

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable



The entrance to the St Mary Magdalene Hospice was electronically operated. You had to speak into an intercom and explain yourself before the catch would click and you could push open one of the pair of heavy wrought-iron gates. It was as if the nuns were worried an inmate might escape.

“And I suppose they would get out of here if they could,” Ken Jameson mused, as he walked towards the front doors of the building. “If only they could.”

The long path described a precise but unhurried curve between rose beds, the roses preening in their high-summer glory – Duchesse de Verneuil, General Kleber, Nyveldt’s White, Sally Holmes - each of them a vibrant memorial to someone long gone and pretty much forgotten. Only their names were remembered on the identifying tags that hung from a lower branch of each bush – at least until the rain and sun faded the print entirely and the rose became nothing but its perfect immortal self.

“Ah, Mr Jameson – good to see you again,” said Sister Perpetua from behind the reception desk. “How are you keeping?”

“Oh, very well,” Ken said, as he signed in. “Shall I go on up?”

He followed the marble stairs to the second floor, and turned along the corridor towards Room 213. He knocked gently on the door and waited.

“Come in,” said a tired voice.

Ken pushed the door open and poked his head around it.

“Good afternoon, Aimee,” he smiled.

“Oh, it’s you again,” said the pale figure sitting in an armchair by the window.

“Yes – me again,” Ken confirmed, closing the door behind him. “Do you mind if I sit down?”

Aimee shrugged indifference, and turned her head to look out of the window. She was small – not *petite*, but *small*, Ken thought – and her green eyes were dark-rimmed. Her wrists were tiny and pale, and her folded hands seemed too frail to risk lifting so much as a teacup.

“You’re looking well,” Ken said, lowering himself into the second armchair. And it was true – she was, comparatively. From the notes he had been given by the Hospital Visitors’ Association, Ken knew that Aimee Vibert was twenty-nine years old, born in London of French parents, a genealogist by profession. He also knew that she was dying. On his first visit it had become apparent that she was not particularly keen on being visited at all. The resident psychologist had assessed her as clinically depressed, and Ken couldn’t say he blamed her one bit.

“Isn’t it a beautiful day?” Ken suggested, nodding towards the rose garden. He almost added, “The kind of day that makes you glad to be alive” but he stopped himself. He was a relative novice Visitor, and he was not yet sure quite what tone to take. He didn’t even know what he should talk about. Aimee’s circumstances – stuck in this place with nothing to do but read and think – didn’t lend itself to conversation about the day-to-day trivialities that most chatter hung upon. But if the present was too mundane to discuss, the future was too terrifying to contemplate. And the past, Ken imagined, must have seemed to her a cruel and conspiratorial overture.

He looked around the room. Beside the bed was a pile of paperbacks – two piles, in fact. One stack was comprised of books that were fingered and broken-spined. The others were pristine and unopened.

“Read any good books lately?” Ken ventured, in a half-joshing tone, as one might say “Do you come here often?” or “We can’t go on meeting like this.”

Aimee looked at him briefly. “Eight,” she said, and turned away again.

“Oh, how I envy you the time to sit and read,” Ken said. “There are so many books I mean to get around to, but I just never seem to manage it.”

“We can swap places any time you like,” Aimee said, her eyes still on the garden.

Ken nodded, feeling chastened. “Sorry,” he murmured.

It was Father Cuffe who had suggested to Ken that he might like to volunteer for the Hospital Visitors’ Service. They had been talking after Mass, Ken hitching his grandson up on one hip between sentences. Father Cuffe, knowing it was nearly a year since Pru had passed away, had asked how Ken was getting along.

“Oh, you know – keeping occupied. Business is always quiet in the summer, but I mustn’t grumble,” Ken replied breezily. He put his hand to his grandson’s cheek. “Grandad mustn’t grumble, must he, little Dan?”

“I wasn’t asking about business, Ken,” said Father Cuffe. He was an uncompromising young man who, presented with a bush, tended to hack it to the ground rather than beat about it. “How are you in yourself, without the missus now?”

Ken ruffled Dan’s hair, keeping his eyes on the toddler as considered a reply. He bit his lip.

“Well. It’s hard. Sometimes. Yes. It can be hard,” he admitted.

“You need something to take you out of yourself,” Father Cuffe said. “I know just the thing.”

At which point Michael came across from chatting with friends and said, “Here, I’ll take him, Pop.” He lifted little Dan from the crook of Ken’s elbow. “Quick pint before lunch, eh?”

“Why not?” Ken smiled. He shook hands with Father Cuffe. “Will you come for a drink, Father?”

The priest shook his head. “Not for me, Ken. But we’ll talk again over the next few days.”

And they did. Father Cuffe was insistent and convincing. He was of the opinion that Ken had issues around mourning and that those issues needed closure. Quite right too, he said. And in dealing with his unresolved sadness, Ken could offer something to others who also had troubles. Ken had a gift with people – that was his job, being good with people – and he could use that gift in God’s work. It was a win-win, Father Cuffe reckoned. Just make the phone call, that’s all he was saying.

Ken made the phone call. There was an interview, in which he was asked about his background, and what he could bring to the Service. Ken wasn’t sure that twenty-five years as a theatrical agent counted as any kind of qualification – but, yes, he supposed he was a good listener, and a practiced judge of character. He was used to dealing with temperamental, unpredictable personalities. But that was all just showbiz stuff, he said. It was frivolous. Not, in the end...well, you know.

“Not life and death?” ventured the lady in the flower-print dress. “You mustn’t avoid saying it, Ken. The people you’re assigned to will be thinking about death all the time, one way or another. It won’t help them to pretend it’s not happening.”

And it was that observation that convinced Ken to sign up. Because Father Cuffe was right – there were hobgoblins to be stared down, and Ken knew that he had been covering his eyes for a year. More than a year. Ever since Pru fell ill, really.

“My wife used to love the roses,” Ken told Aimee. “She grew them in the garden. Old English ones, mainly. And ramblers. We had dozens and dozens and she could name every one.”

“Used to?” Aimee said, still gazing out at the grounds of St Mary Magdalene’s.

“She passed away a year ago.”

Aimee tipped her head back on the chair and looked up at the ceiling. “God, that’s easy to say, isn’t it? *She passed away a year ago*. Twelve months after I die, someone might say exactly that about me. *She passed away a year ago*. Simple fact. Done and dusted. That’s that.”

Ken clasped his hands together in his lap, keeping his eyes on Aimee as the lady in the flower-print dress had trained him to do. Not dropping his gaze. Not appearing embarrassed or discomfited, although he was, very. “It’s not simple at all,” he said. And he heard a chime of annoyance in his voice, of which he was a little ashamed.

“Do you know how I got the virus?” Aimee asked, almost boredly, still staring at the ceiling. “From a blood transfusion. I sliced my arm open with a machete in Kenya, and they gave me infected blood.”

Ken did know. It had been in the notes.

“It’s rotten luck,” he said – and it sounded feeble even to him.

Fifteen minutes passed in silence. If he was honest, Ken preferred the silence to the tippy-toed conversation. He could manage the silence. He’d had plenty of practice with Pru, sitting by her bedside for hour after hour, thanking God for the respite of stillness and quiet after the terrible bouts of screaming and weeping or the spectacular, poisonous anger that was the most upsetting symptom of her degenerative sickness.

“Well, time I was on my way,” Ken said eventually. He pulled himself to his feet. “Is there anything you’d like me to get for you next week?”

Aimee shook her head, eyes still on the ceiling.

“Well. Okay. So. Till next week then,” Ken said as he walked to the door. “Same time next week.”

She closed her eyes, as if he had already left the room. So he left the room.

Outside, the sun shone on the rose garden and conjured shifting rainbows in the spray of the sprinklers. Teased by the warm breeze, the maples along the stone wall of the Hospice gossiped in whispers. And it was difficult to believe that in a world so delightedly alive anyone could ever find a reason to die.

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“There’s nothing of her, really,” Ken said, “but I don’t think that’s the illness. I think she was always just a little bit of a thing. And though she’s drawn and pale, you can see how pretty she’d be with a bit more colour in her cheeks.” He sipped his vodka-and-lime, and put his feet up on the stool. “Obviously she’s not that chatty at the moment, but I think she’s got a good heart, really. You’d like her.”

Pru’s photo stood on the windowsill in its silver frame. She was in the garden, standing by

the trellis-arch and pointing out the prodigious performance of her beloved Gloire de Dijon. She had been better that day – clear-eyed, sharp, bright. All the adjectives Ken had become accustomed to using when talking to specialists about the wife he was losing by degrees. Though he could barely admit it to himself – and certainly not to the professionals – he came to dread the intermittent days of lucidity, because they seemed to him little more than a taunting reminder of what had been taken away. Just as he felt he'd adjusted, almost accepted Pru's departure from him, God would allow her back – briefly, but long enough to reduce his fragile stoicism to tearful and shambolic dismay.

He finished his vodka and went to the kitchen to make himself an omelette. He watched TV for a while, as the sun sank behind the eucalyptus at the end of the garden. When the room was dark but for the flicker of the television, Ken hauled himself to his feet and trudged upstairs.

Naked in the bathroom, he inspected himself in the full-length mirror as he brushed his teeth. He'd lost weight since Pru died, but his stomach still hung down in a graspable globe. His hair was untidy – he used to get it cut only at Pru's prompting – and his white calves were traced with blue veins. He knew that he looked older than he was. Dammit, he *felt* older than he was. He had made a *decision* to get old, to be honest. It seemed time.

In recent weeks, friends at the golf club had begun making gentle suggestions that he might like to come to dinner one evening and meet Marjorie or Harriet or Karen. Ken had no interest in meeting them. He looked down at his penis. What a comical word, he thought. But 'cock' seemed too urgent, too active, too *cocky*. He'd decided he liked the archaic word 'pintle'. It sounded like some minor piece of domestic piping - a run-off for overflow or the feeder to a garden water-butt. An appropriate word in the circumstances.

Lying in the dark, he thought of Aimee and wondered what she was thinking about at that moment. If there had been a mercy in Pru's illness, it was that she didn't seem to know that she was dying. But Ken had known. Night after night, he had cried himself to sleep beside her, terrified and lonely on her behalf.

In fact, he still did.

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Ken's next visit to Aimee fell on June 21st – midsummer's day. His birthday.

"My first without her," Ken thought, as he put on his tie. And then he corrected himself – it was the second. But the first had come so soon after Pru's death that he had barely registered it.

He was washing up the breakfast things when the phone rang. It was Michael.

"Happy birthday, Pops. Got any plans for the day?"

"Oh, just pottering. You stop counting once you get to my age."

"Linda was wondering if you'd like to come to dinner tonight. Get here in time to see Danny before he goes to bed, eh?"

Ken hesitated. Though he was happy to see Michael around and about – at church, or at the golf club – he was wary of situations in which they might have the opportunity to talk properly. Because he feared what Michael might want to talk about.

The lure of little Dan, on the other hand, was too much to resist.

“Well – that’s nice of you. Yes, I will. About six?”

He locked up the house, running through Pru’s ritual – “Upstairs windows closed? Have you checked the back door?” – and strolled down the hill and along the common to St Mary Magdalene’s.

The roses in the grounds were even more resplendent than the previous week. He paused to admire them, and wished that he’d known about this place when Pru was alive. She’d have loved it – although she would have tutted over every undeadheaded bloom, and frowned at each black-spotted leaf. She was very particular about the proper care of roses, was Pru.

“How are you today, Aimee?” Ken asked, when his knock was answered with a weary permission to enter.

“Bored,” she said. She had a swollen sore on her bottom lip, which she chewed intermittently, giving her the appearance of a perplexed child.

“It’s my birthday,” Ken told her, for want of anything else to say.

She looked at him sidelong. “And for all we know, it could be my deathday,” she said. And then, to his surprise, she smiled – though mirthlessly. “It’s an interesting thought that every year we each live through the pre-anniversary of our death, did we but know it.”

Ken ignored the observation. “When’s your birthday, as a matter of interest?”

“The fourth of October. I keep asking the doctors how long I’ve got, because it would satisfy my sense of symmetry if I were to go precisely then.”

Ken looked down at his hands clasped in his lap. “My wife died on her birthday, as it happens,” he said quietly. Outside, a motor-mower coughed and stopped, noticeable only now that it was silenced. Ken looked up at Aimee, eyes on hers, as if to convey that he was unable to carry the conversation for the moment, and that she would have to take it up.

“How long were you married?” she asked, as if it were of no more than cursory interest to her.

“Thirty-two years.”

Aimee leaned forward, chewing her lip. “And doesn’t that seem like an absurd waste now?” she said. For the first time Ken saw a keenness in her eyes – some passion for an idea. “I mean – now that she’s gone, what does it all mean? What was it for?”

“We were happy. I just thank God for the time we had.”

She sat back, and shrugged. “Well, I wouldn’t bother with that, if I were you. God’s not there to listen.”

Ken opened his mouth to protest, but Aimee wasn’t finished.

“All my life I’ve been told that I’ll be judged by God, some day. But who is he to judge me? God does more terrible things in an afternoon than any human being could manage in a lifetime. And as no one has ever mentioned that he’s an Almighty Bloody Hypocrite, I have to conclude that the God I was told about doesn’t exist.”

“Free choice,” Ken ventured, weakly. “We all have free choice. That’s the point.”

There was colour in Aimee’s cheeks now, and she banged the heel of her hand on the arm of the chair, almost shouting.

“Oh, yeah. ‘Do whatever you want - though of course if it’s not what *I* want, you’ll burn in Hell’. What kind of a free choice is that?”

“No – it’s not like that...”

“It *is* like that! That’s *exactly* what it’s like!” Aimee yelled – and she broke off in a fit of coughing, holding her hand to her mouth, doubled up and breathless.

Ken hurriedly brought her a glass of water from the nightstand, and she gulped it, spluttering. He stood there, feeling useless and wondering whether he should call someone.

“I’m sorry I upset you. Perhaps it would be better if I went,” Ken said, when she had recovered herself, sitting back in the chair and panting as she sipped the last of the water. She nodded.

“I’ll come again next week, if that’s okay,” he said, lifting his jacket from the back of the chair.

“Happy birthday,” she croaked, as he opened the door. “And many more.”

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They were rehearsed homilies, all the things he had said to Aimee. As he walked back along the common, he realized that he trotted out such blandishments – ‘I thank God for the time we had’; ‘We all have free choice’ – because he knew that they were expected. They were mandatory. They protected everyone, including himself, from more disturbing and pernicious reckonings.

But in the solitary dark he’d often asked himself exactly the questions that Aimee had raised. As the moon crept across the bay-window of the bedroom, he had tried to conjure some beneficial use for the happy memories, the remembered years of contentment – but he could find nothing there except a mocking counterpoint to the loneliness and the pointlessness with which he now shared an empty house.

And it had started even before Pru had died. In the slow years of her gradual derangement, he had felt powerless and victimized. He was ashamed to admit that he believed he had suffered more than she – because he was aware of her situation, as she was not. He was confronted daily by loss and disappointment and plans denied. He couldn't bear it.

As he walked along the common, he felt a lurch of giddy admission in his stomach, and he staggered from the pavement to a bench beside the Old Pond. He sat down and blinked, not sure whether to follow his thoughts where they seemed to want to go.

It was Pru's birthday – the tenth of June. She was still sleeping when he woke up. The sun was on her face, and he could almost have convinced himself that she would open her eyes in a moment and look at him, smiling as he pulled on his dressing-gown and asked her if she fancied a cup of tea. But she slept, her hair curled around her face.

He padded downstairs and put the kettle on. He unlocked the back door and walked out into the garden in his bare feet. The wet grass was cold and fresh between his toes. Birds chirped and trilled in the apple trees. The roses that Pru had planted and tended were glistening with moisture, each bead of dew silvered in the low morning rays of the sun. On the wrought-iron table at the bottom of the garden there lay a pair of secateurs. Pru would have a fit if she knew he'd left them out in the open overnight. He picked them up, and walked to the trellis-arch, where the Gloire de Dijon was flowering with more promiscuous fervour than it ever had before.

Ken selected a full, open bloom, on which the dew nestled between the petals like the substantiation of some secret holy passion. He snipped it from the branch, taking a long stem with it, careful not to disturb the moisture or the casual intimacy of the petals. Carrying it inside, he placed it neatly in a narrow glass vase, which he set on a tray beside the teacups and milk jug. He made a pot of tea and put some biscuits on a plate.

Carrying the tray upstairs, he imagined Pru's face lit by happy recognition, her mind coaxed out of the thickening fog by the sight of a bloom she had brought into being with years of tireless, delighted attention. Dear God, surely it couldn't be too much to ask that she might be restored to him, whole and perfect, as the flowers of the rose were reborn each summer after frost-bound months of seeming dull and dead.

"After all, it's her birthday," Ken muttered, as if it were the clinching convincer of a contract negotiation.

Pru was awake, sitting up. She looked at Ken as he came in, and her expression was serene, unfathomable.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart," he smiled, and put the tray on her lap. She gazed at it – at the teacups, the milk jug, the moist pink-edged yellow bloom of the rose. He poured milk into the cups and topped them up with strong tea.

"Would you like a biscuit?" he asked.

Pru reached out her hand and lifted the rose from the vase by its stem. Deliberately and with precise care, she dunked it bloom-down into a brimming teacup, and then mashed it into her open mouth, her eyes expressionless and blue.

“No! Pru – no!” Ken wailed, and snatched the dripping, stained rose from her. A thorn had punctured her palm, and bright blood trickled to her wrist. She yelped and kicked her legs up, the tea things scattering across the bed as she fell back, whimpering, her mouth full of petals.

Ken gathered her in his arms, pressing her to his chest, and he wept as her limp hand bled onto the white pillow, and her eyes looked out vacantly on the chirruping summer garden.

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That evening, when Dr Ross came downstairs, Ken was in the garden, sitting at the wrought-iron table. The doctor sat down too.

“A sad business, Ken,” he said.

Ken nodded, not looking up.

“But a mercy, perhaps, considering, hm?”

Again, Ken nodded.

“I thought she had a little while yet, but you can never tell,” the doctor said. “Unpredictable, these things.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, watching the bees doing the rounds of the rose bushes.

“Would you have me give you something to help you sleep?” Dr Ross said. And then he added, “Ah, no – you’ll still have plenty of pills left from the other week. Won’t you?”

Ken lifted his head sharply. “Yes. Plenty,” he said.

“Ah, that’s good. So, in three or four weeks’ time, you’ll have used them all, will you?” the doctor said slowly and precisely. “And then you’ll want some more. But not before. Am I right?”

Ken held the doctor’s gaze for a second or two and then dropped his head. “Yes. Not before then.”

The doctor got to his feet. “Often there’s an autopsy – but not necessary in this case, eh?”

Ken swallowed and rubbed his eyes with his fingertips. “No. Not if you can avoid it, George. Thank you.”

The doctor nodded. “As I say – it’s a mercy. You look after yourself, Ken. You’re a good man.”

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“It wasn’t a mercy, though,” Ken murmured

Sitting on the bench by the Old Pond, just down the road from the Hospice, Ken watched the carp mouthing the water's surface, and the yellowflag irises sway and nod.

“It wasn't a mercy at all. It was selfish.”

If he was right that Pru had not known what was happening to her – and the constant reassurance he allowed himself was that she hadn't suffered, she hadn't understood – then there was no mercy at all in releasing her. She was in a state of grace, having no knowledge of good and evil. She was as ignorant as new-made Eve. But he, a fallen Adam, had free choice. And he had chosen to liberate himself from the capricious and tyrannical treachery of her illness, in order to accept the steady and comprehensible misery of bereavement. And he had lied about it.

“Michael, there's something I have to tell you about Mum.”

After the funeral they had sat together in the garden, both in their dark suits and black ties. Michael was drinking Scotch – Pru's favourite – and Ken had a vodka and lime. Ken had explained, in a faltering murmur, how they had made a pact, he and Pru, that if either of them were incapacitated, beyond hope, then the other would help them escape the suffering. And he had kept to that pact. He couldn't renege, however it hurt him to carry it through.

And as he said it, his eyes fixed on the house in which Michael had grown up, Ken believed it was the truth. Not, he knew, a factual truth, but an emotional one. A truth about his marriage that transcended any considerations of documentation or literal accuracy. He turned to look at his son.

“You do understand, Michael, don't you?”

Michael's face was wet with tears. “I wish I could have said goodbye to her, that's all. I just wish...” He shook his head. “It was very brave of you. I couldn't have done it. You did the right thing, Dad.”

Ken put his arm around Michael and accepted the offered approval which, he was grateful to admit, vindicated him. He was brave. He had done the right thing. Even his son said so. And could God himself contradict such an assertion?

But if what he'd done was self-serving and cowardly, Ken was defenceless against God's indignation. He was an open-and-shut case. The only hope then would be that there was no God, and therefore no judgement. The ultimate recourse of the guilty - to deny the power of the court.

As the office workers took lunchtime strolls around the Old Pond, Ken gazed up to the infinite sky, and blinked at the sun until his eyes streamed. And when he lowered his head and looked out across the water, he could see only shimmering blue and smudges of shifting yellow – there was no form to the world, no shape and no composition. Just colour, random and nonsensical, and the rustle of the empty wind in the reeds.

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Michael and Linda lived in a smart modern house that was not really to Ken's taste, although he and Pru had always been impressed by the garden, which was informal and exuberantly colourful, full of hidden little corners and twisting paths shadowed by overhanging branches.

"Little Dan is going to love this when he's a bit bigger," Ken said, as he and Michael took a stroll in the evening sun after dinner. "All these secret places to hide away and play."

They walked back to the patio and sat at the wooden table, lit by perfumed candles as the dusk came down. Linda brought coffee, a bottle of port and a vodka for Ken. She sat down and took a mint from the bowl.

"I think the little devil is asleep at last," she said.

"Oh, he's a good boy really," Ken said. "Just like Michael was."

"Mostly, yes," Linda nodded. "But do you know what he did yesterday? He pushed a slice of bread into the VCR, the monster." She poured the coffee. "He knows he's not allowed to touch the VCR."

Michael chuckled. "But he doesn't know *why* he's not allowed to – that's the problem."

"Well, just knowing it's naughty should be enough," Ken said. "You shouldn't have to reason with a two-year-old."

"This is what I keep telling him, Ken," Linda agreed, nodding towards her husband.

Michael gave a little shrug and a glance to the side – a gesture of Pru's that meant, *Try to stay with me here – it's really not that difficult*. "There's a big difference between being naughty, when you know why something is wrong, and being disobedient, when you break a rule that seems to have no rhyme or reason to it."

Ken frowned. "That's not a good attitude to teach a little boy, Michael."

"Dad, I can't get as exercised about him posting a sandwich in the video – which must be an irresistible adventure when you're two – as I can about – I dunno – putting his hand in the fire, or running off in the mall. What I'm teaching him is a sense of perspective. If we go similarly bananas about everything he does, how is he to know which really matter and which don't?"

Ken swirled ice around in his glass, watching the syrupy vodka climb the sides.

"Well, have it your way. But I warn you – you're encouraging him to question your authority," he said.

"Dear God, I hope so," Michael laughed, and downed his port in one swift shot.

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"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

In the warm gloom of his own garden the scent of roses still lingered, and the trellis-arch was framed against the penny-bright moon. Ken sat at the wrought-iron table, leaning forward on his elbows, his hands clasped under his chin.

“Michael says we needn’t obey rules that seem arbitrary to us. I don’t know where he got that idea. Not from me or his mother, I’m sure.”

But children grew in unexpected ways, Ken knew. They rarely turned out as replicas of their parents, embodying every taught value and demonstrated attitude. They had free choice.

“You see, I don’t understand why you made Pru ill. She didn’t choose her terrible sickness. Why would you do that to her? It seems arbitrary to me.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose between the tips of his forefingers, thinking. He considered people who break laws, who defy authority because what is right doesn’t seem to them to align with what is allowed.

“And I didn’t choose my course either. You placed me and Pru in a situation that was unbearable – and from that point, my choices were limited and horrible.”

If an oppressed people, for instance, refused to comply with the governing regime, no one would accuse them of selfishness or cowardice. The dehumanizing misery of their lives justified rebellion.

“Lord, the suffering I prevented was largely my own – but didn’t I have the right to end the horrors you visited upon me? What was the purpose of that? In what possible way was your will being done?”

From the corner of his eye, Ken saw a movement in the bushes. He kept quite still as a fox trotted out onto the grass, eyes mirrored in the moonlight. In its mouth was a moorhen, held by the neck, trailing loose feathers. The fox dropped the bird in the middle of the lawn, where it fluttered brokenly, not yet dead. The fox gave a little mewling shriek - and from behind the shed scampered three cubs, falling over each other to get to their mother. They nuzzled against her and she pushed them with her snout towards the flailing bird. After a few moments of confusion, they got the idea. They backed off and pounced; they nipped and growled; they tormented the crippled prey, stalking and biting and pulling, blood in their nostrils and flesh between their teeth.

Ken watched in breathless fascination. The cubs were being taught how to survive – it was a vital part of the cycle of life, and it had always been so. Nature made provision for the education of little foxes.

But, Ken noted, it must have seemed pretty cruel and arbitrary to the moorhen.

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“You were brought up a Catholic, weren’t you?”

“For my sins,” Aimee nodded. “Convent education, bible class, missionary school – all that.”

She was looking paler today. Her hair seemed thinner and her skin was dry and taut across her cheekbones. She sat in the chair by the window with a blanket on her knees, and she was tapping her fingers on the armrest, as if she was impatient for something.

“So it must have been difficult for you to come to the point of not believing in God. After everything you’d invested in your faith, I mean.”

She shrugged. “He didn’t keep up His end of the payments.”

Ken had brought her roses from the garden. It was a habit he’d fallen into over the weeks. Now that the summer was coming to its end, the late-blooming roses were egging each other on to an explosive finale. Ken looked forward to getting up early and choosing the flowers he would cut. He’d decide on a theme – colour or shape or even some fanciful connection between the rose names – and he’d put together a bouquet of a dozen blooms. The first time he’d arrived with his floral offering, Aimee had thanked him dismissively and left the bunch carelessly on the bed. But he’d persevered, and now Aimee looked forward to seeing what he’d brought, and she allowed him to chat about that week’s choices, smiling a little as he explained the selection process.

“God has a plan,” Ken said. “What happens might seem arbitrary to us, but that doesn’t mean it has no purpose.”

He said it not because her comment had prompted it, but because it had become a silent litany for him – one which repetition might make credible, so that belief in it would allow him to be content. But as he heard it aloud, he realized how insulting a platitude it was to present to a woman dying. If a purposeless death was beyond acceptance, how much more incomprehensible and pitiless would it be to die for some unrevealed Divine purpose that would benefit only God knew who?

Ken spoke again quickly, as if he could leap in fast enough to drown out his own words before they reached her. “I don’t mean to say that there’s a good reason for your illness. I mean, it’s just rotten luck, that’s all. I mean...”

He expected her to be angry – he wouldn’t have blamed her – and he was ready for more spluttered yelling and flushed indignation. But she sighed, and pushed her lank hair from her cheek with thin, curled fingers.

“It’s not rotten luck. It’s my fault,” she murmured.

Still concerned to smooth over his monumental insensitivity, Ken protested at her suggestion. “No, no – it’s just bad luck. No-one’s fault. An infected transfusion – terrible thing to happen.”

“I had it already,” she said, and her eyes were filling with tears. “From a man.”

Ken gaped. He couldn’t find any reply.

“It’s a punishment, you see,” she continued “Mortal sin. Mortal punishment.” Silent tears were dripping from her chin now. She sobbed aloud all of a sudden. “...but it seems so *harsh*...”

She wept for an hour, her face against Ken's lapel, her fragile shoulders trembling as he murmured infantile soothings. Eventually, like a child, she cried herself to sleep, and Ken lowered her back in her chair and pulled the blanket up to her chest.

*

It was early October. The roses were gone, and the trees in the grounds of the Hospice were the main feature, ochre and crimson against the clear cold sky. Ken stood on the path between the bare rose bushes, and looked up at the window of Aimee's room. Had she been sitting in her usual chair, she would not have seen him – she was blind now. Her eyes had failed her, as had her kidneys, which were bypassed by a dialysis machine. The tubes in her nose supplied oxygen to her disinterested lungs, and her tissue-paper skin stretched grudgingly over her twig bones. Her heart, though, was still strong, so the doctors said. It might keep her going for months. She had a good heart.

Ken's hands were deep in the pockets of his expensive but shabby overcoat. It still had a smell of Pru about it, and he couldn't bring himself to get it cleaned and mended. He lifted his eyes to the fat red sun as it glowed dully above the maples.

Over the months, he had come to understand that God's purpose was unfathomable. If Aimee's illness was not at all arbitrary, but a punishment as she said, then it was out of all proportion to her sin, and beyond his understanding. And if Pru's illness was not a punishment for some unknown sin, but was as arbitrary as it appeared, then it too was incomprehensible. In the end, there was no explanation that any reasonable man could accept. There was only suffering – random or ordained, it made no difference – just the suffering that God visited on his children, as casual and as unconcerned as a vixen might set her cubs on a wounded bird.

“He gets it from me, does little Dan,” Ken told God. “I won't obey rules that I don't understand. You may say that people must suffer, but I can't see why they should. You gave me free choice, and you must expect me to use it.”

And he walked into the Hospice, up the marble stairs to Room 213, his hands still deep in the pockets of the overcoat that carried Pru's smell. Inside the left pocket, Ken's thumbnail rubbed over his wedding ring. And inside the right, his hand clutched the prescription that Dr Ross had renewed a few days before.