A Brief Encounter … or was it?

It was Halloween and I was having dinner with a few friends. One of them said we should tell ghost stories. There was a lot of laughter and fabrication but when it came to my turn I told them about something that happened to me some years earlier. The room went quiet.

It had been a very long journey home, I was tired so as I stepped from the last train of the night onto the cold, deserted platform I shivered pulling my coat tighter around me. It was only a short walk home maybe 10 or 15 minutes through the quiet streets of the village that I had lived in for many years. I wasn't apprehensive but there was an unusual chill in the air this particular night, the leaves on the trees rustled in the wind and there was no cars or people about. I wasn't afraid I knew the streets well but this night it just felt a little different. As I walked past the old church the steeple was beautifully lit up by the bright beams and in the shadows I noticed an older woman standing alone. She had a blue dress on, her hair was pinned in a neat bun and she had no coat despite the wind and rain. She looked pale and dressed a little old fashioned and definitely not for that night's weather.

As the lights flickered I tentatively asked if she was alright. At first she didn't answer so I asked her again if she needed some help. She turned and with a sad smile she whispered "I'm just waiting'.

"It's very late can I walk you home" I asked

"No" she replied "someone's coming for me. He will be here soon" her response was calm and peaceful not strange at all but something about her answer had made me shiver or maybe it was just the cold and rain and tiredness, after all it was late and I had travelled along way that day.

I remember saying something like "I hope he doesn't keep you waiting too long on this cold night"

Then as the church bell chimed midnight the woman looked towards the church doors, she smiled and said "There he is".

I instinctively turned looking towards the church as well but there was no one there. I turned back towards the woman to tell her but she had vanished. I looked up and down the street and across the road but there was no one there, the street was empty. I stood for a moment completely confused, then I started to hurry home convincing myself I had just lost sight of her. Later I started to think about the church clock, I hadn't heard it chime for many years, I realised it must have been repaired whilst I'd been away.

The events of that evening played on my mind so a few days later I mentioned it to an elderly neighbour and asked her when the church clock had been repaired. She smiled knowingly telling me that it hadn't been repaired and hadn't worked for many years but she suggested I go to the local library and speak to the librarian.

The librarian listened quietly and then took me to a small room where there was a display of historical photos of the village. As I was looking a photo of a young woman caught my attention, I stopped to look at it more closely and felt goose pimples on my arms and neck. The photo was of the church in about the 1940's and there standing by the door in a blue dress was the very same woman I had spoken to a few nights earlier.

I looked questioningly at the librarian and told her that I was sure that was the woman I had seen standing looking at the church.

Under the photo the woman's name was printed as Florence Elliott. The librarian went on to tell me that Florence had been engaged to be married to a local farmer who joined up to fight in the 2nd world war but sadly he never returned home.

She said that village folk law tells of Florence walking to the church every night and waiting until the last chime of the old church clock at midnight for news of her fiancée. He never came back and Florence never married and died many years ago. Some say of a broken heart.

I stared at the photograph and noticed that there was a young man standing next to her in military uniform.

Was this her fiancée I asked. The librarian replied that the strange thing was that no one remembers a figure in the original photograph. Smiling gently she told me that he suddenly appeared in the picture a few years later.

My curiosity got the better of me, just before midnight I walked to the church and waited. The church beams were bright but there was no one there, no sound or chimes from the clock at midnight. As I turned to go home I heard a gentle laughter, not of sadness or fear but of two people finally meeting after a very long wait. Or was it just the leaves rustling in the trees.

My friends were all quiet one or two were rubbing their arms as if they too were cold. Another of the party asked me if I believed in ghosts, I said that I didn't really but whenever I pass the church after dark I always glance towards it just in case someone is still standing there. You just never know.

(948 words)