

NOT AFTER MIDNIGHT

It was Don who kicked things off in his usual fashion before everyone had settled.

‘I am a little confused’ he said placing his coffee cup back on its saucer before helping himself to the remaining chocolate biscuit.

‘Confused? Why?’ was Belinda’s somewhat surprised response.

‘Well, in the first instance it’s from a collection of so-called long stories but it isn’t is it’ catching the attention of everybody else.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Christine hoping he would get to the point.

‘Well, its not is it, long I mean. It only runs to fifty pages. OK I agree it’s not magazine short story length but on the other hand it is only quarter of the length of say, Stephen King’s *The Mist* which is included in one of his collections of short stories’

‘I suppose one man’s short is someone elses long’ added Alan dryly.

No one had an answer for that so Christine, seizing the lull in the conversation filled it with one of her usual effusive welcomes drawing attention in particular to Jim whose first time it was to attend the Monthly Book Club meeting. Jim felt a little awkward, but weathered his embarrassment with a smile and gentle nod.

‘I take it you have all had the opportunity to read this month’s offering of Daphne Du Maurier’s *‘Not After Midnight’*

A series of nods and mumbles went around the table which she took to mean ‘Yes’. Don said he’d read it one sitting. Everyone had but only Don felt it worthy of mentioning.

‘We appreciate that this is your first time, Jim....’

Jim politely interrupted by saying that he knew the story, well kind of, and that he would try and keep up.

Another round of appreciative murmurs went around the table accompanied with well-meaning smiles.

‘The main thing is you enjoy the evening and that hopefully we won’t scare you off from coming next month’ continued Christine ‘and as Don rightly pointed out, it is not very long. But’ she paused ‘is it long enough?’

Alan, who was by nature, the quiet member of the group thought it was ‘after all its got everything needed for a compelling story and its shortness keeps things moving and to the point’

‘What do you mean it ‘had everything’?’ asked Belinda ‘personally I thought it a bit weird’

‘For a start it begins in an unassuming way. An English teacher, Grey by name grey by nature going on holiday by himself to a Greek island to do some painting. Then through a series of ordinary circumstances finds himself embroiled in a macabre murder after which he fades back into his ordinary life without mentioning it to anyone.’

‘As I said, a bit weird’ reiterated Belinda.

‘Why weird?’ pushed Don ‘what in particular?’

‘All of it. The ghastly brash American getting drunk and rude every night. His apparently deaf wife who went snorkling every night. The jug, what was that about and then the macabre ending where Tim Grey, saw the grotesque corpse of the American lashed to the anchor when he looked down into the water’

‘But which bits were not actually possible’ pushed Don again hoping to gain a point as he usually did.

A thoughtful silence followed before Belinda said rather hurriedly ‘The spiking the Barley Water with Spruce and Ivy, that was a bit far-fetched’ trying to justify her position.

This was what Don liked, an opportunity to impress, if not others certainly himself as he pointed out that in Greek Mythology Spruce and Ivy were infused in Mead. The Mead was there to give the resulting concoction sweetness but together they were used to induce intoxication.

He finished his piece with ‘which adds a certain twist to the story seeing as it is set in Greece’

Christine sighed as she always did when she knew Don was being Don again, always knowing, or claiming to know, something that others didn’t.

She leapt once again into the abyss of silence that followed as she asked ‘So is this a story about a series of ordinary incidents that domino into the rather grisly end or is this a carefully executed murder, if you will excuse the pun’ as she smiled at her own joke.

Christine waited for an answer,

‘Or maybe a re-enactment of a Greek Tragedy’ offered Jim before falling silent again.

‘Interesting point’ mulled Alan trying to grasp the implications of the last comment.

‘I suppose if we look at it like that....’ Said Belinda leaving the rest of her sentence unsaid.

Christine urged her to continue.

‘OK I said it was weird. I suppose looking at it like Jim suggests then maybe it is really quite clever. I took it for how it was’

‘And there is nothing wrong with that. What one gets out of a story is what the reader sees which may be or may not be what the writer originally intended. So what.’

‘Ah Yes’ interjected Don ‘but if there is another facet, another way of looking at something if you have some additional background knowledge does that not make the story more interesting’

‘For some it may’ retorted Christine before Don could take the group down another of his avenues.

Christine did a round with the cafetiere and biscuits. The coffee was accepted while the biscuits returned untouched.

‘So, in summary’ said Christine drawing back their attention ‘we have what is called a long story which as Don pointed out is shorter than many short stories. We have a story which is a series of rather ordinary everyday events with maybe slightly eccentric characters, or maybe we have a very carefully planned murder or as Jim suggested a re-enactment of a Greek Tragedy. Which is it?’

What followed was the usual silence as group gathered their thoughts.

‘Or maybe’ Jim said in a thoughtful whisper ‘it’s not a story at all’

‘Sorry, I don’t quite follow’

‘What if it’s not a story’ Jim continued ‘or at least not fiction, would that make a difference?’

Belinda didn’t like the way the discussion had suddenly turned.

‘Of course it’s a story’ she said rather sharply ‘its absurd to think it otherwise, it would mean there was a murder committed, that there is a murderer out there and there is a painter holding onto a secret he has no right to hold on to’

‘Yes, maybe you’re right’ said Jim gently ‘but just for the moment, consider the consequences. How would or does the quiet living English teaching painter feel having to hold on to such a secret for so long?’

‘Guilty?’

‘Maybe...’

‘Maybe he’s managed to push it to the back of his mind and tries not to think about it.....although I don’t think I could’

‘Mmm maybe’

‘Or....maybe he wants to tell someone but doesn’t know how to.’

‘Yes, that could just as easily be true’ replied Jim

Another uneasy silence enveloped the room. Words wanted to be spoken but silence swallowed them.

Finally, Alan spoke.

‘Tell me Jim, How long ago was it you read the story?’

‘The first time was when it was first published’ I have a signed copy.

Silence gripped the room in the knowledge there was something more to come.

‘I knew Du Maurier, a friend of a friend. It was in 1967, I was in Greece. I went on my own. Needed to be away, away from the stresses of teaching a subject I didn’t really understand to a bunch of prep-school boys who didn’t want to learn. What I wanted to do, what I always wanted to do was paint in the hope that one day I’d have an exhibition of my work. That was my dream, pretty much my only dream. The nightmare was seeing the rude American guest at the bottom of that cobalt blue sea lashed as he was to that anchor.

I tried but I couldn't I had to tell someone. I mentioned it to a friend who in turn mentioned to Daphne as an idea. So I ask you again, What if it wasn't a story?'

Silence had its way, no one spoke, no one made a move to go, in fact, no one moved at all.