

## **For better or worse**

With his head in his hands, Jim muttered to himself, "It was just a simple mistake so how the hell did I end up here? It was just the wrong number, just a flippin' human error, that anyone could make."

He rose gingerly to his feet, steadying himself against the cold brick wall. He started to pace. Long loping strides, back and forth. He stopped and slumped down with his hands on his knees, staring curiously at the wall opposite his hard wooden bench.

The graffiti on the walls told some gruesome tales, individual lives scratched into the faded paint, like modern hieroglyphics, recounting sordid stories of miscarriages of justice and painful individual histories. Jim winced at some of the explicit language, words that he hadn't used or heard since his days in the Army. He pressed the palms of his hands hard down on the bench and raised his head in anguish, "It was a simple mistake, it was just the wrong number, why wouldn't they believe me?"

Hearing a jangle of keys, Jim turned around as the thick metal door at the far end of his cell creaked open; a man dressed smartly in a pristine blue uniform slipped around the door, he was smiling sympathetically, "The jury is still out Jim, it's been a couple of hours now." The man hesitated, "That's a good sign Jim, and that means they haven't come to an immediate decision. Fingers crossed, eh?" The man crossed two fingers and with an exaggerated gesture, pointed them in the direction of Jim.

He added, still smiling, "Chin up mate, I'll get you a cup of tea, milk, and two sugars?"

Jim nodded. Two hours? God, it seems like a lifetime.

He sat back as his mind fired into action and started to contemplate the past two months. Just how did he end up here?

\*\*\*

The nurses had tried to make it a happy anniversary, saying, "Fifty years, Jim, that's some achievement." Jim appreciated their support and of course, it was, but Jim couldn't help feeling that the celebrations were very one-sided. Muriel sat upright on a wooden chair. Her face remained silently stony, her empty eyes flicked from Jim to the two nurses and back again, whilst she inattentively clutched a slightly damp, brightly coloured greetings card between two twisted hands.

It was probably about five years ago that they both noticed something was not quite right. It was, at first, simple things, like forgetting appointments, leaving household items in strange places and asking the same question repeatedly. Jim once found their electric kettle stacked neatly in their chest freezer! They sought help and an lumber-puncture scan confirmed the worst.

Jim remembered the words from the Neurologist plainly, “Advanced dementia, I’m sorry.”

At first, everybody was very supportive, but without Jim noticing it, people, including past close friends became infrequent visitors. It was on one cloudy Saturday morning as Jim was enjoying his first cup of tea, it suddenly dawned on him that he hadn’t spoken to a single soul during the past week, apart from the progressively bizarre conversations he had with Muriel.

Jim never asked for help, so someone must have said something, because the mental health team, comprising a tired woman accompanied by an earnest-looking teenage girl, both from his local health centre, descended upon Jim and battered him with options. But Jim remained stubborn. Muriel was to stay with him in their home as he told the health visitor, “I said, over fifty-odd years ago, ‘for better or worse’ and I’m not the sort of man that reneges’ on his vows.”

The health visitor nodded, sighed and gently patted Jim on his shoulder So, he was set up with a line of nurses, health visitors and volunteer helpers and a list of drugs that he had to administer to Muriel, all colour-coded with the measured dosage and daily medication. Jim put out the line of pills each morning, set alongside Muriel’s favourite rose-patterned glass filled with fresh spring water, ready to start their daily routine.

These nurse’s words were indelibly imprinted in his mind, “Just follow the colour codes on the pill dispenser, Jim, and nothing will go wrong.”

\*\*\*

The young police officer was speaking but Jim was only paying scant regard. His attention had been drawn to the peeling paint in the corner of the room. Through his recently prescribed spectacles, he spotted a little black insect-type creature, possibly some type of beetle industriously busying itself seeking shelter away from the threatening world it lived in. As the little beast snuggled down hiding itself from Jim’s view, Jim felt a flow of envy seep through his body.

“Lucky lad,” he said under his breath.

\*\*\*

Jim had never been in a courtroom before; he’d watched several dramatised trials on television but this was his first ever visit to his local Crown Court. His remand appearances had been informal affairs, in the modern Magistrates’ Courts in the town centre. The whole affair had become somewhat brumous; it was like they were discussing someone else and not him. The men in suits and the women in skirts insisted on calling him James, a name he hadn’t been called since his mother passed away many years ago. He had said “Call me Jim” a few times, but his request was ignored.

But today was different; the room was dressed in oak panels, a blue pelmet over a wooden pitched canopy with two posts supporting it on each side. The whole room was

brightly lit by a very ornate chandelier. A coat of arms was affixed in the centre of the room. Jim strained his eyes to read the legend written underneath the badge, but his eyes failed him. "I should have brought my specs", thought Jim. His attention focussed on the man sitting underneath all this paraphernalia. He was dressed in a long velvet dark red gown with a long slightly off-white wig that cascaded over his shoulders.

"The Beak," said Jim quietly to himself. Jim watched as the Judge slipped on a pair of black-rimmed spectacles and cleared his throat.

He looked directly at Jim.

"He looks tired," thought Jim.

The Judge asked Jim to confirm his name and address and then said, "You've been charged with the murder of Muriel Morrison by wilfully giving her an overdose of prescribed medication, how do you plead?"

The Judge was now looking down at Jim. He felt his chest tighten as the judge's eyes glowed questioningly. The courtroom was silent. Jim's mouth was dry, his voice coarse, "Not guilty," he heard himself saying. Nodding in acceptance, the Judge shuffled the papers in front of him and uttered, rather forlornly,

"You may sit".

Jim sat.

\*\*\*

The cell door opened. The familiar man still smartly attired in a neat blue uniform appeared in Jim's view.

He was still smiling.

"They're back, Jim, the jury, looks like they've come to a decision. Come on mate, smarten yourself up and give me your cup." Jim stood up and handed the blue plastic mug to the man. He steadied himself against the cold wall.

"Whoa, now Jim, take it easy," the blue uniform grabbed Jim's arm. Jim nodded his thanks. He stood still stamped his feet and stretched out both arms. Speaking softly Jim told his escort,

"Sorry, right I'm ready, let's go."

Jim slipped through the open cell door and marched towards the stairs leading to the courtroom. He could hear faint muttering coming down from the court. As he mounted the stairs the room fell silent. As he emerged into the artificial light a rush of anxiety gripped his inside. Jim sat down on the wooden bench opposite the Judge.

The judge ordered Jim to stand. Jim obeyed and stared straight ahead. The Judge looked across at the jury.

“Have you come to a verdict on which you all agree?” he asked. Jim clasped his hands together and whispered,

“Here we go ... I’m so sorry, Muriel, I really didn’t mean it.”

The end