

FORECAST

BY STEFIN KOHN

It's early November, and Sandra walks through the wrought-iron cemetery gates. The fallen leaves, heavy with damp, stick to the worn soles of her boots. A lingering fog twists through the trees. She tightens the belt on her coat. In her haste leaving the flat this morning, she grabbed one of her mum's old scarves. Florence has been gone almost a year now, but Sandra can still smell her scent, hyacinth-sweet, wafting up from the periwinkle wool wound around her neck. She can't decide if it's a comfort or a torment.

Once a week, Sandra visits Enderby Park, taking a fresh bouquet of flowers for her mum and a sandwich for herself. It's a peaceful place: the gnarled trees bending towards the leaning, lichen-covered stones, the drowsy climb of old roses on the brick walls. Sandra eats her lunch on a bench opposite her mother: *Florence Margaret Harrison, 1905–1977* and tries to find comfort in her silent company.

Today, Sandra waves to Albert, the volunteer gardener, standing outside the small brick lodge where he keeps his hand tools and escapes the rain. The paid maintenance men visit Enderby Park once a fortnight with their bright jackets, petrol-fuelled trimmers and coarse language. But Albert favours old-fashioned methods and manners.

As Sandra approaches, he's turning out his trouser pockets.

'Glasses?' Sandra points to the top of his head.

'What would I do without you, love?' He laughs, retrieves his wire-rimmed spectacles, and settles them on his nose.

Sandra walks on, smiling. Albert's been a sympathetic presence, one she could confide in about her mum's drawn-out illness, the round-the-clock care she provided at the end; her own life put on hold for so very long. Without judgement, he has listened to her confessions of guilt, remorse and shameful relief.

Her smile fades, though, as she remembers another recent conversation. Albert arrived to scrape moss from the stone of her mother's neighbour, *Harold James Benedict, 1896–1917*. They fell into easy conversation as she finished her sandwich.

'Another life cut short,' he said, gesturing towards the gravestone. Sandra murmured in sober agreement.

Albert chewed on the inside of his cheek. He stood, brushing his hands together, finished with his task.

'You'll think I'm mad, but I talk to them.'

Sandra felt tears prick behind her eyes, but managed half a smile, considering all the things her mum might say to her. 'Oh, Albert. I'll only think you're mad if you tell me they answer back.'

Albert nodded slowly.

'Oh, but sometimes, they do.'

Since that conversation, Albert's told her he's seen some unusual visitors – men in military uniform; women in Gibson Girl-era hats and ground-sweeping skirts. He tells her the door of the keeper's lodge keeps swinging open, like it wants him to welcome these guests. He studies her closely when he shares these stories; Sandra feels she is being given some kind of test.

So, she offers Albert, and herself, reasonable explanations for his encounters: *A veteran visiting a fallen comrade, someone playing dress-up, a loose latch.* But away from the cemetery, she picks at them like a hangnail. They remind her of the night her mother died; of something else that does not lend itself to reason. How, after another oppressive day of nursing, she woke to see Florence standing next to her.

Groggy, Sandra rose on her elbow, pushed the hair out of her eyes. 'Mum?'

She turned, squinted at the bedside clock, groaned: half three in the morning. *What is it now?* She thought she'd measured enough morphine to ensure a few hours of uninterrupted sleep. Her body heavy with fatigue and resentment, she knew she should throw off the covers, lead Florence back to bed.

'Are you in pain?'

Her mum's white nightdress shimmered in the blue-black darkness. 'Sandra,' she said, in a tender, relaxed voice Sandra hadn't heard in years, 'You'll see me when it snows.'

Sandra rolled on her side, burrowed beneath the pillow. 'Go back to bed, Mum.' Exhaustion pulled her under.

The next day, the coroner estimated time of death as one o'clock.

'One?' Sandra repeated, her voice trembling. *But I talked to her at half three!* She gazed at her mother's waxy, blueish face, sure the doctor must intuit her negligence. Sure he would insist on tests to prove that Sandra had erred, had been irresponsible, had somehow *caused this*. Instead, he handed her a sheaf of forms, told her he was sorry for her loss and closed the front door behind him.

Walking on, these thoughts fly from Sandra's head, because on her favourite bench sits a man. A young man wearing – she squints, *yes* – military uniform. Sandra frowns. She's never seen anyone visit her mum; she feels a proprietary flush of jealousy.

'Sorry to disturb,' she says, approaching. 'Did you know my mother?' She gestures towards Florence's gravestone.

The man shakes his head.

'No,' he answers, his voice hoarse but polite. 'The person I'd planned to visit isn't here today.' A lock of hair flops over his forehead, which looks swollen and sore, like an old bruise. He offers a woebegone smile. Instinctively, Sandra takes a step forward.

But before she can reach out to pat his arm, the man stands and walks away. Sandra shakes off her wistfulness. She bends to brush fallen leaves away from the foot of her mother's grave, and as she does, rereads the inscription carved into the stone.

Always with you.

A weight settles on Sandra's shoulders. She'd agonised over which phrase to choose; had flipped through the undertaker's heavy book for days. *Gone but not forgotten. Forever in our hearts. Until we meet again.* At the time, her choice seemed comforting. Now, it seems reproachful. She rests her head against the marker. She wishes, again, for absolution, for a *sign*. But the cold stone offers nothing.

With a sigh, she stands and surveys the cemetery. She sees a young mother pushing a pram, a man walking his spaniel, and, finally, Albert, leaning heavily on the handle of his rake.

'Are you talking to your tenants?' Sandra calls out, brushing aside the spider webs that stretch between the taller gravestones. He greets her with his usual cheerful smile.

'Sandra,' he says, 'who were you talking to?'

'I think it was the man you saw the other day. The one in military uniform. Are you jealous?' she teases gently, then follows him to a nearby bench where they settle against the wooden slats.

'I know who it was.'

'You do?'

'Harry Benedict.'

Sandra waits but Albert remains still. She prompts him:

'A regular visitor then?'

Albert removes his glasses. His eyes are bright. 'A resident.'

Sandra repeats the name: 'Harry Benedict.' Realisation dawns. 'Albert, do you mean *Harold* Benedict ... the man whose grave you were tidying a few weeks ago ... the one who died during the Great War?'

'I've just seen you talking to him.'

'His son, you mean?'

'No, Harry himself.'

'That was Harold Benedict, who's been dead for decades?' She chuckles, adjusts her scarf. 'Enough with you. It was just a poor soul visiting a loved one and feeling a bit melancholy. But you're

telling me I was talking to a dead man!' This time Sandra's laugh dies in her throat as she catches Albert's look of utter seriousness.

'There are things we cannot explain, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't believe them.'

'Albert,' she says, concern puckering her forehead, 'are you feeling all right?'

'Let's go to the cottage.' Albert rises to his feet, smoothing work-worn hands down the front of his muddied trousers. He looks to the sky. 'Snow's coming.'

After the damp chill of the November afternoon, Sandra welcomes the relative cosiness of the gardener's cottage. Wooden-handled tools stand sentry against the wall, rain gear hangs limp and lifeless from a hook. Albert switches on a lamp, and its golden glow casts a small but warm illumination on the worn work table.

'I'm a facilitator,' he says, stretching his hands wide. 'When it's time for the visit. I help arrange things.'

'Albert, what are you talking about?' A frustrated headache tightens behind her eyes. 'You're worrying me.'

'It seems that you can talk to them too,' he continues. He looks at her sharply. 'But that's not news to you, is it?'

Sandra takes a deep breath, wills herself to stay calm.

'You're talking about ghosts, Albert.' She hears the waver in her voice, remembering how her mother shimmered at her bedside, but she continues, stoutly. 'And I don't believe in those.'

'Ah, but you want to.'

'What?'

'You'd like to see your mother again. You'd like to know she doesn't blame you, that she forgives you. She's haunting you, Sandra.'

'It's *grief*, not ghosts ...'

'Call it what you like. Either way I—'

'It was horrible, Albert, *horrible!*' Sandra interrupts, heat flooding her face. 'The pain, the agony ... it was no way to live. Maybe I *ended* the suffering ...'

'Whose suffering?'

Sandra stops, opens and closes her mouth, gasping like a landed fish.

'Hers,' she says, hearing the doubt in her voice. 'Hers,' she repeats, hearing the truth.

'In which case ...' Albert offers his gentle smile. He stuffs his hands into the pockets of his corduroy trousers, walks to the cottage door.

'In which case ...?'

Tears spill from her eyes; she dashes them away with the back of her hand. She moves next to him and looks out into the misty cemetery. The leaves fall from the trees in dying shades of murderous crimson.

‘In which case, maybe it’s time to forgive yourself.’

Despite Albert’s forecast, there’s no snow, just miserable wet and cold. The first frost comes, but the leaden skies suck the sparkle out of the air. November is almost over before Sandra has enough fair weather and inclination to take lunch at Enderby Park.

With her coat buttoned to her throat, and a woollen hat snug on her head, she replaces the soggy, spent flowers on Florence’s grave with fresh blooms, then walks through the cemetery, peering through the nearly naked tree branches for Albert. He’ll be raking up the last of the oak leaves for a bonfire in the far corner or trimming the hawthorn hedge near the infants’ plot.

She walks to the gates of the east entrance. With still no sign of the elderly gardener, Sandra retraces her steps until she’s standing in the centre of the grounds. She turns in a slow circle and sees commuters taking a shortcut to the Tube station; a young couple on the bench near the west entrance; a woman and her labrador.

She hurries down the pathway that leads to the keeper’s cottage. As she draws near, she sees the door rocking open and closed, as regular as a heartbeat. *Oh Albert, what did I tell you about fixing that latch?* She pushes the door all the way open, her light-hearted greeting dying on her lips as she sees a group of maintenance men sat round the table.

‘Sorry, is Albert ...?’

The three men look up, startled.

‘No Albert here, love.’

‘The volunteer gardener.’

The men look at each other, then back to her, curious.

‘Nah,’ says one, standing and walking to the kettle. He pours hot water into a mug, dunks a teabag. ‘I’m Richie and this is Colin and Joe.’ He blows on the brew, takes a cautious sip. ‘Don’t think we’ve ever had an Albert.’

The other men shake their heads, muttering in agreement.

‘Isn’t there an Albert buried over near the east entrance?’ the one named Colin asks. ‘The bloke we nearly dug up when we repaired the brickwork last spring?’

Joe snaps his fingers. ‘That’s right! Albert Wilson, Walker ... Wright ... something like that.’

‘What?’ Sandra shakes her head, tries to marshal her flying thoughts, make the men understand. ‘No, this is Albert the gardener. He’s not *buried* here, he *works* here. Saturdays ...’

‘Yeah, you’ve said, love,’ Richie sighs. ‘But we’re the only ones keeping tabs on this place these days.’

With a hasty thanks, Sandra backs out of the lodge. She’s gripped with an urgent need to prove them wrong. ‘Wilson, Walker, Wright,’ she repeats, irritated with herself for never thinking to ask for *her* Albert’s last name. She picks her way through the newly shorn grass towards the far edge of the cemetery, clumps of soggy green shards clinging to her boots. She moves slowly, stopping to bend and read the inscriptions on the stones. Many of the graves sag sideways, the inhabitants long since forgotten by anything but time.

Then, just as she’s about to turn away: a small stone, smothered in ivy. She crouches, pulls away the twining, suffocating vines.

Albert Wheeler, 1888–1968. Do not doubt, believe.

She feels her heart hammering in her chest. *Albert’s a common name. This is just coincidence.* Someone else, surely, has seen *her* Albert trimming the hedges or planting springtime bulbs, pruning the lavender, pulling up weeds.

She stands and looks through the bare branches to the larger cemetery. This time, she sees a thin woman in a white nightdress, the air around her gauzy as a dream. A frosty prickle tiptoes up Sandra’s backbone, but instead of feeling scared, she’s strangely exhilarated. Sandra inhales, filling her lungs with cold, fresh air and courage and walks toward the apparition. She scrambles back to the main pathway, but the woman has disappeared.

She hastens her pace, dodging dog walkers and grizzling children and families clustered and crying around freshly dug earth. Her eyes scanning side to side, she walks on, searching for the mysterious woman, covering every section of the cemetery, until, footsore and despairing, she’s back at Florence’s gravestone. She lowers herself onto her usual bench, adrenaline spent, as exhausted as she was the night her mum died. She rests her forehead in her hands. *It’s foolishness that’s led you on this goose chase*, she chastises herself. *Did you really believe that was your mum?* She sags with disappointment.

Idly, she notices a tiny cluster of bluebells, out of step with the season, pushing up through the muddy earth next to her mother’s stone. She wonders if she will ever be worthy of the grace that a reunion, real or imagined, might offer. She looks again at the misguided springtime blooms, bravely flowering despite the elements.

She hears Albert's voice: *There are things we cannot explain ...* She decides to believe.

She straightens, clears her throat.

'Mum?'

Around her, the air coalesces, surrounding her like an embrace. She looks up at the sky, low with grey clouds, brimming with promise.

Finally, they come. Flakes, fat and forgiving, land on her upturned face.

'Snow,' she says, with the wonder of a child.

The winter wind moans a response, but within it, Sandra hears another, gentler tone. And she knows the ghost she's talking to.