

Betsy, I Remember You

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The sun has not yet risen. I lie here, where I've been for six years alone in a bedroom, in Auckland, New Zealand. My body has changed: my frame and muscles have wasted and my health is sapped more with each passing year.

Lying here I think of you, Betsy Brown of Greenwich, Connecticut. It was 22 years, 22 long years ago, that I knew you. I now look back wistfully upon that year in Sussex, it seems, every day.

My older sister and I waded through crumpled autumn leaves, ankle deep in a rusty sea which we kicked up with each step; walked home by lanes which led a winding path beneath outstretched branches, from where the bus had deposited us in the 4.30 twilight. Home, to a warm, dark Tudor cottage; to a huge fireplace, criss-crossed windows and low ceilings, under a stone roof: a place we called home, as had how many generations before?

It was a year of collecting conkers, long walks on our cousins' farm at Broadbridge Heath, in gumboots, through gently inclining fields to the wood on the hill – the highest point for miles and miles – to the old fort (a place of fascination for a seven year old boy), along the broad pathway that led under a high ceiling of branches and out, down the other side to the river Arun, around the base of the wooded hill and along the broad, flat fields to complete the circle and return to the house, in fading light. A year of enchantment: of driving in the country in our Morris 1100 (which was replaced by a red Triumph Herald station wagon), of overgrown country lanes – my private Narnia.

We travelled to France; my head was always over Dad's shoulder to see how fast we were going (having no speed limit was rather a novelty); sometimes he forgot to drive on the right hand side! Then there was the time the accelerator cable became detached in peak hour traffic – in central Paris: with one foot on the clutch, his right hand grasping the cable and his head barely able to peer over the dashboard, he manoeuvred us in a haphazard series of hops and starts, amid a chorus of horns, to the safety of a side street.

Beech forests, baguettes (which then seemed too long to fit in the car), endless cathedrals: my sister Julia and I grew heartily sick of waiting for our parents to finish drinking their fill of the architecture: 'It's only a factory,' we'd try to convince them, though we knew we'd never get them back on the road before their appetite for stained glass and flying buttresses was satisfied. I loved France, I always will: tree-lined highways, hot chocolate and croissants, pensions, every memory. Come to think of it, details of that holiday have departed; instead, it's wrapped in a vague, golden glow.

Still I think of you, Betsy Brown, of the Opel station wagon your mother would drive us to school in (it had automatic transmission; she always put it in neutral – or was it park? – when we pulled up at the lights; the engine's tone would rise exactly a minor third); those mornings were cold and steam would come out of the exhaust. Sometimes the fog was so thick you could hardly see a few yards in front, even with the lights on. I remember once seeing that the stream by the intersection where we turned left on the way to Horsham, had frozen into a lumpy block...

There was a grass snake in the field of long grass behind our garden, one day; it didn't move – was it dead? We didn't dare touch it, lest we would die as a result.

A year: one year, rosy in the memory: a year of seeing squirrels in a tree in our back garden, of molehills – something foreign to anyone from Auckland, New Zealand.

When we arrived, our first house was a semi-detached in Edenbridge, Kent (that was when we had the 1100). I remember arriving – some memories never lose their immediacy – it was a grey winter's day and we waited in the car outside while our parents went to the door. It was purple. The place didn't look promising and Julia started to cry. 'You never know, it might be nice on the inside, you shouldn't judge a book by its cover,' I said, hopefully.

Now I live in the house from which we departed for England, in Auckland, New Zealand – the house

in which my whole life has been lived, with the exception of that one year. This morning I struggled from my bed at 6am, too restless to lie there; this was an unusual event. I sat on the front steps and wrote, as traffic noise from the motorway, louder than the encircling birdcall, invaded the tranquillity of morning. I'd not been outside for weeks; nor been up in a cold winter's dawn or seen a thin veil of mist suspended before the setting moon, for years – not since my days of tramping in the New Zealand bush.

We sat, waited. I suppose I've always had an optimistic streak and though the rest of the family hated the Edenbridge house, for me, it was just an adventure. It was there we first saw sleet (I didn't want to believe it wasn't proper snow): we leaned out of an upstairs window, letting it alight briefly on our upturned hands, before melting. There was an ever-present smell of coal gas – I guess that's what I will forever associate Edenbridge with – a smell.

There were allotments near-by, something unknown in New Zealand. It was always cold (we were only there for the coldest months of winter) and I vividly recall the morning wait for the school bus: by the side of the main road a group of us would stand, rigid and trembling, as we desperately anticipated its approaching warmth, with exhaled breath rising in clouds about us. I'd never felt cold like that before – we don't get it in Auckland, not that cold: it was a chill that penetrated and gripped your hand; a numbing presence which bit through to the bone. 'Come ON, bus,' we'd all be silently thinking; it would come eventually but, as with all things so desperately awaited, it came in its own impersonal time.

Our neighbours had problems – he was a landscape gardener, a profession which, for me, has ever since had connotations of mental disturbance; it was a violent relationship and my room, just large enough to fit my bed and to stand up in, was against the thin wall that divided the two houses. Every day, it seemed, he would be destroying his home, presumably to make alterations: banging reverberated through the building and he could frequently be seen carrying bits of house into his back garden, which we looked down upon, over the wooden fence. I was always slightly anxious that he might mistakenly demolish the thin dividing wall in the middle of the night and that I would be confronted with him.

My room was situated on the first floor landing, opposite a narrow staircase which wound its way up to a dim attic. A store room was situated there, a skeleton painted on the floor. Straining upwards, I could just peer out of the window to see the neighbourhood from an unfamiliar perspective: fences, walls, roofs all reached up towards me. Nothing else stands out as being unusual about that house, except perhaps for the framed Mona Lisa print hanging inside the loo door. A conservatory led from the kitchen to a neglected, narrow garden.

While at Edenbridge, we attended a convent school: rice pudding at lunch, playing soldiers on the tennis court at morning break; my recollections are few and any memories of class have long faded. One memory does stand out, however: before going in to lunch, we were lined up outside and summoned by denomination; as Anglicans were never summoned, I went in with the Catholics – the nearest thing, I thought.

We were soon house-hunting in Sussex and visited a large house called Baguio on an overgrown country road: it had two stories, a large ramshackle garden (where a seven year old's imagination could run free) and a disused petrol pump opposite. But home was found in a small village called Slinfold. We rented a semi-detached Tudor cottage (the middle of a row of three) on the main road – a quiet lane winding past an old stone church, past our house, on, down into a hollow overhung with oaks and up, round a left hand bend, as it left the village. Home – 2 Collier's Cottage, The Street – we had found it: home, it will always be.

Where are you now, Betsy Brown of Greenwich, Connecticut? – and where have these years brought you?

I lie in bed, sunrise approaching – irredeemably and, now I see, avoidably ill. I have learned, and learned through hard experiences, lessons which always seem to come too late. A grey sadness has descended: what should have been, where I should now be: progressing, fuelled by creativity and

enthusiasm. Not choking, slowly poisoned by my own body as it grows ever more disordered, reacting to foods and inhalants.

Passion: if I could shake this thief that is overpowering me more with every passing day, there are a million worlds waiting. Yesterday, during a brief respite, I hunted around the house in my wheelchair, for books; I found them: Kandinsky, Michelangelo, Rafael, Utrillo, Vermeer – each a world on its own, begging to be studied; but a brief skim and exhaustion was overwhelming.

Knowledge: I've bought books on post-war world politics; the writings of the classical historians; poetry, art; my mind, weighed down with lead, cannot be itself; nor can I break through this wall to reach my own self waiting on the other side.

Waiting, patiently waiting; all I in reality am: a spirit choked, locked in this gloom of chronic illness, bursting to break free, should a crack appear in these walls; my mind drifts back to happier times...

Spring Lane – down the hollow, round the left hand bend and there it was – our favourite walk: chickens clucked around a farmhouse; a tangled mass of foliage crowded in from either side where flowers peered out, as if to greet us with a little song. It ended in a disused railway line, a favourite spot for picking blackberries or looking for Roman remains. We never found any, but our greengrocer did: we still have the Roman tile he gave us. It fell, regrettably, and is now joined with Araldite across one corner.

Betsy, I remember doing cart wheels in your garden. I didn't know you well, but recall the warmth of your family, your mother especially. You had a large two-storied house just beyond the village, in Hayes Lane.

1972: a year of playing mouse-trap with my English cousins, upstairs in their warm Tudor farm house – a house that is forever like home, even to those who have never lived there; playing *Mouse-Trap* upstairs as the rain fell at dusk, or rocking on the Victorian rocking horse (five feet long if it was an inch – big enough for two, easily).

Here I lie: jazz guitar, books, writing; learning to sketch, earning a living doing the things I know I could thrive at, given the chance: all of my desires, all I want to be and indeed am, beneath this disguise of illness – are you all deserting me, my outstretched hand left to grasp only at the air?

England, Sussex, Slinfold: I want to return to you and renew our friendship. I remember you, Betsy. Most of all, I remember your long blonde hair.

I look out the window; the sun has risen, now.

Epilogue

The illness described in this story is *Chronic Fatigue Syndrome*. In the time since this story was written I have become strong enough to live on my own and without a wheelchair.

– 1998