

The Slayer Rule

“All this stuff was just under the surface,” Derek said. He was sitting cross legged on the kitchen floor in front of a dirty pile of pottery pieces.

“There’s mud everywhere,” Christine whispered as she filled the kettle.

“I’m going to put it back together again.” He was laying the blue and white pieces out like a jigsaw puzzle.

Who’s going to clean the floor? She thought.

Derek had claggy soil under his nails and a brown smudge across his chin. He looked up at Christine, but she was hidden behind the fridge door.

“We have to talk,” Christine said quietly to the milk carton, the Tupperware of macaroni cheese and the packet of deli ham. Derek had his head down trying to solve the riddle of the jug. Christine poured milk into her tea and mouthed ‘I can’t go on like this’, words lost in the cold air, before closing the fridge.

She looked down at her dishevelled husband.

“Derek.”

He muttered to himself but didn’t respond.

“Derek, I—”

“Christine.” He interrupted her but didn’t look up. He was wiping a piece of pottery with a grubby thumb. “I know things have changed over the years,” he said, “you still love me of course, but it’s perfectly natural to feel differently towards each other.”

Derek matched another piece of pottery and a *Ha!* escaped his lips, “Shift some of your things into the box room and we don’t need to mention it again. Can you pass me the kitchen roll?”

Christine passed it to Derek and returned to the lounge. Gripping her cup so hard, a drop of tea splashed onto the rug - she scrubbed it with the edge of her slipper so he wouldn’t notice.

Not sharing the bedroom would be a relief but at that moment all she felt was shame.

“Just imagine all those years it’s been buried deep,” he said from the kitchen floor.

Muttering to himself he took his fragments to the shed. Christine finished her tea in silence, then dropped down and wiped the mud from the tiles.

History was his thing, when they first met, she delighted in his enthusiasm. He took her to exhibitions, he bought her books and membership to the British Museum, but somehow, she never could keep up. Never could find her feet. And then it was too late.

He sat in front of his favourite quiz show with a glass of beer.

“Where are all the proper bloody questions? It’s all about people who’re famous for doing bugger all,” he said to nobody in particular. Christine sat in a corner under a lamp sewing a cross-stitch meadow.

A documentary came on about the forest floor, he switched it off with a snap and returned to the kitchen. After her mother died, she’d taken to sneaking visits to the library when Derek was at work. She’d read about mycelium, the information superhighway between

trees and fungi, and remembered as a child her mother making her recite the names of wildflowers and native trees.

She picked up the TV remote and turned it back on with the volume down, but his quiet voice came from the kitchen table, "Turn it off."

Her only sanctuary was her sewing room, which used to be her mother's bedroom until she died some years before. Her rocking chair was next to the sewing machine, and several cross-stitch patterns were neatly stacked on the nest of tables. The walls were pale blue like a spring sky and sometimes Christine rocked in her chair, feeling sunlight from the window on her face. She'd let herself doze but always with an alarm set to be ready for the end of Derek's shift.

Only a week after her mother passed away, the solicitor was round to change the will so Derek would inherit the house if Christine died. Intestate is a messy business, Derek had said.

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Derek continued to collect odd bits and pieces, and junk from the auction rooms. Until one day he announced: "I'm converting your mum's old room into an archaeological display. Jeff from Engineering gave me the idea – saw it on that Time Team."

First the bedroom and now her beloved sewing room, she felt like she was being pushed to the margins. But she knew better than to let her face slip.

"That's where I use my sewing machine—"

"You can have it in the conservatory."

“Oh no, it’s so cold in there.”

“I’ll take that old rocking chair to the nursing home on the hill,” he said, “they’ll love that old chair.”

A memory of her mother rocking her brother to sleep flashed into her mind as blood rushed to her cheeks.

That was the day she made her decision.

Some months later she watched him eat his toast, a dab of butter on his chin as he pulled on his coat and left the house for work. She waited until the sound of his car receded, pulled on her boots, and pushed through the gate at the end of the garden. The field at the back of the house led to a large wooded area, which is where she hoped to find them.

It took several trips to become familiar with the twisted, fallen hazel and the barbed wire perimeter fence, she could almost hear her mother’s voice warning which of the plants were to be strictly avoided: foxglove, lords and ladies, giant hogweed, wolfsbane. But Christine knew what she was searching for.

Derek started clearing out her sewing room and moving in boxes of pottery and grubby artifacts. The rocking chair was another matter, thankfully the old people’s home wasn’t allowed to accept it.

“Health and safety gone mad”, said Derek. So he wedged it in the corner and piled boxes on the rose patterned cushion.

Towards the end of autumn Christine finally found them, growing in a circle near the foot of a tree. Beautiful white against the green and brown jumble of the woodland floor - Amanita Virosa: The Destroying Angel. She turned a sandwich bag inside out to protect her

hands and picked them all, stowing them in her pocket until she could hide them in her gardening box.

At midnight she pulled on her dressing gown, thankful for the snoring coming from next door. She clicked on the reading lamp under the stairs and turned on Derek's computer to search for: pictures of Destroying Angel mushrooms, and, how deadly are Destroying Angels? And finally, how long until deadly mushroom symptoms start?

It was 12.25 when she finished, which seemed long enough. The house was silent but for the ticking of her mum's old grandfather clock.

In the morning she felt tired and couldn't eat her muesli and barely touched her hot chocolate. Derek didn't notice, buried behind his newspaper drinking his strong black coffee.

Once he left for work, she opened the door to his pristine workshop and wondered when she'd last been inside. She unhooked the penknife from its place on the rack, and on her way out wondered if the presence of her fingerprints would be considered suspicious. She smudged the door handles with the cuff of her jumper just to be sure.

The mushrooms in the bag were slowly turning from immaculate white to slimy brown.

The following day she got up at 6am and boiled the kettle. Using his penknife, she cut up all three mushrooms, even though one was more than enough. Although fatal it would be a slow painful death, but she had a plan for that too. After they'd soaked to make a deadly broth, she took the shrivelled up remains behind Derek's shed and buried them in a shallow ditch.

She made her hot chocolate and Derek's coffee.

“You’re up early,” he said.

“Early bird and all that.”

He frowned before sitting at the kitchen table, unfolding his newspaper while he waited for his toast.

“I found this on my travels,” she handed him the penknife and he looked at it.

“Where?”

“Down the side of the sofa when I was vacuuming.”

He popped it into his jacket pocket, his frown deepening.

She wondered if it would taste bitter. But, she supposed, nobody lived long enough to report on the taste. Derek turned his newspaper to read the classified ads, certain he would find a cheap metal detector. She drank her hot chocolate. He took a mouthful of coffee.

She wasn’t sure how long it would take to work. Most reports said a few hours. All of them said it would be fatal.

“I think I might do some cross stitch today.”

He peered over the top of his paper. She’d stopped sharing plans for her day some years ago.

“Yes, I think I’ll go do some cross stitch right now,” she said as she got up from the table.

Christine shifted the boxes from her rocking chair as Derek slammed the front door. He was attending an archaeological event in Birmingham and wouldn’t be home until the next day.

Sometime later, she'd managed to stitch a blue butterfly and half an open window, when the cramps began.

"It's called The Slayer Rule," the nice young man in the library had said. She told him she was writing a novel and needed to get her terms correct.

"Sounds like something to do with vampires doesn't it."

Christine smiled pleasantly and asked him to read the definition.

"It says a murderer cannot retain a property in his or her victim's estate. Sounds about right I'd say. You wouldn't want that Rosemary West inheriting anything from her victims would you."

Christine made her exit, satisfied that Derek would not get his hands on her house.

Another cramp gripped her stomach. She picked up the phone and dialled 999.

"I'm in my rocking chair in the sewing room," she winced.

"Yes madam?"

"I think I'm terribly unwell."

"Can you tell me — "

"I'm not safe here anymore. I'm so scared of him—"

There was a moment of panic, the pain was so intense - but she was sure the nurses would make her comfortable until the end came.

"I'm at 9 The Laurels."

She ended the call, intending to say more about Derek but not managing the words, she surmised that enough had probably been said.

For a moment, the cramps eased, so she set her cross-stitch aside and closed her eyes.

And rocking gently in her chair, she let her head drift towards the window, feeling the warmth of the sun on her face for one last time.