

Daffodils

The first year was the daffodils.

Mary hadn't been to the grave until then. She had gone straight home after the funeral service, after the young minister in the grey church pronounced the benediction. In this day and age, there was no reason a woman couldn't be at the graveside, she knew that, and Dòmhnall and Cathy had encouraged her to go. But she couldn't face that narrow mouth in the sandy machair soil, and she knew Murdo wouldn't mind.

She stood at grave now with her bunch of daffodils. He had called to her last night, a year after he had gone. So she had got up in the mizzle of early morning, and pulled on his old fleece jacket over her dressing-gown, and plucked the best of the blooms and buds. They had planted these bulbs together long ago. The oldest, her own favourites, were the delicate pheasant's eye narcissi, petals like pale porcelain. Murdo had liked the bigger bolder ones, the gold trumpets that laughed in sun and storm. She had made a bunch of both varieties, and she held it loosely in her hand now as she looked at the stone.

Dòmhnall had shown her photos of the stone, but it was different seeing it in the flesh, with the wind blowing cold off the Minch and curling over the saltmarsh beyond the cemetery, with the echoing call of a curlew in her ears and the raw clean smell of spring in the air. The slab was big. Tall, broad-shouldered Lewisian gneiss, like himself. Lichen, egg-yolk yellow, had already colonised the *M* of *MURCHADH DÒMHNALLACH*, though it had yet to touch the English translation underneath. Cathy had mentioned something about the lichen, about needing to come down with a knife to clean it one of these days, though the stone had been up scarcely six months.

But no-one had mentioned the daffodils. They clung in a thick cluster round the foot of the stone. The narcissi, and the big daffies both. And a third variety, a flock of tiny bright bells. Someone must have planted them. Cathy, probably. Mary placed her own bunch quietly on the ledge formed by the base of the stone, below the space left for her own name, and hurried away.

The second year was the bluebells. Mary had gone down once or twice since that first time. She had dead-headed the daffodils and gathered the seeds. She had watched the daisies and dandelions spring thick as stars in the grass in the rest of the cemetery, but the bluebells didn't appear until late April of that second year. There were more daffodils that year too, a bright squadron brimming outward from the stone. When they had almost faded, the bluebells opened.

"What bluebells?" asked Cathy, when her mother asked her about them.

"Go down and see for yourself," said Mary.

The third year, Mary went more often. The bluebells became a rippling pool, reaching far beyond the borders of Murdo's grave. The flag irises came before the bluebells finished, stiff saffron-bladed spears, candles keeping vigil in the night.

The fourth year, after the bluebells, pansies and violets carpeted the cemetery. Mary fancied they were thickest over the graves themselves, all the graves, not just Murdo's. Murdo's came mostly in regal purple, with a smattering of lilac pale as peat smoke, but other graves glowed with all shades of flame from twilight violet to ember-red to sulphur-yellow to snow-white. Like the stones, the faces of the flowers were all towards the east, towards the sea, towards the sunrise, apart from the ones in the Reverend Morison's lair. These were Bunsen-burner-blue and, with the long-gone minister and his wife, faced south. Mary knew by now not to mention the flowers to Cathy or Dòmhnall.

Mary was ready when the roses came, the year after that. They were pale pink, *Albertine*, the same variety Murdo had planted at the front gate that year long ago. These ones climbed all the way up and over the stone and cascaded down the sides. Their fragrance floated on the breeze and drew the bees from the machair, the heavy Hebridean bumblebees and the honeybees from the house on the hill. The bees liked the foxgloves too, the white and the purple. Mary went to see them nearly every dry day that summer. *The bee-loud glade*. She remembered the line one afternoon as she sat in the sun. They had learned that poem in primary school. W. B. Yeats. *I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree*. Murdo used to quote from it sometimes, though as a rule he wasn't a man for literature; that had been beaten out of him by the primary school headmaster.

"Mam, I'll take you, if you want to go to the cemetery," said Cathy near the end of the summer. "You shouldn't be driving so much."

The glade grew, year by year. Each winter, it faded back into the machair. Mary seldom went then, when the days were so dark and the wind whipped salt off the bay. But each spring, Murdo called her when the daffodils were back. By the twelfth year, the headstone was dwarfed by the apple tree that grew at its back. Honeysuckle twined with the roses in its branches, and the birds of the air made their nests in the tangles. The bees were loud, but sometimes, beyond the cemetery, Mary could hear the singing, the psalms carried on the wind from high and far away.

"Where's the car key?" Mary asked, the summer of that twelfth year.

"Mam, I told you, Dòmhnall has it."

"Why does Dòmhnall have it?"

"You know the doctor said you can't drive any more."

"Oh, I'm not *supposed* to..."

“No. It’s against the law. You don’t have your licence any more. I’ll take you, if you want to go somewhere. Where do you want to go? Shall we go to the Post Office for a wee spin?”

“I don’t want to go to the Post Office. I want to go to the cemetery.”

“Again?”

The fifteenth year, the tree blossomed in the spring and in the autumn bore heavy red-gold apples. Mary reached her hand to one, and it came away easily. She held it to her mouth. Its scent was like honey.

“Mam! Are you not going to wash that?”

Mary looked at the fruit in her hand, then round and up at Cathy. Strange how she was taller now than Mary was.

“Why? I’ve picked it from the tree just this moment.”

“What tree? We’re in the cemetery. That’s that apple from Tesco that you’ve had in your pocket since yesterday. Look, there’s a big bruise on it. We can stop at the Post Office and get a nice fresh one on the way home. Or a caramel tart. What about a nice caramel tart?”

The seventeenth year, the daffodils filled the cemetery like galaxies when the universe was young. It was a cold day, a grey day, a day when the quicksilver sea lay heavy and the seals sang mournful lullabies to their babies on the reef.

“It’s too cold today, Mam,” said the woman, the one who had taken her car. “Let’s go home and make a cup of tea. Michael Portillo might be on. You know, the man who goes and sees places on the train. You like Michael Portillo.”

“I’m going to go home in the autumn,” said Mary. “When the apples come. In the bee-loud glade.”

“*Tugainn*. Come on. The grass is wet, and look, you’re wearing these old shoes again. Your feet are going to be soaked. Why are you not wearing the new boots we got you? They’d keep your feet nice and warm.”

“The bee-loud glade,” said Mary again. “Who wrote that?”

“That was Yeats, remember? That poem Dad liked.”

“My husband liked it too,” said Mary.

They took a few steps towards the gate.

“I’ll pick some daffodils to take home,” said Mary, stooping with a painful effort of arthritic joints.

“Mam, these are plastic flowers. From someone else’s grave. Come on, we’ve got plenty daffies at home.”

Mary ignored her and picked several gorgeous blossoms. She knew Murdo wouldn’t mind.

“I’ll drive,” she told the woman when they got to the car.

“You can’t drive, remember?”

“Why not?”

In the autumn, when the leaves were turning on the sycamore tree in the garden, on a night when the moon was full, Murdo called to her. Mary got up quietly, so as not to disturb the children. It always took so long to get Dòmhnall back to sleep if he woke, especially now he was teething. She pulled on her cardigan over her pyjamas, and Murdo’s old fleece over that.

The key was in the ignition. Mary shook her head. Murdo must have forgotten to put it back in the glove compartment when he came back from the prayer meeting last night. The engine sputtered to life. The handbrake was stiff, and she had to use both hands to take it off. She would have to phone the garage in the morning.

The road to the cemetery was quiet. When she got out of the car, she heard the long cold exhalation of the waves on the shore, sharp as eternity. She walked into the moonlit glade. Murdo was standing beneath the tree, tall and broad-shouldered and solid as the island bedrock. He held out his hand. They sat down amid the roses, with their backs to the tree, and they shared a honey-sweet apple until the morning star rose and the sky streaked gold in the east.

“Tugainn, a ghràidh,” he said then. *Come, my dear.*