

Passing Presence



Sitting in the Old Church during a quiet afternoon, Giles was experiencing a deep sense of peace. The churchyard was mercifully quiet, with no small children playing around the pathways nor older people romping about smoking and drinking in the Garden of Remembrance.

He had been wanting to spend some time alone for several reasons, but mostly it was coming up to the anniversary of his wife Ellen's death and he had been aware that everyone had told him to get on with his life, and indeed he had started to forget things. He had started to forget birthdays, anniversaries, special times spent together in the long-distant past. This was what everyone suggested in order to reclaim his individuality and start afresh, but Giles also knew that it had left him with a feeling of guilt.

The guilt was, everyone said, a natural experience, but one that needed to be overcome before he could start to move on to a new life. What new life? As he sat in the church silently and patiently experiencing the hum of noise from the surrounding activities on the roads, Giles realised that not only did he not have a new life, but he actually didn't want one either. What was wrong with the one he had already got?

After all, he was experiencing a real sense of continuity with the past. Giles reflected that his life hadn't changed when Ellen died. It continued, with their relationship deepening and flourishing. He was as aware of her today as he had ever been, and although she couldn't speak to him, he found that this was not a barrier to communication. He could speak to her and remember her words and her responses, and enjoy them now just as much as in the past. Things had changed, yes, but also, things were very much the same, despite the changes.

The afternoon was wearing on and Giles had heard the Edward Betham School Clock ring the hours, starting at 1pm, as he arrived and now it had just rung 4pm with its light clanging tone. The light was slowly dying and, he knew, soon it would be time to go home and leave the church for another day. The sun was shining sharply through the church windows and making the window and furniture cast a shadow across the aisle. Giles sat staring at the window on the north side and contemplating the little group of candles twinkling away on the windowsill. His eyes starting to close and the heaviness of sleep made itself known. Struggling to keep his eyes open, Giles was suddenly startled by a movement in the sunlight. He looked around. Nobody else was in the church, but he felt very strongly that had been aware of a form, a figure, and that of a woman, pass by and although he didn't see who it was, he did see a shadow move across the line of sunshine, clearly outlined on the wall of the church between the rows of chairs.

Giles was startled? Yes, but not frightened. The atmosphere in the church grew warm and he felt an intense calm, a feeling of contentment which gave him renewed energy. Giles now knew that it was time to go home, time to go out and perhaps do some shopping on his way home, time to invite friends round and cook a meal, time to enjoy, time to be himself or perhaps take steps to rediscover who he was again, after more than forty years of marriage and all that means in moulding together two individuals into one item.

The peace of that afternoon remained with Giles for the rest of his life.

Neil Richardson