

Two for Joy

The kitchen was spotless. Still, Anna frowned and worked a cloth over imaginary specks on the worktop. The warm sunlight sparkled off the taps as she rinsed the sink and looked out into the garden. There was a memory in every part of it. The tall flagpole cherry tree now fat with the promise of blossom, and the bluebells that swayed in the gentle breeze.

She watched a magpie land on the wall, his bright beady eye checking out the prospect of food.

“Gallus besoms,” Bill had called them, but Anna knew he had a grudging admiration for them. Leaning on the windowsill she looked on as the bird strutted and hopped along the wall, the indigo sheen of his feathers burnished by the early morning light, a rattling call announcing his presence to all within earshot.

Anna scanned the garden for its mate, but the lone magpie danced across the wall in search of insects. Bill thought the old rhyme about the appearance of these birds was a nonsense. Anna only half believed it herself but would laughingly remind him of the times when it seemed to come true.

“Do you remember we saw three, and that very morning Elsa next door told us her first grandchild has just been born? A girl?”

“They are very clever birds, I’ll give you that Anna, they can actually recognise themselves in a mirror, but I seriously doubt they’re the Mystic Meg of the bird world.”

She remembered Bill telling her that Rossini's opera *The Thieving Magpie* wasn't entirely accurate, these intelligent birds were interested in many things beside shiny objects.

Memories.

Everywhere.

Closing her eyes now, she could hear his voice, see again his soft smile.

She blinked away the unshed tears and looked out over the sun-dappled lawn.

She never tired of looking at the garden, and that always puzzled Bill. Every morning when she opened the blinds she'd stand and look out over the grass and shrubs as if she were seeing it for the first time.

"What do you expect? That it'll have vanished through the night?" Bill would shake his head. "It's a garden, what's the fascination?"

Anna thought the world was divided into two sorts of people. Those who were gardeners and those who weren't. Bill did what had to be done in the garden. He cared for it, but Anna loved it.

She missed him. Her life was full of spaces where he'd been. Where he should have been, with her, in their retirement. Together.

One for sorrow it is then.

"Just three more weeks to go," she whispered to the solitary bird. Lifting her case she locked the door and left.

Mrs Willis was on her list of patients today, so Anna reasoned the single magpie in the garden had been spot on. That woman gave her more bother than almost any other patient Anna had known in all her years of nursing, and there had been some real characters. Whatever else she could say about her career, it was never dull! It was frustrating, rewarding, infuriating, sad, happy, tiring, but never dull.

Even Mrs Willis had her entertaining moments, with her contrived accents and mangled pronunciations. It was a bit of a standing joke among the staff in the surgery, they thought she might have “irritable vowel disease!” Her long-suffering husband worked long hours in the city and thanks to his promotion they were planning a move quite soon.

Not soon enough thought Anna.

She'd make her visit to Mrs Willis at *The Laurels* her last call. A simple dressing, thirty minutes at the most. Unless of course the woman had more brochures of luxury flats overlooking the golf course or “exquisite” loft conversions by the Marina, or....the list could go on, and frequently did.

Anna could only feign interest for so long, then she would pretend to have one more urgent call and make her escape.

Good plan! The thought of a swift exit from Mrs Willis made her smile. The radio came on as she started the car and Vivaldi accompanied her to her first visit.

It was a good day, busy, and in general most of the patients seemed to be on the mend.

Anna completed the treatment cards and ticked off her visits.

One left, *The Laurels*.

Hauling her case from the boot Anna made her way up the gravel path to the “solid mahogany” front door. Mrs Willis was always keen to share the details of the quality her home contained, and for Anna that said it all about the woman. She was someone who knew the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Even that poor dog they kept in the utility room. A beautiful young spaniel, Tess.

Apparently on a visit to the vet, Mrs Willis announced in a loud whisper that her new little dog was a “prime example of the breed, just under one thousand pounds,” knowing this information would be all around the village by the end of the day.”Champion bloodlines we understand, heard a litter mate was sent to Sandringham, unofficially of course, the Royals are very discreet.”

Poor Tess, Anna though, acres of countryside freedom or the utility room of *The Laurels*, that wee dog certainly got the short straw.

Ringing the doorbell, Anna could hear a few dispirited “woofs” from the back of the house. After a pause the door opened and an anxious Mrs Willis beckoned Anna inside. She frequently looked worried. In the beginning Anna would ask her what the problem was but quickly discovered that her concerns were, at least to Anna’s mind, invariably trivial. A child with meningitis, a teenager in a road traffic accident, these were worries. What vexed Mrs Willis was a lack of short-stemmed lillies for her Ikebana class or running out of headed notepaper.

Anna followed Mrs Willis down the hallway to the small sitting room at the back. She’d never been invited into the good rooms at the front of the house, they were for Rotary meetings or fellow golfers, not for the nurse with her wee bag of bandages. As social classes go, Mrs Willis placed Health Visitors in the same group as window cleaners and hairdressers.

Anna set her case on the small side table by Mrs Willis’ chair and began to change the dressing.

“I’d rather hoped you’d be here earlier Nurse, I really have such a lot to do you know.”

Anna apologised, she was later than usual due to a last minute addition to her list of calls, a new patient in the Hostel. Mrs Willis shuddered in horror when she’d heard some of Anna’s patients were in the homeless unit.

“Oh I could not do your job, not at all, how could you? I mean.....”

Given the choice right now, Anna thought she’d rather have the worn and weary faces of those unfortunate souls than this frozen-faced , empty-headed.....

“Enough” Anna said to herself, “in three weeks this will be not be my problem.”

As Anna set about her work, Mrs Willis droned on about their new flat, they’d decided on the bungalow near the golf course. So much to do, organising a house move. Anna only half listened, nodding and smiling at appropriate intervals. She could hear the soft whining of Tess in the next room.

Mrs Willis saw Anna look towards the door.

“She’ll have to go of course when we put this place up for sale, it won’t do to have dog hair or dog smells when we have potential buyers in, and she can’t come to the new place. It’s a very select development you know, there’s an actual Peer in the same road!”

“Are you selling her then,?” Anna smoothed the end of the dressing in place and sat back.

“That was the original plan.” Mrs Willis looked away, her face darkening in embarrassment. “We placed an advert in *The Horse and Hound*, and a breeder got in touch. He came this morning to check her out. I mean, given her pedigree she should produce top quality pups. I admit he examined her quite thoroughly, and put her through her paces in the back garden; good conformation and pace are vital, apparently.”

Looking thoroughly mortified, Mrs Willis went on. “I know you won’t let this go any further, patient confidentiality and all that, but, well, she’s not really top drawer as spaniels go.”

“Oh dear,” Anna managed to sympathise.

“It gets worse,” Mrs Willis leaned forward in agitation, “when the breeder left, the stupid dog didn’t want to come back indoors and I spent half an hour chasing her around the garden. Truly I’ll be glad to see the back of her.”

Anna stood up and closed her case. “She’s a lovely dog Mrs Willis, she’ll make a fine pet for someone, good pedigree or not. Put an advert in the Post Office.”

“I don’t have time for that,” Mrs Willis snapped, “I’ve called my husband, he’ll take her to the pound in the morning. Not a local one of course, it wouldn’t do if got out that we’d actually been sold a pup, but right now I have more urgent matters. I appear to have lost one of my earrings, probably in the garden chasing that stupid beast.”

“Oh dear,” Anna said again. She had seen the earrings in the past, and they were quite exquisite, luminously perfect drops in a diamond setting. Big enough to be disgustingly expensive, stopping just short of being vulgar.

Anna found it hard to place sentimental value on material objects, the exception being the plain gold band Bill had given her on their wedding day.

Mrs Willis had her back to Anna now as she thumbed through the phone book. “I’ll have to get someone in with a metal detector, the stones are set in platinum, surely they can detect that. Search every inch of the place, and if it’s not in the garden, that breeder found it and pocketed it.”

Anna raised her eyebrows at this conclusion. Poor man! Let’s hope the earring is in the garden she thought.

“You can see yourself out Nurse?”

Anna was about to say her goodbyes, but Mrs Willis waved her hand dismissively as she began her tale of woe into the phone.

Back at the surgery, Anna completed her notes and re-stocked her case, already thinking about the next day's list. She was startled by the slamming of the file drawer. Maggie the receptionist was looking at her.

"You were a million miles away there Anna, why aren't you dancing around, grinning from ear to ear lady? Three weeks to freedom! The way things are going I'll be in my eighties before I can retire."

Anna sighed, "you're right Maggie, as a certain Mrs Willis might say *the world is my oyster!* It's been a long day, but you get off home now and I'll lock up, see you in the morning."

Alone in the quiet reception, Anna came a decision. Lifting her chin, she breathed in and straightened her shoulders.

Thirty minutes later, sitting in the car outside *The Laurels*, Anna listened to the tick of the cooling engine. Try as she might she could not find a doubt in her mind, it was the right thing to do.

Later that evening as she sat at home, feet up on the sofa, she smiled and stroked Tess's sleek ebony coat.

Mrs Willis had been more than happy to give the spaniel away, basket, bowls and blanket included, happy in the knowledge that "patient confidentiality" was assured. Anna stretched and yawned, she'd only had Tess a few hours but they seemed to fit very nicely around each other. Now leaning against the back door, Anna could hear Tess snuffle around in the dark as she explored her new surroundings.

"Come on girl, bedtime," Anna smiled as the dog turned around three times in her basket before settling down .

Next morning, Anna let Tess into the garden while she made breakfast. Another bright morning. Tess scampered back into the kitchen and sat expectantly, stumpy tail thudding against the floor.

Anna laughed, “you seem to have the best of this deal Miss, you enjoy your breakfast while I go out and collect your deposits!”

With her pink tongue and white teeth Tess seemed to be grinning. In the garden Anna stooped to pick up the dog mess. She hesitated then laughed out loud scaring a pair of magpies.

Back in the kitchen Anna sang as she dried her hands. Tess looked up at her new mistress.

“OK girl a quick walk then I’ll have to leave you, but I’ll be back at lunchtime. You mind the house ‘til I get back.”

Planting a kiss on the silky head Anna set off.

At the surgery she picked up her notes, smiled at the patients waiting, smiled at the doctors and saved her biggest smile for Maggie.

Well that’s better, now you look like a woman who’s ready to enjoy her retirement.”

Maggie laughed as Anna gave a little skip on her way out.

Outside *The Laurels* Anna took a moment to compose herself She should show a little concern for her patients worries.

It was a rather dishevelled Mrs Willis who came to the door.

“What? I didn’t expect

Anna interrupted gently,” no you’re quite right Mrs Willis, you’re not due a visit today but I want to give...”

Mrs Willis raised her hands as if to push Anna away.

“Give the dog back? I absolutely refuse, don’t even think of bringing it back here , if you don’t want her, take her to the pound yourself. My earring has not been found and my husband has called the insurers. I am devastated, I do not need any more trauma.”

Anna waited until Mrs Willis ran out of breath.

“I found your earring,” Anna said quietly.

Mrs Willis leaned forward and hauled Anna into the house.

“Richard, Richard come here! she’s found it, nurse has found my earring.”

Snatching it from Anna’s outstretched hand Mrs Willis held it up tenderly, checking it

“Where did you find it?”she asked as she kissed the precious gem.

“Thank you so much” said Mr Willis shaking Anna’s hand gratefully. “We must give you a reward .”

Anna could not take her eyes off Mrs Willis who kissed the jewel again.

“Well it’s really Tess you should thank, she somehow swallowed it yesterday during her escapade in your garden. Fortunately it’s quite a big earring so I spotted it easily after her bowels moved this morning.”

Mrs Willis swayed a little as she held the gem at arm’s length now and probably didn’t hear Anna’s words of comfort

“I gave it a good rinse.”

The End.