

# Major Pettigrew's Last Stand Chapter 1

Major Pettigrew was still upset about the phone call from his brother's wife and so he answered the doorbell without thinking. On the damp bricks of the path stood Mrs. Ali from the village shop. She gave only the faintest of starts, the merest arch of an eyebrow. A quick rush of embarrassment flooded to the Major's cheeks and he smoothed helplessly at the lap of his crimson, -clematis--covered housecoat with hands that felt like spades.

"Ah," he said.

"Major?"

"Mrs. Ali?" There was a pause that seemed to expand slowly, like the universe, which, he had just read, was pushing itself apart as it aged. "Senescence," they had called it in the Sunday paper.

"I came for the newspaper money. The paper boy is sick," said Mrs. Ali, drawing up her short frame to its greatest height and assuming a brisk tone, so different from the low, accented roundness of her voice when they discussed the texture and perfume of the teas she blended specially for him.

“Of course, I’m awfully sorry.” He had forgotten to put the week’s money in an envelope under the outside doormat. He started fumbling for the pockets of his trousers, which were somewhere under the clematis. He felt his eyes watering. His pockets were inaccessible unless he hoisted the hem of the housecoat. “I’m sorry,” he repeated.

“Oh, not to worry,” she said, backing away. “You can drop it in at the shop later—sometime more convenient.” She was already turning away when he was seized with an urgent need to explain.

“My brother died,” he said. She turned back. “My brother died,” he repeated. “I got the call this morning. I -didn’t have time.” The dawn chorus had still been chattering in the giant yew against the west wall of his cottage, the sky pink, when the telephone rang. The Major, who had been up early to do his weekly housecleaning, now realized he had been sitting in a daze ever since. He gestured helplessly at his strange outfit and wiped a hand across his face. Quite suddenly his knees felt loose and he could sense the blood leaving his head. He felt his shoulder meet the doorpost unexpectedly and Mrs. Ali, quicker than his eye could follow, was somehow at his side propping him upright.

“I think we’d better get you indoors and sitting down,” she said, her voice soft with concern. “If you will allow me, I will fetch you some water.” Since most of the feeling seemed to have left his extremities, the Major had no choice but to comply. Mrs. Ali guided him across the narrow, uneven stone floor of the hallway and deposited him in the wing chair tucked just inside the door of the bright, -book--lined living room. It was his least favorite chair, lumpy cushioned and with a hard ridge of wood at just the wrong place on the back of his head, but he was in no position to complain.

“I found the glass on the draining board,” said Mrs. Ali, presenting him with the thick tumbler in which he soaked his partial bridgework at night. The faint hint of spearmint made him gag. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Yes, much better,” he said, his eyes swimming with tears. “It’s very kind of you . . .”

“May I prepare you some tea?” Her offer made him feel frail and pitiful.

“Thank you,” he said. Anything to get her out of the room while he recovered some semblance of vigor and got rid of the housecoat.

It was strange, he thought, to listen again to a woman clattering teacups in the kitchen. On the mantelpiece his wife, Nancy, smiled from her photo, her wavy brown hair tousled, and her freckled nose slightly pink with sunburn. They had gone to Dorset in May of that rainy year, probably 1973, and a burst of sunlight had briefly brightened the windy afternoon; long enough for him to capture her, waving like a young girl from the battlements of Corfe Castle. Six years she had been gone. Now Bertie was gone, too. They had left him all alone, the last family member of his generation. He clasped his hands to still a small tremor.

Of course there was Marjorie, his unpleasant -sister--in--law; but, like his late parents, he had never fully accepted her. She had loud, -ill--formed opinions and a north country accent that scraped the eardrum like a dull razor. He hoped she would not look for any increase in familiarity now. He would ask her for a recent photo and, of course, Bertie’s sporting gun. Their father had made it clear when he divided the pair between

his sons that they were to be restored in the event of death, in order to be passed along intact within the family. The Major's own gun had lain solitary all these years in the double walnut box, a depression in the velvet lining indicating the absence of its mate. Now they would be restored to their full value—around a hundred thousand pounds, he imagined. Not that he would ever dream of selling. For a moment he saw himself quite clearly at the next shoot, perhaps on one of the riverside farms that were always plagued with rabbits, coming up to the invited group, bearing the pair of guns casually broken over his arm.

“Good God, Pettigrew, is that a pair of Churchills?” someone would say—perhaps Lord Dagenham himself, if he was shooting with them that day—and he would casually look, as if he had forgotten, and reply,

“Yes, matched pair. Rather lovely walnut they used when these were made,” offering them up for inspection and admiration.

A rattling against the doorjamb startled him out of this pleasant interlude. It was Mrs. Ali with a heavy tea tray. She had taken off her green wool coat and draped her paisley shawl around the shoulders of a plain navy dress, worn over narrow black trousers. The Major realized that he had never seen Mrs. Ali without the large, stiff apron she always wore in the shop.

“Let me help you with that.” He began to rise from the chair.

“Oh, I can manage perfectly well,” she said, and brought the tray to the nearby desk, nudging the small stack of leather books aside with one corner. “You must rest. You're probably in shock.”

“It was unexpected, the telephone ringing so absurdly early. Not even six o'clock, you know. I believe they were all night at the hospital.”

“It was unexpected?”

“Heart attack. Quite massive apparently.” He brushed a hand over his bristled mustache, in thought. “Funny, somehow you expect them to save heart attack victims these days. Always seem to on television.” Mrs. Ali wobbled the spout of the teapot against a cup rim. It made a loud chonk and the Major feared a chip. He recollected (too late) that her husband had also died of a heart attack. It was perhaps eighteen months or two years now. “I'm sorry, that was thoughtless—” She interrupted him with a sympathetic wave of dismissal and continued to pour. “He was a good man, your husband,” he added.

What he remembered most clearly was the large, quiet man's restraint. Things had not been altogether smooth after Mr. Ali took over old Mrs. Bridge's village shop. On at least two occasions the Major had seen Mr. Ali, on a crisp spring morning, calmly scraping spray paint from his new plate glass windows. Several times, Major Pettigrew had been in the store when young boys on a dare would stick their enormous ears in the door to yell “Pakis go home!” Mr. Ali would only shake his head and smile while the Major would bluster and stammer apologies. The furor eventually died down. The same small boys slunk into the store at nine o'clock at night when their mothers ran out of milk. The most stubborn of the local working men got tired of driving four miles in the rain to buy their national lottery tickets at an “English” shop. The upper echelons of the

village, led by the ladies of the various village committees, compensated for the rudeness of the lower by developing a widely advertised respect for Mr. and Mrs. Ali. The Major had heard many a lady proudly speak of “our dear Pakistani friends at the shop” as proof that Edgecombe St. Mary was a utopia of multicultural understanding.

When Mr. Ali died, everyone had been appropriately upset. The village council, on which the Major sat, had debated a memorial service of some kind, and when that fell through (neither the parish church nor the pub being suitable) they had sent a very large wreath to the funeral home.

“I am sorry I did not have an opportunity to meet your lovely wife,” said Mrs. Ali, handing him a cup.

“Yes, she’s been gone some six years now,” he said. “Funny -really, it seems like both an eternity and the blink of an eye all at the same time.”

“It is very dislocating,” she said. Her crisp enunciation, so lacking among many of his village neighbors, struck him with the purity of a -well--tuned bell. “Sometimes my husband feels as close to me as you are now, and sometimes I am quite alone in the universe,” she added.

“You have family, of course.”

“Yes, quite an extended family.” He detected a dryness in her tone. “But it is not the same as the infinite bond between a husband and wife.”

“You express it perfectly,” he said. They drank their tea and he felt a sense of wonder that Mrs. Ali, out of the context of her shop and in the strange setting of his own living room, should be revealed as a woman of such great understanding. “About the housecoat,” he said.

“Housecoat?”

“The thing I was wearing.” He nodded to where it now lay in a basket of National Geographics. “It was my wife’s favorite housecleaning attire. Sometimes I, well . . .”

“I have an old tweed jacket that my husband used to wear,” she said softly. “Sometimes I put it on and take a walk around my garden. And sometimes I put his pipe in my mouth to taste the bitterness of his tobacco.” She flushed a warmer shade and lowered her deep brown eyes to the floor, as if she had said too much. The Major noticed the smoothness of her skin and the strong lines of her face.

“I still have some of my wife’s clothes, too,” said the Major. “After six years, I don’t know if they still smell of her perfume or whether I just imagine it.” He wanted to tell her how he sometimes opened the closet door to thrust his face against the nubby suits and the smooth chiffon blouses. Mrs. Ali looked up at him and behind her -heavy--lidded eyes he thought she too might be thinking of such absurd things.

“Are you ready for more tea?” she asked and held out her hand for his cup.

When Mrs. Ali had left, she making her excuses for having invited herself into his home and he making his apologies for inconveniencing her with his dizzy spell, the Major donned his housecoat once more and went back to the small scullery beyond the kitchen to finish cleaning his gun. He was conscious of tightness around his head and a slight burn in the throat. This was the dull ache of grief in the real world; more dyspepsia than passion.

He had left a small china cup of mineral oil warming on its candle stand. He dipped his fingers in the hot oil and began to rub it slowly into the burlled walnut root of the gun stock. The wood became silk under his fingertips. He relaxed into his task and felt his grief ease, making room for the tiniest flowering of a new curiosity.

Mrs. Ali was, he half suspected, an educated woman, a person of culture. Nancy had been such a rare person, too, fond of her books and of little chamber concerts in village churches. But she had left him alone to endure the blunt tweedy concerns of the other women of their acquaintance. Women who talked horses and raffles at the hunt ball and who delighted in clucking over which unreliable young mother from the council cottages had messed up arrangements for this week's play group at the Village Hall. Mrs. Ali was more like Nancy. She was a butterfly to their scuffle of pigeons. He acknowledged a notion that he might wish to see Mrs. Ali again outside of the shop, and wondered whether this might be proof that he was not as ossified as his -sixty--eight years, and the limited opportunities of village life, might suggest.

Bolstered by the thought, he felt that he was up to the task of phoning his son, Roger, in London. He wiped his fingertips on a soft yellow rag and peered with concentration at the innumerable chrome buttons and LED displays of the cordless phone, a present from Roger. Its speed dial and voice activation capabilities were, Roger said, useful for the elderly. Major Pettigrew disagreed on both its ease of use and the designation of himself as old. It was frustratingly common that children were no sooner gone from the nest and established in their own homes, in Roger's case a gleaming -black--and--brass--decorated penthouse in a -high--rise that blighted the Thames near Putney, than they began to infantilize their own parents and wish them dead, or at least in assisted living. It was all very Greek, the Major thought. With an oily finger, he managed to depress the button marked "1—Roger Pettigrew, VP, Chelsea Equity Partners," which Roger had filled in with large, childlike print. Roger's private equity firm occupied two floors in a tall glass office tower in London's Docklands; as the phone rang with a metallic ticking sound, the Major imagined Roger in his unpleasantly sterile cubicle with the battery of computer monitors and the heap of files for which some very expensive architect had not bothered to provide drawers.

Roger had already heard.

"Jemima has taken on the -call--making. The girl's hysterical, but there she is, calling everyone and his dog."

"It helps to keep busy," suggested the Major.

"More like wallowing in the whole -bereaved--daughter role, if you ask me," said Roger. "It's a bit off, but then they've always been that way, haven't they?" His voice was muffled and the Major assumed this meant he was once again eating at his desk.

"That's unnecessary, Roger," he said firmly. Really, his son was becoming as unedited as Marjorie's family. The city was full of blunt, arrogant young men these days and Roger, approaching thirty, showed few signs of evolving past their influence.

"Sorry, Dad. I'm very sorry about Uncle Bertie." There was a pause. "I'll always remember when I had chicken pox and he came over with that model plane kit. He stayed all day helping me glue all those tiny bits of balsa together."

“As I recall you broke it against the window the next day, after you’d been warned against flying it indoors.”

“Yeah, and you used it as kindling for the kitchen stove.”

“It was broken to pieces. No sense in wasting it.” The memory was quite familiar to them both. The same story came up over and over at family parties. Sometimes it was told as a joke and they all laughed. Sometimes it was a cautionary lecture to Jemima’s willful son. Today the hint of reproach was showing along the seams.

“Will you come down the night before?” asked the Major.

“No, I’ll take the train. But listen, Dad, don’t wait for me. It’s possible I might get stuck.”

“Stuck?”

“I’m swamped. There’s a big flap on. Two billion dollars, tricky buyout of the corporate bonds—and the client’s nervous. I mean, let me know when it’s finalized, and it’ll go in my calendar as a ‘must,’ but you never know.” The Major wondered how he was usually featured in his son’s calendar. He imagined himself flagged with a small yellow sticky note—important but not time sensitive, perhaps.

**The funeral was set for Tuesday.**

“It seemed good for most people,” Marjorie said on her second call. “Jemima has her evening class on Mondays and Wednesdays and I have a bridge tournament on Thursday night.”

“Bertie would want you to carry on,” the Major replied, feeling a slight acid tone creep into his voice. He was sure the funeral had also been scheduled around available beauty appointments. She would want to make sure her stiff wave of yellow hair was freshly sculpted and her skin toned or waxed—or whatever she did to achieve a face like stretched leather. “I suppose Friday is out?” he added.

He had just made a doctor’s appointment for Tuesday. The receptionist at the surgery had been very understanding given the circumstances and had immediately insisted on moving a perennially asthmatic child to Friday in order to squeeze in his EKG. He -didn’t like the idea of canceling.

“The Vicar has -Youth--in--Crisis.”

“I assume the youth are in crisis every week,” said the Major sharply. “It’s a funeral, for God’s sake. Let them put the needs of others ahead of their own for once. It might teach them something.”

“The funeral director felt that Fridays were inappropriately festive for a funeral.”

“Oh . . .” He was rendered speechless and defeated by the absurdity. “Well, I’ll see you Tuesday, then, about four o’clock?”

“Yes. Is Roger going to drive you?”

“No, he’ll come straight from London by train and take a taxi. I’ll drive.”

“Are you sure you’ll be all right?” asked Marjorie. She sounded quite genuinely concerned and the Major felt a rush of emotion for her. She too was alone now, of course. He was sorry he had felt so furious at her and assured her gently that he was quite able to drive himself.

“And you’ll come back to the house afterward, of course. We’ll have drinks and a few nibbles. Nothing elaborate.” He noticed she did not ask him to stay. He would have to drive home in the dark. His empathy shriveled away again. “And perhaps there is something of Bertie’s you’d like to have. You must have a look.”

“That’s extremely thoughtful of you,” he said trying to dampen the eagerness that brightened his voice. “Actually I was meaning to talk to you about that at some appropriate time.”

“Well, of course,” she said. “You must have some small token, some memento. Bertie would have insisted. There are some quite new shirts he never wore . . . Anyway, I’ll have a think.”

When he hung up the phone it was with a feeling of despair. She truly was a horrible woman. He sighed for poor Bertie and wondered whether he had ever regretted his choice. Perhaps he had not given the matter much attention. No one -really contemplates death when making these life decisions, thought the Major. If they did, what different choices might they make?

It was only a □twenty-□minute drive from Edgecombe St. Mary to the nearby seaside town of □Hazelbourne-□on-□Sea where Bertie and Marjorie lived. The town was a commercial hub for half the county and always busy with shoppers and tourists, so the Major had made careful calculations as to traffic on the bypass, possible parking difficulties in the narrow streets by the church, time required to accept condolences. He had determined to be on the road no later than one thirty. Yet here he was sitting in the car, in front of his house, unmoving. He could feel the blood flowing, slow as lava, through his body. It seemed as if his insides might be melting; his fingers were already boneless. He could exert no pressure on the steering wheel. He worked to quell his panic with a series of deep breaths and sharp exhales. It was not possible that he should miss his own brother’s funeral and yet it was equally impossible to turn the ignition key. He wondered briefly whether he was dying. Pity, □really, that it □hadn’t happened yesterday. They could have buried him with Bertie and saved everyone the trouble of coming out twice.

There was a knock on the car window and he turned his head as if in a dream to see Mrs. Ali looking anxious. He took a deep breath and managed to land his fingers on the power window button. He had been a reluctant convert to the mania for power everything. Now he was glad there was no handle to crank.

“Are you all right, Major?” she asked.

“I think so,” he said. “I was just catching my breath. Off to the funeral, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” she said, “but you’re very pale. Are you all right to drive?”

“Hardly a choice, my dear lady,” he said. “Brother of the deceased.”

“Perhaps you’d better step out and get some fresh air for a minute,” she suggested. “I have some cold ginger ale here that might do you good.” She was carrying a small basket in which he could see the bright sheen of a green apple, a slightly oily paper bag that suggested cakes, and a tall green bottle.

“Yes, perhaps for a minute,” he agreed, and stepped from the car. The basket, it turned out, was a small care package she had meant to leave on his doorstep for his return.

“I -didn’t know if you’d remember to eat,” she said as he drank the ginger ale. “I myself did not consume anything for four days after my husband’s funeral. I ended up in the hospital with dehydration.”

“It’s very kind of you,” he said. He felt better for the cold drink but his body still ran with small tremors. He was too worried to feel any humiliation. He had to make it to Bertie’s funeral somehow. The bus service ran only every two hours with reduced service on Tuesdays and last bus back at five p.m. “I think I’d better see if there’s a taxi available. I’m not sure I’m fit to drive.”