

## Natural Causes

It was still dark, that was the problem. Dark and cold. She missed the girl who used to light the fires. Today it seemed it was up to her.

She crept out of the room, trying not to wake her husband. Husband. That sounded good. She had tucked the blankets around him as she got up, to keep him warm and let him sleep a little longer. He'd been late to bed last night, it was taking him a while to get the hang of routines of the pub. She'd rather have stayed in beside him, but the fires needed lit. They would likely be busy today, and they needed to get the bread in the oven.

In the hallway she lit the lamp, and held it aloft. She could hear quiet sounds coming from her mother's room. Perhaps she was stirring? No sound from her father's room yet. He slept the sleep of the dead when he was drunk, and he had been drunk again last night.

Lighting more lamps down in the kitchen she set to work, riddling the ash out of the grate, and collecting it in the pail. No warmth to it at all this morning. She stacked the kindling, and piled the coal loosely around it, lighting it, and leaving it to properly catch while she carried the things through to the bar, to lay the fire in there. She kept the light down low; if people saw a light in the pub they might think them open.

But then that she noticed the stool on the floor, and the shape beside it. She righted the stool, and moved to see better what lay on the floor.

It was a man lying there, cold and still as the night itself, haloed in blackening blood, an empty cup on the floor by his clutching hand. Hair dark with blood, his face slack. For a moment she didn't recognise him, this man whose face was usually so animated. It was the eyes that did it, his pale blue eyes. Her father. Sleeping the sleep of the dead. She felt a blow to her body, as if physical, could not catch her breath. The guilt of the flippant sleep idea. The fact that she was not sad. Was she sad?

She drew breath. No surprise that the fool had died with a drink in his hand. And look, there,

tumbled from his pocket, was the chain locket he always wore. She had always wondered who was in it, but found now that she would respect his secrets.

Still, she had a pub to run. What did she do now?

She thought of her husband, curled up warm in his bed. Adam would know what to do. He had buried his mother recently. She would wake him in a moment, but she might just lay the fire first. Her father was awfully cold.

And so again she riddled, again she swept, and again she lay the fire. Lighting it, before turning to her father to promise him. "I won't be long."

Her mother was coming down the stairs as she took the fire making stuff back through. She couldn't leave it in the bar, coal tended to go missing. "Could you get the bread on?" She asked her, putting the pail away. "I've done the fires." She didn't want to tell her. Not just yet. Keep just another moment while she was the only one that knew.

Upstairs, she opened the door to her bedroom quietly. Adam had moved, but was still asleep. He stirred now, in the lamplight, smiled at her, and reached out to pull her onto the bed. If only she could.

"Adam," she said, "get up. My father is lying dead in the bar." She could have said that better, she thought, but what to say?

Adam struggled to sit up, searching for his clothes on the floor. "Dead?" He asked, incredulous. "Are you sure?"

"Get up!" She insisted, passing him his shirt.

"What happened?"

What had happened? Adam put his arm around her shoulders. Comfort that she found she didn't need.

"Looks like he finally drank himself to death." She decided. "What now?"

Adam pulled his shoes on. "I will go and get the burial man. He can take him away, and keep him cool until the funeral. Shouldn't be too hard in this weather. He will arrange for fires to be

lit where the grave needs to be as well.”

“Do we need to report it?”

He looked at her. “Do you want a fuss about it Sally? I'm not saying we should hide the fact. We'll have a great big funeral, but not today. It is New Year's Eve after all, and from what you say, we know how he died. Do you want the pub shut today?”

“No.”

“Right, I'll get the burial man, and you'll need to tell folk. Have you told your Mum?”

“No.” Of course he knew what to do. He always knew what to do. “I'll do as you say.”

He grinned, “I should get you to write that down.” He gathered her in for a warm kiss. “Are you going to be alright?”

She nodded. She would be fine. Was it disrespectful to think that things might be easier now?

He dashed downstairs, and Sally realised after a moment that she was alone. She thought of her father, alone in the bar. She had things to do. She made her way back down the stair and into the kitchen, where her mother was chopping vegetables, the warm smell of baking bread filling the air. She turned around when Sally came in, wiping her beetroot-stained hands on her apron. “What's going on, Sally? Adam said I should ask you.”

Sally searched for the words to say. She didn't want it to come out like it had before. A hammering on the pub door interrupted them, and her mother rushed to answer it, Sally on her heels.

In her haste to reach the door, her mother almost tripped over the body on the floor. She glanced down at it, probably unable to make out what it was in the poor light. Repeated hammering distracted her, and she stepped over the body, going to the door. Stating clearly to whoever it was; “we are closed.”

“Mum!”

But her Mum ignored her, instead opening the door a crack. She saw who was there.

Everyone knew the burial man, although you didn't want him at your door. Sally watched her mother realise that she had stepped over a body, and move closer to see who it was.

Sally took a step forward too, unsure what to do.

The burial man was sure though. He went straight over to lift the body.

Her mother stopped him. "Don't drag him." She said, and the burial man stopped, placing the body back down.

"I'll need some help to carry him."

"Mum." said Sally, wanting to hold her, to move her past this.

"Wait," said her mother, "I need to see to the bread."

And she did.

"I need to get on with this" said the burial man. "Adam's asked me to get him out of the way."

"Yes" agreed Sally, "we'll be busy today."

She could hear her Mum emptying the bread out of the oven. Her Mum should surely say goodbye. "She won't be long."

When she returned she was paler, her eyes red rimmed, but she was somehow more present as well.

"Oh Mum." Said Sally, reaching out to touch her mother's arm.

"It is Callum isn't it?"

"Aye." Agreed Sally.

"Who killed him?" She asked, and Sally noted the flinch of the burial man.

"Why do you think someone's killed him?" She asked.

"He's dead."

Sally was distracted by the door opening again. Adam had returned.

"It was always going to happen." he said to Sally's mother, "we all knew he had a problem."

She seemed to accept that.

“Come on,” Adam said to the man, “I’ll help you move him.”

Adam and the burial man together were strong enough to lift and carry her father, but outside, in the snow, lying him in place on the sled was an undignified affair. Sally and her mother watched over the three men in the cold and the persistent dark.

“Can I say goodbye?” Her mother asked, once they’d got him on the sled.

“Of course,” assented Adam, as if it were his permission to give.

And her mother stepped forward into the snow, shivering in the cold.

Her father looked so cold.

Her mother brushed her father's hair into place as best she could with her fingers. She smoothed it off his face, gently attempting to close his eyes, but failing. She pushed his jaw closed. He looked better.

“I will close his eyes.” Murmured the burial man.

“Thank you.” Her mother nodded. Trying to tidy his hair better, she put her hand behind his head, but seemed to have trouble lifting it.

Adam broke the silence. “You’ll need to get on.” He said, passing the burial man some money.

Her mother leant down and, for the first time in a long time, and for the last time, she kissed her father. “I will sing your soul to heaven, Callum.” Did she believe it? No matter; he did.

Adam closed the door as the burial man set off down the hill. She heard the screech of the cold metal runners on the melting snow.

“Get your Mum some tea,” he said, “I’ll clean up.”

So the women retreated to the warmth of the kitchen, her mother glancing around at the jobs to be done.

“Are you alright Mum?”

She looked at her hands, she held something pinched between her beetroot stained finger and thumb. She glanced over at the vegetables. “I’ve got a splinter.”

Sally wet the cloth she carried in her belt, and gently sat her mother down at the table, wiping the blood from her hands, but leaving the red stain. Her mother wouldn't let go of the thing she held. "Let me see."

She held it up: a long wooden splinter; the kind you got sometimes when changing the beer barrels.

"Where was it?" Sally asked her.

"I think it must have been on the floor." She answered. "Adam changed the barrels last night. Perhaps he dropped one."

Sally nodded, Adam was a long way off being good at changing barrels. She looked around. "Shall I put more bread on? Or cut more vegetables?"

"Perhaps Adam didn't drop it." Her mother said. "Callum had a ridge in the back of his head, Sally. That's where I found the splinter. Why would he get a ridge like that from hitting his head on the floor?"

"A person's body is a curious thing," Sally replied. "Who are we to know how it might break? You're not saying that Adam-" she couldn't finish the question. Couldn't put into words what she herself suspected.

Her mother looked at her, and laid the splinter down upon the table. "I will not say anything, if you don't want me to. But Sally, I pray that we have not simply exchanged one cruel master for another."

Adam could surely not be cruel, could he? Her mother took her hand firmly in hers. "Promise me Sally, we must stay innocent of this. Ignorant and innocent, and we have a means of ending it. Promise me."

Her mother was so insistent, her gaze so steady, that Sally automatically agreed. "Mum, I don't understand-"

"Good." Her mother cut her off. "Keep it that way."