

The machines that were keeping the old man alive wheezed and thumped. Fluids were being fed into his veins from bags suspended from metal poles, through lines which connected to the veins in his wrist, and an oxygen mask covered his nose and mouth. Beneath the mask, tubes down his throat helped his lungs inflate and deflate. Back at the nurses' station the two nurses discussed the old man.

"So there's no hope? No hope at all?"

"You've seen them like this before. No. I don't know if he is even going to last the night."

The old man's granddaughter chattered away to her grandfather as if he was awake and aware.

"...and we found this coupon for a competition, you know, the prizes were all holidays! You can go on it when you get better..."

Her mother pursed her lips. She had brought her daughter in because she thought that it might be the last time she saw her beloved Gramps. She hadn't realised that the end was so close.

"...and we filled it in and sent it off. Mum said it was out of date, but I didn't think that that would matter..."

Mum had already told her that her grandfather was not going to get better, but the girl obviously wasn't listening, probably on purpose.

"...and guess what? We got a letter. We won the third prize in the competition, a coach holiday. Mum couldn't believe it, but she phoned them and they confirmed it. You can go on the trip when you get better! It will do you good."

His granddaughter was so pleased for him and his daughter couldn't bear to disillusion her. Sure, they had won the prize and she didn't understand that, but the doctor had said that there was no hope. They settled down to wait in the chair beside his bed, the girl wrapped in her arms. Eventually they both dropped off.

A snort and a gasp and the high pitched tone of an alarm woke them.

"Gramps! You're awake!"

Gramps' eyes were wide open and he was weakly stirring in his bed. The nurses rushed in and started checking alarms and the intravenous lines pumping liquids into the old man. One nurse removed the oxygen mask.

"Stay still, Mr Stevens, please. We need to get a doctor to look at you. Please don't struggle"

The old man lay back and turned his head and looked at his daughter and granddaughter. A tear ran from the corner of his eye. From nowhere a doctor rushed into his room. She checked the monitors, and the pulses in his throat, wrist and ankle. All seemed normal.

"I don't believe it!" she said.

The old man started to cough and choke. The doctor carefully removed the tubes from his throat and the old man took a deep ragged breath.

"Aaaaah! Where am I?" he whispered.

His daughter stepped forward and said "Dad, you're in hospital, you've been sick. Very sick."

“Ah, that’s why....”

He raised the hand with all the tubes going in to it.

“Do you want water, Dad?”

He nodded weakly.

Over the next three days, to the astonishment of the medical staff, the old man rapidly recovered. By the morning he was able to sit up, and though his voice rasped a little because of the tubes that he had had down his throat, he was able to speak and even eat a little. By the second day he was able to leave his bed with a little help. All the tubes and most of the monitors were removed. On the third day the doctors could think of no reason to keep him in hospital. He was discharged by a disbelieving doctor and released into the care of his family.

“Gramps, you can go on that holiday now,” said his granddaughter as they travelled home.

“What holiday is that, sweetie?”

“The one we won for you! It’s a coach trip.”

“Oh, well, sweetie, I’m not well enough for coach trips yet.”

“You have to! You have to!”

So against the better instincts of both himself and his family, the old man claimed the prize and the trip was organised for him. He continued to rapidly gain strength and when the time for the trip came around he was able to walk without support and only needed a walking stick to get around.

His daughter and her husband and the old man’s granddaughter came to see him off. The driver welcomed the old man and loaded his suitcase into the bowels of the bus. A number of the older generation were milling around, saying goodbye to relatives.

The old man looked at the bus.

“What museum did this bus come from?” he asked.

He had a point. The bus had definitely seen better days. The driver struggled to latch the luggage compartment and some of the metal trims were missing. It was dirty and one of the back windows had a crack across it. The front bumper was wired on, and the windscreen wipers had obviously seen temporary repairs.

“Is that legal?” wondered the old man.

“Can you look after him, please?” his daughter asked the driver. “He’s just come out of hospital.”

“No worries, madam. We’re used to his sort. He’ll be OK with us.”

The driver himself looked as old as the bus. His hair was grey under the greasy cap that he wore. He was wearing stained overalls and he walked with a limp. He winked at her.

“Been doing this run for a long time now. Don’t worry, we’ll see he’s OK.”

The driver helped the old man up the steps of the bus and showed him his assigned seat, and the old man settled down. The interior of the bus was as battered as the outside. The seats were worn and sunken, the fabric was frayed, and the windows were grimy. Everything smelled stale. The old man sighed.

Slowly the bus filled up. Many of the travellers seemed to be in not much better state than the bus. One old man was nodding as if in the grips of Parkinson’s Disease or similar. His companion was a grey haired old woman dressed in fashions from at least fifty years ago. A lady two seats in front of him was bald as if from a session of chemotherapy. She was seated next to a heavy man with a red face. Another traveller was as pale as a ghost. Almost everyone seemed to have a companion and the old man wondered if he would fit in as a single person. The old man revised his already low expectations downwards.

Just as they were ready to move off, another passenger arrived. She made her way down the bus and took the last remaining seat beside the old man. She nodded and smiled to him and settled herself down.

“Hullo.”

The old man nodded. She seemed pleasant enough and didn’t seem to be suffering from any obvious afflictions. She was an older lady, grey hair, glasses. She was wearing a scent which reminded him strongly of his wife, who had died nearly twenty years ago.

The driver started the coach. This took three or four tries, but finally the engine burst into life, covering those who had come to see it off in a cloud of black choking smoke. After crashing the gears a couple of time the driver managed to persuade the bus to jolt into motion. It spluttered out onto the highway and they were finally off.

“Hm, I wonder if this bucket of bolts is going to make it all the way,” the old man said to his seat companion.

“Oh, I think it will. After all, they’ve made this trip many times before.”

“I wonder. I’m Eric, by the way.”

His seat companion didn’t respond with a name. Oh, well.

They headed south on the main road. The old man chatted with his companion as they travelled. In spite of the fact that he didn’t know her name they got on well. He told her all about his late wife, Ellen, and she responded with tales about her husband. She didn’t mention his name.

Time passed, and in spite of the inauspicious start the old bus rattled merrily down the road, soon leaving parts that the old man knew. They pointed at and discussed the little villages and towns that they passed through. The weather, which had been a bit grey, improved and the sun came out. The sky turned blue, with light fluffy clouds promising continued fine weather.

Soon they stopped for lunch, at a small village inn, with a swinging sign featuring the head of a king. Eric and his seat mate clambered out of the old bus. Eric dismounted more easily than he had expected. The stiffness that had been plaguing him for years had eased a little.

He and his companion ordered their meals and sat outside with the rest of the travellers in the sun. For the first time in many years he ordered a glass of beer. His companion had a sherry.

“My wife, Ellen, used to like a sherry,” he mentioned.

“I’ve always liked a sherry with my lunch.”

He leaned back. The sun was warm and he was enjoying her companionship.

“This is very pleasant. I’ve not had a pub meal in... oh, many years.”

“Me neither. There’s something relaxing about it, isn’t there.”

The driver called them all, and they all climbed back into the bus. Eric noticed that everyone seemed a lot more relaxed, and were chatting more animatedly. Even the man with the complexion of a ghost seemed less pale, and the guy with the shakes seemed steadier. Obviously, the holiday was working its magic on them. Even the driver was limping less.

The bus started easily enough this time and the driver headed south once more. The old man settled back and chatted comfortably to his seat mate. She was a motherly type, a little younger than him, he thought. Although her hair was grey and her skin wrinkled, her eyes were bright and smiling.

The driver described the small towns that they were passing through over the intercom. Eric wondered why he hadn’t used it on the first leg of the journey. Eric heard interesting fact after interesting fact which he immediately forgot. Eventually he drifted off into a snooze.

“Eric! Eric, wake up! We’re at the hotel!”

His seat companion was shaking him.

“Oh, sorry, I haven’t slept like that in ages.”

“Don’t worry. You must have needed it. Come on.”

They all went into the reception of the hotel and received their keys. The driver arranged for their bags to be delivered to their rooms, and directed them into the restaurant. Eric and his companion shared at table with another couple. It was a pleasant meal, but the other couple were more interested in each other than in conversing with Eric and his companion, and Eric was a bit annoyed.

“Let’s move to the bar,” said Eric’s seat mate.

When they were seated in the bar with their drinks, she said “I guess those two had not seen each other in a while. Don’t feel annoyed with them.”

“Yes, you’re right. I shouldn’t. You sound just like my wife, Ellen. The voice of reason. I’d be getting annoyed and she would calm me down.”

“Do you miss her?”

“She was the other half of me. When she died, I didn’t know how to carry on. But I did. My daughter did her best but it was my granddaughter who cheered me up and pulled me out of it. I think of my wife every day. Your husband?”

“Oh, he was my other half too. I was so sorry to lose him.”

“Do you have any kids?”

She looked at him.

“Yes, they saw me off.”

She didn’t elaborate. He felt her warmth beside him and it seemed natural somehow when she took his hand.

She stirred.

“Time for bed, I think. We’ve a long day tomorrow.”

He wondered if he had done something wrong but she smiled and kissed him on the cheek before getting up and leaving for her room. He finished his beer and headed for his room.

The next morning they all gathered for breakfast before setting off again. The coach party were uniformly cheerful, and maybe even a little noisy. Eric went for a full English breakfast, bacon and eggs, something he hadn’t done for a long time. The pale man, who was looking less pale by the minute, joined him.

“Marvellous, isn’t it?” the pale man said. “I’ve been eating just cereals for so long, I think I’d forgotten what real food tastes like. There’s nothing like a full English breakfast!”

Eric’s companion from yesterday appeared. She favoured fruit and yogurt, which his wife had usually chosen, Eric remembered.

After breakfast Eric packed his suitcase and carried it down to the bus. He’d not been able to do that in years. He was feeling so much better that he was almost humming.

He was surprised when he saw the coach. It appeared that someone had been working on it overnight. It gleamed. The cracked window had been fixed, and the missing chrome work had been replaced. The bumper had been repaired and the bus looked immaculate. The driver himself appeared to have found a better suit and his cap looked newer and less crumpled. He didn’t limp.

“Wow!” he said.

“Wow, indeed.” said his seat companion, as she came up behind him and linked arms. “It looks gorgeous, doesn’t it?”

They climbed into the bus and took their seats. Someone had been working hard on the interior of the bus too. The fabric was bright and new looking, the seats were no longer sagging, and the view through the windows was crystal clear.

“They did all this in a night? Incredible!”

“Yes, awesome, isn’t it?” she said. She didn’t seem too surprised, though.

Of course the bus started at the first try, and they swept out of the car park onto the road in style. The driver gave a running commentary as the bus continued to travel south.

Eric and his companion relaxed and enjoyed the trip. At some point Eric had taken her hand and they leaned together companionably as they travelled.

They stopped for lunch at an inn very similar to the one that they had visited the day before. Eric bought his companion a sherry and was pleased to find that they stocked a beer that he used to drink years ago.

“I thought that they had discontinued this,” he said to her.

They boarded the bus after lunch and the passengers were happily talking and joking. Eric and his seat mate settled down companionably again.

“Last stage,” she said.

He nodded.

Finally they reached their destination and the driver asked everyone to leave the bus. Eric and his companion climbed down and looked ahead.

“Are you ready, Eric?”

He looked at her and saw not only the motherly woman who had been his seat companion, but also his bride of many years ago, in her white wedding dress, and the mother of his daughter, and the grandmother of his granddaughter.

“Yes, Ellen, I’m ready. Why didn’t I recognise you before?”

“You weren’t ready, my love.”

They turned and walked ahead, hand in hand.

The nurses at the nurses’ station heard the change in the monitor beeps and came in to check on the old man. They looked at one another.

“I’ll get the doctor,” said one of them.

The other shook the old man’s daughter awake.

“What’s wrong?”

“He’s deteriorating. I’m afraid it won’t be long now. We’re sending for the doctor.”

The old man’s daughter tried to get up without disturbing her daughter, but she woke up too.

“Mum, what’s happening?”

“Oh, my love, I’m afraid that Gramps is slipping away. He’s not going to wake up.”

Gramps’ granddaughter burst into tears.

“No! No, he can’t die! He can’t!”

“I’m so sorry you had to be here, my love. I’m so sorry.”

The doctor came rushing in. She checked the old man’s monitors and looked at his notes.

“I’m sorry Mrs Richards. There’s nothing we can do. His heart... It just isn’t functioning properly. His kidneys... They’re not helping. He’s going downhill quickly. His heart traces... Well, they’re already irregular and they will soon cease.”

The old man’s daughter put her hand to her mouth. She walked across to the old man’s bed and took his hand. His granddaughter walked round the bed and held his other hand.

“Thank you, doctor. Thank you for telling us.”

“The nurse will stay here with you, and I won’t be far away.”

Gramp’s granddaughter started talking to him.

“You know Gramps, I had a great idea. What if Mum bought a ticket to a draw, you know the ones that give prizes and not money. Suppose we won a holiday, a bus holiday. Suppose you got better...”

She choked up a little.

“Suppose you got better, and you went on the trip. I think that you would have enjoyed it wouldn’t you? You always liked coach trips. Especially when you went with Granny, Mum says.”

So the old man’s life slipped away. The monitor beeps which had been mostly evenly spaced suddenly sounded like a galloping horse then changed to a single continuous tone. A nurse hurried in and switched off the monitor. The doctor came back.

“I’m sorry, Mrs Richards. Do you want to stay with him for a while? Stay as long as you like and tell the nurse when you are ready to leave. We’ll handle the rest.”

The old man’s daughter looked at the old man and at her own daughter.

“We’ll stay until my husband arrives,” she decided. “Thank you, doctor.”

Later as they walked out of the ward and headed towards the lifts the old man's granddaughter said softly "He would have enjoyed the trip, if we'd won it and if he'd got better."

"He would, dear, he would."