

Memory

It was almost three months after William's death before Caroline could even think about clearing out his closets. His demise had been sudden and unexpected and she found herself fighting the urge towards depression on a daily basis. Their daughters, both grown-up and married now, had taken good care of her in the intervening time and one grandson in particular had outdone himself with his many kindnesses.

However it was another teenager, a boy called Joe who lived on the second floor of their building, who she asked to help her carry the bags of clothes downstairs for the Goodwill on the morning she decided that it was time and he had said he would be glad to help. She spent the first hour of the morning dividing William's clothes into two bundles – those to give away and those to keep, just in case. At some point during the second hour she realised that there was no 'just in case' left in her life and she swapped the idea of two bundles for more black bags.

When Joe arrived she hoped that he wouldn't notice her tear-stained cheeks or, if he did, he would have the sense to ignore them. To his credit, he simply glanced at the bags that surrounded them both and asked, 'these are all to go, right?'

'Yes,' she replied, hesitating, unsure whether she was actually ready to give them away yet after all. 'These are all to go. Just give me a moment, will you?' she added, disappearing into the kitchen to compose her thoughts.

When she stepped back into the bedroom a few minutes later, Joe had picked up her husband's old army jacket from the sofa and tried it on. William had worn it on almost every date they ever went on before they were married and had held on to it for nostalgic reasons; it was the kind of jacket that now, forty years later, kids were wearing again.

'I'm sorry,' said Joe, startled and embarrassed. 'I shouldn't have –'

'Please,' she said quietly, stepping towards him and staring at him for a moment. She put her hands out and felt his slender arms in the sleeves that had encircled her body so many times when she was a young woman. The jacket smelled of William still and she breathed him in. Unable to stop herself, she closed her eyes and leant forward, her mouth finding Joe's quickly, her lips softening against his as they kissed, this old woman who'd been young once, this young boy who'd grow old sooner than he knew.

A moment later she stepped away from him and looked at the floor for a moment, resisting an urge to laugh. Instead, she turned her attention to the bags again. 'It will take at least three trips, I think,' she said, nodding her head. 'What do you think, Joe, will three do it? Can we do it in three?'