

A STATE OF LIMBO

(a monologue)

by

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Organ music – discreet and sombre. Lights slowly come up on an open coffin, which stands on a trestle.

AILEEN enters and dutifully approaches the coffin to pay her respects.

AILEEN is somewhere between her late fifties and early sixties and wears a simple blouse and skirt, with beads and earrings. Her hair is reminiscent of a bouffant.

She turns from the coffin and steps forward. She has about her the look of a woman haunted by memories.

The organ music fades.

AILEEN: It wasn't until he was in his coffin that I finally got round to telling him that I still loved him.

She turns to consider the coffin as it fades into the darkness behind her.

Lights up on a settee, which AILEEN moves to. She sits.

I'd been meaning to make my feelings known since goodness knows when... but never seemed able to find the right moment.

Through the years, conversation had become all but monosyllabic and I for one saw no reason to penetrate the longuers of silence that filled the latter period of our marriage. The paucity of dialogue suited me.

She reaches over the arm of settee and picks up a paperback.

I became an avid reader of Barbara Cartland.

Removing bookmark, she settles to read.

(Without looking up) 'I've got a lump,' he said, on one of those rare occasions he felt the need to articulate.

Mildly irritated, she replaces the bookmark, closes the book, puts it to one side and rises.

The imparting of such information sent a tiny shiver down my spine. He'd never had a day's illness in all the thirty-two years we'd been married, so his denouement was not something to be taken sitting down.

She sits.

He said it was the size of a two pence piece and was situated at the top of his left calf. I did offer to take a look, but he said not to bother. So I didn't push it.

The doctor thought it was something and nothing and would probably go away of its own accord. (*with slight unease*) But it didn't.

It was when I got up to go to the toilet late one night and heard Bill whimpering in his room that I realized the situation had entered a new phase.

(*by way of explanation*) Separate beds. Separate rooms. It was an arrangement we both favoured.

(*calling into the darkness*) 'Is everything all right?' I called, as I hovered by his door. Bill didn't answer.

Beat pause.

For someone who'd been called from his bed at two in the morning, the young doctor – a locum – was remarkably civil and had even gone to the bother of putting on a tie.

‘It’s the hospital for you,’ he said to Bill without any hesitation, and handed me an envelope containing his prognosis. There was something of the alarmist in his demeanour. He had blue eyes.

Beat pause.

I packed Bill an over-night bag and was just putting on my coat when he stormed into the lounge. ‘Have you seen them?’ he said irritably. ‘Have I seen what?’ I asked with quiet exasperation. ‘Car keys,’ he snapped. ‘You’re in no fit state to drive – I’ve ordered a taxi.’

Bill was not best pleased.

Beat pause.

It was a right rigmarole we had to go through at the hospital before a bed could be allocated. First, Bill had to be processed on the computer. The girl on the other side of the partition tapped everything out in slow time, using just the one digit. Well, she soon picked up on my vexed expression and excused herself by saying she suffered with brittle nails. (*with disdain*) Brittle nails. You wouldn’t find one of Barbara Cartland’s heroines with brittle nails.

To my way of thinking, her trouble was nothing a good manicurist couldn't have put right – and I told her so. But some people just can't take advice.

Once she'd collated all the relevant facts – sex, age, religion and who you voted for in the last General Election – she casually informed us that the hospital was full and would we 'kindly take a seat in the reception area until a bed becomes vacant'.

AILEEN opens the paperback.

It was just as well I brought my book along to read.

Bill said very little. Well, little of any real consequence. He was still mad at me for going to the expense of a taxi. 'You're here now,' I said, 'so make the most of it.'

He took me at my word. First he complained that he was sitting in a draught – but wouldn't move. Then he became disgruntled about the neon lighting, saying it was giving him a headache, but declined the Paracetamol. And then, after returning from a visit to the gents', he bellyached about the chicken tandoori that he'd discovered deposited over the urinals.

Oddly enough, he made no mention of the pain. Men are strange beasts.

She closes the book.

‘Have you heard the weather forecast?’ said this old woman as she sat herself down beside me. Judging by her appearance, I reckon she had a budget account with Oxfam. I shook my head and smiled politely. ‘Jesus reigns,’ she said with all the fervour of an evangelist.

It was a play on the word ‘rain’.

Some people, I’m sure, would have derived comfort from her proclamation, but not Bill. No. ‘For Christ’s sake bugger off,’ he said. ‘Please don’t say “for Christ’s sake” unless you mean it,’ was her retort. Bill said, ‘This is a hospital, not a church.’ ‘But God is everywhere,’ said she with total conviction. Bill’s hackles were well and truly up. ‘If he’s everywhere,’ he hissed, ‘he wants to make himself useful and mop up the chicken tandoori that’s been spewed up in the gents’ bog.’ I was appalled, him talking in that fashion to a total stranger... and a woman at that. She didn’t turn a hair, however. She simply took a card out of her knapsack and handed it to Bill before disappearing down the corridor.

He didn’t even bother to look at it –

She opens book.

– he just tore it in two.

She picks up the bookmark, which is one half of the card referred to, and reads from it.

‘Selfishness spoils the beauty of life – just as weeds spoil the beauty of a garden.’

She reflects for a moment and then returns the card to the book.

I couldn’t have put it better myself.

Beat pause. She glances to one side.

I watched as this woman got out of the lift carrying a Sainsbury’s carrier. She was all alone and in quite a state and I noticed the arm of a pyjama jacket dangling over the side of the bag.

She had bereavement written all over her face.

A few minutes later, the phone goes and the girl at reception calls across with news that a bed had become vacant on the Ave Marie Ward up on the third floor.

One man’s death bed is another man’s aid to recovery – or so it was hoped.

Bill didn’t make a good patient. Said he couldn’t sleep, hated the food, thought the nurses too young and took gross exception to the man in the next bed getting out his prayer mat and praying to Mecca five

times a day. In fact, I hadn't heard him say so much in years.

(glancing down at her book) I turned a deaf ear and got on with my Barbara Cartland.

Blackout.

Lights up on Aileen standing by the side of the settee.

It was decided he should have an exploratory operation. I thought it would've made more sense to have removed the growth outright, but Mr. Balsam, Bill's surgeon, had other ideas.

'Let's not be too hasty, Mrs. Bannister,' he said, 'premature removal of a growth can cause more harm than good.'

She sits.

His tone of reassurance left me feeling unsettled.

Benign though the growth was thought to be, it had the potential of becoming as lethal as an assassin's bullet.

A worried look on AILEEN's face.

Blackout.