



The Memory Box

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I SAW HIM again today. That's what reminded me. Must be nearly 70 years now. A long time. I hadn't realised how much I missed our little reunions, the way we could get together and feel the nameless years just fall away.

When I first arrived he used to see me all the time. He'd lift the lid and take me out, have a really close look and put me back so he'd know where to find me another day. He changed of course, but it never seemed to make any difference, he always came back for me, happy to see me. Some of the others told me it wouldn't last, but I never believed them. I always put their warnings down to jealousy. Back then they weren't like me – they were old, years old. His first words, what lessons he had on Mondays, how to stack hay and how much feed his old man had told him to give the chickens. Later on there were others too, some quite big ones – where he left the spanner in the Meteor engine, why he didn't bother going straight home from Birmingham that time, the favourite drink of that girl, the blonde from the bus station. You know the one? No? Well, neither does he now.

This morning he peered in and had a good look around, the way he always did, but he didn't see me. Perhaps he can't actually see me any more. It's possible he doesn't want to. I can't tell, and he's not giving much away. I've been here long enough now to be used to it and much as I like to be granted a glimpse of him every now and then, the same face, a little older every time, more distant, maybe more confused, it doesn't hurt any more. Actually, it's getting more difficult to read him these days. Sometimes he looks right at me and I think he's going to get it, I really think he's going to spot me; then other times it looks like he knows where he should look, but hasn't got a clue why – or what for.

There are loads of us now, piled up, discarded, abandoned. It's a bit of a mess, not unlike the way his shed ended up, and there's some important stuff in here that's lost to him. Shame really. Back then of course the piles were made up quite neatly, scraps of things that weren't needed any more tidied away with kindness so as not to get in the way

of the fresh arrivals. And no wonder, in those days there was a constant stream, a deluge, of new ones, exciting ones, each more important than the last.

I'm not really sure why I arrived. I'm not even sure he knew. One day I was just there and it seemed to matter. Not that either of us realised it of course. Well you don't, do you? Everything happens so fast when it's like that, every day's an adventure, every conversation a revelation. Each new person is somehow more than the last and nowhere near as much as the next. He was drinking in the world, devouring stuff he didn't even have names for.

That first day I was part of a whole landscape he had rolled up and put away in the blink of eye, the way the young can. There was some real beauty in there as well, one or two that deserved proper consideration. But it doesn't happen like that and it was me that stayed with him, a press-ganged Old Faithful that wouldn't change a thing.

It was like that for a while, and what times they were. High on the morning sun, giddy with the warm nights, his reach only just exceeding his grasp, exactly as it should be. On reflection it probably didn't last very long, a bit like a perfect summer, but it felt forever wonder-full. Over time, the new arrivals slowed up, the torrent slackened to a steady trickle, but still plenty going on. There were new words to welcome, different routes, fresh ways of doing things, lots of faces, even more names, stacks of stuff to hang on to – but noticeably more went straight on the piles.

And I liked it that way, I saw what was happening, revelled in it, I never felt threatened by it. The best of us were built to last. Especially me. And him. He did all that I asked, probably more than I merited, and I gave freely in return. We scuffed the sky and feasted our eyes on the ocean deep. At least that's what it felt like. Excuse me.

Of course, the dark pile over there was growing all the time, but that was OK, there was ample room for all of it. What was the use of worrying about tomorrow when today was so thrilling? Every day. And no matter how shiny and crisp all this unceasing input was, there was the reassuring certainty he'd be back for me next time. When the high days were spent, I'd feel as peaceful as old

age, reflecting how little it mattered that the days were getting shorter. He cared about what we'd done, gloried in what we had and drew strength from the familiarity. He guarded me against the brash young pretenders and I afforded him the freedom to regret little and want to change even less.

The trouble with knowing something in your heart is that by the time you realise you need to know it even more surely in your head, it can be too late. I saw him often enough, peering over the piles, surveying the murk, but now if he found me at all it was more often than not by happy accident. I longed for those heady times and couldn't understand what was conspiring to limit his recollection. The once-bright fire in his eyes became a fading glow that appeared warm enough, but offered little comfort to my cooling sense.

How stupid am I? How rash? How pathetic? All that time he'd fed me with attention and I was so busy expecting more that I forgot to notice he needed a reciprocal offer. I wanted to be found at the very moment I should have been doing the finding, joining the dots and making it all OK again.

There are things he'd want to change now, of that I'm sure; and the sadness that change is so far beyond his reach is too much. For me. Again, for me. Always for selfish me. But for him it's just another day into which he peers only to feel the emptiness. He sees a void where I now lie with my new comrades, my long abandoned peers, languishing in this serene resting place, a final reminder to nobody in particular that we used to be so full.

You can't be unhappy. He can hardly be anything. They give this a cruel name, a word that brims with action even as it describes inaction. Dementia is not demented. It's fuzzy. It's gigantic. It's life with the speakers in the next room. It's funny. It's frustrating. It's disturbing. It's emotional. It's besieged by a relentless love that's rarely breached by sorrow.

I know because he came back this afternoon, at long last, and told me so. That'll do.

For Dad.

BROADSHEET STORIES

Tales to last a coffee or two



ABOUT BROADSHEET STORIES

BROADSHEET STORIES are intended to give writers the kind of audience artists can reach by hanging their work in coffee houses and local galleries.

We publish a story a month, printed on newspaper-sized sheets (hence the name) and distributed free at venues in the south of England.

If you are a writer, we are looking for contributions. Stories should be between 1,200 and 1,900 words in length. We pay a token fee of £25.00 for each one published. For more details email submissions@stiltjack.co.uk or phone Martin Cooper on 07894 340970.

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