**Rose and the Daemons**

*In the time of crisis, when life and death lie in the balance, in equal measure unpalatable, the spirits come to us.*

*The eudaemon; the soul of justice, the fair and wise counsellor. And the cacodaemon; the false friend, the traitor, the oily-mouthed architect of our dark and secret fears.*

*Of duty, mercy, self-interest and despair is their business wrought, and hence, so too is ours.*

~ ~ ~

Fifteen minutes later, Rose awakes again, mind dislocated, the acid-burn of fear in her mouth. It is night, she knows that. Her eyelids feel thick and heavy. She can see only shadows, impressions of black, grey and olive-green, unresolved.

Her face is salt-stiffened from tears. Her throat feels dry and the muscles ache. Has she been screaming? A memory fragment impales her. Men came. They tore her from her bed. She tried to fight them, but she was too weak. They brought her here, to this place she does not know. When was that? She struggles to remember but time has slipped from her grasp.

She can hear the men talking in the next room. Incomprehensible. Soft sibilants like snakes. This room stinks; bleach but with an unidentifiable rank undertone. Something hard and cold wraps across her cheek, insinuates itself into her nostril, into her body. Sensations slip around her, sly and deceitful.

Oh God! Is she even near her home anymore? Perhaps they have flown her somewhere? There is a word for that. It wriggles from her. Reduction? Rehydration? Redaction? An ugly word. Orange jumpsuits and barbed wire.

There is a clatter of sound to her left. Sharp and metallic. Rose’s mind brings forward a tray of surgical instruments - scalpels and serrated scissors. Instruments for cutting and dissection. For torture.

And then the pain arrives, late to the party, as her body comes out of sleep. This pain is quick-footed, sharp-toothed creatures that chew at her legs, nibbling her away. Rose knows that if she could look down, she would see her skin eroded by open wounds, suppurating. She can identify the smell now.

But the pain from those sores is as nothing, a mere appetizer, compared to the main course which hits as she tries to move. The bones of her hip and pelvis are shattered. They grate against each other, trapping and crushing the nerves. This pain is a band of steel across her chest. It grips and immobilises. She can’t cry out. Fresh tears dribble down the sides of her face.

Her breath comes in shallow pants. The saliva builds, and trickles to the back of her mouth. She tries to swallow but cannot make it happen. The fluid pools behind her tongue until, as she inhales, it is drawn in a rush into her throat. Rose feels it flood down towards her lungs, blocking the airway. She can’t breathe. Panic rises uncontrollably, a wild and vicious thing, driving her to ignore the pain and whip her head from side to side, searching desperately for air. She chokes silently in a terror so absolute that she no longer knows herself, until her heart, unable to keep going any more, finally releases her.

*Rose Arthington*

*Aged 96.*

*After a long illness.*

~ ~ ~

Rose’s bedroom has red, velvet curtains pattered with small white flowers. She had ordered them from John Lewis many years ago. A luxury. She still likes them though, she thinks. It was a good investment.

From her bed, Rose can see a framed print of Jim and the children in the Lake District. She had been going through a photography phase, a retirement hobby. Not a bad shot, good light. She can’t make out the faces. Her vision is starting to trouble her. Her memory too if she’s honest. She determines not to think about it. Be positive. That’s her rule.

Her children are visiting. She can hear them talking in the kitchen. Patrick’s laugh. So distinctive. It’s nice for them all to come. It is a shame she is not feeling too good. They could have gone to that cafe, she can’t think of the name right now, but it does such good coffee. Jim would enjoy that. No! She is being silly. Forgetting for a moment. Jim is gone. Has been gone for a long time, she feels. The grief has a worn, familiar feeling.

Tabitha comes in, carrying a tray.

“Cup of tea, Mum?”

Tabitha sits on the bed and helps Rose to sit up, pops an extra pillow behind her. The tea is milky and sweet. Just as she likes it, but she only manages a few sips. There is hot, buttered toast and it smells nice, but Rose doesn’t feel too interested in food these days. She will just have a square of that chocolate though.

Rose closes her eyes and sinks back on the pillows. Her mind drifts. Her children. Patrick and Amy had been twins. No ultrasound in those days, so a bit of a shock. Then Tabitha, the afterthought, ten years later when they had had time to get over it. Patrick and Amy are close like twins are supposed to be. Chalk and cheese though, she thinks. Tabitha is the baby. Rose thinks they all probably spoiled her, but she was such a sweetie, always good-tempered.

There is a hum of voices round her. Perhaps it is a party? She hopes not. She doesn’t actually feel up to a party. Amy is talking about holidays, their early trips as a family. Rose remembers those trips. Can’t think where they went, but remembers; the smell of wet grass, the glow of the tent in the early morning sun, lying in a row with Jim and the children like little sausages in their sleeping bags.

Some quiet music starts to play. Bach - “Air on a G-String.” She lets herself float with the slow, even strokes of the violin. When the music ends, Rose surfaces again. She really is very tired. A hand is holding hers. A low voice. Rose sleeps.

The doorbell. A memory envelops her. Someone is calling for her.

“Hey, pet. D’you want to come out dancing tonight?”

And Rose does. She does want to go dancing again.

But she shouldn’t leave the children. Not when they have come to see her.

“It’s ok, Mum. We’ll be fine.” Tabitha. Reassuring. That’s nice.

So Rose leaves her family chatting in her bedroom, makes her way to the front door. And she was right. It is Jim. He is smiling his wide smile and holding out his arms to hold her once again.

*Rose Arthington*

*Aged 93*

*In peace.*

~ ~ ~

It is still early when the doctor pulls up outside the house. A neighbour is putting his bin out, recycling week. Just an ordinary day for him, she thinks. Not for this family though. Not for Rose Arthington.

As the doctor walks up to the front door and rings the bell, she feels the weight of responsibility as a physical thing. She straightens her back to better bear the burden. When the door opens, she greets the daughter with a professional smile.

It’s borderline. She hates that situation. A serious infection. Pneumonia. Probably urine infection too. There is moderate dementia. The notes show it started about five years ago. There is the expected memory loss and confusion but also, sometimes, hallucinations. Probably dementia with Lewy bodies, she decides.

She talks to the family. Gets the story. The youngest daughter visits her mum twice a day, stays overnight when necessary. Normally they do ok. Went to a garden centre last week and had a cream tea. Seemed fine then. Well, relatively fine. There is a flicker in the daughter’s eye. Perhaps not so fine then? You had to be sensitive to nuance in these situations. Perhaps, the daughter is starting to struggle?

The doctor weighs the option of admitting Rose to hospital. Probably a reasonable thing to do, she thinks.

A question, unbidden, seizes her. *But what will happen if you admit her?*

The doctor knows the answer. X-rays, blood tests, IV drips for antibiotics, rehydration. Rose is very underweight, clearly hasn’t been eating for a while. So maybe a nasogastric tube and liquid diet straight into her stomach. Never an easy decision in the elderly particularly with dementia. Then the confusion of being in hospital. Possibly some sedation if she is very unsettled. With treatment, she might recover but she could well not. Borderline.

Another voice niggles at her. *You have to follow the procedures. There are recommendations for treating infections. You have done it a thousand times. Just call the ambulance.*

But there are so many procedures. Which procedure is the right one? Rose has a ‘Do Not Resuscitate’ order but that is not helpful here. That only covers a heart attack. Is she on a palliative care pathway? No. Has Rose made an advance decision, a plan for her own care? No. The doctor sees no sign of this in the patient notes. If only people made plans. If only they thought about it. But no-one wants to think about death. Everyone prefers to ignore it. How do you want to die? The last taboo.

*Do you have consent to admit her to hospital?*

That’s a fair point, she concedes. The doctor goes to sit with Rose. Explains that Rose is very poorly. That she may have to go to hospital. Watches the old woman’s face drop and her jaw tighten with a stubbornness that sits uneasily on the gentle features.

“No. I’m not going.”

Her reluctance seems clear but a few minutes later, Rose has clearly forgotten the conversation. Can Rose refuse to be taken to hospital?

*No. She clearly lacks capacity. This is your decision alone. And if Rose dies at home, there could be an inquest. No-one is going to defend you if you make the wrong call. The family might complain. Say you didn’t offer Rose proper care because of her age or her illness.*

The doctor shudders, images of headlines with her face next to that of Harold Shipman.

But …

*If you save Rose’s life today, she could well not reach another crisis for years*. *What will happen in those years?*

The doctor considers this too. As Rose’s brain slowly shrinks, everything that she knows will be lost to her. Her children will become strangers, her husband erased, a retreat to the earliest memories of her childhood, until eventually even that is gone. And the physical symptoms too. Loss of the ability to process vision is clearly starting. As is the indignity of incontinence. Over the years, her muscles will weaken until she cannot swallow, cannot move. Locked in with only her hallucinations for company.

*Call the ambulance and you can forget about this. Tend to your other patients. What happens in the future will be someone else’s decision.*

Such a tempting thought. No-one would blame her. No-one will even question her if she calls the ambulance. Why is she agonising with this?

*This is just an old woman dying. Do no harm.*

*No. You cannot withhold her chance of more life. Will you rob her of her last few months with her family?*

The doctor stands by Rose’s bed. She is sleeping quite peacefully now. Reluctantly, the doctor takes her phone from her pocket.

*Go on. Think of your career.*

It doesn’t feel right. A final question pauses her hand over the keypad.

*If it were you, what would you choose?*