

The Legacy of Love

Rick shoo-ed Julie towards the door, passing the coffee in her favourite cup and—with a moment's hesitation—her pack of cigarettes. 'You go take a break, Jools.'

A slight sheen glistened on her brow. Anticipation and excitement fueled her preparations for this special family gathering.

'I will. When we've got this all set up.' Looking into Rick's brown eyes, she smiled, paused, and put the pack down. *He's a chip off the old block, that's for sure.* In a flash of memory, she once again saw Rick's father and she felt her heart burst.

Rick counted aloud, setting out the plates and cutlery, 'How many are we, Jools?' His hand brushed against her runic ring—engraved 'Strength' and 'Journey'—a legacy from her grandmother, as was the hammered silver pendant she wore.

Her eyes danced as she turned her face to look at him and he scanned her light, almond-shaped eyes and high, flat cheekbones, testimony to the survival of her Icelandic forbears. Julie's grandparents were settlers who had endured near-starvation and dug out new lives on the Canadian prairies of Manitoba.

The traditional family fare consisted of mounds of steaming meats, roasted vegetables, cabbage rolls, pierogis. Julie's specialty Yorkshire Puddings and jugs of pungent gravy complemented the spread, prepared with love. This meal banished her memories of childhood hardship and parental abandonment. The dinner—to celebrate her eldest son's coming wedding—staked her claim to happiness and the loving family she had craved as a child.

Julie looked up at the photo on the wall, taken at Rick's brother's wedding in England. In a moment in time, they stood next to their son, who sat laughing in his baby stroller. *Was it thirty years ago?* An unexpected shaft of pain shot through her body. That was another family scene, a *scene* in the truest sense of the word.

'Think I *will* have that cigarette,' she said.

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Julie shuddered at the recollection of their arrival at Rick's parents' home all those years ago. An overnight flight, with the baby and his paraphernalia all bundled up, was followed by a two-hour drive in congested traffic on the *M-who gives a fuck!*

They'd come a week early to relax and offer their support. At the house, they were shown into a sunlit, hospital-crisp bedroom with a fold-a-cot for their baby.

'Please—call me Martha.' *Good to see she's softened a little since the wedding. Does she like me?* Martha threw her arms around her son, then reached towards Julie, tensed a moment and instead, blew a kiss at Julie's cheek.

Rick's father hugged Julie, a gentle smile on his lips, 'Come on in, love. You must be shattered. Here, give us the little lad.' He patted her back, ushering her inside. Turning to Rick, he sighed, 'Your mother's been running around in circles all day. You know what she's like. Worries about every little thing.'

'Mum, how is my lovely little mum?' Rick spoke softly and squeezed her hand.

'So wonderful to have you to ourselves, Richard. It's been too long.' Her face lit up. She then told her daughter-in-law, 'We've cleared out the cupboards and drawers. You'll want to keep yourselves organised.' She gave Rick a sharp look. 'The ensuite too. We've given it a thorough clean. Wouldn't want our little man to get any of those nasty germs, would we?' She chuckled the baby boy under the chin. 'Ooooh, I think he's filled his pants. How long has he been wearing those?'

Sloppy Canadians. When I think how we prized the disinfectant, how we struggled to keep clean and avoid pestilence during the Blitz. Martha whisked away child and soiled nappy, leaving the exhausted couple alone. 'Help yourselves to tea, won't you?' she called back.

Julie flinched, and craved a cigarette. Until now, she'd thought she could dodge another of Martha's bullets, and have the odd smoke with her kindly father-in-law. *Not to be.* Martha declared, 'He no longer smokes.' Julie bit her lip. She'd noticed his frequent walks and long breaks in the bathroom, after which he returned in a shroud of smoke and smelling of peppermint. As the days passed, Julie escaped outside and her 'odd cigarette' became chain-smoking.

Julie skipped her habitual coffee, unless specifically invited for a brewed cup.

Martha, drank copious amounts of strong English tea—steeped then poured—from a teapot into a 'proper porcelain cup'.

'Tea just isn't the same in one of those mugs or in that styrofoam rubbish you get these days.'

Julie agreed, as she felt the same about her coffee.

How am I going to keep up with the nappies, the baby linen, and Martha's household regime? Julie shrank into herself under her mother-in-law's constant helicoptering.

‘Heavens, Julie. Your room needs a freshen up. Those nappies stink to high heaven. Why do you use those throw-away things? You can use our washing machine, you know.’ Martha whisked past with a bag of soiled baby diapers. *Frittering away good money on disposable nappies and cigarettes. How did my lovely boy marry this Canadian? I suppose they waste their money on junk food, too. And those silver baubles she wears—*

On the day of the registry service—an elegant affair in a flower-bedecked mansion—Julie opted to stay home.

‘Maybe it’s for the best,’ said Martha, ‘Babies do fret.’

Oh, Mum, if you knew how infuriating you can be. How sad I feel for you. Rick reached for Julie and hugged her trembling frame. ‘I’ll stay here with you, Jools. We can take the little fella for a run in the park.’

‘No, no. You go.’ *That’s all I need. I’ll be the dragon-lady next—keeping him away from his brother.*

‘Cheer up, Jools. Things will look better when Big Sis arrives from Australia with her children. They all love you.’ *The next few days are going to be a juggling act. Mum just can’t help sabotaging herself. And she tries so hard.*

The wedding party gathered on the high summer’s day in a quaint English village setting—as green and flower-filled as a Thomas Hardy novel. The children, milling around with baskets of posies, were immaculate at first. But they soon became riotous and disheveled, their faces and hands smeared with wedding-cake, as were many of the adults—for different reasons. Julie and Rick felt cocooned within the festive crowd. For the remaining days, they joined Rick’s Australian sister and her children on daytrips and picnics in the lyrical West country.

On the last day, Julie walked in on her in-laws in their living room. Her father-in-law had a leather case with brass closures resting on his lap. ‘This belonged to my mother. In those days it was something precious—’

Martha looked up at Julie. ‘We thought—when your little fellow grows up, he might like it.’

Julie was thrown off-kilter. *Can I trust her? What’s going on?* ‘Oh, that is so thoughtful of you both.’ *What is it?*

Rick gave first his father, then his mother a long hug. ‘How about this, Mum? You hold onto it for him. Keep it as a surprise.’

His father looked away for a moment, swallowing.

‘Well, then, we’d better get you both sorted.’ Martha turned her back, her shoulders heaving. After a brief pause, she began flapping and bustling around the suitcases. ‘All packed? Gosh, you’ve got a helluva lot of stuff!’

Her husband slipped in beside her and put his arm around her, ‘Martha, dear, just go and sit down for a few minutes. I’ll make you a cup of tea. No need to fuss. Let’s make the most of these few minutes we have left together.’

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Julie sat outside with her coffee and cigarette, awaiting the family party. A four-wheel drive vehicle, its lights beaming, pulled up in the driveway.

‘Hey, little brother—Welcome to Canada!’ Rick rushed out, wrapping his arms around each member of his family as they spilled out of their car.

His younger brother greeted Julie, showing her a leather case, the one she had seen in England thirty years prior. ‘Just before Mum died, she specifically said I was to make sure it was given to Julie for safe-keeping—and that she passed it onto your eldest son on his marriage.’

Julie froze for a moment. She gasped for air, her emotions torn between guilt and sadness.

When the relatives had sated themselves, and regaled each other with family stories, Rick’s brother handed the leather case to Julie.

She reached out, then recoiled. ‘Maybe you should do this, Rick?’

Her husband smiled, ‘Well, I think it’s for the groom. Steve, maybe you should decide. Now or later?’

‘Let’s open it now—while it’s just us?’ Steve was keen to see the contents. He took the key and turned it in the lock. The snaps sprung open. Within the case’s quilted interior lay a traditional English porcelain tea set. It was accompanied by envelope which contained a letter in Martha’s hand, and a grey World War II ration card. A stillness fell over the crowded room.

The engaged couple read the letter in silence, ran their fingers over the ration card and blinked at the black and white photo of the young woman looking at the camera—her eyes haunted, her expression strained. They had never seen that face before or heard her name.

The letter in the envelope spoke of a mother’s love for her children; of Martha’s anger in the beginning, then her sadness when they all moved so far away. She told of her memories

of war, of hunger, and how the reviving cups of tea the family shared—in porcelain teacups such as these—became a symbol of hope for a normal life, a better life.

The tea set, like Julie's Icelandic jewelry, was a legacy of Rick's grandmother's struggle. These were the priceless symbols of the mothers who had given them life.

When the letter was passed to Julie, her hands trembled. She looked down, took in Martha's wobbly handwritten script and felt her warm breath on her cheek once more. Rick's mother had reached out to her across space and time and Julie's heart missed a beat. She felt something she had not expected. She felt connection not only to Martha, but also to the Icelandic grandmother she had never known.

In Martha's last words, she wished them well in their new life together.