

MAY SHEPHERD

Hemlock Bookshop

Clearing out her mother's things was no easy task. There was ninety years of accumulation to be sifted through, kept or disposed of.

Marion had left the desk until last. It was there where her mother had spent most of her life, writing the romantic novels for which she had become famous. The desk had pigeon holes across the back which were stuffed with notes on scraps of paper together with old correspondence. Marion read through some of the old letters, nothing of which needed a reply, and then she found a letter addressed to herself. Intrigued she opened the envelope and inside on a single sheet of paper was written the words. Hemlock Bookshop, Section S.

"This is odd" she said as she showed the note to her daughter later in the day.

"Well, you know how grandma liked playing games, and was always thinking up fun things for us to do. Remember the treasure hunts? I think this could be another of her games." replied her daughter Emma.

"Mother did have some odd ways" continued Marion. "Do you remember the Spring Vigil? Every year she would disappear on a certain day, towards sunset, and sit on the bench in the park. She would never explain why she did it."

"Let's leave the desk for now" said Emma "and we'll pop over to the bookshop and see if we can pick up grandma's trail."

It was a nice afternoon for the short drive into the town, followed by a stroll through the High street and into the side street which housed the bookshop.

"Ugh! Creepy" exclaimed Emma as she gazed into the shop window. The shop looked dark and gloomy, and the area inside the front window looked as if it should be cleared out and restocked.

"Pointy hat and broomstick" Emma laughed. "Fancy trying them on?"

"Behave yourself and don't embarrass me." smiled Marion.

They walked into the shop where a man of indefinable age looked up at them, then disinterested, continued with what he was doing.

Marion started to weave her way through the books looking for section S. Suddenly the room was filled with relaxing harp music and she looked around to see Emma standing by a music machine looking shame-faced. The shop assistant looked up with a slight frown as Emma scurried towards her mother.

"I thought it would lighten the mood" she giggled.

Finding Section S they started their search picking up books and looking at their titles.

“If we’re looking for one of grandma’s books we should be looking in section W not section S. She was Elizabeth Waters, and her romantic novels would hardly go down well with these books. “The correct way to kiss a frog”, or “How to poison your husband in three easy lessons.”

The two women began to giggle.

“Can I help you ladies?” came a voice from the desk.

“Marion held up her hand and shook it. “Just give me a moment please” she said as she quickly turned away to suppress her laughter.

“Mom. What was grandma’s maiden name?” Emma asked.

“Sheldon. She was Elizabeth Charlotte Sheldon”

Marion paused “Ah ah! Now let’s see. Sh sh sh here it is. Elizabeth Sheldon.”

Marion pulled a book from the shelves entitled “The Worst of Times.”

“Eewe” said Emma.

“It’s written in diary form,” said Marion flicking through the book. “This is definitely what we came for.”

She took the book to the man at the desk who sniffed “Are you sure this is one of our books?” he asked.

“Well it was up there on the shelves” shrugged Emma.

“Hmm. Well the price is ... Umm 7s and 6d What’s that in real money?”

The two women stood there.

“Shall we say £2.99 then?” said the man.

Marion paid for the book and edged towards the door with her purchase.

“Can I help you with anything?” The man said looking at Emma.

“The harpy music. I’ll take a C.D. of that.” Emma paid the man and quickly joined her mother outside the shop.

“I wonder if grandma put the book in the shop.” Emma mused.

“Without a doubt. I’ll read it tonight after supper.” Marion said looking thoughtful.

The following day Emma couldn't wait to get the children off to school and drive across to her mother's house. She found Marion sitting at the kitchen table clutching a tissue to her red-rimmed eyes.

"Oh Em! Mom had a child before she met dad. She was only sixteen and her boyfriend was down here doing his national service. When he went back up north she never saw him again. Mom's parents sent her away in disgrace. In those days they had places where young girls could go and have their babies, then they could come back home without them. Mom's baby was adopted."

Marion sniffed. "Listen to this last page. 'You will live in my heart until the day I die, and every year on the day of your birth I shall go to the park and watch the sun go down, and I shall think of you. This is my promise'"

"Grandma's Spring Vigil," murmured Emma quietly.

"Why didn't she ever tell me," cried Marion.

Emma put her arms round her mother.

"She did now," she said.

Winter days came and went and as Spring drew near Marion knew what she had to do. The date of the vigil was the 16th of April and on that day Marion prepared the supper well in advance and left it to cook slowly. Then she walked to the bus stop for the bus which would take her to the park, not giving any thought on how she would get back home again.

As she waited for the bus a car drew up. Marion opened the passenger door and without a word she got into the car.

"I knew you would do this, and I couldn't let you come home alone." Emma's face was serious for once and tears shone in her eyes.

She drove to the park and drew up in the road outside the park gates, then waved a thermos flask and the daily crossword puzzle in the air.

"I'll be waiting here when you're ready to go home" she said.

Marion got out of the car and walked into the park. The bench was positioned at the top of a small incline and she puffed her way up, vowing to get herself into shape sometime.

A look of annoyance crossed her face when she saw that the bench was already occupied, but she settled herself at the end and gazed out onto the pond. As the last of the sunlight trickled through the trees and danced on the water, she wondered how it would have looked to her mother over the years. She took out her book and turned to the last page. 'You will stay in my heart until the day I die and every year on the day of your birth I shall go to the park and watch the sun go down and I shall think of you. This is my promise.' Tears formed in Marion's eyes as she read the words again.

“It took me years to trace her.”

Marion turned and looked towards the other end of the bench at the woman who had spoken. She was also holding her mother’s book.

“I wrote to her several times but she never replied.” the woman continued. “Then a few months ago I received this book in the mail. No letter, just the book, and after I’d read it I knew that I had lost her. I think she hoped I would come here on this day, and I think she hoped you would come too. My birth name is Dorothy Sheldon. I’m your sister.”

***May Shepherd** died recently and her short story was entered in the competition by her daughter. May Shepherd retired in her late 50s having battled various illnesses throughout her life. With an active mind, she decided to join the U3A. Having always enjoyed craft-work: knitting, cross stitch, card making, she joined more groups: gardening, bridge, bowls, and later, creative writing. She wrote many short stories and poems, all of which invoke either a tear or a good belly laugh. With a great sense of humour and a positive attitude until the very end, her daughter remarks that, she would have been 'chuffed to bits' to have her work recognised in this way.*