

Embers

He sat by her side through those last hours. As her eyes smiled up to him he glimpsed a remnant of her beauty. Her fierce grip relaxed; her hand lay trembling in his. He gently stroked her bloated cheek. The morphine was doing its job. Her lids closed. She mouthed the silent words.

'Thank you, Dugald'.

Her pulse grew weaker and stopped; their 33 years of marriage ended. He was relieved that she had been able to leave peacefully after her long painful journey through hypomania and alcoholism to liver cancer.

Purgatory for two: no extra charge.

'Good-Bye Isobel.'

To say more would have been hypocritical.

His once deep faith in God was long gone, crushed out of him as they had slithered downwards to this final gutter of her illness. He had lived an increasingly lonely life, moving them from place to place, trying to hide her sickness, caring for her, doing his best, putting her first, obedient to the sense of duty in-bred back in his native Scotland.

The hardest part had been that she had refused him children, perhaps knowing what lay ahead.

ooOoo

He sold the house and put his affairs in order. Anything left would go to his nephew Alasdair, the only relative who had ever visited. Dugald cringed again as the scene flashed back from those long years ago.

Back-packing on his gap year before University, the boy had stayed only for the first few mouthfuls of the meal.

Isobel, had been mercifully absent, locked down in her room with her bottles of gin. The boy had been delightful, shy, witty and full of youthful enthusiasm.

Then she appeared naked, framed in the doorway, leering, and slurring her words. Even then, after years of self-abuse, she still looked amazing.

"I can see it in your eyes, sonny. You want to do it, don't you? Come on then, its open night at the funny farm. Get you dick out laddie and shag the arse off me. Your Uncle's wee winkie has fallen off, it seems."

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Alasdair had mumbled, "Goodbye Uncle Dugald, I have to go, sorry", as he gathered his things and fled.

And that was how their secret had escaped back to Scotland, surely.

Dugald had expected some response, but there had been silence.

Dugald well knew that nobody lives for ever and with two pensions and the portfolio of safe shares inherited from his father-in-law, he knew he had enough. He had planned this trip many times in his head. Now at last, free of his burden, he was off to fish his way around New Zealand in his new camper van.

He wore a big grin, the first day of rest of his life.

Then, just as he was dropping off the last of her clothes at the charity shop, the bundle of letters fell out. When they had disappeared from his hiding place all those years ago he had searched everywhere he could think of, eventually accepting that Isobel must have destroyed them in a fit of jealousy.

'Morag, oh Morag, lassie, what did I do to you!' he sobbed, frozen, staring at them in disbelief.

Sticking to his plan he drove north from Auckland.

On the seat beside him, the letters stirred again the image that had been a frequent visitor to his lonely bed. *Morag in her swimsuit: small, slim, dark hair, deep brown eyes, shy, quietly spoken and very beautiful.* When he could resist no longer, he pulled over, parked at the viewpoint overlooking the ocean, and reached for them, his hand shaking. He searched for the photograph, but it was gone. But now he realised that there were many more letters that he had hidden. He sorted them by date order and stared at them, tears running down his cheeks.

He caressed her first letter; it had been waiting for him when he arrived at the Bank in Auckland. Even before he read it again, he knew the words by heart, the words that had been his friend during those first months of loneliness, and again, when he had lost Isobel to her addiction and he had accepted, eventually, that he was alone again.

Sunday 14 April 1968.

Dear Dugald,

Everyone at Church has been asking about you and how you are getting on.

Your BB Football Team is really missing you. The boys want you to come back. They say they will keep losing without you to coach them.

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We miss you too in the Choir.

Margaret Curran and Jim Gibson are to be married. Janice is to be their Bridesmaid.

The Wedding will be in June. Tommy Bilsland will be their Best Man.

God's Blessings to you from us all.

Yours very affectionately,

Morag (Clarkson)

PS I do miss you very much. This is a photograph taken at Largo, so that you will not forget what I look like. Please do write soon.

She had written every Sunday night after Church and he had done the same the same, every week for his first eight months, planning their new life together. She would come to him after his year's Probation.

'Morag, Morag, Morag...'

His tears fell, smudging the ink.

He read slowly through all of them, including the last heartrending ones he had not seen before. The ones with the English postmark, the ones that told him of her new life, told him that, as he had not written for almost three years, she would not write again, that she would assume that he was happy, that she would try to find happiness without him.

'Oh Morag, lassie, if only I hadn't been transferred to Hamilton!'

Dugald had been called to Head Office in Auckland late on the Thursday afternoon. It had not been a request or an invitation.

'McDonald, report to the Hamilton Branch on Monday morning. Ask for Mr McAllister. He needs a bright energetic man to help develop his Insurance side. Miss Nicolson in Wages will find you a suitable rooming house.'

That was how the Bank had worked then. You were 'posted', in accord with their requirements. No debate.

He arrived in Hamilton by bus with his two cases two days later, on Saturday morning. A very attractive red-haired girl bounced up to him.

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'Well Mr Dugald McDonald, you are quite a bit younger than I expected!'

'Sorry Miss eh? I'm afraid you have the advantage of me?'

'Advantage Miss McAllister. Miss McAllister to Serve and Yes, it's an ACE!'

Miss McAllister wins the Match, 6 Games to Love!'

She bent down pretending to haul at his heaviest case and in doing so he caught a full view into the cleavage of her ample bosoms, as she intended.

'Well, do you like what you have seen of Hamilton so far, Mr Dugald McDonald?'

She remained bent over, leering up at him.

'Eh, y-yes. Thanks.'

'Dad is playing Golf so he sent me to collect you, to make you feel welcome.'

She stepped close to him tip-toeing up to whisper huskily into his ear, 'Well, Mr Dugald McDonald, **do** you feel welcome?'

He could smell her scent; his head was spinning.

'Yeh, yeh, yes, very m-mu-m-mu-much so. Call me Dugald, please.'

'*Call me Isobel, please,*' mocking his still strong Scottish accent.

'Dugald: what a manly name. Dugald McDonald. Yes. I like it very much. Do you play tennis Dugald?'

She took him to his digs in her father's car. Later she took him to the Tennis Club. She appeared at his digs next morning and took him to Church. He ate dinner with the McAllister's that evening.

She walked him back to his digs, pushed him backwards into the darkness of the doorway, reached up on her tiptoes, circled her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately, pressing her ample bosoms and strong thighs hard against him.

His dreams were of a naked red-haired nymph with large breasts; he woke several times, fully aroused.

Too busy to write his usual letters to Morag, she did not learn of his new address and he did not receive any further letters from her. He knew he should write but never did. Isobel and his new job at the Bank in Hamilton filled his world.

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Within six months he was an Assistant Manager. They were married almost a year to the day of their first meeting. Isobel stopped working and concentrated on being a passionate lover and tennis star.

Three years later, on his promotion to Deputy Manager, they moved Christchurch, on South Island. With special responsibility for supporting all the smaller outlying branches on, most weeks he had to spend many nights away from home.

That was when the trouble had started. Isobel did not like living alone and missed all her friends. She was bored and hated Christchurch, she wailed at every opportunity. Whenever he was away she would track him down by telephone and demand that he speak to her at once, whatever his situation.

'I need you Dugald! I want you in my bed, now! Or perhaps should I go and find someone else to keep me warm? Is that what I should do? There are plenty men here who want it, you know!'

At first he had been shocked by her language; then he began to notice that she was slurring her words. Arriving home he would often find her comatose, almost naked and with the radio blaring. He was never sure if she had done as she threatened. Occasionally, when she was 'high', almost her old self, she was very passionate, but her periods of depression increased in frequency. Alcohol was ever present.

Her Mother blamed him, repeatedly saying:

"Dugald, be a proper husband my lovely girl. Stop being nasty to her, be NICE to her."

After a few years her Father eventually confided:

"Isobel has always been a bit 'up and down', a bit like her Mother, actually, and very 'needy' as a wee girl, but always very affectionate."

Dugald anaesthetised himself from his situation by working even harder, but his secret was hard to hide. Although he was well respected by colleagues and customers alike, his increasing unannounced 'holidays' and unexplained absences and lateness at meeting were obvious to all. The whispers against him began.

Head Office soon learned of his predicament and was wary of a man with a 'erratic wife'. His career stalled. He was returned to general banking duties. He was moved around, usually to deal with smaller 'problem' branches. The Bank did not seem to recognise this irony.

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The car park was empty and the light was fading. He must have been here for hours, must have dozed off. He switched on the interior lamp and re-read the final letter yet again:

To Dugald McDonald Esq.

Dear Sir,

I write to advise that Miss Morag Clarkson is to leave the Bank and move to Poole, in Dorset, leaving Banking, wishing to make a fresh start.

Some months ago, at her annual review, she intimated to me, in confidence, of her future intention to leave us to join you in New Zealand.

I now understand from her that 'something must have happened' to change your affections for her.

My sincere hope is that this communication will encourage you to think carefully on your behaviour in this matter.

In all my years in Banking I have never had occasion to write a letter of this nature, and I do so only because Morag is a very special young woman.

We here at the Bank are very sorry to lose her; she has been one of our very best Cashiers.

Yours Sincerely,

John Morse, Esquire

Manager, Glasgow, (St. Vincent Street Branch).

Isobel had scribbled across it, in the Bank's blue crayon,

Good riddance!

He thought back to those early weeks in Hamilton; Isobel had worked in the Mail Room, opening and sorting the incoming mail.

As he read and re-read the hidden letters the embers of his love for Morag Clarkson glowed brightly in his heart.

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That night Dugald kneeled in his camper van and prayed for the first time in many years.

Next morning he drove to Dargaville Library.

'Good Morning, eh, Rebecca,' peering at the girl's name-tag. 'My name is Dugald McDonald and I need your help.'

'Yes, of course, what can I do for you? Take a seat.'

'Rebecca, I'm trying to trace an old friend, form over thirty years ago. I wondered if the internet might help, but I know nothing about computers, not really, juts the basics. Could you suggest how it might work, help me, please?'

Rebecca listed his information, giving everything that he thought might help, with dates and places, as best he could remember them.

Suddenly she stopped him: 'Did you say *'Pollokshaws'* Methodist Church?'

'Yes, until I left Glasgow in 1968.'

'But that's my Gran's old church and she has a friend who arrived only a few days ago. I don't know her name but she is originally from Glasgow too so I bet she would be able to help.'

'But Rebecca, Glasgow is a very big place, like Auckland, not like Dargaville.'

'Well Mr McDonald, from what you've told me so far this looks like our best chance. Shall I ring Gran? See what she says? You never know, she or her friend could know something that might help you.'

An hour later he drew up outside a very pretty house with a beautiful garden.

A woman he did not know opened the door, skipped up the path towards him and threw her arms around him and hugged him hard.

'The famous and elusive Dugald McDonald. Praise the Lord and His mysterious ways! Come away in with you and meet someone who has come all the way here hoping to find you. Come on! Come on in you great big ninny! I don't know whether to kiss you or kill you! COME IN, Dugald, right now!'

She led him through her house to the rear garden. A small neat white haired woman was standing with her back to him.

She turned and her hand flew to her lips to stifle her sob.

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'Dugald!

'Morag!

'I came to you at last Dugald. Did I do the right thing?'

'Yes lassie, but can you forgive me, for all my badness to you?'

'I do.'

She smiled up into his face and he leaned forwards and kissed her, pulling her to him hard.

'I'll go and make a cup of tea while you two catch up', Jeanette said quietly.