

Last Memory – by Sue Watkinson

It is early February and the heavy wooden doors are open wide. Outside the air is light and cool, inside it's warm and oppressive. The late afternoon sun, like a lantern, white and bright, shines low through the tracery of branches on the beech trees.

The sky is blue. Not the clear bright blue of a spring day, nor the heavy deep blue of summer but a limpid hue, tinged with turquoise and peach, an indication of a still, clear winter night to come.

Alice stands in the hallway, looking out, a longing to be in the fresh, cool air overwhelming her. A young blonde woman in a blue and white uniform is watching a dark-haired young man, his arms laden with boxes, rushing in and out of the door. She spots Alice and calls out 'Just wait there a minute luv.'

Bustle and voices, more boxes, packages stacked up high. Distractions are many. The light invites Alice to move forward, down the steps, onto the drive.

'Alright there Queen?' She turns and looks at the young man, dashing back to the van for his next armful, and moves on slowly. He disappears inside and no-one sees her go towards the road.

Traffic roars by and she turns left alongside the safety of a stone wall. The bend in the road, the pattern of the trees, a view ahead, so familiar. Ahead are high stone posts and intricate metal gates. She has seen these before, a long time ago, and she knows where to go. A wide smooth path leads down to a lake where ducks, geese and swans glide and bicker: they swim towards her but she has nothing for them and they lose interest. She sits down on a familiar bench - 'In loving memory of Jim, husband of Alice, Dad and Grandad to his family'- and watches their antics as they begin to settle down for the night on little islands. Does she remember the many times she has sat here alone or with children, just watching quietly, enjoying the peace, the sudden silence as the birds tuck their heads under their wings ready for sleep? The sky is still light but the sun has dropped below the horizon and fingers of frost are riming the grass.

A little dog snuffles round her ankles and Alice puts down a hand to touch a soft, curly coat. It's warm and she buries her cold fingers deep into the fur.

A whistle, 'Bengie, come on, come here'. The little dog gives a short bark but stays with her. A figure appears beside the bench, big coat, scarf, hat, warm smile and a bright light shines down on her face. She blinks.

'Bengie, who have you found? Oh, hello, are you alright?'

Alice looks up and tries to smile at the bright eyes,

'I'm Carol, what's your name?'

'A, Al,'

'Anne, Alison ... Alice?'

Was that a tiny nod?

'Is anyone with you?'

Alice tries to shake her head but her expression is blank.

Carol picks up Bengie and puts him on Alice's lap.

'He'll keep you warm, give him a cuddle.'

She takes out her phone, makes a call and speaks urgently. Alice is shivering now but Bengie is such a comfort. The sky is darkening.

Carol puts her phone in her pocket, sits down close to Alice and puts a young arm round her shoulders; she pops her hat on the short, white curls and winds her scarf round the thin neck and shoulders. Carol starts to sing a song she remembers about evening and Alice joins in. Together they wait.

The delivery driver has finished his round. He thinks he might pop back to the care home and see whether that bright, young assistant is off duty any time soon. She was really giving him the eye. Then his thoughts turn to the old lady who moved so slowly past his van. Where did she go? He feels disturbed, anxious, turns the van round and drives the short distance. The blonde assistant answers the door.

'I saw one of your old ladies leaving the home earlier, I can check on the CCTV, look' - he switches on the recording - there is Alice looking up at him, moving round the van and out of sight.

'Oh my God, she's done a runner, no-one's noticed.'

And suddenly there is panic. Raised voices. Phone calls are made.

Back at the park, Carol, Alice and Bengie are being escorted by torchlight to a car. A large and soft spoken police officer makes a radio call - 'missing person found safe, where do I take her? No, she can't explain.'

There was a pause.

'So, they've just noticed she's gone - not a good reference for that place. She's OK but very cold. A dog walker found her and phoned the station.'

The car is warm and moments later they are at the door of Park Lodge where the staff are waiting. The young blonde assistant stands close to the delivery driver, holding his hand, smiling up at him with tears in her eyes.

'You're a real life saver.' she tells him as Alice is led inside.

The police officer speaks to the manager of the Care Home. 'I'll have to report

this incident Madame, and suggest that you change your procedures. You need a statement for every mobile resident, ID, familiar places, medications, photograph, family; you must know the sort of thing. If, God forbid, this happens again, we can see the statement and we'll know where to start looking. If young Carol hadn't found her when she did we'd have a body on our hands and that'd be bad news for your business.'

The delivery driver and care assistant are exchanging phone details. Carol and Bengie are sitting in the stuffy dining room waiting, while Alice is wrapped up warmly, safely confined once again.