

Opening extract from  
**Caring for Cathy**

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# 1

The dog was there when David came downstairs for breakfast, a golden Labrador, barking wildly on the porch outside the main doors. The animal pawed the glass panes as though it wanted to break through. Several residents were beginning to gather curiously in the lobby, quite safe, because the glass was thick, and the doors were kept locked at all times. David had to pause for a few moments, to make sure that he understood what was happening.

The dog wasn't angry, he decided; it was agitated, jumping about excitedly, and chasing its tail. And it had its attention on Cathy, in her wheelchair, well to the front of the other watchers. Cathy herself was excited. She was shouting, and waving her arms.

David pushed past the other residents, and went to her. He bent over, and put his head close to hers.

"Is it your dog?" he asked.

He knew that Cathy owned a dog. Her husband used to bring the dog on visits, but had given up months ago because he said it was a nuisance.

Cathy nodded, and made a sound which indicated yes, "Mmmh!"

Rose appeared, and placed her wide frame protectively in front of the audience, her back to the doors and windows.

"All right now, everybody, in to breakfast. It's breakfast time. Don't keep cook waiting. Go along. The dog won't hurt you. I'll get somebody to take it away," she said.

Rose seemed not to notice that far from being alarmed, the exuberance of the animal had set smiles on the faces of the residents. One or two were joking, and trying to attract the dog's attention.

David tried to tell Rose it was Cathy's dog. He pointed at Cathy, and opened his mouth, but no words came. This sometimes happened when he wanted words urgently. Rose looked questioningly at him through her thick lenses.

"Come on now, David, follow me."

She swayed on her thick, veiny legs, wheeling Cathy behind the crowd, toward the dining room. Rose was very old for a nurse, but with most of her lumpy body hidden in a loose blue uniform, all you noticed was her energy, and the slate coloured eyes, swimming under her spectacles.

Cathy had a place for her wheelchair at a table with David, and Mark Demeter, but it wasn't possible for David to speak to Cathy about the dog in the dining room. Dishes and cutlery clattered. The residents were all chattering. The care assistants were talking above this noise, as they served the food. Mark, dressed this morning in a grey suit, with a white shirt, and a green bow tie, was speaking loudly. He was addressing the occupants of an adjoining table, but they weren't listening. Cathy made an anguished sound that came from deep inside her, but wasn't a shout or a scream.

"Arrrrrgh, arrrrrgh, arrrrrgh!"

Her arm swept across the tray mounted on her wheelchair. The plastic plate of oatmeal porridge, unfortunately placed there, and waiting to be fed to her by a carer, was splashed on the floor. Having somebody push their food on to the floor was a commonplace event, and the staff would clean up without any recriminations. What struck David was that Cathy was disturbed by the arrival of the dog.

After finishing his cereal, David left the dining room. He would have to wait to see Cathy. The dog had gone from the

porch. He went into the deserted sitting room, seated himself at the upright piano with the front panels missing, and began to tinker with a few bars. A fragment, of Liszt – he thought it was Liszt – came to him, before he went on to the only two tunes he could remember at that moment, *It's a Long Way To Tipperary* and *Yes, Sir, That's My Baby*.

It would take a while for a care assistant to feed Cathy with a spoon. She was usually one of the last to finish eating. Then she had to be taken to the toilet, which required two helpers. After that, she usually had a cigarette. This had to be held to her lips, in the smoking room, by a carer. Cathy had explained to David that she had Huntington's, a genetic disease. A bad seed in her family had sprouted, by surprise, in her. To David, her mind seemed intact, while many of her other bodily functions had failed, or were failing.

Cathy had arrived at Denby Hall within days of David's arrival, about three years ago, and they had always been friendly. She had been much more capable then. She could converse, and walk unaided for a few yards. She could feed herself. She had impressed David as a dignified person, with her long thin neck, her copious head of dark hair, and her smooth, small-featured face. She was full of jokes and laughter, despite her affliction. Cathy was a youthful-looking fifty then, more than twice his age. They used to sing, and play music on the guitar and piano in those early days, and Cathy had introduced David to her visiting husband, Desmond, as 'My special friend.'

David had a dim memory of getting off the bus, on the tree-lined country road near his father's house in Somerset, when he was twenty. The day had been washed into bright colours by a spring shower. Above was a rag of blue sky. The rain was dripping from the leaves of the oak trees which lined the road, and the tarmac glistened. The box hedges on the far

side of the road, which hid the house, were smoothly clipped. The grass verge was mown like a bowling green. He was home from the Royal College of Music for a long weekend.

In just a second, as David slung his pack over his shoulder, and hurriedly stepped out from behind the noisy engine of the bus, to cross the road, the life he lived then, ended. The end was the terrifying snarl of an animal of red painted metal and chrome, leaping at him; then nothing. No sensation of pain. He was told much later that the car wasn't even speeding.

What started then, was a long slow ascent from darkness, through mist that had never entirely cleared, and still hung in wisps around David's judgement. As Cathy had explained her life to him, from the perspective of her cell, as she called it – the place inside her head where her brain was – he had tried to plot the mental map of his own new life on a largely empty canvas. David had no recollection of childhood, of school, or the music academy. A lot of the things he had been taught, like English, elementary mathematics and geography, remained imperfectly. But he had no memory of who taught him, or where. He could remember some songs and music, and he retained a small measure of skill with the piano. His hands at least escaped serious injury; almost the only part of him that did.

David's physical problems were manageable. It was his state of mind which troubled his father, and Caroline Higgins, his psychotherapist. He realised that he was a worry and, to please them, he had sometimes pretended to have memories and interests, like following Manchester United, or gardening, which really he did not have. But he had also recognised that he could not go on pretending just to please. In any event, his father and Caroline were perceptive, and would eventually see through him.

David had cooperated as far as he could in his sessions with Caroline at Denby Hall. She probed into the fog in his head very gently. These meetings were designed to bring him

back to the world he had left. He felt he was standing on one side of a chasm, reaching across to Caroline, and she to him, but without success. At times the mist cleared, and their fingertips could almost touch. At other times, the fog between them was impenetrable. And there were occasions when he had a clear view, but still the space between them was as wide and deep as the Grand Canyon. David imagined that Cathy, of course, was on his side of the chasm, along with most of the Denby Hall inmates. They all looked across the canyon, all of them marooned.

More than three quarters of an hour elapsed before David was able to intercept Cathy's carer outside the smoking room.

"I'll take her for a while, Doreen," he said, and pushed Cathy's wheelchair out of the fug, into the sitting room. It was an accepted exchange, and Cathy made no sign, except a slight facial expression of agreement.

David sat on a stool by the wheelchair, and leaned close to Cathy. He had found that although Cathy could not converse in ordinary tones, or speak words clearly, if he whispered faintly to her, she could sometimes breathe an understandable reply. The doctor, nurses, and other staff, did not always appreciate the usefulness of this method. And David had also gained the ability, over the years that he had known Cathy, to interpret, to a degree, the babbles and moans to which her speech had been reduced.

"Is that dog... Polly?" he asked, trying to remember the name of Cathy's dog.

"Mmmmh. Poppy."

"Yes, Poppy. I remember. How did she get here?"

He could not work out Cathy's reply, and decided it was an unnecessary question. What was important was that the dog was here, and Cathy was pleased to see it, but obviously upset at the implications of its arrival.

David had been buoyed up by the feverish pleasure of the animal as it capered on the porch. Relatively few patients had visitors, and those who came, did not come frequently. Denby Hall was a place that friends and loved ones at home were tacitly reluctant to visit. This was not necessarily because they were unfeeling, or because Denby Hall was forbidding – it was not. The Hall was a place that was unsettling to people outside. To David, Poppy’s arrival was so affecting because it was an enthusiastic acceptance of the place – admittedly by an animal – an acceptance that seemed to flower, and include those who had witnessed it.

“I’m going to try to find out what’s happened to Poppy since she disappeared from the porch,” he said, in a low voice to Cathy.

Cathy breathed a sound that was “Yes.” David left her with a helper, and found Rose in the dispensary. He stood by the door hesitantly. Rose could be sharp.

“What do you want, David? I’m busy.”

He watched Rose, her fingers in rubber gloves, selecting various colours and sizes of pills from a cupboard, and arranging them in slots on a tray. She was studying a chart on the wall at the same time, preparing the lunchtime doses. The names of all the residents were written on the chart, and against the slots on the tray. David had pain-killers. Cathy had Olanzapine to control spasmodic movement.

“The ... dog?”

“Now, don’t distract me, David. I have to get this right.”

Rose was a nurse of an old-fashioned kind, which Cathy, in the time when she could speak fluently, had described as ‘The Rub & Scrub School of Nursing’. She had a stern eye, but a soft underbelly.

It was easier for David to talk while Rose was concentrating on the pills.

“I aah... w-wondered about the dog.”

“It’s tied up outside. Keith is going to get somebody to take it to the pound later.”

Keith was in charge of the day shift. The pound, and the town’s dogs’ home and kennels were about a mile down the road.

“Why are you asking?” Rose said, covering the tray with cellophane, setting it on a side table, and swinging round to fix David in the frames of her spectacles. Her nose and cheeks were randomly placed lumps of dough. Her eyes looked like raw oysters in their shells.

“It’s ... Cathy’s dog.”

“Well, she can’t keep it here. Now that’s obvious, David, isn’t it? She can’t look after it herself, and this is a home for sick people. We can’t have dogs roaming around licking germs all over things, and biting, can we?”

“I could... look after Poppy, in the garden outside the Hall.”

“No you couldn’t. You’re not well enough.”

“I could take Poppy back to the pound.”

“No, David, you couldn’t. It’ll be a business handing the dog over. You can’t just walk in there, and walk out. You couldn’t do it.”

“Come on, Rose ... I’m n-not that useless.”

“What you really want to do is to get hold of the dog, isn’t it?”

Rose had a faint look of self-satisfaction about her mind-reading powers, honed over forty years on people like him.

“I ... g-guess so.”

“Well, you can’t have it. And who told you the dog was Cathy’s?”

“She did.”

Rose clamped her lips sceptically. “I expect her husband didn’t tie it up at home, and it escaped. It’ll have to go back. Keith’s found it, and he’ll sort it later.”

After this rebuff from Rose, David went to his room. He assumed that Keith had not yet had time to make an arrangement to remove Poppy, and therefore that she would still be tied up outside.

David's room was on the second floor facing south, overlooking the sparse trees in the Denby Hall grounds. The empty sea of the English Channel filled the windows with a grey brightness, like mercury, which merged into the sky. He put on a padded anorak, which made his already plump body look rotund. He had gloves. His thick, short, dark hair was like a fur hat, and didn't need a cover. He went downstairs, and arranged with Keith to be away for an hour, and Kay, the receptionist, let him out of the front door.

David was one of half a dozen residents whose convalescence was nearly complete. He was allowed to decide his own activities, and go out for a walk alone. He had to keep a promise to return at a time agreed with the shift manager. He walked slowly, and hesitantly, because he had one leg slightly shorter than the other, as a result of fractured bones. He also had a number of metal plates and pins in his thighs and hips, which were sometimes painful.

Once outside, the chilly sea breeze hit him, and he began to scout the grounds of Denby Hall. 'Denby Hall' was a grandiose name, attractive on notepaper. In reality, the Hall was a wind-blasted, fifty year old, shed-like wooden structure, with rooms for forty residents and staff on three floors. The building, with its faded terracotta paint, was lodged on a tussocky piece of south coast land, which sloped towards the water, then fell for a hundred feet in a sheer chalk cliff. It was at the edge of the town. The grounds had some sheltered areas of weedy grass, with ill-kept flower borders. The brick walls and terraces were crumbling. The garden was too exposed to grow anything less hardy than gorse, flax, and a few stunted pines. David's search of this scanty landscape did not take long.

He found Poppy behind the garages, near the rubbish bins, tied to a wooden pallet. She was a powerful dog, and had managed to drag the pallet a few yards. He talked to her from a distance to be assured of her good nature. David had no experience of dogs at all, that he could recall, and some slight fear of them. Seeing nothing but warmth in the amber eyes, he stepped forward, and released her. He took the leash, which Keith had improvised – an old leather waist-belt threaded through her collar – and led her away.

Along the cliff, the path parted from the busy road, and was quieter. On one side the sea hushed; on the other there was a grassy bank. David and the dog walked together for twenty minutes. Then pellets of rain started driving in from the south. Poppy was joyful, tugging at the leash, and wagging her tail energetically. David's legs, in jeans, were wet and chilled after a while. He kept his head down, and his eyes on the daisies in the grass, which were being lashed by the wind. He tried to concentrate on what he should do with Poppy. This really came down to tying her up again to await Keith's action, or letting her go.

David couldn't work out why Poppy had run away from Cathy's husband. He had known Desmond almost as long as he had known Cathy. Desmond thought that 'Dog' as he always called Poppy, wasn't worth all the bother it took to look after her. It didn't make a lot of sense to David to return Poppy to Desmond, if she didn't want to be with him, and he didn't want her. Presumably this was what Keith would do.

When they were near to Denby Hall, on a sudden impulse, David freed Poppy, and tossed the leash behind a bush. He did this without thinking that he was interfering in other people's lives, or doing something, apparently trifling, which might have bad consequences. In an imprecise way, he thought he was doing something positive for Cathy.