

The Hero

Drip, drip, drip the noise followed her around the house. She identified the source as the downstairs toilet, flushed it several times, lifted off the lid of the cistern and peered inside. She had no idea what she was looking at or for but she just felt she had to do these things. The dripping was now faster, almost continuous and she knew it would also be expensive.

Delving into her address book she found the telephone number of old Mr Harrison who had last provided plumbing services for her and prayed he was still alive and plumbing.

“Oh, I retired about two years ago,” Mr Harrison informed her, “I handed the business over to my grandson Mark, let me give you his mobile number. Be sure to tell him that I gave it to you and that should get him over to you quicker.”

Mark sounded young but he thought the problem was fairly straightforward so he reckoned he could fix it on his way home that evening.

The bell rang at six o'clock and Mark duly presented himself carrying a large bag of tools. “Yes, I thought it just needs a new valve, and it so happens I have one here.”

It took him about twenty minutes and he seemed to know what he was doing. They negotiated a rate for cash and Mark followed her into the kitchen. Passing down the corridor he stopped to look at a photograph of her son.

“That’s Peter Simmons,” he exclaimed. “Of course, you must be his mother. At school we all worshipped him, especially when he was captain of the First Fifteen. He was about two or three years above me, but he was a regular hero in his lifetime to us young ones. Then when he signed up with the Royal Rifles, well everyone was so proud. I heard they had a bad time of it in Afghanistan, but they are back now, aren’t they?”

She nodded in confirmation.

“Well, next time he’s home on leave tell him to get down to the Bricklayer’s Arms where there will be a few beers waiting for him.”

She smiled and ushered him out the front door. Mark’s departure seemed to suck the life out of the house. Returning to the kitchen she sat at the table and let her memory drift to the last time she had visited her son Peter.

The charge nurse had met her in the entrance hall and had assured her that Peter was making progress, slowly and steadily but he was still far from well and it would be some months before he could be discharged. The day room was artificially cheerful with bright curtains, lots of lights and large battered leather sofas and armchairs. Two blank computer monitors and several game consoles were stacked against the far wall surrounded by towers of computer game packs. Peter was sitting, almost posed in an armchair with a book open on his lap beside an empty chair and a small side table. He submitted to her embrace and resumed his seated position. She arranged herself in the empty chair and began to prattle on about her journey, how crowded the train was and how expensive the snack trolley. All the time Peter’s eyes flickered around the room, scanning, seeking, searching. Eventually they stopped and settled on her. She had then leaned forward and asked how he was and how the treatments were going. He had told her in a low stuttering voice about the physiotherapy for his legs, the speech therapy for his stutter and the visits to the Psychologist for his shattered nerves. He had smiled when talking about visits from his friends in the regiment and a look of pride had come over his face when he mentioned a visit from the Brigadier. Then it all seemed too much for him and he slumped back in his chair. As if on cue the charge nurse reappeared and it was time for her to leave. The charge nurse had cajoled him to his feet and to escort her to the door of the day room. A look of terror had crossed his face but he suddenly steeled himself and started to walk across the room but after a few hesitant steps his determination had vanished and he had crossed to the wall and begun to cling to it as he slowly moved towards the door. Their farewells were brief as if they both wanted to

escape to their own worlds as soon as possible, only they both knew that their worlds were filled with shattered dreams.

She closed her eyes, laid her head on her folded arms and wept.

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