

OF ALL THE PLACES

By Margaret Cameron

The Catering College was located in a side street off the Main Street which was a long string of a street running through the town. The thing that caught Heather's attention was the number of churches and places of worship that were knotted along this long string. There was Church of Ireland, Methodist, Roman Catholic and Presbyterian. Also, Baptist, Salvation Army and a clatter of wee halls. It should have been called Church Street, Heather had thought at the time. But that was away back in the mists of time—in the mid-1950s.

Now here she was, an 'auld doll' of ninety, and had just moved into sheltered accommodation. She never thought then that it would come to this. In fact, she never thought that her eyesight or hearing would diminish or that she would have to go into any type of home, but who does? You just have to adjust to the situation—and to wearing glasses, hearing aids and crossing your legs when you laugh or cough.

It's nice here, though. I have my own little dwelling with a sitting room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. Then there is the Communal Room where all the residents can meet. I went for the first time recently as we were all invited to celebrate someone's birthday and that is when I saw him. My eyesight may not be all that good but I knew the cut of him immediately although I hadn't set eyes on him since 1956. Isn't it strange that in such a wee place as Northern Ireland that we wouldn't have crossed paths in all those years and now of all the Homes in all of Northern Ireland he has to be in mine. It makes me feel like Rick in Casablanca.

It was seeing him again that brought back memories of the Catering College and that long street of churches. Fed up with working on their fathers' farms she and Linda decided to take the catering course together with a view to earning some money of their own. They had been inseparable since school days and had remained friends until four years ago when Linda died.

Linda would roll about laughing if she were here now and heard that I had met 'yer man' again.

The catering course was for one year and few had cars then so the students remained in the college over most weekends. Heather and Linda had quickly eyed-up the talent and both had fancied a guy called John, dark haired and of athletic build.

On the first weekend the girls were out browsing around the town when they saw John and his pal, Samuel James, a tall, lanky, studious young man with freckles and ginger hair.

‘I don’t like the one you’re getting,’ Linda said as the boys approached.

However, as the meeting progressed it became obvious that John was interested in Heather and Linda was left to partner Samuel James.

‘I don’t fancy ginger guys. I’m only going with him because of you and yer man,’ Linda had said afterwards. It was several Sundays later when Heather and Linda were on their way to church that they saw John ahead of them. Intent on catching up with him they were dumbfounded when he turned into the Roman Catholic Church.

‘Heaven’s above, yer man’s a left footer!’ said Linda.

‘Gee whiz . . . and him called John. If he’d been called Kevin or Seamus we would have known. Of all the churches in this big long street and he has to go in there.’

‘Well, I’m glad Samuel James isn’t one,’ said Linda.

‘How do you know?’

‘Because, he’s a drummer in the Purple Star Pipe Band in his home town. You’ll have to stop going out with yer man.’

‘I’m only going out with him because of you and your Drummer Boy!’

‘Indeed you’re not. You’re head-over-heels in love with him. You’ll end up with a squad of weans and spend your time going to wakes. Catholics like funerals.’

In class and lectures and evening study there was no time for arguments and banter but when the foursome got together it was always a lively give-and-take time.

‘We saw you going into the Chapel yesterday,’ Linda had said.

‘Aye,’ said John. ‘I was saying a wee prayer for you.’

‘Well, don’t bother. I’ll pray for myself. What did you confess to the priest? I wouldn’t like to have to confess to our minister. Would you Heather?’

‘What would you have to confess?’ John teased. ‘You’re just trying to sound worldly and sophisticated.’

‘I would have as much . . .’ began Linda but Samuel James intervened.

‘Ugh, wise up Linda. He’s only winding you up.’

The light-hearted banter continued throughout the course but when Linda went too far it was always Samuel James who silenced her.

‘Now, that’s enough Linda,’ he would firmly say and Linda would pipe down.

Occasionally, at weekends, the foursome went to the Golden Spear, a popular café in the town, where there was an old piano. Samuel James could play and he and John had good singing voices.

‘I’ll take you home again Heath—er,’ John would croon. ‘Danny Boy’ was another of his favourites.

‘Play something modern instead of those aul “Come all Yous”,’ Linda said. ‘Play ‘Zambesi’ . . . *de de dede de dum dum*.’ Samuel James was delighted to show off his talents as his fingers ran up and down the keyboard while Linda looked on admiringly and John birrled Heather around the floor.

One Sunday John invited the others to join him as he was going to watch a football match.

‘On a Sunday?’ asked Linda. ‘Is it that football where the players run around with the ball under their arm? That’s not football. It’s an aul woman’s game. Rugby is the game. My two brothers play.’

‘Rugby,’ laughed John. ‘Where big men roll around the ground and end up in a heap of big backsides.’

‘I like a man with a big backside,’ announced Linda, proudly.

They all looked at Samuel James and laughed.

‘Skinny ass,’ said Heather.

In spite of all the banter John and Heather’s relationship deepened and by the end of the course there was a vexation between them.

‘If you really loved me you would “turn”.’

‘That cuts both ways. If you really loved me you would “turn”.’

Heather blinked and shook her head, bringing herself back to the present.

It’s time I got ready.

She stood looking at herself in the mirror in her bathroom.

I wonder will he recognise me or have I changed so much?

She had checked with the warden and established that he really was *the* John.

As she entered the Communal Room she saw him seated on the big leather sofa reading the paper. She seated herself beside him as the tea was about to be served.

‘Hello John,’ she said. ‘Remember me?’ she smiled.

He looked up from his paper for a moment and then a look of recognition came over his face.

‘Heather, it’s you! I would recognise that voice anywhere. What a surprise’

They stared at one another, then he leaned over and hugged her.

‘Your hair may have changed but you look just the same—and you have kept your figure.’

‘You too, John. You haven’t gone bald or got a big beer belly.’

They both laughed.

The afternoon was spent talking and the tea was forgotten.

‘How long have you been in here? I’m here over a year.’

‘I moved in about three weeks ago,’ she said.

‘Tell me how the years have treated you.’ He looked at her left hand. ‘Did you ever marry?’

‘No. I was engaged but my intended was shot by the IRA four weeks before the wedding day.’

After the Catering Course Heather had got employment in a hotel on the Antrim Coast and she and John continued to correspond by letter and phone but the romance was going nowhere.

John was working in the Fermanagh area but his ambition was to run a restaurant of his own. John wanted her to join him in his plans but neither would cross the barrier. It was when Linda asked her to become bridesmaid that Heather met Duncan, a young policeman who was a cousin of Samuel James. Duncan was the best man.

‘Isn’t Duncan the spitting image of yer man,’ Linda had said. He was dark haired and very involved in sport. After Linda’s wedding Heather became despondent and decided it was time to move on and started dating Duncan.

‘Here, we better move,’ said John as the staff began to clear the tea things. ‘Are you doing anything tomorrow morning? I don’t drive much in the evenings but I like to go out in the mornings.’

‘Oh, you have a car. That would be lovely. I gave up driving once I hit ninety.’

‘Ah, but don’t forget. I’m a year younger than you.’ He still had that impish twinkle that broke her heart in years gone by. She playfully smacked his forearm.

Heather went back to her room with a spring to her step and a smile on her face.

From then on they met every day and continued to talk of their past years.

John had, after a few years, realised his dream of opening a restaurant. It was then he met Collette who was a Domestic Science teacher in the local Technical School. She was seven years older than him.

‘Do you have a family?’ asked Heather.

‘No, sadly, we didn’t. But we adopted two boys. One did well and lives in Perth, in Australia. I only hear from him at Christmas and on my birthday. The other boy was a heart-break to Collette and me. Drugs . . . he died of an overdose. It broke Collette’s heart. She took dementia and died eight years ago.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Heather. She saw the hurt in his eyes.

Heather settled herself in the car as they sped along the County Down coast.

‘What about Linda and Samuel James. How did life treat them?’

‘Both are dead now. I miss Linda. We were friends for over eighty years.’

‘Could you ever have imagined them getting married,’ Heather mused. ‘The things she used to say about him. You were invited to the wedding. I remember hoping to see you again.’

‘Yes, I regret that now. Samuel James was a decent guy but back then I wouldn’t have gone into a Protestant Church.’

Samuel James took up teaching on leaving the college, and on getting married Linda gave up catering to bring up a family. They had four sons. Three played rugby. The youngest was a music teacher and like his father was a drummer in the local pipe band. Samuel James died of a stroke when in his fifties and Linda soldiered on until the beginning of Covid when she took ill and never recovered.

‘I enjoyed visiting them,’ Heather continued. ‘There was such a happy, loving atmosphere in their home.’

‘Samuel James was able to understand every one’s views and aspirations and live contentedly,’ John said.

Today they walked the full length of the long street and back to the car. En route they had called into the chapel, had lunch in the Golden Spear café and had stopped at the locked gates of the Presbyterian church and the site of where the College had been. Back in the car they sat in a wistful, reflective mood.

‘Do you believe in fate? Our lives are not our own, we try to please parents, church, society: everybody but ourselves. Maybe it is in the stars.’

‘Agh, whatever will be, will be,’ Heather said.

“‘Que Sera Sera,’” said John, suddenly breaking into song.

“‘Whatever will be, will be,’” they both chorused. “‘The future’s not ours to see Que Sera, Sera.’”

John started the car and left the long street behind.