

I was glad to be here. Jim had been right to persuade me. I'd argued strongly it would be a mistake to rake up old, partly forgotten memories, but then obeyed an urge to see it again before it moved into the hands of strangers from the young couple I'd rented it to 10 years ago. It might lay some ghosts.

I had parked the car at the top of the hill, cars apparently now banned from the narrow alleyways leading to the harbour. A dated and shabby looking single-decker bus, parked at the carpark entrance, appeared now to be one's transportation to the harbour if required. I made my way to the open door where an elderly man, with the appearance of an old age pensioner, was sitting in the driver's seat. The driver I asked myself? Several passengers were also seated. The bus driver was wide eyed and looked a little crazy but as he seemed to be in charge I asked him if the bus would be leaving soon. With a grunt and a nod he crashed the bus noisily into gear and we set off with a jerk.

It was a glorious day, Cornwall at its finest. The old fishermen's cottages, in a variety of coloured dressings, providing stark contrast to each other; nestling among the myriad of greenery stacked on the hillside. Purple bougainvillea, pink and white valerium randomly scattered in its midst. Hints of the previous evening's rain exaggerating and defining each leaf and petal.

Riding down the familiar steep street I recognised few places. Tom Hitchin's shabby door had at last been painted and Viv Coleman's windows replaced with fashionable bow fronts.

We dismounted at the harbour's cobbled entrance where a panoramic view of the stony headland was exposed. A tranquil haven lay beneath, sheltering from an expanse of turquoise sea reflecting the clear blue skies above. Small boats with tall masts made little movement in the calm waters. A lone seagull rested on the iron railing guarding the path of the lifeboat.

The view was fronted by *my* cottage . . . until contracts were exchanged. Bequeathed to me by my grandparents, Nan and Pops had lived here for most of their lives; it was where I'd spent my school holidays. Such a tiny house. Tiny lounge/entrance hall, tiny kitchen where, in consideration of the low beamed ceilings, a short flight of stairs led to two small bedrooms and even tinier bathroom.

My bedroom I remembered particularly. Built into the roof and accessible from a wooden-floored square which passed as a landing. A fantasy room. A Peter Pan . . . a Pooh Bear's room. With a steeply sloping ceiling there was just enough headroom for a child's

bed. Pops had fixed a wooden rail, made from his old boat's mast together with brightly coloured pennants along one wall. A low blue chest taken from the cabin of his boat stood in one corner with just enough wall space above to hang a picture of the boat, painted by a local artist. How I loved that room with its white walls and cotton bedcover, blue rugs and curtains, spending many hours perched on a chair, gazing out to sea through the miniscule window, uniquely set half into the wall, the top half teetering strangely into the roof.

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Now I scrambled over the low stone wall into the garden, avoiding the spot where the old hydrangeas still bloomed profusely.

'They're too big for such a small garden, Fay' Pops had said.

'No, they're not dear, they're just right' Nan replied.

Geraniums in pots perched precariously now on a lone windowsill.

The miniature stone lion still crouched on guard on the harbour-sided wall. Nan had bought it for Pops. She said it reminded her of Richard the Lionheart. Pops' name was Richard.

I dug into my bag for the key my agent had given me, the door opening easily. It was dark coming in from the brilliant sunshine.

It had changed. Or were my memories different – of a life, of a home until ten years ago? Was it the furniture, the pictures, the curtains? Trivialities.

Margot and Ted Holmes had rented it since . . . since it happened. They'd made few changes, just a dab of paint here and there. They were moving out next week and the agent was meeting me here in an hour. I'd arrived early to be on my own, half expecting, on opening the door, to see Nan come from the kitchen to hug me, Pops close behind. Nan's chair wasn't there, nor Pop's. On a pine table placed between two leather sofas by the old iron fireplace lay some letters and magazines. Glancing at them casually and noting their interest in the racing world, I saw the brown envelope with my name on. Left for me to collect? I picked it up before wandering through to the kitchen.

In here I felt strongly the close presence of Nan, her curly white hair, trim figure and the wrap around forties style apron she always insisted on using.

'You're still here aren't you Nan, Pops?' I whispered. I imagined her nodding and holding out her arms. Nan and Pops . . . it was always Nan *and* Pops. One didn't think of them as singles. They were a couple, a pair, a package – no dividing line. Two souls as one.

Slowly I climbed the stairs, passing the bedroom they had shared for so many years. It was a private place, as was the whole cottage . . . implanted with their love for each other, their caring; their giving of a love so great as to almost exclude the rest of the world. Except me . . . no-one could have given me more love throughout those years. Motherless and fatherless as I was, they'd given me every little piece of themselves they could spare from each other.

I opened the door to my bedroom, empty but . . . so tiny! How could it have been so tiny? However had my bed fitted in? Had I really looked through that microscopic window for all those hours? Blue curtains still fluttered in the light sea breeze, I'd taken the mast cum hanging rail and the picture when I left.

Tearfully I descended the stairway, pausing in the kitchen.

'Why, Nan? Why didn't you tell me if something was wrong?'

I dug into my pocket for a tissue, feeling the thick brown envelope. Drawing it out I examined it. Just my name – I didn't recognise the writing. Inside was a scrap of paper and another envelope. On the scrap of paper was written – *'We found this in the little room at the top of the house when packing. It had become wedged behind a pipe and your agent suggested we leave it for you to collect. Can we say how happy we have been here in your cottage. It holds a special atmosphere of warmth and love'*

Best wishes from Ted and Margot Holmes.

The enclosed envelope was unaddressed, old and crumpled. I opened it carefully. The writing, on a small sheet of lined paper was faded, but otherwise firm and clear.

Dated December 1945 it read:

To whoever may read this after we have passed into another life.

Fay and I have now been married for 3 perfect months since meeting during a terrible war in which we both saw many tragedies. We have been witness to families torn apart by the loss of loved ones and are of one mind that we shall never be separated. Therefore, if family responsibilities allow, we will not be parted by death. It will not be our intention to hurt or neglect any of our loved ones – whoever he/she or they may be at that time.

Our souls are bonded by everlasting love and must travel into eternity together. We do not know how, or when, we will make this journey. All we ask is an understanding of our wishes and our abhorrence of an unbearable loss.

The signatures . . . Richard White and Fay White were in different handwritings, the note obviously written by Richard.

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I leaned against the sink for support. Poor, poor Nan and Pops. When the end had come they had faced it together, as they had faced everything throughout life, and planned their departure from it. If this had come to light when they'd been found I could have borne my own loss easier. In my grief at the time I had screamed into the cottage 'Why couldn't you say goodbye to me?'

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I was sobbing into the sink when the agent arrived with Jim. Jim took the letter from me, read it, passing it back to me.

'May I read it too?' The Agent asked. And after – 'It does confirm what the community thought at the time, although the saddest thing is that Mrs White wasn't seriously ill after all. Her brain tumour was benign, and operable as the autopsy proved. This letter, in your room, was meant for you to find'.

I nodded, unable to speak . . . remembering. The call from the police, the awful drive down from Somerset, the identification procedure. Nan's beautiful hair still wet from the sea at the bottom of the headland from where they'd jumped. Hand in hand no doubt.

Jim's arm protectively round my shoulders I dabbed my swollen eyes. 'They had fifty-five happy years here and I have some wonderful memories.' I sobbed.

I turned to my agent. 'Rod, I haven't signed anything yet, have I? The cottage is no longer for sale.'

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