

A Great Flicker of Hope

Philip Reed, in his old dressing gown and worn slippers, could feel a familiar sensation overcoming him: a great, swathing sea of horror with the tide coming ever closer, willing to swallow him whole, to drag him down, and then leave him, soaked and desperate, upon the shores; smashed up on the rocks. Loneliness could eat up a person like that, as he'd seen in the past, and spit them out utterly defeated, depressed and dreadful. He thought back to his late mother, tucked up in her old flat, who would watch her hair grow gradually grey in the greasy mirror placed by her armchair. He had watched a successful life blow away, like sticks from a sturdy nest; leaving it slowly getting weaker and weaker until it became but a shell of what it once was: his children had left him, and he kept his money in an old account, spending as little as he could - only buying the bare necessities which he would get on the 1st of each month.

Stretching his legs, he walked over to the dirty window through which a dingy road ran through the barren landscape and perhaps, if he was lucky, he would spot a car or lorry drive past quickly leaving him nothing but a haze of grey smoke, almost as dark as his life had become. He used his imagination to think of what life was like beyond that, in the cities and further afield: the life of the rainforest, the animals roaming the Arctic, and the heat of the desert. Being cooped up in his house, a child grounded by its parents, was only worsening his condition; and the only engagement he had was with old Mrs Cooper from the local shop, each month, and she was the only crack of light that appeared in his life. Even she could see the aura of darkness that shrouded him, following relentlessly like a shadow, despite her deteriorating eyesight. He devoted weeks to sitting stiffly in his armchair, dozing, and getting up only to feed himself. He didn't like the state he was in, he wished he could do something about it, but he couldn't: like someone with a broken leg without crutches, he couldn't make his way on his own.

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Philip did little during the day, and what he did do he didn't finish: a solitary letter was placed by the salt pot, the envelope next to the toaster, and the pen on the floor; he had accumulated several large heaps of dirty crockery, only half washed, and piles of rubbish lay in black bin bags near the stairway, ready to take out. His life had become a repetitive set of instructions, like he was programmed by some amateur coder, and he worked like clockwork; albeit running towards the end of its cycle.

It was then, after a sound like a single note on a xylophone rang from the top of the front garden as the gate clanged shut, Philip's eyes rose tiredly to see a blob of ginger descending from the top, crossing the dewy grass gracefully. He heard a gentle knock at the door and, in a daze, turned and trudged across the soft carpet to the solemn door and opened it.

He stood a little while, rubbed his eyes and pushed his glasses further up his nose as he saw the lean figure standing on the doormat: her bright green eyes watching him steadily, her freckled face a mixture of concern and love, her smile wide, and her hands stretching up to meet him. The person stepped forward and Philip found her hands gripping to his back and a single tear transferred from her face to his as they embraced in the doorway, next to the bin bags by the stairs.

"Oh, dad, what have you done to yourself?" it whispered to him. Philip was too shocked at this unforeseen visit to say anything, and indeed the touch of a fellow human felt alien to him, a sort of extra-terrestrial power, but one which had once felt normal and which he had regarded without thought. He was, at that instant, a species seeing another of its kind after being kept inside a cage for so long. A smile, so strange and unfamiliar, seemed to burst to his face like a flame to a match having been struck.

It had been years since he'd seen his daughter, he'd thought, yet in fact it had been 3 months since they had last met, and he had fallen into this sullen abyss shortly afterwards. He cradled

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her in his arms for a few minutes or so before she talked again and he felt his own strength growing back, slow and steady like ivy.

“Oh, dad, what have you been doing? Are you okay?” she asked, and her worriedness struck him there and then. “Can I come in?” He stepped aside and shut the door routinely behind her as she leant against the wall and placed a hand upon his shoulder.

“Thea...” he muttered softly. The next hour passed swiftly and Thea talked, something he hadn’t experienced in a while. He wanted her to slow down for just a minute, so he could savour each sound as it came out of her mouth, to embrace each word, to use it like a blind person uses a guide dog: to guide him.

“Help.” was the word she ended on, although he had heard little of her speech prior to that.

“Help.” He repeated ptafter her, the second word he’d spoken in a few months.

“Look, dad, I can’t just leave you cooped up in here. See-” and she held out her firm hand for him to grasp before leading him back to the door, out, and up the path. “I’m concerned for you, dad. But, I’m here, I can get you some friends, some support. I’m here for you.” And that one, unexpected visit brought a great flicker of hope.

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