



## Speculations on A Dead Man's Body A Living Woman's Pills\*

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She might or might not alert the police. The dog had halted, sniffed, then ripped through the underbrush. She thought he might have found a hedgehog or dead squirrel. But it was a body, male, with a fractured skull. They were near the riverbank on the far side of the bridge where the current flowed smoothly.

Laura had made her way all summer along the broken track on the quiet side of the bridge to have breakfast. At that point, the ground flattened, held firm by soft grit at the water's edge. She would perch on a collapsible stool and unwrap her yellow neck-scarf, slugging coffee poured flask to red tin mug, pulling at hunks of buttered sourdough as she stared out at the river. Afterwards, she would unpeel two small oranges.

She'd often wondered who came at night. Some mornings the evidence lay scattered – crisp bags, chocolate wrappers, empty beer cans, a condom – but she'd never felt afraid of coming alone and would pass by the detritus and move towards the water's edge. A woman can decide to be afraid and curtail her movement. Or she can carry on as if she owns the space of the world.

Already, clusters of flies and preoccupied ants feasted on the stilled and darkened cranial outpouring. She observed a large Damsel fly hovering over the head, before it passed on about its business towards the shallows. She was relieved not to see actual brain matter, remembering an unsettling image from the movie *Pulp Fiction* involving a clotty eruption of meninges in the interior of a car.

She leaned over and examined the open-eyed face. Middle-aged. Pale skin with few lines, beardless, the eyebrows a mouse-fur colour. He wore cream corduroy jeans, now grass stained and muddy on both knees, and above that, a jacket of

\*This short story is about the way one woman deflects anxiety. As a reflective person pushed to her limits her decisions show her desperation as well as her unwillingness to be influenced by conventional attitude towards the elderly.

tan and white stripped seersucker. In the course of the attack, one shoulder had been ripped loose and the fabric and some padded filler hung forlornly in the grass. Beneath the jacket a white t-shirt carried spatters of blood. It could have been a fancy art pattern, she thought, except it wasn't. Out of instinct, she said a prayer for him. Her boot toed the left leg, which lay spread-eagled from the groin. The body wasn't far from the water, in fact the right hand fondled the river, which trickled and curled through remarkably clean fingers. Not flat-topped digits, but long and tapered, with clean, trimmed nails. He lay in *rigor mortis*, which meant death had occurred recently. After twelve hours, the body would move to its next phase and soften.

There was nothing to be done. Not for her the flight up the river path to the road, screaming for the police, creating a melodrama for them to feast on in the village like the flies already soaking up the man's coagulating blood. *Shocking really . . . in this quiet place*, she imagined someone telling a news reporter, or . . . *we won the Tidy Towns last year . . . we all know one another here . . .*

She hitched her belongings further along the bank, away from the body, and set down the stool. Already, the dog had lost interest in the man and would now stick close, awaiting his daily crust of sourdough as well as the drop of coffee after she'd drained her mug. Although the vet scolded her about stained teeth, the dog loved his coffee.

Mornings were usually sunny, and the usual summer deluge rarely poured before eleven o'clock. It suited her not to go to her mother Grace's house until after eleven, gave her time to build herself up. Preparation was essential. Breakfast in the peace and quiet. Difficult to get Grace to leave her bed. If she insisted on remaining there so much, Laura would sometimes rant, they'd have to get a hoist, and how would she like *that*?

But it all went over Grace's head. The big press off the kitchen which used to hold her partner Lukas's giant containers of oatmeal, dried pulses, and raisins, was now stacked with tight bundles of incontinence wear, with special ties and adhesive tapes. Nobody ever considered the hazard to the environment presented by elder care, Laura sometimes reflected. All those plastic aprons, gloves and never-ending nappies? It wasn't solely the genuinely infantile whose needs created excess, but the senile infantile, liquids and emanations comparatively vast and all with a right to life until they decided to let go of it. Unlike the poor sod she'd just discovered. *He* didn't have any choice in the matter, she mused.

Occasionally, while counting out her mother's morning tablets, Laura considered the medical armaments prescribed by the hospital doctor after Grace had fallen down the stairs and had to be hospitalised. But none of these tablets would ever help her to walk again, to wash herself, dress herself, hold a knife and fork, and none would restore her memory. So a few weeks earlier, Laura had stopped dispensing the night-time blood thinning tablet. She felt certain that there were other caring daughters and sons throughout the land who attempted to accelerate a natural process, whether from kindness or self-preservation.

Just as the sequence of time in terms of actual hours and minutes regarding the reporting of a dead body seemed to her not urgent, so too she considered the sequence of memory. In dementia, past, present and future were moveable feasts to enter at will and in any order. Her mother remembered all far past events in exact detail, and songs she had learned in Irish and

English as a young woman. She could even call up some school German and would sometimes greet Laura by chanting out the days of the week, except that she had been taught to say *Sonabend* and not *Samstag* as Laura had later been taught in the same school.

Upbeat weekly emails landed from Laura's brother in Australia and her sister in France. Travel was now difficult even if they wanted to come. They were all soft talk and horse-shite as far as she was concerned, waving and laughing on Skype calls to Grace, displaying the latest celebrated grandchild from a patio in Perth or a geranium-packed atelier outside Lyons. Blind in one eye, her mother could hardly see them on the laptop screen, and although she smiled and nodded as old people were supposed to, grandchildren no longer interested her. At such moments, Laura's sadness deepened, mostly because of their assumptions about what might interest Grace. Laura had often imagined her mother's thoughts of the past like a stream of crossing currents and oppositional pulses of memory. Such busy traffic left little room for the present.

But she, Laura, regarded herself as a tough old bird now. She rarely gave way to tears. She didn't grumble. There was no point in trying to discuss the matter of her mother with her brother and sister, or with the cheery cousins who occasionally dropped in to see Grace, cream buns or a box of chocolates in hand. Breakfast by the river was one way of lightening everything. She would leave her bed and head off.

It had taken her and Lukas four years to build the eco-wood and glass home, with a few high, airy rooms, finally completing two guest bedrooms the previous year. Now all that remained was to make a garden, with rainbow pots, creamy gravel and no mowing. Lukas wasn't the most energetic of men, but neither was she the most energetic of women, except where caring for Grace was concerned. And Lukas often helped because she could not physically lift her mother. *Easy, my darling*, he would say, slipping his strong arm beneath Grace's shoulders, nodding at her protestations, joking kindly with her. He would get the old woman up, changed, dressed, and down to the table for her dinner in the evening, before helping her into the sitting-room where she would stare at the television for a few hours, channel-hopping to find the noisier game shows.

She poured herself a second mug of coffee, now settled comfortably on her stool. Here by the river, something happened even when nothing happened. Her life melded into something utterly contained and safe, yet extraordinary. In recent years she'd wondered if she was experiencing synaesthesia. Sometimes she imagined she could perceive every invisible but active cell around her as a physical pulse within her brain. Here, all edges and anxiety vanished, were part of some process that was almost acceptable. Her mother's decline was inevitable and because she, Laura, wanted to get on with grief, and the rest of her life, she urged on the future.

How often had she tiptoed into the still morning bedroom, hoping – yearning – that her mother would have died in her sleep? But no. The broad chest rose and fell gently as she dozed.

“Enjoy her, she won't always be there,” someone once remarked. Ever since, if anyone asked after Grace she told them nothing beyond a basic *she's-doing-very-well-thanks* and promptly changed the subject. None of *them* had had to lie awake in a fret about the women who came in twice daily from the care provider, who sometimes forgot to do basic things such as empty

the bins which were crammed with her mother's used personal care items, or run the dishwasher, or encourage her mother to get up. The caring organisations really amused her, with their sanctimonious advertisements on television portraying a facially erased old person nodding gratefully, and some young one with eyebrows like a character from Peking Opera peering down into their face. It fucking sickened her.

So, a little tweak here or there. In time, the lack of a blood thinner would do its work. She was relying on that, she told Lukas.

She watched the dog for a few moments as he entered the river shallows, paused, then lapped at the water. Above, clouds were gathering. It wouldn't be long before it rained. She gathered up her mug, flask and plate, shoved them into a canvas shoulder-bag, folded the stool and clicked her tongue to call the dog to heel.

There was one more thing to do before the village began its speculations. The discovery would make national news. How wonderful it would be, if delusional also, to live in a place where murder was never really reported. She heard a forensic scientist on a podcast speculate that Irish people excelled at disposing of dead bodies. And although she questioned this information, apparently they worked hard to delay and conceal. They burned the body, or dismembered it, or buried it first, buying time for escape. Or, as in her case now, they failed to report. She did not intend to report the dead man's body. Or they withheld pills and hoped for the best.

She closed in on the body again and watched. He had probably been a sweet child, who went to school with other boys, came home, enjoyed his dinner and told his Mammy what had happened that day and what the teacher had said. She prodded the torso with the edge of her boot. Still in rigor mortis. She searched the pocket of her jacket, found the spare coins she always kept for when she visited the city, to give to homeless people on the streets. She withdrew a two Euro coin and a fifty cent piece, turned them over thoughtfully between thumb and forefinger. Quickly, she spat on each coin and rubbed it clean with her yellow linen scarf. Then having second thoughts, she turned to the river and rinsed the metal pieces again, feeling water flow like a balm through her fingertips. How fresh it was, how sweet and free, she thought, suddenly wanting to remove her clothing and jump in for a swim. Again, she dried each coin carefully.

It was surely enough for a crossing, she thought, then chided herself momentarily for such a fanciful notion. She approached the body and squatted. Flies rose in a fizz. The natural process was well underway. But the ferryman that leads the dead would be content. Even with the head turned to one side, both coins remained in position, making black skull-holes of the face, closing off the poor, shocked eyes from the light.

She stood again, then walked away, the dog trotting ahead of her. When all the fuss died down, she would return, but with Lukas, to swim nakedly in the morning light.