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# **The Man Who Disappeared: Exploring Dementia in Short Fiction**

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**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA by Research.**

**University of Huddersfield**

**September 2016**

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## The Man Who Disappeared

It made its way through the brain, destroying as It went. It saw the workings of the brain as a series of wires and laughed at how easy it was to unplug them. Sometimes It cut through them cleanly and quickly, a neat execution, killing the memory before anyone had time to remember it had been forgotten. Other times It dragged the death out, made it slow and painful, its own unique form of torture. Sometimes It was picky about its food, choosing one memory over another. It had a particular taste for faces, previously it had been names.

In the beginning It lay low, not wanting to draw too much attention to itself, not until It had gathered its strength. To begin with the man didn't even realise It was there. It sent out its scouts to explore the man's mind and search out the weak spots. Once It had gathered enough information It slowly began to flex its talons and by the time the man began to notice the army invading his head it was too late, It had already taken hold and woven its web too tightly for it to be broken.

Sometimes It made its presence known through only the quietest of whispers, a forgotten name or a wrong turning. Other times its greed would overwhelm and It would swell in size until It engulfed everything. The blackness in the man would expand until he no-longer knew where or who he was. It made him lost within himself. On other occasions, instead of withholding information, It would overload the brain with a tsunami of material: thousands upon thousands of memories, thoughts, images, facts, voices, faces; a dizzying mass of information; haircut at half past three get sausages from Dales Wildman Street dinner with Anne second house on the right with a blue door the 567 bus don't be late the taste of salt in the sea air new shoes for his birthday walk the dog feed the cats pay the electricity bill Christmas '85 in Dumfries his mother shouting for him to come downstairs his wife shouting for him to come upstairs the children shouting for him to come and play with him in the garden Carol's face coming closer and closer her eyes shining where did he leave the car didn't he sell the car when did he sell the car on, and on it went, never stopping. The befuddlement this never ending stream of thought caused the man made It laugh at its own wicked cleverness.

\* \* \*

It followed the man into the kitchen one afternoon. The man was hungry but couldn't remember if he had, eaten lunch or not. The pile of dirty plates in the sink suggested that he

had so he surmised that he just needed a small snack to tide him over until teatime, whenever that would be. Time confused him these days. He picked up a banana from the fruit bowl and that's when It decided to play a game with him. As the man turned the banana over in his hands to ascertain that it wasn't still green, he became perplexed and suddenly could no longer remember how he was supposed to eat the fruit. He passed it back and forth between his hands struggling to remember. He knew some fruits like oranges needed to be peeled before you could eat them, yet with others like apples and pears one simply bit into it, skin and all, but of bananas he could not recall. It enjoyed the man's uncertainty and let the image of the apple linger at the forefront of his mind until the man decided the peel was meant to stay on and took a large bite out of the fruit. The peel's waxy texture turned almost powdery as it made contact with the man's tongue. It was tasteless, yet somehow sharp, drying out his mouth in the way that the acidity of a gooseberry will do, and left an unpleasant and lingering aftertaste on his tongue. As the man spat out the banana skin, his face contorted with disgust, It was beside itself with laughter. After a few moments spent struggling to work out how to peel the fruit, the man finally succeeded and paced up and down the kitchen, slowly chewing the banana. Once he had finished, he stood holding the banana peel in front of him unsure whether he was meant to keep it or throw it away. Uncertain, he resolved to wait until his mind felt clearer and to make the decision then. He placed the banana skin in the breadbin for safe keeping and left the kitchen.

\* \* \*

It enjoyed watching the man search for a memory that was no longer there, watching him reach out desperately for the names of people and places. It enjoyed taunting him, dangling the thought just out of reach, edging it towards him and snatching it away. It made trying to hold onto memories like trying to keep a firm grip on a bar of soap with wet hands. More often than not, like the soap, the memories would gaily slip from the man's fingers and slide down the plughole.

There were days when It seemed to have disappeared and the man's mind worked almost as well as it had in his youth. His brain would spring back into colourful life, words flowed freely, names matched faces, and the man would tentatively begin to wonder if perhaps this time It was gone for good. But inevitably It would return. It would wake from its hibernation with renewed energy, returning with greater force than ever before and usually with some new cruel trick It had learnt and would mercilessly test out on the man. It made the man think

he was young again. It played him memories from his youth, working down the docks, drinking with friends, meeting his wife, holding his new-born son for the first time. Some days It would make the man forget who he was.

One morning It led the man over to the high bay windows at the front of the house, where the window cleaner was just finishing up his work. The window cleaner was an elderly man; his face was thin, drawn, and covered in a layer of greying skin that hung loosely from his cheekbones like an oversized piece of cloth. The man was surprised he was able to work, his movements as slow and seemingly painful as they were. Realising he was being watched the window cleaner beckoned for the man to open the window, presumably to discuss payment or arrange a future booking. The man fumbled with the catch and after a few failed attempts succeeded in opening the window. A light breeze wafted through the newly created space bringing with it the scents of spring and filling the man with a welcome sense of contentment. He greeted the window cleaner cheerfully and enquired how he could help but the window cleaner merely stared back at the man as though waiting for him to say something more. The man began to repeat the question but as soon as he did the window cleaner began talking. The man paused and so did the window cleaner. The man tried again and the same thing happened. Despite his usually calm nature the man was beginning to get annoyed. He made a further attempt to find out what the odd old man wanted but once again the window cleaner talked straight over him, he too sounding increasingly annoyed. At this point the man lost his temper, the window cleaner should know better than to play such foolish and childlike games, it was something he wouldn't even expect of his own grandchildren and he told him as much. To the man's ever increasing annoyance the window cleaner didn't appear to register the man's comments as he was too busy shouting his own insults back through the window. By now the man was angry and confused, he'd only opened the window because the other man had asked him to and now he was caught up in some kind of ridiculous argument with a man he didn't know. He finally lost his temper and began to shout at the other man. To his displeasure the window cleaner responded in kind, becoming ever more vocal and animated, hurling a barrage of insults towards the man.

The garden surrounding the window cleaner began to change, the world became distorted as colours merged together and fragments of the garden seemed to disappear and float away. The window cleaner's shouts became louder and louder until they no longer sounded like words but an unbearable roar that filled the man with an overwhelming sense of fear. Then as quickly as it had started, it was over. There was no window cleaner; there wasn't even a

window, simply an old man shouting at his own unfamiliar reflection, a reflection that stared back at him with a face filled with confusion. It had fooled him once again.

\* \* \*

When It was feeling particularly strong It would break Its way out of the brain and venture forth to new playing fields, untouched land It would claim for its own and lay waste to, where it could wage its war and conquer the body. As It took control of them, one by one the man's fingers began to work against him. They refused to do the simplest of the man's biddings and often he couldn't even remember what it was he wanted them to do. The craftsman quickly disappeared to be replaced by a man who struggled to tie his own shoe laces.

In the garden was a crumbling outhouse that functioned as a utility room, just large enough to fit in a washing machine and tumble dryer. On washing day the man would amble to and fro between the backdoor and the outhouse carrying bundles of laundry, first to the washer, then to the dryer, and finally back inside to be ironed. Now he lived alone it was a much smaller task than it used to be but the man liked this routine and habits like this helped him feel as though he was in control. It had noticed this and was displeased. It watched one day as the man carried the laundry basket back into the house and set it down on top of the kitchen table. It watched as the man sorted through the basket pairing socks and folding underpants. It watched as the man retrieved the ironing board from the cupboard under the stairs and brought it through into the kitchen. And then It struck.

As the man tried to set up the ironing board his fingers lost their grip and the object fell from his grasp. Bending down to retrieve it, the object suddenly became unfamiliar to him and he could no longer see how to manoeuvre the criss-crossed legs into a position that would let the ironing board stand up. The man tried to pull one of the legs so that it was at a right-angle to the top of the board, but this only forced the other leg into a horizontal position which confused him further. The man made various attempts to get the ironing board to stand with diminishing success. At one point he managed to slot the holding bar into one of the grips but when he stood it up the board only came up to his knees. Exasperated, the man tried to alter the board's height but he couldn't remember how he'd got it to stand in the first place and his fingers were refusing to grip properly. Losing patience with it, the man began to haphazardly push and pull at the thing, wrenching it until, with an unpleasant grating sound, the legs jammed. The man swore in frustration and aimed a sharp kick at the ironing board. As the pain shot through his foot, the man's frustration bubbled into anger until, with an amount of



strength that took even It by surprise, he lifted the ironing board above his head and threw it across the width of the room where it crashed into the wall and broke.

The man stood panting for a while. His head felt as though it was full of smoke. His thoughts clouded, he was unable to remember what he had been doing or why his arms ached so much. The man gazed around the kitchen blankly looking for something that would jump start his memory and explain to him what he was doing. Curious, It held back any clues, waiting with interest to see what the man would do next. The man's eyes came to rest on the laundry piled up on kitchen table; he smiled to himself confident that he had remembered now. He crossed the room and scooped the clothes back into the laundry basket and headed out of the backdoor towards the outhouse.

As he closed the outhouse door behind him, the man could hear the whoosh of the water as it filled the drum of the washing machine. He was overcome with a sense of satisfaction and achievement, confident that this time It hadn't won.

In the kitchen, the ironing board lay broken on the floor.

\* \* \*

As It grew stronger it began to alter the world around It. It made the familiar, unfamiliar and the new, terrifying. It took the street map in the man's head and jumbled it up, moving landmarks and changing street names. Once familiar journeys became never ending mazes in which he would remain trapped for hours, retracing his steps over and over again, confusing left from right and going around in circles. Sometimes this could happen without the man even having to move. It distorted the man's perception and regularly made him lose his footing. It began to play with time. It made the days stretch on for months and years fly by in seconds. For all the man knew the birth of his daughter could have happened fifty years ago or merely five days ago.

In the very early days of Its attack, back when the man had first become aware of It, he had sought help from doctors. They sent him away with a myriad of pills and vague, non-committal assurances of confidence that their prescriptions would keep It at bay. For a short time the medication appeared to have an effect. The chemicals confused It. It hadn't prepared for a counterattack and for a while It was forced into hiding. The man felt lighter in body and mind. He rejoiced in being able to return to a sense of normality and congratulated the doctors on their excellent concoction of drugs, but it was not to last. Soon It learnt how to

work its way around them and they stopped being effective. After a time they told the man not to take the pills. It had got too strong for them to be able to work anymore. They were a waste of his time and a waste of their money. They exchanged the pill boxes for removal boxes and moved the man out of his home into a different sort of home, a home with locked doors and set meal times.

\* \* \*

It was triumphant in its victory and celebrated by testing out its latest trick. In its last and final act of cruelty, It started to make the man fade away. As with everything It did, It began slowly at first. It made the man disappear for seconds, then minutes, and then when it was confident no-one had noticed, hours at a time. Soon there were days when the man didn't seem to be there at all, It smothered him and replaced him with a stranger. A stranger that was unable to do anything for himself. A stranger that would scream and lash out when approached. A stranger that spent his days rattling locked door handles, trying to get out in time to collect his children from school. A stranger who spent his nights crying for the mother he thought had forgotten him.

Then one day It won and the man disappeared altogether.

## The Flood

On the corner, where Castle Street bent to the right and became Ann Street, was a small house with a bright red door. It was an odd shape, with an extra fifth side where the building curved around to follow the bend in the road. It looked like a ramshackle country cottage that had been plucked up by a giant, tossed about and worn in his huge hands, and then dumped without much thought near the centre of town. It was quite out of place, and yet the locals didn't pay it much attention at all. The only person who really saw the house was Jean McCreedy and she rarely saw the outside of it, preferring to stay inside the confines of its meandering walls. Jean had lived in the crooked house ever since she and Archie married, almost seventy years ago. It had been considered an odd little house even then, but they had liked it, and even now, long after Archie's death, Jean refused to move, despite the concerned pleas from her son, Allan. Jean's whole life was in that old house and she couldn't bare the idea of leaving. The world around her and the house had changed greatly over the course of the years, neighbours had come and gone, shops had opened and closed, the town had almost doubled in size, and yet Jean and the house remained almost unchanged.

Jean ventured out less and less as the years went by, until one day she stopped going altogether. Her new reclusive state distanced her from her neighbours until she had all but been forgotten by those living around her. Her son would ring her every other day to check she was alright and once a week, a supermarket delivery, organised by him, would arrive at Jean's front door. Jean had been unsure about this at first, she was concerned about letting a stranger into her house, but in the end she had developed a soft spot for Gary, the delivery driver. She considered him a friend now and looked forward to his visits and the opportunity to ask him about his wife and children, and to chastise him for his unkempt appearance. Other than these weekly visits and the occasional courtesy call from one or other of the church do-gooders, Jean spent her days in solitude.

As the seasons began to change, the wind brought with it whispers of the oncoming winter. Outside the crooked house the rain fell heavily. It hammered down onto the pavements and ran in streams down the roads. It had rained continuously for weeks. The ground was sodden, the rivers were rising, and now there was a storm coming. Allan began to ring every day to check Jean was managing in the deteriorating conditions. As the days grew shorter and darker, Jean confined herself to the front room, the warmest in the house, heated by a small wood burning stove. Although these days she struggled with the logs, Jean refused to replace

it with a gas fire despite Allan's insistence. She felt there was no need when the old stove still worked perfectly well. In the evenings she would pull a blanket over her knees and watch television. On this particular evening the final of her favourite quiz show was playing and Jean lay on the sofa, half watching it and half asleep. As the show drew to a close and the trophy was awarded to the team from Nuneaton, the studio audience burst into a round of applause rousing Jean from her slumbers. Shivering slightly, she switched off the television and rose from the sofa with the intention of going to turn the central heating on. Without the noise of the television to mask it, the howls of the wind and roar of the river filled the aged house and made it groan.

Pulling her dressing gown tight against the cold, Jean moved slowly into the hallway, her joints stiff from lying still for so long. The warped wooden floorboards of the hall felt oddly cold underfoot and after a few moments Jean became aware of a damp sensation spreading across the sole of her slippers. Fumbling slightly in the dark, she reached for the light switch and an orangey glow illuminated the hallway, revealing a slowly expanding pool of water. On closer inspection Jean discovered the water was seeping through the bottom of the front door. She slid the bolt, opened the door and stepped outside to investigate. Moving out into the street, still in her dressing gown and slippers, Jean was hit by the full force of the wind. She stumbled and only stopped herself from falling by grabbing onto the low railings that ran along the front of the house. Steadying herself, she surveyed the scene in front of her. She was reminded of the canals in Venice, although those water-filled streets held nothing of the threatening menace presented by the street in front of her. It had become a river, a steady current of murky water flowed down it carrying rubbish, branches, and empty wheelie bins. The rain was continuing to pour down, it bounced off the roofs of the cars and ran into the amassing water that was already halfway up their tyres. Further down, where the road ran parallel to the river, came the terrific noise of surging water. Jean found herself walking away from the safety of her house out into the middle of the street. Flood water lapped around her calves and the rain quickly soaked through her dressing gown. Wading through the water, Jean set off in the direction of the river. Not fully aware of what she was doing, she was drawn towards the wild torrent. If asked, she wouldn't have been able to explain why, but she simply felt the need to see the swollen river close up. She continued down the flooded street, her usually slow movements made even slower by the force of the water pressing against her legs.

Something brushed against her, the leaves of one of the many tree branches flowing down stream, and Jean was brought quickly back to her senses. She became aware of the icy

water lapping around her legs and the wet clothes sticking to her skin. Scared by how close she had come to the coursing river, Jean's heart began to pound, she felt dizzy and for a moment thought she would lose her balance and tumble into the foaming water. She stood for a moment breathing deeply, then turned back towards the house.

Back inside Jean collapsed in the hallway, exhausted. She wasn't sure how she had made it home. Her legs ached from walking against the current she had been sure was going to drag her under. She lay on her back staring up at the ceiling, out of breath and shivering, until she realised she was lying in a puddle. The flood water had spread and the whole of the hallway resembled a paddling pool. Slowly, Jean moved herself into a sitting position and then, using the telephone table to pull herself up, managed to stand. She was sore, tired, and soaked to the skin. She looked at the telephone sitting on the table next to her and knew she should ring her son to come and help her but she couldn't remember the number. Resolving to look for the phone book once she had changed into some dry clothes, Jean began to make her way up the narrow and winding stairs that led to the upper floor of the house. Entering her bedroom, she peeled away her clothes leaving them in a soggy pile on the floor. She stood, naked and shivering, droplets of water falling from her hair onto the floor. For a moment she lost herself and could no longer recall how her clothes had come to be so wet. Misplaced in her own mind, Jean began the process of finding dry clothes and dressing herself. There was a purpose to her getting dressed she knew that much, but she couldn't grasp what it was, there was something she had to do, something to do with Allan, it seemed an odd time of day for dressing, surely she should be getting ready for bed at this time.

Dry clothes on, Jean began to focus better. She should ring Allan and ask him to come and get her before the flooding worsened and the roads became impassable. Back downstairs she assessed the situation. The water had already spread into the living room, soaking into the heavy rug that lay under the coffee table, and was now attempting to make its way to the back of the house and into the kitchen. She really should ring Allan. She went over the telephone table to search for his number. The water was higher here than in the living room and was already lapping against the table's antique legs. Archie's table. A wave of grief hit her square in the chest leaving her winded. She couldn't allow the table or any of his furniture to be damaged.

Archie had been an engineer for the Navy during the war and later had gone on to be the Chief Engineer for a large cruise ship company. As he travelled all over the world, he'd developed the habit of bringing back a souvenir from everywhere they docked. He'd had a

particular weakness for teak furniture from Southeast Asia, and as such the little house was crammed with dark, intricately carved tables, chairs, and bookcases. After he retired, Archie turned his attention to books, filling his beloved bookshelves with dusty tomes scavenged from charity shops and second-hand stores. For Archie, the older and more worn the book, the more valuable. At first Jean couldn't understand her husband's new obsession but as with most things, his enthusiasm rubbed off on her until she too spent long afternoons rummaging through charity shop boxes, searching for a hidden gem. Since his death, Jean often found herself flicking through the aged volumes, the smell of the yellowing pages reminding her of him.

She couldn't let Archie's collections be ruined by the murky water. She hurried through the house and into the kitchen, where she began rummaging in the cupboard under the sink, grabbing fistfuls of the plastic carrier bags she kept under there. Gathering the bags in her arms, Jean seized the kitchen scissors from the jar of utensils on the side, before returning to the front room to pick up the ball of red yarn from her sewing basket. Back in the hall, she began wrapping the carrier bags around the legs of the telephone table to protect them from the water, tying them in place with lengths of wool.

Once she had finished, Jean moved into the front room. Here the water was edging dangerously close to the bottom shelves of the two floor-to-ceiling bookshelves built into the alcoves that framed the fireplace. She began the painstaking task of removing all the books from the bottom shelves and relocating them to the top of the dresser, where she hoped they would stay safe and dry. By the time she had stacked all the endangered books out of harm's way, Jean's arms were trembling from the strain, but she couldn't stop yet. This time holding them in place with the roll of sticking tape from the bureau, she began wrapping plastic bags around the bottom of the bookshelves. Once satisfied they were protected, she moved onto wrapping up the bottom of both the dresser and the bureau. Her knees were incredibly painful from kneeling on the hard wood floor for so long, but she was so absorbed in her work that she hardly noticed. She still had a niggling feeling in the back of her mind that she needed to ring Allan, but she couldn't remember why. She knew she had something important she needed to tell him, or ask him, she wasn't sure which it was. It would have to wait until later anyhow. She needed to finish protecting Archie's furniture. She couldn't let him come home and find it damaged. Jean moved on to the legs of the coffee table, then the armchairs, and finally the sofa. She was near exhaustion and her dry clothes were as wet as before, but still she persevered. Finally noticing that her knees were suffering, Jean took a cushion from the

sofa and carried it through to the kitchen with her where, after retrieving the remaining carrier bags from the under the sink, she placed it onto the sodden floor and with difficulty knelt down once more.

Outside, the storm raged on. The rain fell even harder and the wind beat against buildings, rattling the window panes in their frames. Roof tiles were loosened and sent spiralling up into the sky, only to come plummeting back down to the ground, hitting the ever rising flood water with a splash. The water that forced its way into the houses on Castle Street also worked its way onto the railway lines and into the town's factories and hospital. When it reached the substation the town's power failed. The lights in the crooked little house faded into nothing plunging Jean into darkness. She fumbled in the blackness, searching for the drawer in the table where she kept the matches and the candles, and then up to the table top for the candelabra. Her swollen fingers struggled to strike the matches but once lit, the long tapers filled the room with a ghostly light and cast flickering shadows across the walls. Jean stood the candelabra in the water covering the floor and watched as they sent glimmers of light dancing across the surface. Then, undeterred, she began to wrap the plastic bags around legs of the dining table and chairs. It was a slow and laborious task, her body demanded rest and with the power gone she struggled to see what she was doing. The lack of light and her tiredness made her work even slower. Her fingers began to seize up making her fumble with the wool and sticking tape.

By the time she had finally finished, Jean was weak. She tried to stand up but her joints were stiff and her legs refused to respond to her demands. She shuffled across the floor to the nearest dining chair and using her last reserves of strength pulled herself up until she stood supporting herself on the table top. Using the walls to hold herself upright, Jean made her way back to the front room, carrying one of the white tapers to light the way, paddling through the water that now reached over her ankles. The front room was almost entirely dark save for the faint glow coming from the fireplace. The little stove, elevated above the water level by the hefty stone hearth, was still emitting a little heat, although the fire itself had dwindled to almost nothing. Jean collapsed into the armchair nearest the fire and sat shivering, the lower half of her body soaked to the skin, waiting and wondering what she should do. The water lapped about her ankles. She swirled her feet through the water as though she was dancing with Archie.

The rain was relentless. It beat down upon the roof of the little house until it found the cracks between the roof tiles. It began to work its way into the house from above, trickling down the attic walls, an air attack in support of the ground assault below. Downstairs the water was rising ever faster and threatened to reach over Jean's knees. From her seat in the front room, Jean could see the water reach the second shelf of the bookcases. Unable to move to save the books, she sat and watched as the water seeped into the pages. She imagined the ink beginning to bleed down the pages, the words blurring until they were no longer legible, stories washed away into nothingness, until all that was left was a mound of sodden paper. As she watched Archie's books disintegrate, the tears ran down her cheeks like the bleeding ink in the volumes she held so dear and felt as though she was losing him all over again.

She wished Archie was here now. Where was he? Why wasn't he back yet? They were meant to be going to the dance at the Town Hall. Or was it tomorrow. Or last week. She needed to telephone him. Or was it Allan. Allan. She needed to ring Allan. The phone was too far away. From her position by the fire Jean could see out into the hallway. The encroaching darkness prevented her seeing much but she could just make out the edge of the telephone table. She needed to ring Allan. She had to tell him something, something important. She must ring him. She tried to stand but the weight of the water prevented her and she didn't have the energy to fight it. She slumped back into the chair, her movements causing the water to splash over the tops of her knees and send ripples out across the room.

The sound of the river roaring down the street was deafening, as though at any moment it might come crashing through the little crooked house, washing it and its contents away. The fire in the stove had long burnt out and now, as the water seeped into the grate, the few remaining hot ashes were abruptly extinguished, their glowing embers replaced by hissing steam. The candles had burnt low and with a final sigh, flickered into nothing. In the darkness and unable to see the clock on the mantelpiece, Jean could no longer comprehend the passing of time. Minutes could have passed or hours. The water slowly covered Jean's legs entirely and her lips began to turn blue. As the icy vines of cold spread through her body, Jean's mind drifted away from the darkness and the danger surrounding her. She thought of Archie and the dance. He had just been offered a commission on the *Himalaya* and they were in the mood to celebrate his success. Yet buried beneath their feelings of jubilation was the lingering knowledge that it was also their last chance for a night out together before months of separation and overseas stamps. As they made their way through town the sky was beginning to bruise. It was one of the first proper evenings of spring and smatterings of blues



and purples littered the otherwise clear canopy bringing with them a sense of longer days and the promise of summer. The doors to the Town Hall were open wide and the sound of music floated down from the first floor and out into the street.

In the small hours of the morning, a myriad of lights appeared outside the front windows of the crooked little house. They cast long dancing shadows across the front room where Jean sat, comatose, waist deep in icy water. Urgent voices cut through the cacophony of the storm, shouting back and forth across the howling wind, getting closer and closer to the house.

Urgent knocking echoed around the house as a pair of fists began hammering on the front door. The letter box rattled. Someone was shouting her name. Jean knew nothing of this. All she could hear was the music of the band. The other dancers seemed to fade away until there were only two left on the floor. As he spun her around, his arm tight about her waist, she felt a happiness she had never known and never wanted to end. She wished she could stay in this moment forever.

## Keys

After nearly a hundred years of service, the old hospital was finally closing. Once a grand private residence, The Manor had been a home for the mad and insane since the turn of the century. When the term asylum fell out usage the Manor underwent another transformation, if only in signage, and became the County Mental Hospital. Now it was going under yet another transformation, this time into an echoing relic. Over the last few weeks, the hospital's many buildings had slowly been deserted as patients were relocated to different facilities, until they stood empty and quiet.

A battered 2CV, its green paintwork flecked with rust, trundled up the old manor's lengthy driveway and came to a stop at the foot of the steps that led up to the main doors. The car door opened and a small yet formidable, grey haired woman stepped out onto the gravel. The old Sister paused for a moment and then began making her way up the stone steps. When she had finally hung up her uniform and handed her keys over to the new Sister, she had hoped never to have any need to return to the old hospital, she had said her goodbyes and made her peace with leaving. Yet here she was less than a year later, climbing the worn stone steps once again, all because of a phone call, all because the frantic voice on the other end of the line had begged for her help, all because Martha was refusing to leave.

The Sister had been waiting for this to happen ever since she'd read in the papers that the hospital was to be closed. The current staff had hoped the lure of the new care home, specially built for elderly residents like her, and of a bedroom all to herself instead of a shared ward would have been enough to convince Martha to move. Yet it seemed Martha's fear of change had won out and now she was screaming and shouting, refusing to leave and threatening to hurt herself if anyone tried to force her. That morning they had tried to persuade Martha onto the bus, gently talking her around to the idea, bribing her with sweets and promises of presents. When that didn't work they tried a more forceful approach, threatening to pack up and leave her behind. Now, with all other residents relocated and the staff ready to move onto their new jobs, they had finally rung the old Sister and begged for her help.

Reaching the main door she instinctively entered the door code into the keypad. She expected the codes to have changed since she'd left but the light flashed green, the lock clicked, and she let herself into the building.

In the vast entrance hall, the remaining nurses huddled in a corner chattering amongst themselves. They fell silent as they heard the Sister's footsteps ring through the hall and turned to face her.

"Leave." The Sister had no wish to waste time exchanging pleasantries. "Go on, go home, go onto to your new placements, go wherever you like. But go." Her command was met with silence until a large nurse pushed her way forward and address the Sister,

"We can't just leave *you* here."

The Sister raised an eyebrow, "And why not?"

"You're not staff anymore. Beside it's not safe for anyone to be left with her."

"She won't hurt me."

"Oh yeah and what makes *you* so special? She's had at swipe at nearly all of us this morning. Last time we tried to go in there she nearly had Beth's eye out." She gestured to one of the other nurses who had a small scratch to the side of her face. As the other nurses started clambering to list their near injures, the Sister silenced them with a wave of her hand,

"She's frightened. What do you expect? If you'd rung me when this first started you could have saved us all this hassle. Now I'm telling you to leave."

"On your own head be it."

The nurses left, leaving the Sister alone in the echoing hall. Taking a deep breath, the Sister made her way up the main stairs and along the corridor to the Central Ward. She knew where Martha would be, whenever she was upset or angry, or just wanted some quiet, she always went to the same spot. She always had done in all the years the Sister had known her and probably had for many before that. The Sister walked through the empty ward, past the rows of abandoned iron bed frames, the noise of her shoe heels on the wooden floorboards reverberating around her. She reached a door at the far end of the room. It was painted the same shade of green as the dormitory walls and looked just like a built in cupboard. The Sister opened the door to reveal a linen room crammed with floor to ceiling shelves that would once have been filled with blankets and pillowcases but now lay bare. At the far end of the room was a large porthole window that looked out over the drive and grounds. Martha was sitting on one of the two chairs by the window, a book resting on her lap.

Martha didn't move as the Sister crossed the room to sit beside her. She remained rigid, staring fixedly out of the window. Once the Sister had lowered herself on the spare chair she was so close to Martha that their shoulders almost brushed each other as they breathed. The pair sat in silence surveying the view from the window. Neither one knew how long they had sat there before Martha leaned over and rested her head upon the sister's shoulder,

"I've missed you Keys."

The Sister wrapped her arms around the other woman's small frame, holding her close.

"I've missed you too M."

The two women clung to each other tightly for a time until Martha peeled herself out of the Sister's firm grip.

"I watched you arrive."

"Just like old times."

"I hoped you might come."

"Is that why you've been causing everyone so much bother?" She looked at Martha, an eyebrow raised, Martha smiled sheepishly backed. "I didn't want to leave either you know M. It was frightening for me too. I worked here my whole adult life, I didn't know anything else, I didn't think I could be anywhere else. But things change and sometimes you have to let them even if you don't want to. Change can be good, it doesn't always feel like it will be, but it often is. I really didn't want to leave this place but it was the right time, and it is for you now."

"You scared?"

"Terrified. Are you?"

"Yes."

Martha sat quietly for a while, staring out the window, mulling things over. Eventually, she turned to Keys, her decision made.

"We better get going then. I don't want to be late for tea, there might be cake."

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Keys pulled away from the front of the Manor and drove slowly down the long, sweeping driveway. Unable to keep her eyes from flicking up to the rear view mirror, she watched the grand building shrink away behind them, until, as they reached the patch of woodland that hid the site from the view of the main road, it disappeared for good. Keys hands tightened around the steering wheel as she wondered if she would ever see the old place again.

As the car pulled onto the main road, leaving the hall and all that was familiar behind, Martha seemed to shrink back into the car seat. Wrenched away from all that she knew, she sat wide eyed, staring blankly out of the windscreen. Glancing across to the passenger seat, Keys noticed how small and fragile the woman sitting next her looked. She suddenly became very aware of how old Martha was. She'd spent nearly every day of the last forty or so years with this woman and now she was overwhelmed by the realisation one day she would lose her. Martha's recent deterioration only served to compound this fear.

Keys had seen Martha many times before she had first spoken to her. When she had started working at the hospital, she'd done her induction training over on the East Wing. Every morning she'd walked past the bay windows of the Central Ward and every morning without fail, Martha had been sitting by the porthole window, reading and looking over the grounds. She had kept up this habit the whole time the Sister had known her. Occasionally she would go outside and ask them about the flowers and sometimes even helped plant a few, but mostly she liked to watch from a distance. As a young nurse, the Sister had waved up at Martha each morning, always receiving a smile and a nod in return. But once her training had been completed she was moved to another ward and had no need to walk past Martha's window anymore.

The young nurse worked hard and quickly earned herself the red cardigan and large iron key chain of a senior. Now stationed on the Central Ward she had wanted to get to know the woman in the window. Although she'd been warned against getting too friendly with the patients, she was intrigued by the figure who had greeted her to work every morning in those early days when she was new and scared. She had become a familiar and reassuring face.

At first she had thought that the woman in the window was a similar age to herself but as she approached her she could see that the other woman was much older, nearing middle age. As she sat down beside her on the window seat the woman turned to face her;

“I know you. You used to wave to me every morning and then one day you stopped coming.”

“I know, I got moved to a different ward, but now I work on this one.”

“You weren’t in red before.”

“I’m a senior now.”

“The senior for this ward?”

“Yes.”

“So, your first day in charge. You nervous?”

“A little.”

Martha reached over and patted her own the knee.

“Don’t fret, I’ll look after you, we’ll be okay. They’re all pretty tame on this ward, you just need to watch out for Emily, she has a tendency to throw things when she gets tired, and Carol will scream if you try to touch her, but other than that it’s pretty quiet. Oh and keep an eye on the night staff, they always eat the biscuits from the day staff’s cupboard, I’ve seen them at it.”

Martha stared intently into the young nurses’ eye waiting for a response, slightly breathless after talking for, what was for her, an unusually lengthy period of time. Keys smiled;

“Thank you for the tip Martha. It’s very nice to meet you finally. My name is...”

“No, no, no. You shouldn’t tell me your name. We’re not supposed to know your names.” Martha was suddenly agitated, almost scared, as though she feared knowing the nurse’s name would get her into serious trouble. “You should know that if you’re a senior.”

“I know, I know; I’m sorry, don’t be upset. It just feels strange being called Nurse or Sister when I’m not really either.”

Martha nodded, sitting silent for a moment, pondering, until her face lit up as she thought of a solution.

“Keys.”

“Keys?”

Martha reached forward and rattled the large ring of keys hanging awkwardly from the nurse’s belt.

“Keys.”

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“I know this place.”

Martha’s excited voice cut through the silence in the car, jolting Keys back to the present.

“I know this place, I used to live down there.”

“Where?”

“Down there, that turning, you’ve just gone past it.”

“On the left?”

“Yes, that’s where I used to live.”

“Do you want go and have a look.”

“I don’t know.”

Martha’s excitement faded from her voice, and she began picking at the skin on the back of her hands. Keys pulled into a layby and turned the car around, drove back along the road until she reached the junction, and turned onto the narrow country road.

“You’ll have to direct me M, I don’t know where I’m going.”

Martha said nothing but stared intently out the windscreen at the tarmac ahead.

As they drove along the road they passed several farms and the odd cluster of houses. At one point they drove through a small village Keys didn’t recognise, complete with pub, post office, and church. She kept asking Martha for directions but the only reply she got was an urgent,

“Keep going, keep going.”

As they passed yet another cluster of house, the lane began to grow narrower and narrower until it stopped being a real road at all and turned into a dirt track almost blocked by overgrown hedges. Branches scraped against the sides of the car and the grass growing in the middle of track made a rattling sound as it caught on the underside of the vehicle.

“M, are you sure this is right.”

“Keep going, keep going.”

“M, I’m not sure this –”

“Keep going, keep going.”

As Keys began to question her own sanity for allowing herself to be directed into the middle of nowhere by an institutionalised mental patient, the car rounded a bend to reveal a gate marking the entrance to a large yard on which stood a dilapidated looking cottage.

Keys slowed the old car to a stop and got out to open the gate. It was chained shut but the rusted padlock crumbled between her fingers and she was able to open the gate with ease. Returning to the car, she edged it cautiously into the yard. She felt uneasy; there was a tingling sensation on the back of her neck that made her feel like she was being watched. The moment Keys turned off the engine, Martha opened the passenger door and stepped out into the yard. She stood still for a moment, gazing about the yard, and then began walking towards the old house. Keys followed her. It was eerily quiet and air hung heavy around her.

The cottage had clearly been abandoned for some time. Most of the windows were boarded up and those that weren’t had no glass left in them. Ivy had taken over much of the building, spreading across the roof and pulling it in so a gaping hole exposed the attic timbers to the elements.

Martha stood by the front door staring at the few faded remains of the once blue paintwork. A horseshoe still hung from the warped timbers. Keys watched as Martha reached out to touch it. Her fingers glanced across its edge making it sway slightly on the remaining nail it clung to.

“It was my father that sent me away. He said I read too much. He said it wasn’t normal.”



Martha's words lingered, suspended in the heavy air, as Keys tried to register what her friend was telling her. Unaware of the impact of her words, Martha continued to watch the horseshoe sway to and fro.

"What do you mean that's why he sent you away?" Keys floundered, "That makes no sense, Martha, why would he make you leave home for reading?" Martha didn't respond, instead she began to pick away at the door's peeling paintwork. "Martha, explain, I..."

"My mother used to read a lot." Martha cut across her. "She had a few books of her own, but we used to walk into town each week for her to get a new one from the library, and when she'd finished it, she'd give it to me." Martha ran her nail under fragment of peeling paint, trying to prise it away from the wood. "When she died, my father couldn't bear to be reminded of her so he got rid of all her belongings, including the books. I started going to the library alone and reading there but my father didn't like it. He stopped me going, said that books were a distraction from more important things, that I needed to be at home to look after the family now mother was gone, that I had no business reading when there was work to be done." She tugged at the peeling paint, ripping it free from the door. "I still managed to find things to read though, I used to steal pamphlets from church on Sunday and read them over and over again in secret. My father was furious when he found out, said I had disobeyed him too many times. He said there must be something wrong with me, that I needed my head looking at, so he sent me away."

Keys struggled to process what she was hearing, unable to make sense of it, and unsure how to respond. Twice she made as though to speak but the words faded in her mouth. She tried again, but all she could manage was a faint;

"Martha, I don't understand."

Martha crumbled the paint into powder between her fingers and let it fall to the ground.

"Neither did I."

She stared up at the house for a moment and then wandered away to explore the yard and the lost memories of her childhood.

Keys watched her from a distance. When she'd first met Martha, Keys had often wondered about her life before the hospital, who she had been, who her family were, what had happened for her to end up where she did. She had been told on her first day at the Manor

not to talk to the patients about these things, they were disturbed and reminders of their lives outside the hospital would hinder recovery. Over the years this attitude became outdated but by then the Sister's wonderings had faded to nothing and she began to forget that Martha had had a life before the Manor. To find out now, so many years later, and to realise how unnecessarily Martha's life had been wasted filled Keys with such a multitude of emotions that she felt unsteady. As she watched her friend chatter she was once again faced with that which her retirement had forced her to acknowledge, that she had become as institutionalised as the people she cared for. She had spent longer at the Manor than some of her patients and had been more frightened of the freedom her retirement would grant her than some of her charges awaiting their release. And now she was being forced to acknowledge that Martha, who, she suddenly realised, was the person she'd known the longest was, in many ways, a stranger. She knew next to nothing about her.

Martha had stopped talking and was stood silent next to an old stone trough, staring down into the rain water that filled it. Keys went to stand with her and as she stood staring down at their reflections, she felt weary. The faces of the women looking back at her were lined with creases, the skin sagging, their shoulders hunched.

"Who are those two old women?" Martha asked. Keys chuckled, turning to look at Martha she expected to see her friend do the same, but Martha was frowning down at the two watery women in deep confusion "Keys, who are they?"

Keys sighed, and felt as old as her reflection looked. She placed an arm around Martha's shoulders and gently steered her away from the trough,

"Come on M, time to go."

Keys led her friend across the yard and helped her into the car. As they drove back down the winding lane, away from the cottage, Martha did not look back.

They drove down the dirt track, along the winding lane and returned to the main road to continue their journey. The drive passed in silence. Leaving the countryside behind, the road dropped down into the valley, leading them into the bustle of the town. Industrial buildings loomed above them as they joined the throng of cars on the town's ring road. After an endless string of traffic lights and filter lanes, Keys pulled off the ring-road. They left the commotion of the town behind them in favour of large stone houses hidden from view by high grey brick walls and tall trees. Once the private homes of wealthy mill owners, the huge buildings had long since become an assortment of flats, private clinics, and offices for

expensive solicitors. Martha stared out of the window following the patterns of dappled light that flittered their way through the canopy of lofty trees and shone down onto the dark tarmac that stretched out in front of them. Keys pulled off the main road onto a quiet side street. The road was flanked on one side by a row of new build flats and on the other by a high brick wall, obscuring all that lay behind it from view, save for the tops of the leafy trees which poked their heads over the top. Part way along the wall the old brick had crumbled to rubble leaving a gaping hole, half-heartedly boarded up with old pallets.

The wall continued until it gave way to a lofty box hedge which in turn gave way to two ornate stone pillars which flanked the beginnings of a sloping driveway. Keys pulled onto the drive, it was much shorter than the one at the Manor and as soon as the car pulled round the first bend the building sprung into view. A grand Victorian structure, it was smaller and more homely than the Manor had ever seemed. Keys parked the car outside the main doors and the pair sat staring up at the building. The last of the day's sunlight bounced off the door's stained glass windows, casting dancing, coloured, patterns onto the large stone pillars which supported the porch. A tide of anxiety washed over Keys as she grappled with the thought that she was abandoning her friend to another institution she didn't deserve. The pair sat in silence for a time, surveying the building from inside the car. The minutes ticked by and then Martha leant across and placed her hand on the sister's knee;

"It'll be fine."

## A History Lesson

Joyce looked out to the gardens and driveway below. The flowerbeds were a mass of vibrant colour and the lawns were littered with patches of daisies and buttercups. The trees marking the outer boundary were bursting with life, green buds opening into even greener leaves, blossom forming cotton candy clouds amongst branches, and birds singing to their newly hatched offspring as they flew back and forth delivering food. Beyond this green canopy shielding the old hall from the main road, past the large sign that read ‘CRESTWELL RESIDENTIAL CARE HOME’, Joyce could pick out the rooftops and chimneys of the town, and beyond this the open countryside and rolling hills that surrounded the valley in which the town sat. Once she would have been able to list the names of these hills without even having to think about it, the names tripping off her tongue as easily as the alphabet, but not anymore; these days names were often elusive.

Joyce noticed a figure making its way up the gravel drive towards the main doors. As it drew nearer, it became clear that the figure was a woman, young looking, wearing a short summer dress, and carrying a small rucksack on her back. Joyce watched with increasing interest as the woman made her way up the stone steps at the front of the building and disappeared from view. A moment later the clanging chime of the doorbell echoed through the building.

Lilly stood on the front steps waiting for someone to answer the door. She was not yet, as Joyce had thought, a young woman, but a schoolgirl still. As she stood waiting, she became hopeful that no-one would answer the door and that she would be able to sneak away unnoticed, escaping what she was sure was going to be a torturous few hours. She was still furious with her mother for making such a horrendous suggestion, even more furious with herself for not being able to come up with a better alternative, and practically seething at Mrs Withers for setting such an awful piece of work. Her heart sank as a figure, heavily distorted by the frosted glass, approached the door. All hopes of escape dashed, the door opened and Lilly was greeted by a woman in a blue uniform;

“Hi, you alright there?”

“Hi, I’m Lilly...” She stared at the ground, her mumbling fading into silence.

“Lilly?” The woman looked down at her kindly “Angie’s girl right? I’ve heard a lot about you. You’ve come to see Joyce, yeah?” Lilly looked up surprised. She couldn’t

imagine her mum having time to talk about her at work when she could barely make time to talk to her at home. The woman continued to smile at her “Come in then love, I’m Carys. Your mum’s just nipped up to Joyce’s room to let her know you’ve arrived, I’ll take you up.”

Carys pulled the door open wide and Lilly followed her through the door and into the entrance hall. The door closed behind them, cutting off the fresh outside and locking them into, what felt to Lilly like, an airless box. It was swelteringly hot, even in her light dress Lilly felt herself beginning to overheat. The entrance hall was fairly large, with a lounge off either side, where the home’s residents were sat watching TV, chatting, and dozing. Predominately wrapped up in heavy knitwear, they seemed oblivious to the suffocating heat that was starting to make Lilly feel lightheaded. At the far end of the hallway, next to the foot of the staircase, was a small reception area where an exhausted looking receptionist was trying in vain to reason with a lady in a pair of bright purple slippers who was furiously waving a newspaper in her face.

“Joan,” Carys explained with a smile as they approached the staircase, “She thinks she runs the place.”

Bemused, Lilly followed Carys up the stairs to the first floor. What on earth was her mother thinking suggesting she spend an afternoon in this madhouse? She couldn’t see how it was going to help her with anything. She didn’t want to be there; in fact she would rather be anywhere but here right now. Yet, behind the fear and anxiety, she knew she needed this to go well. If it didn’t there would be even worse things ahead, her mother’s anger and disappointment for a start as the plans they had made based on today going well fell apart.

The staircase led up to a large square landing with doors leading off into the residents’ rooms. At the far end was another staircase cordoned off with a chain and a sign reading “STAFF ONLY”. From within one of the rooms, Lilly could hear her mother’s voice. A door opened and Angie appeared;

“Hiya love, I was just reminding Joyce that you were coming, she’s looking forward to having a chat with you.” She smiled expectantly at her daughter but Lilly couldn’t make herself reciprocate the gesture. Carys placed a hand on Lilly’s shoulder,

“Well I’ll leave you both to it, nice to meet you Lilly.” She flashed her a smile, before turning and heading back towards the staircase.

As Carys disappeared down the stairs, Angie turned to face her daughter “Lil’, I know this is all out of your comfort zone, but remember, sometimes it’s good to push yourself. Joyce is a really lovely lady once you get her chatting, and if you’re nice and friendly I’m

sure she'll be able to give you loads of help, but if you just sit there in silence it'll be miserable for both of you." She made it sound like a threat. "Now if there's any problems press the call bell or come and find me, okay. My shift finishes at three, so if you want a lift I'll meet you by the main door at about ten past, okay, otherwise you'll have to get the bus back. I don't have time to be hanging about waiting for you." Lilly stared at the carpet, powerless to meet her mother's stern look. Angie sighed, "Lil', you've gotta' promise me you'll try. I know you'd rather sit and work in your room or in the library, but you can't for this one, and if you want to get into Fellside, you need to do well across the board. Promise me you'll give this your best shot."

Before Lilly had a chance to respond, her mother had let herself back into Joyce's room leaving Lilly alone in the corridor.

"Joyce, Lilly's arrived, my daughter. We were just talking about her, remember?" All traces of severity gone, Angie's voice was now kind and gentle. Lilly felt a stab of resentment towards the woman beyond the door for receiving more care from her mother than she did. "Lilly come in, come on." Angie beckoned her daughter into the room. "Lilly wants to talk to you about a project she's doing at school, we think you might be able to help."

Lilly shuffled into the room. It was bigger and much lighter than she'd expected. She'd imagined a care home to be filled with dark, little rooms, with shabby furniture, but Joyce's room was nothing like that. It was spacious and homely, with pictures hanging on the walls, smart armchairs, a coffee table, and huge bay windows that flooded the room with sunshine. Sat in one of the two armchairs by the window was, Lilly assumed as there was no one else in the room, Joyce. Like the room, Joyce was nothing like Lilly had imagined. There was nothing of the fragile old dear Lilly had envisaged in her at all. Instead, she was dressed in a chiffon blouse and navy slacks and wore her long hair in a braid that brushed her waist. She looked up as Lilly entered, and Lilly could tell that despite what her mother might say, this woman was most certainly not looking forward to talking to her.

Angie beamed at them both, ignoring the obvious tension filling the room, "Well, I'll leave you two to have a nice chat. Some of us have to get back to work." She turned to face Lilly, "See you later love." She gave her daughter's shoulder a quick squeeze and disappeared, leaving Lilly stood nervously on the threshold to Joyce's room.

Joyce eyed the girl up and down, assessing her. She sighed heavily.

"Well come on if you're coming in then, don't loiter in the doorway. Sit yourself down."

Lilly shuffled across the room and seated herself in the spare armchair opposite Joyce. She didn't meet the old woman's daunting gaze. She was beginning to wish Joyce was the fragile old dear she'd imagined. There was something solid about her, sturdy and unwavering. She had an air of authority about her that made Lilly feel small, as though she was in trouble and had been called into the head teacher's office.

"What did Angie say your name was?" Joyce barked. Lilly's mumbled reply was inaudible. "What was that? You'll have to speak up, my hearing's not what it is. What? Come on girl, a mouse couldn't hear what you're saying, let alone me."

Under Joyce's hard stare, the words in Lilly's mouth faded away, and again she found herself looking down at the carpet, her voice lost to her. Joyce sighed, her hard stare softening slightly at Lilly's nerves. She leaned conspiratorially across the coffee table;

"I've got some biscuits squirreled away somewhere. I quite fancy one myself, do you? Why don't I get them out for us and you can tell me all about this project and what we need to do. How does that sound?"

Using the arms of her chair to help push herself up, Joyce rose and went in search of biscuits. She was unsteady on her feet and had to hold onto the furniture as she moved across the room to retrieve the packet from one of the drawers in the bedside cabinet. Lilly, preoccupied with anxiety and attempting to extract her school folder from her bag, didn't notice.

"Erm...well...it's...it's for...it's for History...for...for one of my GCSE modules. Erm for all the other modules there's either an exam or a...a...a piece of coursework, it's er normally an essay but this time it's more of a...er...urm...a...project, like, we have to put together a scrapbook, or, or, something like that, and do a presentation."

"I see, so what's the topic?" Biscuits in hand, Joyce sank back into her chair.

"Erm...well...its...its...erm, not very clear..."

"Go on." Joyce nodded encouragingly as she opened the packet of biscuits.

"Well...its...World War Two...and looking at, at, life in, erm, Britain at that time, and we, we have to put together some kind of personal account...of...of it. So like, finding someone who lived through it or someone whose relative did and erm talking to them about it. Mrs Withers, she's my teacher, she suggested a family member, but it's only me and mum, so mum suggested you." Lilly said all this to the top of the coffee table, unable to meet Joyce's penetrating stare. Joyce slid a biscuit across the table.

“I like your mum, she always got time for everyone, not matter how busy she is.” Another pang of jealousy shot through Lilly as Joyce continued, “So what do you want to know?”

“I don’t know.” Lilly cautiously nibbled at her biscuit, still not daring to look at Joyce directly. She floundered, struggling to think of what to say, “I guess just what it was like back then.”

“That’s very vague.” Lilly didn’t respond. “I take it you want to do well?” They sat in silence for a moment both of them waiting for Lilly to find the words to answer. Eventually a whisper escaped from her lips;

“I need to.”

“Need?” Joyce raised an eyebrow.

“If I’m going to get into Fellside.”

“Fellside? Fellside Grammar?” Lilly nodded. “Why do you want, sorry, *need*, to go there so badly?”

There was another long pause as Lilly struggled to piece together her words, “I want to study History at university, but I need to get good A levels to do that, and mum says I won’t be able to do that at the school I’m in at the moment, she says it isn’t good enough and that no-one ever gets the grades that I need, so I can’t stay there, we looked at Grentham ‘cause it does the best in the local league tables but it’s a private school so we can’t afford it, which means it’s got to be Fellside, but to get in there I need get at least all B’s in the subjects I want to do at A Level, but there’s so much competition I really need to get all As to be guaranteed a place, and to get an A overall in History I *need* to get an A on this project...” Having run out of words, Lilly went quiet again, out of breath from saying so much. Redness flushed her cheeks and she looked back down at the top of the coffee table, embarrassed.

Joyce leaned back in her chair taking in everything Lilly had said. Her eyes narrowed as she assessed the nervous figure before her. Her irritation with the girl melted away, replaced instead by a mixture of pity and understanding. The pair sat in silence for a while, Lilly, her words all used up, too afraid to say anymore, and Joyce, Joyce was forming a plan. Several minutes passed, Joyce leaned forward abruptly, lowering her face to Lilly’s level, forcing her into meeting her gaze.



“If you’re going to get a good grade in this project you need to do your preparation. When you write an essay you don’t just dive in with no thought to what you want to write, or at least I hope you don’t, and if you do you need to change that if you’re planning on going to university, you won’t be able to coast by there, or at A Level for that matter. No, you start with a plan, don’t you, you do some research, you work out what points you want to make, and you starting framing your argument. You need to do the same with this. I could sit and talk about my life until the sky bruises and sun sets but who’s to say that any of it will be of any use to you. You need to go away and have a serious think about what you need to get out of talking to me, what bits of my life will be relevant to you, what you want my opinions on, how you want to present this project in the end, and a hold load of other things to boot, or we’re both just wasting our time, and at my age I don’t want to be wasting any of what little time I might have left. Come back tomorrow with a solid plan and a good set of questions, and we’ll give it proper try.”

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There was still something profoundly intimidating about the old woman Lilly thought as she scrambled to collect her notes, flicking through them to find the starting point.

“Do you want me to read it all out? It’s kinda just a mess of notes at the moment.”

“Just give me the key points so I can make sure you’ve not missed anything.” Joyce flashed a wicked smile at Lilly, “make sure you’ve been paying attention to me and not daydreaming.” Lilly made to protest but Joyce laughed and batted her comments away before she had chance to utter them, “I’m teasing you, go on, tell me all about myself then.”

“Well Joyce Elizabeth Anderson, you were born in Stepney in 1929 to Mary and Albert Anderson. Your father was a market trader; money was scarce so when the war broke out he joined up because the money was better. He died in 1940 and in 1941 you and your three brothers were evacuated to a village in Cheshire. This was partly for financial reasons as your mother was struggling for money after your father died. Your brothers were all still very young and were sent together to live on a farm just outside the village. You were older, twelve did you say? Yeah twelve, and you were separated from them and sent to live in the village with the Rigbys. They were a middle-class couple, both teachers, with no children of their own. It was a huge culture shock moving into their home as you were used to living in a small, crowded house, and you now had a bedroom to yourself. You saw your brothers a little

at school but you were in different classes so not a lot, but the Rigbys arranged for you to visit them on the farm every few weeks. You struggled a bit at school but the Rigbys helped you with your work and with their encouragement you began to really enjoy school. And erm, that's as far as we got."

Lilly sat expectantly, waiting for Joyce to comment, but the old woman remained silent; staring out of window as though she had forgotten Lilly was there.

"Joyce? Joyce are you okay?"

When no response came Lilly began to worry Joyce really had forgotten she was there or that she really couldn't hear her. She wondered whether she ought to fetch one of the care assistants to make sure Joyce was okay, but then she noticed the tears glistening in Joyce's eyes. This scared her even more. The old woman's vulnerability was more frightening to her than the possibility of her memory or her hearing failing. Unsure what to do and on the verge of tears herself, Lilly reached out and placed a hand lightly on Joyce's arm.

"Joyce...Joyce...what's the matter."

Joyce flinched slightly at Lilly's touch.

"It's just, oh I don't know, it just all sounds rather odd you know, my life as a list of dates and places, and nothing else."

"I do have more than that, you know, the details and stuff, they were the key bits. I've not missed anything important have I? It was hard to keep up and get it all written down. I can show you the other notes I didn't read out."

"I wasn't criticising, it just sounds a little strange to hear it read back like that, that's all. There's nothing wrong with what you've got, nothing at all, that is exactly what happened but it doesn't, it doesn't quite get it fully. I don't know how to explain, it, it doesn't grasp the emotion of any of it, and that's not your fault, I'm not saying that at all, but a list of bullet points doesn't convey how scary it all was. How terrified I was to leave home, I'd never been outside of London before, and being separated from such a large family and left alone with people I'd never met, it was frightening. I didn't know who was going to take me in, if they'd be kind or if they'd be cruel. I didn't know if I'd ever see my family again. I'd didn't know if I'd see London again, if there'd be any of it left by the time the war was over. I can't even begin to explain to you how that felt. My brothers were too young to fully realise what was happening. They thought it was all some great adventure, especially when they got

the farm, they thought it was wonderful. They embraced the freedom of the open fields because they thought it was just a holiday and I didn't want to shatter that illusion for them and fill them with the same fears that were swallowing me. To me that vast expanse of countryside seemed threatening; the tightness of the city seemed safe to me, being packed together feeling secure, the openness of all those fields made me feel so vulnerable."

Joyce fell silent, staring out of the window. Lilly didn't know what to say, she couldn't find any words that could even remotely describe what Joyce had made her feel. She felt a tear roll down her cheek. Joyce turned to face her;

"Oh don't you go getting upset too, it's bad enough having one maudlin old bat in here, you don't need to join in" Joyce smiled at Lilly, "It's not your fault; it's just a little odd for me that's all." Lilly went to say something but Joyce was straightening herself up. "How are you doing in your other subjects? Are you on track to get those A's?"

Lilly looked at Joyce, shoulders back, business like, and knew the moment had passed and that a veil had been drawn over the moment. She sighed, loathed to think about school and the mass of exams that were creeping closer and closer.

"I should be okay I think. That's all just exams and coursework, that's fine, I can do them, its..." she gestured around the room "...this, I'm no good at."

"And what exactly is 'this'?"

"Other...things, people, I don't know. Anything that's not just working on my own. Like you said, I've sat and listened to you talk for hours and all I've got from it is a list of facts. I can sit and write essays fine, but I'm no good at any of the other stuff."

"I'm sure that's not true."

"Is." Lilly stared at the floor.

"Don't get all surly with me Lilly. I have seen enough young people who believed they couldn't do things in my time to know that most of the time they are perfectly capable of doing anything if they really want to. It's just a case of gaining the confidence to do it, and that takes time, but you, like all of the others before, will get there, if you want to."

As Lilly left Crestwell later that evening, her rucksack filled with notes about Joyce's life, the old woman's words lingered in her head and she felt lighter than usual.

“Do you mind if I use this to record your answers?” Lilly placed a Dictaphone on the table in front of Joyce. “It must be my mum’s, I found it in a drawer at home. The last few times I’ve visited I’ve been so busy writing down your answers that I’ve not really been listening to them. I’ve been trying not to just get bullet point facts and try to get the emotion like you said but there’s only so much I can write. This way I can listen properly to what you’re saying and then write my notes up from the recording later.”

“Your mum doesn’t mind you using it?” Joyce asked, leaning over and picking the Dictaphone up off the table, turning it over in her hands to get a proper look at it. Lilly shrugged,

“I’m not sure she even knows she’s still got it, besides I’ve not really seen her to ask, she’s always so busy with work.”

“Well as long as you’re sure it’s not just making extra work for yourself.”

“It is a bit I guess, but if I make a note of what time we start, then I can mark down the time I ask each question, or when you say something I definitely want to use, then it’ll be easy for me to find the right bit of the recording. It’s fine if you don’t want to be recorded though, I don’t mind, I just thought it might make it easier for us to chat properly this way, but it’s up to you.” Lilly looked at Joyce, wide-eyed, awaiting her response. Joyce smiled at her,

“I don’t see any harm in giving it a go. If you think it’ll work better then I bow to your expertise as an interviewer.”

Lilly blushed a little as she turned on the Dictaphone. “Right, so yesterday we talked in more detail about your life living with the Rigbys and how over the years you spent with them they pushed you to do your best at school, even managing to secure you a place at a local Grammar School. When we finished you had just started telling me about what happened when the war ended. Can we pick up from there; you said your parents wrote to you asking you to come home...”

“You are getting good at this, a proper professional.” Joyce flashed Lilly a mischievous smile. “Yes my mother wrote to me, well, her priest did on her behalf, she didn’t know how, but anyway, the letter said that now the war was over she wanted me and my brothers to return to London, so we could be a family again. She’d saved up some money

which she hoped would be enough to cover our train fares and wanted me to write back immediately letting her know when we would be able to travel down. My brothers were brimming with excitement to go back home and be with our family again. Although saddened at the prospect of leaving the farm, the family they'd been staying with told them they were welcome back any time, so for them it seemed like they could have the best of both worlds. For me, I wasn't so sure. I was starting to build a life for myself and going to back to London felt like taking a step back.

“You didn't want to go home then?”

“It wasn't a case of not wanting to. I longed to be back with my family more than anything. I'd only seen my mother once since leaving home and I desperately wanted to see her again. It was just, I felt I owed it to the Rigbys to do the best that I could, to at least finish my time at school. They'd put so much effort into helping me, not only to receive an education but teaching me how to make the most of it. It had taken them a long time to convince the grammar school to even let me take the entrance exam. I was a risk, an evacuee with low literacy levels, but the Rigbys saw my potential and wouldn't take no for an answer. It didn't seem fair to them if I threw it all away. On top of that, not that I told anyone this at the time, I had hopes of becoming a teacher myself.”

“So what did you do?”

“I wrote to my mother and told her I couldn't move back. We exchanged a few, fairly frank letters, until she got a train to come and see me, to try to convince me to go back with her. It was a fairly fraught meeting but in the end, with some help from the Rigbys, she saw how much school meant to me and we came to an agreement that I would live with the Rigbys during term time and would spend the holidays in London. Understandably, I don't think she was overly happy with the arrangement.

“What happened when you finished school? Did you go back to London then?”

“No.” Joyce chuckled, “and my mother was even less happy about that. I think she'd convinced herself that I would, but by then I decided that teaching was what I wanted to do. So, after a lot of hard work, and a lot of help from the Rigbys, and from my teachers, I managed to get a scholarship for a teacher training course in Manchester. It was the best thing I ever did. A few years there taught me so much about the real world, I met so many

interesting people, and formed my own opinion about things, and at the end of it all I got to go back and to teach at my old school.”

“Why go back there” Lilly asked, confused “If you’d learnt so much from going to new places why didn’t you move on somewhere else, or go back to London and work there and be near your family?”

“That school did so much for me; I wanted to return the favour. It also meant I got to help children like me. You know, children from poor backgrounds, children who had so much potential but no-one to focus it, the underdogs that made their way through the school halls were always my favourites. Not that any good teacher has favourites mind.” She winked at Lilly. “It was such a fantastic time to be thrown into the adult world.” Joyce’s face lit up as she spoke, her eyes bright. “I got to be part of the post-war socialist utopia, witness the building of the welfare state and the NHS, it was incredible. It didn’t last but at the time, and as silly as this sounds, I truly felt like I was part of a generation helping build a better world.”

As Lilly lent across the table to turn off the Dictaphone, she looked Joyce straight in the eye.

“I don’t think that sounds silly at all.”

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Lilly stood on the front steps waiting for someone to answer the door. The summer sun blasted down on her as she bounced impatiently from one foot to the other. Usually she would have dreaded the prospect of entering the furnace of the care home but today she was desperate to get up to Joyce’s room and fill her in on everything.

In her hand Lilly clutched a large brown envelope, its edges slightly worn from where she had been grasping it. Despite all Lilly’s fears that her History project had been a complete disaster, Joyce had repeatedly told her that she was sure this wasn’t true and now the papers inside the creased envelope not only proved Joyce correct, but also secured Lilly a place at Fellside Grammar School come September. Lilly felt that things couldn’t really have gone any better. She knew Joyce would be pleased for her. Lilly had visited her the day before, filled with nerves about her impending result and in need of reassurance. Joyce had been quieter than usual, claiming a slight cold, but had still managed to say the right thing to make Lilly feel better and now Lilly wanted to return the favour. She was sure her news would

bring a smile to Joyce's face and she so desperately wanted her friend to be proud of her, to validate her achievement.

Just as she was starting to give up hope that anyone was ever going to let her in. Carys' distorted figure appeared behind the glass and the door opened. Bursting with excitement, Lilly waved the envelope frantically in front of Carys' face, ducking past her and running across the hall towards the staircase.

"Lilly wait!"

Carys' voice echoed through the empty entrance hall, there was an edge to it that cut through Lilly's bubble of exuberance. She paused, her foot hovering above the first step of the staircase. "Come and see your mum."

"Why?"

"Just come and see her."

"I promised I'd tell Joyce first. Mum said that was fine, I'll come back down as soon I've told Joyce."

"You need to go and see your mum."

There was an edge to Carys' voice that told Lilly that this was something more than her mum wanting to know about her exam results.

"What's the matter?"

"Just come with me."

As she followed Carys past the reception and down one of the many lengthy corridors, Lilly's anxiety raised its head. It spread across her chest, gripping it tightly. Something was wrong, she could tell. Her mum never asked to see her when she arrived, she was always too busy. Lilly rarely saw her mum when she visited Joyce, not until she met her back downstairs at the end of her shift. Part of her wished she'd ignored Carys and ran straight upstairs to Joyce, avoiding whatever was about to happen to her now.

They reached a door marked 'Senior Care Office', Carys knocked and entered. Lilly followed her in. Her mother was sat doing paperwork at a desk so covered in piles of paper that its surface could barely be seen. Angie stood up as they entered, moving herself around to the front of the desk. She looked exhausted. She attempted a smile for Lilly but only

managed a grimace. Carys gave them both a forced smile, "I'll leave you to it." and left, closing the door behind her,

"Mum?"

Lilly's voice trembled slightly as she looked at her mother's ashen face. Angie sank into the sagging couch that filled the only part of the room not taken over by filing cabinets. "Come and sit down Lil." She looked at Lilly almost pleadingly and patted the space next to her.

"What's going on Mum? Has something happened? Is Joyce okay?"

For a moment Angie didn't say anything. She stroked her daughter's cheek gently with the back of her hand, brushing a stray bit of hair out of her face and tucking it behind her ear.

"Well you know she wasn't very well yesterday, well by the time she went to bed she was feeling a lot worse. One of the girls went to check on her a bit later and she was struggling to breathe so we had to call an ambulance and get her taken to hospital."

Lilly's eyes widened "Is she okay now? Is she back yet or is she still in hospital?"

"No love, she..."

"No what? No she's not back or no she's not in hospital?"

"Lil, she's not coming back, she..."

"You mean she has to stay in hospital."

"Sweetheart, I'm so sorry..."

"No...no..." Lilly felt her chest tightened as panic began to spread through her like wild fire "No mum...please..."

"She didn't make it, I'm sorry Lil."

"You mean...you mean...she...that she..."

"She died, sweetheart, early this morning; the hospital said it was very peaceful."



The tears rolled thick and fast down Lilly's cheeks. Angie reached for her daughter, arms wide; Lilly collapsed into her embrace and burrowed her head into her mother's chest. Wrapping her arms fiercely around her, Angie held her daughter tight against her body, as though the wall of arms would protect her child from all the heartache and sadness in the world. Lilly's muffled sobs reverberated through her and a tear rolled down Angie's cheek as she realised it was too late.

## The Inspector

“Morning, Joan Fraser, Health Authority Inspector, the manager should be expecting me.”

The woman by the trolley didn't look up. “She's on the phone.”

“I see. Well is the deputy manager around at all?”

The woman kept her eyes firmly fixed on the mass of cups and saucers in front of her.

“She's on meds round, can't be disturbed. If you sit in the lounge I'll bring you a drink.”

Joan made her way into the larger of the two lounges where a number of the home's residents were sitting watching television. She settled herself into one of the empty chairs and waited for the manager to finish her phone call. The programme on television was about Martin and Janet, a couple who wanted to relocate from their small house in the city suburbs to an old farmhouse somewhere in the South Downs. Martin wanted plenty of outbuildings where he could fulfil his dream of restoring classic cars, whilst Janet wanted a spacious kitchen and a large garden. Joan sighed deeply, God she hated daytime T.V., it was always the same, whichever home she visited. Just as the presenter was informing Martin and Janet that it was proving difficult to meet both parties' needs within their modest budget, and Joan was starting to lose the will to live, a young woman wearing a green polka dot dress entered the room.

“Morning everyone, how are we all doing today?”

The woman bounced across the room, flicking off Martin, Janet, and their countryside dream, in favour of some lively blues music. The woman then proceeded to dance her way around the room stopping to say ‘Good Morning’ and to have a brief chat, and in some cases, a small dance with each resident. When she reached Joan she did a double take, immediately followed by a huge smile.

“Hello, I didn't spot you there.”

“Are you the manager?”

“No, not me, I'm Jayne the Activities Co-ordinator. Carol's the manager; she's in her office at the moment though.”

“Does she know I’m here, I’m supposed to have a meeting with her.”

“I’m sure she’ll be with you as soon as she can, you’re welcome to join in with us until then if you like.” Jayne beamed at her. “We’re doing gardening this morning.”

Then with a wink and grin, she was off, bustling around setting up a long trestle table in the centre of the lounge, covering it with polythene, and setting out trays of plants, an assortment of decorative plant pots, and pots of compost, all the while chattering away to the residents and twirling around to the music in her petticoated dress whilst they watched her, mostly smiling and laughing along with her. Once the table had been set up and a few chairs pulled up around it, Jayne went around the room asking each resident in turn if they wanted to join in. Some were thrilled, some flat out refused, and others appeared not to follow what was being asked of them and simply nodded and smiled.

“You coming to give us a hand then, Joan?”

Joan was momentarily taken aback by this stranger knowing her name, but then again, her inspection had probably been mentioned in briefing, so really it wasn’t so strange. She checked her watch; she really wanted to have had a briefing with the manager by now and be on her way. Although, she mused, it probably wasn’t a bad idea to join in with the activities, at least then she’d have a thorough idea of how to rate that aspect of the home in her report. She returned Jayne’s expectant smile and joined her at the table.

“Lovely stuff, sit here between Henry and Siân.”

Jayne pointed to a spare seat between a bemused looking gentleman and a severe looking care assistant. Joan settled herself down and, on Jayne’s instruction, began transferring the seedlings into the patterned pots. She noticed that to her side, Henry’s arthritic fingers were preventing him from removing the seedlings from their plastic tray and he was becoming increasingly frustrated. Leaving her own plants to one side, Joan endeavoured to help him but he batted her away so forcefully that she gave it up as a bad job. Meanwhile, to her other side, Siân was trying, without much success, to stop the lady on her other side from sprinkling handfuls of compost all over herself as though it was fairy dust.

Joan checked her watch again; she’d been in the home almost an hour now. Feeling a bit peeved that none of the senior staff seemed to be acknowledging that she had arrived; Joan excused herself from the mess of the gardening table and went in search of the manager’s office. Unfamiliar with the layout of the building, it took her a while to find the

right door, having twice almost let herself into a resident's bedroom by mistake. These old buildings with their winding corridors and wonky walls weren't exactly ideal for a residential home, not like the newer built-for-purpose buildings. However, unlike the larger multisite homes, the old buildings retained more of a homely feel, which on the whole Joan preferred.

Having eventually found the right door, Joan knocked, and after hearing a muffled "Come in" from the other side, entered. At the far side of the room, behind a desk covered in neat piles of paperwork, sat the manager. She was relatively young, compared to most others Joan had encountered in her position and clearly prided herself on her organisation. The office was spotless. Although small, and crammed to the brim with various files, documents, and other necessary resources, everything had its place. Each folder and drawer had been labelled with a detailed description of its contents, the latest policy and procedure guidelines had been hung on the walls, along with a carefully colour-coded staff roster, and on the wall next to the door where Joan stood hung a large whiteboard showing a hand drawn floorplan of the building, complete with occupancy details for each room. The office was so organised that had Joan asked to see a specific document she knew the manager would promptly be able to retrieve it from the correct file. Joan instantly liked the woman.

"Hello, Joan Fraser, Health Authority, here to do the inspection, just wanted a quick chat before I get started."

The manager didn't look up.

"Morning, Joan, sorry now isn't a great time, I'm snowed under. I'll see you at our two thirty meeting."

Joan was confused. As far as she knew, no such meeting had been arranged. She always made a point of speaking with a home manager at the beginning and at the end of her inspection. A scheduled meeting, shoehorned into the middle of an afternoon, was not how she operated. She felt as though this manager was creating fictions in an attempt to avoid her. Then again it was possible it was just an administrative error and her secretary had simply forgotten to put it in her diary, it wouldn't be the first time.

That aside, Joan still felt miffed. She was annoyed by the manager's dismissive attitude. She was used to managers being overly attentive, either keen to show off their hard work or else desperately trying to get her on side so she wouldn't score them too harshly in her report. In some cases, managers had been known to stick to her like glue for the duration of the inspection, trying to steer her away from anything bad she might pick up on, and

preventing her from talking to the staff and finding out what was really going on. Joan was used to most behaviour from managers but what she wasn't used to, was being ignored. Her feelings of warmth towards the young manager evaporated almost as quickly as they had arrived.

“I appreciate you're busy, we all are, but I really think it would be better if we..”

“I know, I'm sorry, I just need to get all this paper work done and then I'm yours this afternoon.”

“I'd prefer to talk to you before I start my inspec...”

“I know Joan but..”

“Really now, it is customary to..”

The manager's head shot up seemingly confused.

“Look, work with me here, Joan, we always have our meetings at half past two, every time, always half past two.”

Now it was Joan's turn to be confused. Always half past two? Every time? Did this manager not realise she'd never inspected here before? How did she expect Joan to know these things? It was really quite thoughtless of her and she was about to say as much but the distracted look on the manager's face and the dark circles under her eyes told her it wasn't worth it. Instead, she forced her face into what she hoped would be a kindly smile;

“Right then, half two it is then.”

The manager made a noncommittal noise and buried her head back into her paperwork, which Joan took as a sign it was time for her to leave.

Shaking her head in mild disbelief, Joan left the office and began making her way back to the entrance hall. She was sympathetic toward the manager in some ways, tied to her desk all day when she would most likely prefer to be on the floor with her staff and spending more time with her residents. Joan had seen the same thing in numerous other homes and she didn't like it. In her opinion it was better for everyone if a manager spent less time shut away in their office, the staff worked better and morale on a whole was improved. She'd mentioned it in her reports many times but nothing ever came of it. If anything, over the years she'd seen

managers spend more and more time behind closed doors. Still, she made a note to mention it again.

Arriving back by the front doors, Joan found the care staff leading the residents into the dining room. Siân, the severe care assistant from the gardening table was there and insisted, quite forcefully, that Joan join the residents for lunch, ignoring Joan's protestations that she had a packed lunch waiting for her in the car, and so once again Joan found herself ushered into a room and told to sit and wait. She supposed it wasn't that unusual really, most homes she visited offered her lunch, although she usually ate in the manager's office and not with the residents in the dining room. Seeing a lady sat alone at a table, Joan went to sit with her. She tried to engage her in conversation but the woman simply smiled at her absentmindedly and patted her on the knee.

A hot trolley of food appeared in the doorway, followed by a burly and bearded man in chef whites. He served the food onto plates, which Siân then delivered to tables, followed by the kitchen assistant with a selection of vegetables. Joan was pleasantly surprised by the food. Over the many years she had been an inspector she had sampled some fairly awful care home catering, which was partly the reason she had started carrying a packed lunch with her. The plate of food in front of her however, appeared to be restaurant quality. A substantial piece of fish coated in a herb crust, with a side of steaming potatoes and fresh greens. It tasted wonderful. She was convinced she'd never tasted anything so good in any of the homes she'd visited before. Joan was so focused on eating her own food; it wasn't until she'd cleared her plate of the last morsel that she noticed the woman sharing her table hadn't taken a single mouthful. Instead she was slowly moving the food around her plate with her fork. Joan tried to get her attention, asking if she was hungry and if she needed any help but the woman didn't seem to hear her. Joan tried miming eating the food but the woman didn't pay her any attention. Worried that the woman was going to go without food, Joan scooped a small amount of food onto the fork and tried to feed it to the woman.

"Don't do that." Siân appeared at her elbow. "Don't pester her, if she doesn't want to eat it she doesn't have to. It's not your job to try and force feed her."

Joan started to protest that she was only trying to help but Siân had already moved on to a different table. Realising that she wasn't going to get anywhere, Joan left the other woman to push her peas around the plate and went in search of the kitchen. She wanted to compliment the chef on the excellent food and get her food hygiene inspection done whilst

she was at it. If the standard of the food was anything to go by, she was sure the chef would pass with flying colours.

She was unsure where the kitchen was but her instincts told her it wouldn't be far from the dining room. She spotted a lift, entered it, and pressed the button that would take her to the basement floor. For a moment the lift didn't move, for a fleeting moment Joan had an image of her being trapped in there and having to be rescued. She had never like lifts much, but then with a rather severe jolt, the lift began to descend. With another forceful jolt, the lift stopped, the doors opened, and Joan stepped out into a large, brightly lit kitchen.

First glance told her it was in better state than some kitchens she'd seen over the years. There were no dirty pans lying around and the surfaces appeared to be clean and shining. On the end of the central island, rows of dessert dishes were laid out, each filled with a portion of cheese cake, ready to be taken upstairs as soon as the residents had finished their main course. To Joan the whole operation seemed to be perfectly organised.

Joan was just beginning to wonder where the chef was when she saw a plume of smoke appear in one of the high windows running around the top of the basement room. She couldn't abide chefs smoking, especially so near the kitchen, it was unhygienic. They could wash their hands all they liked but the smell would still linger about them and that couldn't be good for the food they were handling. If she had her way chefs wouldn't be able to smoke during their shifts at all but she knew this would never happen, it was the same with care staff. Nevertheless, Joan marched over the fire exit, carelessly left open, and let herself out onto the stone steps that led back up to ground level. At the top of the steps there was what appeared to be a ramshackle garden shed made out of scrap timber and corrugated Perspex leaning against the outer wall of the main building. Through the sagged mesh door, emblazoned with a large 'DO NOT DISTURB' sign, Joan could see the chef, slumped in a faded garden chair, surrounded by tomato plants and engulfed by the fug of smoke. The man looked worn out. Joan sighed, she supposed it was the stress of the job that drove people to smoking so much. She sympathised but still didn't condone it. Unable to bring herself to deliver the telling off she had prepared, she shook her head and retreated back down the stairs and into the kitchen.

The upside to the chef occupying himself with a packet of cigarettes, Joan thought, was that she would at least be able to carry out a thorough inspection of the kitchen cupboards undisturbed. She worked meticulously, assessing each cupboard in turn, working her way through the dried goods, onto the fridges, and finally onto the freezers, on the

lookout for anything that might be past its best. Closing the door on the last of the large freezers, Joan suddenly found herself standing face to face with the kitchen assistant.

“What are you doing in here? You’re not allowed in here? Kitchen staff only.”

Unwilling to waste more energy explaining herself to clueless staff, Joan quickly apologised and excused herself from the kitchen. It was becoming clear that information about visitors wasn’t being passed on to staff, as well as a wider concern of staff attitude to said visitors. Unimpressed, Joan took the lift back up to the ground floor and set off down the maze of corridors for her two thirty meeting with the manager.

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Joan sat on one of the chairs in the entrance hall by the main doors waiting. All in all it hadn’t been a bad day really. Her meeting with the home manager had gone better than she had anticipated. She had listened carefully to what Joan had to say, conceded that improvements needed to be made, and had been very responsive to Joan’s suggestions. As she sat there, a young care assistant, barely out of school, approached her to ask if she was alright. Joan told her she was waiting for her lift home to arrive and for some reason this made the girl look worried and she scuttled quickly away. Shortly after another carer approached her;

“Are you okay, Joan?”

“Yes thank you, just waiting for my lift.”

“Who’s coming for you?”

“My mother.”

“Your mother?” The girl raised her eyebrows.

“Yes.”

“Okay then.”

The woman gave her a fake smile and walked away to the far end of the entrance hall where the young worried carer was stood. Joan watched her as they stood talking in hushed tones; occasionally throwing the odd look in Joan’s direction. She chose to ignore them, silly young girl’s with nothing better to do.



A few moments passed, then a few more, and a few more after that. Joan felt she'd been forgotten. She left her chair by the door and went in search of a telephone so she could ring home. She wandered the corridors trying to find the manager's office with little success. When she did eventually find it, the door was locked, the manager, her shift over, had gone home.

Joan wandered further down the corridor until she found a door marked 'Senior Care Office', she knocked and entered.

"Excuse me, sorry to disturb you, my mother appears to be running late, do you have a phone I could use to ring home and check all's okay?"

The Senior sat behind the desk didn't look up. "Only staff are allowed to use the phone."

"I realise but..."

"I'm sorry, staff only."

"I only want to..."

"I don't make the rules, you'll have to take it up with the manager."

"Her door's locked."

"She'll have gone home."

"Oh come on, I just want to phone my family."

The Senior finally looked up meeting Joan's glare with a steely look "Your family know you're here Joan."

This was too much for Joan.

"What on Earth are you talking about? Oh never mind, this is ridiculous." Furious, Joan stormed out of the office and returned to the chair by the door.

Outside the sky had grown dark. Streetlights cast an orange glow along the road, and curtains began to be drawn. Inside, Joan was still sat by the door, her eyes closed, her head dropping. She felt a pressure on her knee and stirred a little,

"Joan."

Slowly she opened her eyes. A girl in uniform knelt before her, gently shaking her knee to rouse her.

“Come on Joan, I think it’s time for bed.”

“My family” she murmured “they’ll be waiting for me.”

“Your family know you’re here Joan, it’s all been organised.”

“I don’t under...”

“Your son organised it for you Joan, for you to come and have a little stay here.”

“No.” Her head felt muddled, nothing seemed to make sense anymore. “You’re staying here with us tonight Joan, you’ve got your room here all set up.”

“My room?” Nothing made sense.

“Yes Joan, room three” The floor felt as though it were moving under her.

“Room three?” She felt unsteady on her feet.

“Yes Joan, room three.” She began to sway.

“Room three.” The words sounded familiar in her mouth, room three, room three, room three.

She allowed the girl to help her to her feet, then take hold of her hand and lead her away from the door, into the lift, up to the first floor, and down yet another winding corridor, until they reached a door labelled “Room 3: Joan Fraser”

“Here we are Joan, room three.”

Joan let go of the girl’s hand and pushed open the door. It was a good sized en suite room, with a bay window opposite the door, that during daylight hours overlooked the driveway and front lawns, but now it was dark and the girl had followed her in and was drawing the curtains. To one side there was a wardrobe and a dressing table littered with cards and photographs. On closer inspection, the photographs seemed to be mainly of her two sons and an assortment of children, with an older woman that she didn’t recognise, as well as a few faded photographs of a young nurse. Against the other wall was a single bed covered in a faded patchwork quilt. Joan was drawn towards the quilt, it seemed familiar to her. She sat

down on the edge of the bed and stroked the worn patches fondly. She knew this quilt, she had made it for someone, or had someone made it for her? She couldn't recall. As for what it was doing here, she couldn't figure out at all.

The girl was bustled around the room, chattering away as she did so, but Joan wasn't listening. Her eyes had come to rest on the photo frame sitting on the bedside table. It held an old black and white photograph, faded like the quilt, of a young couple on their wedding day. The pair were standing on the steps of the church, their faces caught mid-laugh and a shower of confetti hung frozen above their heads. Joan knew that couple well but she couldn't place their faces. Out of nowhere she recalled that moments after the photograph was taken, the heavens opened and the whole wedding party had had to make a mad dash in torrential rain across the church yard and to the reception in the dry haven of the village hall. Joan ran her hand gently across the frame, her fingers softly stroking against the couple's faces. A smile slowly spread across her face;

“Jack.”

## **The Man Who Disappeared: Exploring Dementia in Short Fiction**

### **The Portfolio**

*The Man Who Disappeared (TMWD)* is a short-story cycle exploring ideas of dementia and the self. The collection experiments with point of view demonstrating that there are multiple and varying perspectives from which dementia can be viewed. The full length collection comprises of fifteen or so stories that each tell a different version of dementia and the implications of the disease on the self, but that sit cohesively together to tell a full narrative of the disease. Within these stories broader themes of aging and institutionalisation are also addressed. The creative writing portfolio is an extract of this larger collection and consists of a selection of stories specifically chosen as they reflect the wider topics addressed in the full collection. Like the full length collection, the portfolio opens with the title story 'The Man Who Disappeared' ('TMWD'). Acting as a prologue to the narratives that follow, 'TMWD' is an introduction to dementia designed to contextualise the rest of the collection. 'The Flood' follows on from the loss of self narrative in 'TMWD' and incorporates themes of loneliness and isolation. 'The Inspector' twists the loss of self narrative to show that is possible for a person to live with dementia and still retain the core of who they are. Whilst 'Keys' and 'A History Lesson' explore the broader issues of old age and institutionalisation.

### **Introduction**

The Alzheimer's Society annual report states at in 2015, 850,000 people in the UK were living with dementia (2015, p.11). Considering how likely it is that dementia will impact on all our lives in some way, it is talked about very little. Like with any mental health condition, there is a certain amount of stigma attached to a dementia diagnosis. It seems that dementia is either ignored or wildly misrepresented not only by the media, but in literature and film as well. There is a huge amount of emphasis on the terrifying loss of self narrative and I aim to demonstrate that by not solely focusing on this stereotype, and instead addressing the disease from multiple points of view, *TMWD* is able contribute to a broader and more representative canon of dementia literature. As a short story cycle, *TMWD*, is able to present a broad but unified picture of dementia, in the same way that James Joyce and Michelle Green have used the format to portray a paralysed Ireland and a war-torn Sudan, retrospectively. I will show that the loss of self narrative dominates much of the dementia literature from novels by the likes of Liz Moore and Melvyn Bragg, to short films like Hazel Hayes', *Dementia*. Whilst acknowledging that the loss of self is significant to the dementia narrative, it is but one part of

a much more complex subject and is a very narrow viewpoint from which to survey the whole topic. *TMWD* aims to present a broader picture of the disease incorporating and reflecting the many different narratives of dementia, of course addressing the loss of self narrative but without allowing it to dominate the collection. In order to do this, *TMWD* experiments with point of view. Looking at the disease through the eyes of the person with dementia, their carers, friends, and even dementia itself, not only allows the collection to show many varied dementia experiences but also provides room to address the broader issues that come with dementia such as aging and institutionalisation.

### **The Short Story Cycle**

In *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* (1989), Susan Garland Mann refers to the short story cycle as “the concept of the unified short story collection”. Put simply, a collection of short stories held together by a strong thematic link. The narratives featured in a short story cycle can be read as stand-alone narratives, yet when read a part of a whole portray a broader view of their “unified” concept. A classic example of this sub-genre of the short-story is James Joyce’s *The Dubliners*; a key text in the modernist canon. Joyce uses the format of the short story cycle to allow himself to portray *his* Ireland. Writing against the stereotype of Ireland portrayed by the Irish Literary Renaissance, Joyce’s social commentary was considered daring as the *Dubliners* stories were viewed as shocking and immoral. The unifying theme running through Joyce’s collection is paralysis. From Father Flynn’s death by paralysis in the opening pages, to Conroy’s party in ‘The Dead’, Joyce’s characters are living in a constant state of paralysis. They are bound by social standing, class boundaries, and money, in a Dublin that is presented as equally unable to move forwards as its inhabitants. The characters in *Dubliners* all belong to the lower middle classes and Joyce portrays them as living in precarious state, always on the edge of dropping into the lower classes; Eveline desperately struggles to feed her family, whilst Little Chandler will never fulfil his dreams of becoming a poet as he is trapped by his marriage and his work. ‘Eveline’ demonstrates the state of paralysis most clearly as the young girl tries to escape with the boy she loves only to find herself at the docks unable to step onto the boat. Joyce explores his characters responses to their surroundings with each story featuring its own epiphanic moment, such as Eveline’s realisation that she cannot leave Dublin. Whilst the stories in *Dubliners* can be read individually, when read together as a thematically linked collection, these epiphanic moments come together to create something larger than themselves.

A more recent example of the short story cycle is Michelle Green's, 2015 collection, *Jebel Marra*. In 2005, Green spent six months in West Darfur, Sudan, working for a humanitarian aid agency during a period of extreme conflict. On returning to the UK she began writing about her experiences. In Green's own words, the stories explore "the complexities of the ongoing war in Darfur" drawing from both her own experiences and extensive research, they are fictional but "all rooted in a particular time and place." (Green, 2015). In fifteen stories, Green tells the narrative of the conflict through fifteen distinct voices. From soldiers and politicians, to aid workers and children, each story delivers an individual experience of the crisis. Like *Dubliners*, the stories in *Jebel Marra* can be read as stand-alone narratives, but when read as a unified collection Green's stories give a broad understanding of what it must be like to live through such a devastating conflict. The stories in *Jebel Marra* are so connected it is possible to view it not just as a short story cycle, but as a composite novel. There has been much debate concerning the defined difference between the short story cycle and the composite novel. Dunn and Morris state in *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* that,

"...*composite novel* and *short story cycle* are terms diametrically opposed in their generic implications and assumptions. *Composite novel* emphasises the integrity of the whole, whilst *short story cycle* emphasises the integrity of the parts." (Dunn, Morris, 1995, p.12)

Malcolm Cowley puts it more simply, describing the composite novel as lying "midway between the novel proper and a mere collection of short stories" (Dunn, Morris, 1995, p.3). Whilst *Jebel Marra* is without doubt a short story cycle, the collection also contains elements of the composite novel as within the collection, Green has written characters that appear in multiple stories giving the collection the "integrity of the whole" Dunn and Morris refer to.

*TMWD* can also be viewed as a short-story cycle and, like *Jebel Marra*, to some extent a composite novel. In *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*, Nagal states that;

"In the short-story cycle each component work must stand alone (with a beginning, middle, and end) yet be enriched in the context of the interrelated stories." (Nagal, 2004, p.15)

This is true both of not only *Dubliners* and *Jebel Marra*, but also *TMWD*. Each story within the collection can be read as an individual narrative, each telling its own story about

dementia. However, when read together, the stories tell a broader, more detailed, and more accurate dementia narrative. Not only do the themes and messages of the stories overlap and strengthen each other but, like *Jebel Marra*, *TMWD* contains aspects of the composite novel as characters appear in more than one of the collection's stories. Carys, the friendly care assistant in 'A History Lesson' appears as the protagonist in the much darker narrative 'The Kindest Thing'. Not featured in the portfolio sample, 'The Kindest Thing' sees Carys battle with the ethics of assisted dying, determining that a patient's 'self' has been lost to dementia and that keeping her alive is a form of cruelty. Similarly, the 'The Escape Artist' sees the character Keys become a more well-rounded and complex character as the narrative demonstrates her own struggle with dementia. Utilising the format of the short story cycle and incorporating elements of the composite novel strengthens the unified themes of *TMWD*.

### **Dementia Defined**

Dementia is an umbrella term that refers to a number of symptoms caused by degenerative conditions affecting the brain. These conditions include; Alzhiemers (the most common form of dementia), vascular dementia (caused by a stroke), and Korsakoff's Syndrome (associated with heavy alcohol use over a long period of time), (Alzheimer's Society, 2016). Dementia affects each person differently but generally symptoms include a loss of memory, disorientation and confusion, communication difficulties, and changes in temperament. A person with dementia may be able to maintain a good quality of life for a number of years after diagnosis, but generally symptoms will become more severe over time. Typically dementia diagnoses are split into three stages, Early, Intermediate, and Late. Early stage symptoms include problems with short term memory, difficulties carrying out daily tasks, loss of words, and changeable emotions. At Intermediate stage these symptoms will increase in severity and a person may also develop difficulties in recognising people and objects, lose track of time, and experience changes in behaviour. Finally, at Late stage both short-term and long-term memory will suffer, a person will find it hard to follow a conversation and to recognise family member, and will have extensive care needs (Bupa, 2016). I began writing *TMWD* after being inspired by my own experiences of dementia. In 2015 I spent six months working as an activities coordinator for a leading dementia care provider. I was based at a single-site residential care home where the majority of residents had some form of dementia diagnosis or memory problem. My role meant that I spent a lot of time working with residents both one-to-one and also as a group, which allowed me to observe the huge variety of ways dementia can affect people. For some the symptoms seemed to come and go, others

appeared to be permanently living in some kind of alternative reality, and some were very conscious of what was happening to them; aware that they were losing a part of themselves. I met some extremely interesting people during my time working for the care home, many of whom inspired the characters featured in *TMWD*.

### **Dementia in Literature: The Loss of Self**

There is a common fear surrounding dementia that the effects it has on a person's memory will make them lose part of themselves. It is a narrative that is seen over and over again in dementia literature from Melvyn Bragg's *Grace and Mary*, to Liz Moore's *The Unseen World*. The 'self' is defined as "distinct individuality or identity of a person or thing; one's basic nature; one's own welfare or interests" (Collins English Dictionary, 2016, p.520), and these loss of self narratives imply that a dementia diagnosis strips a person of everything that makes them who they are.

Melvyn Bragg's novel *Grace and Mary* is a prime example of such a narrative. Like much of Bragg's work, *Grace and Mary* is semi-autobiographical, based on the last of years of his mother's life. The novel flits between two timelines, the present where John watches his mother, Mary become consumed by her dementia, and the past, which John creates for his maternal grandmother, Grace. It is, as Bragg describes "two stories intertwined, two women that span the century" (SceptreBooks, 2013). Mary displays many of the common symptoms of dementia, forgetfulness, confusion, and later, mood swings as she becomes loud and rude toward the other residents in the care home. As her condition deteriorates, John becomes less and less to see the woman in front of him as his mother, instead he feels like he is "watching the closing down of a machine" (Bragg, 2014, p.49). As the novel progresses, Bragg becomes more dramatic in his use of language referring to the situation as a "wreckage" (p.75) and Mary as being "in the derelict waste of the world's end" (p.163). Bragg's emotive language is a tool to reflect John's growing desperation. Although the title suggests the novel will concentrate on Grace and Mary it is also heavily focused on John and how he comes to terms with his mother's condition. For much of the book he is fixated with trying to find a cure for his mother and it is not until the latter stages of the novel that he "finally come(s) to the conclusion that she would never again be as she had been before" a seemingly "obvious conclusion" but one it takes "some time to accept" (ibid., p.199). In an article for the Guardian, Alex Preston writes that Bragg's novel reminds us that "dementia is about the destruction of narrative, the dissolution of the past" about a "man losing his mother" (Preston, 2013). Bragg disagrees stating that *Grace and Mary* "isn't the [most] miserable book, its



celebratory” but despite his claims, or intentions for that matter, *Grace and Mary* contributes to the mass of dementia literature that focuses on loss and the heartbreak.

Although vastly different from *Grace and Mary* in many ways, Liz Moore’s novel, *The Unseen World* bares some striking resemblances to Bragg’s novel. Also following two timelines, Moore’s novel takes place in the 1980s as the young Ada witnesses her computer scientist father, David, develop dementia, and in the late noughties as Ada discovers the final pieces of the puzzle that makes up David’s mysterious life. Like *Grace and Mary*, *The Unseen World* is told from the perspective of a child watching their parent become consumed by the disease, however unlike John, Ada is still a young child. Her teenage years become blighted by her father’s illness and the discovery of his assumed identity. In *Grace and Mary*, John views his mother’s decline as the closing down of a machine, Moore take this a step further and David becomes the machine, specifically his beloved creation ELIXIR. Ada observes how his speech changes, reminding her “of the way ELIXIR had been given a set of responses to use when nothing else was available” (Moore, 2016, p.137). Like ELIXIR, David develops a set of stock phrases which he reverts to, not just mimicking, but becoming his own creation. More distressing for Ada, is that as David’s dementia progresses he reverts back to his old identity, Harold. Ada effectively loses her father twice. Her physical father is taken from her by dementia and her memories of him are taken away by the revelation that David was never really David at all.

I have stated that it is important not to become fixated on the loss of self narrative; however it is important to address it as part of a wider dementia narrative. Two of the stories in *TMWD* do just that, the title story and ‘The Flood’. However, they differ from both *Grace and Mary* and *The Unseen World*, in that rather than focusing on the outside perspective of a relative, both ‘TMWD’ and ‘The Flood’ focus on the person with dementia. In *Shaking Hands with Death*, Terry Pratchett refers to dementia as a “very, very slow-motion car crash”:

“Nothing much seems to be happening. There’s an occasional little bang, a crunch, a screw pops out and spins across the dashboard as if we’re in Apollo 13. But the radio is still playing, the heater is on and it doesn’t seem all that bad, except for the certain knowledge that sooner or later you will definitely be going headfirst through the windscreen.” (Pratchett, 2014, p.33)

This was the effect I wanted to create in opening moments of *TMWD*. ‘TMWD’ acts as a prologue or abstract for the narratives that follow, introducing the disease and the monster

that is being battled against throughout the rest of the collection. Within the story dementia becomes personified as 'It', a monster that possesses and wages war against the body imprisoning its host within their own self. The monster's actions start off small but, as Pratchett states, the end result is inevitable. 'TMWD' clearly presents some of the most common dementia symptoms, memory loss, difficulty problem solving and carrying out daily tasks, as well as some of the more severe forms for disorientation and misrecognition. Throughout the story It plays games with the man, enjoying the confusion it can cause. One of the first key moments of misremembrance is when the man forgets how to eat the banana;

“He knew some fruits like oranges needed to be peeled before you could eat them, yet with others like apples and pears one simply bit in to it, skin and all, but of bananas he could not recall.”

Samantha Harvey's novel *The Wilderness*, contains a similar scene in which the protagonist Jake attempts to make an omelette but becomes confused by the egg shells, unsure if they are “packets that you throw away or apple skins that you eat” (Harvey, 2010, p.40). Harvey's novel is littered with small moments and actions like this that speak volumes about Jake's deteriorating condition. Told from his point of view, *The Wilderness* shows the deterioration of Jake's memory through his own thoughts and demonstrates how he creates ways of working around this in order to continue living a normal life. Jake develops a method of “casting” for memories, “forcing himself into them” in order to “connect” and “establish a continuity of time” (Harvey, 2010, p.8). As the novel progresses and Jake's symptoms worsen, Harvey “disorientate(s) the reader with the revelation that none of Jake's memories is (sic) reliable” (Webber, 2009). Jake's memories become inconsistent to the point that it becomes difficult to determine what is reality and what is misremembrance. Most affecting, is how Harvey makes it clear that Jake is aware of what is happening to him, he knows that “gradually he is being scattered and lost” (Harvey, 2010, p.188). 'TMWD' shows a similar progression of deterioration. When the man fails to recognise himself in the mirror he demonstrates the most severe symptoms of a confused sense of reality and experience of illusions.

“There was no window cleaner; there wasn't even a window, simply an old man shouting at his own unfamiliar reflection, a reflection that stared back at him with a face filled with confusion.”

Eventually, the man's dementia consumes him, he loses his 'self' and the 'monster' wins.

Like 'TMWD', 'The Flood' is another 'loss of the self' narrative and was inspired by the widespread flooding in Cumbria over the Christmas period in 2015. As part of the mountain rescue, my uncle helped with the evacuations during the floods. He told me that most of the people he evacuated were elderly people living alone; trapped in their own homes with no electricity. Several people had tried wrapping plastic bags around their furniture in an attempt to protect it from the rising water levels, and there were some people with limited mobility who were trapped in their chairs watching the water rise around them; actions mimicked in 'The Flood' by Jean as she desperately tries to protect her husband's beloved furniture and books. There are several instances in 'The Flood' where Jean loses her 'self'. The first suggestion that Jean's mind is working against her comes as she investigates the cause of the water seeping into her hallway. On seeing the flood waters rushing past, Jean, "not fully aware of what she was doing" is "drawn" towards the dangerous waters. When she finally comes to her "senses", Jean is scared of her actions, unable to remember how she got there. She returns to her house where, yet again,

"[...] she lost herself and could no longer recall how her clothes had come to be so wet. Misplaced in her own mind, Jean began the process of finding dry clothes and dressing herself. There was a purpose to her getting dressed she knew that much, but she couldn't grasp what it was [...]"

As the storm worsens, Jean's condition deteriorates and with it her sense of reality. She becomes increasingly confused, believing that she is waiting for her long dead husband to return home. By the time the rescue team arrives outside her house, Jean has already lost her grip on our reality. She is in a dream like state in which she inhabits a reality she wants to be true;

"All she could hear was the music of the band. The other dancers seemed to fade away until there were only two left on the floor [...] She wished she could stay in this moment forever."

The story's ending is intentionally ambiguous in regards to whether Jean survives the flood. There is a sense that regardless of her living or dying, Jean has already 'gone'.

Whilst 'The Flood' is a 'loss of self' narrative, it is also narrative that reflects the loneliness of dementia. In 2013, the Alzheimer's Society reported that "of those living alone, nearly two-thirds (62%) of people with dementia reported feeling lonely" (Kane, Cook, 2013). Jean has become very isolated in her old age "preferring to stay inside." Her

withdrawal from society has led to her being “all but forgotten by those living around her” and so she spends her days alone. This isolation leads to the dangerous situation Jean finds herself during the flood and is a reflection of many real cases that occurred during the Cumbrian floods in 2015.

### **Dementia in Literature: A Different Point of View**

One of the key features of *TMWD* is experimentation with point of view. In the same way that Michelle Green’s *Jebel Marra* approaches the war in Sudan from multiple viewpoints, *TMWD* aims to present a variety of dementia narratives. A high proportion of dementia fiction presents the disease from the point of view of an outsider and not the person living with the disease. As previously stated, both *Grace and Mary* and *The Unseen World* present dementia through the eyes of the family. The novels focus on the relatives’ point of view, their experiences, and how dementia impacts on them. The narratives become less about how the disease affects the body it inhabits, and more about the grief of losing someone you love. There are exceptions to this and Hazel Hayes’ short film *Dementia* is one such exception.

Released on her YouTube channel ‘Chewingsand’ in 2014, Hayes’ film has reached over 92,000 views and received a number of comments from care sector workers commending her on her accurate representation of how frightening living with dementia can be. The film opens with a woman entering an attic and looking through her old belongings. She becomes trapped there with the faceless man, or the ‘Creature’, as Hayes refers to him. He is a disturbing personification of dementia, similar to the monstrous ‘It’ that consumes the man in ‘*TMWD*’. As *Dementia* progresses the woman ages and she becomes increasingly distressed, confused by her unfamiliar reflection and calling out to the invisible studio audience for help whilst they merely laugh and clap at her. The film ends with the woman and the ‘Creature’ sat side by side in an almost resigned companionship, as though the woman has accepted that they must live together. In the accompanying ‘Making Of’ video, Hayes explains that her intention when creating *Dementia* was to “hone in on people’s deep down fears”. The film was born out of Hayes watching a relative suffer with the disease and she says that the film is her own take on what it must feel like to live with dementia. Hayes admits that she finds her own creation “disconcerting” as it is based on her own “deepest fears” of “growing old, losing my mind, losing the people I love, becoming irrelevant” (Hayes, 2014). The inclusion of the studio audience adds another disturbing layer to the film. Hayes explains the inclusion of this “added torture” as a demonstration of how lonely and frustrating it must be to live with dementia;

“[...] not only is she going through all this but she’s trying to reach out to someone and they don’t care and they’re not helping.” (Hayes, 2014)

Whilst Hayes’ film still ascribes in general to the loss of self narrative, *Dementia* does hint at an alternative. When Hayes’ shows the woman and the Creature sitting side-by-side she is, in many ways, presenting an accurate representation of what it can be like to live with dementia. Not necessarily something that completely takes over your life, but something that must be lived alongside. Of course, for some the terrifying loss of self narrative is an accurate portrayal of the experience of dementia but it isn’t always the case, and the entertainment and media industries’ continual pandering to our fears surrounding the disease means we often become fixated on this version of dementia, believing it to be the only one, when that isn’t the case. Dementia so often becomes synonymous with the loss of self and the notion that dementia reduces a person to a shell of their former self, but this is a huge oversimplification. It is possible to maintain a good quality of life for many years after a dementia diagnosis and *TMWD* aims to demonstrate this.

‘The Inspector’ provides an alternative to the loss of self narrative as Joan is able to maintain her identity through her dementia. It is a classic reveal narrative that toys with the reader’s perception of reality. In the same way that Jake’s reality becomes inconsistent in *The Wilderness*, Joan’s reality differs from ‘true’ reality as she is unaware that she is no longer an inspector and instead a resident. The story shows that with the right treatment by care staff, dementia can be the driving force behind retraining parts of the ‘self’. In many ways, ‘The Inspector’ is comparable to Truman Capote’s short-story ‘Miriam’. Capote’s unsettling, almost sci-fi, ‘ghost story that isn’t quite a ghost story’, questions what makes something a reality. The narrative follows the widow, Mrs Miller, as her comfortable lifestyle is disrupted by the appearance of the young Miriam. At first Mrs Miller seems excited by their encounter but as Miriam begins to regularly appear outside her apartment demanding to be let in, she becomes increasingly afraid. Eventually Mrs Miller seeks out the help of her neighbours; they search the apartment but are unable to find any trace of Miriam. Mrs Miller returns to her apartment and the story closes with Miriam appearing behind her once again. Capote’s story and ‘The Inspector’ are both tales of different realities, ambiguous characters, and misrecognition, in which the protagonist’s world is layered over, what must be assumed to be, the ‘real’ world. Miriam is real to Mrs. Miller but not to her neighbours, in the same way that Joan is really an inspector, just not to the staff in her care home. ‘The Inspector’ makes us question our perception of reality and rethink the way we should approach people with

dementia who live in different realities. Like so many of the stories in *TMWD*, 'The Inspector' is loosely based on a resident I met when I worked in the care sector. A former nurse and inspector for the Health Authority, the combination of her dementia and the fact that she was living in a care home, meant that most of the time she still believed she was working in that role. Like the character of Joan, she would spend her days inspecting the home, writing up reports, and having daily meetings with the home's manager. By allowing her to live in her own reality, instead of continually telling her that she was no longer an inspector and dragging her back into our reality, the staff enabled her to retain her huge part of her identity and therefore her 'self', instead of repeatedly taking it away from her. 'The Inspector' uses this to highlight that the loss of self narrative is not always inevitable.

### **The Broader Spectrum**

As my personal experience of dementia came primarily from working in a care home, it naturally became entwined with other issues present in that environment, issues of old age and institutionalisation. Unsurprisingly these other influences worked their way in to my writing broadening the spectrum of my work to not only address dementia, but also to encompass the issues that brush alongside it. Read as a stand-alone story, 'Keys' doesn't appear to fully 'fit' the theme of the collection, but when read in context it clearly demonstrates the wider issues of aging and institutionalisation that are so tightly interwoven with dementia. As with many of the stories in the collection, Martha's character is based loosely on a real person with dementia; a former long-term resident of Storthes Hall Asylum, Huddersfield. Unable to refer to the asylum staff by name, the residents reportedly referred to carers as 'Keys', because of the large key chains they carried. Following the asylum's closure in 1991, the woman in question was moved to a nearby residential care home and a member of the asylum staff made the same move. At the new home, the woman was comfortably able to refer the staff by their names but was so institutionalised that she still referred to the carer from Storthes Hall as 'Keys'. This story stuck with me and I became fascinated by the potential relationship that could be struck between a resident and carer both making the same life changing move.

On the surface 'Keys' appears to be about Martha coming to terms with moving away but it is actually just as much about Keys dealing with the same issue. The story was originally written from Martha's point of view but it quickly became apparent that Keys' character is just as institutionalised and proved a more interesting protagonist to work with. Just like Eveline's epiphanic moment in Joyce's *Dubliners*, Keys' epiphany is the crucial

point in the narrative. As she is “forced to acknowledge” that her oldest friend is “in many ways, a stranger”, Keys must also come to terms with the knowledge that she is just as “institutionalised as the people she cared for”. Up until this moment however, she is merely an observer, seeing the effects of institutionalisation in a way that is comparable to Maggie O’Farrell’s novel, *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*. Like *Grace and Mary*, and *The Unseen World*, O’Farrell’s novel takes place across two timelines. The first in 1930s Edinburgh, where the Lennox family struggle to control their wild and outspoken daughter Esme, and the second decades later as Iris Lockhart finds herself responsible for the great-aunt she never knew existed, Esme, who is due to be released from a psychiatric unit. Interwoven through these two narratives is the voice of Kitty, Esme’s sister and Iris’ grandmother. Her memory deeply affected by dementia, Kitty’s thoughts jump back and forth between her present life in a care home and her childhood with Esme. The effects of institutionalisation from both Esme’s life in the psychiatric unit and Kitty’s in the care home are seen through the eyes of Iris, providing a detailed but distanced perspective. Just as Keys can only see Martha from a distance until her epiphanic moment forces her to see their similarities.

‘A History Lesson’ is another example of a story in the collection that does not focus solely on dementia. The narrative follows the friendship that grows between school girl, Lilly and retired teacher, Joyce. The story uses Joyce’s dementia as a framing device. Her being in a care home is crucial to creating the environment for her and Lilly to meet, but it does not become the main focus of the narrative. Her dementia does not define her, it is simply a tool used to create the opportunity for two very different characters, whose paths would not normally have crossed, to meet and learn from one another. ‘A History Lesson’ also addresses the themes of loss and family relationships. Although not explicitly mentioned, the story hints at a fraught, almost estranged, relationship between Lilly and her mother, Angie. Lilly is so concerned with her schoolwork and making into Fellside, and Angie is “always so busy with work” that their paths seldom cross, to the point that Lilly immediately knows something is wrong when Carys tells her Angie is looking for her because her mother “never asked to see her when she arrived”. Joyce’s death is the turning point in Lilly and Angie’s relationship, a loss that brings mother and daughter together.

“[...] Angie held her daughter tight against her body, as though the wall of arms would protect her child from all the heartache and sadness in the world. Lilly’s

muffled sobs reverberated through her and a tear rolled down Angie's cheek as she realised it was too late."

Joyce's death forces Lilly to reach out to her mother, and in turn forces Angie to realise how much her daughter needs someone in her life to look up to and confide in. When read as a stand-alone narrative, 'A History Lesson' is very much Lilly's story, but when read in the wider context of the full collection it is just as much about Joyce finding herself a purpose and feeling useful again. Before meeting Lilly, Joyce was relatively isolated, sitting alone in her room watching the world through the window. Her meetings with Lilly give her a new lease of life as she is able to become a teacher again, as she helps and mentors Lilly through not only her project, but her anxiety and shyness as well. By addressing broader issues, 'A History Lesson' and 'Keys' both provide a wider point of view from which dementia can be approached. This widening of the lens enables dementia to be seen in the context of the subjects which surround it and allows dementia literature to move away from solely focusing on the loss of self narrative.

### **Conclusion**

*TMWD* aims to demonstrate that there are many different dementia narratives. Through experimentation with point of view the collection shows that the loss of self narrative, whilst important, is not the sole dementia story. By utilising the format of the short story cycle, like James Joyce and Michelle Green, *TMWD* is able to present a thematically linked and unified set of stories that provide a broad and detailed dementia narrative that incorporates multiple voices and perspectives. Like *Jebel Marra*, the collection has elements of the composite novel which binds the stories together even more tightly. Whilst dementia literature like *Grace and Mary* and *The Unseen World* portray the disease from the perspective of the observer, *TMWD* focuses on the character with dementia, giving their lived experience priority. Like much dementia literature the collection addresses the fear of lost identity as 'TMWD' and 'The Flood' both demonstrate the loss of self narrative as the characters lose themselves to dementia. However, the collection also shows that this isn't the only dementia narrative, as 'The Inspector' and 'A History Lesson' both highlight that with help it is possible for a person with dementia to retain part of their identity. 'The Inspector' also challenges perceptions of reality by acknowledging that in order to enable a person with dementia to retain their self they may need to be allowed to live in a different or altered reality. Whilst still primarily being a collection of stories about dementia, *TMWD* also incorporates wider issues such as aging and institutionalisation, subjects strongly linked to



experiences of dementia. By addressing them in 'Keys' and 'A History Lesson' the collection is able to provide a broader understanding of dementia. *TMWD* is successful as the collection contributes towards a more representative dementia literature. By using multiple points of views to present a broader picture of the condition and by widening the focus to address the issues that go hand in hand with it, *TMWD* is helping to move dementia literature away from the stereotypical view that dementia is solely a loss of self narrative and showing it to be subject deserving of diverse and varied narratives.

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