

The Gravedigger's ladder

Through the lantern light Allie watched as two men dug a grave a few rows down from where she was standing. One hacked away at the ground with a pick axe for a few minutes then took a break while the second shoveled out the loosened soil.

Dark grey clouds filled the sky as rain fell intermittently. Allie noticed the jacket of one of the workers was darkened at the shoulders and upper back from being wet. A ladder was propped inside the grave allowing the two men to climb in and out.

Allie shivered at the thought of entering another person's grave. What must they be thinking as they stood inside digging this hole intended for the deceased? The level of the ground was nearly above their heads and Allie could only just make out the top of the ladder peaking up. Wrapping her shawl more tightly around her shoulders Allie turned her gaze back to where she was standing.

Eliza Campbell

1815-1903

The stone was plain with nothing but the name and the years. Allie would have chosen differently but Arthur had been the one to decide.

Feeling her chest tighten, Allie's gaze turned back to the gravediggers. They were both standing beside the hole they'd been digging. The one was wearing a navy woolen cap with wisps of ginger hair peeking out the back. The other a black knitted toque matching the colour of his beard. The ginger haired one noticed her watching them and tipped his cap towards her.

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Allie nodded though she quickly turned her gaze away preferring not to be noticed. Shifting her weight as her feet stuck into the muddy grass, the tips of her black boots began turning shiny and brown. Late winter was not the best time to come to the cemetery but it was also the most likely time to be alone.

Staring at the tombstone Allie remembered shelling peas with her grandmother as a young girl, cracking the green pods open one at a time and brushing the peas out into a bowl. Allie would sit on the edge of the veranda of the big farm house allowing her feet to dangle off the side. A barn cat would often come by and sniff at the pile of discarded casings. Grandma would sit on the rocking chair and laugh watching as the cat jumped and pounced at nothing in particular.

“Eliza Campbell. I knew her.”

Allie jumped noticing the two gravediggers beside her. It was the one in the navy cap who had spoken. Instinctively Allie put her hand to her left cheek where a bruise, now barely noticeable was healing. She was still worried people would see or that maybe if she wasn't careful these men would do the same thing to her.

“Sorry, miss. Didn't mean to scare you.” He continued, smiling.

“It's Missus.” Allie said quietly hoping it made a difference. She hesitated before giving her last name. Maybe this man knew Arthur. “Martin. Mrs. Martin.” She hugged her shawl more closely again realizing she was alone in a cemetery on a dreary day. The bearded man in the toque stood a few paces behind carrying the pick axe over his shoulder. Perhaps this hadn't been such a good idea after all. Allie shifted her feet in the mud again, her chest tightening.

“She was my teacher back in school. I liked her. Told me I was smart.” He smiled, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepening.

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Allie looked at the man. "You must be thinking of a different Eliza Campbell." Allie began. "My grandmother wasn't a teacher."

"No, I dug this grave myself. Remember that?" He turned to his comrade who nodded. "It was her alright. Lived in the big old farmhouse at the top of the hill." He pointed out beyond the cemetery to where Allie's family home had been when she was a girl. "She wasn't a teacher for too long though. Got married."

Allie turned from the men back to the grave, eyebrows furrowed, tears prickling her eyes.

"You must miss her an awful lot. Otherwise you wouldn't be here standing in the mud." He said.

"I like to come and get some air." Allie said her hand stroking her injured cheek again.

"I find sometimes when I miss the ones who are gone I just talk to them like they're still here."

The wrinkles around his eyes deepened again.

A light drizzle began to fall. Allie took the shawl from around her shoulders and placed it over her head tying the ends under her chin. Turning towards the man again she noticed him holding out an umbrella.

"I've got another one in the shed. You can take this one." He said.

Allie looked from the umbrella to the ginger haired man, to the man in the toque, then back to the umbrella. Cautious, Allie took it.

"I'll leave a lantern here for you too. That way you can stay as long as you want." He placed the lantern beside the stone making her grandmother's name shine brighter. The man tipped his hat and carried on down the row, the second man following behind him still holding the pick axe over his shoulder.

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"Thank you." Allie called out as they retreated.

Closing her eyes Allie took a deep breath feeling the cold air enter her lungs.

Grandma I don't know what to do.

And then as though it were magic Allie could hear her grandmother's voice. **There's not much you can do Allie dear.**

But the children Grandma. What about them?

I didn't say there's nothing you can do. I said there's not much.

What do you mean? What can I do?

There is kindness in this world, Allie. Remember that.

Then the voice was gone. Allie opened her eyes blinking back tears, the drizzle sprinkling cold drops of water onto her face. She remembered then that she was holding the umbrella the man had given her. Opening it she held it above her head, the sound of the rain echoing all around her. The lantern flickered.

The sun was just above the horizon as Allie rocked on the veranda sipping at her tea.

"Hey grandma, did you used to make your students do their arithmetic when you were a teacher?"

Allie laughed "Yes, I did, my Lily."

"Were you always a teacher grandma? Daddy says he can't remember a time when you weren't a teacher. Said you taught him and Uncle Joey." Lily brushed a loose strand of hair from her face.

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“That’s right I did.”

“And you were born here in this house and you’ve lived here all your life.” The young girl’s eyes shone brightly.

“Just about.” Allie smiled at the young girl a slight pit in her stomach forming as she caressed the finger of her left hand where her ring had once been.

“Grandma you look sad.”

“I was thinking of something sad.”

“But there’s nothing to be sad about.” The young girl came and sat beside her patting the old woman’s knee.

“You’re right.” Allie smiled taking her grand-daughter’s hand. “There’s nothing to be sad about now.”