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A New Map of Love

Written by Abi Oliver

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A
New Map
of Love

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February 1964

One

1.

It was never George Baxter's intention to run off from the funeral. He had not planned to be first out of the car park at the Crem, driving like the clappers despite the weather before the others had finished admiring the flowers. Nor did it seem at all the thing to be whistling on the way home from laying your wife of twenty-six years to rest, let alone if what you found yourself whistling were tunes from *South Pacific*. But he was not himself. He seemed to have lapsed into a *Scouting for Boys* reflex from his upbringing. A Scout Is Always Cheerful, No Matter What. And he couldn't stand the silence in the car – a silence that would now go on forever.

The windscreen wipers beat time. Fat snowflakes slopped against the glass. He kept an eye on the rear-view mirror to see if the pack of mourners was catching up, but there was no sign. They would be taking it more carefully.

In his grey saloon he dashed through the villages until, from the brow of the hill, his own came into view at last. Greenbury was a cosy huddle of dwellings round a square church tower, tucked in at the toes of the chalk down. Today the snow had reduced its thatched cottages and cob walls to a few black lines, like a Victorian engraving. He swooped downhill between rows

of snow-laden elms, roared into the gravelled yard and braked beside the pea-green Morris pick-up.

The house, screened from the road by laurel and hawthorn, was cream-faced with a beard of Virginia creeper and stiff whiskers of winter roses, which in summer would scale to the roof in a rampant wig of gold blooms. Unlike the cottages at the heart of the village it was only about a hundred years old, the roof tiled, not thatched. At the drive's entrance, hanging from a gas lamp, now electrified, was a sign announcing, **CHALK HILL ANTIQUES – Geo. Baxter Esq.**

George jumped from the car, slamming the door as he strode to the front door. One hand grasped his black trilby, the other fumbled for keys in a trouser pocket that was suddenly unfathomably deep.

'Damn it.' There was the usual tussle with the lock, the dog barking inside. Door open at last, he took a frantic glance behind him in case the black-hatted pack had caught up. Thank heavens he had taken his own car.

'Hello, old boy,' he said to the hound before racing up to the bedroom, a tall, fleshy man taking the stairs in doggy bounds. Bedroom: jacket off, must hang, good quality suit. Trousers down, onto a wooden hanger and hooked on the wardrobe door. George felt his face take on a look of bewilderment. Where had his clothes gone? His real clothes? He performed several laps round the room in his vest and long johns, staring fruitlessly at the bed and the seats of chairs. Dangling from the back of the Windsor chair was an orphaned pair of braces. He picked them up and gazed at the perished elastic. At last, in an indignant outburst,

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‘Winifred! What in God’s name have you done with my trousers?’

The faint rebound of his voice met only silence. Winifred Jane. Win . . . He sank down on her side of the bed. She was not going to answer. She would not be answering ever again. Now the silence weighed upon him: he sat, as if winded. Feelings jostled inside him, vibrations of long-ago abandonments. He gave his thighs a vigorous rub.

‘No good – this is no good at all.’

He was about to get up when he caught sight of the basket on Win’s bedside table in which she kept her hair things. George reached over for it and heard himself let out the ‘ughnm’ sound which these days seemed to accompany his bending or stretching for anything. The basket had once contained a gift of lavender soaps. Win kept it tidily stacked with the hairpins, rollers and kirby grips with which she used to ‘put my hair up’ every night of their marriage even though he longed for her not to. The only time she had let all this go was a few winters back, when she had that terrible flu.

‘I must look a sight,’ she apologized through a haze of Vicks VapoRub. ‘I’ll get my rollers in as soon as I’m better . . .’

As if she must do it for him. Her hair was still black as the inkiest blackbird then. Every day it was immaculate, the tight curls tamed by hairspray and waving back away from her forehead, the way the Queen wore hers. He squeezed one of the rollers in his hand and winced. It was all wire and mesh, like a bit of fence from a prisoner-of-war camp. Fancy sleeping with that pinned to your skull every night. When her hair faded she began to tint it. She wasn’t dyeing it, she insisted, just ‘giving it a wash through’. She didn’t manage all that by the end – nor the

curlers. She had been natural then in a loose nightgown. Beautiful in his eyes. She rose to meet death, old Win did. She rose and grew as never before while moving daily further out of his reach.

He put the basket back on the bedside table and sat staring at the window. Might the two of them, had they both lived long enough, eventually have grown back together in some fashion? He saw them reaching out, connecting first at their fingertips, slipping a palm round each other's wrists in playful union, her white inner arm sliding along his until they were lime trees, pleached into a seamless . . .

Lord God, how long had he been sitting here?

He leapt from the bed. He had to find his . . . It came to him: the washing basket. Of course – he'd put his trousers in the laundry as usual, thinking someone, *someone* would wash them.

One pair of oil-stained trousers the colour of cattle dung safely retrieved and flung on the bed. A blue striped shirt, a favourite navy jersey, both elbows out – Win had not been up to darning lately. As he fastened his shirt buttons he went to look out at the drive. The pack would be here any minute, surely? It was quiet, the snow marked only by tyre tracks and the dark trail of his footprints. From up here they looked small and lonely, an uninhabited archipelago in a desolate sea.

He hurried downstairs, the hall tiles icy under his feet. Standing on the kitchen's grey lino, George eyed the table, humped as a camel under a white cloth. Beneath it, he knew, was Vera's spread. Any minute now, she and the rest of Win's cronies would all be swarming at the house. Of course, he had had a word with them all at the Crem, before the need to take

off seized him so abruptly. And now, here were the expected funeral bakemeats. For a moment he tried to persuade himself that he could manage it, stay and face them all – Rosemary, Pat, Eunice and the others, all full of *poor Win*. And of course Vera – oh dear God, Vera – whose every act made him feel guilty or inadequate. He felt stretched to the end of himself, the thought of it all unbearable.

Nose twitching, he reached forward to lift the edge of the cloth, keeping his body well back as if there might be something dangerous underneath. He examined the mounds of sandwiches and hams, the trifles involving glacé cherries, the inevitable pies, all laid out lovingly by Vera, marvellous Vera, who had started as a cleaner in the shop and now seemed to run his entire life.

‘I can’t,’ he stated, dropping the edge of the cloth. ‘Just can’t.’

Lifting it again, he poked his head underneath and ferreted about like an old-fashioned photographer. After scooping a few offerings into a linen napkin he turned, performing a sudden swivel to avoid tripping over the dog whose nose was wiffing hopefully beside him.

‘Get out of the damn way, Monty – oh Lord God Almighty.’ He looked down at himself. Navy jumper, shirt tails, long johns. ‘My trousers!’

Upstairs, and after a dangerous moment of entanglement with his fly buttons, he seized some socks – ‘Damn it, they’ll be here’ – and tore downstairs again. Sandwiches, coat (flask already in pocket), boots, dog. Where was his pipe? No – too late for that.

George opened the front door and peered out. Coast still clear. The Morris had a hat of snow on its cab roof.

‘Right, Monty . . .’ He couldn’t leave the dog here. He’d be raiding people’s plates and humping their legs. ‘In you get.’ Opening the cab door he picked up the grumbling basset hound and heaved him onto the front seat. ‘Too many pies,’ he told him. ‘That’s your trouble.’

Jumping in, he started up the engine – ‘Come on, come *on* . . .’ The windscreen wipers swished. No cars appeared, no black hats. He’d made it. He eased the pick-up out of the drive, turned on to the Didcot road and drove away with the speed of a fleeing burglar.

2.

He parked the Morris at the crest of the track that cut along the side of Greenburton Hill. Everything was white now except for the fresh tips of winter wheat, a rectangle of threadbare corduroy across the sloping downland. Flakes collected steadily on the windscreen. Every so often he switched on the ignition to move the wipers.

In the quiet, George sat beside Monty, chewing slowly and gazing out at the falling snow. The dog's attention was torn between the whirl of flakes and the fast dwindling beef and horseradish sandwich in George's hand. The sandwich was winning.

'You look about as cheerful as I feel,' George addressed Monty's mournful countenance. 'Eh – Mr Glum?' he added, aware that the dog's expression was permanent rather than any great sign of sensitivity to events. 'A right pair we are.'

Sandwich suspended in hand, he examined himself in the rear-view mirror. The wide, pink face staring back at him was that of a man of fifty-six years and two months. Its features showed signs of losing life's long tussle with gravity. Large grey eyes, nose a strong wedge of a thing which had embarrassed him when he was young. Now he rather hoped the eyes looked soulful and the nose distinguished. His biscuit-coloured hair

was swept into clumps, giving the appearance of having recently encountered gale-force winds. He gave it a futile pat with his free hand. The sight of his own face seemed only to add to George's creeping sense of shock.

'What the hell have I done, Monty? How on earth did we end up here?' He had run off from his wife's funeral do like a bolter fleeing a wedding. Here he was, hiding away from all the people who had cared for Win. The very people he should greet and thank; from whom he should accept sympathy. He was sure they already thought him a toad, all those blasted females. He could see it in the way they looked at him. They already thought he had neglected Win. And now look – he had done a bunk. 'What kind of man am I?' he groaned at this evidence of his own derangement.

Monty, eyes pleading and a string of drool dangling from his jowls, followed the sandwich looping in the air in George's hand.

'Here you go old boy.' George lobbed this last crust. Monty snapped it up like a performing seal. 'Oh, and look what I've got – your favourites.' Monty's gaze snapped towards the rustling in his pocket. The ancient, comforting joke: 'Bassetts for a basset.'

He selected a liquorice and white sugar sandwich from the little box and flicked it upwards. Monty caught it in one.

'There – and don't go pinching them from my pocket.'

George wiped his hands on his trousers and reached into his other tweedy pocket for his hip flask (silver, L.G. Birmingham 1892 – not really antique). He pulled off its cup, surprised at how much his hands were trembling as he poured a tot of the amber liquid. Its scent made his nostrils flare; that cognac

glory-hallelujah of copper-pot stills and oak barrels. He sat back, so far as it was possible to sit back in the upright seat and stared out at the bloated sky.

‘Oh dear God, Monty, how am I ever going to face them after this?’

Monty offered no further comment except a grunt as he settled on the seat, eyes half closed, resigned to the fact that there was no sign of any more liquorice allsorts.

George laid a hand over his pounding heart. ‘You should be ashamed of yourself,’ he lectured himself. He drained the silver cup, then resorted to swigging straight from the flask. The alcohol slid down, burning pleasantly in his stomach. His muscles slackened. Gradually, his agitation faded. He became reflective. The least he could do, he thought, pushing himself woozily upright again as a mark of respect, was to drink a private toast to his wife.

‘Poor little devil,’ he murmured, pouring another snifter into the cup. ‘We didn’t have a clue, did we?’ After further thought he added, ‘I’ve been a shocking bad husband.’ He shook his head. ‘Good sort, you were, my dear. You deserved much better.’ After another lengthy pause he raised the cup high. ‘Well, I suppose we gave it our best. Cheers, Win old girl.’

He was downing the contents when in the fading light he saw movement ahead on the track. A man in a brown coat was coming slowly up the rise, a scarf muffling his throat. He was looking down, talking to a child who was holding his hand as they stumped through the snow. Both of them had on navy-and-white-striped bobble hats, as if someone had knitted them a matching pair, and wellingtons. The boy’s – somehow he seemed a boy, in his blue anorak – were red.

George felt a bit of a fool sitting there. On the quiet hillside he could just hear the man talking in an even voice and the child's chirping replies. The lad had wide eyes which seemed to take in everything in a trusting sweep. It was his openness George noticed first. With a pang he saw that the boy could have been himself fifty years earlier: round-faced, pink-cheeked, solid. He was always big for his age, making people think he was older than he was, that he had more courage and substance than was ever the case.

Hearing them, Monty leapt up from the seat and started barking. The father and son stopped, startled, then smiled. The boy said something and his father picked him up and brought him along the passenger side of the van to look. At this Monty went berserk, snarling with gums rolled back like some mythical beast, scrabbling on the seat and sending trails of slobber down the window. George caught a glimpse of the boy's face, mouth open in surprise, the smile gone.

'Hello!' George waved in a way that he hoped would appear jolly. He's friendly really, he wanted to tell them. It's just his territory. The father, pale and serious, gave a brief nod and moved further away, stooping to put his son down.

'Steady on, Monty – you'll burst a blood vessel.' George was filled with sudden anguish, as if he and his dog had struck the wrong note, spoiled some innocence of the afternoon for the man and his boy.

In the mirror, he watched the two of them recede slowly down the track into the village, two figures side by side. Himself and his father, a nervy schoolmaster. Himself and the spectre of the son that never was, for himself and Win. The ghostly image of a whole past that might have been different.

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He put the cup back on his hip flask, feeling warm and muzzy, yet desolate. His feelings opened by the drink, by the man and his son, he looked out over the muffled hillside. The longer he sat there the more the tracks and familiar landmarks were being reshaped by snow, so that this place, so near home, now felt only half recognizable. It felt as if his life had been filling with snow these past months. He had thought it would just continue, its paths and crossings, its knolls and slopes, more or less predictable as before. It had been a limited existence to which he had resorted and by which he had often felt dulled and constrained. But at least life with Win had been familiar and safe. Now, dear Win was gone. Win, who had been slipping from his grasp finger by finger, so that she had left him some time before death took her. Gone: every gentle reproach, every quiet breath and valiant smile. And he was left adrift.

Realization throbbed in his mind: here he sat, George Oswald Baxter, alone with his unfortunate initials and ridiculous dog. He had not one blood relation in the world. Alone with no compass in this explorer's blizzard, all landmarks effaced. Alone, and . . .

No, that could not be right. Strange sensations jostled inside him. Feelings that seemed utterly out of place. Seconds later, it crackled through him, a bolt of elation so fierce that he had to seize the steering wheel. His heart started banging like a tomtom as a shameful excitement stole his breath and filled him to the back of his throat. This was terrible. He was going off his head, first running off and now this . . . He gripped the steering wheel. For heaven's sake, man . . .

But yes, yes – it would not be denied. *The life force.* He was not the one who had died. He had life in him yet. And how he

wanted it – all of it! Wanting stormed through him and made itself his whole condition. It yanked his ears and dragged him by the ankles. It was a primitive hunger gripping and filling him: a greedy, mindless, ravenousness for life.

Possibility swirled before him. *Life*. It meant walks holding hands in meadows freckled with buttercups. It laid before him dishes of ripe peaches, carafes of wine and evenings swimming naked in the river . . . It swept him across grand landscapes; it meant riding bareback over the plains . . . No, maybe it didn't . . . His imagination stalled for a moment. He found horses utterly terrifying. But it did mean seeing a wider world. And a world in which he could share a bed with a lovely woman, a woman who would fizz and leap and undulate and make him laugh and – without malice – laugh at him.

He felt so lost, and his longing was in such crazed collision with anguish and remorse that he folded forward under the force of it until his head touched the steering wheel. His body heaved. For the first time since a summer morning in 1944, on an Italian hillside, he wept. Eyes closed, his sobs rumbled up and overcame him; tears ran onto his hands. Only gradually he became aware of something wet and whiskery and faintly liquorice-scented nudging at his ear.

'It's all right,' he said. Still weeping he sat up, extricating himself from Monty's concerned nose. 'You sit down – that's it, boy.' His arm round the dog, comforted by Monty's stinky warmth, he looked out at the darkening afternoon. 'We should just drive off over the hills, and never come back. Are you game, Monty? You and me?'

The dog gazed gormlessly at him. George wiped his face and blew his nose, cold reality settling on him again. What the

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blazes was he thinking? He had only just taken leave of his wife. It was no good doing something rash. He had to get his bearings – and in the meantime he had a business to run and a dog badly in need of a tin of Winalot.

He started the engine and let it idle for a few moments before letting off the handbrake.