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Guilt

by Sue Hitchcock

Everything changes. Nothing changes. “Plus ça change...” as the French say. The Queen died. Was anyone surprised? Or has dying gone out of fashion? I remember when King George died, when I was ten years old. The sonorous voice of John Snagge announced that the king had died and I ran down to the scullery where my mum was washing clothes to tell her. She gasped, but death was not so unfamiliar in those days when antibiotics were still rarely used. I had already heard the shrieks of a woman who lived a few doors down. She ran into the street screaming “My husband is dead.” He had had tuberculosis.

The National Health Service had been instigated two years before the death of King George and it seemed like a gift from God to the poor who died of industrial accidents and diseases. Their children were given free milk, cod liver oil and orange juice, producing a generation who lived long and believed in the Health Service like a religion, with a priesthood of doctors.

I, too, should be grateful to all those medics who have brought my husband back to me, but there is a cuckoo, called NHS in our nest. We wanted things to be as they were, but we are too old to expect it. Still, do all these medics need to be here every day. Their extra furniture is blocking my view of the TV and my husband is distressed by his continual failure to do what they ask. Pity the poor therapist who had to listen to my invective. She wasn't to know I wasn't a believer and I had allowed my daughter to dial 999 in the first place, which would imply I belonged.

Forgive my atheism. I am old and expect to die, as in olden times grannies would set out to look for firewood and never return. How can I die a natural death, not feeling guilt about avoiding the NHS.