

# LOST INTERLUDE

(Written for "The Listener" by PHYLLIS McDONAGH)

IT wasn't as though Nana was any longer a young woman. Seventy-six, or was it seventy-seven this year? When one got up as far as that, time wasn't necessarily of account. Fay knew there were lots of old women of that age—and older—whose intelligence was keen, whose energy propelled them along at an amazing rate; but of late she saw that her mother was getting tired. She was what she looked—an old woman.

It was her memory that had failed her. She had moments of complete blank, as though a curtain had been pulled down. At other times she would slip back a few years and relive past events. Only a few weeks back she insisted on going into town and buying Dora a wedding present. She couldn't let the young thing go off like that and get married without remembering her—and Jim, too, he was such a nice lad—a really suitable match. . . Dora was her niece—she had been married five years, and had two boys. . . Nana made a great fuss of them when next they came to call on her, and showed them a new china vase that Fay had bought her as a present. It was Dora's wedding gift—but already she had forgotten. At other times she would be seized with an almost feverish burst of energy, when she would insist, in spite of her enfeebled strength, on running round the house doing all sorts of unequal tasks. On these occasions Fay could only follow her helplessly—assisting where she could—till the old lady, breathless from her exertions, would decide to take a nap.

IT wasn't easy for Fay. She was the only one left now. . . Bruce—Eric—and last of all Jon. . . She felt terribly about Jon. The others had married and gone away; but the War had taken Jon. Something so final about that. Jon was the youngest—her spoiled one and her adored. . . Jon always kept sunshine and laughter in the small house. Fair-haired Jon, who dreamed of one day becoming an artist—who wrote poetry in secret—and lived on the laughing edge of things.

But though Fay and Jon were so close, Jon was really Nana's boy. Fay had always known that. He was the last and the most dear. Nana was his baby. When she was tired, he would take her up in his strong young arms and carry her, protesting, to her room. No use to argue with Jon. His hands were so gentle when they smoothed her hair—so expert in tucking her in. His good-night kiss lay warm on her lips long after he and Fay had gone downstairs.

WHEN Jon told her he was going to the War, Fay's heart had stood quite still—then her own blankness was wiped out in thought for Nana. But for Nana, mercifully, there were the intervening shades. Moments—hours—when she could slip back into the past—where she was not alone. Jon was with her there. Jon, as a schoolboy—clumping up the stairs, his boots muddied, a bruise across his cheek. Jon, in his first long trousers, awkward, absurdly self-conscious of his new manhood and dignity. . . Only Fay was shut in with the unrelenting knowledge that somewhere out there in that murky horror was her Jon.

His actual going, in reality, had been less cruel than Fay had dreamed—for it was Nana who needed her in that moment; who made her forget her own anguish of parting. In that last minute, with Jon's arms about her and his choking voice bidding her farewell, Nana's mind was bitter-clear. She did not weep till Jon's long figure had disappeared down the drive—then she hid her face against the chair and cried—wildly and brokenly. . . Fay's own grief had been submerged in that of her mother. Soothing, comforting, trying to reassure. . . That same night Nana fell asleep with a smile on her lips—because Jon was out late—and it must be that nice girl of the Beveridges who was keeping him so long. . . Fay was alone in her darkness.

SHE grew thin and nervous. She would start at a telephone ring—the sight of a telegraph messenger turned her sick and faint. . . When it did come, however, she was quite calm. She knew when she took the telegram that they would be telling her Jon was dead. . . It wasn't as dreadful as all her hideous dreams of it. For with the realisation something within her had died, too—died with Jon.

NANA was sitting by the window knitting when Fay came to her. They were socks for Jon—but sometimes she could forget, and declare that she must be growing an absent-minded old woman, as these were a man's size—and far too big for a small boy.

Fay came in quietly and went and stood by the window. She was very quiet—very still. Then she looked up into the sky, and saw, far up, a little white cloud floating like a baby's puff on a blue coverlet. She was holding something in her hand—a bit of paper.

Nana's eyes peered through her spectacles. Fay was not a very bright companion for her these days. She was losing her looks, too. Perhaps she was in love—girls were so funny these days—made such a business of it.

"Nana." Fay's voice was remote and far away. "We've just had news of Jon. . . He won't be coming home to us after all. . ."

Nana's needles stopped their clicking. The room behind Fay was a vast silence.

Nana's voice was queer.

"What do you mean, Fay?"

"Jon has been killed, Nana."

She turned round. Nana's eyes held hers for one terrible moment of comprehension, while her mother's heart cried out its denial.

Fay slipped swiftly forward to her knees. Her strong arms held her mother, sustaining her. But even as she knelt, like a dark cloud that passes, she saw the pain and realisation fade from Nana's eyes. They looked blue again—and clear. They suddenly twinkled with merriment and a conspirator's cunning.

She put a finger to her lips and drew Fay close to whisper—

"Dear, I've got some cakes up in the top cupboard. Slip them in Jon's school-box—I got them as a little surprise."

Fay rose slowly from her knees.

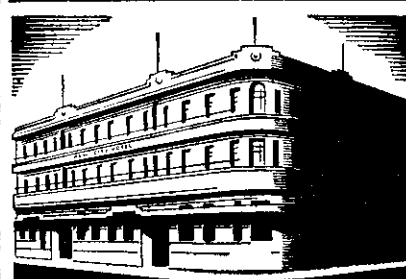
"All right, Mother, I'll do it now."

Funny Fay walking in that stiff way

across the room. Queer voice, too. . . Poor girl, maybe she was in love, after all. . .

Nana took up her knitting again and counted her small doubts and wonders into her slow, careful stitches. . .

— THE END —



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