

A Bowl of Keys

It had been a circuitous descent for clever Claire to be in this, quite literally, dead end job. Her life had funnelled down to a few rooms in this decaying Victorian pile in a coastal town. A gentleman's residence that would shortly be taken over by developers and turned into another hotel with sea views. That is, once Mr Trevellion had ceased his daily snail slow journeys between bed, fireside chair, and antique bathroom with its noisy plumbing. Her role was nominally carer and general factotum. When he remembered Mr Trevellion paid her. Neither of them were concerned by this. Mr Trevellion because he had long since stopped giving money any considered thought, and Claire because all she wanted was the refuge of this drab and dimly lit catacomb of unused rooms. Occasional aircraft passing overhead, the hum of traffic on the busy coastal road, a delivery of food by the Ocado van, and the arrival twice a day of the professional nurse were the only intrusions.

During Mr Trevellion's many hours of sleep Claire would quietly raid the bowl of keys that lay in his bedside cabinet drawer below the myriad bottles of medicine, the water carafe, the unopened books, the detritus of a sick man. She would wander the corridors trying the locks and stare into rooms filled with dark and looming furniture. There were glass cases of stuffed animals, hunting trophies on the walls. Impossible to believe a family had lived in these rooms and that they had been full of life and occurrence. The house had died before its owner.

Claire had also reached the end of her road. Like Mr Trevellion she too waited. Mostly she was waiting for the nurse to be careless with the key that wasn't kept in the bowl with all the other keys. The key to the drugs cabinet. Her meanderings along the corridors with their bare light bulbs were only a distraction. She felt that she had no real curiosity left in anything. The loop of memories she played and replayed were of decreasing interest even to her.

One afternoon when she planned to visit again the attics that must have once been the maid's bedrooms she realised that the bowl of keys had swelled in number. She took out a key for a more modern lock and knew precisely for which door it was intended. It was for the wing of the house that could not even be approached from the outside as it lay within a warren of walls and outbuildings. All with locked gates and doors.

Claire felt the faintest flicker of excitement as she turned the new key quietly in the lock and swung open the door. She drew in her breath sharply as a corridor full of light, carpet and paintings was exposed. This must be where Mr Trevellion used to live. She decided to start at the top of this wing and work her way down. She had been presented with a conundrum. Why had Mr Trevellion chosen to live in the unloved part of the house? Doors opened onto guest bedrooms, sparsely furnished but with style and warmth. Then she opened the door to what was clearly the main bedroom with windows that looked across the bay. She moved across thick carpet to the bedside table on which there was a digital clock, a lamp and a photograph. Claire lifted the photograph, and a voice said, "Ah, Charles obviously thought it was time you met me." The bathroom door was open and a man with thick grey hair stood smiling at her. Shock held her still for a moment.

"Are you the lodger?"

"My name is James," and he took the photograph from her unresisting hand and placed it carefully back on the bedside table. "Oh, no....I am more than a lodger." Said with total confidence. Slowly a blush suffused her face as the significance of the photograph of the two men with their carelessly enwrapped arms and shared amusement filled her mind. Silence for a heart beat.

"Why do you not visit? Why?"

"Charles does not want me to see him whilst he is dying. I stay here because he likes to know I am close by, and this is my home."

After this James took her back to the door through which she had entered. Claire's thoughts were a confusion of embarrassment and curiosity, but she knew, of course, that she would not use that key again.

When she returned to Mr Trevellion in his bed, after seeing the vigour of James, he looked even

more frail and nearer to death. He lifted his eyes to her. The sentences came hesitantly “ It was time you understood. You needed to meet James.” Once again Claire was acutely embarrassed. So Mr Trevellion had always known about her journeys around his house. “ I thought, I thoughtyou twotogether.....” Then he slipped back into a sleep; a semi conscious state from which he never recovered.

The next time James and Claire met was at the funeral of Mr Trevellion. They stood side by side in the church, side by side at the graveside. One after the other they let a handful of earth slide through their fingers to patter onto the coffin lid. The small sounds unnaturally loud in the quiet. Together that day. Together. “But how?” Thought Claire, “But how will this be possible ?” however, for the first time she felt her focus shift minutely away from her own planned suicide.