

The Last Sip

by Juliet Robinson

‘Morning Alden.’

‘Ms Woodwhite,’ Alden brings the trolley to a stop. ‘Eleanor Winter the police released her this morning.’

‘Thank you. Could you help me get Eleanor on the table please?’

Alden and I have done this many times, once Eleanor is safely resting on the slab, I sign off the paperwork, see Alden out and then I read the police handover that Eleanor brought in with her. Her family have already been in touch, they identified Eleanor while she was still at the police mortuary, and they’ve requested a closed casket funeral.

Twenty-three-year-old medical student, she had taken a gap year to travel, the baby of the family with two older sisters, she loved reading, liked to dance and apparently was an excellent cook. Pretty, well the young woman in the photo is. Eleanor suffered in the last hours of her life, and the trauma of this is evident when I examine her, it’s hard to match her corpse to the smiling photo in her file.

I put the radio on, and music fills the room, ‘Hello Eleanor, I’m Cathrine I’m going to get you ready.’

My duty to Eleanor is simpler than normal, her internal organs have been removed by the police coroner, her body sewed neatly back together. Still, I wash her again and her body tells me that she fought. I massage her limbs working out the rigor mortis, then shave her, after all these years I find it easier to shave the dead than the living, bring a razor to my own legs and I will draw blood. Her lips are burst, she lost teeth, and her jaw has been dislocated it takes me a while to wire it straight and then shut. What were her last words, I have a feeling she didn’t she didn’t beg, I sense defiance.

While the arterial embalming runs, I drink coffee, reply to emails and handover Mr Lamont. He has been here for two weeks now, waiting for his sons to travel back across the Atlantic in order to bury him in the family plot on Mull. He is more than ready to leave. The sons don’t remind me in anyway of their father, who was lean and wry witted.

They have been rounded off by their time in America, there is a softness to their souls, almost pampered. They place their fathers cardboard coffin (he insisted on that) in the back of a rental van and away the Lamont's go.

The bell rings and a childhood friend of Eleanors stands at the door, she has brought clothes for her friend to be buried in. I bring her into my office and offer her comfort, I listen to her stories about Eleanor, and they fit with who I have come to imagine my client was. Her friend's heart lightens, and I am glad, because Eleanor's was a life that should be celebrated. As I see her friend off, she hesitates, then takes from her bag a battered copy of the Hobbit.

'Please can you put this in with El?'

Eleanor is to be buried in soft cotton pyjamas printed with dogs, the pictures are cute and colourful, the fabric is worn. I dress her in them as the sun sets, I sort her hair, brushing it out, gently smoothing into place, so it falls upon her shoulders. Though it is to be a closed casket funeral, I apply light make, bringing the appearance of life back to cold skin, the flush of love and laughter to bruised cheeks. I fold her left arm across her waist and bring her right hand to rest over her heart, under it I place her book. She is ready.

Black tea leaves, peppermint rolled then chopped, a crushed bay leaf, a snip of rosemary, cinnamon, two birch leaves, a teaspoon of dried powdered willow bark (measure carefully), orange peel, three pink peppercorns and honey (be generous).

I brew the familiar recipe in a chipped blue teapot which once belong to my grandmother Tilda. She taught me the recipe, just as she taught me how to deal with the dead. Once it is ready, I take it out onto the porch which is heavy with the scent of magnolia and clematis, it's a warm night and the stars seem strangely far away. I pour two cups and sit back to wait.

It isn't long before I hear footsteps light and sure of themselves, the screen door swings open and out comes Eleanor. She's golden, full of promise and ready for what comes next. I gesture to her cup of tea; she sits down, and we drink.

After a while she asks, 'Why is it we never love the people we ought to?'

'He handed himself in.'

'I deserved better.'

'You did.'

We drink in silence, finishing our tea. For a while she sits holding her empty cup, in the palm of her hand. I don't rush her; she has all the time in the world. Eventually she places the empty vessel on the table and stands.

'I'm ready.'

'I know.'

I gather the empty cups and head back inside alone.

