

Essential Journeys Only.

The ease of thoughtless words dropped like scattered coins on the church steps after a wedding.

Children scrabbling to catch the silver ones, darting fast scooping up handfuls. The shyer ones politely making do with the scattered coppers.

'62 years is a long time, do you miss him?' that's what she asked me, 'Can you imagine?'

I could. I knew her. She wanted the dirt – from the horse's mouth, quotable stuff that she could regurgitate to the other customers. But it was an easy question requiring no effort, no depth, not a deep dig.

'What did you say?' I asked.

'Yes', I said just that. 'Yes.'

She twisted the ring on her left hand and sighed, stared out at the tall trees he'd planted, the raised beds that are now crowded with seeding weeds, looked up towards the ridge at the back of the cottage automatically scanning the tops for stags.

I recalled him talking about death, his own before he became riddled, before he needed the tubes and the morphine and the special cot-like metal bed crammed into this tiny room – now gone. Only the marks on the paint work to tell where it had been and the indentations in the carpet pile.

He said he wanted pegged out on the ridge, 'Feed the eagles. Give me to them on the top of the hill. I hate waste. I want Parsi. Build a table, a raptor bird table – I don't want the earth, no digging, nor the fire. A tower of silence for my last act of charity.'

We'd laughed then and she and I laughed again. The tea grew cold.

She wanted just the minimum: no flowers, no grave, no scattering of ashes – a few hymns at the crematorium, the Lord's prayer, a modicum of decorum before the weeping and shaking and screaming behind the thick cottage walls.

She sorted his clothes on sleepless nights. Bin, charity or hesitant gifts – three black bags each knotted twice.

'Did she like the funeral?' The damn woman had asked me as I stood asking for stamps.

'Like?'

'Is it as she wanted? It's hard to tell', she rabbited on. 'The usual man would have had a lunch organised, been there before the rest arrived, have gotten her there first. It would have been less parsi-monious....', she let the word hang like a brick.

'Yes', I said just that. 'Yes', she did.

She hadn't gone to the usual chap. There was a falling out, decades back. This other Man, this kind man had taken her the long drive, the scenic route round the back roads they used to go to Beaulieu to buy the good tweed, the special shirts, the Crowdie and the oats. Where she'd gotten her hair done, taken her passed the shop they'd bought each other birthday gifts and the café where he'd wait

whilst she had her bi-annual perm. She wanted this last journey to be just this kind man and her man in the back, in his mock oak box. The three of them on this cold day before the snow came in big drifts blocking the roads. A window in the weather – a tight run before they shut the snow gates sealing us in, tethering us all to the jagged hill.

There was no food, no curled sandwiches, no trays of sherry, whiskey and recollections. There were just us three and the dog on this drive back, the dog in the boot and strands of haylage stuck to her fur coat, the smell of moth balls and sheep as she sat up front being brave and glad it was another hurdle overcome, another hill climbed. And the silence when the fat flakes started at the dam – a smothering, a covering blanketing the peaks, turning the black road white. The wipers straining across the wind-shield and the radio with the weather warning 'essential journeys only'.