

Waking Up in the City Morgue

When Catherine Turner looked in the mirror, she was disappointed by what she saw. The 52-year-old woman returning her gaze had a sagging jawline, deeply etched crow's feet, and a puffiness under the eyes that never fully went away. Stepping back – something she avoided doing when naked – it was to be confronted by the same, grim effects of ageing writ large. She'd be startled if she ever caught an unguarded glimpse of her own reflection in a shop window. Even though her journey into middle age had been as gradual as everyone else's, she was always jolted by the reminder of how she really looked. Because it was nothing like the much younger version of herself that existed in her mind.

How to deal with the rush of thoughts and feelings that came to the surface at such moments? For Catherine there was a phrase that summed it up. 'Gracious acceptance' was her chosen philosophy. Gracious acceptance of the fact that, with every year that went by, her very best days were receding further and further into the past.

She'd be needing all the gracious acceptance she could muster this morning, she thought wryly, surveying her wardrobe. The first cupboard contained her expensive items – some designer garments, pretty dresses she had bought for a holiday or silk items that needed to be dry cleaned instead of washed – things she thought of as too special for every day. The third cupboard had round-the-house clothes, and once treasured garments she no longer wore, but which she couldn't bear to part with.

It was the second cupboard she was looking in now, the cupboard of new-ish outfits. Clothes that weren't anything special, but that were perfectly presentable. The kinds of clothes worn by invisible, middle-aged women when they went out to lunch with their invisible, middle-aged friends.

Being the first Friday of the month she had a standing lunch arrangement with two girls from school days. Same time, same place. It had been the same for several years, but she sometimes wondered why, because every time they met they just seemed to go over the same conversational ground.

Marta, a landscape artist who had enjoyed brief commercial success in her early forties, lived on an emotional roller coaster of pie in the sky fantasies followed by crushing disappointment, and had little real interest in anyone except herself.

Meantime, there was nothing you could tell the super-chilled Briana that could surprise her, and she had an irksome habit of continually asking after Catherine's brother, Gerry, who she'd had a crush on as a teenager – one that seemed to have resurfaced late in life. Every second or third lunch Briana would ask if she'd been in touch with Gerry, and every second or third lunch Catherine would have to tell her the same thing: 'no.'

Gerry's wife had estranged him from the rest of the family, and Catherine had had no contact with her brother for over a decade. Although she had heard, via the grapevine, that Gerry and the toxic wife had parted company about a year ago, she knew nothing more because he lived in another city, and they had no mutual friends. Growing up, she and Gerry had been particularly close and he was her only sibling. Deeply wounded by his inexplicable withdrawal, as far as she was concerned it was now up to him to signal if things had changed.

A third friend used to come to their lunches – and brighten up their lives with her irresistible *joie de vivre*. May Delaney had combined the sweetest of temperaments with a sparkling sense of humour – enough to make Marta forget herself, and Briana melt out of her brittleness. But May's husband, Stanley, had been transferred to the Bahamas, and they had been gone for three years. During this time May had frequently pleaded with Catherine to go out and visit for an extended holiday, an idea that, on the one hand, thrilled Catherine but, on the other, she didn't feel ready for.

Klaus's heart attack, two years ago, had left Catherine a widow at a relatively young age and she was still coming to terms with life on her own. It was true that neither of her very busy, married sons seemed to have much need for her. And having retired early she had no career to think of. But for reasons she couldn't quite put her finger on, reasons, she supposed that had to do with clinging to the familiar and the known, the idea of a long-haul flight on her own to the other side of the world, even to be with May, felt like a step too far.

Catherine had a deep-down inkling that she was living in an ever-diminishing world. Still inchoate and unexpressed, it was a sense that would register briefly from time to time that if she

wasn't careful, her life would shrink and narrow to the point where the comfort of the familiar became increasingly uncomfortable. When any changes to her routine would come to seem like upheavals, and the smallest of molehills take on the dimension of mountains.

Little did she realise, as she settled on an outfit from the second cupboard – dark pants and a jacket with a soft, cotton scarf to provide a splash of colour – that she was about to find salvation that very morning.

She was walking along a pavement to her lunch date when a man in a motorised wheelchair appeared round the corner, hurtling forward at such speed that pedestrians had to throw themselves out of his path. In Catherine's case, she abruptly found herself shoved against a shop window by a schoolgirl falling against her legs.

In the moments after the wheelchair had passed, while those around her, including the girl, peeled themselves off each other and back onto their feet, Catherine's cheek was pressed against the window of the shop, which turned out to be a recruitment agency. On the other side of the glass, a neatly printed card read, "Admin Assistant – City Morgue. Two-week contract."

Before retiring, Catherine's working life had been as a paralegal, a job demanding both admin as well as legal skills. That's how she and Klaus had met thirty years ago. At the time, he had been an up and coming young lawyer, and she had been an attractive and vivacious addition to the paralegal pool. Both working in the area of medical law, during the decades that followed, there were few aspects of human biology that hadn't been the focus of one case or another.

Biology had been a subject of special interest to Catherine since the time she'd been first introduced to it at school. While many others in her class were repulsed by the workings of the human digestive tract, Catherine had found it intriguing. Some of her fellow students had shielded their eyes from school documentaries about bilharzia or gonorrhoea, but Catherine had found them deeply fascinating. And it was gruesome medical errors and biological abnormalities that had been the sweet spot in her otherwise desiccated work of a paralegal – one of the few things about her job that she missed.

During her time at university, needing to earn some money, she'd worked for the father of a friend who owned an undertaking business. For several years, she had been quite used to dealing with corpses, and the matter-of-factness with which undertaking staff had gone about their business had soon rubbed off on her.

Within a minute of having her face shoved against the shop window, Catherine was inside the recruitment agency, her entirely uncharacteristic spontaneity prompted by a sudden and powerful curiosity.

'The City Morgue job.' She pointed to the window behind her. 'Is it still available?'

The angular-looking woman on the other side of the desk regarded her without enthusiasm. 'I'd have to check,' she said.

The recruitment agent had spoken to her client, Claudio, the afternoon before. He was desperate. The problem was that the window advert was deliberately vague. They had discovered in the past that they wouldn't get a single applicant if they advertised what the job *really* entailed. So instead, they put up a bland 'Admin assistant' notice, and tried to find some compliant twenty something who wouldn't object as and when the full truth came to be revealed.

The woman standing in front of her didn't belong to that category. If anything, she gave the air of being decidedly non-compliant.

'Can you check now?' asked Catherine, nodding towards the phone on her desk, thereby confirming her unsuitability.

The woman looked at her evenly, making up her mind about something, before saying, 'The job involves more than only paperwork.'

'Go on.'

Detecting the glint in Catherine's eye, the other woman shifted in her seat. 'The candidate would have to help with ... bodies.'

'Really?' Now Catherine was really interested.

'After they've been dissected.'

'You mean, post-mortem stitching?' Catherine practically beamed.

'You've done this work before?'

‘Never. But I’ve always wanted to!’ In fact, this was the first time Catherine had ever considered spending her days stitching up cadavers but, as the words tumbled out of her mouth, she felt them to be true.

The recruitment agent’s eyes narrowed. ‘They’re only offering eighteen dollars fifty an hour.’

Catherine shrugged. ‘Neither here nor there.’

The other woman picked up her phone and hit speed dial.

Catherine started work the following Monday. Up till then, she had never given much thought to the whereabouts of the City Morgue, and she was surprised to find it directly opposite the food court in a popular shopping mall. The pungent aroma of deep fried chips accompanied her as she made her way along a corridor opposite the fast food outlets, through a pair of anonymous swing doors, and into a bland reception area in which she had to press a buzzer for attention.

Soon, she was shown into the presence of Dr Claudio Agostini, Chief Forensic Pathologist. A slim man about the same age as her, his completely shaven head and steel-rimmed glasses gave him a cerebral presence. He also had the most observant eyes – which, she supposed, was central to the work that he did.

In just five minutes he had explained why she was needed – the illness of a staff member; what she was to do – paperwork for a variety of cases and post-mortem stitching for some of them; and where she would wash off – something, he assured her, that would soon become imperative.

The only question he asked her was why, given her impressive paralegal career, she had wanted this particular job. He was amused when she explained her interest in biology.

Dr Agostini may be all business, that gleaming, bald head of his seeming to pulse with intelligence, but Catherine warmed to him, all the same. There was a certain lightness, even jocularly about him that seemed incongruous given the nature of his job. She had already been told that Dr Agostini had a team of five forensic pathologists reporting to him, two here and three at hospitals across the city. Plus a supporting team of administrators. It occurred to her that he could easily have asked one of his colleagues to take her under his wing. That he chose to do so himself made her wonder.

She spent her first morning reading up on procedures, watching induction videos and signing confidentiality documents. It was only the afternoon when she was asked to go to the change room, pass through a foot bath and dress in suitable gowns, gloves and boots.

‘All ready?’ Dr Agostini looked at her over the top of his face mask as she joined him. Earlier, he had offered to let her watch an autopsy, so that she could get a better idea of the whole process.

‘Nothing quite like your first corpse,’ he said.

‘A very special first corpse,’ she replied.

He raised his eyebrows.

She tapped the clipboard she was required to carry, with details of the deceased. ‘We were born on exactly the same day.’

She’d made the discovery only a few minutes earlier, and had double-checked it several times since.

‘Hmm,’ he mused. ‘That’s happened once or twice for me. Makes you think ...’

‘That it could just as easily be me?’ prompted Catherine.

‘Exactly,’ he said, bringing a remote control out of his pocket and pressing a button. The room was filled with classical piano music.

‘Chopin.’ She smiled with recognition.

‘First piano concerto.’ He glanced at her with approval. ‘A favourite.’

‘Mine too.’

The cadaver on the brightly lit table wasn’t nearly so ghoulish as the images she’d seen on TV. Pallid and lifeless, of course, but not a blue-skinned horror. There was only the slightest muskiness, a locker room smell, along with the clinical tang of disinfectant.

The woman had had a good figure, observed Catherine, much better than her own. She was slimmer and looked as though she had been fit and supple. Glancing at that lifeless face, the dishevelled hair, it was hard to tell how she would have reacted, had they encountered one another in the street. But from the look of her smooth hands and manicured fingernails, the woman had been well presented.

‘Deceased two days ago?’ queried Dr Agostini, taking a scalpel from an assistant who had been waiting for them at the examination table.

‘Yes.’ Catherine didn’t need to double-check the paperwork. It had already occurred to her that the same afternoon she’d been lunching with Marta and Briana, this woman could have been sitting at the very next table, little knowing that in less than 24 hours, she would be dead.

Catherine watched in fascination as Dr Agostini made bold Y incisions from the shoulders, under the woman’s breasts, and down to her naval.

She knew that post-mortems were only required in cases of sudden death, or where there was something suspicious or unnatural, or in cases of accidents or medical errors. She’d read countless reports over the years when she was a paralegal.

Dr Agostini was methodical, efficient and moved with speed of practice. For her benefit, he also offered a few pointers about what he was doing.

‘Middle-aged female, living alone, unexpected death. Had the appearance of being in good health. In cases like this I always check the heart first.’

He had opened up the abdomen and reached inside, taking her heart in his hand, and leaning to inspect it under the dazzling light.

Once again, Catherine couldn’t help thinking how, only two days earlier, that heart had been pumping at somewhere around 80 beats per minute – or possibly much faster if the woman had been on the cross-trainer at her local gym. She would have had plans for the rest of the weekend. Perhaps this was going to have been just another week, or maybe she was having to face up to something highly stressful? Whatever the case was, for her, the week had never come.

Had she had any warning? Would she have known, even a minute or two before she finally died, that she was about to lose her life?

Catherine didn’t realise that she had asked the question out loud until Dr Agostini returned the woman’s heart to her chest.

‘In the case of myocardial infarction, it can vary,’ he answered. ‘Often there is severe chest pain. There may be varying degrees of recognition about what’s happening. Sometimes the signs are

so minor that people don't even know they've had a heart attack. They may think it's just indigestion. Anyway, that wasn't the scenario here. Next stop, the brain.'

'Stroke?' queried Catherine.

'That's what we'll check for.'

She glanced at his surgical instruments, wondering how he was going to open the skull.

Instead he turned to nod to his assistant, who flicked a brake on a wheel Catherine didn't know existed, then began pushing the whole table, cadaver on top, across the examination room towards swing doors.

'MRI,' Dr Agostini told her.

'You don't have to saw the head open?' she asked.

'Not generally. We're looking for atherosclerosis of extracranial or major intracranial arteries. Dissection can muddy the waters.'

In the next-door room, the cadaver was placed on a conveyer belt and loaded into the machine where scans were taken. They revealed that the woman had, almost certainly, suffered a massive stroke.

Back in the examination room, the assistant showed Catherine how to stitch together the tissue Dr Agostini had cut open. Skin, muscle and soft tissue was very different from working with felt and curtain fabric, the only things that Catherine had stitched in her life. But she focused intently, followed instructions, and worked through it. She was aware, all the time, of the oozing of subcutaneous fat out of the cadaver. It seemed to liquefy and slide from the incisions across the skin onto the examination table and seep across her gloves and protective clothing. And with it a floral aroma, somewhat sickly.

Even in the temperature-controlled City Morgue, the odour of decomposition was unavoidable.

That evening, Catherine's elder son, Jamie, phoned her after supper.

'How was your first day at the morgue?' he asked. Jamie was as amused as all her other friends by what he termed his mother's "macabre side".

‘Interesting,’ she said. She had stitched four cadavers that afternoon. It was the first that was most vivid in her mind, not only because it had been her first, but also because of the shared birthday. Telling her son about the coincidence, she recollected how, on leaving the building that afternoon, she had been about to cross the street when Dr Agostini had appeared up the ramp from the basement car park, behind the wheel of a bright-yellow Porsche.

She’d smiled. ‘Nice car!’

He’d pulled up beside her, the driver’s window wound down. ‘My indulgence,’ he’d replied, eyes twinkling.

From inside the car, she’d heard the sound of orchestral music and she’d had the sudden recognition, in that moment, that in an important way, Dr Agostini knew how life should be lived.

Moments later, he had taken off, the engine of the car unleashing its distinctive, throaty roar.

Later that week she had to stitch together the corpse of a young girl whose face she had recognised immediately – it was splashed across billboards, bus shelters and shop windows throughout the country. An eighteen-year-old model who was the ambassador for a well-known clothing chain, she had been found dead after a heated row with her boyfriend at his apartment. Catherine had seen a news item on TV about the death, little thinking that she would encounter the naked form of the famous model on the examination table at work.

Conducting the post-mortem, Dr Agostini tut-tutted as he sliced open that famous body, to study its gastric contents – blood and urine samples being already subjected to drug screening. Lethal drug toxicity, he told Catherine, was sometimes very difficult to establish. Drug use, albeit of the legal varieties, was so prevalent that about a half of all post-mortem cases showed positive for some level of toxicity. Knowing the history of each case could be critical in proving if particular drugs, or a combination thereof, had caused death.

Catherine, whose work as a paralegal had included insurance cases for the body parts of models and sportspeople, couldn’t help a certain consternation as she watched Dr Agostini smoothly open up the girl’s torso and reach inside it as though rifling through a handbag for a lost set of keys. But the girl was no longer a fashion model, she had to remind herself. She wasn’t even a person.

At the moment of her death, she had been reduced to a medical curiosity.

One with her own particular acrid aroma, she noted. Stunning as the young woman had been, in all the posters and screenshots, three days after death, she was rotting from the inside, and the odour of decomposing human flesh was unmistakable.

As confronting as the scent was, the hideous discoloration Dr Agostini revealed when he opened up the girls' chest cavity: the windpipe was seared brown and the lungs oozed black tar. Catherine had looked from the famous, pristine beauty of the girl's youthful face, to the congealing sludge in her burned lungs. The contrast could hardly have been more striking.

'Smoker,' Catherine found herself saying.

'Fairly typical damage,' responded the pathologist, pragmatically.

Catherine nodded.

'What seems the most perfect specimen may conceal a multitude of horrors. You can never tell from the outside what's going on inside.'

The rest of Catherine's week went by in a combination of post-mortem work and administration. During the course of the latter, she identified duplications in City Morgue systems and got approval to eliminate them. By her twentieth corpse, she was also making headway with her stitching.

Come Friday evening, she felt somewhat disappointed to be already halfway through her assignment. Like the mid-point of a holiday, she had the sense of more stimulation to be experienced – along with the recognition that, before she knew it, the temporary contract would be over.

Meeting friends for dinner that Saturday night, and socialising at the tennis club on Sunday, as she answered all the wide-eyed questions about what went on at the morgue, she told and re-told the story of the corpse with whom she'd shared a birthday. The young girl – professionalism forbade her from revealing the identity – whose apparent, youthful beauty couldn't have been more sharply contradicted by the grotesque contamination of her lungs.

And as she told the stories, Catherine realised that her five days at the morgue had been about a lot more than the experience of mere coincidence or the startling disconnect between outward appearance and inner reality. What had begun as simple curiosity – 'morbid fascination,' Jamie would

have said – had led to something else shifting. What exactly, she couldn't yet put into words, but she felt it. It was a gathering recognition, a rising tide which she sensed had a deeply personal significance.

The night before her second week at the morgue, she sat at the small writing desk in the corner of the sitting room. Opening the drawer, she glanced across the neatly arranged stacks of cards, printed stationery and deluxe, speciality writing paper.

Catherine had always loved the act of writing with a fountain pen on fine quality paper. When she and Klaus had travelled to places like Venice, Paris or Amalfi, they'd always linger in stationery stores, where she'd select a few of the more irresistible items: items that remained in her desk, waiting for a suitably momentous occasion to be used. They filled more than half the wide desk drawer. Now, as usual, she reached over for one of the free notepads that estate agents sometimes dropped into her letterbox. Hers was an automatic reaction. Long ago she had decided that there was no point using expensive stationery for mundane correspondence:

'Dear Ludwig and Simona,' she wrote to her house cleaners, whose twice-monthly visit was due the next day. 'I won't be at home today. Please can you polish the mirrors in the hallway and bedroom?'

She signed the note and added a smiley face, before leaving the note on the kitchen bench, along with the usual cash payment.

On week two, Catherine had to sew together the bodies of six children who had been killed when their school bus was T-boned, around the same time she had been playing tennis. There was also the corpse found floating in water, the stench of which no amount of washing or rinsing seemed to eliminate. Perhaps because she was becoming inured to the cases she had to deal with, instead of any one cadaver making a singular impression, as the days went by she was struck by something else: the number of cases for whom the cause of death was one thing, but who would have faced some other medical crisis had they lived very much longer. Many of them, around the same age, or even much younger, than her.

There was the forty-something man who had died of a heart attack thirty minutes after meeting with his accountant. The post-mortem established the formation of a blood clot causing myocardial infarction. It had been further revealed that his abdomen hosted several large, malignant tumours to which the man had, apparently, been oblivious. He had been living with Stage 4 cancer and had been completely unaware of it.

Then there was the young woman killed in a car accident. The force of collision had fractured her skull, ribs and vertebrae, causing extensive internal bleeding leading to death. As it turned out, she had also been on the brink of acute liver failure, which would have seen her delivered to the emergency ward of the local hospital, had she lived very much longer.

As Catherine left the morgue each afternoon and made her way through the food court, the insidious odour of subcutaneous fat roiling and merging with the more pungent aroma of deep fried chicken nuggets, she sensed a return of the feeling that her temporary work at the city morgue had done more than refresh her curiosity about human biology. It was also causing the tectonic plates of her world to move in ways she was only starting to define. In particular, she had come to recognise two strong and contradictory sensations.

Day after day, as she encountered the cadavers of yet more people, very often younger than herself, laid out on the examination table, she had become acutely aware of just how fragile life was. How very easily it could be taken away at any moment. How so often it was.

Who was to say that her own abdomen wasn't filled with grotesque-looking tumours, or that she wasn't on the brink of some other life-threatening crisis? If her work at the City Morgue had taught her anything, it was that you could tell nothing from outward appearances.

None of the people whom Dr Agostini had sliced open so meticulously had woken up, on a morning during the previous week, knowing that they had only hours to live. They'd no doubt expected just another day ahead, perhaps during another unremarkable week, month or year. And yet it had turned out to be the very last day of their life.

Along with this sobering, but unavoidable recognition, was another, quite unexpected sensation: it was a feeling of lightness. Without realising it, she had burdened herself with the assumption – incorrect as was now all too evident – that she would still be alive in thirty years' time.

That life's pleasures were to be eked out. That joy must wait. That fulfilment, resolution and closure could be constantly postponed to some point in the mythical future. Instead of celebrating all that she had to live for, right now, she was coming to realise that she had unknowingly worked her way into a well-worn rut based on beliefs that were just plain wrong.

On her last afternoon at the City Morgue, Dr Agostini sent a message asking to see her before she went. She knocked on his door shortly before 5 pm.

'Ah – Mrs Turner.' He waved towards the chair opposite. 'Already it is time to say goodbye.' She smiled, meeting those perspicacious eyes.

'Has your interest in human biology been satisfied, to some extent, in these past two weeks?'

She paused before saying, 'I've certainly learned a great deal.'

'Good.' He nodded. Then leaning forward, he placed his elbows on the desk, forming a temple with his fingers and touching his chin. 'Would you be interested in learning more? I ask for purely selfish reasons. Your maturity and professionalism have been an asset to our team. From time to time, when we need extra cover, it would be helpful to know that we could ask you back.'

Catherine had already guessed that Dr Agostini might pose such a question.

'I think I've seen all I need to satiate my curiosity,' she replied. 'And the smell of subcutaneous fat ...'

'Nothing to recommend it,' he conceded. Leaning back in his chair, he seemed resigned to her response. 'And the work can be confronting, yes? All those body fluids. Decomposition.'

'Discovering that our lives dangle by the most fragile thread.'

He nodded. 'There are certainly more causes for us to die, at any given moment, than most people care to contemplate.'

'But in another way—' Catherine met his gaze '—I have found the experience strangely liberating too.'

He raised his eyebrows.

‘It has made the reality of my own death much more real. More normal. Matter of fact. I’ve come to see that it can happen at any moment. And in a strange kind of way, it’s like a burden I wasn’t even aware of has been lifted from my shoulders.’

The pathologist’s spectacles glinted as he tilted his head in agreement. ‘First face death, then we know how to live?’

‘If we assume we’re going to go on forever,’ she went on, ‘we’re not really living.’

‘*Carpe diem*. Seize the day.’

‘Is that why you drive the Porsche?’

Dr Agostini tilted his head to one side. ‘No one has ever asked me that question quite so directly—’ he chuckled ‘—but yes. Yes, it is. I know it may seem a little child-like. But I love the car, and I have the chance today. Who is to say I will have the chance tomorrow?’

For a long while they held each other’s gaze across the desk, before Catherine said, ‘I can honestly say this has been the most life-changing experience since I lost my husband.’

‘In a positive way, I trust?’

‘Very positive. It’s been just what I needed to get me out of my rut. I feel strangely, gloriously lighter, which is why I would be very happy to cover any future staff absences.’

‘Wonderful!’ Dr Agostini beamed at this unexpected conversational turn. Considering what she’d just said, he asked, ‘A regular reality check?’

‘Exactly.’ She nodded.

‘I have no doubt that most people would benefit from the same thing.’

Catherine began making changes that very evening. Pouring her favourite Sauvignon Blanc into one of the special wine glasses she only usually brought out for dinner parties – and the last of those had been when Klaus was still alive – she sat on her sofa, picked up her phone and pressed a favourite contact.

Moments later, in the Bahamas, May Delaney answered her call.

‘Lovely to hear from you, Katie!’ she enthused. She was the only one who called Catherine that – and Catherine always felt somehow more vibrant and interesting because of it. ‘How are you?’

‘Wondering if you’re still taking in visitors from the old country?’

‘Depends on the visitor,’ May replied playfully.

‘Me,’ said Catherine – then had to pull the phone abruptly from her ear as May squealed at the other end.

‘I thought you were *never* going to come!’ May managed finally, when she’d calmed down.

‘I thought so too.’

‘When were you thinking?’

‘As soon as convenient for Stanley and you.’

There was much excited chatter – they were on the phone for nearly an hour as May talked excitedly about all the things they could do, the people she wanted her to meet, and the places on the island she wanted to show her.

By the end of the call they’d agreed she was to visit in a month’s time.

The following morning, Catherine spent a cathartic few hours going through her wardrobe. Ruthlessly purging almost everything in the third cupboard, along with a good deal from the second, her selection criterion was very simple: if she didn’t feel great in it, she was throwing it out. No longer would she deny herself her best clothes or favourite outfits. No longer was she going to make do, or put up with the dated, the dull or the second best. She had a cupboard full of beautiful clothes and she was going to wear them!

Saturday afternoon was spent applying much the same principle to her crockery cabinets. Out went the ‘everyday’ service, which she’d routinely used for the past twenty years. Neatly wrapping and stacking the plates and bowls into cardboard packing boxes, she replaced the items with the much loved but almost never used porcelain given to Klaus and her as a wedding gift by his parents. She emptied the cutlery drawers and refilled them with the silver dinner service. And she switched her most treasured glassware from the rarely used dining room to the kitchen. For as many, or as few, glasses of water or wine she had left to drink on this earth, she resolved, she would do so using the generous, beautifully shaped glasses that gave her such pleasure.

That night, with unusual spontaneity, she invited both sons and their families round to eat takeaway meals off the best family china, and to quaff champagne from the many cases that Klaus

had stored downstairs. Her sons and daughter-in-laws were more than curious about what had brought about the unexpected changes. She told them that it was really quite simple: working in the City Morgue had made her realise she wouldn't live forever. She may as well make the most of each single day that she had the incomprehensible good fortune of waking up to.

She could tell, by their expressions, that they didn't really get it. That their own death was still an intellectual abstraction. Something around the corner. Over the horizon. Like her own had been until she'd worked at the City Morgue. Just as she knew that no amount of talk could help them reach the same realisation that she had. *That* was a recognition that went deeper than words.

She spent a lot of time over the next week ferrying unwanted clothes and homewares to local charity shops. Carefully choosing which bundle of items should go to which not-for-profit, each of the deliveries was accompanied by a note carefully handwritten on quality Venetian notepaper, sometimes embossed or illustrated, and in each case written upon with heartfelt gratitude.

Catherine had written and posted another important missive, the response to which came to occupy her thoughts each day after she had slipped it into the mailbox near her home. She had thought very carefully about the words she had written, expressing herself in a way that was as deliberately neutral and open as possible.

Fortunately, she didn't have long to wait for a response. Late that same week the phone rang one evening shortly after 8 pm. It was her brother Gerry. He'd got her note, he said. He was pleased she'd made contact. During the long conversation that followed, there wasn't a thing he said that surprised her as he recounted his former wife's inexplicable resentment of the family, or his own, conflicted feelings when he finally got a divorce.

What did surprise her, however, was the way just listening to his voice made her feel. A voice she hadn't heard for well over ten years and yet which she knew so very well. It came as an unexpected and joyful reminder of how wonderful it felt to have a brother again.

In no time at all, Catherine was on her way to the Bahamas, where she was immediately caught up in the social vortex of May's life, and introduced as 'Katie' to May and Stanley's friends. There was the

welcoming party at their home on her very first weekend. The yacht club regatta. The art exhibition and informal socialising that seemed to accompany even the most mundane trip to the local shops.

It was at social tennis on her first Sunday that she met May's photographer friend Ant – and felt an instant connection. Ant evidently felt it too. He had soon offered her a tour of his favourite island scenery, and, re-experiencing the same intensity of feelings she had as a young girl asked out on a date, she had said yes.

During the days that followed, one thing led inevitably to the other. May was not only aware of the blossoming romance, but actively encouraging it. And although Catherine felt deeply insecure about revealing her body to a man who wasn't her husband – the first time such a thing would have happened in thirty years – to the point that, before, she would have stopped things well before they could get that far – with Ant she felt different.

Nature took its course, and far from feeling inhibited and undesirable, Katie relished their intimacy. Making love was different from the way it had been in the past. But she was thrilled by the rapture, the ecstatic connection she had long-since assumed to be a thing of the past.

Katie didn't know where things with Ant were going. But nor did she think much about it. They were here, now, unreserved in their adoration of one another and in making the most of each, precious moment.

'I sometimes wonder if these aren't the best days of our lives,' Ant said, one morning, as they sat on the balcony outside his bedroom, looking across the palm-tops towards the sea.

'If you have the good fortune to reach our age with some level of financial independence, and the kids are making their own way in the world and you're in good health, has there ever been a better time to be alive?'

Reaching out, Katie had squeezed his hand. 'Not for me,' she said.

When Katie Turner looked in the mirror, she felt more vibrant and alive than she had for many years. The 52-year-old woman returning her gaze had a holiday tan and a sparkle in her eye. Stepping back from the mirror no longer bothered her. Nor was she startled by unexpected glimpses of herself in

shop windows. She was alive, was she not? Gloriously, wonderfully alive! The possessor of robust health and happiness. Someone with the immense good fortune to share her life and love with others.

How to deal with the rush of thoughts and feelings that bubbled up to the surface at such moments? For Katie there was a phrase that summed it up. 'Heartfelt gratitude' was her chosen philosophy. Heartfelt gratitude for the fact that every day she woke up was the most precious of gifts, one never to be taken for granted, especially given her deeply held conviction that there had never been a better time to be alive.

(Photo credit: Gorgeous bedroom photo by Ali Inay on Unsplash)