

12. Making The Decision

I HAD BEEN CHATTING to Heather one night on the net, and had rashly invited her around to the house for a bite to eat, and to meet mum. The day she was due to come over it occurred to me that maybe I should do something about the décor in our house.

I stood on a kitchen chair and started to remove the rows of socks from the ceiling; carefully withdrawing the small pins so as not to chip the paint or plaster. We had got into a routine, mum and I, with this sock thing. I would take a pair down, wear them and then put them into the washing basket. Mum would wash and dry them, and then pin them back to the ceiling or a wall.

‘Can we start to put my socks back into my sock drawer like we used to, mum?’ I ventured as I stood there, painstakingly removing them. ‘It’s better, don’t you think?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said, predictably. ‘Ask Peggy. She’s the one who puts them up there.’

‘Aunt Peggy says she’ll put them back in the drawer from now on,’ I said.

I was learning how to play this game.

‘That’s all right then,’ replied mum.

When the socks were all put away I went into the lounge to dismantle the Christmas tree: after all, it was the middle of February.

‘What are you doing?’ cried mum.

‘I’m putting the tree away until next Christmas,’ I said.

Mum put her hands to her face and started to weep. ‘Please don’t,’ she sobbed.

I put my arm around her, trying to comfort her. ‘We can’t leave it up all the time, mum,’ I said.

‘Why not?’ she said.

A good question, when you stop to think about it.

‘People just don’t,’ was the best I could do. ‘A Christmas tree is supposed to be just for Christmas. People take them down again afterwards.’

‘It’s so pretty,’ she said, ignoring my argument. ‘Turn the lights on.’

I switched on the dozens of little coloured lights. Mum stared at the sparkling tree. She never really paid any attention to the tree when the lights were off; but when they were lit she would just stand and stare at it for long periods, lost in the land she now inhabited. It was a bit like the way people tend to stare into the flames of a real fire.

‘It’s magical,’ she observed.

Alzheimer’s seems to have a way of compensating its sufferer for the carnage it inflicts on their everyday memories. It often leaves them with childishly fresh eyes, which bestow an infantile wonder upon creation, as though they were observing life for the very first time. Little things the rest of us take for granted they see with a new and enchanted vision, discovering charm and wonder everywhere in this tired and unfair world of ours. Perhaps the new vision is not so much a corrupted sense, but a heightened or sharpened one; perhaps there really *is* magic left in the little things still, but the rest of us do not have the terrible affliction of Alzheimer’s and therefore have become immune to the spell. Sadly, the compensation for the damage is a passing phase, whereas the wreckage is permanent, and on the whole the exchange of new eyes for old memories is a terribly unfair one.

‘Okay, I’ll leave the tree up,’ I said.

Bruno was now a part of our family, and he had his little ways too. He would run out into the back garden and wait for me to come out to him. This was a game he enjoyed. I would run at him (a few brief steps, as the back garden was not large) and clap my hands, whereupon he would bark and run into another corner of the garden and wait for me as before. Then I would clap my hands and chase him again. He would keep this up for a good half-an-hour. Of course, poor Bruno didn’t know that this game was designed to give him some exercise; I had stopped his nightly walk down the street for a while, being too embarrassed to be seen out with an Alsatianish mongrel with a shaved bottom. But his rump was no longer piglet pink, and was now a sort of misty grey, like a five o’clock shadow: designer stubble for dogs. I’d have to start walking him again, I thought.

It was around this time that a worrying incident occurred. I was awoken one morning around 5am by a very loud and persistent knocking on the front door. I jumped out of bed, hurriedly put on my dressing gown and went to the door. I remember being surprised to discover it was not locked.

I opened the door to see a man standing there whom I instantly recognised as Joe, a guy I'd gone to school with 35 years earlier. Mum was standing beside him, dressed in just her nightie. She was holding a strappy sandal in one hand. I braced myself, as the air was freezing.

'Hello, Martin,' said Joe. 'I found your mum wandering around the shops down there.'

He jerked his head to indicate the row of small shops at the end of our street.

'She seems quite confused,' said Joe. 'I thought this was the house.'

'Come inside, mum,' I said. 'Thank you very much, Joe. I appreciate this.'

'Ah, it's nothing,' said Joe. 'I was going to work anyway.'

A quick wave and he was gone.

'Sit by the fire, mum,' I said. 'You'll freeze to death out there dressed like that. What did you think you were doing?'

'I was looking for the shoe man,' she replied, starting to shiver. 'I need to get these sandals fixed.'

She held one of them up. The ankle strap had been sliced through cleanly. I didn't have to guess who had done it, and it wasn't me or Auntie Peggy.

This incident brought the harsh reality of our situation home to me. The truth was simple: I just couldn't cope.

I wasn't in the house often enough, or long enough, to supervise my mother properly. Even when I *was* there, like now, she still wasn't safe. Mother could not live at home any longer. I'd known this decision was coming, but that didn't make it any easier. I tried to tell myself that it would be for the best, that she would be much better off if I could find her a place somewhere where they could take care of her properly; that she would be safer there, happier. As I said earlier,

we can get used to almost anything. I also think we can find ways of justifying anything, too, if we try hard enough. My mother had always been the first to help whenever anyone she knew had ever needed support; now, she was the one who needed help, and all she had on her side was one stupid, useless son. The guilt I felt at this time was overwhelming; she had never given up on me, but here I was giving up on her. It was all so bloody unfair.

That afternoon, with a heavy sense of defeat, betrayal and weakness, I telephoned the social worker who had contacted me months ago to ask me if I needed support when mum had first been diagnosed.

‘No, I’ll be fine,’ I had said back then, without even thinking about it.

How wrong I had been.

‘I’ll come out next week and have a chat,’ she said cheerily.

Mum was still staring at the Christmas tree when Heather knocked on the door.

‘I’ve brought you both some supper,’ she announced as she came in. ‘Home-made lasagne. I hope you both like it.’

Mum and I just thought it was Christmas all over again. She ate as though she hadn’t had a proper meal in weeks, which she probably hadn’t. My cooking is basic at best, whereas Heather’s was sensational. Mum set about the dish with a frenzied zeal, eating a huge portion and then going back for more – something she never did with any of my offerings. She usually talked through a meal, too, but tonight she was silent. She simply ate and ate, until the whole dish was empty.

‘That was wonderful, Wendy,’ she enthused.

‘My name’s Heather,’ said Heather, though she appeared not to be in the least offended.

‘I never knew you could cook like that, Wendy,’ remarked mum.

‘I’m a chef,’ she said – which explained the quality of her cooking. ‘And my name’s Heather, Rose. I’m not Wendy.’

Mum nodded as though she understood.

‘You’ve put on an awful lot of weight since I saw you last,’ she said, sagely. ‘You really should get more exercise.’

‘Thanks,’ replied Heather, smiling.

Strangely enough, this was the start of a great friendship between my mum and Heather. Mum continued to call her Wendy every time they met, and even Heather began to think it was funny in the end.

A few days later the social worker called at the house to speak to us, and an era for my family drew to a close.

The social worker was a pretty, middle-aged woman with a genuine smile, an unconquerable sense of humour and an observant manner.

‘How are you keeping these days, Rose?’ she asked.

‘I’m doing great,’ replied mum, emphatically.

‘That’s good. The last time I talked with your son, Martin, he said you were a little confused sometimes. Is that still the case?’

Mum looked perplexed. ‘But you couldn’t have talked to Martin,’ she said. ‘He lives in Africa.’

The social worker looked at me. I shrugged: there’s your answer.

‘This is Martin,’ said the social worker, pointing at me.

‘That’s not Martin,’ laughed mum. ‘That’s my brother, Richard.’

The social worker shook her head. She didn’t have to play along with mum’s delusions like I did. ‘No, Rose. That’s your son, Martin. He’s been looking after you.’

Mum shook her head. ‘I don’t need anyone to look after me. I can do everything myself.’

‘But you know this is, Martin, though. Don’t you?’

‘I don’t know who everybody is in here,’ said mum. ‘This house is more like a hotel than a home. There’s always people coming and going. I don’t know who half of them are.’

‘I see,’ said the social worker, turning towards me. ‘Do you want me to start looking for a place for your mum to stay?’

So this was it. If I said yes, there would be no going back.

I looked at mum, and she just sat there, oblivious to the fact that her entire future was about to be decided. I nodded. I couldn’t bring myself to say the words out loud.

The social worker closed her folder and smiled. 'I'll see what I can do,' she said, standing up from the kitchen table. 'I'll give you a call next week.'

We shook hands formally, and she left.

'She was nice,' I said to mum, when the lady had gone.

'Who was she?' asked mum.

I felt my face get suddenly hot. 'She was someone from the council,' I said. 'She came out to make sure that you're okay.'

Mum nodded and seemed satisfied with the explanation. But something about the social worker had unsettled her. She was very thoughtful thereafter for a couple of days, and each evening when I came in from work I found myself locked out of the house again, a kitchen chair propped under the handle.

That recurring drama was still being played out, but only in runs of a day or two and often with several months between episodes. This time she had a new motive.

When I complained that she was locking the door, she replied, 'I have to. I have to protect myself!'

'From who?' I would shout back, in exasperation.

'From those who want to put me away,' she would shout back.

'No-one wants to put you away,' I would argue, feeling the guilt sweep over me like a tidal wave.

'Ah, you don't know everything,' she would reply. 'I hear things. People tell me things. They warn me. They tell me to protect myself.'

'Who tells you these things?' I once asked her, trying to reason with a mind that now worked to its own rules, and not to the world's.

Mum would look at the radiator quickly, and then look down at the floor.

'The little girl in the radiator?' I said. 'She ought to mind her own business.'

I couldn't believe I had actually said that.

'She knows things,' whispered mum.

I changed the subject, and got on with the business of life in our house, until the next evening, when the entire performance would be repeated, often blow for blow, and word for word.

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About a week later, I got a call from the social worker, who gave me an address of a care home which specialised in cases of dementia. She asked me to drive out at the weekend and give the place the once-over.

I asked Heather if she would come with me. She and I had started seeing each other properly now, and although we'd only been together for about a month by then I had quickly come to trust her good judgment and solid sense.

We agreed to drive out together the following Sunday afternoon and found a large, isolated house, standing on a small hill overlooking the road. As we turned into the driveway, the abandoned mansion in the film *Psycho* came to mind.

'Looks charming,' I said.

'Let's take a look inside,' said Heather.

We walked up the long flight of stone steps to the front door, and rang the bell. I was expecting someone like Lurch from *The Addams Family* to amble down the dusty hallway, but the door was swung aside by a young girl in a smart, blue and white uniform.

'Good afternoon,' she said, brightly. 'Are you visiting a resident?'

'We're here to view the place,' I said. 'My mother might be coming to stay here.'

I realised I was lowering my voice as I spoke; I think I subconsciously felt embarrassed to admit that I was committing my mother to a home.

'I'll get the manager for you,' replied the nurse. 'Do come in.'

We were shown into a long hallway, and asked to wait. The house was spaciouly designed with sculptured plasterwork on the ceiling, and had obviously belonged to someone of some wealth or importance a couple of hundred years ago. I imagined it was the kind of place that once had live-in servants; today it was a functional care home for unfortunates like my mother.

A silver-haired woman of about 60 walked up to us. 'Hello,' she said, shaking hands with us both. 'I'm Sally. I understand you'd like to look around?'

‘Yes, please,’ I answered, feeling as guilty as hell.

Sally began the guided tour, walking us down a long corridor and waving her hand into various rooms, as though she was pressed for time: ‘This is the dining room. This is the television room. This is the kitchen.’

We popped our heads briefly through each doorway as we passed. The empty dining room was laid out like a small café, with a few tables here and there draped with plastic covers. A small, blue and green plastic cup with a lid and spout and two handles had been left on one table. It was like a baby’s training cup: I wondered if it was for a resident.

Heather looked into the television room. An elderly lady was sitting alone watching football on the TV. ‘Hello,’ said Heather. ‘Sorry to disturb you.’

‘Fuck off!’ shouted the old lady.

I popped my head in.

‘You fuck off too!’ she shouted.

‘Pay no attention,’ said Sally. ‘That’s Alice. Everything all right, Alice?’

‘Fuck *off*!’ shouted Alice.

‘We’ll leave her to it,’ said Sally, and the three of us all toddled off to view the kitchen.

Large stainless steel units were placed around the walls. There was little to see, but it looked clean enough.

‘Breakfast is at eight, lunch at 12, and dinner at five. Bed by 10,’ said Sally. ‘We have a dietician who puts the menus together, and a trained chef who prepares the meals.’

We nodded.

‘Let’s look at some bedrooms,’ suggested Sally. ‘We can go upstairs.’

We followed Sally up a very narrow and very steep flight of stairs. ‘My mother would have trouble with these,’ I said. ‘They’re very steep.’

‘It’s an old house,’ replied Sally, ‘but there is a small elevator for residents who are unsteady on their feet.’

Once upstairs we wandered down another long corridor. On the wall outside each bedroom door there was pinned a small photograph of the relevant resident, together with a hand-written note of each name.

‘This one is vacant at the moment,’ said Sally, throwing wide a door. On the wall outside was a photograph of an old man wearing a woollen hat and no teeth. The note said simply: ‘Charlie’. I wondered what had happened to him.

Charlie’s old room was pretty basic. The top half of the walls was painted a pale green, and the bottom half a grubby cream, and there was a single bed, a bedside table with a lamp on it and a small dressing table.

‘The bedrooms are all singles,’ said Sally, ‘but they’re quite serviceable. There is a private bathroom, as well.’

Sally opened the *en suite* bathroom door. A wet room yawned before us: no bath, just a slanting, tiled floor, where Charlie would stand to wash himself, the suds and dirty water running away through a hole in the floor. There was also a toilet and washbasin.

‘Are all the rooms the same?’ asked Heather.

‘Yes, they’re all the same,’ said Sally.

An old man had shuffled into the room behind her. He was wearing a frayed dressing gown and had a box of dominoes in his hand. Sally turned around.

‘No, Fred!’ said Sally, in a very commanding tone of voice. ‘Charlie isn’t here any more, is he?’

Fred looked a little perplexed.

‘Charlie can’t play dominoes with you today, Fred,’ announced Sally, still in a loud voice. ‘Now run along and find someone else to play with.’

Fred shuffled from foot to foot, not sure what to do next.

Sally took the old man by the shoulders and physically turned him through 180 degrees so that he was facing the door again. ‘Off you go, Fred,’ she said.

‘Dominoes today, with Charlie,’ muttered Fred, as he shuffled away down the corridor.

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Sally watched him go and then returned her attention to us.

‘Any questions?’

We both shook our heads, too shocked to speak, and then we drove home in complete silence.