

The Best Friend's Tale:
REMEMBRANCE DAY

GOING down that familiar road in East Finchley, she wondered how she had managed to stay away for all those long, lonely years, years which left a dark, echoing void in her mind. She also wondered why she chose to return on the evening of Remembrance Day, with the fallen leaves rustling noisily on the pavements and the dust rising in eddies when these were sporadically stirred and lifted by the nippy November gusts. Lately, she had begun to question the notion that people are the captains of their fate, as a result of watching herself drift rudderless on its currents or lie in wait for the opportunities that it deems fit to offer at rare intervals.

The road, with its neat rows of semidetached houses distinguished by their pebble-dashed facades and latticed windows, was basically unchanged, although the paintwork on some of the window frames was the worse for wear, crackling with age and mildew. Against the wintry twilight, the pollarded trees, a trademark of north

London suburbs, looked dark and menacing, like mutants thrusting arthritic fingers into the sky.

She stood before the house, all of whose lights were on. A late-flowering climbing rose, with a few stray blooms that had survived the frost, formed a natural canopy over the portico. She recalled helping Albert to plant it shortly before she left. It was no more than a sapling then, a cutting which had newly taken root, barely a metre tall, which they had bought at the nursery near Alexandra Park. She had chosen a hardy floribunda that promised clusters of fragrant pink blooms all through the summer, preferring it to the delicate tea hybrids, with their standard two flowerings a year and their obscenely large, overly lush blooms that also wilted twice as quickly. Looking at the rose arbor, she was again reminded of how long she had been away.

Before she reached the front door, she could hear the makings of a party: obstreperous chatter and movement; the infectious, feet-thumping beat of Albert's favourite West African tribal music (an interest he developed during his stint with the vso in Sierra Leone). She wondered if it was Albert's private 'do' to commemorate Remembrance Day (a lame excuse for hedonism) or a communal barbecue for the Neighbourhood Watch committee. Neighbourhood Watch brought to mind tireless Anne, medical sociologist, Doctor of Philosophy, who kept the entire road updated on the latest theft or attempted break-in with her little bulletins, and who painstakingly urged all and sundry to install

the latest burglar alarms or inscribe their valuables for easy identification. She wondered if Anne still lived next door and whether she still conducted research on the ailments of geriatrics at St Barts.

The front door was open and the place was packed. This must be some party, she thought, with guests spilling into the hall. She tried to find a familiar face among the crowd but was confronted by a horde of strangers. Has Albert made so many new friends since she left? They used to entertain on a modest scale, for she preferred the intimate dinner party for six to the typically inane English bash for fifty, where one had too much to drink ('bring a bottle each' being the unspoken mandate), too little to eat (celery sticks, cheese straws and those ubiquitous salt-and-onion flavoured crisps won't even appease those on diet, in her opinion) and an annoying time struggling to make small talk above the deafening music.

They were a good team, she and Albert. She would bustle around the kitchen all afternoon, concocting some exotic fare, sparing neither cost nor effort to achieve just that perfect touch in both taste and visual appeal. On these occasions, he would return from work earlier than normal, giving her time to wash, dress and look elegant while he laid the table and prepared the wines. When the first guests arrived, they would be resplendent as the quintessential host and hostess, the personification of casual bonhomie, who made it all seem so effortless.

Weaving through the crowd, she decided that she

was not going to impose herself on this montage of alien faces. Her old friends were probably gathered in the kitchen, as they customarily did after one of her successful dinner parties, when they felt they needed to reciprocate her unparalleled hospitality by contributing to the washing-up.

She wandered upstairs, hoping to surprise Albert. With cocktails in hand, people lounged on the steps or draped themselves over the banister. A few wore beatific faces, as if rendered mellow by alcohol. Others were ostensibly befuddled, no longer aware to whom they were talking or what they were drinking. As the music was earsplitting, she could not make out what they were saying, but marvelled nonetheless, at the queer shapes their mouths assumed in the mute drama: pursed into a thin line or rounded for vowels. What a bunch of freeloaders, she thought, gazing into all these strange faces who ignored her in their audacity and who treated Albert's house as their neighbourhood pub.

She was about to berate them when she was distracted by the poppies in their buttonholes, which evoked a surge of emotion, a sentiment so potent she was ready to forgive them for infringing on her private domain. She recalled the Remembrance Day collections at school when she was a little girl in Singapore. The form teacher would place the tin on her desk and the little children would march up with a reverential expression and make their offerings, usually the cost of a day's abstinence from candy bars or chewing gum. The whole procedure had the sanctified air and quiet

dignity of a religious ritual. Then the teacher would distribute the poppies. In those days, these had petals of red felt with black buttons for centres, mounted on a strip of wire to serve as boutonnières. She would wear hers proudly for a day and then secrete it away for safekeeping in some bottom drawer. When she moved to London years later, she was disappointed to find poppies made of paper, for she had imagined, in her childish naïveté, that real poppies might be handed out in England on November 11. However, this disappointment was more than compensated for by the solemn ceremony at the Cenotaph in Whitehall, over which the Queen herself presided, and which she continued to find inexpressibly poignant. For the poppy had ceased to be a mere floral token for a small donation. It became a symbol of life and death, of love and remembrance, after her mother explained to her the significance of the occasion. She embroidered around each poppy an elegiac tale of soldiers in the Great War, snatched from the full flower of manhood in the trenches of Flanders, and returned prematurely to the earth whence all life springs, to push up fields of poppies. What had especially moved her was the suggestion of seasons and cycles, for in death was regeneration and in the ritual of remembrance, the enduring nature of love. But where was Albert?

*By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul
loveth:*

I sought him but I found him not.

Entering his bedroom, she found Christine holding court in a circle of women. She was shocked to find her best friend and confidante so much older. The grey streaks on Christine's hair were very pronounced and didn't look like deliberate salon highlighting. Christine's eyes also looked puffy, as though she had been crying, and she was without her usual heavy make-up. Christine's friendship with Albert dated back a long way, to when they were children and neighbours in Potters Bar. She wondered what Christine, who was by turns an adherent of nouvelle cuisine, the arts-and-crafts movement, macrobiotic diets, lesbian rights, the Church of Scientology, Greenpeace, Zen Buddhism, homeopathy and holistic medicine (at the last count), had been up to lately. Having sailed the seven seas by working everywhere from Oman to Port Moresby, Christine was one of the most consistently faddish people (if that does not constitute a logical contradiction per se) but also one of the nicest. Christine had accepted her, a Chinese girl from Singapore, without much ado, and embraced her into her intimate circle.

She wanted badly to talk to Christine, who would be able to fill her in on all those missing years. But she found herself recoiling from the constant reminder of the interval she had stepped out of their lives, a gaping wound with no memories to salve. Besides, time was playing tricks on her mind. From her corner of the room, she gestured to Christine, but the latter was too engrossed in expounding her latest obsession or preaching some newfangled theory. And then her eye

was caught by one of Albert's open wardrobes. What has he done with all his clothes? Has Albert taken in a tenant after she left and moved into the little bedroom? She looked around for explanations and found none.

*I will rise now, and go about the city in the
streets,
And in the broad ways I will seek him whom my
soul loveth:
I sought him, but I found him not.
The watchmen that go about the city found me:
to whom I said, Saw ye him whom my soul
loveth?*

In desperation, she went downstairs again. In the living room, food was laid out in the style of a buffet. Someone had obviously gone to a lot of trouble for such a spread, which did not bear Albert's distinctive stamp. Has he relied on caterers this time? She spotted a few familiar faces among the crowd: the Cohens who lived four doors away; Margaret and Maria from the wine appreciation group; Brigitte and Malcolm from Hastings; Dorothea from Waldshut, Caroline from Surbiton. They all looked perceptibly older than when she had last seen them. She gravitated towards them. Someone was commenting about a cremation, about scattering the last remains in the Jewish Cemetery near Golders' Hill Park. She recalled the site, a sunny spot of yews and cypresses full of bird song in summer, where Albert's parents were buried. She was wondering about

the connection when she overheard the crucial questions: 'Has Albert left all his worldly possessions to his only cousin or did he die intestate?' And then she understood the significance of this gathering.

Albert, her dear Albert was dead and this was his wake, a congregation of friends and colleagues from both her time with him and after her departure, playing his favourite music and turning it into the joyous occasion that he himself would have prescribed for his send-off party, because he didn't care for sadness and mourning, never lived by half measures, and embraced death as he had embraced life, with a fierce, fearless passion. 'The awful daring of a moment's surrender,' he would quote T.S. Eliot and usurp it for his credo.

Her mind was in a turmoil, when she espied Anne leaning against the wall near her, an observer rather than a participant, the stereotypical wallflower who was almost a living proof of the maxim that academics are socially inept, if not for her enthusiasm in the Neighbourhood Watch scheme. She moved towards Anne, who was all dressed in black such that her poppy really stood out in stark contrast. Anne seemed to stare at her in disbelief. For a transitory moment, she wondered if she too had aged beyond all recognition. And then Anne let out a scream and dropped her wine glass, causing the others to step back as she crouched to retrieve the splinters. After regaining her composure, Anne muttered apologetically: 'I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me. I was thinking of Albert when I thought I saw Kate standing before me...'

A thoughtful guest stopped the music and everybody rallied round poor Anne, allaying her fears and trying to convince her that it was a figment of her imagination and not an apparition of the long deceased Kate, Albert's beloved late wife.

Now she knew why she had returned that evening, why there had been this dark, echoing void in her memory, why she had lingered in a spiritual limbo and why time seemed to be playing tricks on her mind. As the pieces of her puzzle fell into place, the multitude of everyday objects no longer posed an obstacle in her path. She found herself gliding through the walls, like a zephyr through air. Where it was dark outside, the light of her sudden epiphany illumined the garden, so that it became brighter than day. Each tree, each shrub, each blade of grass that she and Albert had so carefully tended when they were alive, blazed with a gilded edge and basked in the golden glow. Dimensions lost their usual meaning and soft contours cohered with brilliant outlines like a Surrealist painting. And in the heart of that effulgence stood Albert, waiting for her with open arms and with all the velveteen poppies of her childhood in each hand.

*Set me a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon
thine arm:*

*For love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the
grave:*

*the coals thereof are coals of fire,
which hath a most vehement flame.*