

DEATH AND THE SHOVEL LADY

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Keywords: Life, Death, Values in medical practice

Cycling to work, on a good day I can sustain this illusion - that nothing changes. Everything is as it has always been.

It's autumn now, the mornings are dark again and the leaves are turning. The first of the season's cold, today I have to work hard to stay warm. My commute takes me twenty minutes. It sets me up for the morning, and helps me dissipate the accumulated mental garbage at the day's end. There's a light fog hanging over the loch, and colonies of water birds have gathered in the grey - herons, perched and unmoving, sinister in their long grey coats; a phalanx of three mallards makes a finger, three winged bones pointing toward the sky.

There's meaning in all this, I think. The squat form the church tower makes, rising above the mist; the slate grey of the water merging with the sky; the mad reds and the yellows of the spiralling leaves. This view, seen from just this angle, it hasn't changed, for hundreds and hundreds of years.

The Shovel Lady has her house beside the church, I can pass it on my route, if I choose. Someone's ancestors were sold that land by the church a long time since, and built a cottage on the plot, with a garden stretching down to the water's edge. The Shovel Lady and her husband acquired this place a life - time ago, and had lived there since - content enough together for sixty years, and then she alone, for ten.

I call her the Shovel Lady after a joke that she made to me, just before her husband died.

The last few months of his life had not been good. Even at his best a dithering old man, rather powerless in the face of his wife's assertions, latterly he had withered, brain shredded - too much tobacco, alcohol,

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