

The Locarno

Lucy Hamilton

She stood by the Locarno, looking out of place in her all-black ensemble. It had been a Sainsbury's and was now a Budgens, but she remembered it as a dance hall. She'd met Ernie here sixty-five years ago – she'd tell Hannah that when she got here – how even without her glasses on, she'd known immediately that she loved him.

Valerie wore all-black these days because if death was coming, she might as well wear something fitting. So far, death had kept her waiting, but any day now she would meet it.

These days, she was used to waiting, if not for death, then for some visitor. Or for Adam, who cut the grass, though she kept telling him not to bother.

When Ernie had died, 6 years back, she'd thought a broken heart would take her. But it hadn't. And so, she'd waited then too, reading up on common symptoms. It was technically possible, said her doctor, though he'd said it was unlikely; in most cases, they assured her, the prognosis was a fortnight.

She'd tried hard to prove them wrong. In the weeks and months that followed, she'd surrounded herself with painful things, photographs of Ernie: the two of them away at Thoresby Hall or feeding squirrels down at Troway. She dug trinkets out of boxes she hadn't peered inside for years. She filled the mantelpiece, telling visitors: 'Ernie bought me that,' when he hadn't, and would look away teary-eyed while they told her how much they also missed him. They tried to force her to be cheerful; he wouldn't want them to sit here moping – cheery words to keep her heart intact, though she willed it not to listen.

But it seemed to listen, regardless, and still, death kept her waiting, her heart refusing to break no matter how hard she provoked it.

And then a strange shift seemed to happen. No sooner had she accepted that she might have to go on living, than the others in her life seemed to decide the end was nearing. Endless visitors, who had initially come to pay respects to Ernie, now seemed to feel obliged instead to come and see her while she lasted.

They'd drag her out to Millhouses to gaze nostalgically at duck ponds, reminiscing about the lido, and guzzling tea from polystyrene. As she'd reach to sip the scalding liquid, they'd say: 'It's hot, Nan! Can you manage?' Like Death himself was lurking beneath the lid, doing backstroke across the surface.

But death no longer frightened her, if anything, it was annoying. Always showing up when you weren't prepared and staying away when it would be welcomed.

So, she wore black to coax it out and had begun to visit graveyards. If her days were really numbered, she might as well pick out a good spot.

Today was one such visit. Ernie was buried in St Mary's. Her granddaughter, Hannah, had insisted she come with her. As Valerie waited – she was always waiting! – she sniffed the flowers in Budgens, but the selection was insulting to one whose heart was really breaking.

And yet, apparently not quite broken. It was alarmingly resilient. What troubled her wasn't that she hadn't loved him enough but that others might begin to question it. They knew that Ernie had loved *her*, of course – like a duty that should be honoured, like the Saturday morning shop and in the washing-up of dishes. It was the kind of love that Hannah would never know, let alone experience, because she didn't know where to look and wouldn't recognise it if she found it.

Valerie paused. Maybe that was it – *exactly* what she needed – one final glimpse of real, old-fashioned love before it vanished. She stepped back out into the drizzle and stared up at the Locarno, without her glasses she could imagine the sign still read: 'Mecca Dancing'. She scanned the street looking for love – not for herself but in the ways of others, in gestures and in glances, enduring like the dance hall.

If her heart could glimpse true love just one more time, that would surely be enough to break it. No more waiting, maybe just a second or two, but then blissful, velvet darkness.

She sighed. Where was Hannah? Perhaps she'd gone straight to the churchyard. She'd sounded only vaguely interested in seeing where her Nan had met her Grandad. Valerie turned to leave, smiling sadly at that corner where Ernie had once stood waiting, where her life had changed forever.

Two young women had paused to cross the road and were exchanging playful insults. The tallest of the pair was grinning, self-conscious with the attention, as the other looked up adoringly, the way that she'd once looked at Ernie.

That woman was Hannah, who'd begun waving in her Nan's direction. The pair glanced sideways at the traffic, scanning left to right in tandem.

But as traffic split and they crossed towards her, Hannah's smile suddenly faded.

'Nan?' She stammered, 'Nan, can you hear me...? Nan! Do we need to call a doctor?'