

Dementia: A Novella

by Hans Peter Braendlin

A sample of the opening pages

They found Nurse on the pavement early this morning, Jonathan says. Her neck broken and her head smashed in. Right under Gloria's window four stories above. You went to Gloria's room last night. You remember. The window was open. You watched Gloria sleep. Peaceful...

Rock-a-bye Baby...

Then she came...

What are you doing here? Why are you standing? Where's your wheelchair? Get out of here! Now! You have no business here, you old lech. And the doctors will know pronto you can walk. What a fraud!...

She shouldn't have...

Always telling you what to do...

Rearranging things--deranging--the tables, the chairs, the vases, the photos, although she knows you like your things a certain way, your way, in their certain places...

You know she took the watch Marlene had given you...

Getting you up at night, when it's her night shift. We don't want to wet the bed, do we... Hut two three four!... Making you get up even though you don't have to go, even though you can control yourself, and she knows it...

Taking the pipe tobacco away, saying it's poison. Saying you can't smoke on the balcony either. Locking the Glenlivet away, saying it's poison. Telling Edie to stop bringing that stuff--the tobacco and the Scotch--though the flowers are okay...

Jonathan says detectives are here, looking around and talking to the doctors, the staff, and some of the residents. The investigation would go on, but for the time being they had to take precautionary measures. You were in the hall--nailed to the ground, you and your wheelchair--when they came, the white smocks, pulling Gloria, struggling and crying, to the elevator--one of those between the women's side and the men's side of the floor--to the elevator going down. Why me? What have I done? Not to the tombs! No! Please, please, don't take me there! No!...

That shouldn't have happened...

Gloria had told you the tombs are what the other residents here call the rooms in the basement, where the doors are always locked from the outside, where the windows are small and high up, just above the ground level outside, and have bars on them--I think she said they have bars--where they have a little garden only, with a high fence around it, not open and free like the big garden she and I like so much--The tombs are where they keep you from wandering away, or from hurting yourself, where they keep you when they think you might hurt somebody else...

They shouldn't do that to Gloria...

Nurse... All because of her...

You must do something... Think of something...

Nurse has a name, but I've forgotten it. Must ask Jonathan to tell me again, next time he comes by...

I don't forget Jonathan's name. He finds my tobacco and holds it for safekeeping. He lets me smoke on the balcony, even inside when the windows are open. He says I cured his father's cancer. James. James Sawtelle. That was a long time ago, but I remember. Pancreatic. We caught it in time.

I can remember the past. At times.

I need to. Now more than ever.

Mustn't let the now make me forget...

Many things to think of--earlier things, elsewhere--the good and the bad. Rethinking them, getting a grasp on them. Being there...

When I'm here it's difficult. Here I forget things...

Jonathan finds the Glenlivet. He knows it helps me remember. Smoking the pipe does too.

...

Is that why Nurse...?

Jonathan, he's different. He tells Edie to go on bringing the tobacco and the Scotch...

He found the watch--when was that?--he found it way back in the drawer of the night-stand, under some papers...

I want it to be him who helps me get dressed. He's patient. Unlike Nurse. He comes and gets me, often. Talks to me. Listens to me. Pushes the wheelchair, to the garden, or to the salon next to the dining hall. When we're not in the garden--when the weather is bad--Gloria and I like to be in the salon before lunch and dinner and in the afternoons...

They don't know I could do all that by myself--get dressed, get into the wheelchair, maneuver it. They don't know I actually don't need a wheelchair. I keep that to myself--for the time being, until I find my bearings--keep it even from Jonathan and Edie. Except Edie knows I can handle the chair.

Gloria knows I can walk. That's how I get to her room. I walk. What luck we're on the same floor! I walk from the men's side of the floor to the women's side--When nobody's around...

Making sure first it's evening...

It's hard to keep track of time here, in this place...

Ring the bell, Nurse says...

On Jonathan's days off it can happen that nobody pays any attention to me... It can happen that nobody comes to get me for lunch or dinner. Ring the bell, she says. Ring when?...

What is this place?...

If it weren't for Gloria--and Jonathan--I'd get the hell out of here...

Why lunch at eleven and dinner at five-thirty?... Who eats at those times?...

I don't like the dining hall. I'm uncomfortable among a crowd of people, but it's more than that, isn't it. It's as if everybody's waiting for something, waiting, not knowing what for... Makes me feel clammy...

Worse, I can't sit with Gloria. Michael--calls himself the maitre d'--says I can't. Gloria's table and mine are fully occupied. No room for additional seating. No exchanges either. The residents like to keep the same seat assignments, he says. It makes them feel at home. And because most of them have their own wine, water, or soda bottles, or are on special diets, they have to stay put--That's what he said, they have to stay put--with nameplates by their place settings to remind them where they belong--Hut! Hut! But if there's a departure from one of our tables--He said departure, didn't he?--he'll see to it that an arrangement is made!... Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall... More likely ninety-nine luftballons, waiting to drift away... Marlene loved that song... Carl, your mind's wandering. Get a hold of yourself!...

I think he's full of it. I want to sit with Gloria right away--don't want to wait. Must talk to him again. More forcefully...

I could have lunch and dinner in my bedroom, at that little table, where I have breakfast. But

then I wouldn't see Gloria. Maybe I couldn't even sit with her before the meals, in the garden or in the salon. I wouldn't like that at all. The dining hall it is. At least I can look at her there...

The people at my table. Next to me that dapper guy, jacket and tie all the time, big, strong looking, but not always clean. His room on the same floor as mine, I think. Didn't I see him in the hall once? I think it's the same man. I forgot what his nameplate says. Likes to joke a lot. His laugh the bleat of a goat. Smells like one, too. Incontinence? Maybe he should have all his meals in his room... His seat would become free...

Opposite me that woman--Don't know her name--Tall, bony, pointy nose, all that makeup. Looks like the Witch of the West. A mole on the ridge of her nose--like a third eye, it's so big. Talking a lot--I don't remember what about. Gives me the glad eye all the time. Those incisors, an inch long it seems. You want to cross your legs when you see her bite into food. That time when her foot touched mine, inadvertently I thought, but then it happened twice again--I now keep my feet under my chair...

You're being uncharitable, downright unkind--What is it with you?...

Next to her that shriveled-up old fellow--Don't know his name either--Doesn't look well, chin on his chest all the time, eyes on the plate, doesn't speak. Has difficulties pushing his dentures back in when they fall out. A nasty cough, repeatedly. A candidate for imminent departure?...

Now that, Carl, that's ugly...

Why do I feel so uneasy today, so tight?...

It had been so good with Gloria...

Have to get up from the wheelchair... Up!... That's it... Walk around a little...

The mirror--it hangs crooked... You gave it to Marlene when we were in Venice... Have to adjust it...

That man there, Carl, in the mirror, he doesn't look all that old. It's his baby skin, Edie keeps telling him. Dad's skin. It's the sparkle in his eyes, Gloria says. She knows he can walk. He can do that--and then some, thanks to her. It's their secret. Theirs only, again, now that Nurse...

Some time ago--Carl forgot when--Gloria had sat down on a bench next to his chair, in the garden, by the bushes with the red flowers, the bushes next to those with the yellow flowers--Jonathan had placed him there, after Edie had gone home, leaving him with his pipe and tobacco. I'm Gloria. I'm Carlton. Carl. She's beautiful. Makes me feel young. Cuts through the fog here. She's dainty, like a daffodil. Delicate features. Expressive hands--hands of an artist.

That slightly crooked smile, dynamite. The lips full and soft, sweetly curved. They made him want to kiss them. Wrinkles, but they look good, make her look good, and strong--Character! White hair, totally white. Wavy, down to the shoulders--gorgeous. Those deep blue eyes, luminous, warm. Sometimes a faraway look in them.

They had talked. Carl doesn't remember what about, except that it was good, that it was warm. Again the days after that. In the garden, or in the salon next to the dining hall, before the meals, which he likes too when Gloria's with him, when it doesn't matter that he can't smoke there. He doesn't remember what they talked about. Except for the time when it wasn't good, when it was cold, when she said she may have to do chemo. Breast cancer. His hand had hurt from the clenching of the fist...

Must ask Jonathan about that--Have they done all the tests, all the scans, radiation, explored all the possibilities?...

Her smiling that crooked smile, I'll turn bald.

Then the day when she said come I'll take you to my room. It's more comfortable there. She told Jonathan she'd see to me--she'd push my chair.

They had looked at her photo album. This is Frank my husband. This is Frank Junior. They're dead, died together twelve years ago, in a car crash. Carl had told her his wife Marlene had also died in a car accident, and his daughter Jo was dead as well. He hadn't told her he had been driving the car, and how Jo died. Gloria had taken his hand and given it a squeeze.

Taking me to her room again the following evening, after dinner. Standing there, silhouetted against the light of the setting sun, smiling at me. The aureole! Why do I remember that so clearly? As clearly as I remember the past? She's so beautiful...

Carl gets off the wheelchair and walks to her. She looks surprised, then laughs. She cups his face with her hands, pulls his head down to hers, kisses him. First softly. Then hard, her mouth open, her tongue seeking his. She unbuttons his shirt and slides it off. She moves his hand to the top button of her blouse. He unbuttons the blouse and slides it off. No bra. She takes his hands and places them on her breasts. Small, but still round and firm, wondrously. He strokes them, gently. She laughs, a laugh of pleasure. She opens the belt of his pants, unzips them, pulls them down, then his shorts. He steps out of them. She places a hand on his genitals, strokes him, gently. He feels the stiffening, implausible as it seems. She laughs, delightedly, and pulls him to her. He kisses her. Hard, wet. She drops her skirt, her panties, steps out of them and her shoes. She takes his hand and places it between her legs. Wondrously soft, wet, warm. She takes him

by the hand and leads him to the bed, placing him down on it...

The passion had come, out of the past it had seemed. Slowly and gently at first, then rapidly, fiercely, intensely, all senses afire with power--silencing the pain of the past...

Carl still had his shoes and socks on, he had suddenly been aware of, had not been aware of before.

You had walked to her room the following night, and again last night. She had fallen asleep afterwards.

Then she had come...

You can't let them keep Gloria in the tombs. Must talk to them...

The fog again--with her down there now--the fog taking hold of me again...

Carl! Do you have a moment?

Jonathan. With a man. Didn't hear them enter.

This is Detective Pierce. He would like to talk to you.

A detective? What's this about?

Detective Pierce. How do you do? Please have a seat.

Thank you, Mister Carothers. But this won't take long. I just have a question or two. About Nurse Critch.

Critch! Of course! Martha Critch. That's her name. You remember now.

What about her?

Last night--Have you seen or heard anything unusual?

Not a thing.

I understand you're friends with Gloria Marlowe.

Marlowe! You forgot her last name is Marlowe! Why does this happen to you?... But that other thing, about you being friends with Gloria, that's a good one... If only he knew.

Yes, we're friends.

When you talked to her, did she reveal any animosity toward Nurse Critch?

What's going on here? What gives with this animosity thing? Gloria a suspect? Are they nuts?

Not Gloria. No way.

Now, you and Nurse, that's another matter, but he doesn't need to know that.

So you agree with the people here who say she's a very gentle person, non-violent?

Gentle? Ha! You want to shout it to the world that she can be aggressive--beautifully, sublimely

aggressive. But the world mustn't know. Not yet anyway.

Gloria gentle? Absolutely. She wouldn't hurt a fly.

And now, Mister Carothers, I have to ask, can you account for your activities last night and early this morning?

Aha! Your turn now. Your activities? Wouldn't he like to know... Gloria!... But what happened afterwards, when you were about to leave? It's all in a haze... Something with Nurse... Whatever... He mustn't know you were there.

I was here. The TV, then sleeping.

Thank you. I have no further questions for now. But I may want to talk to you again at a later time.

Push the chair toward him. Make it seem difficult. Give him a limp hand to shake.

I'll be here. Where else would I go?

He and Jonathan are leaving. Jonathan's waving at me, smiling...

You've got to do something about Gloria... Get going... Clear the fog...

Sort things out first...

That photo, there, the one of him of the hard eyes, staring at you from within his baby skin, and of the woman who would never be your mother, whom you never knew. You killed her, he said to you when you were five, Edie nine. Edie said our mother died giving birth to you. But it's not your fault. How come it's my fault, you asked him. You were big and caused complications, he said. What does complications mean, you remember asking. You demanded too much of her, took too much away from her. You took her away from me. It's unjust. You must bear the responsibility. What does responsibility mean, you asked. You'll know some day, he said.

You've been sharply attuned to complications, injustices, responsibility ever since.

He did a lot for him, Edie had tried to convince him. No money spared. All those expensive toys, the stereo system. Tennis lessons--on the private court. The fitness room just for him. Only the very best in clothes. All those nannies. Only the very best private schools. The camps, two every summer. Columbia...

Columbia was good. The world opened itself. The classes, and Carlo and Charles, Caroline--they were the first ones to call me Carl--we were the four Charleys...

Before that, no. The world was closed. Despite Edie. She was away all that time, at the boarding

schools. Why didn't he send Carl to boarding schools too, instead of those academies in the city? He ran away once, but the police caught him. After that just waiting, waiting to get away... Why keep him next to him but distant and cold, looking at him with the hurtful hurt in his eyes, when they weren't hard, having breakfast by himself, going to his study upstairs right away after supper, leaving him alone, again, alone with the nannies--whose faces and names he has forgotten--then alone with the housekeepers--he remembers the last seven--or is it eight?

End of sample

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