

The Care Home

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Prologue

The playgrounds of my youth have become modern burial grounds for plastic cider bottles and empty packets of Malboro lights. Weeds have grown over slides and swings where children once played. My school, Tyneside Comp, where I wasted many years lost in the tedium and monotony of the classroom, is closed forever. The rants of miserable teachers and the ghosts of frustrated children sealed in by the metal grates that now cover the windows and doors.

My grandparents, who saved me from a childhood of poverty, are ageing, old and their personalities are melting away like hot candle wax. They seem to have given up looking for the energy to live, even if living is only a sense of working class pride manifested by a clean house or a freshly shaven face.

People I have called friends for fifteen years or more no longer call, text or even answer if I call them. They've moved on, moved away, been married, got engaged, they're mortgaged to a life or a woman or a job, drowning in debt, being parents or residing in a state run cage at the pleasure of Her Majesty. I am crippled with a painful embarrassment if the thought of contacting them enters my mind, as if the desire to reflect on good times over a quiet pint with an old friend is so horrendous.

The music scene is woeful; indie is dying, lying on a sweat ridden sheet with its veins infected by the TV POP disease that is killing my one love. From Elvis in the fifties to the Libertines in the naughties, music has grown naturally. Simon Cowell has destroyed, in one live final, an industry

that took half a century to build. Oasis are gone, Amy is a white chalk outline on a bedroom floor in Camden, and the biggest selling act last year was a bunch of pretty little boys singing like prepubescent girls to music written by old men in beige offices in London with no drugs, guilt, anger or love in the words they have penned.

The Conservatives/Liberal Democrats have taken over a country fraught with financial terrors, while David Eton Cameron and his band of aristocunts pound the arses of the poor with huge dildos fulfilling their sexual and financial dreams at the same time.

And yet here I am, still here, always here, wanking into the wind; my cum squirted into a town that doesn't even swallow, thus perpetuating my literary infertility. But the world is a hopeful place and I am hopeful with it.

Chapter One

It started out as a joke.

I don't remember applying for the job, I have no memory of the interview and the first day is a bit of a blur. I do recall people being perplexed when I told them that I had accepted the offer of employment; my first offer of employment. Well that's not strictly true, there was a sixteen day nightmare at the local KFC, but we don't talk about those greasy days, I had acne so bad even my grandmother's dog stopped licking my face.

I went to my aunt's house after work one night in my first week. She opened the door to find her nephew in an oversized, cotton, lime green shirt with dinner medals all over it, tea stained olive green cotton pants and cheap, plastic black shoes. She laughed uncontrollably, they all did; they found the demise of my university aspirations hilarious now that I was spoon feeding pensioners for minimum wage.

My options at this time were limited. A year previously I had been kicked out of my grandparents' house. My grandmother accused me of stealing a box of Pro-Plus. I denied it. She told me to leave. I left. Since then I had been living in a council flat on a street in South Shields affectionately known as Heroin Row.

I had managed to stay on at college for a year, surviving on state benefits, cash hand-outs and food parcels from friends and family. But after a year it became too much, I was turning eighteen and my pride dictated that I needed to provide for myself; and that is how and why I

became employed by Sandhaven Healthcare.

I arrived for my induction at 13:50 to begin at 14:00. I had only managed three hours sleep the previous night after an impromptu gathering of friends at my house turned into an all-night party. I arrived with no idea of what was going to happen that day or what I would be expected to do, but what I did know is that I was in a bad state. My mind was fractured and splintered into a thousand tiny pieces.

I had fucked a girl in the small hours of the morning; she was young and naive and had arrived at the party having been promised free alcohol and cheap sniff. As soon as she found out I was single (I wasn't, I had lied) she led me into the bedroom. She didn't insist on protection and so no protection was worn, and now that the cocaine and alcohol levels were diminishing the paranoia levels were soaring.

I woke up the next day and decided, at best, I was going to have chlamydia and at worst I'd have dirty genital herpes. I checked my raw penis with regularity on my way to work, for any signs of impending genital sores; the people on the bus must have been horrified.

And now the Black Dog was on my shoulder, whispering in my ear and sinking his rabid teeth into my neck.

- What have you done, Nicky, what have you done? You should have known she was a coke slut, she didn't insist on protection and she let you cum inside her; you silly little prick. What were you fucking thinking, and now you've certainly caught herpes, that shit's for life man, no getting rid of it, what are you going to tell your girlfriend? And you spent one hundred quid on toot, on toot, Nicky! You're borrowing money from your family for food and then you go and spend a hundred notes on white powder. It's your first fucking day at work, man. Sort yourself out.

The bus ride was agonising and when I arrived, Karen Donnelly, the home manager and resident nurse, was waiting in reception to greet me.

- Hello, young man, how are you? she said with an evil undertone

in her voice.

- *Fine, thanks*, I replied in what I hoped was an enthusiastic manner.

- *Let's get started, Nicky, lots to learn.*

Karen led me out of the reception area and through some locked double doors. I remember thinking that it seemed like a prison rather than a nursing home. Sandhaven had two separate wards, one was a general nursing home and the other, where I was to work, was an elderly mentally infirm ward – or EMI for short.

EMI was the polite, politically correct way of announcing that the residents of this ward are nuts, insane, mental, dementia ridden pensioners, pre-dead humans dressed in pastel cardigans; clothes they would have long ceased to wear if they were *compos mentis* enough to remember that the evil that is vanity and narcissism could be used for good when deciding to throw away beige, moth bitten attire. These poor souls had forever lost the ability to function normally as productive members of society; in fact, they were now considered a burden.

I was finding it hard to breathe; the cheap sniff had coagulated in my nostrils, forming a crusty layer resulting in an annoying whistling sound when the air left my lungs and made its way out of my nose. I was to learn later that a blocked nose wasn't the end of the world when you worked in an old folk's home. There aren't many things that smell as bad as an overflowing colostomy bag; it's a smell you never forget. It doesn't smell anything like faeces, it's a heavier smell than that, more intense. It smells like a combination of rotting human flesh and wet cement.

My comedown was killing me. My cock was starting to itch insatiably, either due to disease or a reaction to my drowning paranoia. The general manager of the home, Karen, was giving me a tour of the building. She was tedious. I was losing the will to live. I was shaking and sweating uncontrollably and the inane dribble that was being expelled from Karen's mouth was making me feel worse.

I excused myself and went into the bathroom to inspect my genital situation, hoping I would find no physical evidence, no burning sores or viscous seepage.

A quick penis check proved inconclusive, it was red and sensitive, but that could just be friction burns (I hoped and prayed). A thick smell of acidic urine filled the toilet as I emptied my dehydrated bladder into the basin. I took some of the sandpaper masquerading as toilet roll from the basin and removed as much of the coagulated coke snots from my nostrils as possible and took in a deep breath of urine filled air. I felt much better.

Toilets have a different function when you take coke. They are still rooms of relief, but a different kind of relief. The first thing that a coke head does when he walks into a bathroom is scan for a good surface on which to chop up a line of charlie; even if that person doesn't have any on them at the time. The habit becomes innate. Disabled toilets are always the best to do coke in, plenty of room and plenty of large surfaces. I took out a small wrap from my pocket. I kept a little coke from the party in case I needed it when I got to work. I needed it.

If you have to attend a job the day after, it's always best to carry some with you, not to get high, just to fight off the comedown and the feeling of impending doom which can often lead to suicidal thoughts. Of course, it would be better not to attend work at all, if possible, and no excuse for non-attendance is taboo, including fraudulently claiming that a close relative is dying or has died.

I crushed up a medium sized line, rolled up a mucus drenched ten pound note and sniffed the toot up my left nostril. It felt good going down. And then my bowels started to move violently inside my stomach. I just got my pants down in time before I sprayed liquid faeces all over the basin. I felt great.

After that I hung on to Karen's every word with a new found enthusiasm.

There were thirty-five people on the ward with five empty rooms.

All EMI wards are built in the shape of one continuous square, with the bedrooms, bathrooms and common rooms situated around it; all of the doors that led off the ward were locked at all times and a code was needed to open them.

The reason for this was very simple; there are three types of residents living in the home. There are the bedridden; people who are so far in to their disease that they are physically incapable of moving, their limbs are seized and their minds are lost.

Then there are the sitters; these people always sit, you put them in a chair and they stay there. They'd given up looking for an escape or were not capable of walking further than a few steps before falling and breaking their hip. Ask anyone who works in the care profession; a broken hip leads very quickly to death. It will kill the elderly faster than cancer or heart disease or diabetes. The broken bone seems to result in a crushed will to live.

Last but not least are the walkers; these particular residents still have the strength to walk, and walk they do. All day, every day, round and around, constantly searching for a door that will lead them out of the hell that their family has placed them in. Their mumblings were incoherent, but the look on their faces was obvious; they were desperate. Desperate to leave anyway they could. Desperation looks different as we age, for a child it appears and disappears in a moment, but in the elderly it's tattooed on their faces and screaming to be heard.

They are the reason why the ward is one continuous corridor, so they can't get lost and so that if a carer needs to find them they can never be far.

Having been shown around the ward for an hour or so, I was told I could leave. I would be starting the next day at 08:00.

The shifts in the home ran from 08:00 until 14:00 or 14:00 until 20:00 and on a really bad day 08:00 until 20:00. Twelve hours in the company of the aged; wiping their backsides, washing their genitals, spoon

feeding them and cleaning up whatever mess their body had decided to evacuate that day.

There was a nightshift from 20:00 until 08:00 but that was worked by two Ukrainian men whom I never had the pleasure of speaking to. They worked every nightshift seven days per week; they never had a day off and never called in sick. Audrey, one of the more experienced carers, told me that they both had doctorates from universities in the Ukraine; these universities were not recognised by Britain and so these two well-educated Eastern European doctors were now watching over elderly, sleeping, British pensioners, twelve hours per night every night for minimum wage. I often wondered how bad circumstances in the Ukraine must be for this situation to be the greener side of the grass.

The job required little skill. The calibre of the people who applied for the job was poor, the expectations of the company were small and the wages they paid were even smaller. As I was under twenty-one, I wasn't entitled to an adult minimum wage. This meant that I was paid £3.60 per hour over a 42.5 hour week. This paid me at the end of each month, before the government took their slice of my pie, £612 or £153 per week, and I was on a contract known as '*bank*', which basically meant I had no contract at all, I was entitled to no sick pay or holiday pay.

£612 per month to look after the nation's elderly; people who had paid tax for fifty years, mothers who had raised the next generation of Britons and men who had fought in World War Two and saved us from a future of fascism. Make sense? Fuck knows, who am I to argue with the capitalist powers that be?

The only caveat that successful employment carried was a full criminal check. This check will show every time you have been arrested, charged or been found guilty of a crime, regardless of when it was.

Three months before I had applied for the job, I had been arrested for assault after an altercation with a middle aged man on a night out. I demanded a cigarette from his box of Lambert and Butler Gold. He refused

and called me an unpleasant name. I took offence to the name calling and broke his nose. This resulted in an arrest and a night on a blue mattress. That resulted in a charge and a court appearance and the court appearance resulted in a guilty plea.

Even a recent record of violence did not prevent the management of Sandhaven Healthcare from hiring me to be responsible for the welfare of these very vulnerable adults.

Chapter Two

I arrived at work the next morning at 07:50. I sat in one of the common rooms. Karen Donnelly sat in the corner of the room, holding a folder over her face. She was an unattractive woman, not so much in her looks, although she was heavily overweight, wore ill-fitting pants suits and had unfashionably permed hair. It was her personality that made her so violently ugly. She had been a nurse for thirty years and had become jaded and resentful of the profession and the people who relied on it.

One by one the rest of the care assistants entered the room, all of them female, all of them weather beaten with badly applied make-up and food stained uniforms and all at least fifteen years my senior. I sat back in my chair, nervous, paranoid and shamefully scared.

The second day of a comedown isn't better or worse than the first. The first day is always monumental, earth shattering and suicide inducing, but the second is more subtle. The fatigue sets in, you begin to heavily regret your foolish actions and you profess purposefully that you will never do it again. And yet the Black Devil Dog persists, mercilessly clawing at the skin on your back and barking doubt into your ear.

- Nicky, Nicky, Nicky, what are you doing here? Nicky Daniels out in the big bad world, working in a care home. You can't do this, Nicky, you're not ready, man. You saw some of the nutcases who reside here, they're going to tear you apart. Just leave quietly, no one will notice, I won't tell anyone you lost your nerve, just leave, mate.

As the room filled with the chatter of women, I started to slowly

calm; a roar of laughter went up and the paranoia returned like a house guest who had overstayed their welcome.

- *They're laughing at you, Nicky. Hahahahahaha.* The black beast's wicked words never stopped.

- *Quiet now, girls!* Karen bellowed from behind her file.

- *Jimmy in room two had a fall last night; he has a nasty gash on his left arm and on the left side of his face and head. I need a volunteer to take him to the hospital.*

I scanned the room and found each one of the carers had their hands raised with seeming excitement.

- *Audrey, you can go, the ambulance will come for him at 12:15, so make sure he is ready and waiting at the door. I don't want him to be late for his appointment, it reflects badly on Sandhaven. And this time, Audrey, can you make sure he's clean shaven and isn't wearing odd socks? The doctors at that hospital will think we don't care.*

It seemed that everyone really cared about the welfare of the residents; everyone was so keen to volunteer. I later found out that the only reason for their enthusiasm was that a hospital visit meant a day out of the home; it was a way of escaping for a day, and I would take advantage of this myself in the future.

- *Okay, nothing else to report, seems as though the nightshift was quiet last night.*

Everyone started to rise up out of their chairs.

- *Wait a second, Karen said, Judith has called in sick this morning she was on an 08:00 til 20:00 shift. Are there any volunteers to work the extra shift this afternoon?*

This time when I looked around the room there were no volunteers; everyone was looking anywhere except at Karen; checking their fingernails and pretending to be reading health advice posters on the wall.

- *Nicky?*

I looked over in trepidation.

- *You can do it, can't you, it's your first day, I'm sure you are keen to learn as much as you can?*

Sighs of relief filled the room and before I had the chance to retort Karen continued presumptuously.

- *Everyone, this is Nicky Daniels and today is his first day, so make sure you look after him and answer any questions he may have. I have a lot of paperwork to fill in, so I'm going to be in my office and off the ward all day.*

Karen always had a lot of paperwork to do and was never on the ward.

- *Julie, you and Audrey do rooms eleven to twenty. Sam, you and Elaine do rooms twenty-one to thirty-five, and Nicky you do rooms one to ten.*

Sniggering filled the room.

- *Alone?* I asked.

Karen moved the file from in front of her face and placed it on her lap. It was the first time I'd seen her vicious scowl.

- *What's wrong, my boy, can't you handle it?*

She smiled sarcastically, causing her red lipstick to spread widely across her face like the blood from a drunk's burst nose after a fight on a Friday night.

- *Yes, Karen, I'll be fine,* I replied, defeated by her condescending manner.

We all exited the room to attend to our residents.