

## THE STRANGER (part 2, midday)

“I got caught today, Dad. The silly moo scared me out of my wits.”

Leo, in his wheelchair, moved slightly at the sound of his son’s voice.

“Who was that? Where?”

“Down at the old house, Dad. I went to lift some of them daffs from your garden.”

“That’s not our garden now. You shouldn’t be there.”

“Yeah, I know. But you should have them. You don’t get around anywhere to see them in a field.”

Leo turned. His eyes barely made out his son standing in the doorway, but he could hear the rain outside, and the overflowing gutter spilling like an open tap onto the edge of the veranda. The thought of daffodils reminded him of the random shoots in late winter that offered surprises in formal beds of roses, lavenders and box hedges in the great gardens he had tended over decades. The daffodils were the gentle rebels of those gardens, and he loved their spirit.

Eric pulled off his jacket and set down the raffia basket of plump daffodil bulbs, still wrapped in their black earth. “We’ll head out when the rain passes and decide where to put these,” he said.

Something was bothering him, though. Not the confrontation with that woman as he’d lifted the bulbs, but something about her stare. She was hostile, he thought. She reminded him of his wife, Del, who had been wary of strangers and slow to trust. Even after twenty-five years and two kids, she hadn’t ever really trusted him. He’d called her a tiger. She didn’t appreciate the taunt, and it made him mock her the more. The two of them had been in a continuous simmering war, defending themselves against each other. The marriage, broken by bitterness, died in their arms. She’d left years ago, as soon as the kids left home for their lives in the city.

The sense of being abandoned still hurt; the pain had no end. The shovel she'd given him for a birthday one year hadn't been used, until today. He thought she had a cheek to give him a tool like this, when she always narked him about being in the garden, as she said, "all the time." Her domain was the house, and he narked her about how obsessed she was with cleaning. The kitchen was cleaned more than it was cooked in. There was no joy. It was just pointless, all the time. After Del left, Eric recovered the part of himself that felt, well, anything. These days he felt pleasure in solitude, in rain, and in gardens during the bleak, and then the bright, months. He felt a belonging, a longing for earth this morning before that woman, a stranger, intruded.

Eric was staring without seeing the rain outside, then pulled his thoughts back to his father.

"Did you ever know that woman in the top house? She's been moving things around in the garden and all the terraces are broken. She walked in on me while I was digging. Standing there dripping wet in the rain, telling me she'd been looking after the garden. Complete rubbish!"

"No," Leo replied, "but I hear she's an odd one. What do you call that hair? Dreadlocks? A bit of a character in town. Solo animal, right? That hair reminds me of your Del's."

"Yeah, a bit. She looked nervous to me. Del would've yelled at me. This one was a bit quiet, sort of shy. As if she was trespassing."

"If you ask me, you should've stayed away. Your Gran always told you, stay away from strangers, hah! Thanks for the daffs though, those were always beauties."

Leo and Eric went quiet. There was little to say about the lost garden, the lost wife, distant children, Gran. The memories of loss always burned deeper than the yearning for those lost.

There was often nothing to say. The two men knew how to leave one another alone. They had gardening in their bones. They understood that things take their own time to grow, or not grow, and find their own place. All the same, Eric wanted to go back to that old garden, even if

it meant facing the weird woman. Maybe he'd take her something—there were plenty of bulbs—or maybe he'd show her how to lift them properly. Maybe he just wanted space to work in the garden while the soil was wet.

“Come on Dad, the rain's gone, let's get outta here and get some air.”

“I'm not keen. You know that.” Leo usually resisted outings his son suggested. There was little point if he couldn't walk the distances in the forest air that used to give him pleasure.

Half an hour later, though, father and son were in the roughed-up HiLux driving downhill past dripping trees toward the lake. The light came off the water, the sky had finished its weeping and now played sun-cloud shadows over the land, cheering them both.

“Hey, Dad, what say we swing past the old house and have a look. You never know, old dread features might make us lunch and a cuppa,” he chortled.

Leo rolled his eyes and said nothing. Eric turned into the narrow road and bumped around the broken edges of bitumen where little brown pools formed. A grand rainbow spread for miles over their path and landed gently somewhere in the forest beyond.

“Very nice,” said Leo.

After another turn, they pulled up across the road from the front house. Eric dragged on the handbrake and opened his door, glancing down the glistening driveway as he worked his body out of the cab. He stopped and swore. Swore again. He was going nowhere. Down the back was a white van, doors open, ramp ready. A few pieces of bulky brown furniture were on the ground. Two children wheeled bikes, a young man carried a storage box.

“Too late, Dad. We've been beaten to it. At least we got something, eh? Let's go home.”