

SHORT STORY



My beloved

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Joan saw the man in black was there again. He resembled a statue, so still did he stand. 'He looks like a zombie' she thought, moving restlessly in her deep black leather chair. The chair was a new acquisition. It had all the mod cons. It was the type of chair made for old people whose bodies are fading, people who constantly feel pain in their joints and muscles, people who need physical comfort. She turned her eyes away from the window that looked out over the seafront where her zombie man was still standing, seemingly rooted in the sand, and looked over at Tom. She sighed, partly in relief, partly with frustration as she saw he was asleep. At least he wasn't bothering her with his aimless anxious questions. Her lips pursed in a thin line of disapproval. She was exhausted. She was sick of looking after him. More than that though, she mourned the loss of his mind.

Tom had been a scientist, a graduate from Cambridge when she had met him sixty-two years ago. She had been to the local grammar school, considered herself a cut above those who had gone to the secondary modern school, but she had left school at fifteen, as most had, in those days. Tom had reeled her into his world of science and in particular to his fascination with and love of the animal world, particularly the world of birds. A city girl, she had previously thought little about birds except for the usual types such as robin red breast, blue tits, pigeons, gulls, ravens, larks, the type of birds one heard about in songs, rhymes and so on. Now she was a near expert on the habits of any bird from buzzards to pelicans, from lorikeets to peafowls. In the early years of their retirement they had travelled the globe following Tom's obsession with birds. Joan though had also reeled him into her world: the world of fashion, of being concerned with your appearance, of noting the latest trends, of shopping cleverly, wisely, but always with an eye to glamour and substance. Tom had followed her meekly, with humility. He knew nothing about the superficiality of appearance and gave her full control over their income to buy what she wanted, understanding that she had knowledge he had never possessed and that he wasn't particularly interested in gaining. Some of his indifference however was feigned. He never demurred for example when she insisted upon the cashmere coat rather than a man-made fibre one, even though it was four times more expensive. His vanity, hidden by his shrugs of unconcern, was nevertheless revealed in his eyes when he looked in the mirror and saw a handsome, well-dressed man, who, miraculously, was wearing exactly the right colour to reflect his eyes, in clothes so well cut he could have passed for a male model with his tall lean body. It was in these unexpected ways that they had mirrored each other. They were complementary. And so they had lived all their lives in a type of reflective harmony. Joan was not of the type to be humble, or second best. She had

learned well from her husband's knowledge, but she had tutored herself too. She thought of herself as an autodidact. As far as Joan was concerned this description could match anybody's university diploma and degree. Yes, she had decided her degree was in Autodidactism ever since she first heard the word long ago. It worked for her. She always got the conundrum in *Countdown* before Tom, mostly beat him at scrabble, and had always had a finer grasp of their financial situation despite his Cambridge education. 'Cambridge, indeed!' she had sometimes muttered to herself, but never, disloyally, to him.

Just then there was a ring at the bell. Struggling out of her deep leather chair Joan answered the door to a plump middle-aged woman who smiled cheerily at Joan, introducing herself as Muriel from the Care Homes Association. As they walked into the lounge Tom opened his eyes looking with suspicion at the visitor.

'Who is this?' he said grumpily. This was one of the most disturbing aspects of his changed character, for Joan. He had always been the most civil person, the type to be the most warmly appreciative and respectful of others. He had been the life and soul of any social occasion. He was the raconteur, the man who could charm people with his knowledge and winning ways. He had never in his life been discourteous to a stranger.

Sighing deeply for the umpteenth time that day Joan turned to him and through gritted teeth said,

'This is Muriel, Tom. I already told you. You know I need a respite and she has come to help me.'

'Oh', said Tom, looking startled and as if he wasn't quite understanding her.

Three days later Tom went into care. When Joan said goodbye to him in front of Janice, the manager, he simply said, 'Where are you going? I am not staying here. I want to go home.'

Later that evening Joan poured herself a third glass of wine and sighed. She felt at one with herself for the first time in months, no, maybe years. She slept soundly that night for the first time since Tom had started falling and hurting himself around the apartment. The next day she booked herself into the hairdressers for a cut and colour, the beauty salon for a massage and pedicure, and made a mental note to buy a new jacket for herself now that spring was on its way. This was a welcome respite – a very welcome break from Tom and his exasperated, anxious, disturbed demands upon her.

A few days later, under the supervision of Janice, she went to see Tom for the first time. Janice had thought it better to wait a while until Tom had settled in before visiting him. She went with trepidation. Would he be grumpy? Would he be asleep? Would he even be aware of her at all? When she got to his room he was nowhere to be seen. She asked one of the assistants who told her Tom was on the toilet. 'Please tell him wife is here,' Joan said. The assistant returned to tell her that Tom had said he didn't have a wife.

That day her welcome break had become a sorrowful and mournful abandonment. For two hours she lay on her bed and sobbed. The next day she went back to see him. This time he was in his chair, half snoozing. When he opened his eyes he could barely speak. Janice had phoned to tell her he had fallen twice the previous day. His face and arms were bruised. This would no longer be a welcome break, Joan had to recognise. This was the end of the road. She couldn't manage any longer. She held his hand rubbing it with her other hand and he smiled.

'Do you like that?' she asked.

'Yes' he said and smiled.

'Who is that man?' asked another patient hobbling past the door on his walking stick. Joan answered, 'He is my beloved'.

Notes on contributor



Helena Hargaden, D.Psych, MSc, TSTA(P), works in private practice in Sussex. Drawing on her experience in Jungian analysis and psychoanalytic supervision she developed relational perspectives in transactional analysis in collaboration with others. Author and co-author of a number of papers on a variety of subjects, her work has been translated into a number of languages. In 2007 she was awarded the Eric Berne Memorial Award for her work with Charlotte Sills on the domains of transference. She is one of the original founders of the International Association of Relational Transactional Analysis and is an international speaker on relational psychotherapy. Her latest book, *The Art of Relational Supervision* (Karnac, 2016), includes six contributions from psychotherapists reflecting on their experience in relational group supervision.