

The Reunion

Driving along the narrow familiar country lane I reminisced about the many times I'd walked them twenty-five years previously. 'Twenty-five years!' I repeated aloud. Where had the time vanished to?

It had been two months since I'd received an email from Diane Green. If it hadn't been for the words 'Thornbridge Hall' I probably would have deleted it without opening it!

'Reunion night with accommodation for the intake 69-72' it read. I found myself immersed in memories of long forgotten days. It was with trepidation I eventually decided to accept.

I approached the drive to the hall; two concrete pillars topped with lion's head one either side of the entrance. Progressing slowly along the gravelled drive my stomach began to churn like a spin dryer. I had no idea who else had agreed to attend. I'd lost touch with all my college friends long ago.

Taking my small case out of the boot I looked across to the imposing entrance of this grand old hall that had once been my home. I don't think I appreciated at the time how lucky I had been to live in such surroundings. With a deep intake of breath, I steeled myself and entered the building.

The entrance vestibule was just how I'd remembered it; dark, imposing and empty! To the right was a door which led into what was the student common room. As I stood in the entrance of the room my mind transported me back to an incident over a quarter of a century previously. A group of us were idly chatting and smoking cigarettes. Suddenly a shout of alarm made us jump. Jane had set her hair alight with the match to light her cigarette! We couldn't believe how easily the flames rose and how quickly someone had the sense to smother them. She had a lucky escape but the unpleasant smell of singed hair reached my nostrils again!

'Hello, have you just arrived?' I turned around to see a short, plump fair haired middle-aged woman smiling at me.

'Er, yes just a couple of minute ago. I'm Elaine Brown, as was, Moses now.'

'I'm Diane and I can see you don't recognise me,' she chuckled. 'I'll take you to your room. We're all meeting in the dining room at 6pm.'

I followed her up the grand wooden staircase to the room I'd been allocated. What a transformation there'd been to the rooms since my time here. The old bathrooms with the enormous cast iron baths you could almost swim in were long gone and forgotten! The modern fitting of the en-suite rooms contrasted starkly with the grandeur of the Great Hall with its elaborate marble and carved wood fireplace.

Checking my make-up before leaving my room I made my way to the dining room. By the door was a table on which stood glasses of red and white wine as well as orange juice. I helped myself to a glass of red wine.

Hesitantly I moved further in to the room looking around at the many groups of faces all in animating conversation. 'Surely there must be someone here I know?' I thought plaintively.

From the far corner came the sound of raucous laughter. I immediately recognised Jo Anderson. I'd never liked her, man-eater and all round flirt. There she was, again, holding court and being the centre of attention! I turned and stepped towards the opposite corner.

In front of me was a small circle of women seated near a little grey glassed topped table. The woman with her back to me was sitting in a wheelchair. Next to her was Diane who noticed my approach and beckoned me to join them. She introduced me and they, in their turn, introduced themselves. They were all names from the past, some long forgotten; faces half familiar.

Finally, I turned to the woman in the wheelchair, Edie the first person I'd recognised immediately!

'Hi Elaine, it's really good to see you and you look so well.'

My head buzzed with thoughts, Edie in a wheelchair, what should I say? I was hoping my face wasn't conveying the confusion I was feeling. 'Edie it's been so long. When Diane contacted me I couldn't refuse. I hoped it'd be a good opportunity to rekindle old friendships. It's so nice to see everybody.'

'Sit next to me and tell me what's happening in your life.' I found a chair and placed myself alongside Edie's wheelchair.

It was turned ten when I decided it was time to return to my room. My evening with Edie had been a bewildering experience. Of all my college friends from so long ago, she was the only one who'd joined the reunion bash. Once settled into bed I reflected on the evening's events.

Edie, it turned out, had MS and that was the reason she had become wheelchair bound. It had been good to see her but that pleasure was soured by the disappointment I felt that past friends had stayed there; in the past. How I wished I'd done the same but how that filled me with guilt when I thought of Edie's life now.

When I arrived home the next day my husband asked me how I'd enjoyed my trip.

'It was all right, but it was full of boring middle-aged women!' He collapsed into fits of laughter while I looked on incredulous.

I went to see Edie a couple of times after that reunion weekend and she came to my home for a short break. Sadly, it wasn't many months later that I learned Edie had died.

Before that fateful email arrived in my inbox I'd always maintained I'd never go to a reunion; that the past should remain there - in the past! I should have acted on my logical mind and not my emotions. As the saying goes, 'You live and learn!'

Carolyn James