

All Change Here

The Lakes, England.

Dr Martha Wallace-Aylin, (Senior Lecturer in the Department of Ecology and Sustainability at Kettle Bridge College of the Earth), checked her appearance in the full-length mirror, tidied her unruly red-hair under her lime green wide-brimmed rain hat then shrugged into the dark russet Burberry all-weather coat, a garment which had been her late husband's pride and joy.

Richard Aylin had always clamoured for the very best of everything and had pompously asserted his coat was guaranteed waterproof, a claim which Martha had disproved since inheriting it three years earlier following his tragic death.

(Poor Richard, the controls on his battery-assisted German bicycle had jammed, causing him to crash through the level crossing barrier into the side of a high-speed train.)

Easing her darker green facemask into place, she wet her index finger and slicked down her bushy eyebrows, resisting the quiet smile on her lips which threatened to creep into her eyes.

'Well, Dylan, here we go. Another one bites the dust.'

Dylan whined, sniffing at the crack of the utility room door, eager to be out for a bonus walk despite the downpour.

'No! No dogs allowed at funerals. **Here!** Into your cage like a good boy.'

Tail between his legs the lockdown rescue spaniel scuttled inside, curled into a coil with his nose tucked into his tail, his eyes resentful.

At Kettle Bridge House, a rambling, crumbling edifice, (formerly the manor house of the Aylin family and now a struggling care home with a fifty-fifty split of private and local authority residents), Martha parked in the slot reserved for 'The Owner'. Her brother-in-law, Edmund Cartwright was standing by the main entrance. He too was masked and clad in an identical Burberry raincoat.

As she approached, he glanced behind to check they were alone then leaned forward to whisper in her ear, 'Good news, my darling, I have a buyer for this mausoleum. With a fair wind the deal will go through before Christmas. I've asked Crispin to send a confirming letter to Marcel expressing an interest in both vineyard properties.'

'Why both?' Martha asked.

'Crispin said we should do it to create a negotiating position. Look, come round to the coach house later, after this charade. I'll cook, we'll break out a bottle of special Champagne and ... '

All Change Here

'Martha!'

'Edmund!'

'So, **there** you are at last! Let's catch up on the others, they've gone ahead. Bloody Humanists! No sense of occasion. And it's a **bamboo** coffin, to be **buried**, on a day like this, would you believe. Why they don't just create a pyre and burn her I'll never understand. You do know Martha, that my dear sister Irene was completely loopy these last two years? How in Hell's Name did she find it possible in her madness to persuade Crispin Hargreaves to stipulate all this walking rigmarole. Is this how we should save the bloody planet, by walking everywhere, even in this **bloody rain**? We'll all catch bloody pneumonia in this deluge. Come on, let's get this over with and get back to the dry for Edmund's nosh up and a decent drink.'

Major Terrence Aylin (Rtd) inserted himself between the pair, placed a large fat hand in the small of each back and propelled them forwards. Terrence was a former Rugby Internationalist and currently Life President of Kettle Bridge RFC. At six foot four, he was as tall and beefy as he was loud, a condition arising from deafness from his time as a training officer in the Royal Artillery.

The Celebrant was waiting for them at the entrance to the Aylin Vault. He was a tiny man, hatless and bald, wearing a scruffy army surplus jacket and paint-spattered blue nylon over-trousers of the lightweight kind worn to resist summer showers, shedding water onto his muddy trainers. With a glance at Edmund, he offered a sad shake of his head then stumbled through the poem by Sara Teasdale, which the deceased had asked for specifically.

As the rain teemed down, Martha's Burberry started to leak at the seams. Tilting her head forward, she closed her eyes and dreamed of the change of climate soon to come, living in a place where the words of the poem might seem less incongruous.

There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground,
And swallows circling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pools singing at night,
And wild plum trees in tremulous white,

Robins will wear their feathery fire
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.

All Change Here

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn,
Would scarcely know that we were gone.

Then, to the embarrassment of everyone, the speaker added:

'Goodbye, dear 'Eileen', we will all miss you.'

Under his breath but still clearly audible to all, Terrence muttered:

'**Prat!** Her name was **Irene**, not bloody **Eileen**.'

The small crowd of graveside mourners dispersed quickly.

Only Terrence, Edmund, Martha and Crispin Hargreaves, (the Aylin family solicitor), made it back to the socially distanced wake at the Kettle Bridge Village Hall.

Sarah Blessed, the care home manageress, a huge florid woman smelling of stale sweat and sherry, had popped in briefly, downed three large glasses of home-made organic Elderflower wine then made her excuse, claiming she was short-staffed.

As Sarah waddled out, Edmund pressed upon her a large cake tin of food intended as a replacement for the lunch she had missed by attending the funeral. It was also a useful way of diminishing the uneaten piles prepared for the mourners who had chosen not to attend. Sarah's generous portion included Edmund's famous home-made foraged mushroom vol-au-vents and monster thick spelt bread sandwiches filled to overflowing with a paste of grated organic cheese and wild cranberry pickle. There was also a less appetizing selection of stodgy wholemeal fruit scones and cakes made with wild garlic and organic rapeseed oil.

France.

The Languedoc breeze was warm and balmy, bees buzzed lazily among the sweetly scented flower meadow, returning laden with pollen and nectar to their beehouse. To the south, in the far distance, the mountains of Andorra shimmered in their muted September colours.

On the slopes immediately below, swathes of organic grapes hung heavily on the vines.

Across the valley, on the veranda of the smaller steading, the gaggle of students from Kettle Bridge College lay in small groups, dozing as the sun dipped, tired and stiff after their first day harvesting the new season grapes, tipsy on last year's vintage, nibbling at

All Change Here

the remains of their barbecued evening meal, wrapped up in their own world of intrigue and romance.

On the patio of the larger, grander converted farmhouse, Martha pushed her slim, fit, naked body out of the infinity pool and padded across to take the dangled towel from his hand. She looked down and smiled at the naughty effect she was having on his manhood. At fifty-three to his forty-seven, she thought they made a perfect couple.

It had taken a fair bit of planning, slowly building on each advantage and opportunity, meeting secretly to enjoy each other while carefully preparing the ground. The success of her book, *The Organic Forager*, had been crucial. In the final tally they had garnered enough to buy and renovate both properties, turning the smaller one into a self-catering hostel for summer walkers and winter skiers. It was also an ideal base for the grape-picking students at harvest time.

With the shadow of the pandemic becoming a distant memory, the English couple had made a success of their venture. Free from cold dreary winters, damp tepid summers, wet and stormy autumns with their destructive gales, they were enjoying their new life in a more benign climate.

By dint of hard work and discipline, they had crafted a good team to support them and were now relaxed into a simpler, easier lifestyle, free to enjoy long rambles with their dogs, foraging for edible fungi, truffles and herbs, enjoying Nature's organic bounty as in unfolded month by month.

'Martha, did I ever tell you how gorgeous you look?'

She lay face down on her sun lounger.

'Crispin, stop fishing for compliments and give me a massage, there's a good chap.'

(Poor Edmund, Terrence and Sarah; the day after the funeral, all three had been rushed to hospital with suspected food poisoning, never confirmed. In their weakened state, within days the trio had capitulated to the rampant Covid 19 Omicron variant.)