

Bury St. Edmunds, UK
Harriet's Tea Room

26 February 2003
Chilly winds

It was a dark sunny day, the kind of late to which I am prone. I sat on a bench in the Bury gardens feeding the doves and squirrels. I didn't feel too good about things, rather down and out. A man sat on the bench beside and began to speak. He was 90 years old.

As he spoke, I studied the delicate lines in his face; the deep wide eyebrows; the glassiness of his eyes, the pauses, as he searched for the words, the way he gracefully clasped his hands on his lap. This man, who'd lived twice as long as me, lost his wife three years ago – after 67 years of marriage. He spoke of how they'd met in N. Yorkshire and that he couldn't really recall any argument they'd ever had.

And so, the pages of a man's life opened to me and so much beauty and sadness fell out. He said, "You don't realize things in life until you bury someone more important than yourself." He stopped at this point, trying to compose himself. His wool coat was pulled to his chin and a knitted gray cap pulled over his ears. He rubbed his hands often; dry and sandpapery, but beautiful in grace. His milky blue eyes scanned the gardens and the doves at my feet eating the seeds.

He said, "Can you imagine life without birds?" He paused, rubbed his hands together and coughed. "Use to be a lot of nightingales in Suffolk. When I was young, I used to like to sit here." I interrupted him, "Here, in these gardens?" He patted the seat. "Yes, right where you're sitting. I'd come in the hot summer evenings, around 1923, or so. I was really young then. I came to hear all the nightingales sing."

He scanned the gardens, the trees, remembering, his eyes teary but bright.

“When the last war came (WWII), they all left. Must have been the planes that scared them away, or the rockets thrown over from Germany.” He paused to look in places and remember, nodding in affirmation of what he’d seen. “My wife thought the war probably killed most of the nightingales. They don’t exist anywhere else but here. If they couldn’t live here...”

He said other things that were quite nice. “If people were more friendly in the world, things would be much better.” Also, in relation to war or to life, “If you’re lucky to be a survivor – you got to learn to appreciate that.” And, “You got to know what’s worth fighting for and stick to it.” And, “If you got money, don’t just stick it in the bank – live a little.” We laughed.

Also, “If you got friends, you’ll always be all right.” He spoke more but at times his strong accent made it difficult to understand. But I was mesmerized by the light that shone from his eyes and his belief in what he had said. He grew quiet and then asked, “A war is coming, isn’t it?” I told him I thought so. He said, “The protesters in London, I hope they realize the wrong they have done – defending someone like Saddam.” He shook his head. “They should have lived in London when the rockets were flying.”

He fell quiet, then he whispered as he watched a flock of doves fly over, “No one remembers, anymore.” He stood, shook my hand, and said he had to ‘catch the bus.’ He had a car, but walking kept his diabetes and arthritis in check. His hands were soft and warm, underneath. I looked at the blue veins. ‘History of a life passing through me,’ I thought. I watched his slow awkward gait as he moved toward the Abbey Gate. I knew then, that I too wanted, someday, to be old.

I thought of how lonely his house must be with his wife gone. How his eyes filled with tears at the mention of her name. The love in his voice. I looked out at

the gardens, where he'd come to listen to the nightingales on summer nights over seventy-five years ago.

Where did the nightingales go when the war came? Or did they just not sing anymore? I never thought of what happens to birds in war. I was busy thinking about me, and the war to come.

Now I know everything will soon change and I, too, will survive. I will find a way to appreciate even that.

