

“Just another day”. by Mac Mckechnie



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On an old wooden pallet down a forgotten alleyway between two run-down houses, sheltered by a hoarding, lays a large cardboard carton stained with dust and grime. An old man stirs from his sleep, his regimented body clock had woken him. Thankful to have been woken from a troublesome dream, letting it pass from his mind. Morning light leaks through the flaps of the opening of the box. Sounds of commuter traffic penetrate the inner sanctum. He surfaces into the light of day gasping for a breath of the cold early morning air as if surfacing from beneath the ocean. And assesses the day in the city of wind. “Hmm!” He grunts at the foul weather blowing about him. To live in Barnsley, you had to love to the wind. You got to love the wind. Crawling from the carton nowadays he calls home, he stands and supports himself against the hoarding gathering his thoughts. Grateful for another day, another breath, another pain. Pain that murmured from a long-forgotten war. Pain that meant he was still alive. A large brown rat scurries along a wall. Stopping momentarily to look at the human before scurrying away behind a pile of rubbish in search of a morsel of food.

The old man had found the tenancy off Blucher Street by accident. The former tenant having abandoned it for one reason or another. The vacancy was a step up from the seedy market district around the corner that was noisy and besieged by mongrels of the humankind. Upon the discovery the old man relocated his meagre possessions to the splendour of the quieter surroundings. Undisturbed and unnoticed, for now. Times would change, they always do. Nothing stays the same forever. For now, it was home. Sanctuary from the elements. Sanctuary from those that wanted to confine him.

Wanting no trouble, the old man kept to himself, he distanced himself from people. Blending in with the pavement, and buildings. Withdrawing from the

world that had wrenched him from sanity of life and thrust him to the insanity of war. Lacerated wounds would heal, but there are some wounds that are too deep for sutures to reach.

Straightening himself, he feels the creaks of his joints. Inhaling deeply, cold damp morning air and diesel fumes fill his lungs. Taking a comb from a tired brown briefcase runs it through thinning grey hair. Scissors trim a shabby white beard as he looks at himself in the reflection of a window of an old building that was once an abandoned paint store. Now long abandoned as he was. Unfolding the faded overcoat, he had used as a pillow, he pushes weary arms down its sleeves. Retying a narrow black tie with a Windsor knot he straightens it in the reflection. Adjusting a brass Veterans badge on his lapel, gives it a rub to polish it. Reminding himself to stand tall as if a Warrant Officer was about to inspect him. Patting down trousers, secures a battered trilby firmly down on his head. And runs his fingers along the edge. Giving the briefcase a rub with a sleeve to polish the fading leather. Firm fingers clutch about the heavy twisted knob of a weather-stained length of driftwood. Balancing himself, relieving the pressure from a troublesome leg.

To look at him, no one would ever know the old man as being homeless. And in many ways, he was not. He had an abode he could call his own. Albeit a large cardboard carton. Appearing like an elderly gentleman going out for a daily walk. The cap, walking stick and brief case adding to his guise of respectability. His mind was as sharp as the day they had shipped him off to war. To a war no one wanted. No one talked about. He was damned if he went and damned if he stayed. And when it was over, he would be discarded and left to fend for himself. But that was a long time ago. But the dead, we will remember them.

Checking a gold watch, 8:00AM, he had slept in. Happy for the extra half hour. Giving the watch a wind before tapping the face as though to remind the second hand to keep moving much like himself. Looking to the sky to a sun shrouded by the thick rolling clouds threatening to pour down on him as any moment. Pulling a retractable umbrella from the briefcase, a rare find on the street. Like a magpie his eyes on the lookout for objects that others overlook and walk by. One man's misfortune is another man's luck. Opening the umbrella in time to catch the first spits from the heavens above. Securing the buttons of the tired overcoat about his neck, begins his daily round. "What day is it? ..." He asks himself, "...Monday? No that was yesterday... Tuesday... Must be Tuesday." He confirms with himself. Perhaps he would treat himself with a cup of hot tea

and bacon and eggs. And he knew just the place wondering if Samantha would be working today. He was in no rush; he had all day. His diary was clear, as were most days. “Ahh!” The old man moans as he feels his spine clicking into place as he straightened himself. Masking the limp, he casually strolls from the alleyway to the footpath to decide the best way to head. How the street had changed over the past fifty years before the world had gone mad with economic growth. Concrete shop fronts stood where once a row of back-to-back houses had survived almost as if they were gasping for breath in the town’s backwater, Pushed aside by progress and money. Supplanted by designer stores and converted factories now night clubs. Sandwiching themselves between the grey tarmac and the grey clouds above, much had the town that day. Encouraged by the ever-increasing number of parking buildings and Supermarkets sprouting up like mushrooms over the town a steady pulse of commuter traffic bleed slowly along arterial routes into Barnsley. The daily congestion coagulating and clotting. Only to bleed again and shuffled themselves like cards to be dealt into alternate lanes. In the jostling madness, drivers cursed in one breath and forgave in the next. They were all in the same predicament, addicts in desperate need of their morning fix. Caffeine.

The old man left Blucher Street for another day, and headed to the other end of the town centre near the Alhambra Centre hoping that was quieter. Leaning heavily on the walking stick to ease the discomfort of an old wound. His leg a barometer to the weather. He stops at the corner pub to rest the leg and inspect the grimy building façade; he had all the time in the world. He moved on slowly, the café was about as cooped up as he ever wanted to be. The large windows with views onto the street outside made the confinement bearable. It should be open by now he reckoned. Hoping no one had taken his table.

A cold gust of wind slapped his back side causing the umbrella to blow inside out. And reminding him to keep moving. “Bugger.” He cursed, turning about to invert the brolly. Sheltering close to buildings he made his way to the next street junction. Stopping to observe the coming and goings of morning commuters. Appearing invisible to them, unaware of the old man’s presence. He was but a chameleon on the sidewalk of life. The chilling wind yelped at his ankles. He resisted its nudging, preferring to go at his own pace. And the limp lessened as he found his stride. Only to ache again to remind him it was still with him. The café laid just ahead, he sheltered from the blustering strong wind, cowering beneath the umbrella. Seeing people rushing to escape the scattered showers of

rain like machine gun bullets. Rain drops sounding like artillery shells exploding on the umbrella. Dark thoughts detonate in his mind. Then shells fall silent, and the ghost of a wind pushes at him, almost causing him to lose his balance. An unseen hand catches him from falling.

Looking every part, a somewhat untidy businessman on his way to the office he stops at the entrance of the café and closes the umbrella. Giving the umbrella several sharp shakes to loosen it of rain that had attached itself to its black nylon skin. Pushing the door open a buzzer sounds his arrival. Disappointedly he sees his table has a reserved sign on it. About to take another table a voice calls out to him from the counter. "Morning Alfie!" A waitress calls out from behind the counter. "Morning Sam." Alfie replies looking about for another suitable table near the window. "I saved you your table." Indicating the sign was for him. "Oh... Thanks. I thought it might be for someone else." "Can't have my favourite customer miss out on his favourite table... The usual?" She smiles at him. "Thanks Sam... Cup of tea would be nice. A bit nippy outside." "Coming right up... Make yourself comfortable." "Mind if I use the rest room?" "You don't have to ask, of course you can... You know where it is." He relieves himself and washes up, taking the opportunity to enjoy the hot water. Splashing water on his face looked at himself in the mirror. A handsome looking seventy-seven-year-old stared back at him. Behind the reflecting mask, a mind that had not aged a day. What had happened to the youthful face that had been there before? Time, he conceded. It passes gradually, then catches up on you suddenly. No one was immune to it. The youth may think they are impervious. Until the next generation pushes them aside in their hurry to be somewhere, they did not need to be. Alfie smiles, reappearing in the mirror, sees himself smiling back at himself. "What are you smiling at?" He asks himself. Then the smile drops, and Alfie disappears, and an old man looks back at him. "That's more like it soldier...." He tells himself, taking a more regimented tone.

"Papers on the table Alfie." Samantha calls out. "Thanks Sam." "Busy day today?" She asks. "Maybe... Lets' see how the stocks have done shall we?" Alfie lied. Flicking through the pages hoping a headline would catch his attention. Same news, on a different day. Only the places and names have changed. Opening the centre of the paper for the outbreak of World War Three. Not today, maybe tomorrow. The Prime Minister was acting like a bull in a china shop. And it never ends well for the bull. Was anywhere in England any

better he wondered? Having not voted in thirty years he had no reason to criticize or complain. "There you go Alfie..." said Samantha placing a large white plate before him. "...I gave you an extra ration of bacon." "You're alright Sam... Thanks." Taking in the feast. "Don't tell Kaye." She winks, about to walk away. "What's your dream Sam?" Asked Alfie by surprise. "Sorry?" Catching her off guard. "Your dream? ... You must have a dream to get out of here... No offense, but this can't be what you want from life?" He asked curiously. "I know... It's a struggle to get ahead... Money comes, and money goes..." "But if you could?" Alfie probed, seeing a faraway look in her eyes. "Well..." She hesitates, "...I've always wanted to study law." She confessed her deepest secret. "Law? ..." Taking him by surprise, "... Really?" "Yeah, I'm saving, but I never seem to have enough... Then there's Sarah." "How is she? ... How old is she now?" "She's adorable... Coming up five... Day-care takes much of this..." She sighs, surrendering to her predicament. "... She takes priority." "I understand... Don't give up... No one ever got anywhere by giving up... You'll get there." He offers his advice. "Yeah, I know... One day." Sighing at the elusive dream.

Seeing Alfie distracted by the passers-by outside she leaves him to finish his breakfast. Watching an umbrella take flight. It's owner desperately in pursuit. She had never asked him what Alfie had done for a living. Accepting what others saw in him. An old man with a briefcase, An overcoat and tie. Going about his day. A gentleman. A retiree going about his day. There was something about him that roused her curiosity. She had a feeling there was something more to Alfie than met the eye.

Sam found herself thinking about Alfie on and off as the day wore on. She decided that when he came into the cafe as he did most days, she would try to make some time to chat to him and find out more about him. He seemed to be interested in her dreams for the future. She liked that. It was much better than dwelling on the past which for Sam was not a happy one. Pregnant at sixteen years old she had left home much to the relief of her disapproving parents and moved in with her boyfriend, the baby's father. This was a mistake. Brian had turned out to be the worst kind of partner for her. He couldn't hold down a job for more than a week or two. He drank far too much and used drugs which changed his personality from her beloved boyfriend to a selfish violent man. He regularly turned his anger on Sam and beat her regularly for the slightest reason

or just because he was having a bad day. When she looked back on these times it was amazing that she had managed to give birth to a beautiful healthy daughter.

Matters took a turn for the worst after Sarah was born. Brian complained about everything, the baby crying, the smell of dirty nappies, the attention Sam gave to her little daughter who meant the world to her. One evening after a heavy drinking session he had picked up the child and had threatened to harm her. Sam was terrified and decided that she had to take her daughter and leave before something terrible happened. A friend had told her about a local refuge for victims of domestic violence and the next morning after Brian had gone out, she called them for help. They told her to pack some things for her and the baby and leave as soon as possible, and that they would pay the taxi fare if she had no money. One hour later Sam and Sarah were in a taxi headed for the refuge. Sam had left a goodbye note for Brian but hadn't told him where she was going.

For Sam that was the start of their new happier life. The refuge gave her a room for them both and she had begun to feel safe at last. Fortunately, Brian had not tried to contact her, and she learned from her friend that he had quickly found a new girlfriend. Sam was relieved to hear this as she had heard from other girls at the refuge that some of their ex-partners had stalked them and threatened them for months causing them to live in fear of leaving the safety of the refuge. Sam stayed at the refuge for a few months, and they had helped her to find the job at the cafe. The other young mothers were happy to look after Sarah while she was at work but, needing her own independence, Sam wanted her own home so when the cafe owner offered her a flat in a property she owned at a reasonable rent and not far from the cafe she readily agreed. From then on, she managed to scrape by from week to week, paying for Sarah's day care was expensive but somehow, she managed and was now looking forward to next week when Sarah would start at the local school and day care bills would be less.

The next morning, at the cafe, Sam again put the reserved card on Alfie's table, but he didn't appear at his usual time and by the time the lunchtime rush began he still hadn't arrived. Sam wondered if he was alright but as she had no way to contact him there was nothing she could do.

Later that afternoon a local policeman called in for a cuppa, so Sam asked him if he knew Alfie. He told her that Alfie was quite well known in the area and

although he hardly looked like a vagrant, he had been sleeping rough in the town centre for months.

Sam was horrified to learn this and vowed to talk to Alfie and help him if she could. The policeman, Dan said he would keep an eye out for Alfie and let her know she was concerned about him. He thought Alfie would be pleased to know that someone cared.

Sam went home after work wishing she had taken the trouble to talk more to Alfie before this.

Next morning, she was at the cafe, looking out for Alfie when Dan called in to speak to her. She could tell by his face that he had bad news. After a particularly chilly night Alfie's body had been discovered under a cardboard box in an alleyway. It seemed likely that he had suffered a heart attack. A search of what few possessions he had revealed no information about his next of kin so it was usual in the circumstances that the local health authority would arrange a simple funeral. He offered to find out the details for her as she had said she would like to attend.

When the day of the funeral came Sam and Dan went together to the local crematorium to pay their respects to Alfie. Dan was wearing his police uniform. There were not many people in attendance. A local vicar who had agreed to lead the service, an official from the local health authority, a couple of the local market traders who had also known the old man and a smartly dressed middle aged man in a dark suit and tie who carried a briefcase. It was a short and simple service. Prayers were said but there were no hymns. At the end when the coffin was screened by a long curtain some soothing music was played and then the people stood up to leave.

Samantha and Dan were last to leave and at the exit they found the smart gentleman talking to the two market traders. Bidding them goodbye he approached Sam.

"Good morning" he said to her "I wonder if I might have a quick word with you. My name is James Collins. I am a solicitor acting for Mr Robinson, Alfie, as you might have known him. Could I ask your name, please?" Samantha told him her name. "Ah, Sam" he continued "Mr Robinson mentioned you last time I saw him. He said you were very kind to him."

Sam was astonished. Why would someone who slept rough and had no home need to consult a solicitor? “I had no idea of Alfie’s lifestyle until Dan, here, came to tell me he had died” she said. “I just thought he was a lonely old gentleman. He would call into the cafe every morning and I would chat to him. I wish now I had spent more time getting to know about him, but I didn’t want to pry.”

“Samantha” he said “there is much you don’t know about Alfie and until now I wasn’t allowed to speak about him at his request but now, he is gone I would like to tell you his story. Unfortunately, I have an appointment in half an hour, but would you be able to come to my office, say about 2.30 tomorrow afternoon?” He took out his wallet and gave her a business card. Willis Collins & Co, Solicitors and the address which was in the town centre not far from where she worked. The next day was Wednesday, a quiet day at the cafe, usually. “I’ll have to check with my boss” she replied “but I think it will be alright. If not, I will give you a call on this number.” She pointed to the number on the card.

“Excellent” he said “Until tomorrow, then. Very nice to meet you.” Then, after shaking their hands he left. Sam and Dan looked at each other but neither knew what to say so they made their way back into town, Sam agreeing to let Dan know what happened after her appointment with the solicitor.

Sam’s boss, Kay, was intrigued when Sam told her about meeting the solicitor and agreed to her taking the time off and making up the hours later so the next day Sam arrived at the solicitor’s office and was shown in to see Mr Collins. After greeting her and offering her tea or coffee he began to tell her Alfie’s story.

Alfred Robinson had been a young Lieutenant in the army during World War 2. He had an excellent record and was well liked by the men in his platoon. While serving in France at some time during 1941 he led a secret mission behind enemy lines to destroy an enemy communications station. Unknowingly they had walked into a trap and 6 of the men who went with him were killed and the others, including Lt. Robinson, were captured and taken to a German prison camp. One can only imagine the horrors that they endured but at the end of the war when they were finally released Lt. Robinson was the only one of the five who came home. Alfred Robinson blamed himself entirely for the loss of his men. He could not forgive himself and said many times that he did not deserve to live in comfort while his men lay dead in a foreign land. This was the reason

he lived rough as he did. His parents had owned a jewellery business in the town and were very successful. They also wanted Alfred to learn the trade so that he could take over after the war. They lived in a very nice house at the edge of town and as Alfred was their only child all that they had would pass to him. Alfred did try to do as they wanted. He had never married, nor did he have any ambition for his future. It was as if he was just going through the motion of life until it was over. When his parents died Alfred decided to let the business and the house and engage a solicitor to look after his affairs and finances. This left him free to punish himself by living rough. He drew a little cash when he needed it just for food or essential items but recently his health was failing. His heart was weak, and his legs were giving him pain.

Sam listened with tears rolling down her cheeks as Mr Collins told her the story. "It's so sad that he felt he had to live like that" she said, "such a waste of a kind and thoughtful man".

"Alfred came to see me the day before he died," said Mr Collins. "He told me about his conversations with you and he wanted to help you achieve your dreams. He made an alteration to his will. Samantha, Alfred Robinson has left you £75,000 for you to study Law or whatever it takes to help you succeed in the future."

"No" cried Sam, "surely not. That's such a large amount. Oh, I can't accept that"

"I can assure you that you can," he explained "and I also want you to know that the amount is only a small part of his wealth. The remainder has been left to a trust which provides funding for others like yourself who want to improve their education. Take it, Samantha and build on it."

He explained that it would be some time, due to probate, before she received the funds, but he would keep in touch to let her know as things progressed. She thanked him and went home to think it over. She spent the evening going over all that she had learned that day. Her heart ached with sadness for the kind old gentleman that she had hardly got to know and yet she admired his determination and courage. She still had not decided to accept Alfie's gift but as she didn't have to decide straight away, she would leave that decision until later.

Next morning at the cafe she confided in Kay who advised her to think it over carefully but that if she did accept the money, it could make a huge difference to

her and Sarah's lives. Kay promised to keep it to herself and said that she was there for Sam whenever she wanted to talk about it. The cafe was quite busy that afternoon and when Dan called in, she didn't have much time to chat to him. When he stood up to leave, he tried to catch her eye and she went over to him.

"I know you're busy" he said "but if you are free this evening would you like to come for a drink with me? I'd love to know what you found out about Alfie" he paused "but more than that, I enjoy chatting to you, even though the reason has been sad. Anyway, maybe you already have a boyfriend. In which case please ignore what I just said, and you can tell me about Alfie tomorrow or sometime when it's less busy."

"No" she said "the only other person in my life is my five-year-old daughter, Sarah. Thank you, Dan., I would love to come for a drink with you tonight."

Arrangements were made and Dan left the cafe with a smile. Kay noticed that Sam was also smiling but decided not to ask her why.

Sam spent the rest of the afternoon in a happy haze. She had liked Dan from the moment they met but had assumed he was married or had a girlfriend. She was really looking forward now to their evening together.

Something else I must thank you for, Alfie, she thought to herself. I wish you were still here though so I could tell you in person. I haven't decided yet about your gift, Alfie, but either way I will pursue my dreams and if you are looking down on me in the future, I hope I will make you proud.

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