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## The Opening

It took me a while to realise I'd made a mistake, but by then it was too late.

"You've made your bed - now you must lie in it," as me' mother used to say.

I had chosen to move into a Care Home after Diana died, while I was numb and mostly mute - her death from cancer was so sudden and so shocking. From diagnosis to death was only 3 months, and I, who had managed major projects and helped shape company contingency policies, was completely unready.

"Found wanting," as my guilt-ridden mind told me, "wholly wanting; in both senses of that verb."

Of course I couldn't talk to anyone about it.

Then my own health deteriorated, another hammer blow, yet my mind stayed sharp - sharp enough to batter me with regret, and lock me into sterile spirals of repetition. Earworms, the Germans call them, and they dominated my thoughts for what seemed like ages.

So, when it became clear that I was destined for a wheelchair, and fed up with my own cooking, I chose to move into this Care Home. I had hoped to leave an inheritance for my children- not that my son needs it, but "needs must where the devil drives" - this phrase being one me' father used - so here I am, finances in place, and wondering if survival is worth it.

Because I hadn't realised how many of my fellow residents were living with dementia, or that all the offered activities were oriented towards women. Arts and crafts, with much hearty high-pitched encouragement from staff - "Come along, Joanie, you know you'll enjoy it!"

Plastic smiles all round, and poor Joanie either looking sour or uncomprehending, as she gets wheeled away. No one stopping to check for her wishes in the matter, nobody stooping down to her eye level to see what's going on.

Once I came out of my shell, it was unbelievably boring. I wanted to talk about the news, discuss books, history, big picture stuff. Enid, who sits at my table for meals, wants to talk about her family and the food when she says anything at all. Pat, who sits on my left, always brings a book with her - it's mostly Agatha Christie, and she responds but never initiates a chat. John, who sits opposite me, has Parkinsons, and hates being looked at, because of his shakes, and is very hard to understand.

Used to be a Professor, apparently.

And the TV! Television is on, everywhere, all day, and with bedroom doors open, and at a high volume for the hearing impaired, sometimes the corridors are a conflicting cacophony of popular channels.

Some silence would be golden; instead I get noise, and banal conversation and I'm stuck in it.

Somebody offered me 'mindfulness' as a solution - the first time I was polite in my refusal, but eventually I lost patience, maybe after the third time, and I bit her head off. That was quite satisfying!

I started going to the mid-week services a Chaplaincy put on - after all I had nothing better to do, and at least they were outsiders with fresh faces.

The hymns were ok, but some of the choruses they chose seemed to be only fit for kids in Sunday school. These do-gooders, they annoyed me some of the time. A lot of what they said and did was pitched for residents with reduced capacity, I could see that, but they banged on about God's love, which I don't feel. Still, now and again they made a comment that got my attention- like a throw-away line.

One time the bloke on their team, Peter, came up to me after the service and squatted down beside my chair- a courtesy I really appreciated - and then asked me how I was. I told him part of the truth, then he surprised me by commenting that we hadn't signed up for this, had we?

It started something- like an unclenching- someone who didn't pretend everything was alright, nor that they had all the answers! Someone who didn't chivvy me along to be cheerful, who didn't cajole me with high-energy smiles and bright platitudes. And he said "We", which intrigued me.

On another occasion, I decided to test him.

"Where's God in all this? I asked. "Inside you," he replied, which I hadn't expected.

"And outside, too" he went on. I thought that was rubbish, and I told him so, but all he did was grin, which annoyed me, so that suddenly I was spoiling for a fight.

"What did I do to deserve this?" I asked him angrily, overcome by a wave of self-pity. "I'm totally useless!" No sooner had I said it than I despised myself for showing such weakness.

He took his time to answer. "Maybe we all do," he replied. "Or maybe your situation is just a statistical probability."

"You're saying shit happens?" I demanded, incredulous. "Nothing more profound?"

"Well, yes it does," he replied, "and sometimes the only choice we have is how we deal with it."

Another of me' mother's sayings popped back into my head - and not for the first time since I'd become a resident - "Sometimes you have to make the best of a bad lot!"

"Easy for you to say," I threw at him.

"True", he acknowledged, as if I had just played a good tennis shot, "but this isn't about me, is it?"

I ended it then, I was so angry, but for all that, I turned up at the next service, and afterwards decided to have another go at him.

Which led to a sometimes-colourful exchange of views - well, colourful on my part, at any rate! This went on for some time. Afterwards I realised I felt more alive, my anger had got out, and I felt better for it.

Something Peter had said about finding my meaning stuck with me. Something about using the word connection instead of the sentimental and meaningless yuck of the term 'love' that everyone bandies about, as if it is as easy to find as the air we breathe.

"Get out of yourself," he challenged me, but he grinned as he said it, and that was OK. He'd earned it, taking my flak all this time. "Ask God, ask yourself, what you can do."

Reluctantly I realised he was right, I couldn't mark the big world any more but I could do something in and for this little nearby world I now, performe, inhabit.

I did indeed have some power left, and it was down to me how I used it.

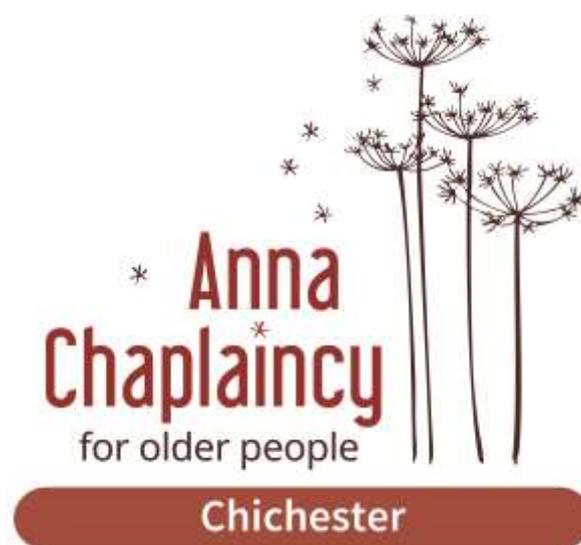
"So Pat", I asked at lunchtime, "How is it going? Have you figured out who the murderer is yet?" Pat looked up, astonished, but then she replied. And I decided that each day thereafter at every meal I would initiate something with each of my tablemates. It felt like an opening, and who knows, I might even become fond of them!

And I can offer to read something for the Professor. Next, I'm going to see if I can get a book club and a film club off the ground.

I'm also preparing a list of tricky questions about prayer for Peter. Sometimes he really comes across as a smart Alec! I don't really care who's right or wrong - not that I'm going to tell him *that!* Turns out it's not so bad, being alive after all...

Love and blessings, David

### Chichester Anna Chaplaincy



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