



A WALK IN THE PARK

BY JAN KANEEN



'Won't be long Mary love.' I called goodbye like I always do and pulled the front door shut.

I walk through Clissold Park most afternoons after lunch, have done for twenty years or so, ever since I retired. I found the wide skies and old oaks a huge relief and it gave us both a break. I didn't want to be too long today though, because the new people in the flat above keep calling round for this and that, and I didn't want them disturbing my Mary. I wore my summer jacket. Though it's still July, it was breezy and there was a nip in the air. I wore my good linen slacks. They're baggy and comfortable, ordinary and old-fashioned, a bit like me. I like being baggy and behind the times, it hides me, makes me see-through. The summer leaves were noisy in the wind and the birds were singing. I love it when the trees sound like they did this afternoon, noisy and full of life. Outside the park café, I looked through the window. I don't usually go in if there are teenagers, especially those ones who wear hooded jackets and jeans half way down their backsides so their underwear shows, so I was relieved when it was just mothers and children. I neatened my hair in the window because the wind had blown it untidy. My father's ghost looked back at me, a tall, half-invisible old man. I went in and joined the young mothers, babies and sticky-faced toddlers who were killing time growing up. I joined the queue and waited my turn. The usual girl nodded a blank hello.

I said, 'Toasted teacake and cup of tea, please.'

'I'll bring it over,' she said, nodding at an empty table. I sat down and sifted through the newspapers: *The Sun, Mail, Telegraph*. I like to read all the newspapers because it helps with my writing. I study the different points-of-view then make up my own mind, though I only buy the Guardian. I didn't open *The Sun* because I'm embarrassed by the bare-breasted girls but the story on front was about a teenager who'd mugged an elderly lady for tuppence. The headline said 'Scum. Throw Away the Key.' There's something about that word 'scum,' it's so violent, and judgemental. I didn't want to go there, but my thoughts often run away with me these days, and this afternoon they seemed to have a mind of their own. Whether I liked it or not I was back in my old classroom behind that worn wooden desk.

Mr Jacques is barking right into my face. His mouth is close up to my cheek, so I can smell his sour breath. His hair is shiny with Brylcreem and his face is pale with splotches of raspberry red, like it's been slapped.

I've just said, 'Shakespeare didn't take exams in Shakespeare, Sir, and he was a writer.'

I can't remember what Mr Jacques said. It probably included drivelling idiot or scum, it often did, but my memory's full of holes these days, especially about things I've tried not to dwell on. He breathed in slowly as he walked to the back of the classroom to get his hook-handled cane.

'Bend over, Bailey,' he said, quiet now he was in control again, though the little veins at his temples were still throbbing. Funny what sticks in your mind. 'You *will* get it into your thick skull if I have to beat it in. You will never, ever be a writer.'

Bending over his desk at the front of the classroom, my face to the wall, I could hear everything acutely, I could feel everything acutely.

'Pants down first boy. Only men take a beating with their trousers up.'

Each stroke made a crisp swoosh as he sliced the cane down with full force.

The girl plonked the teacake in front of me. She must've seen me jump because she was more careful with the cup of tea and very nearly smiled as she left my change. The cup was greyish yellow and made of wavy pot.

I used to enjoy sitting in the café by myself. Everyone else was always with somebody, but I preferred my own company. Being alone was what made it nice to be back together again. I took a bite of teacake and thought about Mr Jacques. He'd been right about one thing, I wouldn't get an apprenticeship if I didn't pull my finger out. He was wrong about me not being a writer though. I might not have been paid for it, but I've written most days of my life and enjoyed every minute. I wonder how things would've turned out if I'd done better at

school. Still, no point in regretting what you can't undo, and if I hadn't started at the Post Office I'd never have met my Mary.

I opened the Guardian at the crossword. I've always liked cryptic crosswords, they get your mind working. 'One across - a cube squared, three letters.'

I used to catch the bus to the post office on Tuesday afternoons to collect our pensions. Sometimes, just for fun, I'd solve the crossword clues at home in the morning without filling the answers in, then later, when I got on the bus, I'd choose who to sit next to; someone smartly dressed maybe, someone reading a broadsheet, then I'd get my writer's pen out, the one Mary bought for me when I retired - it's beautiful, black enamel and ringed with gold, sits in your hand just right - and I'd fill the answers in really quickly so they'd think I'd done it without trying. I used to like imagining what they'd say when they got home, 'Do you know darling, I sat next to a fellow on the bus today and he finished the Guardian crossword from start to finish in the time it took to get from Stoke Newington to Finsbury Park. That's less than fifteen minutes! Must have been some sort of lexicographer, or writer or something.' 'Oxo,' that was the answer. I filled it in smiling, thinking how daft I can be.

Once I'd finished the tea, I folded up my Guardian and took the cup and plate back to the girl.

'Thank you,' I said, and put the change in the green Macmillan Cancer Support charity tin. They've been marvellous with my Mary but there's only so much they can do. I told them there was no point in them coming any more once we got the letter from the hospice. I hope they didn't think I was being rude, but it was what Mary wanted.

'Laters,' said the girl, without turning round, buttering slice after slice. I separated the thick wad of twenty-pound notes into two halves and pushed them quickly through the slot. No-one noticed. I shut the café door behind me. The bell tinkled on the way out. I hadn't noticed it on the way in.

I decided to have a last look at the smallest pond before heading home. I used to like the way the sky reflected in the water. I followed the path between the close-cut lawns, where the roses are dusky pink. I bumped into the Pug Lady. She smiled. We pass most days. She has

green eyes, emerald really, that always manage to catch the light even on dark afternoons, and she said, 'What a blustery day.' Her short curls changed colour as the wind moved them, so they were warm honey then corn dolly yellow, like my Mary's used to be before they became brittle wisps of frizz. The pug wagged its tail. I bent to stroke its head. It felt like velvet.

I said, 'Blows away the cobwebs.'

Walking on, I sighed with relief, glad that I didn't have to talk to her anymore or look at her colours, and glad for the fast-moving clouds. They always widen my perspective, give me space to think about other things, so I can forget about Mary, just for an hour or two. It used to get me down sometimes if I'm honest, the endless chores, bed-bath ablutions, preparing all the meals, day in day out. She couldn't even get to the loo by herself any more. I know that makes me sound selfish. I'd tell myself things like, it's not like she can help it, and, it's so much worse for her. She didn't ask for any of it, the lack of independence, the weeks of sickness, the pain. No-one should have to live with pain like that and no-one should have to leave their home to die among strangers.

At the pond, a middle-aged woman was laughing as she threw crusts to a mob of ducks. The toddler in the pushchair was laughing too, pointing and wriggling his chubby legs calling, 'Gangan kacks!' Even the ducks were laughing. I thought about my own Grandmother. My thoughts are so real sometimes, more real than Clissold Park, more real than now. I closed my eyes and I was in her tiny cottage on the banks of the Great Ouse.

'They're Sugarstealers, my duck, in their tiny tutus, searching for sugar. That's what they eat.' We're staring out of the kitchen window where a troupe of lighter-than-air fairy ballerinas are bobbing ensemble, on the breeze. I'm standing on a three-legged stool so I can help her wash up. It's hot and I'm wearing my shorts and a striped tee shirt that Granny used to say made me look like Christopher Robin.

I turn to her to share the magic, and I see one inside, stuck on the tea-tray, by the sugar bowl and I cry out, 'Oh no, one's died.'

'It's not dead you silly,' says Granny,' her grey eyes shining silver, 'it's snoozing because it's full-up. Very carefully, she picks up the fragile piece of fluff, and blows it out of the open window from the tip of her finger. It pirouettes away.

Later, we're feeding ducks, down by the river. I pick a dandelion clock. My cheeks puff out as I tell the time.

At three o'clock I notice something shocking. 'Granny, sugarstealers aren't fairies, they're dandelion seeds.'

Granny looks at me hard, then the dandelion clock, then she nods.

'Sugarstealers do look very like dandelion seeds, that's why they hide inside them when they're tired and full-up. There's probably some greedy sugarstealers in there right this minute, between the seeds, having a catnap.'

I squint at the half-bald dandelion clock, searching for the truth, then at Granny, my eyes narrowing to slits. 'I see,' I whisper, dropping the dandelion.

'Are you all right?' The toddler's grandmother was looking at me with concern and I remembered where I was. I'd dropped my Guardian and it was blowing about in the wind. She'd picked some of it up and was handing it back to me, all crumpled.

'I'm so sorry,' I said. 'I'm fine. I was remembering being little, down by the water with my grandmother.' She nodded, thinking she understood.

I walked on and decided to have a final sit down on the bench, near the bridge. I knew it was getting late but I think I was putting off going home. There's a small animal enclosure at that end of the park, with chickens and goats, and an ornamental river full of red-eared terrapins. They're quite famous locally, been there since the eighties. They were popular because of Teenage Hero Mutant Turtles, and street-sellers used to peddle baby ones at the entrance to the park. It said in the local newspaper that parents would look at their 50p-sized shells not believing they could ever grow to the size of dinner plates. When they did, they'd sneak the terrapins into the water after dark,

pretending that it was all right to just let them go. I sat, watching their heads bobbing about in the green water as the light brightened. I wiped the sunshine from my eyes as it pricked through the clouds, wishing that letting go was always that simple.

I popped into the corner shop on my way home. Mr Costos was watching the football on his small TV that sits on the counter between the neon-coloured sweets and the energy drinks. The shop smelled like beer. Mr Costos hides his can of Newcastle Brown out of sight below the counter top, but not its smell. I bought a pint of semi-skimmed and a loaf of wholemeal with the coins left in my change purse, though we didn't need either.

'Hello, my friend,' said Mr Costos. 'Is that all I can get for you today?' I nodded yes and wondered if, after all these years, Mr Costos knew my name was Brian.

I turned back into our quiet road. It was never grand, our Edwardian terrace, even when I was a boy, but mother and father worked hard to own their own home and it still stands proud by its patch of untidy green. We had it converted into two flats after father passed away. The bottom flat is plenty big enough for the two of us, and we needed the money to help Craig emigrate.

The front door felt heavy as I pushed it open. I put the shopping on the kitchen table and called, 'I'm back.' It was involuntary, like breathing or feeling hungry. I put the kettle on. I almost didn't bother shouting, 'Do you want a cup of tea?'

I went in, just to be sure. She was the same as I'd left her. I took her hand and told her, 'I'll be there now, just two more promises to keep.' I kissed her white hair, then her cold white skin, then her cold, blue-white lips, and remembered her alive.

I'm standing outside the ward door watching her through the cross-wired window. She's gazing at the waffle-blanket bundle, crooning, her eye-brows raised so she looks surprised. Suddenly, I feel uncomfortable, like a peeping Tom. My eyes switch focus and catch my own shadow in the grey glass. I look dog-tired and stubbly. I shake my head and breathe in, refocusing on Mary. Her warm cotton nightie is wrinkled

under the stiff sheet, her blond curls shining warm honey and corn dolly yellow in the electric light. I push open the swing-door, breathing in starch and new baby. She doesn't look up straight away, unable to stop gazing at Craig, but eventually, she raises her eyes. Her lips don't curve upwards but flatten together. The smile doesn't come from them, it comes from somewhere deep behind her dark green eyes. I bend to kiss her hair.

In the bathroom, I washed my face and took out a plastic tub of tramadol tablets from the glass cabinet. I poured them into my left hand and swallowed them down with water, again and again. When there were none left, I went to the box room that Mary used to call my library. I looked at the pictures on my desk: Craig and Alison and the grandkids, smiling in their bright summer clothes from the other side of the world, a lifetime away. I looked at the walls lined with neat coloured boxes, file after file, filling all the empty space; the story of our life. I sat at my desk and cleared some room, took out my writer's pen, the one Mary bought for me when I retired. It's beautiful, black enamel, ringed with shiny hoops of gold, sits just right in my hand. Have I said that already? Sorry if I'm repeating myself but I'm getting tired now. I took out my writer's pen, and looking at the empty page, began our final chapter.

WRITER PROFILE



Jan Kaneen was born in Bolton, Lancashire, the first of a family of chrome-platers to go to University. She left UCW Aberystwyth with joint honours in English and history and a two-year-old son. She spent the 90s in London, working on Indy magazines including *The Modern Review* and *Everywoman*. Now, two more sons and one husband later, she lives in the middle of nowhere in the Cambridgeshire fens, writing fiction. She began creative writing in 2014 to see if she could, and signed up with the Open University. She's now in her final year of a Creative Writing MA, still at the Open University where she's finishing her collection of weird short stories, working title, *Unfairly Stories* – tales of the not always supernatural. She's won or been listed in oodles of short story and flash fiction competitions, and been published round and about, most recently in *Ellipsis 'One'*, Bath Flash Festival and *Salome Magazine*. She was nominated for a 2018 Pushcart and Best on the Net and blogs at <https://jankaneen.com/> and tweets as @Jankaneen1

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