

The Understanding Stranger

Ray Kinsman

Stepping onto the train, the old man moved down the corridor, slid back the door of the compartment and sat down next to the window.

Directly opposite him, a young man sat staring out of the window, apparently unaware that someone else had entered the carriage.

The old man was the first to speak.

'Hello!'

The young man turned his gaze towards the other passenger, his face ashen and clearly showing signs of stress, but did not respond.

'Are you alright?' the man asked in a concerned tone.

The young man seemed to hesitate for a moment then answered, 'No, I am not.'

'Why, what's wrong?'

'You really want to know? Right, I will tell you,' he replied in a shaky voice. 'I have just killed my wife.'

'What happened? Was it an accident?'

'She was going to leave me,' he replied. 'I grabbed her by the throat; I was out of my mind with rage. I did not realise how hard I was choking her until she collapsed on the floor.'

'Well, if it was an accident, did you not call the Police and explain?'

'No, I panicked, I knew the Police would not believe me.'

'Where is your wife now? Have you just left her on the floor?'

'No, I buried her in the back garden. I know it was stupid, but now I am going to put it right. I was running away, but I have decided I must go back and face the Police.'

'Does your wife have any relatives or friends?'

'No, just her parents and they're both dead. We never really had any friends, we kept to ourselves mostly. Maybe that was part of the problem.'

'Then why go to the Police? Nothing can bring your wife back.'

There was a look of shock on the young man's face. He was attempting to think about how to respond when the old man spoke again.

'Do you have a nice garden?'

'A nice garden! What are you talking about? I have just killed my wife, and you're asking about my garden?'

'I like roses best,' said the old man. 'I have two beautiful rose bushes in my back garden. They sit together at a quiet corner, a large one and a smaller one. I spend a lot of time there.'

'Am I right in thinking that you are not going to report me to the police?' the young man asked.

'No. I am sure you loved your wife, and at least now you will be together.' The old man got to his feet. 'Well, this is my stop coming up. I hope everything works out for you. Goodbye.'

As the train pulled into Tay Bridge Station, the old man left the compartment and got off the train. Walking up the Nethergate, he hailed a taxi and headed for home.

The young man thought that the old man was at best eccentric, and at worse quite mad. And yet he felt a lot better after talking to him. Maybe he was not mad after all he reasoned. Maybe the old man was just very understanding, he told himself. Anyway, the man had convinced him, and he decided he would go back home and say nothing to anyone about what had happened.

Back at his house, the old man poured himself a glass of wine and headed out into the back garden. At the far corner of the garden, he stopped to look at his beloved roses.

He thought about the young man he had met on the train. He understood the pain and love he felt for his late wife. The old man felt the same way about both of his late wives.

That was why he had given them a rose bush each, as a way of demonstrating the love he felt for each of them. But also, as a way of saying sorry for what he had been forced to do, when each of them, in turn, had attempted to leave him.
