



INSIDE THE hospital the wards are bright with flowers, gay curtains hide the marks on the windowsills where the bars used to be. I climb the stairs and go along the endless corridors with the cell-like bedrooms on one side and the open ward on the other. More visitors today, wives are going home for Bank Holiday and husbands have brought suitcases... Grandma holds up a baby to his mother: 'Hasn't he grown! You'll be home soon, don't worry. Not just yet, dear, but soon...'

'Jean's here in the ward,' Sister's soft, Irish voice sounds at my elbow, 'Mabel's in the dormitory.'

Jean shuffles out from the tables and holds out her podgy hands in welcome.

'I've got a visitor!' she shouts, very loud, for she is stone deaf. She has been in hospital for fifteen years and has no relatives. I bring out her birthday present. She looks spellbound at the handkerchief in its cellophane case.

'Don't just keep it, Jean, it's for you to use.' Watching my lips, she shakes her head. 'Too nice,' she says, 'can't spoil it.'

Her arm round me with happy possessiveness, she leads me to the white counterpaned dormitory. Mabel sits on the edge of her bed and pushes back her long, dark hair with hands that tremble incessantly. Jean has gone, she helps in the kitchen. Mabel is under sedatives, she moves and speaks slowly, and there are long silences.

'I knew you'd come today,' she says, 'I felt it somehow.' She takes my bunch of lilac and rests her cheeks against the scented blooms. 'Last time,' she continues in her quiet voice, 'you brought me daffodils. They lived so long.'

I ask her if her sister has been to see her lately. 'Oh no,' she answers, 'it's because of the children, you see, she can't leave them.'

Her parents are dead, she has no home. She has been in the hospital years. Between bingo and helping in the garden, she has found a place for herself. Silently she goes to a wash basin and fills

a vase for the lilac, then comes back and sits in the chair, still as a Quaker in meeting, smiling as if she knew a secret no one could share.

We go into the canteen for tea. While Mabel goes to the counter, I try and find a table. The canteen is crowded, the air blue with smoke, like a large, bare buffet at a main line station. I have a feeling someone is watching me, and old Mr. Garwin hobbles towards me. He stoops over the table peering at me with his rheumy old eyes.

'It's you,' he says, 'you've come to see me!'

He holds out a shaky, gnarled hand and clasps mine solemnly. I ask him how he is. He says he's very well indeed, and settles in a chair at my side. His clothes are ash stained, and he smells of sweat and stale tobacco. He usually says he's seventy-two, but today he boasts he is eighty-five. He looks of immense age, like an old bent tree. He has been in hospital most of his life.

He sees Mabel at the counter, and she smiles back kindly, and orders another cup of tea. When she returns: 'They're giving her them pills again,' he confides in me, 'ain't half the girl she was, are you, love?'

They have found a strange happiness between them, these two, a mutual caring that gives a focus to their lives.

Mabel puts his cup on the table: 'Drink your tea,' Grandad!' Jean, her tasks in the kitchen done, comes along and joins us wordlessly.

We talk, and I buy Mr. Garwin some cigarettes and put them down in front of him. He puts out his hand, the skin lined as oak bark, and slides them without remark into the pocket of his coat.

When I go, Mabel and Jean see me to the gate. Mabel, pretty in spite of the remoteness that is part of her illness. 'Come again,' she says, 'soon.'

Jean hugs me like a little child, glowing with happiness in her world of silence.

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