In a Good Light

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YOU NEVER GET OVER A HAPPY CHILDHOOD, ACCORDING TO Donovan. What we all need is a little disappointment. I think I know what he meant. But this isn't about Donovan. It's about my brother, Christian. And Penny, of course.

It's funny, because I hadn't given Penny a thought for years, but on the very day Christian made his announcement I had an odd experience which made me remember.

It was a Friday in late February. There was a soapy smell of hot-house hyacinths outside the front door when I went to fetch in the milk, and in the kitchen there was the musky smell of Elaine, Christian's carer, preparing his breakfast. She doesn't actually need to do that. He's quite capable of making his own. Everything in the house was designed so that he can manage in his wheelchair. He's what they call a T2 paraplegic, which is nowhere near as bad as it could be.

Elaine's the latest (and the least agreeable) in a series of people whose job it is to come in daily to help out. Christian's not an especially demanding employer, but it's heavy work and doesn't pay well, so naturally staff turnover is high. I preferred the last chap, Mike. The three of us used to sit around and play Scrabble in the afternoon; he had a good vocabulary for a home help. You wouldn't catch Elaine playing Scrabble, not that I've asked her.

She didn't come through the usual channels. She was passing the house one day when Christian was out front salting the driveway in case of frost, and she took the trouble to stop and talk. In the course of their conversation it emerged that she was looking for work as a carer and had some experience, so Christian took her number. A fortnight later Mike handed in his notice and Christian got straight on the phone. No references: her last patient couldn't oblige as he was dead.

When I saw her standing at the hob stirring a pan of scrambled egg that morning it occurred to me that Christian must have given her a front door key. That made me feel rather uneasy. I didn't like the thought of her coming and going as she pleased - in fact, I'd been considering asking Christian if we couldn't advertise for somebody new, even though it would mean some short-term upheaval. I've nothing against Elaine, but when she's around I feel as though I'm an intruder in my own house. I can't relax. There's so much of her. I don't object to her size - a waif would be no good in a job like this - but she always has so many bags and hats and scarves and appurtenances; it's as if she's trying to fill up as much space as possible.

Conversation is another sticky area. It's a choice between long, haunting silences and a bombardment of unwanted advice on everything from pedicures to pensions. It's

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something I've often observed about members of the caring professions: they tend to interpret jovial self-deprecation as a cry for help. I think Elaine sees me as someone who needs taking in hand. The other day she even suggested it was time I got a foot on the property ladder. I said I was afraid of heights. She said, 'Are you really?' So I had to explain that it was a joke. She said, 'Oh. Your sense of humour,' and gave me one of her caring smiles. Naturally Christian hasn't picked up any of these signals. Men are notorious for not seeing what's under their noses and he is no exception.

I suppose what annoyed me about Elaine's remark was the implication that I must be just dossing here temporarily until I've sorted myself out, when in fact this is my home. I've lived here since it was built in the mid-Eighties. My studio is at the back of the house, facing south-east, so I get the sun in the morning, and the box room is quite adequate as a bedroom. I've always been able to sleep anywhere. Sometimes, when I've been watching a late film in the sitting room, I can't be bothered to go to bed at all. I just flop over fully dressed on the couch - another big advantage of not sharing a bed.

I suppose our domestic arrangements might strike an outsider as odd. Living with your brother wouldn't be everyone's idea of fun, but we know each other better than anyone else alive, and if he needs me I'm always there to help. In fact we're happier than most married couples I come across. I suppose that's why none of my boyfriends have outlasted the initial surge of euphoria; it would take a truly exceptional man to compete with Christian.

On this particular Friday I was dressed more formally than usual because I was going to give a talk to a group of primary school children in Surrey about my work as an illustrator. I'd never been asked to do anything like that before, but my latest book had just won a prize so in the miniature world of children's publishing I'm suddenly somebody. I should say 'our' latest book, since it's a collaborative effort. Words by Lucinda Todd. Pictures by Esther Fairchild. Lucinda Todd bashes out the text in about a week and it takes me the best part of nine months to do the illustrations. This inequality of effort is supposed to be addressed by a forty/sixty split of the royalties. I'm no mathematician, and I'm not saying I've been stitched up, but someone has and it's not her.

'You look smart. Are you going somewhere?' said Elaine, glancing up as I hovered in the doorway, wondering whether to retreat to my room until she was out of the way. I was wearing a linen trouser suit, fresh out of the dry cleaner's. I could still feel the stapled ticket grazing the back of my neck.

'Oh, just to a primary school,' I said, advancing into the kitchen and slopping milk into a glass. 'I don't know why I've dressed up for a load of eight-year-olds.'

The newspaper was on the table, still folded. I sat down with my milk and started to read the headlines.

'For a minute I thought you had a job interview,' she said. This wasn't the first time she had implied that in her opinion painting by day and waitressing by night did not constitute a proper career path. 'That colour suits you,' she went on. 'You should

wear it more often.' With Elaine even a compliment comes welded to a piece of advice.

I decided to play along. 'Do you think so? I'm not sure.'

She tipped the scrambled egg onto a slice of toast and ground pepper over it with a vigorous wringing action that put me in mind of someone killing chickens. 'Definitely. It goes with your eyes.'

The suit was green. My eyes are blue. It occurred to me she was either colour-blind or having a laugh, but her expression was sincere. Before I could think of a suitable reply she was off again, with another suggestion. 'I've got a friend who could do your colours for you. She holds up these fabric samples to your face and works out what season you are.' She poured orange juice into a tumbler and put it on a tray with the plate of scrambled egg. 'She did me before Christmas and it turned out I'd been wearing the wrong colours for years. Everything was fighting with my skin tone. Where do you keep your napkins?' she said, opening and closing drawers on cutlery, teatowels, pegs and balls of garden twine.

'I don't think we've got any,' I said, which was not quite the truth. I knew we didn't have any. 'We're not big on napery,' I added, in case she was after a tray-cloth next.

'Oh well. He'll have to do without,' she replied, in a voice as crisp as new linen.

'Why are you taking him breakfast in bed, anyway?' I asked, watching her balance the tray in one hand while she swept up the newspaper that I'd been reading and tucked it under her arm. 'You don't need to indulge his every whim, you know.'

'It's just a one-off treat,' she explained. 'I won't be making a habit of it.' And she shook her long, copper hair back, rather like a horse flicking off flies, clip-clopped down our wooden hallway in her Dr Scholls and disappeared into Christian's room, closing the door behind her.

IT TOOK ME ABOUT AN HOUR TO GET TO WEYBRIDGE BY CAR. I don't like driving on the motorway, but I had my portfolio of paintings and a box of books which was too heavy to carry.

It was breaktime when I arrived and the kids were all out in the yard. I could hear the high, echoing shouts as soon as I opened the car door. I'd have been happy to stand and watch them all day: the boys charging around, colliding with each other like a herd of maddened sheep, the girls decorously skipping, or sitting on the benches in little huddles. And the loners, standing with their backs to the wall or, worse, plum in the middle of a football game, petrified or oblivious.

'All in together, girls,
Never mind the weather, girls,
When it's your birthday
Please jump IN,'

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went the chant as I staggered past the skippers with my boxes. A teacher with a whistle round her neck stood on the steps leading to the entrance, hugging a coffee mug, while a group of girls stood around her, very close, clamouring for her attention. I wouldn't have admitted it to Elaine, but I was extremely nervous at the thought of addressing a classful of eight-year-olds. People always assume that children's authors must have a natural affinity with children, and understand just how their minds work. It's not an unreasonable assumption I suppose, but it doesn't apply in my case. I don't even know any children. When I get to work on a book it's myself as a child I'm thinking of, not modern children, real or imagined. In truth I find them a little scary, as if they might somehow unmask me.

In spite of this attack of self-doubt, I must have looked like a legitimate authority figure because before I'd advanced very far a small boy accosted me and asked if I could peel his satsuma. I found this rather touching, so I put down my baggage, and was presently besieged by half a dozen other petitioners wanting me to open packets of crisps, or prise plastic straws from the back of drink cartons. I couldn't remember this sort of free-range snacking being encouraged when I was at school. On the contrary, milk was just coming off the menu. The only source of refreshment was a crippled drinking fountain on the outside wall of the toilets, which yielded a slow drip of metallic tasting water which swelled to a trickle when someone inside pulled the chain. In any case, our mother would never have stooped to crisps: she would have sent Christian and me to school with something nutritious and embarrassing like a hard-boiled egg or a stick of celery.

Somewhere a bell rang and the crowd around me melted away, leaving me with a handful of orange peel. I put it in my suit pocket and picked up my boxes again. The teacher blew her whistle and two hundred children stood rooted to the spot. For a second I froze too, and then I remembered that I was an adult, and therefore not bound by the same rules, and I picked my way self-consciously between the little statues to the door, my progress followed by two hundred pairs of eyes.

I had over-prepared for the event of course. Having fixed on the notion that I would need to fill the time with chat and avoid awkward silences at all cost, I had rehearsed an hour-long lecture, written up on twenty cue-cards as if I was addressing the Royal Society. I had the confused idea that eight-year-olds might be withdrawn and uncooperative creatures like the teenagers they would one day become, but I couldn't have been more wrong. They were still buzzing from their workout in the fresh air; at least half a dozen hands shot up before I'd even unpacked my case. Everyone wanted to ask a question, or just tell me what they'd had for breakfast. Half the time they were repeating the point made by the previous speaker, but I found their enthusiasm and lack of inhibition totally disarming. Pretty soon I abandoned my notes and the lesson descended into an amiably anarchic free-for-all, only loosely tied to the subject of illustrated books.

The teacher, Miss Connor, who looked as though she was straight out of college, had withdrawn to the back of the room to listen. Occasionally she threw out a warning cough if any of the children became too boisterous but, after a while, even she began to relax, when it was clear I wasn't going to dry up altogether and need rescuing.

Quite often, having almost dislocated a shoulder in the process of stretching up to secure my attention, some poor kid would then forget what it was he wanted to say and collapse back into his seat, mumbling in confusion. It was at this stage, when I had stopped feeling nervous and was beginning to enjoy myself, that instead of addressing my remarks to Miss Connor, or the back wall, I started to pick out individual faces.

'Has anyone any idea what this book might be about?' I asked, holding up a painting done in acrylics, which had formed the cover of my last book. It showed, from above, but with a skewed perspective, a summer garden full of trees and flowers in full bloom. In the middle of the lawn was a greenhouse, from which a cloud of butterflies, balloons and parrots was emerging.

Whoosh. Up went thirty hands.

'Yes?' I singled out a boy with white-blond hair and colourless eyelashes. He reminded me of a hamster I'd once known.

'Um . . .' He subsided, covering his face. I could see the veins on his arms, thin blue tributaries through the skin. 'A garden,' he finally spluttered, inspired.

'Good idea,' I said. 'Any other offers?'

'A garden,' said the next contributor, a scruffy kid with a number two haircut.

'Ye-e-es,' I replied smoothly, moving on to his neighbour, a girl.

'Oh. I was going to say garden too.'

'Was anyone not going to say "garden"?' Miss Connor put in, and several hands fell.

'Football?' came a suggestion from the back..

'Football,' I said, looking over at my painting as if I couldn't remember what was in it. 'Interesting. Why do you say that?'

'Because I always play football in the garden.'

There's no arguing with the logic of personal experience.

Only one hand remained up, but its owner, a girl with dark, shoulder-length hair, had her head down, writing, which was why I hadn't noticed her earlier.

'Yes?' I addressed the top of her head as her neighbour gave her a terrific nudge.

'Oh!' She looked up at me with wide, grey eyes, and the moment I saw her face an electric jolt went right through me, and I thought I know you. But of course I didn't know her at all. I'd never seen her before in my life. What startled me wasn't just a striking resemblance to someone I'd once known: it was more complicated than that.

It was Penny I had recognised, not as she was now, or as I'd ever known her, but as she must once have been. It was the strangest feeling, remembering something I'd never actually experienced, and I was still recovering when she spoke again.

'I think it's about a magic greenhouse,' she said, meeting my eyes, and I felt the ripple of another strange current between us. The Magic Greenhouse had been my title for the book, ditched at the last minute in favour of Gordon's Garden.

For the rest of the session I tried not to stare at her, but felt my gaze pulled in her direction time and again. Her answers, it seemed to me, were always the most perceptive, the most intelligent. The dinner bell took me by surprise. I had meant to wind up in plenty of time, possibly set them a little task - a drawing competition or something. But Miss Connor stood up and told the children to leave their things exactly as they were on their desks, and then she thanked me for coming and they all gave me a short round of applause before stampeding for the door.

While Miss Connor tidied up, I packed my things away, and then on the pretext of admiring the displays - a whole wall of papier-mâché humpty-dumptys and stuffed sock puppets - I had a quick look at the exercise book on the dark-haired girl's desk. A chewed pencil lay in the fold of the open pages, which were covered with laboriously joinedup writing. I flipped the book shut with one finger and read the name on the front. Cassie Wharton-Smith. That surname alone, long since expelled from memory, settled it, but I remembered, too, right back before everything went wrong, when Penny and Christian were still together and happy, Penny used to say, 'If I ever have a daughter I'll call her Cassandra.' And Christian, who used to cringe at the thought of children, even hypothetical ones with sensible names, would cringe even harder and say, 'People like you should be sterilised.'

'She's a bright little thing,' I said to the teacher, pointing to the desk Cassie had recently occupied.

'Oh yes, she's a lovely girl,' she replied, shouldering her handbag and opening the door for me. 'She's got a wonderful imagination.'

She locked the classroom, one of those Portakabins reached by a flimsy wooden staircase. The tiny, grey lobby in which I stood waiting was cold and cluttered. Padded jackets ballooned from a double row of pegs on either wall, almost meeting in the middle. Through a chink in the floor I could see the grass below. When I stamped my foot experimentally, the whole structure seemed to quake.

'You don't know the parents, do you?' I said, as Miss Connor caught me up. 'I only ask because I used to know her mother. Ages ago.'

Miss Connor shook her head. On the top of her open handbag lay a packet of cigarettes. She was obviously dying to escape for a smoke. 'I don't think the father's around any more,' she said, and then stopped, blushing at this indiscretion.

'You couldn't let me have her address, could you?'

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She gave an apologetic grimace. 'Sorry. Not allowed to do that. You understand.'

'Of course. It doesn't matter,' I said, embarrassed to have asked. For all she knew I could be some mad stalker with a grudge. 'It was so long ago. I don't know what I'd say to her, anyway.'

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