



Something of Value

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Young man has first encounter with human loss

The scenes inside the house are almost as they happened apart from talking about the mine. The outside scenes are another time, another place, but are knitted in to deliver a picture of hope from tragedy

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It was a slow melancholy song in Harry Turner's head. Uncle Joe was dying. A sad refrain that reminded Harry of the man he knew. He was a man full of good humour, activity, kindness and love for his family. Now he was dying. The dirge plagued Harry's mind.

He had arrived home from university that morning to find his father in a less than happy frame of mind. "Your Uncle Joe's unlikely to get better. Your mother has stayed down there all night to give your Aunt Jane some support. You know what she's like when she gets with her sister. Take the car and go and collect her."

Harry could have done without this experience on his first morning home. Somehow, his twenty years had spared him from grief and people close to him dying. He wasn't sure how he would handle it.

The sight of the small mining town as he drove into it, told him that Uncle Joe was not the only one with frail prospects. All along Centre Street, he found windows like blinded eyes, and the many boarded up shops reflected an alternative sadness. Harry had the sensation of arriving in a different world. He really did not want to be here.

He parked the car on First Street, where a couple of nine-year-olds in black T-shirts were indolently kicking a tennis ball against a wall, as he entered the shadowed back-lane.

The cobblestoned lane twisted his feet as he walked. A different world indeed. An hour and a half ago, he had strolled through the chrome brilliance of the Metro Centre shopping mall. All bright lights and lavishly decorated shop fronts. Now the sad, sooted red-bricked walls were better reflectors of his state of mind.

A yard door on his left opened with a click. An old man came out, reaching tentatively with his walking stick at each step. His cap was tipped to the back of his head, and his jacket lapels curled at the corners. He peered at Harry with eyes that were deceptively bright in the thin pale face.

"Hello, Arthur," Harry greeted him. "How are you?"

Eyes narrowed, brow creased, before recognition dawned, "Ah, yes, you're Jackie Turner's lad. I'm not so bad. Bloody arthritis is killing this leg." He tapped the offending limb with his stick. "Are you here for the final crunch?" Now the stick pointed away down the lane.

Harry, his mind full of Uncle Joe, thought it a funny thing to say.

Hesitantly, he said, “No, Uncle Joe. You know?”

“Christ, yes. I’m sorry, I forgot, son. Joe Baxter, poor bloody Joe—any time they say.” He hawked and spat down the grid of a drain. “Mind you, he’s best out of all this.” The stick waved in a general sweep to take in everything. “Your old man did the right thing, getting out when he did.”

“He’s never regretted it,” Harry told him.

“When I said ‘the final crunch’, I meant the pit wheel tower.” Again, the stick became a pointer.

Harry looked down to the end of the lane, where through a break in the houses the top of the mine wheelhouse poked like a gorilla’s head, over grey-slatted roofs.

“They’re demolishing it, this morning. The bastards.” He was leaning heavily on his stick now, his thin body braced into the chill December breeze. “I was down that mine before they ever built that bigger wheel. Now they’re blowing it away. The bastards.”

“Hard for local folk,” Harry remarked.

“I’m going to have a pint, now,” Arthur said throatily. “I’ll drink to the old mine and to Joe Baxter. Then I’ll go and watch them do the dirty bloody deed. You be there later?”

“Maybe,” Harry replied, without conviction.

Harry watched Arthur’s laborious departure until he disappeared around the next corner, which, Harry knew, led to The Mason’s Arms.

The old green paint on the door to Aunt Jane’s yard had a bad case of psoriasis. Harry paused for a moment before stepping into the sudden stark gloom of the backyard. An old bike frame hung on one wall. A couple of old earthenware sinks had been used as flower boxes, but the plants in them were dried and wasted.

Harry pushed open the backdoor and stopped on the threshold, all his apprehensions justified.

Aunt Jane, thin-backed and stooped, was fussing over a pan which bubbled whitely on the cooker. She turned a grey, careworn face, as Harry entered, and her troubled eyes showed both concern and surprise.

“Ah, you’ve just missed your mother, Harry. She caught the eleven o’clock bus. Nothing more she

could do here.” She came towards him, wiping her hands on a tea-towel. “By heaven, I’m sure you’re getting taller every time I see you.”

Harry heard and understood her words, but his whole body was chilled and tuned to the sound that seemed to dominate everything.

It hung above the bubbling of the pan, above his Aunt’s thin voice, over the rustle of newspapers in the next room. It was the sound of slow laboured breathing, hollow yet strong. An appalling, harsh unchanging rhythm that was almost inhuman, yet which Harry realised, through some instinct beyond experience, was all too human.

“Yes, he’s still hanging on,” Aunt Jane said calmly, defining his horrified hesitation. “John and Paula are in the room there.”

His cousins were casually reading newspapers. John, who was Harry’s age was seated at the table with the paper spread in front of him. Paula, two years older, a big heavily made woman, was sprawled in a deep armchair, with her plump white legs carelessly displayed.

They appeared unconcerned and unaware of the grim, desperate hunting for breath that came from an adjoining bedroom.

And here in the large greyness of the room with its dark overlarge furnishings, there was something else which probed into Harry’s troubled mind. An odour, a smell which permeated everywhere, oversweet, like flowers kept too long, sickening and sad.

John looked up from the paper and smiled brightly, “Hello, Harry. How’s the brainstrain?”

Harry returned the smile and answered the question briefly, but he was confused, more uncertain than he ever thought he might be. He wanted to be reverent but didn’t know how to react to this apparent unconcern. His hands stroked nervously along the curved back of a chair.

Aunt Jane shuffled in from the kitchen, “Would you like to see him?” she asked, as casually as though she was offering a cup of tea.

Could he refuse? Or would that offend? But was acceptance a sign of morbidity? He wished he hadn’t come but nodded his head cautiously.

“John, would you take him in?”

As John pushed open the bedroom door, both sound and smell threatened to overwhelm Harry with their intensity. There was heat across his brow and down his back.

“How-- How long?” he whispered.

“You needn’t whisper,” John said, preceding him alongside the large bed. “It’s a coma.”

Uncle Joe had been a big, fleshy man, with a full red face. Harry particularly remembered the mischievous, teasing grey eyes.

In the dimness of the room, the face on the pillow was yellow and wasted, and the eyes were lost, sunk closed in dark shadowed sockets. The thin white lips were parted, locked, and from them issued that rude, raw breath, as obscene as warmth from a china doll.

“Four days now, he’s been like this. Day before yesterday, just once, he opened his eyes, and he looked at me, and said, ‘What time is it, John?’ So, he knew me, you see? I told him it was five o’clock, and he said, ‘Jesus Christ,’ sounding shocked like he was late for something. And he closed his eyes, and that’s all.”

Harry looked again at that grim skin-tightened head on the pillow and could not imagine those eyes opening or those lips speaking. He had to suppress a shudder.

As they left the room Harry asked carefully, “Is – he really-?”

Paula looked up from her paper, and defined what his question was going to be, she said, “Any time, the doctor said.” Her voice was flat and expressionless. “Didn’t expect him to last the night. That’s why your mother stayed.” Her matter of fact manner numbed Harry. The breathing scratched deep into his senses.

“We’re used to it,” Paula said, divining his discomfort. “We’ve known for a long time.”

Harry wondered how he might feel if it was his father or even his mother, yellowed and deathly, a pale skull on a pillow. The image mercifully refused to shape, as the odour dried sweetly in the back of his throat. Uncle Joe was in that cold, dim room, and his family were here, yet they seemed prepared to just let him go. To Harry, it seemed like a kind of abandonment.

The doorbell rang, sharp and shrill, shaking Harry.

Paula immediately hauled herself out of the chair, as Aunt Jane hurried in anxiously from the kitchen,

“That’ll be the doctor, Paula. Let him in.”

The doctor, a short, round man with florid cheeks, exuded an air of fastidious cleanliness. He beamed soothingly at Aunt Jane and said, “Mrs Baxter, he’s hanging on grimly, I hear.”

He patted her on the shoulder with a smooth white hand, before hurrying into the bedroom.

“What do you think of him, Harry?” Aunt Jane asked.

“Who? The doctor?”

“No, silly, your uncle. See much difference?”

Harry stumbled over his answer. Why did she ask that? The difference was indescribable. “He’s—he’s thinner.” And he grimaced at giving such a stupid, idiotic and childish answer.

They waited in the oppressive awareness of the breathing. The doctor came out of the bedroom, clicking shut his bag. His eyes were gentle, practised in dispelling grief.

“I’ve given him something. It can’t help him now, but it may help you. Call me if there is any change.”

He left, and Harry was wondering how he might tactfully leave, when John asked, “Have I seen you since the mine closed?”

“No, it’s been more than—what? Six months.”

“There’s been hell on. There’s still a stack of coal down there. But it’s all profit with these buggers. No feelings.”

“What will you do now?”

“I’m hoping to start a college course in computing.” He grinned at Harry, “Joining the brainstrain.”

At that moment, from a distance, there came a series of loud bangs, followed by a dull rumbling like thunder.

“Hell, the wheel,” John said, glancing at the clock. “That’s early. I meant to be there.” He stopped talking and went to the window to look out into the bleakness of the yard. “It’s really over. They just couldn’t wait.”

John's voice went on, but something was different.

"Ssh, John."

"What?"

"Listen."

To Harry, it was obvious. That breathing had changed. The rhythm had gone. Now it was short, uneven, grunted gasps, and they were fading.

He followed John's dash into the bedroom and stopped at the foot of the bed.

The breathing was almost imperceptible now, and the pale lips were trembling slightly. Paula hurried in and stood beside John at the bedside, looking down at their father.

"Aunt Jane!" Harry called urgently. She was there instantly, as though her industry had been a disciplined readiness. She stood trembling beside Harry as the lips stopped quivering, and the gasps became one final sigh.

John was weeping silently. Tears soaked the rough stubble on his chin. Paula stood stone-faced, her lips tight at the corners. A great wailing sob escaped Aunt Jane. Harry turned to her, and with an action quite unpremeditated, he put a protective and comforting arm around her shoulders and drew her close. Then she wept silently.

So, it seemed that all the cold disregard was bravery, and now that it was ended, grief could really take over.

Almost pleased with his own reaction, Harry led his aunt silently into the sitting room. She turned back once, "Paula, better ring the doctor."

Paula, dry-eyed, hurried out, and Harry guided Aunt Jane to an armchair. Her weeping was muted now, but her face was drawn and strained. Harry felt compelled to extend his new-found composure.

"Can I get you anything?"

"Yes, son. There's a little bottle of brandy in the cupboard there by the fireplace. Yes, that's it."

Harry looked at the flat half bottle in his hand. Then he found a glass, poured a generous dose of the rich amber liquid, before holding it out to Aunt Jane. She took it in trembling hands and looked at the brimming contents.

Her mouth twisted in surprise, and then an impulsive chuckle, a spontaneous laugh burst forth. "Ooh, Harry, I can't drink it like that. Just a little drop, son. With water." And she smiled up at him, a poignant smile on her grieving face

Paula came back at that moment, and she could not restrain a little laugh. She took the glass and put the drink right.

Harry's former composure dissipated like smoke in a strong breeze. He felt foolish again and incapable of handling the situation.

Now, a heavy silence fell, almost as intolerable to Harry as the breathing had been. They sat and nothing was said, sat and looked at walls.

"I think I'd best get home. Give mother the news."

"Yes," Aunt Jane said, "you'd better. She'll want to be straight down but tell her I'm all right."

Harry said his farewells and opened the backdoor. Aunt Jane called after him.

He turned back reluctantly, "Yes?"

"Thanks, son."

"Oh, that's all right," he replied gladly. He had been thanked. So, he had been a help at this time.

Harry hurried out to the back lane, where winter sunlight was dimmed by a veil of almost respectful grey dust. Relief suffused his body. He had news to give and he had seen it happen. He had witnessed a death and maybe had been some help to Aunt Jane.

He recalled the significance of the dust coating his windscreen, as he started the car. On impulse, he turned left away from the town centre. Small groups of disconsolate men and women were standing at corners, faces drawn and dazed. Others were coming away from the site of the old mine.

A small crowd still lingered at the site, where the dust blew in the breeze like fossilised drizzle. The remains of the great beast of the tower lay, an indecent cairn of rubble, within the precincts of the old

mine.

Men and women stood silently at the wall, while kids jumped on and off the low grey rampart, elated by the spectacle. A different emotion moved the adults. There was something about them that intrigued Harry. Tears moistened the cheeks of some wives as they clung to their husband's arms, yet their faces registered no emotion.

All anger spent, the men stolid and withdrawn, stared beyond the dusty rubble, their posture defiant. Straight-backed, they stood, with shoulders squared, a proud stance as they looked towards an uncertain tomorrow. Harry saw, in the set of the jaw, something indomitable that politicians would never appreciate.

For some reason, Harry thought about what the doctor had said, "I've given him something. It can't help him much now, but it may help you."

What had he meant by that? And what doctor was there to give something that would ease these people through this other passing?

Before starting the car, he climbed out to wipe the grime from the windscreen. As he settled in again, he was struck by how glad he was that he had come. He had experienced something important over the past two hours, something of value.

The song was as sad as ever, but the significance of what he had seen, the apprehension, the dying, the grief, the destruction of a way of life, could be set against the fortitude, the resolve, the stoicism, the bravery and perhaps most of all the sheer dignity that came to the surface. In the face of tragedy and injustice people survived and were somehow made stronger. Now there was hope and defiance in the song. All it needed was a voice.

Harry drove slowly through the grieving town, eager to be in the warm company of his own mother and father.