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Doreen Campbell

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Abstract

For Mr Preston, part of the thrill of a special outing was studying the paper every night to see what was offering and then the few short days of preparation and anticipation that preceded the actual outing itself. There wasn't a lot of choice because he had to get the right combination of age and walking distance but he usually managed to get a special outing about once a month.

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He had long realised the worth of the daily newspaper. It had become an absolute essential in his life because it provided him with a fund of information about the sort of entertainment he preferred. He placed it high on his list of necessities along with rent, food and electricity and he looked forward to its arrival every afternoon around five.

When he'd been in his early sixties he used to go out at nights to public meetings. They were exciting events because, even though the seats were hard, he could sit in among people who were participating, who were experiencing emotions — anger mostly, but often sympathy, amusement or admiration. He could experience this emotion himself, he could participate himself. It gave him a sense of importance and belonging.

Occasionally there would be a free film or slide evening advertised. This was the pinnacle of his existence — going out to the pictures at night. His old age pension did not afford him such a luxury and he was grateful to go along and watch free films or slides on any subject under the sun.

That was when he first realised the value of the newspaper because most of the inner city meetings were advertised and he was able to plan his outings a few days in advance. Sometimes he was regretfully forced to choose between two excellent meetings on the same night and, although it was a pity to have to waste one of them, it did at least create an hour or two of exciting deliberation in order to make a final choice.

Nowadays, of course, it was too risky to go out at night. He caught cold easily in the chilly night air and he knew only too well the distinct threat that congestion posed to his vital daytime activities. Reluctantly, he had had to abandon his beloved evening outings.

But in retrospect perhaps it hadn't been such a bad thing after all, for it had made him more inventive, more enterprising, more determined to find an exciting substitute for his lost outings. He had spent a long time thinking about it, although the actual idea hadn't taken long to perfect, and even though he'd been a bit shaky on his first few outings, he'd soon settled down and begun to thoroughly enjoy them. They became the new pinnacle of his existence, his very own special outings.

That was why today, sitting in his poky little kitchen, Mr Preston was feeling all fluttery and excited. Another special outing had arrived. It was due to start at 11 a.m. and he had had to rise earlier than usual in order to dress carefully and walk the distance slowly so that he would arrive at an appropriate time without being red-faced and breathless.

He studied the curtained-off cupboard which contained his clothes. Plenty of choice of shoes, he thought as he selected a black pair and took down the cardboard shoe-cleaning box from the shelf. Their owners had long gone, he reflected, leaving him to walk their shoes for them. Like walking their dogs he decided, or, taking it a bit further, literally stepping into their shoes.

He chuckled at his joke as he reached for his dark-grey suit. It, too, was second-hand from an Opportunity Shop some years ago but, unlike the shoes, it was now beginning to show its age. He had been forced to reserve its use for special outings only and for the rest of the time he wore a pair of brown corduroys and a double-breasted black jacket that had been left to him by old Mr Moser from the flat next door.

And a good thing the jacket had fitted him, too, he thought as he studied his image in the oval dressing-table mirror and saw that his tie needed re-knotting. Because by then his old double knit cardigan had been threadbare under the arms and badly frayed around the cuffs and pockets.

If he had a wish, he told his image, it would be that the government would give all pensioners free clothing coupons which they could spend anywhere they liked. He personally did not like second-hand clothing but there seemed to be no other choice at present. He decided that he would write a letter to the editor of the evening paper suggesting the coupons. A pleasing vision formed in his mind's eye and he winked at his reflection. He saw his letter in print, with his name beneath it. B.J. Preston, Pensioner.

The bedside clock showed that it was time to leave. He felt a surge of excitement in his stomach as he checked his heater, put on his dark-grey felt hat and let himself out of his front door.

Miss Moser was out in her garden when he got to his gate but, as usual,

she turned her back on him and hurried inside. She had not spoken to him since he'd cut off a few overhanging branches of her walnut tree three years before.

He raised his hat with mock politeness and addressed himself to a lamp post. 'Good morning, Miss Moser. How are you, Miss Moser? Isn't it a lovely day?'

And it certainly was. In fact, it was a beautiful day — almost too beautiful to be indoors. But there it was. The show must go on. Besides, he had often heard it said that the better the day, the better the deed. He waved his hand airily to nobody and said, 'Cheerio Miss Moser. I'm going out for the day but I'll see you when I get back.' He felt his spirits lift gloriously as he carefully crossed the road.

By the time he reached the Mansfield Memorial Park he found that he was a little ahead of schedule so he decided to stay and rest for a few minutes. Wellington was such a beautiful city in springtime and it was so nice there in the sun that he was almost tempted to stay on. But then he remembered that he had worn his good suit for the special outing and therefore the wearing could not be wasted. Ultimately, the outing would give him hours of beautiful memories to mull over and it would be much more rewarding than just sitting there dozing in the sun.

He walked on again, keeping to the inside of the footpath and stopping occasionally to glance casually through people's front windows or to observe out of the corner of his eye someone he thought he recognized from his younger days.

At 10.50 a.m. Mr Preston arrived to begin his special outing. Others had already come and were filing in, quietly and unobtrusively. They were mostly of his own generation although there were one or two young ones, but he didn't think the occasion would have much appeal for them.

He took a seat near the middle, not wishing to intrude into the centre of the activity but wanting to be near enough to hear all that was said and to observe every little detail. It was times like these, he thought as he looked around him, that he was grateful for the excellent memory recall that he still possessed. It meant that every precious moment could be recorded and stored for future use.

The church itself was as stately as a galleon and as beautiful as the day outside it. The stained glass windows and highly polished pews, the gleaming brass nameplates hanging in silent tribute to loved ones long gone, all reflected the loving care which had been bestowed on the church since its inception at the turn of the century. The flowers for today's ceremony were the only real evidence of something new in the church yet they, too, had about them the look of a loving arrangement.

Other churches he had visited on his special outings had never quite come up to the standard of this one in his estimation. Old St Paul's, they called it. Old like him, he supposed, but it was certainly the church where he felt most at ease. He watched the minister as he walked down the aisle. The black and white of his robes seemed to be in stark contrast with the warm golden light that filtered through the coloured glass windows and spread itself over the waiting people.

The minister stopped for a brief word with an elderly woman, touched a younger man gently on the shoulder and then carried on to the pulpit.

The organ began playing its special music and a stir ran through the congregation. 'Dearly beloved...' said the minister manfully and the funeral service began.

* * * * *

For the first time since entering the church, Mr Preston allowed himself to look at the casket lying there at the foot of the altar. It had a single wreath of white lilies on the lid and it contained the body of 83-year-old Edgar Archibald Tompkins. Mr Preston knew this because he'd obtained the details from the evening paper three nights previously.

He also knew that Edgar Tompkins' wife was named Isobel and that during their married life they'd had three children, two of whom were now grandparents and one who was apparently unmarried and resident in California. Edgar Tompkins had served in both the First and Second World Wars and was a Justice of the Peace at the time of his death. He had obviously lived a full and constructive life and was now about to be given an appropriate funeral. It was all very sad and emotional and Mr Preston thoroughly approved of it.

Each time he went to one of these occasions he was struck with the idea that it was rather like a rehearsal where he was the understudy, watching and waiting. It was as if he was learning his part ready for the time when the occasion would be in honour of him. In fact, as the service proceeded he found himself wishing that his own funeral would be just like this one for it was certainly very moving and the minister seemed to speak with such sincerity that Mr Preston felt quite exhilarated.

And that was what he liked about funeral services — the fact that he could get involved, participate emotionally with everyone else in the church. Today, as on all other occasions, it mattered little that he had never known the dead man. He could still grieve over his demise just the same. And he was quite sure that such a good-living and patriotic man as Edgar Tompkins would not have begrudged an old veteran the pleasure of grieving at his funeral.

In fact, Mr Preston felt so overcome with the beauty and simplicity of the service that he found himself wishing he had had enough left out of his pension to have bought a wreath — or to at least have sent a posy bowl to Mrs Tompkins.

But it was not just the funeral services that Mr Preston enjoyed. It was the cup of tea afterwards in the family home. Naturally, he never went to the graveside. People never expected it of him because he was too elderly, but when they saw him mingling with the others outside the church after the service they invariably approached him to enquire how he had known the deceased. And, naturally, he always said that he was an old, old friend from way back in the war days. He felt himself to be on safe ground with wartime friendships because obviously none of the relatives had ever been there at the time. He always took great care to glean every scrap of information he could from each funeral notice and to rehearse his stories well in advance. And he always spoke in glowing terms of the unselfish attitude and military prowess of the dear departed one.

When the grieving relatives heard of Mr Preston's close association with their loved one during the time when they had had no knowledge of him, they were always eager for him to go back to the family home and have a cup of tea and scones or cakes. Mr Preston had no qualms about accepting their hospitality for he saw himself as a professional mourner — and a generous one at that. He asked no fee other than the food and drink and brief companionship and he gave in return comfort and beautiful memories to those who were left behind.

And today was no exception. The minister himself made the first approach after the service and, having assessed the value of Mr Preston's wartime friendship, introduced him to Mrs Tompkins and her eldest son from California. It seemed that they both had heart conditions and could not cope with the ordeal at the cemetery so they were driving home to put the kettle on and get things ready. When they heard the beautiful things Mr Preston had to say about their loved one, they implored him to come and tell them more.

Mr Preston was only too happy to oblige and soon found himself to be the centre of attention in the Tompkins' lounge, eating as many scones and cakes as he could and drawing on his vast store of wartime memories into which Edgar Tompkins fitted remarkably well, as had all the others before him. In fact, he was quite disappointed when the time came to leave but readily accepted that he had no choice in the matter.

A young woman offered him a lift back to the city and, as he had not even the price of a bus fare left out of his pension, he gratefully accepted

it. This was always the risk he took, of course, that he would be left stranded out in some unfamiliar suburb, but so far he had never lost out. He made very sure of that with his quiet, gentlemanly demeanour and his neat appearance.

It was nearly five o'clock when the woman dropped him off at the cenotaph and, because he was full of all the good food he had consumed, it took him longer than usual to walk up Molesworth Street.

And, as he expected, when he turned the corner into his street, Miss Moser was out in her garden again. Of course she scuttled inside the moment she saw him but he was not bothered by her coolness. He raised his hat and spoke jauntily to her closed front door.

'Good evening, Miss Moser. Yes I had a very nice time, thank you. And you?' He took the evening paper from the box and let himself into the flat.

When he had hung up his suit and pushed his tired feet into his shabby slippers, he took the frying pan out of the cupboard under the sink and put a lamb chop on to cook with a teaspoon of dripping. Then he sat down to check the newspaper for anything that might be coming up by way of a special outing in the next few days.

There was nothing, it seemed, that had any prospect for him. Not even a memorial service. Well, that was alright. Having chosen old soldiers, he had long ago accepted the fact that he would have to wait around for them sometimes. He had, in the past, waited for up to three weeks before he'd had a lucky break. And then, on occasions, he'd had such a rush of them that he couldn't manage to be everywhere at once.

Meantime, there was the newspaper cutting of the funeral notice to paste into his scrapbook and, in a week or two, there would be an acknowledgement notice to watch for. He always looked forward to the acknowledgements because they thanked him personally and gave him an added sense of belonging. A kind of bonus, he always felt, and he had no compunction about claiming his share of the gratitude. Sometimes there was even an obituary to include and this was an added thrill, a final rounding out of his documentation.

Then, when the record was complete, he would grade the outing on a star system of one to five. In the past, some of his special outings had not been as successful as others. Some had not gone beyond the church service and it had then been a disappointing walk home to make his own cup of tea. But today was different. It had been a great success and he felt sure that he would grade it highly.

He closed his eyes contentedly and prepared his mind to make the decision.