

I sit with my book and my diet coke watching my washing in the dryer. I am unable to read. Not because the book is boring but because the laundrette is so depressing.

Normally I can block this feeling out but today was different. At first I thought it was because of the drab, muted colours or the faded paint on which faded signs say how much a full cycle wash is and that the dry cleaning machine is no longer in use due to the owner unable (or can't be bothered) to get new parts. I also thought it was the big oversized tables with their sick yellow Formica tops with their mismatching plastic chairs. Or was it the mass of out-of-date papers that crowd the valuable folding space. But the laundrette never changes, so it can't just be this.

It is, of course, all of these things plus the underlying reason: the lack of love and attention this specific laundrette needs. Was I also feeling unloved?

I look at the lady at the end of the second large table. She is reading. Her hair is straight, long and touching her magazine because her head is tilting downwards. She has a gaunt face, all thin and bones. She looks depressed too. Her clothes look depressed, faded and flat. Has loneliness of the laundrette seeped out of the walls and into her? Or is it the other way around?

I look at the well-dressed man in his light grey suit and polished black shoes, with his manicured black moustache. He is folding what appears to be seven months of laundry. His short black hair is groomed and he has an air of authority. Maybe this naturally comes to people who are in their early fifties? I'm unsure. Somehow he looks depressed as well. There's a sombreness that hangs about him and in his movements. Back and forth, from dyer to table carefully folding a new piece of clothing.

We said hellos as I walked in. I felt shy as my small hello was said. I like to be friendly in public even though there is a strong urge to be left alone. Somehow there

is no need to be rude or unhappy towards strangers just because they are strangers. I recall that cheesy but true saying 'strangers are just friends you haven't met'. Sometimes it's the corny expressions that have profound wisdom. It's just their packaging that's shiny. The moustached man's hello, in contrast, was strong and he went beyond the initial greetings. I wasn't expecting the extra "how are you?" and I wasn't in the mood to talk. I responded with a short "fine thanks, and you?" hoping he wouldn't continue this polite chitchat. He replied and that was the end of our conversation. But the bond of the laundrette is stronger than hellos.

The laundrette bond between users is a disturbing one. It's an unwanted link that reflects back what each of us doesn't want to see. When I look at another laundrette user I see the depression in their eyes. I see the look of failure. I don't want to see that look but it's there reminding me that I, too, haven't got a big enough flat for a tumble dryer. It reminds me that somehow my life missed the bit where I live in a big house. But that is just my materialistic side and is fleeting. It's the programmed side of me the advertising companies have installed, that our lives are incomplete if we don't wear the right clothes or have the latest gadgets. I do have a beautiful girlfriend and a wonderful child. I have a lot to be genuinely happy for. I also know there's a deeper feeling of depression, one that has been with me since childhood.

What has always been a part of me, the biggest part, is a deep desire to create stories. Ever since I read 'Where the wild things are' my world was never the same. To be lost with Max in his world, transported with him to his island where he becomes king of the wild things. This magic spell took hold and has never relented. I yearn to be the magician who casts his beautiful spell, enchanting all those who read his words. To be published, to write non-stop, that is the source of my depression as I am not a published author spinning tales of gold every day. Instead I create adverts for

a plastic storage company as their graphic designer, spinning tales of a different sort. I oscillate between really loving it to really loathing it. Months can go by where a slow build-up of using my creativity without meaning will surface. Or what I would call meaning. The deep, touching meaning of human emotion that stories create.

This feeling bursts out of me and the urge to write becomes like a drug. I need to do it. I remember one day about two years ago, I was taking off my coat by my desk at work and hearing a voice inside my head saying, "I'm over graphic design". I stood for a second to digest what had happened. The voice wasn't my voice. It was an image of the words as well as a complete thought. It felt foreign and not of me but I recognised what it was. I had this experience a few times before.

What struck me was the phrase. I could understand if I was over this particular job but didn't think I would be over graphic design. As I sat, a second 'thought' came into my mind. "I want to help people". This was my inner-self calling I could feel. My soul reminding me there is more to life than plastic storage and graphic design. I often would think about the big questions of life, "Why are we here on earth?" "what is a person's soul?", "is there a god?", "who am I?". All those 'life' ones and more that children always ask their parents but never get a satisfactory answer. I never stopped asking. And now I was getting answers. Or was it more questions? What is the true purpose of my life?

This may sound crazy but I can sometimes know things about people without being told them. This first happened about fifteen years ago but I'm sure other things happened in my childhood that have got lost with time. I was in my early 20s, in a nightclub with friends and I was sitting at the bar. They were off dancing or chatting people up. I had just ordered my beer when my head wanted to turn to the right as if

someone had taken my chin in their hand and physically moved it. I was looking directly at a girl with long brown hair, lip-gloss and big eyes.

Without thinking I said, "He wants you to know that it isn't your fault". Quite rightly she just stared at me. I repeated what I had said. Again she stared, this time with a look of disbelief. I said the sentence again but added, "your boyfriend was killed in a car crash two weeks ago and he wants you to know he's alright now and it wasn't your fault". The abuse I got flowed without effort as she told me to "fuck off" and "are you having a fucking laugh or what?" For some reason I ignored this and continued, again as though I had no choice. "You blame yourself for the car crash. He says it wasn't your fault and you blame yourself." More abuse as she looked around her, "Are my friends winding me up? Who told you?" I shook my head, "I'm not trying to wind you up, or pull you. I just have to tell you that he wants you to not blame yourself and that he loves you". There was a sudden calmness that crossed her face as if someone has placed their hands on her shoulders to reassure her. I repeated the message again, this time my voice was softer. Her eyes were full of understanding and I could see a small tear as she whispered, "Thank you" before she left the bar and me wondering how and why I had said those things. Was this helping other people?

A full minute must have passed before I realise that the tumble dryer had stopped spinning. I quickly gather my clothes, my book and my diet coke, said my goodbyes with an acknowledged nod and response from my fellow laundretteers, and left glad to be free from the greyness for one more week. One thing that always cheers me up is seeing my car. It's a silver sports one with beautiful lines and all the mod cons. This is my first expensive modern car. My past ones have always been old bangers, so I'm immensely proud to drive it. I'm also eternally grateful to my mum for leaning me half the money, without which I wouldn't have been able to buy it. I

press the button on the remote that flicks the boot open and put my laundry in. The solid 'clunk' it makes as it opens is always satisfying.

As I slide into the front seat, start the car and pull away, my mind is still with mum. She is such an intelligent and talented lady. I start to reminisce how we would talk about art, astrology and literature when I was a child. I recall how I had gone to bed but was unable to sleep one night. I was worried and ran to my mum who was playing her piano, "Mum, mum," I began to cry, "what happens if you die?" I remember how she stopped playing, turned and looked at me with a warm smile, bundled me up in her arms and said, "What makes you think I'm going to die?" I mumbled through my tears that all things die. She soothed my brow, "Yes, they do but when their time is right. And my time is far away." I questioned how she knew that and she replied, "If you are still, very still, and all around is calm, you can feel deep down what the truth is". Somehow, even as an eight year old, I understood and I never worried about her dying again. That was until mum's stroke.

* * * * *

My phone rang one evening and a concerned pupil was on the line sounding bewildered, "Your mum needs help. She's asking for you. Her speech is slurred and now she can't move her arm". I was at mum's house in five minutes. Normally it takes ten. She was still sitting, lop sided, on her chair in front of the piano, calm. She tried to smile at me. I could see her face contort. Where was mum's smile? What had happened?

We moved her onto the couch with some difficulty as her left leg as well as her left arm was not moving. "I'm going to call an ambulance," I said thinking it was

a mild heart attack. She began to protest that she was okay and didn't want to go to hospital. She had a long-standing hatred for the medical profession since she was a young girl. A doctor told her when she was small that the needle won't hurt and to mum's surprise it hurt a lot. She was stunned the doctor would lie to her. From then on, mum's view of the medical profession has always been filled with suspicion.

Now was not the time to hold a grudge. After I'd spoken to the emergency services I spent the next five minutes convincing mum that hospital is the best place for her. "They suspect it's a stroke mum," I said as I held her damaged hand. It was already discolouring and was getting colder.

I thanked mum's pupil for his help and said it would be okay if he wanted to go. We both agreed that it was fortunate that mum was teaching as she could have been on her own. Ten minutes later I could see the lights of the ambulance through the living room window. I left mum to answer the door. Two ambulance medics walked in as I explained what happened. They checked mum and agreed it looked like a stroke. "It's too big for me to cope with mum," I pleaded. After more convincing, mum agreed.

The drive to the hospital was a blur. The last time I visited this hospital was for the birth of my son. Floods of memories filled my mind as I drove through the streets. The music on the radio in the delivery room as my baby was delivered, the joy in our hearts, the feeling of holding him for the first time and thinking, "this is what the meaning of life is". All these life-changing memories were to be joined now by new and uncertain ones.

As I was parking I could see mum's ambulance pass by. It seemed surreal to have a connection to an ambulance, something I normally would only see as I pulled out of its way wishing it good luck. I stepped out of my car and into the cold. Nothing

else mattered. I followed mum, who was on the metal stretcher, as they wheeled her straight into A&E. This seemed unreal. Everything was too calm. The speed the ambulance medics walked, the lack of noise and activity. I realised that my only real knowledge of hospitals was from TV and films. Surely, there should be loads of people rushing about making noise and looking very serious.

We were shown a waiting bay as the ambulance medic booked us in. Mum was so serene, never complained. We waited and waited. Occasionally, a nurse would pop in and run some tests. It was clear the hospital were busy. Eventually, we were moved to a ward. Again we waited. I held mum's good hand. I didn't know what else to do. After several hours, the X-ray department was ready to scan mum's brain.

Early results indicated it wasn't a full stroke but a minor one, although we were warned that the early scans don't always show full strokes. It's the scan a couple of days later that will defiantly confirm how serious mum's stroke was.

I visited mum every day, and my brother and his girlfriend travelled from Oxford to be by her side. He was shocked when a doctor told him, quite casually, as she leaned over my mum who was semi-conscious, "She's very ill. We're concerned that her kidneys will fail. She may only have a few days to live". When he asked her what she meant by this, double-checking that he had heard her correctly, the doctor said that she had to go and that her junior doctor would explain and promptly left. My brother looked at the junior doctor who stared straight back at him and said he had to go too and he would be back soon to explain. He promptly left my brother with our semi-unconscious mother hooked up to several drips with the knowledge that she could die in the next few days.

The junior doctor never did return to explain. Instead it was left to my brother and I to ask another doctor what it was meant by "your mum could die in the next few

days". This doctor was young and had a kind face. She seemed sympathetic to our situation and sat with us while she explained all of mum's medical problems. It was indeed serious and mum could die within the next few days if the medication for her kidneys failed. This was another medical problem that was unrelated to the stroke. I remember how kind this doctor was and how numb I was to her words. The thought of death was abstract and somehow I couldn't comprehend it.

After answering all of our questions, the doctor left us to contemplate what she had told us. I could feel tears fill my eyes and could see my brother was in distress. We sat in the silence for a while knowing that if we talked it was then real and not just a bad dream. Eventually I softly said, "It's going to be alright". This seemed the only thing to say.

That was eleven months ago. Six months mum spent in hospital. Five in the nursing home in the country where she is now. She never did regain the use of her left arm or leg despite physiotherapy. They wrote her off. In my heart I felt it too but refused to believe. I wanted to believe mum when she repeatedly said, "I'm going to walk again and we'll all go for a holiday in Scotland".

Her speech came back very slowly. Mum's smile had returned to normal and she had hundreds of Get Well cards from her friends, family and her piano pupils. I stuck them into an album. After two months she was out of her semi-conscious dream state and able to sit up for short periods of time. She loved to look at the cards, tears would fall down her cheeks and she would say, "I'm so lucky. I'm so lucky".

* * * * *

My thoughts are still in the past as my car winds along country roads to visit mum. It's a bright winters' day, crisp and cold. I never thought of my mum getting old and definitely didn't think of her living in a home. Who does think of their parents like that? We have to take what life throws at us. Great timing I think as 'The Trick to Life' blares out from my car speakers. The chorus is "The tick to life is not to get too attached to it." I've read something similar in spiritual books. Yes, the theory is more in depth in books but the Hoosiers lyrics of wisdom come in the form of a beautifully crafted pop song that I can sing along to. Don't dismiss it.

The nursing home is a glorious Edwardian building with tall trees lining either side. I'm not sure if this has been converted into a nursing home or purpose built. I'd love to say it was my house. I've got so many books now, mainly from charity shops, that my mind has made mental changes. I have converted the long dining room into my private library, two downstairs bedrooms into my writing room, and refurbished the spacious living room that opens out into the landscaped garden with a huge flat screen TV with surround sound. I'm still planning the huge upstairs rooms.

As I ring the bell, I think of the journey my mum has made in such a short amount of time. From being a private piano teacher who sang in a local choir, enjoyed the jazz club and was very independent, to end up in a nursing home in a wheelchair relying on people to help her get dressed, help her to the loo, cut her food and be far from her friends and family must be unimaginably depressing.

A big, jolly African carer opens the door. I thank her while I sign my name in the visitors' book. I check who has visited. I see the names of a couple of pupils and some friends. The pressure for me to visit every day has gone. I squirt some hand-wash on my hands and rub saying hello to another carer who is pushing a resident in a wheelchair down the hallway.

As I navigate my way around tables, wheelchairs and drip machines to mum, I wave hello to everyone. Mum is delighted to see me. Her face lights up and her good arm extends to cuddle me. I kiss her on the top of her head smelling her hair dye. She decided blonde and thankfully not purple.

I sit next to her and look around at the other residents staring at me. I laugh to myself as one of them, Colin, has managed to pull his jumper part way over his head with his good arm and is now stuck. I wonder if he will ever achieve his new goal in life and be free of his evil jumper? It's not long before Isabella starts up with her constant "please" calling. It's a high-pitched shrill noise that pierces the ear, no matter how deaf you are. Over and over "please" or "help" or "nurse" is the mantra. I talked to her once. I asked her what help she needed. She just stared at me as if I was mad. When I asked her if she liked her dinner she replied, "Yes, it was lovely, thanks," and then continued "help". I also notice Dot in the corner grumbling to herself, "I feel ill. I feel ill." Whilst at least three residents sit staring into space unable to move, speak or remember who they are.

"It's so good to see you," she says to me a couple of times. "I've written another poem," and hands me her notebook. I flick through the pages to find the poem, flicking past various notes she has made over the last five months. It's her way of making sense of all that has happened to her. Eventually I find the poem and begin to read.

**A Sense of Alphabetical Order
in the Lounge.**

Dot sits next to Doris
Sits next to Dorothy who is next to Ethel
Who is last in that row.

Elizabeth rests on a large green lounge chair
Next to the window
Where the sun is shining through

And brightens the lounge,
While Nancy sits next to the other window
And is facing Elizabeth.

Evelyn is in front of Elizabeth
Lying upon a lounge chair
From where her rather loud calls to the carers
Can be heard.
She enjoys chatting with passers-by.
She is almost 100 years old
And seems to be as bright as a button.

The charming lady who sits next to me
Is also nearly 100 years old.
Her name is Ethel W.
We look after each other.
Can you see my glasses, pencil etc.?
I admire and enjoy her gentleness of spirit.
She speaks in a Norfolk accent
Which has a charm of its own.

It can be quite noisy
Here in the lounge
As some residents call out
To absent friends and family
In a drowsy dreaminess.

The carers work well in teams
To do their ever-present tasks.
Then there is a quietness
Disturbed only by one lady
Who repeatedly squeals for attention.

Connie sits facing me at the dinner table
And has the same gentleness of spirit
as Ethel W.

I smile, "This is good mum, really good". She smiles back at me, "but that's not all. I've been practicing". I look at mum not sure what she means. Very slowly I see the blanket across her knees begin to move. First her right leg, then her *left* leg. I'm still confused. Mum is smiling, her eyes sparkle, "I did seventy of these in bed last night and when I'm walking again we'll all go for a holiday in Scotland."

* * * * *

I sit with my book and my diet coke watching my washing in the dryer. I am unable to read. Not because the book is boring but because the laundrette is a place full of stories. The one I see in the tumble dryer reflection is of a mum and her two sons on a beach in Scotland feeling the cold water around their ankles and wet sand squelching between their toes.