

“Tea”, declared Judith’s mother, “should always be made in a teapot, never in the cup.” Judith had no strong opinions either way, and even if she did it would not have mattered, for at the moment her mother did not even know who she was.

The merits of tea from a stainless steel dispenser that had been wheeled around the corridors of two floors of the hospital went undiscussed since her mother had already moved onto the biscuits.

“Plain! All we’ve paid in taxes and insurance and plain bloody biscuits. Pathetic!” This was the angry old woman Judith had now become accustomed to. The tolerant, understanding years were retreating ever more into the distance, as indeed was their relationship.

Today, at least, Judith knew that her mother could be excused, after all the ECT had stopped the overdose threats. The problem, however, was not going to go away like the electrical current that had flashed through her brain; no, this situation was terminal. She no longer loved her mother.

Gradually her memory would return as it always did and the anger and bitterness would once more be directed at Judith. The cold tea and digestives had sacrificed themselves and, for a short time at least had drawn her mother’s fire, but as the crumbs disappeared under the feet of a trouserless man Judith’s heart sank.

“Mother, I have to go now,” she said with feigned reluctance

“Of course”, her mother replied sadly

“Goodbye mother.”

“Judith!”

“Yes?”

“You can leave me now because you were never really with me. Leave me here and let these strangers shoulder your responsibility. Just go! Go and live your life!”

Judith pondered on the significance of memory. Things that had happened long ago no longer seemed to have any relevance. There must surely have been a time when she could have put her arms around her and cried into her breast, as there must once have been a time of trust and respect. Now it was not so. Somewhere love had turned to duty and pride into resentment. Ten years ago mattered no more than yesterday’s dinner or the kitten she had in childhood. All had gone and today stood alone.

She paused by the fish tank on her way out and took a deep breath. It was as though somehow the fresh spring air outside would be all the more regenerative with lungs full of illness and old age.

“You are a good girl! You are a very good girl!” a voice boomed out.

“Hello Olga, how are you today?”

Olga was a regular (this seemed a more apt description than patient). The story went that she had come over to Britain from her native Estonia at the end of the war, but since this was Olga’s story it could have been totally different.

“What day is it today? Tuesday? Yes! Today I am well”

Olga was a short plump woman with dark brown hair and even darker eyes. What could be a soft image of kindness was unfortunately offset by the type of moustache only elderly women sport. Whilst invariably smart, her clothes tended to have the appearance of those worn by African women after Oxfam appeals.

“I was just admiring the fish Olga, is it your turn to feed them today?”

“No, no, never! Not today! I feed the fish only on Tuesday, never today!”

Judith regretted the question but it was too late.

“These are my son’s fish. He is such a good boy with many fish, very many fish. He is such a good boy but he is a bastard. He hits me! He is very good but sometimes he is poorly and then he is a bastard. Bastard boy!”

“I’m sorry Olga but I have to go, I’ll see you next time.”

“Bring me cigarettes in two hours time!”

As Judith hurried down the corridor, Olga’s voice echoed behind her.

“Bastard boy, bastard boy...”

If Olga had a son he never visited her, nor did anyone else. She was irritating and offensive but this was in one sense a relief for other visitors. She could be guaranteed to join in any conversation and take it inevitably down an expletive-ridden path to obscurity. But at least it was a path, and even if its destination was sedation it was still easier to handle than the aimlessness of visiting the sick.

“How are you feeling today?”

“What are the meals like in here?”

“It’s lovely weather today isn’t it?  
Then what?”

The day was still young and the early April sun shimmered through the trees in the hospital grounds. Judith decided that she would not return tonight as she usually did, she could surely find some excuse that would satisfy her mother. Whether it would satisfy her own nagging feelings of guilt was another matter entirely.

Here she was, thirty-two years old, alone and with a mother she had loved to the point of hatred.

Today she had a whole day to do whatever she wanted. For ten or twelve hours she had no responsibility, no demands on her time and yet she felt the emptiness of freedom. What was the point of freedom when tomorrow it would be gone? Do the scars suddenly heal when the beating stops?

Respite yes, but freedom no; that was something a long way off.

She felt her optimism drain away. She did indeed have time to herself but was this what she wanted? Time to herself may have been the problem. The day would be filled, as with so much of her life, with meaningless rubbish.

She remembered how she had felt as a child, long summer holidays that she never wanted to end but had been filled with endless boredom, but a boredom that could never be admitted. For a brief moment she thought that her mother and all the others were right. Perhaps they were the courageous ones, not ashamed to admit their thoughts and fears whereas Judith and the rest of the world paraded around in their masks of normality.

The many things she had in her life for which she should be grateful were as nothing. Was any one truly happy? The rich man suffered terminal greed and the poor man terminal jealousy; the old wife the dread of impending loss, the young the fear of betrayal. Time was not a healer; time was a thief, as the garden bore the ravages of late frosts and March winds Judith felt her own youth was being stolen away.

Judith picked the trumpet of a decapitated daffodil and placed it on the dashboard of her car. She would drive to the coast and take pictures. She would photograph children in the funfair, happy in their ignorance; the old couples with their just-in-case umbrellas; the hustle and bustle of the seafront amusement arcades; the vast expanse of ocean under a cloudless sky.

Today at least she would grasp her short-lived independence and embrace it vigorously; she would create rather than merely preserve. Today she would live for herself.

The psychiatric unit backed onto the General Infirmary but whereas the medical sections had been renovated with large expanses of glass and carefully manicured flowerbeds, the mental health sections remained fifty years behind.

Certainly everything was neat and tidy but the cold grey stone buildings still imparted a sense of foreboding. Trees as old as the buildings themselves lined the driveway and the still bare branches, battling each other overhead, fractured the clear blue sky. High above the rooks maintained a raucous vigil on those with a lesser freedom.

The fine weather seemed almost an intruder into the scene, surely driving rain and black clouds would serve better and create a more fitting gothic horror feel to the environment. As it was the hospital itself seemed as much out of place as the patients themselves no doubt felt.

The real world existed around it in a separate universe. Progress had, for the most part, seen the end of these hospitals - nowadays the prescription was to have a self-sacrificing family or to find a comfortable viaduct or bus shelter to call home. Indeed most of the building had already been drained of its lifeblood long ago. Judith had often wondered if the asylums of her imagination still existed anywhere within these walls but had never summoned up the courage to ask,

“Excuse me, where are the padded cells?”

The section where her mother had become a “regular” was somewhere between the two; an old building but with an anachronistic patio tacked incongruously on the front. There, after dinner the patients would do jigsaws or self-mutilate with glass fragments from the fire alarms.

“In case of emergency - break glass”

Evidently from time to time the instruction was followed to the letter. In this middle ground - no mans land - were the abused teenagers and tired housewives; the former doctors who could relate a little too closely to their patients condition; the sad and the lonely; the “non-reactive” depressives; Judith’s mother.

There was no through road for cars between the two hospitals but visitors using public transport had a choice. Often they would take the longer route through the infirmary and wait for their buses and taxis alongside the relatives of heart attack victims or proud new fathers. This way the plight afflicting their loved ones would be construed as the result of misfortune or an angry God. This was far easier to explain than mental illness. In this case the scars are on the inside and there was no sympathy or understanding. They were just mad.

After a while the concept of clinical depression could become strangely compelling. Judith had begun to feel that the only difference between those needing treatment, as her mother had for ten years or more, and the rest of the population was not so much a matter of degree as a matter on acceptance. Of course she had been told about chemical imbalances and impaired electrical impulses but in practical terms this was a difficult concept to grasp.

It was far easier to believe that her mother, for example, had accepted the way she felt and therefore the depression became manifest, whereas Judith herself, along with countless others, probably shared many of the same feelings but had kept them hidden away deep inside her head.

Somewhere she had read of depression being described as “a snarling black dog” tormenting the sufferer. This was wrong. More likely it was the cute, cuddly kitten that you bring into your home and nurture. The creature that you play with and protect until it grows to maturity, the creature that will use you and then eventually betray you.

On the occasions when Judith came to feel resentment towards her mother these feelings were strong; otherwise she felt profoundly sorry.

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April was always a period of transition; at least one could visibly see a change with the coming of Spring. When she was younger it was always New Years Eve. She would invariably go to bed before midnight as though somehow this demonstrated that she was in control of her own destiny and that the turn of a calendar page meant nothing. Inevitably she would lay awake in bed until well after twelve o'clock.

In the darkness she would contemplate the things that would change. Would the dog finally succumb to old age? Which of her old school friends would marry and move away? Which of her family members would die in the coming year?

But nothing ever changes in January or February. Time just drags its feet more on its indefatigable journey but once the clocks changed and the days grew longer there was the promise that things would be different. They never were.

Looking back on her life the really important events were very few. What was there that was really worth remembering? The past few years should, and in effect perhaps were, turning points, but in reality where was she? Same as before; same as she had always been.

Judith drove straight to the coast, not even calling home to change. Her camera was under the passenger seat anyway so there was nothing she needed. This was evidence of her sadly practical side. If she found herself involved in an accident she would take photographs to make the insurance claims easier. Of course she would convince herself that she would come across some beautiful scene full of profound significance but even she was beginning to doubt if there was anything new under the sun. Nevertheless she was prepared.

The traffic had been remarkably quiet and within the hour she was on the seafront of her childhood. Next week it would be Easter and the place would be full of screaming kids and harassed parents. Over the next few months the shelters on the promenade would fill with the old women in floral dresses sucking on their ice creams or pushing their tired fingers into the cream on their waffles.

Judith sat in the window of the harbour coffee bar and watched. She had left the camera in the car after all, deciding that there would be nothing here she had not seen countless times before. Even the faces of strangers seemed sadly familiar.

Seagulls still swooped down into the gaps in the human traffic to scavenge discarded fish and chips. As a child she would throw scraps into the harbour and feel dismayed at the ensuing battle. That had not been her intention, she wanted to help them all and not perpetuate the survival of the fittest. She wanted to be the face of

charity and benevolence and not the catalyst for rage. But the seagulls were survivors and competition was the spur. Perhaps this was Judith's main failing; she had dropped out of the race.

Why did everyone look so tired? Children argued, parents argued, even their dogs argued. Off to the ice-cream kiosk with them! A ninety-nine to soothe the troubled breast. Then back again; the children still arguing, the parents still arguing. So hot-dogs and soggy burgers and still more fighting.

And so it would go on. Twenty-five years from now these same children would walk the same stretch of concrete and the burgers would still taste of water and lard.

The froth on Judith's cappuccino had miraculously parted to reveal the inky blackness underneath, clinging forlornly to the sides of her fisherman's size mug. Only here could you get espresso or cappuccino in oversize mugs like this with the tell tale traces of a million previous drinkers contained in the rough pot and brown stains. Obviously the harbour cafe felt they had to cater for the more "cosmopolitan" visitor nowadays. Judith felt slightly uncomfortable with this but she did genuinely prefer cappuccino. Until today that was.

Her sandwich arrived; tuna and mayonnaise with a single leaf of lettuce that grew progressively darker towards its edges. Suddenly her appetite had gone.

The back of a chair struck Judith sharply in the back. It was not particularly painful but for some reason she almost felt like crying.

"You little shit! Watch what you're doing!" a tired, angry woman admonished her tired, angry child, "I'm sorry love but he's been a little swine all day".

"It's OK", Judith said reassuringly but the sentiment was wasted. The mother had already retreated into her anger and the child was already attacking the congealed crust on the tomato ketchup dispenser with vigour before squirting copious amounts onto his plate of chips.

Judith breathed deeply, swallowed a quarter mug of cold coffee and left; her sandwich in her hand.

The harbour had changed very little. The same pleasure boats were moored alongside the old rusty fishing boats, only the fishermen had changed. Twenty years ago did they really wear woolly jumpers and smoke pipes? She felt sure she used to sit on the harbour wall watching them do whatever fishermen do with old pieces of rope, shouting across to each other in a strange language only they understood. Today they communicated by their mobile phones; younger men here only through necessity, not because they had salt in their veins.

The day-trippers too had subtly changed. There was no joy, no excitement anywhere on their faces. They had parked their four-wheel drives and oversized cars in the disabled parking spaces and hurried to the sea front. Not through eagerness or the thrill of it however, it was more a case of keeping their stay as short as possible; a case of leisure time intruding on leisure time.

None of these people really appreciated anything. They would never know the thrill of grabbing the seat behind the red jacket of the coach driver; of having an uncle on the committee of a Working Men's Club, of the pound spending money you would be given. That was the true meaning of the seaside.

Judith began to feel old. In no time she would be wearing floral dresses, sitting in some sheltered garden by a clock made from flowers that always read three o'clock, licking her ice cream. Or worse still she could be breaking off the bottom inch or so of the cone, scooping a portion of ice cream into it and feeding it to a white poodle with brown tear stains below its eyes.

She wondered if being alone had brought forward her boredom threshold since after seventy-five minutes she had exhausted the possibilities of a place made for summer fortnights. Throwing the remains of her sandwich high in the air she headed for the car. This time the seagulls were caught unawares and in their eagerness to steal had forsaken a gift.

It was still only three-thirty plenty of time for a shower and a change of clothes. She would manage to see her mother at evening visiting after all.