

**THE VISITOR by Miriam Shtaierman**

The two men sat head-to-head in the corner of the decked balcony overlooking the road leading to the nursing home. It was visiting time and there was the usual to-ing and fro-ing across the pedestrian bridge that linked the small car park to the entrance doors. Undistracted and unnoticed, the men continued their conversation. The lips of the younger man moved quickly; it was clearly a funny story. The older man was laughing. He cupped an ear with one hand - a gesture no-one had seen him make for several years - in order to catch every word.

The younger man had been visiting every morning for two weeks and each day followed the same routine. If the weather was dry, he bundled the older man up in a blanket and took him out to the balcony, always sitting in the same sheltered corner. If it was raining, they sat tucked away near the large potted plants in the foyer café, hidden from inquisitive visitors. The older man had once been a television personality and people were inclined to stare. Once the older man was comfortably settled, the younger one went off to get a pot of tea and some biscuits. The eating and drinking routine took about half an hour as the older man could no longer lift the cup of tea to his lips. For this purpose, the younger one brought a drinking straw which he held to the older man's open mouth and encouraged him to suck. In between the slurps of lukewarm tea, the younger man gently fed him bits of broken biscuit. The older man ate and drank with appetite, every now and then murmuring: 'Ah, that's good.'

Everyone noted the improvement. They all agreed that the older man was more aware of his surroundings - his banter more pertinent. Before the young man began visiting, the older man used to lie in a semi-comatose state. Anne-Marie Ryan couldn't bear to see him fading away, her once brilliant husband who used to hold her hand and tell her that he loved her. Her distress had caused her to cut her afternoon visits to a minimum; sometimes she stayed only a few minutes.

She had begun to plan his funeral. She had contacted her eight children; three were living abroad. Boru, as usual, was nowhere to be found and none of his siblings knew of his whereabouts. She had left three messages on his answering service but now it was full and she couldn't leave any more. No doubt, he was off on some sunny holiday with his partner or doing business deals in a third world country. He'd get in touch once he got back and thankfully, she could tell him that all had changed. His father had returned to the land of the living.

She was baking again for her beloved. Today it was tea brack, one of his favourites. She sliced the brack and placed it in a plastic food container. She added two mini packets of butter and a plastic knife and napkin. Her husband's appetite had returned and she intended to fatten him up. Maybe she could convince the home to let her take him out a bit. She'd get Cormac, her eldest, to help her. She found herself humming in the lift up to his room. He wasn't dead yet and as long as he had some quality of life, he should live on, she decided to herself. Yesterday, he had held her hand and told her that he loved her; the years fell away. If he loved her, than he

wasn't suffering and if he wasn't suffering than she had done the right thing placing him in a home; the guilt lifted and she felt weightless. She couldn't wait to see him.

Anne-Marie knocked on his bedroom door to announce her arrival and swept in, ready to plump pillows and open windows. The bed was empty. She paused long enough to note the pulled back blankets. Something must have happened. Panicked, she rushed out of the room and ran to the nurses' station; there was one on every floor.

'My husband, Brendan, where is he? What has happened to him?' she screeched.

Well used to her bouts of hysteria, the nurse took her hand and smiled.

'Brendan didn't want to lie in bed this afternoon so we put him in his wheelchair. He's out on the front balcony, getting a bit of that evening sun.'

Anne-Marie hurried down to the foyer - her eyes searching for her husband through the large window overlooking the balcony. She could see Brendan sitting in his wheelchair; his face lifted to the sunshine. His hand cupped his ear as if he was listening to some music. He shouldn't be on his own, Anne-Marie thought angrily as she ran out - vowing to inform the staff nurse at the very first opportunity.

'Ah, there you are, my dear,' Brendan smiled at her as she approached.

He hadn't greeted her in such a way for a long time. She smiled back at him.

'Hello, my beloved, how are we today?' She bent down and kissed him gently on the lips.

'I am marvelous, darling; absolutely marvelous. Come sit and join us. Boru was just telling me one of his funny stories. Tell your mother, Boru!' he encouraged the younger man.

Anne-Marie looked at the empty bench beside her husband and her heart sank. He wasn't getting better after all; it was just another stage in the disease. She felt like crying with frustration.

'My love, you look upset. Boru! Tell your mother what you were just telling me, it will cheer her up no end.' He patted the empty space above the bench. 'I know you don't want to ruin the surprise, I know, but look at her, Boru, she's upset. Don't be upset, darling, everything is going to be all right. I promise. Tell her, Boru!'

Aside from the fact that he was talking to thin air, Brendan sounded like his old self. He was sitting upright in his wheelchair, gesticulating freely with his arms. His voice was strong and clear. Anne-Marie began to think that the problem lay with her.

'Is that Boru sitting beside you?' she asked her husband nervously.

'Yes, my dear, it is,' he beamed back at her. 'Boru has been visiting me for two weeks now and we've been catching up on lost time.'

Anne-Marie thought about all the times she'd beseeched her youngest to go and see his father before it was too late. But he was always too busy. And now somehow he was here, or at least, Brendan believed he was.

'Can I sit beside him?' she asked her husband.

'Of course you can, you silly thing. Did you hear your mother, Boru? She wants permission to sit beside you? Move over, son, and make space for her.'

Anne-Marie sat beside her invisible son and watched her husband interact with the empty space beside her. Brendan's hands were now resting in his lap and it seemed as if someone was gently massaging them. She turned and looked at the stone wall.

'So what's the news, Boru?' she asked the air beside her.

'He's taking me on a little holiday, my dear!' Brendan blurted out in excitement. 'A sunny holiday, to somewhere like the Canaries, but even better, he promises.' he lifted his face up to the fading sunlight.

Anne-Marie felt a soft breeze caress her arm; it carried the answer to her question. She leaned into the emptiness beside her.

'Boru says you can come too if you want.' Brendan told his wife.

'I may well do that, my dear,' Anne-Marie said softly. 'I may well, indeed.'