

Losing it

‘You must really hate me.’

John recoils at the venom in the tone.

‘To lock me up; you must really hate me.’ Having spat the words out, Lillian shrugs her glare away from him to stare out the window.

He follows her gaze out into the small sunlit courtyard. There are little birds there – wrens – dancing through the twigs of a grevillea bush. Still shocked, he watches her face relax into a weak semblance of a smile – she is humming vacantly to herself, head gently swaying from side to side.

He knows it is the illness speaking. At an intellectual level, he understands that; but, at an emotional level, the pain of being powerless to help is excruciating. Yet, he turns up every day to visit, to tend her needs – as he always has and will – until her brain finally stops sending the messages to keep her body alive. Then they will all have peace; at least in one sense.

The support group has been good for him, sometimes. When there are a few blokes there ... he can relate to them. The group says that outbursts like these are not uncommon as the insidious degenerative disorder of dementia causes dysfunctions and deterioration in the brain cells.

But John, on the receiving end of Lillian’s vitriol, is still bewildered. The caring husband of over a half a century can’t understand how this wonderful woman that he has known so well could have changed so much – the lady who has been his best friend, lover, wife; a mother, a businesswoman, a grandmother – but now so crippled by the disease affecting her brain that she lashes out verbally at the ones she loves the most.

A knock at the door. Maybe, someone has heard Lillian’s rant.

A nurse’s uniform. Lillian gives a benign smile. ‘You are very kind,’ she says to the new face, while the woman fusses innocuously around the room, as if tidying.

‘It’s a beautiful day, Lillian. These little birds are so pretty, aren’t they? Those blue markings on that wren’s head are fantastic. No wonder it’s called the *Superb Wren*. Would you and John like to sit in the sun – out there on the courtyard?’

‘Who?’

‘John. Here. Your husband.’

The vacant stare returns and Lillian's head rocks slowly, involuntarily, like a caged bear.

John waits dutifully; ignoring being ignored; admiring the unflappable skills of the nurse, one of those palliative care saints who keep the love of his life clean, comfortable and safe in her final months and, perhaps, years. He wonders if he will remember only the good times; or whether these uncomfortable sad last days will invade the memories of the joyous life they have shared and enjoyed together – the children, tennis, water skiing, overseas trips, barbecues with friends and business contacts and now grandchildren ... so much to be grateful for.

The nurse has opened the French window to the courtyard. 'It's lovely out, Lillian? Will I get two chairs? For you and John?'

Lillian shakes, as if woken from slumber. 'Who?'

'John. Your husband. Here.'

The old head turns to follow the point. Her once blonde hair is grey; brushed, clean and held back neatly by a hair band. The blue eyes which once sparkled with the vitality that charmed businessmen across the boardroom, now try to focus.

John searches the look hopefully for the light of loving recognition, that old happy gleam of welcome.

'Who are you? What are you doing here?'

'How was Mum?'

John closes the internal garage door and lifts his eyes slowly to look at his daughter, Jillian. With the blue eyes and blonde hair, she is the image of Lillian in her younger days.

But, at that moment of greeting, she is also hustling her two young blonde-haired daughters out to tennis practice – a flurry of energy and busyness.

With a weak stoic smile, 'She was fine, Jill. Clean and content. Watching little birds in the garden.' He hears the tiredness in his voice.

'Did she recognise you this time, Dad?'

'No. Not much.' He sighs and gulps. 'Maybe she does inside. Maybe, somewhere in there, she understands that we are here for her.'

‘I’m sure that’s right, Dad.’ She glances at the expectant patient eyes of her girls, racquets held discreetly poised. ‘Must fly. Catch you later. I’ll try to get in to see Mum tomorrow, if I can. Are you off to the support group now?’

He nods and shouts as cheerily as he can to his granddaughters, ‘Hit the balls well now!’

‘Bye, Grandpa!’

Their happy departing voices hang in the air, as a calming hush descends over the house. Jill has left orchestral radio music on, quietly, for company. He glances across at the photos on the sideboard – their wedding, him with a tennis trophy, a group holiday in Italy, the children on a boat, skiing, Lillian being honoured at a business function ... a lifetime of memories and successes. Yet, even the colour photographs look pale to him now; drained of their old life.

The familiar house doesn’t feel like his home. Jillian and her husband now live in the main house with their two girls. John and Lillian have the annexe, the granny flat within. It had all been planned and discussed ... because of the illness. But now that Lillian is away – as she has to be; to keep her safe – there is an emptiness, even with the grandchildren.

Car keys in hand, he checks that the house is secure; chanting as he goes, ‘That’s off. That’s locked’ – reinforcing his own memory lest it be found wanting too. With a resigned exhale, he clicks the radio off and heads out.

The bustle of the opening garage door heralds the return of the grandchildren from tennis.

‘Hello Grandpa. Guess what happened to us at tennis?’

‘What happened, Love?’ He smiles at the ten-year-old – one of his few sources of joy and promise for the future.

‘Alicia Coren was there. You know her. She’s played for Queensland. She taught me how to topspin a lob. See?’ She pretends to swing an imaginary racquet. ‘You know; *you* were a top tennis player.’

‘I never played for Queensland.’

‘But you were really good, Grandpa. I’ve seen the photos. Mum told me your stories.’

‘C’mon, girls.’ Jillian interrupts. ‘Off and get tidied up. Grandpa has Aunty Margaret visiting soon.’ As the girls rush off, Jillian asks. ‘How was your support group, Dad?’

‘No blokes. I’m not comfortable being the token male. I got out as soon as it was polite. Told them I was going for a SCAN.’

‘A scan?’

‘Senior Citizen’s Afternoon Nap.’ He laughs at Jillian’s expression. ‘I didn’t tell *them* that, though.’

‘Good to see you laughing, Dad.’

‘How did *you* find Lillian?’ John asks his wife’s sister on the back verandah. Jillian has departed politely to give them peace; leaving the tea pot, cups and biscuits behind.

‘She was okay, I suppose. Seemed to know me, this time. Not too complimentary about you, though.’

‘I can’t fathom it, Margaret. I visit her every day. I try to care for her as I always have. They say that this dementia causes them to be hurtful to those they care about most.’

Margaret dunks her biscuit in the tea and takes her time, as if gathering words. ‘That may be, John. But it may also be something else.’

He sits watching, puzzled, as she dunks her biscuit again.

‘The other view, John, is that the disease is just taking away the self-control that stopped her being indiscreet or hurtful in years gone by.’

‘Yes, I’ve heard that said. But why come out with all this nastiness now?’

Another slow sip of tea. ‘Maybe it’s like a dam wall holding back the pressure of all the thoughts, containing them while she brought up the family ... and now that dam wall has burst.’

John shakes his head slowly. ‘I’ve been a *good* husband. I have provided and cared; been faithful and loving. *You* know that.’

‘She said to me today that you are just a *big noter*.’

‘What? Rubbish.’

‘Tennis? The provider? Lillian was successful too. Remember – a mother, a business consultant, keeping a family together. Has it all been bottled up?’

He sits, frozen in silence, eyes distant – then he stands up, very slowly.

‘Where are you going?’ she asks quietly.

‘Nowhere.’

He looks at Lillian, sleeping peacefully; her breathing gentle. Carefully, he holds her right hand outside the sheets and leans across to kiss her warm forehead.

‘I’m sorry, Lillian. I’m really sorry.’

Suddenly, her eyes open; momentarily startled, behind the blue irises.

John holds his best apologetic smile.

He watches her struggle to focus.

Perhaps his smile has registered, recognition; because her face relaxes. ‘You have a kind face ... not mean, like my husband.’