

The Intervention

Vera furrows her brows as she recognizes the first name on the list. "But, Herbert," she says, "Mark passed away five years ago. Have you forgotten already?"

Her surprise evolves into concern as she continues to read. "And we attended Agnes' funeral together. Surely you remember?"

Herbert was almost seventy-five, but his mind had always been razor-sharp. Or so she'd thought. Was this the first sign of dementia?

Vera and Herbert were married for just shy of fifty years. For their golden anniversary, Herbert wanted to arrange a garden party for old friends they had lost touch with.

"That's okay if you compile the guest list," she had said. "I'll handle sending out the invitations. I know you're not fond of working on the computer."

Vera's worries grow as she continues reading. Herbert had always been a tad forgetful. Had his absent-mindedness recently worsened?

"There isn't a single living person on this list," she says, her voice tightening. "Are you playing some kind of joke on me?"

"Trust me," Herbert replies. "I've found the most recent email address of each guest."

Recalling a television show about Alzheimer's, she remembers that arguing won't help if Herbert is suffering from that dreadful disease.

Convinced that most messages will bounce back undelivered, she decides to proceed as promised. To her surprise, she doesn't receive any *failed mail* messages.

To her astonishment, replies arrive immediately. Every invitation is accepted within the hour.

"Hey Vera, thanks for remembering us," the Calhouns write. They had recently passed away in their sleep due to carbon monoxide poisoning.

"Great!" Agnes Poot replies. "You can count me in!"

Mark Wood is equally enthusiastic: "Tell Herbert I'm looking forward to giving a speech."

Vera's mind reels with confusion and disbelief. What sort of tasteless joke is this?

"Everything will be fine," Herbert tries to reassure her. "Don't worry, my dear."

Vera is nearly overcome with shock when the doorbell rings. When she opens the door, Mark stands before her, younger than she remembers but undeniably him.

One by one, friends she knows are dead show up. As soon as the company is complete, Mark calls for silence. He taps his glass with a spoon to capture everyone's attention.

"Dear friends," he begins, reading from a piece of paper, "it warms my heart to see so many familiar faces gathered here."

He smiles at Vera, who smiles back.

"Allow me to explain why we are here today," he continues. "More specifically, why we responded to Herbert's heartbreaking request."

He lets his gaze wander over the other guests. "Over the years, we've shared many cherished moments here." His eyes meet those of the hostess.

"Today, you welcomed us into this beautiful garden that you loved to maintain once more, Vera, but we owe you an apology."

He clears his throat. "We all pretended that we were here to celebrate fifty years of marriage, but that was an innocent white lie orchestrated by your loving husband. In truth, this gathering is an intervention."

Vera's smile vanishes. "An intervention?"

She turns to Herbert, but her husband's face doesn't reveal any answers.

"Vera, I know this is difficult to hear," Mark goes on, his voice filled with compassion, "but we believe it's time for you to come with us."

Vera shakes her head in disbelief.

"Herbert has decided to move forward with his life," Mark explains. "He has found companionship in a new girlfriend, and she's uncomfortable with your presence."

Vera can't believe her ears. "Herbert has a what?" she stammers. "Mark, what on earth are you talking about? This isn't funny anymore!"

Her eyes dart between Herbert and her guests. She rejects a comforting hug from Agnes. She feels betrayed, not only by her husband but also by her closest friends.

"You all knew about this?" her voice rises with anger. "Why didn't anyone tell me? And Herbert, didn't you have the courage to tell me yourself?"

She stares at her husband accusingly. He lowers his head in shame.

"Herbert, you're not a teenager anymore, are you? You're seventy-five. We've been married for fifty years! A new girlfriend? What kind of nonsense is that?"

"I tried to tell you several times, my dear," Herbert replies gently, "but you wouldn't hear it. You were in denial. You couldn't accept that we no longer live in the same world."

Vera's hand flies to her chest, her breath catching in her throat.

"No longer in the same world?" she murmurs. "What does that even mean? I've been by your side for fifty years."

Suddenly, something dawns on Vera.

With one hand still pressed against her heart, she reaches to touch Herbert's chest. As she scans the faces of the guests, she finds confirmation of what she's only just comprehended.

And in the garden she once called her own, surrounded by flowers and friends, she finally realizes that Herbert is the only living being with a heartbeat.