

Eventide

I found the cheese in the bread bin. Then a couple of days later when I was loading the washing-machine there was a plastic bottle in the laundry basket. But then the recycling bin is next to it. I must have just been tired.

‘Never try to ingratiate yourself with new and zealous district nurses. That’s why I am here. They say that people have got themselves committed to lunatic asylums, you know, undercover reporters and so forth, by fooling the doctors. The ones they don’t fool are the other patients. I didn’t want to fool anyone; I just wanted to be reassured. I looked at her expecting a smile or a dismissive laugh; that’s what Mrs. Hornby would have done. But then Mrs. Hornby had nigh on forty years experience and couldn’t be doing with rule books and assessments. She just knew what to do. This girl looked serious, and a bit frightened.

‘Don’t grow old. It’s horrible. You know what my ambition was? To die quietly in the open air, on the footpath across the fields to the next village, the footpath my great-grandfather took when he walked to the village school; I was hoping I’d be found by a mature dog-walker and not some poor child on *his* way to school. I read once that St. Francis lay on the ground naked when he knew death was approaching, and his friends respected that. Somewhere in the Gospels it says something about not knowing the day or the hour, so I had no business choosing my footpath or trying to avoid school-times. But here they know the day and the hour when you’re to do *anything*. The kind of people who for the best of reasons would have dragged me off the footpath and broken my ribs in an attempt to resuscitate me.

‘You see this little fingernail here? I used to have beautiful hands, cared for hands. I shaped my nails carefully, never painted them; that wouldn’t have done with all the paint and plaster and turps. This pinky nail was a perfect oval, like a gently-arched window. Now it won’t grow – see, it splits as soon as the white appears, vertically. That nail will never be pretty again. Here I can’t even have a smear of face cream. These clothes aren’t mine either. They’re what they gave me after my cashmere sweaters came back from the wash dolly-sized. Horrible crimplene things that would never lose their shape if they had one to start with; it’s like wearing a uniform. I can have so little of my own in here. One of the things I really miss is that deep warmth of a cat’s fur against my cheek, or being soothed to sleep by the sound of purring in the dark. When you most need comfort is when you’re told that the kind of comfort you want is unhygienic. I don’t know where my little cat is now, but the Blue Cross people took her. I made sure of that, as I knew they wouldn’t put her down.

‘Every fortnight someone comes to shave me, more often if there’s some special occasion (like my birthday - I never did like a fuss but here I have no choice; party hats and bilious food-colouring). I told them this made the hair grow back coarser and they just laughed and told me this was no beauty parlour. It’s at least forty years since any man turned to look at me in *that* way when I entered a room but does that mean that it doesn’t matter if *I* lie in the dark and feel bristles on my chin? In my coffin those hairs will grow, they say, and my nails. But they won’t really. It’s the skin that draws back.

‘I know I pong a bit. You hardly need to worry about this yet, but did you know that after the menopause you smell different? But now that I need to wash more, I get to wash less. A weekly bath, and with two of them talking over my head as they scrub, no dignity. I used to be so fastidious. Many years ago, when I was at Art College, I travelled on an overnight train into Prague, a vast and empty stage set of a place, beautiful and dark and grim. I found somewhere to stay but use of a bath cost more than the room. So I washed myself from head to foot at the basin. A ‘Prague bath’ I called it (I was much suppler then).

‘I wish I was dead. You and the priest are my only visitors since I’ve come in here. I like him, and it’s true what he says, loneliness is also a form of poverty. But I’ll tell you, and please don’t be offended, because I know what the St. Vincent de Paul is about - I don’t think I have believed for a long time. I shan’t see those I loved ever again, and if God was really infinitely good as you all say, he wouldn’t have made them suffer like that. Nor would he have let my father – wicked man – live for as long as he did. And they all thought *him* a good Catholic! But I told them to put Catholic on the form because it was part of me for so long, and because that way they would let me have those pictures I love in here. Look at this one; that’s up a staircase in an old convent in Florence. I was twelve when I saw it first, when my mother took me with her on her first visit to Italy. But look what happened to this card. Spectacles and a moustache on Mary’s face. I think I know which of them did it, but I daren’t say anything. None of them seem to last long around here so perhaps that one will be gone soon too.

‘It was looking at paintings that made me an art teacher. I had a small talent as a painter, but I had more of a gift in helping bring out talent in others. That marvellous moment when excellent draughtsmanship, imagination and determined application come together as genius! There would only ever be two or three at most in a class who showed anything like real promise, both in the girls grammar and when I was in the prison service. I am pretty selective, I know, but life is so short, at least that bit of it which has any joy in it and I cannot give to all nor they to me. Some of my pupils went to art college. I don’t have news of them now, but if some girl or woman somewhere can take up her brushes and comfort herself in a trying moment by doing something that she is good at and that gives her joy, then I have done something in life that is of value. And the girls in Holloway had something to brighten their dreary lives, though it depressed me when some got themselves back inside because, they said, it was the only place they had found anyone who took an interest in them. There was a rule that when their work was exhibited that their full names could not be displayed, to protect their privacy no doubt, but to me it just felt like another way to deny who they were even when they had made a success of something. I’ve not forgotten them, though, for what it’s worth.

‘Do tell Father Martin that I enjoy his visits too. He’s an intelligent man, and he doesn’t god-bother me. Yes, I take Holy Communion. It may do me some good - I mean it *is* a comfort to me. It’s what I have known since I was nine years old, the wafer dissolving against the roof of my mouth. Now it takes longer. I have less spit. I hope God doesn’t mind if sometimes I wash him down.

‘Talking of washing down, I wonder while you’re here if you’d help me to get rid of those pills again. I’d rather pretend to be docile than be drugged. Yes, down the toilet. Make sure they’re all gone. Otherwise they might find out and inject me with something instead.

‘I’m not afraid of being dead. But I am afraid of dying. And when I do die, it will be as though I never existed. It’s as though I will have struggled in the water for a while, given up, and the surface is again as smooth as glass. I want you to do a favour for me; there is no-one else I can ask. Look in that drawer. That envelope there, the one with the photographs in it. And there’s something else. That little cloth bag, the draw-string one. Yes, they do sound like beads, don’t they? I want you to take that away too and I’d like you to bury it with the photographs somewhere. Not immediately, after your baby is born. It’s not good for an expectant mother to have her fingers in earth, but I’m sure you know that. And say a prayer for the people in the photographs as you do it, just as you’d pray for anyone who had no-one else to pray for them. If I leave those things here they’ll look at them after I’ve gone, they might laugh at their frumpy clothes, and I don’t want them getting their hands on those beads. Put it all in your bag before they come on their evening rounds. They give me whisky before I go to bed. It’s the only thing I like about here, a little touch of sophistication you might say, though they only do it to keep me quiet. ‘Grant us a quiet night and a perfect end.’ I’ve forgotten none of it.

It was good of you to come, dear. She wasn’t the easiest old lady, not very friendly sometimes and a bit on the secretive side. Didn’t want to mix with the other ladies. I think they thought she was a bit standoffish, those that still think, that is, poor dears. It was a bit sudden; a massive stroke. Better that way. She was on warfarin, the only thing she did take...oh, you’ve turned ever so pale, dear! Sit down here and I’ll get you a cup of tea. Lynn, bring us a tea over here! Yes, two sugars!

‘Will you come to the funeral?’

‘Of course, Father.’

‘Someone will come from Eventide, too. They’re quite good that way. Most of the nursing homes don’t bother.’

‘She gave me some things Father, old photographs. Her husband I think, and a little boy. And this bag of beads. It feels like a broken rosary, or bits of one. She wanted me to bury them all for her.’

‘Let’s see the rosary, Joan. I’d fix it first even if it is to go in the ground. Ah Joan, this is no rosary. It’s teeth. Tiny little teeth, milk teeth. Oh Joan, don’t cry, don’t cry. She’s far from all harm now!’