

The Almost-Widow

by Carina Buckley

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‘He’d already gone when I got up,’ I said.

The policeman must have caught a note of doubt in my voice; there was a moment’s hesitation and a certain angle to his eyebrow before he added a sentence to his notebook.

‘You sleep quite soundly, then?’

‘I took a pill.’ I knotted my fingers together, rubbing the pad of my thumb over a knuckle. ‘The doctor gave them to me. And...’ A heavy pigeon flapped onto the windowsill, catching my eye. ‘I sleep in the spare room now. He’s too restless, disturbs my sleep too much.’

I don’t hurry in to see him in the mornings anymore, either, but I didn’t say that. The policeman didn’t need to know everything.

‘So, let’s say he’s been gone since six, shall we? Around about four hours.’ He glanced up at me. ‘That’s quite a while.’

I felt the rebuke in my tingling cheeks and pushed my shoulders back in response.

‘It’s a big house. He’s free to move around. It’s his home, isn’t it.’

‘Of course, of course,’ the policeman said. He wouldn’t know

what it was like to be locked up, or the value of a wander, I would imagine.

‘I called him for breakfast at eight, as usual, after my shower,’ I continued. ‘I’d just made tea.’ I nodded in the direction of the kitchen. The pot was still on the side, the tea left in it cold and stewed. ‘But there was nothing. I was worried at first it was his heart.’

‘His heart?’ The policeman frowned. ‘I thought...’

‘Oh, he’s always been healthy, physically,’ I said. ‘It’s only his brain that’s the problem. But at his age. You know.’

The policeman nodded once, wrote something else down. I’m not sure he did know.

What I knew was that his pyjamas were neatly folded on his bed – our bed – despite his newly habitual urge to roam. It’s funny what stays and what goes. Interesting, even, from a detached viewpoint, if you’re detached. Geoffrey had always been a tidy man, couldn’t abide a cluttered surface or a wrinkled shirt, never mind washing up stacked to dry on the drainer, and to an extent he still was although I wouldn’t let him do the ironing anymore. Wouldn’t let him do much anymore, actually; it was easier for me to put everything away than to hunt through cupboards for where he might have stowed the plates.

It's the differences that get you, little ones like that. They're the killer, so to speak. That's what does the damage. Before, before it got too bad, he could spend hours in his armchair reading, sometimes until he fell asleep (the book resting on the arm of the chair, a finger marking the page if he was lucky. Not that he would ever admit to sleep: just thinking about what he'd read, he'd insist). Now it was beyond him. The concentration as much as the language, letters dancing away from him. Even the television was more frustration than consolation, the very concepts of narrative and structure serving only to taunt and confuse.

That's where I came in. That was my role now, to negotiate and mediate the wider world. Me, to entertain and soothe, to explain and reassure, again and again and again. If I had known, then, that a dull night's companionable reading would prove on reflection to be a moment of perfect bliss, it's hard to say what I would have done. Is the horror past or present? All I know is that right now, today, I am greedy for those days, and all the ones I had are not enough. It was their timelessness that made them worth having.

I heard the front door slam and jerked round to the noise.

'Sorry, that's Constable Byers,' my policeman said, as his

colleague came in from questioning the neighbours. Goodness knows what they all thought, what they must think of me. It's not the usual way that eighty-year-old women tend to lose their husbands, after all. Not literally.

'Nothing,' said this Byers, tucking his helmet under his arm. 'But don't worry, Mrs Wilson. We've got patrol cars covering the whole area. He can't have got far.'

They hadn't found him yet, though, had they?

'And you're sure you can't say what he was wearing?' The pen hovered over the notebook. I shook my head.

'Definitely his black shoes. I keep them out and they're missing. No laces, you see. Probably grey trousers.' Most of his trousers were some shade of grey. I saw them look at each other. What did they expect? 'As far as I can tell, his blue cardigan. I didn't see it in his cupboard.'

My policeman relayed the sparse description into the radio on his shoulder, bookending it with constabulary code, and then turned back to me.

'I'll leave you with Constable Byers,' he said, informing us both,

and with a nod he was gone.

The house seemed much quieter without him and his noisy radio in it. Constable Byers was younger, shorter, slighter and paler, as if he hadn't been fully finished, and I could see I would need to help him out.

'Cup of tea?' I said. 'I never finished mine this morning.' I gestured through into the front room. 'Have a seat, dear.'

I brought through a fresh pot and we sat together on the sofa, his radio crackling into life every now and then. Sometimes he responded but most frequently he ignored it, and so after a while I learnt to as well.

'I must say,' I said, sipping my second cup. 'You've all been ever so good. I was a bit surprised you took it so seriously.'

Constable Byers set his saucer down on the coffee table, the spoon rattling. 'Of course, Mrs Wilson,' he said. 'We always take a missing person report seriously, but especially when it's a vulnerable member of the community.'

'Vulnerable.' I let the word sit in my mouth a moment before washing it down with more tea. 'Funny to think of that word applying

to me. I suppose it does, too?’ The poor young man blushed and looked at his feet. Those big boots on my nice rug. ‘Geoffrey, certainly. Well, he’d be grateful, if he knew.’

The doorbell rang, and Constable Byers stood up, replacing the cup in the saucer as he did so. ‘That’ll be the dogs, Mrs Wilson.’

‘Dogs?’ My heart began to race and I couldn’t quite catch my breath.

‘Don’t worry. They’re specially trained.’ He opened the door, looking back round at me still on the sofa. ‘Tracker dogs. They’ll find your husband.’

Three big Alsatians they were: Jupiter, Florence and I forget the other one, Micky perhaps, a silly name for a dog. Constable Byers had been upstairs to fetch Geoffrey’s pyjamas before I knew what was happening and the handlers let each dog get his nose in them. I suddenly saw him frightened, feeling hunted, and I felt like I had betrayed him. At least he would never know what I had done.

Whining and straining, the dogs headed out into the empty street, and the reality hit me like the blast of sea air that came in the open door: he really had gone.

Constable Byers shut the door and came to sit back down next to me.

‘They’ll be in touch as soon as they have news,’ he said. ‘Try not to dwell on it. Anything you can do to keep yourself busy is good.’

Hungry. I suddenly felt hungry. Now Geoffrey’s fate was truly out of my hands, it was like my body remembered it existed, and my mind remembered that I hadn’t had anything to eat since six yesterday evening.

‘Would you like a sandwich?’ I said to the young man.

‘Er...’ he began, hands pressed to his knees ready to stand.

‘No, no, you stay there,’ I said. ‘I’m making myself one. It’s no trouble. Is cheese okay?’

‘I’m not supposed to, Mrs Wilson,’ he said. ‘Thanks all the same.’

‘Oh, go on,’ I said. ‘Our little secret.’

‘Well, alright,’ he said, lowering his elbows. ‘Thank you. That would be lovely.’

I laid out the bread and sliced the cheese while the kettle launched itself into activity, and caught myself humming when I went to fetch the pickle out of the fridge. I didn’t want Constable Byers to think me

a monster, but now that my responsibility had been so thoroughly passed on I felt light and empty; relieved, almost, if that isn't a terrible thing to admit.

'Here we go,' I said, passing him a plate off the tray. 'Stay, stay there, we can eat off our laps for a change. Now, why don't you tell me all about yourself?'

He bit into the bread and chewed rapidly, swallowing once and then twice before answering. 'Not much to tell, Mrs Wilson,' he said. 'I've been on the force for four years, joined out of college.'

'That's very nice,' I said. 'And you're married, are you?' His gold band glinted even in the dull light.

'Three years now,' he said, sitting up straighter. He still looked so proud.

'Lovely. Any children?'

'No,' he said, cheeks flushing. 'Not yet. The wife's keen.'

I finished off my sandwich; surprisingly satisfying, I had to admit. Perhaps the company added some flavour. 'We never had any,' I said. 'Never seemed to be the right time. Oh, we were happy enough,' I added, to forestall the inevitable pity. 'We wouldn't have been able to

travel as much as we did. Not back then, not in those days.’ I brushed crumbs onto my plate. ‘Different now, of course.’

It was all different now. Change is the only thing we can rely on in life, after all. But talking to the young policeman, young enough to be a grandson, brought its own change with it, one I hadn’t anticipated. I felt like myself again. I was me, a whole person with my own life and experiences that were not merely supplemental to the act of caring for my husband. Despite it all, I too was still fit and, as everyone reminded me regularly, strong, very strong, as if getting up every day and continuing to care for the person I had built my life around was an unusual act worthy of particular praise. I had to continue to exist, I had to be more. Maybe that’s what they meant by strength, although they couldn’t know how weak I have been.

At three the young man left. The first few flakes of snow began to fall as his replacement, an older woman, took his place.

‘Don’t worry, Mrs Wilson,’ he said before waving goodbye.

‘We’ll find him.’

‘Thank you dear,’ I said. ‘I’m sure you will.’ It was awfully cold outside, the wind bitter off the sea. Awfully cold for an old man to be outside without his coat on. I shuddered and closed the door.

Constable Richards struck me as sensible; warm, too, after a fashion. What would bad news sound like, coming from her, with our shared femininity and her wealth of years? It would have been harder for the young man, and it was good he was gone.

‘Can I make you a cup of tea, Constable?’ I asked her.

‘No, thank you, ma’am,’ she said, feet planted in the hallway. ‘Not while I’m on duty.’

This woman would be sympathetic but professional. It would be kind, but impersonal, and so I would be able to bear the news more impersonally too. Understanding this, I withdrew. I would help us both.

I spent the next couple of hours upstairs in the study, or what used to be the study. With the door closed I couldn’t hear the bursts of radio conversation that continued to staccato through the house. I stood at the window for a while and watched the swirling snow, tugged and blown this way and that by the wind but always heading for earth. They said it made you tired, the cold. That you fell asleep before you froze, and didn’t know anything about it. I hoped they were right.

A picture on the wall was crooked so I straightened it, a street

scene in Granada that we had bought one holiday. The bookshelves were dusted with the grey of disuse. I used to read all the time. I used to do a lot of things all the time.

Energised, I delved into my old self, pulling open drawers and rifling through papers, packets of old photos, a box of postcards we'd received over the years. I'd always enjoyed sending cards when we'd gone away, capturing our holiday in a couple of lines. I felt the warmth of France, the south in summer, and the gentle roll of the broad Rhone we had crossed in a small ferry. I saw the broad streets and proud buildings of Helsinki, tasted again the glühwein on a February night in Berlin, smelt the baked, crushed herbs of a southern Italian hillside.

Our travels had been gradually winding down for a while and came to a final halt five years earlier. Not from choice, not from the choice of either of us.

I'd never been to Portugal. Don't know why, it just hadn't happened, and the pity of it hit me full force. I wasn't dead yet! I wanted to have conversations over lunch again, to take a stroll somewhere new and choose what I would have for dinner rather than make do with what I could find in the fridge or cupboard, or what

well-meaning friends had brought round. I wasn't dead yet.

It was a stupid, self-indulgent thing to feel so sad about. Still, there it was. I was sad, sorry for myself for not going to Portugal, and there was Geoffrey outside in this weather all alone. We never reached Portugal, but I could go. I could go by myself, if I wasn't a carer, a wife no longer but an almost-widow.

They'd told me, the care workers or whoever they were, that I couldn't lock him in or physically prevent him from leaving the house. It's false imprisonment, they'd said. Of course you had to shut the world out, keep yourself safe. That didn't mean I could stop him leaving. Do you see?

It wouldn't be safe for him to go out by himself, I tried to explain. He can't manage, and I can't watch him every waking moment. It was too much of a risk, didn't they understand?

There was a gentle tap on the door and the policewoman opened it slowly, intruding into the room gradually and with the greatest of care.

Eventually I realised they were right, and I was wrong. He needed to be free, and so did I.

'There's news,' Constable Richards said. I was ready to hear it,

prepared for impersonality. 'They've found him, in a field not two miles away. Dehydrated and hypothermic, but he's on the way to hospital now and they reckon he'll be okay with a bit of treatment.'

She smiled a little, to encourage me to do the same. She probably took my expression for the shock of relief. 'There's a car on its way,' she said, 'we'll have you with him in a jiffy.'

I had to wait for my dreams to crumble and blow out of my vision before I could respond. I got to my feet. My legs were trembling. 'I'll have a cup of tea first,' I told her, 'and then you can take me to see him.' There was no rush.



Carina Buckley grew up in Margate, Kent, and now lives in Salisbury. She works in higher education and has recently completed her first novel, *THE TRANSPARENCY OF WATER*. She is working on a collection of short stories as well as a full-length play, *SINCE I LAST SAW MY SISTER*. She has had two short plays performed at the Salisbury Fringe festival.