

The Bus stop

Mary pulled the front door shut behind her. A handsome woman of mature years, with straight shoulder-length dark hair, green eyes, wrapped in a green coat with blue scarf and hat. She smiled at her black cat, Venus perched on the windowsill beside the aspidistra. Leaving her garden, turning right onto the lane leading to the main road. January grey, cold breeze, bare oak and birch trees, surrounding fields bare, lifeless apart from crows. With shopping trolley, she walked slowly along the lane. On joining the main road, she walked along the pavement to the stark, empty bus stop. As always, she arrives 10 minutes early for the 09:45 bus to Tavistock.

Every Wednesday, she makes the journey to town for the church coffee morning, town square market and shop browsing. Mary and her husband John had returned to Devon after careers, family, and metropolitan life in London, to Verbena Cottage for retirement and reflection. This was where they had grown up, went to school together, and became a couple. Unfortunately, John passed away peacefully in his sleep 3 months after returning, leaving Mary alone. Their son and daughter, now across the globe living in Melbourne and Atlanta, each with families, had suggested she come to them, but she stayed, for this was to be her and John's final home. Also, she loved Devon. Zoom meant she could chat to her close family frequently and joke with her grandchildren. They had all met up two years previously for Christmas in Atlanta.

The single-decker blue and cream bus arrived on time. Mary exchanged words with Peter, the usual bus driver, and took her seat midway down the bus. Few passengers: a mother with toddler and pram, an elderly man with grey cap she sees occasionally on the bus, and a teenage girl, with spikey orange hair, a golden nose ring and ear pods, staring at her mobile phone, moving her head to music which is silent to all others on the bus.

The countryside rolled on by, barren, colourless, inhabited by crows and magpies, grey clouds, lifeless villages.

After 30 minutes, the bus arrived at Tavistock central bus stand. Mary alighted by St. Andrew's church and, walking through the neat churchyard past dark green yew trees, entered the church. Inside warm, inviting flower displays, the stained-glass windows catch one's eye. Someone playing the organ, soft choral music creating a serenity, an escape from the January gloom. The same organ that had been played at her and John's wedding.

At the counter she chatted to Eve and Karen about this and that... town talk, the endlessly hoped-for return of the railway. She ordered a filter coffee and lemon drizzle cake and took a seat at a free table. As she was reading the church notices, someone approached her table and said in a respectful, friendly tone, "Hello Mary." Mary looked up to see a tall, elderly lady with short blond hair and blue eyes, dressed very smartly in a blue suit. Mary took in her features and attempted to

recognise her, casting her memory through many years of friends and colleagues. Then she found a memory: a young woman, tall, long blond hair, those strong blue eyes. "Stella," said Mary.

Stella asked if she could sit down. "Of course." Silence as they observed one another, each stunned and bemused, fifty years having passed since they had been sixth-form friends, once the best of friends, then the worst of friends.

"I am so pleased to see you, Mary. After so many years," said Stella.

"I must admit I am stunned to see you, but you are most welcome," replied Mary.

"I have missed you, Mary. After you and John became close, I was angry. Now I can forgive; it was so long ago."

"Stella, I know we were so close, then so far apart. I have thought of you often. Did you find a long-time partner?"

"I left for London, left college early, worked for a bank, then computing as a Business Analyst. I worked freelance across the world... New York, Zurich, Amsterdam, Madrid, Johannesburg. Married to my career." She smiled. "Now I have returned to my hometown to retire."

"John and I came back to Devon from London to retire. Unfortunately, John passed away in his sleep 8 years ago. We were married for 42 years. We have a son, James, and daughter, Clare, each with two children. They live thousands of miles away."

"I want to meet them all one day." Stella smiled. "Can we be friends again?"

"Of course,"

So, they ordered a second coffee, more lemon drizzle cake and chatted about the past, the present and the future; old school friends being a good conversation subject. Stella lived in town and was a member of the u3a, and suggested Mary also joined. They vowed to meet again next Wednesday.

Mary walked to the town market with Stella, chatting to stall holders, purchasing groceries for the next week. In the indoor Pannier Market, they spent a while at the hat stall, each buying a woollen beret to match their eye colours.

Mary took the 3:30 bus home. The sky changing from dull to very dull, to dark, the teenage girl again on the bus as if she had never gotten off. At her bus stop, Mary alighted alone and walked along Bramble Lane to her home. Black cat waiting on the windowsill jumped down to welcome her.

Later, sitting with Venus beside her, she perused past photo albums, seeking memories. An old school photograph showed John, Mary and Stella together. She was pleased she had re-found her friend.