

Separate Lives

The old man sits at their favourite table in the Coach and Horses. From the raised platform, he can look down on the bar area and up into the rafters of the vaulted ceiling.

How many years has it been? He counts on his trembling fingers, four times across both hands. The first time still a vivid memory. The morning after the only time they made love. That Summer of Love, Procol Harum playing endlessly. They sipped large glasses of Pino Grigio at this table. She stunning in her mini-shirt, long boots, and tousled hair, he in fashion with flowered shirt, flares and beard. A day like no other, making a lifetime commitment but not together. They dreamed of a forever relationship but not one to burn brightly then die in the overfamiliarity of marriage. They vowed to meet here the same day every year and treasure their affection.

Tradition demands she is late. He knows he can finish one glass before she comes and has ordered three. Between sips, he scans the pub. Not much has changed. The picture that reminds him of Cezanne's Card Players is still on the wall behind his table, the sacks of grain still rest on the rafters. He has so much to tell her. Every year he makes a list. They could have written to each other or started emailing, but they haven't and it makes their meetings so special.

Her normal twenty minute delay passes. He always dreads she won't come and wonders if three glasses of wine will soften his disappointment. He sighs with relief, spotting her navigating through the bar, staring up at his table. He puts on his glasses. It's not her, she's younger but she looks like her and climbs the stairs to him.

"Are you, John?"

"Yes." He clenches his hands.

"My mother left this letter for you." She hands him a white envelope bearing his name. He shakes as he reads the instructions above. *To be handed to John sitting at a table on the platform in the Coach and Horses at 1pm on July 15th.*

"I am so sorry. Mum passed away last month. I found this in her papers."

John puts his head in his hands, trying to hid his tears. The woman sits with him and puts her arm round his shoulders.

She is tearful too. "We miss her so much."

After several minutes, he dries his eyes and looks again at the envelope. He can't speak yet. He must read the letter first.

Dear John,

How wonderful that we have kept that promise we made for a lifetime. Of course, we knew that death would part us eventually. If you are reading this you will know I have left first. We agreed that our relationship thrived without obligations. So I hope you will not be too disappointed when I tell you the girl bearing this letter is your daughter. May you learn to love her like you did me.

Mary xxx