

A Graceful Plan

By Catherine Shepherd, Consultus Care Agency

Annie rode through one picturesque town after another in green and wild Northern England. It had been a good two weeks at Cecilia. An owl had been calling into the darkness on her last night at Isleton's Lodge. Annie had said her goodbyes to the ghosts that had never bothered her, to the ancient butler Mr Styles, the AGA cooker that turned out a succulent capon one Christmas, the books coated with dust of long ago and her room with the view of the blue mountains. She had taken one last long look at her favourite painting of the monk with the scroll in the darkened room, a ray of light entering through a little high stained glass window. The old lady had made sure she wrote in the visitor's book at afternoon tea and Annie had knelt beside her and taken Cecilia's bony and vein filled hand in her own. The agency always recommended the carers stay two or three weeks at each client to prevent over familiarity.

"Now you take care, you hear. No more late nights and parties hey."

"Oh no, no," Cecilia said looking down at Annie and smiling.

"I shall miss you dear Tinkerbelle. Floating around my room in your gorgeous purple medieval dressing gown."

Annie burst out laughing "and I shall miss you too lovely Cecilia. And it's not a dressing gown; it's one of my best dresses from India."

"Before you leave please check my funeral file is in its place and my final resting clothes are in plain sight."

"It's all organised, the clothes are in the carer's room but you still need to choose a necklace. Remember." Annie spoke gently. "But it doesn't matter yet, we going to get that letter from the queen you know, we going to get you to 100."

Annie said that to all her old ladies.

“If the queen makes it before me,” Cecilia laughed out loud at her own joke and with a shaky hand took another sip of tea.

The old lady had been organising her funeral for 10 years but still at the age of 94 showed no signs at all that her toes were anywhere near to turning up, as she used to say. She discussed her grand farewell in great detail, deciding who would do the catering, carry her coffin and play the massive organ that lived in the 800-year-old cathedral down the road. Cecilia had called up the printing shop to get a cost for church brochures and she had made Annie bake scones one morning for the vicar and undertaker. She had scheduled a meeting in her grand dining hall with its velvet chairs, orchids and big gold mirrors to formally pass on her plans for her final resting place and the church service. It was not strange anymore to Annie at all; she had been coming for two years to Isleton lodge to work. Now she could chuckle about it but she would never forget her horror at arriving on her first day to find her new client on the phone to some poor soul who had been asked to dig around her parents’ grave to see if there was space. Thank goodness the news was positive and she didn’t mind it had to be sideways, her eternal placement, because it would mean she would be nestled forever between her mother and father. She had once told Annie she thought it was a graceful thing she had done. To organise her own funeral as she had no children or siblings. She had written in the famous red leather guest book with its hand drawn stripes, February 2020 / Thank you for an amazing stay, Go Well dear friend/ Annie, Suurbraak, South Africa.

There was something strange about the knock at the door and it made her jump. No one was expected and it was early in the day. Annie looked out the kitchen window and saw a delivery van parked below the poplars. Her dogs began barking.

“Voetsek, away,” she shouted at the dogs as she locked the security gate and opened the door behind. A man stood with a large parcel, a blue mask hiding most of his face.

“Delivery for Annie Martens.”

“Yip, that’s me,” Annie answered, “but I’m not expecting any deliveries.”

“I’m just doing my job,” the man shuffled as he held a very tall and wide parcel up to her.

“It’s from England.”

Thanking the man Annie closed the door and grabbed a pair of scissors. She began to cut away at the hard cardboard. There was a letter and bubble wrap covering a painting.

Her hand shook as she ripped at the plastic. There was the monk with the scroll in the darkened room, a ray of light entering through that little high stained window. It looked brighter than she remembered but then she had only ever seen it in the dim light of Cecilia's study.

Dear Tinkerbell

This is for you my dear, by now I must have finally given up the ghost. Thank you for your care. I know you liked the monk so I've left him for you to look after.

Yours always

Cecilia.

Annie gently put the painting down. She couldn't put her finger on it. Of course she was old and frail. But the fact she had known how much Annie had admired the work of art. And then it dawned on her. The old lady would never have her big funeral. The virus had taken that away. But Annie knew the place well where Cecilia surely lay now. The daffodils in full bloom, the view of the sheep grazing in the shadows of the church, the rustling of leaves in the copper beech above the bench and in the distance those rolling blue mountains. She would visit again one day, wearing her purple dress, carrying with her a bunch of bluebells and a fine lesson in grace.