

Mrs Patterson wasn't always mad. She had gradually slipped into that realm and the nature of her particular form of madness seemed uncertain. *It wasn't the weather* they said, *it wasn't the food* they said, *it wasn't even the street she lived in* they said. *Then what was it?*

The birds sang in their wooden houses, the sun shone and the rain fell, just like it always did in Bayden Point. All was well as Mrs Patterson poured her husband's afternoon tea.

"I see the Church are raising funds again dear"

"Yes, I noticed that, page 12," Mr Patterson said calmly as he neatly folded the local paper in half and placed it gently on the table.

"You know, dear, as I get older the Church never gets any richer. They are *always* raising money for this or that."

"The Lord's work to do. Always God's work to do."

Mr and Mrs Patterson sipped their tea. The day drifted and night soon descended. That was the beginning.

At first Mrs Patterson thought it was a dream. She sat up in bed, straining to hear. Then, like a small child whispering she heard a faint scratching sound. She climbed out of bed, put on her dressing gown and paced slowly towards the door.

As she approached the noise still continued. Just open the door; just open the door she thought as she clasped the handle tight. In one motion she turned the handle and swiftly opened the door. To her disappointment all was how it should have been. The landing table directly opposite was still there; the china swan and beige telephone on top still there; the picture on the wall. All still there. She gave a small laugh, thought of herself as stupid and eventually sank back into a deep sleep.

Mrs Patterson did not tell her husband of that incident. She did not tell of how she thought someone was on the landing watching, waiting, scratching around on the wooden floorboards. No marks were present, why worry him? You have to be careful what you believe these days, she thought.

Retirement had come as a shock to Mrs Patterson. She had worked diligently full-time as a school's secretary for more than thirty years. Now her time was split between the occasional friend and with Mr Patterson in their garden.

"Second time that's happened this week," she said as she placed her teacup down. "You answer the door and I'll get the phone."

Mr Patterson made his way through the house as his wife picked up the receiver. Mrs Patterson pronounced her usual polite opening but she heard nothing, just the faint noise of the telephone line. "Hello, is anybody there?" This time her voice was harder. Again nothing but interference. She replaced the receiver and returned to the garden.

"Who was at the door?"

"Oh, just a man selling junk. Who was on the phone?"

"No one, or least I don't think so. Lots of static, like a crossed line."

"Oh," he nodded, "all these new lines you see. Communication of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century."

"Yes, at least you don't have to call the operator to phone now. Not like the old days. Just straight through. Imagine that!"

"They even say you can send post down the line now."

"E-mail."

"What?"

"E-mail. That's what it's called. E-mail."

Mr Patterson said the word slowly and aloud to make sure it was real. “What will they think of next?”

The sun’s rays scattered the shadows of their garden. A bird with a red breast and sharp eyes landed and edged its small carriage nearer the elderly couple.

“Viruses,” Mrs Patterson said and watched Mr Patterson’s expression.

“Are you all right, dear. You know what the doctor said.”

“Yes, yes dear, stop your fussing Mr Patterson. Viruses dear, on e-mail. That’s what they *have* thought of next.”

“Have you been speaking to Nigel?” A broad smile came across his face.

“Yes, he telephoned while you were in the shower. Oh, you’ll never guess, he’s been promoted!” Mrs Patterson clapped her hands together with motherly joy.

The startled bird flew off leaving the couple in their happy bubble.

“He’s coming to visit at the weekend.”

Mrs Patterson lay awake on the night before her son Nigel was coming. It had been well over a month since the last time he had made his way up country from his tall, shiny building in the city. She should have been calm, collected and happy. She wasn’t. Ever since the faint scratching noise outside her room she had been hiding her fear from her husband.

She had of course heard many sounds over her long life. Sounds of genuine concern and then there was the break in a few years ago. But still, this faint, small insignificant sound had lodged itself uninvited into Mrs Patterson’s mind. Now she had begun to worry. She wanted to know just exactly what the sound was. Several times she had looked on the floorboards for even the slightest of clues. She had even looked on the stairs, a silly thing to do because of the green carpet covering them.

Try as she could to solve her secret mystery all her efforts failed. Not one suitable solution was present. Mrs Patterson had to resolve herself to the fact that she would have to tell Nigel of her little form of madness. Yes, she thought, Nigel will put it down to old age, that would be good.

Her forehead relaxed, her eyelids closed and sleep crept through her weary mind and body.

The red breast was already in the garden before the sun had warmed the ground. He was moving staccato fashion along the top of the box shed in the corner down onto the wooden bench and finally onto the garden fence. His eyes were just as sharp as his last visit. His small pebble head moved at quick precise motions gaining an almost three hundred and sixty degree view. He was watching.

“Nigel!” Mrs Patterson extended her son’s name by at least five seconds as she gave him a huge hug and kiss.

“Mother!” Nigel said looking embarrassed.

“Let the boy put his bag down, Mrs Patterson. He’ll be tired. Nice cup of tea Nigel? Then you can tell us all your good news.” The trio moved through the spotless house and the two gentlemen continued into the garden whilst Mrs Patterson stopped at the kitchen for the tea.

No sooner had father and son settled into their metal garden chairs when Mrs Patterson was at the kitchen door and startled “We’re out of tea!”

Mr Patterson was amazed “Out of tea? Are you sure? I’m sure there was plenty.” He stood up, “Oh well, best be off to the shop then.”

“Thanks dear,” she kissed him on the cheek as he left, watched him walk all the way through the spotless house and watched the door closed behind him.

“Now, Nigel,” Mrs Patterson broached, “can you keep a secret?”

Nigel cautiously nodded, "It's not dad's birthday soon, is it? I haven't forgotten, have I?"

"No, no, nothing like that," said Mrs Patterson shaking her head. Only the red breasted bird noticed the sparkle in her eye.

Nigel leaned forward in his chair with a smile on his face; "you've been a Russian spy all these years!"

"Nigel, no, don't be so silly," she softly replied. "No, follow me."

As if he already knew Mrs Patterson's secret the red breast flew to the upper landing window and waited, watching, still watching.

At the top of the landing outside Mr and Mrs Patterson's bedroom door, with concern, Nigel stood listening to his mother.

"I'm just being silly but I can't get it out of my mind. A faint scratching as if someone was here," she stood directly in front of the table with the china swan and beige telephone. She continued in her best Miss Marple manner "Now, the strange curiosity is no scratch marks!" Her face was stern, as she had hoped that Nigel would be astounded by this fact.

Nigel did not know quite what to make of the situation or indeed his mother's odd behaviour. Wisely he began searching the accused area. "Quite right mother, no marks. Are you sure you're not just imagining it or dreamt it?" The look on his mother face suggested otherwise. "Right, then what was it?"

Mrs Patterson's face lit up, "Exactly! What was it!"

"Mother, please you're beginning to scare me," Nigel half-mockingly said and began to walk back down the stairs.

His mother called out "You won't tell any of this to your father, will you? You know what his heart is like."

"No mother, come and get some tea before you see a ghost. That sounds like dad now."

She took comfort from her son's answer. Almost in a dream like state she instinctively looked at the landing window with just enough time to see the red breast, staccato fashion, nodding his head with approval.

"Well this is nice, isn't it?" Mrs Patterson poured the golden silk coloured tea and offered her husband and son custard creams. They both agreed and accepted their gifts with smiles.

"So, how have you been keeping? You look well, doesn't he look well," she said whilst her husband nodded.

"Very well thanks. It's good to be back," Nigel answered. His attention soon drifted, "you know, every time I visit I always remember a little piece of childhood." Nigel put his tea down and stood up and turned, surveying the memory soaked garden. "Can you believe it was fifteen years when Mike and I converted that old lawn mower of yours dad into a go-cart? What was his name Mike..."

"Yes, it only seems like yesterday son. What happened to Mike? Such an inventive child?"

"Atherton, no Appleton. That's it Mike Appleton. Old Scrumpy. You know," Nigel contemplated "I haven't the foggiest. Ever since we left school. I know he went to university. Probably some inventor or some such."

"That reminds me," spoke Mr Patterson with a gentle tone "congratulations on your recent good news, son." Nigel turned back to his parents.

“Oh yes, My goodness, how could we forget? Congratulations!” Mrs Patterson leapt from her seat and gave her son a tight hug. Mr Patterson also stood up with his hand outstretched waiting for the two to part. When Nigel’s mother was content she had thoroughly passed on her joy, she stepped back with a huge half-moon smile. Mr Patterson moved closer and took Nigel’s hand. The handshake lasted several seconds whilst Nigel’s father kept repeating the word “marvellous”.

After the commotion of celebrating had subsided, Mr and Mrs Patterson sat down. Nigel remained standing.

“Aren’t you going to sit?” Mrs Patterson mentioned.

Nigel slowly sat down, pick up his teacup and began drinking.

“What’s wrong Nigel?” his mother asked.

“Well, that’s all very nice but, but what good news?”

Mrs Patterson nearly choked on her tea. Mr Patterson stared straight at his wife.

“What dear?” Nigel’s mother managed with tea still in her throat, “what good news? Oh Nigel, stop fooling!” Mrs Patterson’s sounded uncertain as she leaned back in her chair as if trying to refocus on her son.

“No seriously, what?”

“Nigel now that’s, that’s enough. You know perfectly well what your father and I are talking about.” Mrs Patterson paused allowing Nigel to stop his joking and join them in their celebration of his career promotion. Nigel’s face remained confused. A sense of urgency inflicted upon her voice, “Nigel. Your promotion.” Confusion continued to reign, “promotion? What? Don’t think so. Well, that’s news to me. Unless they haven’t told me?”

“Oh don’t be so silly, of course they would have told you.”

“Well in that case mother, no, sorry to disappoint you. Promotion isn’t for another six months or so.”

“Why Nigel?” Mrs Patterson began.

“Because I’ve only just settled into my last promotion, you know that.”

“No, why tell me you *were* promoted?” Mrs Patterson pleaded.

“But mother I didn’t.”

“What?”

“I didn’t”

“But you did, last Tuesday, no Wednesday. Your father was in the shower. You phoned and I...” Mrs Patterson was interrupted.

“Phoned? I didn’t phone.”

“You did, you did. Last Wednesday I distinctly recall because I wanted you to speak to you father and you couldn’t and I thought and...”

“Mother, I didn’t make any call. Well, none that actually got through. I thought your line was down. I kept getting a crossed line. I tried telling you that I was coming up but there was too much interference. That’s why I sent the postcard.”

Mrs Patterson’s world quickened, “Why are you doing this to me, why?”

She ran into the kitchen. Nigel stood to run after her. Mr Patterson placed his hand on his son, “don’t, she hasn’t been herself lately.”

Cold rain had dominated the garden in the week that past. Nigel had returned to the city and his promotion was never mentioned again. Instead it sat like a scorpion in Mrs Patterson’s mind waiting to attack. She was all too aware. *She’s not her herself* they said, *she must have a lot on* they said, *retirement can do that to people* they said.

Mrs Patterson was in the bedroom whilst Mr Patterson was painting with watercolours in the lounge. He had cleared the crystal vase containing Irises from the

dinning table and set his drawing board down. He raised his voice “have you seen my paints, dear?”

“In the kitchen, I think, one of the cupboards. Going to paint are you?”

“Yes dear, thanks dear.” He said as he entered the kitchen. He opened several cupboards before locating his paints. He was just about to close the cupboard door when a small, niggling discovery happened. Tucked underneath Mrs Patterson’s finest serviettes was a canister of tea. Mr Patterson noticed the unusual lump in the middle of the usually bright white neat and tidy mass of material. How odd, he thought as he held the canister in his hand, wonder how that got here?

“Dear?” said Mr Patterson now standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“Yes dear?”

“Have you got a minute?”

“Yes dear. Do you want something?”

Mr Patterson began climbing the stairs. Mrs Patterson could hear every heavy footstep as each one brought her husband closer. Thud, thud, thought Mrs Patterson, thud, thud, foot on carpet. Then foot on floorboard. No scratching, she reflected, no scratching.

Mr Patterson stood at the bedroom threshold, in front of the china swan and beige telephone. “What are you doing?” His voice was sympathetic.

His wife was sitting in the middle of the bedroom; clothes upon clothes surrounded her. Old and new photographs displaying their memories were scattered like a shattered stained glass window.

“I don’t really know,” Mrs Patterson replied without raising her head.

Mr Patterson carefully walked towards the motionless Mrs Patterson. He slowly crouched beside his wife, wrapped his arms around her in the stillness.

“What was it dear? You wanted something?”

“Nothing dear, it doesn’t matter,” he said, holding onto the canister of tea and wondered what was happening to the woman he loved.

Mr and Mrs Patterson’s garden was blooming. The flowers had opened to reveal their organic beauty and grass had put on an even greener lush coat. For no apparent reason the sun was shy. It hid behind a thin layer of clouds.

Mrs Patterson sat admiring the suburban splendour, as was her habit now, waiting for Mr Patterson to return from the shops. She was reflecting on her life at present; the change from the relative hustle and bustle of the working world to the serene almost spiritual effect of chatting, drinking tea and discussing the world with her husband and friends, when the telephone rang.

Upon returning to the garden, Mrs Patterson couldn’t wait to tell her husband of her good fortune. Instead she told the red breast that she had only just noticed. She couldn’t be sure and it was probably nothing but she couldn’t help thinking the red breast had been there, on top of the wooden fence, all morning.

“Since you seem to have an interest in my life,” spoke Mrs Patterson looking directly into the red breast’s sharp eyes, “I shall tell you my wonderful news.” The red breast shuffled an inch nearer.

“I have been invited to receive an award!” She waited for the robin to respond. He did by rapid head movements that encouraged her to continue, “and since you are so delightful I shall tell you why. It’s for my long and dedicated service to the school.” Mrs Patterson exaggerated her pronunciation, “What do you think to that Mr Red Breast?” On cue and if staged the robin began to chirp an astonishing song. Mrs Patterson began to laugh. She leaned back in her chair; her contentment as high as the red breast could fly.

Mr Patterson had returned from his task and entered the garden. Her joy was contagious and Mr Patterson smiled when he spoke, "It's nice to see you in such a happy mood."

"Oh darling," Mrs Patterson responded, "You'll never guess what! We are going to dinner with the mayor!"

The red breast stopped his singing and the sun hid further behind the clouds as Mrs Patterson's words flittered through the morning air.

The reflection of Mrs Patterson pleased her. She had lovingly cleaned and ironed her new outfit Mr Patterson had spoiled her with. The dark blue suit was smart, well cut and befitting her years.

"You look wonderful, " her husband said as she was adjusting the matching box hat in the full-length mirror.

"You really think so?" There was concern in her words. "You don't think I look like mutton dressed as lamb?"

Mr Patterson took her hand as carefully as he would a precious jewel and kissed it. "You would upstage a princess."

She laughed. Her worry subsided, "You old fool, you. Give us a kiss Mr Patterson." Her husband graciously obliged.

Mrs Patterson was excited. She was excited by her new clothes; excited by her invitation; excited by meeting the mayor. She was even excited by the bus journey. The Number 52 was ideal ever since Mr Patterson's eyesight had deteriorated.

She could remember when her own eyesight had failed her and the feeling of helplessness that followed. Her husband had been so sweet and had ferried her wherever she had wanted to go. It was such a shame to see the sense of sadness within him when he had to give up the car for good. A kind man unable to offer his kindness.

The couple had planned the route on the kitchen table with his seriousness balancing her jokiness. The night-lights of the town centre increased in number the nearer the bus came to the heart. Now they sat side by side and arm in arm.

"It's so alive, " Mrs Patterson said nodding to various people as they indulged in their own night on the town.

"Ah, the joy of youth. The carefree days, the world at your finger tips," Mr Patterson responded with a faint smile on his lips. "Pretty much like when you're older!"

She nodded her agreement with her husband's words of wisdom. For the rest of the bus journey they enjoyed each others warm silence as light drizzle tapped on the windows.

The bus pulled away into the rainy distance. Mr Patterson led, still linked arm in arm as they negotiated the busy pavements. People with big umbrellas in a rush, people standing in shop doorways with their backs toward the road huddled over mobile phones, people eating, laughing, shouting - the swell of the crowd grew and grew. Eventually Mr and Mrs Patterson reached the Grand Hotel. Mrs Patterson stopped as the hotel came into view. She pulled down on the bottoms of her suit jacket, adjusted her hat and took a deep breath. "Mr Patterson, will you do me the honour of escorting me to the Lord Mayor's Presentation?"

Mr Patterson looked deep into his wife's eyes "the honour would most certainly be mine." He raised his arm and she linked her arm with his. In one motion they walked proudly toward the elegant doormen.

“Good evening Sir, Madam” the doormen said in unison. Their smart peak caps nodding.

“Good evening,” the couple said. Mr Patterson continued, “we are here for the Lord Mayor’s.”

“Very good Sir, Madame. Your invitations please.”

Mr Patterson paused for a split second, “invitations?” He glanced sideways at his wife.

“Yes, Sir, Madame, your invitations.”

A sickening feeling swept through the pit of Mrs Patterson’s stomach. She forced her words out, “But I, we received a telephone call inviting us.”

“Written invitations only, I’m afraid.”

“But this can’t be. You’ve made a mistake. I’ve won an award!”

“My wife has won an award!” Mr Patterson repeated his wife’s statement.

“I’m afraid it’s written invitations only. We have been very clearly instructed Mr...?”

“Mr and Mrs Patterson,” he said throwing his glances back and forth between his wife and the doormen. “Surely there has been a mistake. Can you check, please?” The doormen looked at each other. One repeated the name back to them for conformation and then went inside. They stood waiting like children outside the Headmaster’s room.

“I’m terribly sorry Sir, Madame but no one under that name exists on the guest list.”

The bus journey was dreary. Not one word was said between Mr and Mrs Patterson. Mr Patterson did his best to console his wife but he could tell this shock had run deep. The rain had increased in density and the scraping windscreen wipers were irritating. Normally, thought Mrs Patterson, the journey home always seems shorter than the journey out. Not this time.

Once through their front door, Mr and Mrs Patterson went through the automatic process of hanging up their coats. Still in silence, Mr Patterson followed Mrs Patterson into the kitchen. He watched as she stopped in front of the light blue telephone that was housed, as always, on the square table next to the fridge.

She picked up the receiver and shook it, “you have been invited to the Lord Mayor Presentation,” she imitated, “that’s what he said. The man on the other end said ‘you have been invited to the Lord Mayor Presentation.’”

Mr Patterson carefully encased his wife’s hand with his and replaced the receiver into its cradle. “Time for bed, my sweet.” The two gently walked the stairs and crossed the landing.

Inside the bedroom Mr Patterson lovingly helped undress Mrs Patterson. He removed her smart dark blue suit as soft tears edged their way from her eyes and onto her cheek. She watched her new clothes disappear until she saw her naked body.

“Come away dear,” Mr Patterson said as he held out her night-gown.

Mrs Patterson turned and faced her husband. He could see the spark now extinguished in her dull eyes.

All Mrs Patterson could do to calm her nerves was lie on her side in bed and stare at the curtains. The light from the street lamp managed to penetrate the nets and spill thinly onto the main material, highlighting the pastel pattern. Mr Patterson seemed to sleep soundly with one of his arms resting on her midriff. She could match his breathing with the rise and fall of his body.

Suddenly her senses were heightened simultaneously. The small hairs on the back of her exposed neck rose as if a spider had walked over them and a tingling sensation flooded her fingertips. *The telephone*, she thought, carefully removing her husband's arm and slipping out of the room.

Mrs Patterson, for all intents and purposes, appeared to be functioning coherently despite her extreme condition. Her eyes fixed firmly on the beige telephone. The darkness surrounded the object. *Was it vibrating? Was it ringing?* Her hand held steady as it outstretched for the beige telephone receiver. It felt warm in her hand.

With her eyes wide, she knew she wanted to speak low "Mrs Patterson..." She waited. Nothing. She repeated her words "Mrs Patterson's house..." Again no response. Mrs Patterson carefully put the receiver down as if everything was in order. She automatically returned to bed only to find her state of awake too powerful for sleep to take hold. Before ten minutes had elapsed she was standing beside the landing table clutching the telephone receiver.

From deep within she heard a faint scratching sound "Hello, this is Mrs Patterson," her voice was surprisingly calm, "I thought you weren't going to call now. I thought you were just playing a game. But I understand. This can be our little secret, our little secret, just ours. I won't tell anyone, no you have my word, not anyone, just you and me."

Sub-consciously Mrs Patterson had been unscrewing the earpiece to the receiver whilst talking. She looked down into the machine's innards and to her delight she saw thousands of tiny creatures swarming around and through the telephone wires.

Mrs Patterson lifted the hive closer and admired their unusual, hideous beauty. "My, what lovely lustrous bodies you have. And what a lovely warm glow you possess. But the single most beauty you have been blessed with, is your wonderful, wonderful voice! Sing for me, my voices, sing forever more."

Mrs Patterson screwed the components back together and placed the receiver placidly onto its base as though it was a rare egg housing its unborn children. She walked back into her bedroom, slipped peacefully into bed and snuggled deep into her husband's warm body leaving the door ajar.

Mrs Patterson was never the same again they all said. But she was content that the telephone never stopped ringing.