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The Home

by Chris Kingham

He hated the word 'retirement', but not as much as he hated the word 'village', as if aging made you a peasant or a fool.

The Home was no doubt once a decadent spectacle of Edwardian opulence. Now it was considered as 'Requiring Improvement' by the CQC. Its location did not help. It was 15 miles from the nearest town, and at least five miles even from the nearest main road. Buried in the Devon countryside it hid in plain sight as the failure that it had become, or hid away in embarrassment - depending on which review you chose to read on the internet.

Patrick was afraid. He had been afraid all his life, but now it felt that little bit more real. In his prime he was a fierce man - people were afraid of him even. But inside he always had nagging doubts. He was the product of a Catholic mother and an atheist father. Just enough pragmatism to denounce religion, but just enough doubt to constantly regret that choice. He was meant to have children to look after him in his old age, a wife even. But life had dealt him a different hand. His wife left this mortal coil some 20 years or so earlier, and the fallout meant his children were at best aloof towards him, at worst actively disinterested.

He could no longer care for himself. Too many faculties had become unreliable, and after much protest he was deemed medically vulnerable.

Vulnerable. Is there a truly more frightening word?

The Home was once a source of upper-middle class debauchery, where the parties were Gatsby-esque, and the stuff of legend. It fledged from private owner to private owner until eventually it found its way into the estate of the well known confidence trickster, Ronnie Charlton. On his bankruptcy the Home eventually passed to the Crown. In the 1980s it was refurbished and developed into a care home. Since then it had once again acquired private ownership, but other than a change in name the decor remained the same - an eerie time capsule for the already fragile of body and mind.

His first night was relatively uneventful. He did not sleep very well, but he seldom did. It was on the fourth night that he started to hear the little girl's voice. At first it was unclear what she was saying but after the third or fourth night of this happening he was confident he could make out the words.

“Bertie, you cannot come with me”

His room was on the top floor of the building - the fifth floor - and was most probably once part of an attic of sorts during the Home's more salubrious days. It was a month into his residency that he was awoken once again by the sound of fleet-footed footsteps, followed by the childish soundbite. This time however the curtains - curtains which shrouded a window which looked out onto the courtyard fifty feet below - began to ripple. He was certain the window was closed. It was even his understanding that the windows beyond the first floor could not be opened - lots of disgruntled inmates it would seem.

“Bertie, you cannot come with me.”

The curtains now billowed freely, the temperature in the room dropping just short of arresting his heart. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the edge of his blanket more tightly, his breath crystallising almost as the condensation shot from his aghast mouth - unable to scream.

Then nothing.

The next morning he relayed this encounter to his nurse. He had previously been worried that his sanity would be called into question - but now he felt that might not even be a bad thing.

His nurse was alarmed. She had worked at the Home since the beginning, in the early 1980s - when it accommodated 'disturbed' children also.

“Her name was Rose,” she began, her eyes beginning to fill. “She was the first patient to stay in this room. Your room. She was such a happy little girl. But she was so, so troubled. Her poor parents just didn't know what to do with her when her mood dipped. Now there would be guidance, medication, anything. Then there was this place.

She brought her dog with her - Bertie. He never left her side. It was on such an innocuous night that it happened.”

“What happened?” he asked. But he knew.

“Well we all hoped she had fell. She liked the view from that window - she said you could see ‘home’. She never did say what she meant by that. Now it would seem that her moods were even more profoundly dark than we ever imagined.

We would understand if you want us to arrange for your room to be changed?”

“No, I don't think that is necessary. Maybe this is why I'm here after all.”