

A Different Version

by

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Someone coughed and two black crows took off from the branch of a nearby yew tree. The handful of mourners lifted their heads in unison and watched the startled birds as they dipped and swooped over rows of faded headstones.

“I am the resurrection and the life,” the vicar intoned, bringing eyes back to the graveside, and heads to their former respectful positions.

Only Maureen continued to observe the crows. She watched them skew and glide and spread their wings to catch the wind; and hover: for a heartbeat; before coming in to land again. They touched-down – first one, and then the other – onto a neighbouring mound, fresh-shovelled and offering up a wealth of hidden delights. More cocky than fearful now, the birds began to strike at the clayey loam as if they would pick bare the bones that lay beneath. And, all the time they stabbed and jabbed, Maureen watched; and as she watched, the hammer inside her chest boomed a thunderous accompaniment. The longer she watched, the more violent the beat became. Her head began to spin; the scene blurred, and she would surely have fallen, were it not for the steadying hand at her elbow. Maureen felt the fingers tighten and sensed, rather than saw, the ‘told you so’ look in her daughter’s adolescent eyes. ‘Didn’t I warn you?’ the look would say. ‘Didn’t I tell you to go easy on the hard stuff?’

But really, the girl knew. They both knew: Maureen could not have faced this day sober.

“We therefore commit his body to the ground...”

She snatched a lungful of air, told herself it would soon be over, and resolutely switched her attention from the crows to the proceedings at the graveside.

The coffin was beginning its slow descent into the gaping earth.

“...earth to earth...”

Maureen tried hard to focus on Reverend Timmins’ words. But a fragment of melody crept into her head and kept cutting across what he was saying.

“...ashes to ashes,” the vicar droned.

Killing me..., a voice sang in her head.

“...dust to dust,” he said.

...*softly*, the song went.

Killing me softly.

In the early days, she and Steve had clashed over that number; argued about which artist performed it best.

“Roberta Flack,” Maureen insisted, “no contest.”

But Steve had discovered another recording. A different version. By some little-known group whose name she couldn’t even recall now. And he’d preferred it to the original.

They'd spent their nights listening to both versions, debating the pros and cons of each, he pointing out a guitar riff here, a key-change there; while she applauded the purity of Roberta's vocals. They'd sing along and he'd grab his guitar. "Listen," he'd say "This is what I mean." And she'd grin and nod and tell him it was great, but that she still favoured the original. Often their disputes went on into the early hours, until, too tired to argue any more, they'd call a truce, fall into one another's arms, and agree to disagree.

The fights were harmless at that stage of their relationship: light-hearted spats that ended in laughter and blissful making-up. And the song became *their* song.

Killing me...

She felt Teresa's fingernails digging into her arm.

"Hush, Mum."

...softy

Maureen hadn't realised she'd been humming the tune aloud. She glanced around. All eyes were on her now. What were these people thinking? Did they suspect anything? She couldn't be sure.

"... in the sure and certain hope ..."

The vicar's mouth moved slowly and deliberately over each syllable, as if savouring their taste.

"...the resurrection to eternal life."

Maureen thought it a sensual mouth and wondered what it would be like to kiss.

Killing me...

Were vicars good kissers? She glanced sideways at Teresa, fearing she'd spoken the thought out loud. But this time the girl's eyes held no reproach, and her fingers rested easy in the crook of her mother's arm.

...softly

Steve was a good kisser. Had been. In the early days. Before...

The crows began to bicker. Beaks and talons clashed as they skittered upwards in a frenzy of flapping wings.

Killing me...

But it was soon over. The birds eyed one another for a moment and then settled down to continue their grisly activity.

Maureen shivered.

An easterly wind had struck up, sweeping across the graveyard and snatching at funeral garb, until coats and scarves began to flutter like crow feathers.

...softly

She had refused to wear black. Even though she knew it suited her. Steve had liked her in black; liked her skirts short, her tops tight; liked her hair upswept, her make-up pale, eyeliner dark and dramatic. But she'd chosen a different look today, picked out a softer shade for her outfit; presented a different version of herself. No crow-black widows' weeds for her, but grey, light as a pearl, with just a hint of periwinkle. 'Dove' the shop assistant had called it. That sold it for Maureen. Dove: the symbol of peace.

The vicar had stopped speaking. Teresa was scooping up a handful of soil.

Maureen stooped and followed suit. The sticky mass tumbled from her fingers and landed in a solid thump on the coffin's brass plate, obliterating part of the wording. But everyone knew what it said: 'Stephen John Stone,' it said. 'R.I.P.'

Tragic.

They all thought so. Said as much.

A life cut short.

All true. But what about *her* life?

'What about me?' she wanted to yell. 'What about what he did to me?'

Killing me...

But he couldn't touch her now. Not now. Thank God.

"Merciful God..." The vicar was winding up.

Maureen heard a sob. She looked around. Dry eyes stared back. Teresa's grip tightened. "Hush, Mum."

"Amen," the vicar said.

...softly

It began to rain: fine weeping drizzle, bringing with it a swirling mist and a drop in temperature. Having paid their last respects, the shivering mourners shuffled backwards and started to drift away. Maureen watched them go: heads down, collars up; a few umbrellas bloomed, the movements disturbing the birds again. Up they flew, crying out their protest as they soared. "Haw-haw. Haw-haw."

Maureen hated that crow-call. It sounded like laughter; the cruel and mocking kind.

Steve had laughed that first time she'd had too much to drink. Not mocking. Not then. She'd been out with some workmates. They'd gone to hear a new band on the scene. Steve was the lead guitarist. There'd been a party afterwards but Maureen wasn't used to alcohol. Steve had called her a lightweight and taken her home. He'd quite a following in those days; could have had his pick. That night, he picked her.

Killing me...

Reverend Timmins took her hand.

"God bless you, Maureen," he murmured,

...softly

Maureen looked at the hand holding hers. She'd be willing to bet it had never once been raised in anger. She held on, wanting to keep him there, needing to say something. She opened her mouth to speak, searching for the right words, saw the vicar's expression change, and knew he'd smelt the whisky on her.

Killing me...

Maureen let go his hand. "Thank you," she said.

...softly

And left it at that.

The drinking had been fun at first; gave her a warm, floating feeling; broke down her inhibitions; let her be who she wanted to be; who Steve wanted her to be. But as time went by, things changed. *She* changed. And so did he. The drink made her weak; made *him* brutal.

Teresa clung to her mother's arm, leading her away. The funeral cars were beginning to leave.

She'd threatened to leave. After that first time.

Killing me...

But he begged her to stay. "It won't happen again, babe," he said.

...softly

"I swear it won't happen again."

And it didn't. Not for months. And when it did, it was her fault. She'd antagonised him he said. She always antagonised him.

Maureen watched the cars out of sight until only one remained. A few more steps and she'd made it.

There'd be no wake afterwards. No one to drink to his memory. None to keep her company while they chewed the fat and harked back to better times. There wasn't a soul to commiserate and regret her loss. Only Teresa. And she was just a kid.

Maureen slipped her arm around her daughter. "You ok, love?" Teresa's face, so like her father's in profile, betrayed no emotion. But Maureen worried about the girl; about how she would cope with what had happened. She was at an impressionable age. It was bound to leave scars.

Teresa had been the cause of that last row. Steve was playing a local gig and

she and the girl had tagged along for the ride. There'd been a new drummer in the band. Young. Not bad looking if you ignored the acne and the piercings. Teresa had taken a shine to him. She was growing up. They'd got talking during the break. No harm in it. Just a couple of kids having a laugh. But Steve didn't like it.

"Keep an eye on her!" he'd ordered.

She ought to have seen the warning signs: the mean set of his mouth, the contempt in his eyes. "What kind of a mother...?" Trouble was, she never learnt. And she laughed. Told him to relax and have another drink. Antagonising, see?

“Come on, Mum,” Teresa said. “Let’s go home,”

Steve didn’t come home. Not that night. It was late morning before he showed, and the drink was still on him.

“Bitch,” he’d yelled, and more besides.

The neighbours heard it; said so at the inquest. They’d heard the screams too.

Killing me...killing me...killing me...

And the silence.

...softly

Self-defence. That’s what everyone assumed. Even the coroner. Well, there was no denying the injuries, was there?

“Bitch,” he’d yelled as he struck out. “Bitch,” as his fist found its target, breaking her nose, and sending her sprawling.

And, one minute he’d been towering high above her, looking down on where she’d fallen, the next he was lying beside her, his lifeblood staining her floorboards.

And there, gazing down on them both, Teresa, the bone-handled kitchen knife still in her hand.

Killing me...

softly

They’d got it wrong, those people. The chain of events was not as it seemed.

Same story; different version. But Maureen didn’t mind. In fact, she preferred it to the original.

There was no sign of the crows as the last two mourners passed through the lychgate and out into the circling mist. The funeral car was waiting. The driver held the door open and they both got in. It was over. They were going home.

Maureen sucked in a lungful of air. She closed her eyes, leant back on the seat’s cushioned head-rest and gave herself up to the enveloping warmth of the car’s interior. She breathed again; more easily this time, and began to relax as she listened to the rain drumming a steady rhythm on the roof overhead.

The tempo changed.

A fragment of melody crept into her head.

Killing me...

She began to hum.

...softly.