

Commended

A POSTCARD FROM BRIXHAM

by

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Ruby trudges into the kitchen and puts the kettle on the stove. She leans heavily against the sink trying to calm her mind. The noise of her mother's wailing is drumming in her ears, she closes the kitchen window. The neighbours will know soon enough.

"What do you mean, she's not there?" cries the old woman.

"That's what the landlady said. She hasn't been at the Bay View for three years."

"But she always goes the second week in June."

Ramming the knitted tea cosy onto the brown mottled pot, Ruby shouts, "Well, she's not there now!"

Deidre has been looking forward to her week by the sea since she returned home from Brixham last year. Her holiday is her one extravagance. Her holiday is her lifeline. For years she has made her annual pilgrimage to the Bay View Guest House. Set four rows back from the cliff top. There were no bay views of course, as the occupier of a single room you would not expect to have one. As a singleton, last in the pecking order of guests, she was always shown to the room on the third floor. It had a compromised roof line and a rather mean dormer window looking out onto a matching guest house across the backyard. A shared bathroom had separated her from an identical single room on the other side of the small landing. This is where she had met Brian.

Deirdre has long since overcome the dismissiveness her unmarried status aroused in people such as her landlady. She knows her place. Her mother tells her often enough. She regularly taunts her about her hair, swept back in a bun and her clothes that merge into the background.

"You're not like your sister Ruby. You'll never catch a husband looking like that," her mother chides. Ruby is married with two children and is still turning heads. Deirdre doesn't need to be told that a librarian in her late thirties has little capital in the marriage market.

But in Brixham she is different.

In Brixham she lets her abundant auburn hair tumble free from its pins. Allowing it to whip into her face as she sits on the beach scribbling short stories in her exercise book. Imagining far away locations and romantic endings.

In Brixham Deirdre is another person.

And it's not only her physical appearance that relaxes. So does, whatever her mother would call, her moral code. For the last three years, while she has told her mother and sister she will be staying in her single room at the Bay View, she is in fact ensconced in a double, with a sea view, at the Brixham Heights Hotel. With Brian.

During these second weeks in June, Deirdre has not a care in the world. Originally it was time to herself, now it is time with her Brian. Both their mothers are being looked after reluctantly by their married sisters. Sisters who have escaped the life sentence of care for an ungrateful elderly parent. Deirdre and Brian have 1 week in 52. And they make the most of it.

Then last December Brian's mother died.

This year is going to be different. This year Deirdre has more than her usual small case. This year Deirdre has two additional cases.

As Brian climbs down from the 3.30 train from Churston, he waves and strides towards her. Leaning down he kisses her upturned cheek.

"All stowed away, love?"

Deirdre is handed a ticket from the left luggage assistant. "Yes, all safe until the end of the week."

"Good. We can pick it up when we go home." He squeezes Deirdre's hand.

For the fourth year running, after that fateful meeting in the third-floor bathroom, Mr and Mrs Brian James arrive as usual at 4pm on the second Saturday in June. Mrs James' sham wedding ring, acting as a passport to respectability, shines in the afternoon sun. They are again staying for one week. Half board.

Mr and Mrs James always spend the first afternoon ostensibly unpacking. Later as they come down for dinner Brian guides her into the bar.

"The usual dear?" She nods with a smile. A sweet sherry for her and a half pint for him as they choose from the unchanging set menu. After dinner, they take their coffee in the lounge overlooking the bay. The lights of Torquay twinkling across the water. Brian orders the other half and Deirdre sips a Babycham. Then they go back up to bed.

Later in the week as they walk around the harbor hand in hand, the sun peeps promisingly from behind a white cumulus cloud. Deirdre stops to choose a postcard for her mother. Probably the same view as last year. She slips it into her embroidered straw handbag, bought eight years earlier on a whim from the local haberdashers. As they take tea on the hotel terrace Deirdre composes her card. Her neat librarian's handwriting updating her mother on her plans. And the weather.

Derek walks along the street of terraced houses, shuffling the post in his hand. "If Old Man Harris gives me another telling off for taking too long to sort my round, I'm off to the Co-op," he mutters to himself as he sorts the post for the last few roads.

"Morning Ruby." He lifts his cap in a jaunty manner and smiles. She's still a looker, that one, he thinks to himself. "Looks like a postcard from your sister. Brixham again?" He couldn't imagine two sisters so different as he hands over the view of the Breakwater. "Back next week, is she?"

"Yes, thankfully. Can't take much more of her inside. I can't keep the kiddies quiet all day just to please her. I don't know how our Deirdre stands it."

"Well, I don't suppose she has much choice. Does she?"

Ruby turns and pushes open the front door. Who does that postman think he is? She steps over the cat and calls out to her mother sitting in the back room.

"Mum, postcard from Deirdre. Oh she's written loads. Looks like one of her rambling short stories. Oh my . . ."

Her mother snatches it out of her hand. "Let me see. Usual stuff I expect, cream teas and a concert at the local theatre. Same every year. No doubt I'll get yet another tea cloth to add to the cupboard full she's already brought me."

Ruby stands openmouthed waiting for her mother's reaction.

A piercing wail fills the air. "Ruby, I don't understand. She says she's not coming back!"

Ruby picks up the postcard from where her mother has let it slip from her hand. She quickly reads the tightly packed words written in her sister's neat librarian handwriting. Ruby joins in the wailing. "She's met someone and is going to live with them. She hopes we all get on well without her. Oh, and the weather is fine. Mum, she's gone!"

"Over my dead body!" She leans over the arm of the chair and hauls her handbag onto her lap. Rummaging inside its murky depths, she eventually pulls out a small address book. Her quivering finger points at a faded pencil entry. "There, the phone number for the

Bay View. Deidre put it in here years ago in case there was an emergency while she was away. Well there's one now! Ring them up. Tell her I've fallen, and she must come home today!"

"But Mum!"

"No buts Ruby. Do you want to move in here and look after me?" Her mother looks her straight in the eye.

Ruby grabs her mac and a handful of change from the jar by the door. She runs down to the telephone box at the end of the road and dials the Bay View.

"Are you sure? Not for the last three years?" The phone clicks as the landlady ends the call. A dull buzz fills Ruby's ear. And her heart. She scrapes the remaining change off the shelf and turns to face her new life.