

# Granny May

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It had been an uneasy few days and rain kept falling. And the name of her dead grandmother fell into Deirdre several times, which made no sense. So it just hung there, not even puzzling.

It was her son's girlfriend who preoccupied Deirdre, although the considerable irritation with her was not to be shared.

Deirdre saw herself as kind and with a good marriage. (Though, of course, she would never sound smug. All the same she and Peter, unlike so many, were not divorced.)

Her husband's high opinion of her compassion might be worth protecting, even though he, too, was proving aggravating through these wet days in a graceless cottage. Never-the-less if it wasn't for that girl, Sharon, they wouldn't be stuck here without sufficient distraction.

They had been excluded from their son's thirtieth birthday, although Sebastian was coming down by train to join them at the weekend and bringing Sharon.

"It will be a lovely break for the two of them," Deirdre had told friends, "they can't afford to indulge themselves."

While Sharon said to Sebastian, "Her idea of a gift is to offer a golden cage to catch you for a bit. Still it won't hurt us to give up one weekend if they want company."

So Sharon organised London celebrations with friends and Deirdre, not quite able to admit being cut out felt excruciating, came up with the idea of going down early to prepare the cottage with all Sebastian's favourite foods.

This plan of absence held sufficient promise up till the actual leaving. Then Deirdre, unwilling to be sucked out of home and usual life, felt torn and bleeding, but Peter, who had never been enthusiastic over the idea, and didn't consider a retreat with no television idyllic, lacked his usual patience with her emotions. But the cottage had already been paid for and as it had to be rented for the week they might as well go on ahead.

Eventually, on the long drive, Deirdre found herself stilled by the slip sliding of cloud. Against the substantial and apparently unmoving, the thinned front line pranced across in softer layers of greys and wispy white. There was flashed brightness as gaps opened up.

"It might be sunny tomorrow," she offered, though by afternoon they were under thick skies and in mist, which muted autumn colours and outlines of wintering trees. Animals and houses appeared as etchings, lacking substance. Peter, who had been silent at the wheel till then, suddenly burst into misgiving that his life also seemed half washed out. "I envy those with dramas to tell, those who can pin excuses to some explaining event," he said. "I can't even begin to say what's been watered down in me."

This was new. A sense of some decline began at his sixtieth birthday but now he seemed to be suggesting something in the marriage had diminished as well.

How dare he?

Deirdre was gracious and grateful provided Peter remained convinced of his luck in marrying her, and things were enough as she wanted.

This agitating was unnerving. Naturally they weren't quite as young as they had been, but Deirdre did her best not to let aging show. She made considerable effort and did not appreciate an unexpected confrontation.

"So, this is it?" her husband asked. "We have had the best, with only deterioration ahead."

Their daughter's marriage, soon after his summer birthday, had made Peter feel old, with his little girl grown and gone to another man. Deirdre made it clear she didn't want gloom put near her as she threw herself into the excitement of the wedding, and the groom behaved as if his mother-in-law was a wonder. There was flirtation in the air as she told everyone how she was gaining another fine young man in her life. Of course, she already had Sebastian, except that he'd begun gliding further away once he was living with Sharon. Not that his previous girlfriend hadn't been rather trying, but she wasn't as intelligent or critical.

Sharon was too questioning for Deirdre's comfort, and even worse was that Peter over admired it and called Sharon 'gutsy'.

"You can't help but be impressed by her independence of mind," he had said, "it will be such a strength for Sebastian."

Peter might have started to unearth regrets but Deirdre, who preferred to see that their life together had all been for the best and that they had been especially fortunate, saw no need for further examination.

Having long ago convinced herself and others that she was a tender and loving woman, and since been carried along by this picture of herself, how was she to navigate when Peter started to toss her too near rocky hazards, or stir unfamiliar hard feelings?

She and Peter had continued through the past months to manage a comfortable life, side by side, with the help of a lot of golf for him and comforting meetings with friends for her, who reassured her that this wave of angst over a new decade would soon subside. But now she was enclosed, face to face with him, for three days before Sebastian and Sharon came by train after work on Friday.

The cottage was not cosy as Deirdre had expected and she found herself shut away in half light with a disgruntled man and the weight of stone in her belly, through days of rain. She almost recognised her focus on the infuriating Sharon might be disproportionate, as she looked out through layers of mist, barely able to see the constant fall of rain except for thick drips close to the window from the overhang of thatch.

“An open fire” had sounded romantic in the advertisement but it was a cheerless place with hard floors, no carpets, just some ugly mats and a rug. The pictures had been misleading and Peter, who could usually be relied on to make the most of situations and declare himself simply glad of her company, instead sank further into a flattening weariness. Her hurt over this only made him impatient; he made no effort to soothe with a proud “my sweet sensitive”, in apparent pleasure at his role of protecting a highly responsive flower from the brutalities of the world he knew.

Peter had wanted a woman to look after; to safeguard a gentle patch where she might bloom beautifully in his home garden of soft colours, without rank weeds or the need for weed killers.

Her giving and consideration were sufficient unto themselves, as if only inherent qualities, and Peter who used to say he'd never imagined such generosity possible, took on the task of maintaining equilibrium for her.

It wasn't that his wife was readily offended, just wonderfully feminine and susceptible. She certainly did not selfishly want things her way, she simply wasn't made for rougher ways.

Up till now, belief in her own sensitivity had proved adequate answer to any uncomfortable challenge for Deirdre. She was pretty and lively, with an air of innocence others beside Peter felt keen to shelter, and those who didn't were dismissed as “not as delicate”.

She thought the best of others, as was often said, and hoped people would live up to her expectations. Their daughter certainly did. She was an easy first child and as sweet tempered as her mother. She appeared to have an intrinsic belief in order and liked to put things in the right place. Her sense of the world never seemed chaotic or overwhelming, it simply required mastery, step by step, and the little girl set about each new achievement with quiet determination as she followed convention.

Sebastian was far more tumultuous, with little regard for explanations, especially as to why things were done a certain way. His room was still disorganised, though he was no longer attracted to anarchy, and from an early age he learnt to keep much that might be unseemly from his mother's eyes. It was hardly coincidence that his girlfriends would not fit neatly into the existing family. And because Sharon had no wish to be swallowed in Deirdre's territory, to be added on to what was already in place along with the charmingly convenient son-in-law, Sebastian began to suggest meeting out. Since Sharon insisted on paying her share, despite a low income, they went to places Deirdre didn't like. She tried to tell herself they were “interesting” but they tended to be too hot,

too crowded, and far too noisy, with little of the respectful service Peter's money could buy. Perhaps Peter really did find these intermittent dinners satisfying, certainly he knew Deirdre found it difficult to be long with Sharon and kept at a distance by Sebastian yet he did not take on trying to spare her. This round he would not help her protect some sense of herself by agreeing she was soft-hearted and the younger woman rather harsh. He balked at fixing his son's girlfriend in whatever category his wife chose.

Sharon brought something alive in him and he said, too often for Deirdre's liking, that it was no wonder the boy wanted her. And he refused to agree that Sharon's detachment from her own family posed any kind of threat to Sebastian.

Deirdre rarely revealed how deep the misery went that her son seemed lost to her, though time and again she felt ripped from the blood filled cord of connection while nobody noticed. And then to fail to draw sympathy from Peter was a further blow. He didn't hold her, fondly repeating what an amazing mother she had been or stroke her hair to murmur "my poor sweet love, I know it's hard for you, the children are so deeply lodged in your heart for life."

Instead, cocooned in his new moodiness, he just threw out, "For goodness' sake, he is thirty and has to make his own choices and mistakes!"

Deirdre felt a cold metal plate descend between them, which cut her off from the love she used to believe was in perpetual flow.

She had to get outside! In brittle tones she remarked that the rain looked light enough for a walk.

But the mist still crept across the golden leaves on the hillside which she had glimpsed briefly as bright in the only burst of sun through solid cloud. Everywhere there appeared to be seeping threat to clarity.

Peter trudged, kicking thickening and sodden fallen leaves, muttering that this season of warning, of grimmer times ahead, had once been the most energising, delighting his eyes by rich colouring. But now they too were autumnal it was a threat.

Deirdre felt struck – this was hostility! She certainly didn't look as if she'd hit the autumn of her days and he, after all, was only sixty, while she was a well-preserved 58 and taken for much younger.

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His melancholy over time passing and regret for the unlived, was too much!

However Deirdre did not sob, as she might have done until Peter put his arms about her apologising for being a thoughtless brute. His notion of manhood used to include not upsetting her.

Although he recognised it was oppressing her, he made scant attempt to spare her his sorrow that their boy was setting out with career and woman choices as options closed down for himself.

Any hint of dissatisfaction at his life with her felt traitorous. Besides Deirdre needed him to support good cheer over the adventures ahead. Soon they could start travelling more and their daughter was trying to conceive.

“Won’t that be marvellous!” she said.

“Maybe. Let’s wait and see. But it’ll be her baby not ours. Our era of being parents has gone – finished – and we can’t do any of it again. It’s their turn to give it a go, and hope it’s their best shot. Anyway, I didn’t much enjoy grandparents, and your granny was a dragon.”

“She was not!” Deirdre protested. “Granny May was submissive for decades and who knows exactly what happened. He took to drink on retirement and certainly was very drunk that night. The coroner accepted her version that once she was already in bed he wandered outside to die of hypothermia. It was only one neighbour who insisted that after he passed out she dragged him to the snow. ”

Deirdre was known as a loving wife, so who, for an instant, would question her account?

Even an ashen Peter did not look meaningfully at her when she spoke to the doctor the following morning.

Deirdre had come with her husband in the ambulance and would have to get a taxi for the long drive back to the cottage and the car. She was exhausted, having stayed with him overnight, yet Peter didn’t apologise for leaving her to sort everything, as he would inevitably have done a few months ago.

Deirdre carefully explained the ridiculous bedroom to the doctor. Peter hadn't fallen where there was, at least, a mat, but hit hard floor and caught his head on the sharp edged cabinet, a foot lower than that absurdly tall bed. It was unfamiliar, and he fell with sufficient force to fracture his hip.

Of course Peter knew better.

Or did he? Despite his recent raking over miseries did he want to see this clearly?

Could he factor in to his picture of "lovely wife" that urge to exterminate? (Although it wasn't him she wished to wipe out, only his imposition, and she had, of course, been half asleep.)

Anyway, whatever had possessed him?

She only gave to him when she felt close, and increasingly she had less sexual energy. And after such a day, she had longed only for oblivion in deep, deep sleep.

When he'd begun pawing at her she assumed her rigid lack of response was quite clear, but suddenly he weighed on her too heavily, assuming some right to what she absolutely would not give!

She was astounded by her own fury. She who had given so much was trapped into seeming ungenerous and that, too, felt outrageous.

If only she and Peter simply gone to sleep after a hideous exchange, it would have remained little more than a blurring nightmare.

It would be shocking if he did call her on the details of what happened, and she would never ever offer it to him, or anyone. She had no wish to remember it herself. And thankfully Peter was not a child, with adults hovering in readiness to accuse, so her word "accident" went uncontested.

Once it became obvious Peter really could not get up, Deirdre dialled 999. No friend or family were close enough to rush and look after her, and maybe it was best that she and Peter were entirely alone with this. By the time the ambulance arrived it wasn't clear if he was concussed but he certainly was in no state to contradict her version.

Even so, Deirdre had to forget, or somehow stomach, her own flashing violence. And she had no recollection of being driven in sharp, unadulterated hatred before.

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It was tough luck she caught him so unbalanced, for he had been poised to pounce on her when, certain she couldn't stand it, all her effort went into one shove.

Her urge to eliminate sexual overtures was fierce. But this was not her, not what Peter would recognise as "his Deirdre". She was one who did not attack.

And now Sebastian was on his way as she wanted, but had not considered that she would need him without his tough young woman.

Deirdre was not at the bedside when Sharon teased Peter, "So what were you up to? Obviously not simply turning over, or you'd have slid to the floor."

It wasn't always clear if Sharon was being facetious or inquisitive without seriously caring to know, but unchecked tears began running to run down Peter's still unshaven, pallid and stubbly face.

And as Deirdre and Sebastian returned from discussing how soon Peter might be moved to a hospital nearer home, they saw Sharon reach out to take his hand.

"How dare that girl upset the poor lamb!" was Deirdre's immediate response, followed fast by longing to scream at having to keep any such thought to herself.

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