

Tapestry

I have a tapestry on the wall at home which I know I will never see again. It's beautiful and ancient piece of work, probably filched from a European castle in some war or other. It was brought into the family by my grandfather, a great traveller in his youth. That was before my father married beneath him – not that he would have put it that way – and the family fell on hard times.

It tells of a family, that tapestry. The colours are faded now, but still clear, weaving in and out, just as the people move in and out of the scenes. Eating and drinking, coming and going, together and alone. Like my family. Like all families perhaps.

My family would be amazed if they knew I were thinking of the tapestry. They're more concerned about who will get it, though my Will is quite clear. You see, they do not know that I am thinking. And I don't know by what miracle I'm able to, or even hear what's going on.

I've heard the doctors talk of coma, of my peaceful slipping into that long dark sleep very soon. Though I know that it will not be dark, and it will not be yet.

“Hello Nana,” Sarah’s voice was cheerful above the chirrup of the hospital equipment. She did not kiss her grandmother’s white cheek. No point, she knew with the certitude of nursing training that the old woman would neither hear, nor feel the brush of lips.

“How are you today?” It was the bedside manner, bright, superficial. Sarah knew she was doing it for her own good. She hated to see her grandmother like this, the living death, a Tussaud’s figure under the sheets. “Not long now,” she sighed.

Julie came into the room, her twin sister, though not alike, as different in temperament as they were in looks. She did not waste a glance on her grandmother.

“Oh, that Simon!”

“Why, what’s happening now?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t believe it!”

“Keep your voice down,” Sarah cast a professional eye over the immobile form.

“She can’t hear. Complete coma, they said.”

“All the same, out of respect.”

The picnic is my favourite scene on the tapestry. All them lords and ladies; such impractical clothes. But there's life in the scene, as if the tapestry maker had seen a real family, in a real meadow, with mountains and a lake to look at. And I remember the days we had at Redcar when Jack and George were very little, before the war broke out, and the Sunday School outings afterwards, when my Davey went away, and we would go out to enjoy ourselves as though there wasn't a war on. Only my Davey never came back, never saw his lads grow into men, missed the joys and the sorrows.

They've still got it to come, the young'uns. The pain and the loss.

Our Julie's heartbroken over the way that Simon treats her, and if I could, I'd tell her to leave him well alone. And I pray and hope she'll see him for what he is.

Sarah and Julie left, absorbed in their own worlds, oblivious to the old woman on the bed, robbed of all senses but hearing, unable to communicate, useless except for the love she still felt for her family. They were followed by Jack, their father's brother, though they did not meet. A tall man, well-built and cheerful, though those who knew him would see the lines of strain about his eyes.

"Hi Mam," he said, sitting down quickly and kissing her cheek. "I've brought you some music." He held out a tape, searching her face for some flicker of recognition, that slight movement of an eyelid that would tell him she was on the mend.

He sighed, and put the cassette into the player he had also brought. The sounds of the Big Band music of her youth filled the old woman's room. She gave no sign. Jack let the tape run its thirty minutes and got up.

"Well, I'll be back same time tomorrow."

Dear Jack, he tries so hard. If only I could tell him how I love the music, and him bringing it. It breaks his heart, I can hear the tears in his voice, and I can't tell him not to worry. I won't be going back to him, but I'm not afraid. I wonder of there'll be music like that in heaven, and I can dance with the angels? And Davey. I want to dance with Davey again.

"I'm glad you agreed to come with me," Paul's voice drifted across the room. He sniffed the hospital smell, nose irritated at the cleanness. He looked

around at the equipment, bleeping and flashing, and a scowl marred his features.

“Well, I know how you feel about hospitals,” Denise told her husband. “I remember how you were when our Jenna was born...”

“You made me come.”

“I did nothing of the sort! I’ve never been able to make you do anything.”

“Still,” and Paul fell silent, the unspoken bitterness hanging in the air between them.

“I didn’t come to row with you, Paul,” Denis said softly.

“No,” he sighed, and turned his attention to his grandmother. “How are you, Nan?” he asked.

“She can’t hear you, Spud,” Denise told him.

He looked up at the sound of his nickname. So long since she’d called him that. Denise turned her head quickly, but not before he saw her tears.

“I know. It’s just that... It seems so unnatural.”

Denise and Paul sat facing one another across the old woman’s bed. Each held one of her hands. Suddenly she was the only person to unite them, where all else had failed.

Denise smiled faintly. “Do you remember her at our Jenna’s christening?”

“She was pleased as punch. First great grandchild!” Paul was suddenly serious. “And I remember her telling us Jesus loved us, and us thinking she was potty.” He said.

And I remember even then thinking the seeds of failure were planted in our Paul’s marriage. His father divorced, no news from his mother since, and twenty years is a long time. Jack did his best, but sometimes best isn’t good enough.

In the tapestry everyone’s happy. So idyllic. So rural. Not like our Teesside with the chimneys spoiling the view. At least it’s not like when I were a lass, and you had to watch the wind direction before you put the washing on the line. Funny how you miss the smell. And I” not see the Eston Hills again. These little things seem so much. And our Paul and Denise so close to splitting. The bairns must find it hard. Dear Lord, sort them out! I can’t do it anymore.

I must have been asleep and dreaming. I dreamt that the people in the tapestry were real. I was in it and walking about, something I’ve not been able to do for a couple of years now. And the sun was shining. I could hear birds, and see

the hills, and smell the meadow. It all seemed so real. And then I heard Davey's voice calling me, and I wondered, perhaps it will be time to go soon.

Time the old woman could not measure had passed, and she slipped in and out of awareness, though to the attendant medical staff no change was visible in her unconscious state. She still lived, still breathed without help, but that was all that remained to her.

Brenda visited her mother in law the day following Jack's evening visit, trailing husband George behind her.

"We ought to start emptying her house now, George. She can't have much time left."

George looked at his wife with disdain. Lines etched the thin face he had once admired for its chiselled elegance, the small mouth now tightly closed. Greedy, he thought. She wants her hands on my mother's stuff.

"She could get better."

"She won't! I don't know why they don't just turn this stuff off, give the bed to someone who's got a chance. Even if she did come out of the coma she'd be an invalid, needing constant care. They keep them alive too long these days in my opinion." Brenda stared down at the bed, contempt written across her once lovely face.

"You'd say different if it was you in that bed," George told her.

"Hmph," Brenda snorted, and walked out.

When his wife could not see him, George took his mother's limp hand. It was still warm, his mother's blood still flowed in the veins.

"I'm sorry, Mam," he told her. "She never used to be this bad." He stroked his mother's white hair. "It isn't even as if you've got vast riches and we're poor. You know I'm doing okay. And I know you're not rich. Anyway, this'll probably be the last chance I get to see you The doc reckons you won't last much longer. But if I don't," he bent down and kissed her forehead, and a childhood memory surface.

"Night night, Mam. God bless."

Poor George. His wife hurt him more than she hurt me. She could always hurt me before, but I seem to have gone beyond it now. And he's wrong. She was always like that. It just wasn't so obvious before.

There were no old people in the tapestry. I never realised that till now, and I've had it all these years. Just young people, and children, all dressed in their lace and plumes. Their silks and furs. No poor people either, like those of us who brought up our kids in the shadows of the works, the women who scrimped and starved when their men were laid off – or didn't come back. I was lucky, found work in one of the big stores when the war ended, and retired with a pension. Like George said, never rich, but always provided for. But Brenda would like to live in the tapestry, where the old are kept out of sight, so we can't be reminding such as her of what's to come.

“Ooh, Uncle Jack. Do you have to?”

The sounds of dance music from the thirties drifted through the open door as Sarah entered. She moved to turn off the cassette player, but Jack caught her wrist.

“It's awful!”

“To you, maybe. It's not even my scene either, but your grandmother loves it.”

“Used to, perhaps. She's in a coma now.” Sarah pouted slightly. This was one area where she knew better than her parents and uncle. She wanted them to remember it.

“I know pet. But maybe there's summat going on inside her. She can't talk, but can we be so sure she can't hear, can't feel?”

“Well no, I suppose not, but...”

“Who's to say what goes on in the human spirit when the ability to communicate goes. Even doctors don't know that.”

“Oh, you and your spirit stuff, you spook me. You're as bad as Nana with all that religious talk.” Sarah stopped and took her grandmother's hand impulsively. “Oh Nana, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be nasty.”

Jack smiled, refusing to take the barb.

“You see, you know. In spite of what you think, in your heart you know she's still there, and your instinct is to communicate.”

Sarah let go of her grandmother's hand and looked her uncle in the eye.

“Do you really think it's true then? That there is a God, and another life?”

Jack thought for a moment. For many years he had been a practicing sceptic, unable to take the simple Christian faith his mother had taught him, resentful of a God who had let his wife leave him in the lurch with a young son

to care for. But now? Perhaps it was just the first stages of grief stirring in his heart, or perhaps it was something deeper.

“Yes, I think there might be.”

I know so. I've always tried to tell them that and always felt I'd failed. Others wanted me to blame God when Davey died, but I can see how he looked after me and the boys. I suppose the struggle rubbed off on them, and George married a materialist, and Jack, always more sensitive, married, well what was her name? I can't remember. But she left him so bitter and broken. Oh Lord, if only you'd comfort him!

There are no one parent families in the tapestry. Perhaps it's unreal, or perhaps it didn't happen when the needlewoman made it, because it is a woman's picture, you can see that. Such love between the people, no war. Perhaps it's really about heaven. I wonder. There's a scene where children are playing by a waterfall, and one child has his arm about the neck of a deer. Now that wouldn't happen in real life would it? There's no danger, no fear, just peace. I wish I could tell them, they're so afraid of death, that's why they want me to get on and get out of the way. I remind them too much.

Paul had come without his wife, screwing up the courage to visit the hospital on his own. But he had not come to visit his grandmother, he saw no point. Instead he came to talk to his Uncle George. It seemed easier to George somehow, perhaps because his own life with Aunt Brenda was less than perfect, but mostly because the whole idea of splitting up gave his father such a problem.

George was there, as arranged, but sitting by Nana's bedside, stroking her hand.

“Still here then,” George said, watching his mother's face though addressing Paul.

“Yeah, amazing how she's hanging on.”

“You know, when I was a kid at the chapel, they used to say a Christian's immortal till their work's done. Well, what can Man do? Why doesn't the good Lord take her?”

“But she's not in pain?”

“No.”

Paul sucked in his breath sharply. This was not what he had come to discuss, but he did not know how to broach the subject. Suddenly he blurted, "Me and Denise are thinking of splitting."

"You've decided then?"

"Well, no, but it looks that way."

"And you both feel the same way?"

"It's just not working."

George looked at the taut face of his nephew, and saw his own misery reflected.

"It's tough, I know. Maybe a trial separation? Or counselling. If you're not sure, if you don't really want to end your marriage, why not go for help?"

Paul nodded.

"Denise doesn't want us to split."

George thought there were tears in his nephew's eyes and turned his head quickly, back to his mother's still face.

"Well then," he said.

It's a funny thing, but the longer I lie here, the more my tapestry comes real, the more the things about me, the memories, my family, seem distant. I feel warm, and the blue of the sky, the green of the meadow and the woods seems stronger, more distinct. Perhaps I'm just remembering the meadows of my youth, out to the south of the town where it was farms, and we could go for bike rides, like when Davey and me were courting. That was before they built the estates. I suppose they had to put them somewhere, but it was a shame. And the sun's so warm on my face like I'm in the tapestry. And the people are walking about, and the colours of their clothes, like a rainbow. So sharp and bright. And I can smell the flowers, and hear the waterfall.

They've brought the family in to see me. I must be going, but how can I say goodbye? I wish I could tell them what's happening, so they wouldn't be scared, so they'd know.

And now I can see that there's a city on the top of the hill. I think it was always there, I think I remember from the tapestry, but it's so hard to be sure. Such a beautiful city, not like our modern industrial towns, there's a cleanness about it. I wonder if it's possible to walk there,

There's Davey! I must have died! He's coming towards me. Oh he looks just like he did the day he went away, and I'm old, he won't know me. But maybe...?

I can walk, and run. I'm not in my bed. I'm not even in my own skin. I can see my hands and they're young like they used to be!

There's someone following behind Davey. Oh, he makes my heart jump even more than Davey ever could. It is him, isn't it? He's dressed in a simple white robe, but you never saw a washing machine powder get a glow like that. The light, it comes from him, all around. And I know the marks on those hands.

The family arrived together, as though by common agreement, though nothing had been arranged. It seemed that nothing had changed, except that here they were together, packed in the tiny room.

George and Brenda stood awkwardly, as though they had just suspended a row for the time being. Paul and Denise were holding hands in a corner, whispering together. Julie was still moaning about Simon to Sarah, who was watching Jack.

Jack alone approached his mother, holding her hand, and watching her face. Suddenly he opened her eyes and smiled at him. He stared in shock, then turned to the others excitedly.

"Look, she's opened her eyes!"

"Impossible," said Sarah.

Jack looked again, and his mother's eyes were firmly shut. At the same moment, a single tone came from one of the monitors, and a buzzer sounded outside.