

'One Day'

Across the river from Edna's hotel was the town. She rarely let herself look across to the cluster of buildings that constituted it, except at night when the lights were softly glowing and the details were obscured.

Edna's hotel was called The River's Way, and she hadn't been to the town in nearly fifty years. She had Angie, after all, the young girl who helped out a couple of afternoons a week, to run to the shops for supplies. But other than that, she could usually find everything she needed in the hotel. She had a good team of staff who didn't tend to ask many questions and always kept things ticking over.

"I have no need to," is what she said to anyone asking why she never went across the river; it was the truth, really, though not the whole truth. Edna didn't believe in lies of omission; the guests did not need to know her whole life story. Besides, if she were to tell them that she had been turned out of the town by the torch-carrying villagers who held her in contempt, it might stop people visiting, and she was quite reliant on the town's tourism.

It didn't really matter that the people who lived in the town were quite foul. It didn't matter that the night when they had come for her and Catarina was still enough to make her wake up sweating.

"Yes, I am the founder of The River's Way," she would reply when asked, and she allowed pride to inflate itself a little. "We - I bought it nearly half a century ago, can you believe it? Still going strong. Of course, at first I lived in the main town, but then... well, you know how prices rise! Plus, I personally never trust someone who owns a hotel and yet does not believe it good enough to stay there."

That is what Catarina had said on the first morning after they had fled to try and reassure both of them; they were both shaking, holding each other for what felt like hours in silence. And then she had said that. Softly, quietly, in her special way, and Edna felt her heart beat finally start to ease. Catarina had always known exactly what to say to turn things into a positive.

But now, on cold mornings when the town was starting to stir and the harsh sound of it seemed to bore into Edna's ears even over the flow of the water, there was nothing to break the silence. And Edna's arms had been empty for several decades now.

"What happened to you?" the letter from her sister read; it was old and tattered, but looking at it still brought tears to Edna's eyes. "When are you coming home? We miss you. Times are changing, Eddie, I swear - you and Catarina, you should come by. It's Ma's birthday tomorrow, and I know she'd like to see you..."

When the letter had first come, Catarina, with her now aching cough and premature greying, had stroked Edna's back as she cried. Edna could still feel the touch when she scanned the blurry page. The times might have changed, but had the tides?

She wondered, with a pang, whether her sister would even recognise her now. It certainly wouldn't be her mother's birthday again any time soon. And yet...

"I'm popping out for a quick walk. I might take the canoe, you know. The sun is shining, after all, and Mr Sands said yesterday that he's seen some baby moorhens along the bank..." she said to Angie out of nowhere, taking herself by surprise.

Angie knew, of course; she always knew. She smiled gently, and raised one eyebrow.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No, I’ll... I’ll be going alone. Won’t be long, though.”

“Take as long as you need.”

The canoe was small and a bit battered, but it was Angie’s preferred mode of transport to the town, so Edna felt obliged to trust it. It wobbled slightly in the water, but Edna got herself comfortable and took some deep breaths. Already, from her lower position in the water, the gargoyles that decorated the town’s church seemed far closer and far more grotesque than she was used to.

She almost got right back out again. But then she closed her eyes, and thought of Catarina. Of her smile. Of her softness and warmth and beauty. Of how, even after everything, she maintained a sense of pity for the townspeople who had turned them out; they were only doing what they believed was right by God, she had said. She said that one day they’d come to accept them, and she’d even made Edna promise not to ignore the acceptance when it came. She had died too soon to see the promise kept, but Edna decided in that moment not to break it completely.

So, with still-shaking hands and a head swimming with what could be, Edna dropped the oars into the water, throwing the rope into the river in a sudden movement to let it trail behind her like the wedding trains they never got to have.

And, as she began to drift towards the place that had been her home in childhood, and away from the place which had been her home ever since, she felt calmer than she had in years.

That’s the way the river flows, she supposed dreamily; one day it is turbulent and fierce, and the next day it calls out to you, honey-sweet and repentant. And, when the river calls, you answer.