

THE PRIORY

by Susan Turbié



t was always the same ritual when she came home from work: she walked straight through to the kitchen, shedding her coat as she went. She grabbed the bottle of Tanqueray from the pantry, then a can of tonic water from the fridge. After closing the fridge, she would pause to straighten the magnets on the door, then greeted and petted the dogs before sitting down at the vast oak table to pour her drink. A cigarette was lit, a first puff inhaled, and then, only then, would she deign to acknowledge his presence. Rarely with a greeting or an inquiry about his day, but usually some kind of complaint: 'traffic's bloody awful,' or 'the garden's looking a shambles; when are you going to do something about it? Or else drag that malingerer Harry Mantle out of retirement. Christ knows I don't have the time to take care of it.'

She invariably arrived after him. Ever since she had been made Editor-in-Chief nine years ago, she never got home before eight o'clock at the earliest, while his last lecture finished at five.

On this one particular evening, he was sitting at the kitchen table marking essays when she came in.

'What's for dinner? I'm starving,' she said. 'Didn't have lunch; when I sent Lynda out for a sandwich, she got me prawn salad – on white bread!'

Ignoring her inquiry, he said: 'I thought we might go away this weekend.'

She had her head inside the fridge. ‘Did we finish all the pesto sauce the other night? I suppose I could defrost the stroganoff.’ She finally emerged, munching on a celery stick. ‘Go where?’

‘I thought we might go back to that place in Wales we went to when we were courting. You remember, that B&B in the Gothic abbey.’

‘Good God, that place? Is it still there?’

‘Oh, yes. Changed hands a few times since then, I imagine, but still going strong. I saw it in an article on unusual B&Bs in the travel section of today’s *Guardian* and it brought back memories of that weekend. How long ago was that now – twenty-six years?’

She shrugged, dragging deeply on her cigarette. ‘I suppose.’

‘Well... What do you think?’

She was checking emails on her phone.

‘Hmm? Well, I suppose I could get away from the magazine early on Friday.’

He was surprised she was being so accommodating.

‘Good. I’ll make the reservations, shall I?’

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Traffic was fairly scarce on the M4 on Saturday and within two hours they were crossing the Severn Bridge. Just before three they drew into the car park of the Priory.

After Henry VIII’s campaign of destruction followed by centuries of neglect, all that remained intact of the original thirteenth-century edifice was a single turret and a wall of the nave of the priory church. A cottage had been built adjacent to the turret a few hundred years later (God knows how they’d managed to get planning permission for that, he had wondered during their first visit), and the building was now a Bed & Breakfast. The cottage part housed the reception area, bar, kitchen and dining room whilst the five bedrooms were in the turret. They mounted the winding stone staircase, which was barely three feet wide, to their room: Richard had made sure they were given the same one they had had the first time. The only furniture consisted of two bedside tables with lamps, an oak wardrobe, a small walnut dressing table with a porcelain ewer and basin, (purely for ornamental value, as a small notice stated), and a four-poster Queen Anne bed.

‘I see they haven’t improved the level of comfort since,’ observed Rosemary as she deposited her overnight bag on the bed. ‘And I still don’t see an en suite bathroom.’

Richard was gazing through the lancet window at the emerald lawn that stretched out before the ruins. ‘It would spoil the authenticity of it. And besides, you can see there’s no room for one: the bedroom takes up the entire width of the tower.’

‘Hmm. I don’t suppose there’s any Wi-Fi either.’

He shrugged. ‘I didn’t ask.’

‘Hmph.’ This sound from Rosemary seemed to imply a multitude of reproaches – against the inadequacies of the amenities offered by the establishment, against Richard’s ineptitude and heedlessness. Sighing heavily, she removed her black pashmina and pulled on a Barbour.

‘Well, come on then: we’re in the country now so we may as well act like it. Let’s... go for a walk.’ She said this as though it were some eccentric and tedious pastime, such as trainspotting or collecting manhole covers.

There were a number of footpaths leading from the Priory up into the hills. He remembered how during their last visit they had walked to the top of the hill and made love in the bracken, beneath the disapproving gaze of a Kerry Hill ewe.

But now as they approached the stile, they saw a signpost: Footpath Closed. They went to another footpath: the same signpost.

Back at the Priory, they were informed that it was due to the foot-and-mouth epidemic.

‘What, so we can’t walk in the fields because we might tread contaminated earth everywhere?’ Rosemary asked incredulously.

The proprietor, an Englishman, nodded gravely. ‘You can imagine the toll it’s taking on the local economy.’

‘Bugger the local economy,’ said Rosemary when they were out of earshot. ‘What are we going to do for the rest of the weekend? Walking’s all there is to do around here.’

‘We can walk along the road,’ said Richard hopefully. ‘And tomorrow we can drive to Hay.’

He remembered their trip to Hay-on-Wye twenty-six years ago. After a protracted pub lunch, they had gone book shopping. As they entered the first place, a rare book dealer on the High Street, Richard silently resolved to decide that very day whether they were meant to be together forever based on her literary choices.

She began by splashing out on a first edition of Robert Browning. He inwardly smiled approvingly and selected a handsome edition of *A Shropshire Lad* for himself. Afterwards they went to the Cinema Bookshop. It was Rosemary’s first visit and he could still picture her expression of childlike rapture as she ran past the rows and rows of books.

‘Why, it’s too much!’ she gasped. ‘Let’s meet up in... I don’t know... an hour?’

He agreed happily and said he was going to consult the military history section upstairs. But after making his way towards the staircase, he turned back and spent the next hour secretly following her from row to row, watching her browse and read, observing her reactions as she turned pages, and was absorbed and enchanted by her absorption and enchantment.

Realising that an hour was up and he was still empty-handed, and keen to avoid arousing her suspicion, he grabbed the first book that came to hand, (which turned out to be *The Art of Basketry*) and caught up with her at the till.

She was beaming and laden with books. He observed her booty as she deposited it before the salesgirl. A rather eclectic choice: *A Winter's Tale*, ('it's the only one I've never read!'), a volume of Mallarmé, (Davina Suisse's renowned, highly original translation, he noted), *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, a collection of Chekhov's short stories, a biography of the Duchess of Argyll, a couple of P.D. James and a book about Jack the Ripper (she had spent fifteen minutes in the True Crime section, he had noted with mild dismay).

He concluded that it was a most interesting choice – the Jack the Ripper book notwithstanding – and provided some fascinating insights into her. Yes, he decided as they drove back to the Priory: she was the one.

He could still remember how the scent of printed paper on her fingers as she stroked his face had aroused him terribly.

But now, he had to admit that Rosemary was right: the hills were depressingly barren without sheep and the cordoned-off footpaths made the whole place resemble a crime scene.

They set out along the narrow lane that led to the Herefordshire border. There was no village to speak of, just the Priory, a pub, and a few farmhouses. Rosemary stuffed her hands into the pockets of her Barbour.

'Damn. I forgot my cigarettes. I'm going to nip back to the room. Walk on if you like, I'll catch up.'

Ten minutes passed. Then twenty. Surely she hadn't got lost? It wasn't possible: the lane led straight back to the Priory and they were barely one hundred yards away. He took out his mobile but was informed there was no signal.

Damned backwater, he thought. But then, hadn't he heard Rosemary's phone beep just before she went back to retrieve her cigarettes? He started walking back. On the way, he noticed that one of the footpaths was open again – no tape, no foot-and-mouth warning.

Back at the Priory, he was greeted by a stocky, dark-haired man behind the reception desk.

'Oh... afternoon,' said Richard. 'I was looking for the owner.'

The other man smiled. ‘That would be me. What can I do you for?’

‘No, sorry...I meant the tall, bearded chap.’

The man frowned. ‘Not sure who you mean, sir. I’ve run this place for the past seven years.’

‘Oh... My mistake then. Look, have you seen my wife, by any chance?’

The owner winked conspiratorially at him.

‘Your... young lady, you mean?’

‘I mean my wife,’ said Richard exasperatedly, ‘and I’m not sure I care for your tone.’

The owner assumed a grave, deferential expression. ‘Pardon me, sir, I didn’t mean to speak out of turn, I’m sure. Discretion is the watchword of this establishment. Your wife went up to your room.’

Richard bounded up the stairs. Upon opening the door, he started: for there, reclining on the bed was a slim, young-looking female form. She had her back to the door and was wearing a purple paisley silk shirt and a long black velvet skirt.

‘Er... excuse me, Miss, but you seem to have got the wrong –’

The woman stirred and turned to face him.

It was Rosemary.

But Rosemary as she had been when he first met her: slender, with her long, flowing hair and her long, flowing clothes; her skin smooth and milk-white, before the ravages of two decades of booze, fags and stress.

She beamed at him. ‘I’m sorry, I was exhausted. I feel ready for a walk now, though. Are you all right, darling?’

Richard stared incredulously.

‘How... how is this possible?’

Rosemary stretched and slid off the bed. ‘What’s that? You know, I had the most divine nap: this place is heavenly, so romantic!’ She threw him a lascivious gaze. ‘Of course, if you don’t feel like walking, we could always just stay here for the afternoon...’

‘No, no...’ he said quickly. ‘A nice, brisk walk to blow the cobwebs away is just what we need... I’ll... meet you downstairs.’ And with that he slipped out of the bedroom, bounded down the steps and rushed outside. Leaning against the cottage wall, he closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe deeply. When he opened his eyes and cast a glance around him, everything looked normal – the ruins, the grass, the trees.

Everything except the hills beyond. They were flecked with white: the sheep were back!

He went back inside, ordered a large brandy from the bar and downed it in one. Presently, young Rosemary came down.

‘Shall we?’

As they started along the lane again, she slipped her arm through his.

‘I think we should come back here when we’re an old, married couple,’ she said, casting enraptured glances around the valley. ‘Oh, don’t look at me like that! You know you’re just dying to propose!’

Before he could stammer a response, she exclaimed:

‘Ooh, let’s have some of that divine fudge I bought in Hay! Let’s see...’ she rummaged around in her pockets. ‘Vanilla, cherry and almond, or rum ‘n’ raisin?’ Before he could respond, she broke off a piece of vanilla and popped it into his mouth while she herself devoured a square of cherry and almond. Tugging at his arm, she steered him off the road and along a footpath into the hills.

‘Come on!’

Forty minutes later they were gazing down at the valley from the top of the hill.

‘There!’ she sighed. ‘Isn’t it gorgeous?’

He nodded and turned towards her. Her long chestnut hair was blowing in the wind, baring her creamy white neck.

‘Rosemary...’ He grabbed her and kissed her with a fervour he no longer knew he had. She pulled him down onto a mossy mound, murmuring his name over and over.

Afterwards, he snuggled up to her and fell asleep. When he awoke, he was lying face down on the moss, and quite alone.

He leapt to his feet, calling her name, but there was nobody else on the hilltop as far as the eye could see.

The sheep, too, were gone.

‘No!’ he cried.

He rushed back down the hill, stumbling over the earth. As he reached the bottom, he heard a shout: ‘Oi!’

Turning, he saw a red-faced farmer straddling a quad bike. ‘What do you think you’re doing? Can’t you read?’ He pointed to the foot-and-mouth notice on the fence.

Richard held up an apologetic hand and clambered over the stile.

A little further down the lane, Rosemary was leaning against a fence, smoking a cigarette.

‘Christ, Richard, where have you been? I’ve been waiting for ages. Are we going on this walk or not?’

He sighed with resignation and nodded.

‘Sorry. Let’s go.’

As they walked along the road, they came to the pub.

‘May as well have a drink while we’re here,’ said Rosemary. But as they approached the door, they noticed a sign informing them that during the foot-and-mouth epidemic, the Swan’s Neck would open only in the evenings.

‘Perfect,’ said Rosemary. ‘Well, let’s continue along the road a bit further and then back to the B&B.’

They continued in silence, with Rosemary a few steps ahead of him. He smelt his hands: the aroma of grass mingled with that musky scent she used to wear. There were moss stains on the knees of his cords. He could still feel her and taste her. He closed his eyes for a few seconds.

As the lane curved back towards the Priory, they heard the sound of hooves pounding earth. Looking up, they saw a young lad on a handsome Palomino mare heading through the field towards them. As he approached, Richard noticed that the boy, who must have been around fourteen, had an unusually large head and odd, expressionless, opaque brown eyes. He rode past them without a word and continued down the lane and out of sight.

‘Christ,’ said Rosemary with a shudder of distaste. ‘Did you see that? He looks just like that kid in *Deliverance*.’

‘I suppose there’s some truth in all those clichés about small rural communities,’ said Richard. ‘Come on, let’s have that drink.’

Back in the lounge at the Priory, Rosemary settled in front of the fire whilst Richard fetched their drinks. As he set down his Guinness and her gin and tonic, she resumed her griping about the establishment: if anything, she observed, their first stay there twenty-odd years ago was better. The level of comfort and convenience had been no worse back then, and at least one could smoke in the bar in those days. They then sank into a frigid silence and sipped their drinks. Presently a local man came in, ordered a pint of ale and stood at the bar chatting to the proprietor about hedge clippings in tyres.

The sight of the inbred youth had depressed Richard acutely. That, and the deserted hills and the slaughtered, diseased sheep he imagined. He had foolishly hoped to recapture the romance and bucolic idyll of their first trip there.

But there was nothing but dead sheep and cordoned-off fields and potato-headed children.

They checked out the next morning. Rosemary suggested they visit a cousin of hers in Hereford 'so the weekend isn't a complete write-off.' As they drove out of the village, they saw the boy on his Palomino just ahead of them.

Rosemary hummed the first few bars of the banjo duet from *Deliverance* and gave a snort of laughter at her own wit. Slowing right down and as he overtook the boy, Richard glanced across at him and their eyes briefly met. Once safely past, he accelerated.

Glancing in the rear-view mirror, he saw the boy raise his hand in a wave.



Illustrations by Christine Deleidi