

Home Is Where The Beach Is

I first saw her when she pulled up in a taxi outside the hospital. I watched as she gently closed the door and waited patiently for the driver to lift her suitcases from the boot. A chilling breeze was sweeping through the car park and I watched her pull her coat tighter. I drew my hands into the warm sleeves of my jumper and continued to perch on the cool metal railings, surveying the car park like a bird of prey.

When she reached the automatic doors of the Gilbert Bain she stopped. She turned around towards the railings where I was sitting and waved. Her smile was a sympathetic one, her eyes shiny and watery. Her hand hung in the misty sky.

I could have imagined it, but I didn't.

The Gilbert Bain or the hospital or the "Better place", whatever you wanted to call it had been where I went every night after school and every weekend for the past 2 months now. It was becoming routine. Like eating my breakfast and going to school, it was perfectly normal.

However strangers (or like Dad says "friends you haven't met yet,") waving at me is not routine. Sometimes things that aren't normal or routine confuse me or annoy me, but not today. Today I was curious.

I jumped off the railing and hurried through the automatic doors searching for the women's brown winter parka. Grey faces and tired eyes briefly caught my attention and then a whole stream of doctors and nurses walked past at one point.

Why did everyone seem older in hospitals? Another one of those questions Dad doesn't know how to answer. When I ask that type of thing Dad just says, "Don't ask me." He says it in a sort of honest, genuine voice but laughs too.

He said that when I asked where mum was going. He didn't laugh then though, I didn't either. All the lights, cars and events of that day blur my memory but I don't want to remember it anyway.

I finally caught her meandering through one of the corridors, her walking stick clacking on the pearly white tiles. I caught up to walk beside her. We turned into a room with drawn white curtains and ironed bed sheets. There was an elderly man sat crookedly in one of the beds. His back stooped and his eyes closed. His wrinkled features slept in some relaxing dream. A nurse was fussing around with charts and paper. The elderly woman in the brown parka tottered over to her.

"Hello, we're here to see Albert...Is this an inconvenient time?" I noticed she said "we". She either meant someone else or it appeared that I had now joined her company and was officially visiting a man I had never met before. The nurse nodded kindly and flustered about with papers attempting to tidy her mess,

"Sorry, I was just going. He's been sleeping plenty so I'm sure he'll not care to be woken up."

I watched as the woman brought out a small bouquet of flowers from apparently nowhere and laid it on his bedside table. There was a small label that I couldn't read from a distance.

"Albert...Albert." I heard the women speak for the first time. She had a soft, caring voice with a vague accent, sounded American.

"I bought you some flowers." The old man stirred like I imagined a sleeping angel would. His shoulders lifted higher and his face turned to us. His eyes flickered open and adjusted to the bright white of the hospital.

"Where am I?" He asked barely audibly.

"In the hospital, Albert." The women replied. She made herself comfortable in a chair next to his bed. I stood awkwardly next to the chair, kicking my heels.

"It's me, Helen, remember I promised." The old man sat up less crooked in his bed.

"Helen...honestly?" He chuckled, "It could be the medicine...I'm on every substance possible! I'm in a real state now Helen. I'm not going to last much longer." It seemed he had to make an effort for every time he spoke. His wheezy breath came in short gasps yet he smiled suddenly which shocked me.

"Well, I suppose why should I? I've done everything I want to."

Helen reached over and held his hand.

"That's true, but keep on fighting, just to see me. I promise I'm truly here."

Albert nodded.

"And who is...?" His eyes swivelled to rest on me. Helen held my arm and smiled.

"This is someone I found skulking around here – I think he needs a little company." I smiled a little and nodded. They say smiling is the best way to make a good impression on someone. Albert evidently thought that too because he smiled faintly back.

"I remember the last time I saw you, Helen." The old man rasped. He looked a ghost of what a man should be. "I remember saying goodbye for the final time." Helen smiled and laughed quietly to herself.

"It was at the beach." He turned to me, it was as if he had selected a book from the shelf and was now wiping years of dust from it. His voice rasped and his eyes glittered like sunlight on the Yell Sound as he spoke.

"Yes, it was the beach, the Westsandwick beach. The sun still hadn't set and it was near midnight. We were playing in the cool sands of the dunes, while the other children swam. It would be the last time you would play on that beach, you were leaving. When everyone was busy eating and playing, I dragged you up the hill to my house. I grabbed your hand and lead you to the hen's shed. Underneath a large stack of hay, I pulled out a small metal plate. It had," The old man paused. He laughed and looked to Helen,

"I suppose you don't remember what it said." He smiled. Helen didn't reply but leaned to Albert's bedside table where she lifted the bouquet of flowers. She turned the flowers to him so he could see the message.

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Was carefully scribed on the small white label. The astonishment in the old man's face was replaced with a smile.

"Helen, you were only six. How did you remember that?" Albert rasped.

"Some things stick in the mind." She replied. There was a pause in the conversation and Albert leaned back into the folds of his bed.

"He used to be an author, Albert." Helen was speaking to me. "He's good with words." I nodded, keeping my silence. Helen talked to Albert some more, the glitter in his eyes was fading but remained until we said goodbye and left his bedside.

"Where are you from?" I asked in the grey car park mist. Helen was stood with her wooden walking stick and brown parka waiting for her taxi. I hung onto the metal railings.

"Alaska." She said. Her white face turned to me, her eyes watery. "It feels almost tropical here." She laughed. Her face, I saw, was worn with lines like constant snow storms.

"Why did you come?" I muttered, however obvious the answer was.

"I wanted to see him one last time here, before we meet again."

"Where will you meet again?" I asked. She smiled.

"I'm not too sure..." A taxi pulled up and she wandered over. I watched as she handed the suitcases to the driver and climbed in the car. Before the driver shut the door she shouted to me,

"Remember, keep your home closer to your heart than I did. Wherever you live, you'll always know your home." She held out a small flat envelope to me. I took it, confused.

I hurried through the white corridors of the hospital to Albert's bed. When I got there I thought I was mistaken and I had the wrong ward. He was gone. The sheets folded neatly and the flowers gone. I searched other wards but he was nowhere to be seen.

Mum and Dad are talking with a doctor in the room next door. I sit with the baby and my envelope on white sheets. The baby sleeps quietly on my left arm, her chest rising up and down. I hear her tiny breath next to my ear.

I carefully rip open the envelope. A black and white picture falls out. There is a boy holding a small baby in his arms. He looks about my age. Underneath the picture,

is written.

Mum comes in and lifts the baby. I quickly slide the photo back into the envelope. Dad jokes that the baby was the only good thing that came out of this hospital visit - I know there's more.

Maybe one day I'll tell them what happened here.

I've already told the baby.