

It's for Your Own Good

It was a day with few redeeming features. The sun, for it surely must have been there, was filtered through several kilometres of oppressive cloud. Between them, the elements had concocted a reluctant wash of grey which descended from the low-slung skyline, filling the world from the top down. If it weren't for the cars, it was one of those days that you could believe you were living in monochrome.

Three figures stepped out of a blue Toyota into the car park of the Gladstone Hynes Surgery. From afar, one was busy, attentive, efficient. The other two, with a colour palette to match the day, were considered, concerned and slow. The three shuffled awkwardly across the rain-slick asphalt and through the automatic doors.

"It all seems such a terrible bother, Alison. I still don't really think we need..." began Audrey Young.

"Now Mum. We've been through this. Thomas is concerned about you, that's all. We both are." Alison Young smiled, entirely missing Audrey's thinly disguised grimace at the word 'Mum'.

Since Alison had married her only son four years previously, Audrey had always detested her familiarity. Of course, the thought of finally getting the grandchildren that she was resigned to never having was a source of joy. Yet, there was something in the way Alison moved, spoke, touched her arm when she made a point, which left Audrey ill at ease. She was, Audrey concluded, a walking agenda. The 'spirit and enthusiasm' which Thomas had spoken about so lovingly when they were courting was, to Audrey, deliberate and insincere. She'd hoped she was wrong. She was fairly sure she wasn't.

"It's a formality really. Just a check-up. I'm having one too!" Alison chirped with practiced concern. "It's just good to keep an eye on everything. It's a big house for the two of you. I really don't know how you manage! So, we - well Thomas really - just thought we'd make sure you could...y'know carry on. Cope with it all." That smile again. "Isn't that right Dad?" she added.

Geoffrey Young was already inside his newspaper. A gentle introvert, he'd learnt to cope with life in his later years by disappearing into print. He knew whose company he enjoyed and, to them, he was an amiable and generous friend. For everybody else, he deployed his text armour, fending them off with a book or a newspaper. Geoffrey

didn't claim to have the perception of his wife, but he knew he didn't like Alison very much. Her visits usually required a good hundred pages or so. He lowered The Times.

"S'pose." he muttered without looking at Alison.

Audrey tutted. She hated it when Alison did this. She would draw Geoffrey in, asking him questions - to which he either wasn't listening or wasn't interested - garner a response like a salesman making a close, then claim him as a staunch ally in future conversations.

"See Mum, just a quick mental health check-up is all it is. Nothing to worry about."

"But we both..." attempted Audrey. This time it was the receptionist who cut in.

"Mr and Mrs Young? Dr Datta will see you both now," she chirped. "Erm...you can go in after them if that's OK?" she added, seeing Alison rise with them. Alison slumped back into the faux-leather, reached for her phone, thumbed idly to Facebook and waited.

After fifty minutes or so, the senior Youngs emerged from the consulting room, arm in arm.

"All good I hope?" quizzed Alison rhetorically, as she breezed past them and into the doctor's open door.

Audrey looked back towards the room, squeezed her husband's arm reassuringly and returned to the waiting area.

The consulting room was over-warm and clinically neat. The blinds, photograph frames, bookshelves and even the pens in their matt black holder looked like they had been scared into regimental conformity. Order was Dr Datta's comfort. He removed his glasses, placed them on the desk, nudged them gently until they were parallel to the edge and smiled at Alison Young like an old friend.

"Here for check-up then, Alison?" he offered with a smile. Dr Ranjit Datta spoke in the kind of lyrical, imperfect Indian-English which made it seem like he was putting on the Indian accent.

Alison half-smiled, distracted. "Oh sure...why not?"

Without breaking his bedside manner, the doctor leaned forwards. "So, we have...agreement still?" he questioned.

"We do. Five thousand now, the rest when they're..." she looked down at her hands, twitching her fingers, as if to flick away the last traces of conscience. "...rehomed."

"Good, good," replied the doctor, still smiling confidently. "Such a cruel thing is dementia. Can take most seemingly healthy people, so quick it is. So...random."

"Just make sure. It has to look like they can't cope but I don't want them to look like basket cases. They just need to be convinced that they'd be better off...somewhere where they're looked after properly. It's for their own good, really."

"Will look like needs to look. Paperwork, evidence. All is good."

"Good."

"While you're here," added the doctor, "might as well give you check-up too? Make it seem...authentic? We start with memory test, yes?"

Alison sighed, "I guess they'd wonder why I was out so quickly. OK, let's get it done."

Twenty-five minutes later, Alison Young rose from her chair. Without speaking or looking the doctor in the eyes, she left the room. Behind her, the only remaining trace in the perfect order of Dr Datta's office was a vapour of overpriced perfume and a well filled envelope. Dr Datta looked down at his desk, straightened the envelope and continued to smile.

The regimented, terracotta rooftops of suburbia gazed longingly up towards the sky. Their TV aerial hands and chimney stack fingers pointed skywards and beckoned like children gazing at fireworks. Suburbia; the most divisive region on the planet. The Gaza Strip of the middle classes. Hedges were clipped, windows washed, driveways edged, cars cleaned. To some, born with a parentally pre-loaded vision of their future selves, it was an aspiration. A respectable end-stop of predictable comfort. To others, it was a grid work of soul-sucking, mundane familiarity. For ten years, to Thomas, it had been home. For four years, to Alison, it had simply never been enough.

“All I’m saying is it’ll sound better coming from you, Thomas.” Alison was in a calm yet formidable mood. Thomas knew this because she was using his name in almost every sentence.

It was strange how hearing her use his name had transformed over time. Initially, it had been used gently, like the many pet names he’d had for her; to reinforce sincerity and suggest a deeper, comforting level of intimacy. Now it was less ‘used’, more ‘wielded’. A blunt weapon to enforce clarity, attention or dominance. In the quiet evenings when Alison was out with her friends at God knows where, Thomas took out their letters and the many photographs from the early days of their relationship. He looked into the eyes of the two static figures and tried to flesh them out. To resuscitate the moments which had so enchanted him and recapture the hopeful joy of that time. Each time the ritual had a similar outcome. Anxieties and insecurities which began in his stomach, worked their insidious path up to his chest and then invaded his head. As he looked into the eyes of the lovers before him, he just couldn’t help but wonder. Had he loved her more than she him? Did he really know her?

“I get it,” he replied, “It’s just...”

“Oh, Thomas!” snapped Alison, on the verge of losing her calm, “We’ve been over this so many times. And Datta’s got the money now. I know it seems cruel, but it’s only bringing forward the inevitable. It’s for their own good, you know that. Don’t you Thomas?”

Thomas sighed. He was weary of the whole situation now and just wanted it over. The sleeplessness, the anxiety was constant and loomed over him as heavy and grey as the oppressive sky outside.

“So, as soon as he’s written the report, yes? Datta said we can have it whenever we want, but we’ll probably have to give it a week to make it look convincing.” Alison touched his arm gently. Thomas felt like he was being shackled.

“Yes,” was all he could manage.

The following Tuesday arrived clearer and fresher than the previous week had been. As though the sky had coughed and cleared its chest. In the living room of his parental

home, Thomas sat on the edge of the memory-soaked leather sofa he'd so loved as a child. There was no comfort there now. The solemnity of his face was matched by the atmosphere in the room. It was sickly and tormented. Thomas struggled to look at his parents.

"Mum, please don't cry. It's...for the best. The doctor said that with support and full-time care you could be fine for...for years. But you can't be expected to manage this house any more. It's too much. I'm sorry Mum, Dad. I'm so sorry."

Alison was holding Thomas's hand like a frightened child. Which was precisely what he was. Sensing a weakness, she stepped in.

"Mum, Dad, you know we'll look after this place. Thomas has so many memories here. He can't wait to be back again. The doctor only has your best interests at heart, and it's what he strongly recommended. And, of course, we'll let you choose the...place, you decide to go. There's some lovely ones out there, gardens and libraries and everything. And you'll be looked after. It's a new start, that's all."

Audrey was tearfully silent; shoulders bobbing, exuding defeat. For once, Geoffrey was the one to break the silence. This time there was no book, no newspaper to put down. He stared directly at Alison in a way which she'd never seen before. A gaze full of intent and defiance. What he said was unexpected to all in the room.

"Alright Alison, Thomas. We'll start making preparations immediately. Thank you for your concern and advice." With an effort, he struggled to his feet, placed a hand gently on Audrey's shoulder, and quietly left the room.

"Lovely! I'll put the kettle on then shall I, Mum?" breezed Alison, "I think we all need a cup of tea."

Thomas moved across and sat next to his mother. He placed an arm around her and gently pulled her tear-stained face onto his shoulder. The protected now the protector.

Two months later the blue Toyota crunched slowly into a gravelled driveway, the imposing Georgian frontage of the approaching building slowly peeped out from

behind the retreating hedges. The four Youngs stepped out and entered the building. Alison was the only one to speak.

“Looks lovely! Well done you two!”

In the impressive foyer, they were met by a smiling man wearing a mid-blue suit and an air of confidence.

“Ah, Mr and Mrs Young. And Mr and Mrs Young, ha-ha!” he chuckled, “All the paperwork’s been sent through by Dr Datta. Everything’s in order for an immediate...erm...admission.”

“That’s very good to hear, Peter.” Thomas spoke with unusual clarity and assertiveness as he shook their host by the hand. Alison was jarred by his confidence, but immediately put it down to his nerves and overcompensation.

Turning to face Alison, Dr Peter Johannsen addressed her in calm tones, gently touching her arm.

“So, Mrs Young, Alison, it’s going to be a pleasure to have you here. Yours is an...ah...unusual case, however, you’re in good hands. I’m sure we can make some excellent progress. If you’d care to step this way, Thomas kindly dropped off your belongings earlier in the week, so it should feel just like home.”

Alison had not gone quietly, it had taken four assistants to ‘process her admission’. As she had desperately screamed his name, Thomas had felt all the anxieties of those nights alone ebb away. Pulling away from the Bailsworth Acute Psychiatric Admission Centre, the car was filled with a rich, peaceful silence. Audrey Young gazed out of the back window, her hand on her husband’s arm.

“Ah, well. That’s that then. It’s for her own good.”