffodils danced and nodded in their direction. Holyrood Park

could have been the Garden of Eden. It was as if the weekend had been prepared for them and she suspected John of having made a divine arrangement to ensure that everything was as it should be.

This idea did not seem illogical to her at the time. She had come to regard John as being capable of anything. Nothing appeared to be impossible to him. In fact, she looked upon him as the nearest thing to a deity she had ever worshipped in her life.

She felt now as though Superman had died. The unthinkable had happened. She felt as if the simple act of walking was almost beyond her as she wandered through the void she had not yet reached the bottom of.

Michelle had met John in the Delamere Hotel four years ago; two lonely ships in a stormy sea. The Delamere was one of the more classy hotels in her area but she was still somewhat surprised at how much more refined John was than her other “associates”. Their meeting seemed to have smoothed the restless waters. A number of dinners had culminated in the Edinburgh trip and since then there had been numerous holidays where John always enjoyed supporting his business with a little relaxation. She recalled Cannes and Vienna with affection, and Cairo with a longing to be back among its bazaars and dusty alleyways.

John had told her that James, his chairman, had sanctioned their trips together, justifying the expense with the acknowledgement that Michelle had apparently honed his appetite for success.

John had known James since their days together at Caius College. After they graduated John had done some travelling whilst James had started up the business. Upon John’s return James had scooped him into the firm and their alliance had eventually been talked of in the City in the same breath as Marks and Spencer.

“More like Morecambe and Wise”, John had joked, and Michelle had watched

whilst he and James rolled around the sofa, holding their stomachs and laughing like little boys.

John said that he always knew where he stood with James because his friend could never tell a lie. Whenever he tried, a guilty look controlled his eyes and an artificial smile tried to coax a truthful expression on to his face.

Michelle wondered now if she would ever be capable of visiting Sainsbury's again, not to mention any more exotic locations. The simple task of shopping and living an everyday existence seemed unimportant. The chore of toasting a slice of bread and pouring boiling water on to a tea bag were the extent, nowadays, of her powers.

All around her, graves and headstones told of the repetition of death; why should she escape grief? But why was it so final? Could there not be a more agreeable way of easing out of existence? Perhaps a comma would be better than a full stop.

"Time is a great healer", people had persisted in saying to her all week, and she would reluctantly smile, understanding their need to offer comfort. Time may heal the wounds but it doesn't erase the scars.

She recalled Paris as if her mind were seeking a balm from the past. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth but slipped off as she thought of never being able to go back again without history haunting and taunting her like a forbidden fruit.

A lifetime was such a miserably short time in which to achieve anything. She looked at the trees surrounding her; they would still be here long after even she had gone. Her own 23 years seemed increasingly insignificant. She supposed that if someone had not accomplished anything in their allotted time then it was time for them to die, and if someone had achieved something then they had done what they

were here for and were no longer necessary. It appeared to Michelle a rather harsh judgement but her haphazard thoughts searched for any possible answer that would make sense of her dreadful loss.

She felt utter frustration at the unfairness of life. She felt the helplessness of opposing something as mighty as fate, as if she were nothing more than a grain of sand at the mercy of the whims of the sea or borne on the wind to suffer her own personal destiny. She wanted to scream and rage against the world for depriving her of that for which she lived.

As the fine rain settled on her coat like wet dust, she drifted towards her car as if blown by that very wind.

At the doorway of the chapel Barbara, John's wife, emerged, blinking her red-rimmed eyes at the daylight. Crows cawed up in the horse chestnuts and the dampness of the morning clung to her senses like a cloak. She felt the comfort of her brother Maurice's hand on her shoulder and held firmly to the hands of her two despondent daughters.

She looked out into the cemetery and watched the strange woman in the blue coat climb into her car. She had never seen her before. There were company representatives there whom she had known for many years but did not recognize this woman. Perhaps she was a new recruit. But why was she leaving so soon as if she were making a quick getaway? She must remember to ask James if he knew who she was.