

# Ammonites

I wouldn't have attempted to find Old Becca had she not started to inhabit my dreams. I never attend reunions or Google anyone's fate, but when her face pressed at the window and stared me awake, I decided to break my rule. She had been my favourite teacher after all, and I'd often wondered what had become of her.

When surfing her whereabouts had drawn a blank, I wrote to her at the school c/o of the secretary, marking the envelope for redirection. In the months that followed, Old Becca continued to watch me from the window, calling into my sleep.

While it was 'Miss Lucas' to her face, we all called her 'Old Becca'. She looked way older than the other teachers. It wasn't the grey hair and tweed made her ancient, mind: it was her voice. There was a fluttering in her ribcage when she spoke, as though she kept doves in her lungs. And there was a reticence that suggested an agonised secret — an unhappy love affair that had left her forever bereft was our best guess. We could imagine no finer pain.

Old Becca took us for History and English. She was extraordinary, and we all loved her. Everything was so vivid: she taught poems as though she had penned them, wars as though she had fought in them. There was no lesson more exquisite than the flourish of an Elizabethan sonnet unleashed from her sleeve. Her veins carried the verses from her wrist to the blackboard in a stream of chalk; we copied the lines into our exercise books and learnt them until they circulated in our blood. During her classes, the air would fill with the dust from thundering hoofs and with the cries of condemned traitors as they mounted the scaffold.

No wonder, half-a-century on from our farewell hug, I so desired to see her again, and perhaps even discover the source of her sadness.

For a year I heard nothing. I cursed my inertia and gave her up for dead. Almost a year later, I returned from a summer holiday in Cornwall to find a brief note on the mat. It was in Old Becca's hand, inviting me to her home in the middle of Purbeck nowhere. She suggested a Sunday in mid-October and I wrote back to say I looked forward to seeing her.

I journeyed down from my home in the Midlands through fierce storms. As I neared my destination, the car was buffeted like a kayak along the sunken lanes. I took a sharp turn in the rain-lashed dusk and came to a halt by a stone cottage at the edge of a quarry.

I killed the lights and stepped out of the car, slithering over the white clay to knock at a swollen oak door.

Old Becca appeared in the porch, wearing a bright green cardigan covered in crumbs. Smiling in welcome, she looked even older than I had expected. Yet if her frame seemed frail, the creases in her face made her countenance seem strangely solid.

‘Hello, Miss Lucas.’

‘Miranda,’ she said, taking my hands in hers, ‘do come in.’

She bolted the door on to the night and bade me follow her along a flagstone passage past a row of gamy coats into a cold, bare room. She gestured to a collapsed armchair with clumps of horsehair poking from its leather. ‘Please, make yourself comfortable.’

Before sitting, I reached into my pocket. ‘I’ve brought you something.’

‘Thank you. How kind!’ She took the fist-sized gift, and carefully unwrapped the red tissue-paper.

‘An ammonite! Bless you. It’s a very fine one,’ she said, placing it on the mantelpiece above the unlit fire. ‘I shall treasure it. Do you remember the massive one I showed you? I gave it to our local museum.’

‘You remember showing me that ammonite?’

‘Of course.... Now, before we settle... how about some vodka?’

Becca placed in my hand a crystal tumbler like a fragment from a giant chandelier. ‘To Providence in all its manifestations!’ she said, raising her glass, her voice less fluttering doves than the rasp of shingle on a deeply-shelved beach.

‘To Providence!’ I took a sip, noticing again how old my host had grown. Her whittled face was thickly folded and her furrowed hands, so familiar from the years they had returned our homework, were magnificently foxed.

‘It’s good to see you again, Miranda. But it’s a chilly night. We’d best warm the place up a bit....’

Old Becca lit the fire, and muttered something about how she was planning to write her memoirs. The wood on the grate hissed and the flames sent spiders trickling over the smouldering logs. ‘It’s hard to start writing one’s life. But the thing is,’ she said, ‘when you get old, you burn to tell.’

As we talked into the fire I found myself recalling the autumn afternoon I had climbed the arthritic staircase to Old Becca’s classroom.

‘Have you ever seen one of these, Miranda?’ She opened a cupboard and lifted out a massive stone the shape of a slice of Swiss roll, as thick as an arm and the size of a dinner plate.

I stroked the object’s ridges, enchanted. ‘It’s beautiful. What is it?’

‘It’s an ammonite.’

‘An ammonite? What’s it for?’

'It's not "for" anything, but it has much to teach us, especially about time.' As I listened to Old Becca explain how it had once swum in seas 150 million years before, I kept saying 'ammonite' to myself. Over and over: the word was a gift, just as the object was a miracle.

Then Old Becca took me outside and showed me a sycamore tree. It was shedding its seeds in the wind. They looked like desiccated tadpoles.

'If anyone ever tells you poetry is an abstraction that has nothing to do with life, do this!' So saying, she flung handfuls of seeds into the sky and recited lines from Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind'. I imitated her and threw dozens of the helicopters as high into the air as I could. They circled in gusts across the lawn.

'I recall the afternoon very well,' said Old Becca. 'I could see you were truly absorbed, Miranda.'

'I was. You detonated the word "ammonite" along with hundreds of other words: "Elysian, incandescent, pentimento, insouciance".... When you said I'd remember "intimations of immortality" all my life, you were right. You were inspirational....'

Old Becca smiled. 'I was just doing my job.'

We talked about the other teachers. Since retirement Old Becca had kept herself to herself; she had not kept in touch with any of them. I was struck by her archaic and lonely manner of speaking. And it seemed unlikely she uttered her bookish, old-fashioned phrases to many people.

'Top up, Miranda?' Old Becca swayed over with the vodka bottle and filled my crumpled glass. 'Now where was I? ...Ah yes, after the war I came to England, thinking I might teach for a while. That while became my life....'

We talked more about school and the pupils we remembered. We wondered what had happened to all those young lives.

'And you, Miranda? Tell me what you do.'

'I'm a music teacher.'

'Music?'

'Yes, I teach the cello.'

'How marvellous! Music teaching is a noble calling. The world needs people to express the mystery of life.... Do you have children?'

'No, I wanted them but I couldn't have them.'

Old Becca sighed. 'I'm sorry.'

'It's all right.'

Old Becca knelt down and prestidigitated a bottle of vodka from the sideboard.

'I keep an alembic in my pantry, Miranda. You see, as heir to the throne of the Kingdom of Poland, I have a special dispensation.'

Judging her royal pretension a harmless delusion, I raised my glass to toast the Polish crown. Then Old Becca said in a hieratic tone, 'I would speak to you now about a thing whereof no one knows.'

It was shortly before dawn when she was done telling. My face was wet with tears.

'Miranda,' she said, 'you are the only person I've ever spoken with about this.... It has helped enormously. More than you can know.'

'I'm glad,' I said.

She squeezed my hand. 'It's time to turn in. You'd best sleep here after all that vodka. Will the sofa and blankets do you?'

I nodded. 'I'll be fine.'

With eyes flickering like pilot-lights, Old Becca took my hand and raised it to her lips. 'Sweet dreams, Miranda. It was very good of you to come.'

Rain and vodka kept me from sleep. As did Old Becca's face and the remembered words: incandescence, Elysian, intimations, ammonite — and a word quite new to my mouth, a word I had admitted that to my shame I'd never heard of. 'Very few people have, Miranda,' she'd said. 'There's so much ignorance still.' She seemed to speak directly from her lungs, her voice bypassing her larynx.

From the sofa I watched the storm thrash the windows. My gaze strayed to the ammonite on the mantelpiece, and again I wept. Old Becca's whole family had perished in the word Sobibor.

## **Rolf Venner**

1<sup>st</sup> Prize in the Short Story Category

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