

## The Guide

The man opened his eyes, slowly, as he always did after his night's sleep, then closed them again. 'Still asleep, must be dreaming ... not awake yet'. He waited a few moments and opened his eyes again, preparing himself to face the morning transition to the waking day from sleep which, induced by the drugs and the painkillers they gave him, was a much-craved respite. He hoped it would be Jane, whose smile and gentle words would bring him the first dose of his daily medication. But the familiar images and words murmurings were absent. 'Hallucinating?' He recalled that he had on occasions experienced such hallucinatory dreams, where the world in his mind was so tangible that it required a great effort to think himself back to the reality of a hospital bed. Normally he was unable to raise himself to a sitting position without the aid of one of the sisters or a carer, but now he found that with comparative ease was able to sit up and look round. To his surprise he found himself sitting on grass. Had he wandered out into the hospice garden? He remembered the time when one of the dementia patients managed to find his way out and was trying to sleep on the lawn when he was discovered. But surely, by now somebody would have come to look for him and in any case and even take a few steps without assistance. He was confused.

'Welcome' said a woman's voice from behind him, a soft, purring sort of voice, not one he recognised at all. 'Welcome' said voice again its owner came and stood in front of him, stooped and offered him her hand. 'Do you feel able to stand up now?' His reaction is the question is one of extreme indignation. 'Don't you know that I am terminally ill? I can't stand up with a lot more help than one hand!' She smiled. 'You can here, come, give me your hand.' Her hand was firm but soft to the touch and his indignation fell away as he discovered that he could stand up without too much difficulty. 'There, that wasn't too difficult, was it? Now, if you are ready, we must be on our way.'

'Wait a moment, who *are* you? More to the point, *where* are we?' He looked challengingly at her but found that the stillness and the serenity, enhanced by her silver hair and a long dress in running swathes of grey, white and black, forbade any reaction but a feeling of trust. 'I've been appointed to be your guide.' 'What is your name then?' 'I have several, one that is mine, one that others gave me and the name that God uses.' 'Well, where are we? What is this place?' As far as he could see there was nothing but a green carpet of meadow and wildflowers. It felt soft and yielding under his bare feet. It undulated into the distance, where in a hazy horizon it met the intense blue of the unclouded sky. 'You are here, that's all you need to know at present and I must guide you on the first stage of your journey.' 'So where are we going then?' Her answer puzzled him. 'I do not know, but I shall take you there.' Now, we really must start out.'

They walked in silence for a while during this time he tried to make sense of what was happening. His mind grappled with the conflicting images of where he now was, the seeming infinity of meadow, and a strange lady who had suddenly appeared as if from nowhere, and where he was before. The hospice, the other patients, medication, Jane, the onset of agonising pain, the sudden emptiness of one of the other beds, dying, death ... death. The mist of his mind cleared.

'Am I dead? Did I die last night? Was it last night? Is this,' and he hesitated, 'is this Heaven?'

'We do not speak of death and dying. You pass to one life to another, as we all do. Here has no name. It is here.'

'How long you been here?'

'There is no time here. All is now. I am here. You are here. God is here.'

'I stopped believing in God long time ago.'

'Don't worry, it's not important. What is important is that God never stopped believing in you.'

'I suppose it was God who told you to be my guide.'

'But of course.'

'So you must have seen him. What does he look like? Shall I get to see him? What do I say to him?'

'Seeing is not the right word. We do not see God. We feel God, we know God, we are in God, God is in us. When I leave you at our destination God will tell you what you have to do, just as God told me what I must do.'

They had by now begun to descend and a river came into view. 'Do you see the river? That is our destination but I do not yet know if we have to cross it.' A haze was rising up from the water and the far side of the river could not be made out. He had no idea how far they had come nor how long it had taken. He was not tired and walking was no effort. Time and distance seemed no longer to be of significance as they walked along the bank of the river. As they did so he cast an occasional glance at this woman who was taking him to an unknown destination. Somewhere in his mind a memory stirred. His head was full of questions he wanted to ask, one in particular, but both were silent until they came to a narrow footbridge spanning the river. 'This is our destination and this is where you and I must part company. I now have to cross the bridge, where I shall meet my guide to the next stage of my journey. Here we guide and we are guided in turn. You must now listen and God will lead you to someone whose guide you will be. I must leave you now. Farewell.' The woman touched him lightly on the cheek, turned and began to walk across the bridge. 'Wait. Please wait. I must ask you something.' The woman stopped and turned.

'Yes, what is it?'

'I know you, don't I? I knew you when I was ... ' again he hesitated, 'before I came here. Who are you? Do you recognise me?'

'Yes.'

'But I can't place you, help me.' He sought anxiously in the fading images of his memory but it yielded nothing. Someone he knew at school? An old girlfriend?

'Where we' ... hesitation 'close?'

'Yes, we lived together.'

'You and I once lived together? Surely I can't have forgotten living with someone? Did you love me?'

'In my way.'

'Did I love you?'

'In your way, yes. But we must part now.' She turned to go, hesitated, then came back to him. 'I came to you when I was very young and you cared for me for the rest of my life.'

'I still cannot remember. Please, please, tell me your name.'

'You called me Suki. I was your cat.'

As she vanished into the mists over the bridge his mind called up an image of silver tabby cat would sit on his lap and purr contentedly ... His thoughts were disturbed by another voice, one that seemed to come from inside his head. 'Keep walking along the riverbank; there is somebody you have to meet. He will ask even more questions in you did but I shall give you all the answers.'

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