

Treading on Eggshells

1 - Ryan

Shutting the door behind her, he lead the way across a bright hall and down a corridor. 'I'm Don, House Manager. Let's do your induction and go over your duties – all the usual blah, blah stuff. Here's the office. When we've done that I'll see if one of the residents would like to show you around. Tea?'

Patience studied him as he moved around the cramped office. Setting a mug of tea in front of her, his eyes met hers and his smile was warm, yet his voice was weary.

'You have an impressive CV, we must be lucky to get you.'

They had barely begun to go through the induction formalities when there was a strangled shout followed by several loud bangs. Don stood, knocking the desk and spilling his tea as he turned towards the door.

'Here we go,' he muttered. 'Sorry Patience, I'll see what this is about. You work your way through the files. We have six young adult residents living in their own studio flats here at Tranquil, each receiving supported living. I need you to focus on the support plans for Ember and ...'

The office door flew open, crashing against a metal filing cabinet. 'Ah, - and Ryan here. Good morning, Ryan. Now what's all this noise?'

A short, stocky young man, breathing hard and very red in the face, stood in the doorway. Patience noted his flat broad nose and slightly slanted, wide apart eyes.

'She's taken my music. I want my music.' His voice was a thick, rapid mumble.

Don mopped the tea from the table. 'Do you remember about knocking before you come into the office? Now you're here, meet Patience, she will be working with us for a few months. What music are you talking about, Ryan?'

Ryan glowered at Patience and moved closer to Don: 'Ember's a fat cow. She's got Martin's CD - Sugarbabes.'

'OK, shall we go and find the CD?'

'I'll kick that cow's door down.'

'You know that is not what you should do, and please don't call Ember names.'

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Don raised his eyebrows at Patience with a resigned smile: 'I'll be back - soon as...Patience is a virtue here!'

He winked and left the room, ushering Ryan in front of him. She heard them tramp further down the corridor, knock at a door and Don call in an up-beat tone: 'Morning Ember, are you dressed yet? Could we come in, please?'

There was a pause before a door opened followed by a girl's voice together with Ryan's raised voice and Don interjecting, then the door closed. The ensuing silence seemed like an unnatural shroud. It prompted her to wonder why Europeans, the English in particular, liked to isolate everything? People and their issues were put in compartments - like the rooms here at Tranquil House. In contrast, where she grew up, the extended families shared everything, doors were open and issues became public concerns.

She sighed and started on the files. Don reappeared some thirty minutes later after several more episodes of heated conversations and door banging.

'Sorry about that. Mondays always seem to be bad. When they go home at weekends it takes a day or so for them to settle again. I found the CD under Ryan's bed, with dirty clothes and a bottle of milk sprouting green stuff. His flat is a dreadful mess. I had problems with Ryan's previous key worker - Robert's work ethic didn't meet my expectations. Ah, I see you've got to the weekly planner already?'

Patience had been studying the planner. 'Supported living' meant that residents were allocated social care funding for a fixed number of support hours per day, according to their assessed needs. The rest of the time there were suggested activities or they could amuse themselves as they pleased, so long as it was safe and didn't cost more than their weekly allowance. At Tranquil House there were a variety of activities on offer: special classes at an FE College, swimming, various clubs, volunteering at a charity shop, a mixture of therapies and one resident had guitar lessons.

'I can't see any activities for Ryan?'

Her even gaze rested on Don as he brushed a hand over his head. 'No. We have tried - believe me. He lasted half a day at college and the rest of the day at A&E. He got punched in the face for calling a student a ..., well, he refused to go back and frankly the college were probably glad of it. If he chooses to be difficult, by golly he succeeds. I've been trying to get funding for music therapy. Had a go at teaching him drums myself ...I play in a band, you see. He beat the hell out of my drum kit and drove the other residents crazy by deliberately playing at inappropriate times. His heart condition means that most physical activity is out. He winds all the residents up, so none of them will socialize with him - not that socializing is easy for any of them. Poor kid spends all day wandering up and down the corridor or in his flat watching war films or playing his CDs.'

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He paused, listening. Then grinned at Patience: 'Better watch what I say - he sometimes lurks outside the office and invites himself in here. We don't encourage that. He can read a bit and is savvy when he wants to be. Anything concerning the other residents is of great interest, of course. So it's worth remembering to lock things away when you're not in the office. I expect you would anyway. Oh, you ought to know that he has a thing about war and weapons. His brother was in the army for a time, so I think that's where it comes from, plus all the films Ryan watches. I've talked to his brother about it and asked him to discourage anything too violent.'

Don had finished his shift at 11 o'clock and handed over the next shift to Chrissy, who had taken Patience around the other flats to meet the residents. Patience didn't start her support duties with Ryan until after lunch. Now he was glowering at her from the furthest corner of his small flat.

'You're a black skyscraper. How tall?'

'1 metre 77 - that's about 5ft 10ins. Taller if I wear heels.'

'I'm going to live with Martin when he gets a job. Martin's my brother. We'll go to the pub every day.'

Patience had started on the pile of dirty dishes in the sink. 'You going to help me dry these mugs?'

'No - that's your job'.

She carried on with her tasks, quietly surveying the room and its occupant as she did so. The walls were covered with posters for war films and pictures of animals. It was a cat and mouse game, as he in turn watched her. At last, in her deliberate way she asked: 'What would you like to do tomorrow, Ryan?'

He had his back to her and didn't reply straight away. Finally: 'Watch telly.'

'You need to get some groceries - you hardly have anything to eat. What about going to Tesco's tomorrow morning? If you are going to see Martin this weekend, what about getting some stuff to take over to him - crisps and dips with some celery and carrots, or something?'

There was no response. Sitting on the edge of his bed she started to fold his clothes and tried again. 'That's a nice cat in the photo - is it Martin's? My cat -,' she didn't finish the sentence. Ryan had turned and was pointing a machine gun at her.

'Get your fat, black arse off my bed.'

She sucked in a deep breath of air and remained seated, shaking out a crumpled shirt: 'That is not the way to talk to me, or anyone.'

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‘Get up!’ His high colour had returned. ‘If - if you dare touch me or my gun, I’ll say you pushed me. You’ll get suspended, like Robert.’

Patience bent down to retrieve a tangle of socks and ear phones. Straightening, she hoped she looked suitably severe: ‘Ah, so you tried that trick on Robert, did you?’

She stood up slowly, making the most of her height. ‘Now, take these dirty clothes and put them in the washing basket over there.’

She thrust a pile of clothes onto him, effectively smothering any movement until he could disentangle himself.

Ryan kicked the clothes in the direction of the basket. ‘Robert tried to take my gun away and said he couldn’t work here any more. He walked out the house.’

‘All over a toy gun - how silly. The could get into a lot of trouble with the police - it is quite a good replica AK47. Not heavy, like the ones the militias carried in Rwanda.’

Ryan stopped kicking the clothes about and gazed intently at her: ‘Hotel Rwanda – got that film.’

‘So you will know what a horrible time it was.’ Her voice was low. ‘I lived in Kigale in 1994 - almost died there.’

He watched her pick up the soiled clothes. ‘Why didn’t you die? Doctors say I’ll die – got a bad heart.’

She slowly rolled back her shirt sleeve to show her right arm: ‘That’s why. My arm stopped a machete from going through my head. Some amazing doctors managed to sew it back together.’

He stared at her arm, then: ‘Don’t want to die. My mum – my mum...she cut herself – lots of times - there was blood. The doctors fixed her. Then one day they couldn’t. Didn’t know she’d... an’ she died.’

Gun forgotten, he came up close and looked at the jagged indentation. He ran a gentle finger along the whitened skin and then on to the deeper, purpled furrow that ran up under her sleeve. To her surprise he suddenly sniffed and tears rolled down his face. He turned away, slumped into a chair hugging his arms around himself.

Patience set the washing basket on the table. ‘I’m sorry, Ryan, that must have been terrible.’

She studied him, chewing her lip as she did so. ‘My mother and father died in Rwanda. We all got to die sometime, Ryan. It’s just that some people go quicker than others, and the way they go hurts those that are left behind. It never seems right to us

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but it makes us stronger for having to go through that hurt. You and me - we're stronger for it.'

She fished a t-shirt from behind the chest of drawers. 'You know, I decided something in hospital,' the folded t-shirt joined others in the chest. 'I got out of Rwanda, because there was nothing but hurt and hate all around me.'

She started to pair up the trainers strewn around the room. 'I came to England. I decided that I had to live as good a life as possible while I could - to take what life presented and make the most of it. So when I die, I can go, knowing I've tried to do my best.'

He didn't answer, although he was pale now, and his lips were bluish.

'Need some of your oxygen?'

He shook his head. 'Want to get out, they hate me here. Ember wants me to die. I want to stay with Martin but he says I can't yet 'cos his job takes him all over.' He rocked back and forth.

Patience took another dirty mug over to the sink, rubbing the scourer around it as though she wanted to remove the glaze. Her instinct told her to pull the boy into a hug to comfort him, but that was not professional. Why was there such a gulf between being a professional and being a simple human being who knows how to comfort a lonely, frightened child? She calmed herself, the rules were there to protect both her and Ryan, she had to accept that.

'Ryan, you have the power to change how people feel about you – if you really want to. I see you've got some good pictures - especially the animals. Have you ever visited Barstone, the animal rescue centre? I got my cat from there. Sometimes I go and help out - they have cats, dogs, rabbits, birds, even snakes and spiders.'

He shrugged. 'Had a cat once – when Mum....Slept on my bed. I liked that. Cats not allowed here.'

'Would you like to go to see what they do at Barstone? Most of the animals have been hurt or abandoned. They care for them and try to find them homes.'

He was silent, staring at the floor. Then she heard him suck in a deep breath. He jerked his head up to look her in the face.

'Will you stay with me - if we visit? Don't want to be there on my own.'

'Of course.'