

Can Openers

Mal Jones

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Prologue

Two teenagers sit on their bikes, their voices getting louder – they're arguing. One of them throws his bike in anger against a metal gate and it crashes with a loud bang.

Down an alley a piercing, frightening scream echoes in the night air, a deadly silence, an eerie chill descends. Both youngsters stop and look at each other.

Out of the alley, a shadow is running and disappears in the mist. The teenagers instinctively walk slowly down the dark, damp, dirty gully. As they get towards the end of the alley, they see a figure lying on the ground.

One of the teenagers treads in something that clings to his trainer. He lifts his foot up and touches something sticky – blood. He is nauseous and vomits. The other teen sees a body with a knife pushed into the stomach. A circular red patch has formed on the clothes and blood is around the wound and on the concrete ground.

'Oh God.'

Chapter 1

The automatic doors slid open silently. As Iris walked down the noiseless corridor, she could hear the tip-tap of her heels echoing down the hall. The brightly painted walls and colourful pictures of sunsets and beaches did nothing to lift the sense of gloom and despondency she always felt pervaded the place.

As she walked, Iris tried to calculate how many times she had visited here, coming every day since her mother, Lilian, had been admitted in 2019, just over three years ago. She gave up when she thought of her visit the day before. She felt a deep sense of loss; it wasn't the loss of something that had passed but a loss that hadn't yet been realised. Iris challenged herself to rationalise her thoughts. She forced herself to remember that death had always been a shock; but she knew that what hurt her the most, what gave the Centre such a deep air of gloom, was how death manifested itself here. The option of death and the subsequent agreeing to the lethal injection brought immediate grief to those left behind.

Iris stopped three quarters of the way down the corridor. As she turned to open the pine wood door to her right, she gathered herself and forced a smile. Inside, she found Lilian in the chair next to the bed. The room was small but bright. The window was uncovered, letting in sunlight and displaying a perfect view of the car park. Iris glanced at the family pictures on the top of the chest of drawers and sniffed at the cloying, heavy scent of lavender spray in the air. It occurred to her that the lavender in the room never quite masked the faint, sweet smell of urine coming from the hall outside.

Iris put her bag down on the end of the bed and shrugged off her coat. She smiled and bent down to eye level with her

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mother.

'Mum, why do you want to take the injection?' Iris asked.

Lilian had completed a Hope in Golden Age Assessment at sixty-eight years old. This was when she had been still fit and healthy and living in her own home. A year later she had suffered a mini stroke and, although she made a good physical recovery, her memory had never quite been the same. Iris was worried; she couldn't understand why her mother agreed to have the injection.

'It's Sarah, you know, the nice lady, she's the manager here,' Lilian said. 'She's a trained counsellor you know? She's a very clever lady. She's my End Your Life with Dignity counsellor. I think she said that I've been assessed. She told me my memory loss and health will get worse. She was ever so kind about it. I don't want to be burden to you, love. I think it's for the best. They've tested my capacity, they were good. They said it would be my decision, so I think it's for the best.'

Iris felt tears welling up in her eyes. She didn't want to get upset in front of her mum. Iris coughed away the choked feeling in the back of her throat and quickly changed the subject. After they had chatted, Iris rose to leave. She put her coat on and reached for her bag at the end of the bed.

As she bent over to kiss her mum on the cheek, Iris quietly said, 'I know it's your choice, but let's talk about it more when I come next time.' Iris opened the door into the bright, bleak corridor and left.

Iris worked in a different care home and had researched the Old Age for Dependency department, so she understood the procedures. She knew that everyone sixty-eight years of age needing a state pension, or any state support, had to complete a Hope in Golden Age Assessment. Studies in Scotland and England commissioned by the State Dependency Department led to a further huge scientific study on age, disability, and life span. The study concluded that old age was too costly a burden for the State and mortality management needed to be more efficient.

Iris was annoyed that the company that was awarded the contract for the Hope in Golden Age Assessment was Bihem IT, the largest IT company in Europe and, infuriatingly, Dibble Care had a twenty percent stake. Iris felt sorry for her mother who was given a computer when she was sixty-eight and required to answer hundreds of questions. If her mum did not

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use the computer or failed to answer any of the questions, she would be deemed ineligible for her pension. She also had to have a medical and was seen by a dependency doctor. The medical predicted her future health and noted that at seventy two years of age she will not be able to walk upstairs and will have a stroke and at seventy six lose her memory. Iris considered how onerous it must be for so many elderly people to have to be subjected to the process. Her mother did not understand one of the questions so had to ring a call centre. The advisor would only refer to her by case number, never by their name. It irked Iris that the process was so impersonal. Iris also found out that centre workers had to reach daily, weekly, and monthly targets or suffer punitive action by the Department. Iris wondered how on earth the call centre workers could possibly use the Objective Fair Analysis system under such conditions.

The final part of the Hope in Golden Age assessment was to log and store Lilian's future physical and mental health on the Department database. Lilian would then receive tokens and a personal budget intended to last to the end of her life. Iris tried not to dwell too much on how precise and coldly clinical the whole process was.

The stroke had come completely without warning. It shocked Iris to see her mum struck down the way she had been, still, so Iris thought, relatively young. In the course of recovering from the stroke and needing extra care and treatment, all of her mother's allocated personal healthcare budget had been spent. Despite Iris's efforts to appeal to them, the Dependency Unit took the view, and stated it quite clearly, that it had been Iris's mother's own fault that she had a stroke, as the original assessment outcome noted it should not have occurred until she was at least seventy-two. Iris remembered how stunned she was when the call centre advisor told her that her mother had "obviously made bad lifestyle choices in her younger age". The call centre had no compassion at all, telling Iris "the only person to blame is herself," and asking, "did she eat a lot of fatty food or drink too much or not look after herself since the assessment last year?"

Iris knew that her mum really had no option. With no more personal budget left, Lilian would have no choice but to submit to a Residential Home Positive Choice assessment and go on to a number 3 route. Lilian, at the same time, was also informed

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of the Ending Your Life with Dignity option available only to those over sixty-nine years old.

As a result, Iris became even more obsessed in researching the system for her mother. Every evening after work and increasingly into the weekends she studied and read everything she could about the process. Iris had started to suspect that companies were making a lot of money from the Ending Your Life with Dignity scheme. Lilian moved into the residential home soon after the assessment had been carried out. This meant that Lilian was officially classified as a “burden on the State”, that this was her own fault and therefore all her assets were to be frozen. In the event that Lilian died, the State would get all of Lilian’s savings and anything she owned that would be passed on to Dibble care. Dibble had lobbied the government about this in the past and had argued that as the State, and Dibble in particular, were taking on the responsibility of looking after people, then Dibble needed the funding to provide that service.

This knowledge nagged at Iris all the next day. When she finished work Iris went back to the care home to her mother. This time Iris sat on the edge of the side of the bed so she was slightly above her mum’s eye level. Iris took her mum’s hands in hers and rubbed her wrist gently with her thumb.

‘Mum, will you come and live with my family and me? We have a room. You’ll have privacy.’

Her mother’s head drooped. ‘I do not want to be a burden on you, love,’ Lilian said quietly and sadly.

Iris put Lilian’s hands onto her lap. ‘But Mum, why would you be a burden? You’ve almost fully recovered from your stroke.’

‘Sarah said I have to think about the future. She told me that by the time I’m seventy-six I am going to be very ill, she said I’d lose my memory.’ Lilian paused. ‘I don’t want to be like that.’ A tear slowly rolled down Lilian’s downy cheek.

‘How does anyone know that?’ Iris asked.

‘Because it is in my Hope In Golden Age Assessment,’ Lilian said, brushing the teardrop away.

Iris could feel herself getting annoyed and knew it wasn’t fair to her mum. It was the care home and harsh assessment process that Iris was angry with; she didn’t want Lilian thinking that Iris was angry with her. They chatted some more before Iris left. Iris stood up and once again leaned over to kiss Lilian

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on the cheek. She gently rubbed off the slight lipstick stain she left behind. 'It's okay Mum, don't worry. I'll see you soon.'

As she waited for the automatic doors to slide open to let her out of the home, a short dark woman wearing the care home uniform brushed against her, in a rush to start work. When Iris reached her car and she felt in her pocket for her car keys, her fingers touched a scrap of paper. Iris realised it must have been slipped in to her pocket by the woman who rushed past her in the doorway. On the paper was a hand written note asking to meet Iris away from the care home. There was a phone number and a hastily scrawled name on the bottom of the note.

The next day, as soon as she was able, Iris phoned the number on the note and arranged to meet the note giver in a quiet back street café called Alan's. Iris recognised the woman from the care home straight away. She introduced herself as Vicki. Other than Vicki, Iris, and the man behind the counter busily cleaning the coffee station, the café was empty. Vicki and Iris sat at the corner table furthest away from the counter. Iris had to lean forward to hear what Vicki had to say.

'The number 3 option is a con. The Dignity of Life counsellors and the manager are given incentives to push for the positive choice injection. We, as care staff, try to stop the residents from going for the option, but if we're found out we get disciplined and sacked. We can also get taken to court and could be imprisoned. Dibble Care will say we're going against the Dignity of Life policy, stopping the residents from having a choice, abusing the residents,' Vicki whispered.

Iris listened in stunned silence. She wasn't entirely surprised by what she was hearing but she had never realised how the staff were manipulated and bullied.

'When residents choose the number 3 option, Dibble pockets thousands of pounds. The State pays Dibble in ten-year block contracts per person. So, say your mother came in the home at sixty-nine and then opted for the injection at seventy-two, Dibble would pocket another seven years of funding, plus the money from anything of value and savings your mother may have.'

Iris shook her head, incredulously. She knew it made sense; she read that, ten years ago, the average age in a Dibble home was eighty-six, now it was seventy-five. It didn't take a genius to work out that Dibble was making money by

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bringing the age down of residents and putting a positive spin on it by saying it was costing less.

Iris decided there and then to go to the home that afternoon and take her mother out, whatever cost her financially or health-wise.

Vicki made Iris promise not to tell anyone about their discussion. Iris reassured Vicki and thanked her.

As soon as she left the café, Iris went straight to the care home and again sat with her mother. This time Iris was determined.

'Mum,' said Iris, 'I need you to please come and stay with me. Come on, let's go now.'

Lilian looked up sadly at Iris. 'Look, love, I do not want to be a burden and I can't go anyway.'

Iris stood over her mum. 'Why not?'

'I have already signed for the injection,' Lilian said.

'Well, tear it up and come with me,' Iris replied, anxiously.

Lilian looked down at her lap. 'I can't, she said I wasn't allowed to do that.'

Iris turned on her heel went to find the care home manager. Iris quickly found Sarah in her office and told her that her mother wished to withdraw from the number three option and that she would be taking her mum home. The manager continued tap-tapping away at the keyboard on her desk and didn't look up as she told Iris that her mother could not withdraw from the option. She only stopped typing long enough to face Iris and explain that once the decision was made and the resident was assessed as having full mental capacity, it's placed on record with the Hope call centre and there is no going back. She coldly and calmly told Iris that the program could not be changed under any circumstances. Iris went home and decided to phone the call centre the following morning.

Iris got up early the next day. She dressed quickly without washing and rushed to the phone. After a few rings the call was answered. The call centre worker told Iris that once a number 3 was put in place, there was no going back. That it was a positive choice and if they stopped a number 3 due to family pressure or other reasons then the personalised choice will be taken away from the individual. The call centre worker then asked Iris if she was aware that the injection was to be administered that day. Immediately Iris became distraught, choking and crying. The call centre worker was sympathetic

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and advised Iris that she could make a complaint as the home should have given her 24 hours' notice before the injection was administered. She asked if Iris wanted a complaints form. Iris slammed the phone down.

As Iris raced to the home, her only thought was to stop what was about to happen. She jumped out of her car and, as she ran to the front door to the home, she passed a Chaplin as he was leaving the building. Iris looked across to another door marked "fire exit"; the door was open and an ambulance was parked just outside it. Iris could see a blanket stretched over a body on a gurney, just as it was placed in an ambulance. Iris knew she was too late. They were taking her mother's body to the morgue. The manager saw Iris and came up to her.

Sarah took Iris's hand. 'At least you know she suffered no pain.' She led Iris to her office. Iris stumbled over her words as she told Sarah through tears that she wanted to complain. Sarah looked sympathetically at Iris and told her that the information the call centre had given was incorrect.

'The law is there to give older people rights over their own lives, so they can make as independent a choice as possible. I know this is difficult for you,' said Sarah, 'but things have not gone completely to plan. The call centre should take seven days to authorise the injection and then there is a Form 3 for Old Age to be processed, this has to be added to the Life Plan. If a family member makes contact then this has to go on the computer program. It may hold the injection up for about two weeks. The difficulty is that some residents make the decision but then have to wait, they get scared and are worried about the final solution, waiting for the final day to happen. They panic, you see, and try to withdraw their consent.' Sarah paused and handed Iris a tissue to wipe her tears. 'This cannot be withdrawn, because now their fear of death and their emotional state would overturn the rational decision they made about the biggest choice of their life. Having the injection earlier was better for her mental health and more humane.'

Iris said nothing. She realised that death had become so matter-of-fact to these people, so routine, that at the same time as she was talking to Iris, she was also dealing with a matter of a stolen purse and talking to the office clerk about the residents' lunch. Iris realised that what had happened to her mum was, to the care home, just another management decision. Iris felt

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physically sick. She noticed a large sign on the office wall headed "Dibble's Mission Statement" in large red letters.

*HOPE, HAPPINESS, FULFILMENT, AND CHOICE – THE
DIBBLE WAY.*

Chapter 2

It was a hot day in May. In the garden, the purple and red flowers and the apple blossoms looked glorious, and signs of new life pushed their way through the soil. Spring had finally arrived. The light, happy voices of children echoed through the still air, followed by the deeper, richer sound of a man's laughter, children and their father playing together.

Most of the neighbours, who watched the father and children play, would see a family full of happiness and joy. It was a pleasure to live next to such a respectable and stable family so well suited to the area.

However, appearances were not all they seemed. Like looming storm clouds on an otherwise clear spring day, dark shadows lurked behind the family's closed doors. The difference between appearances and reality would ultimately seal their fate.

Frederick, a family man of sorts, was in the back garden cutting the grass and playing with his children. Zeta, his six-year-old daughter, came up from behind and squirted him with water; they chased each other while he jokingly shouted that he was going to hang her from the nearest tree. She ran around the garden laughing as her father pretended he couldn't catch her. Zara, his eight-year-old daughter, shouted something out of the bedroom window but no one heard her, so she gave up and went back to the computer.

The next-door neighbour put his head over the garden fence and called hello to Frederick; the neighbour commented on a conversation they had previously.

'When I worked for the department, there was still some hope we could help people.'

'Well things have moved on over the last ten years,' Frederick replied. He then went into the house, irritated by his neighbour who stared at him moralistically. Eventually, Frederick calmed down and realised that it did not matter what his neighbour said. The seventy-year-old man had retired in 2012; being out of work for over a decade invalidated the old man's opinion.

Frederick lived in an area made up of identical three bedroom detached houses, all of the owners trying to create their own identity in their own mortgaged space. The street only came to life on weekends and in summer evenings; the rest of the time it was like a ghost town, the residents were in their own individualised space with no sense of community. An area built for the disengaged middle class. They worked longer and harder for less to keep their status and identity. A neo-liberal age at one time provided the material wealth but, for many, those aspirations were gained on credit. After a decade of economic stagnation, during which time endless amounts of credit had turned in to onerous debt, life had become a treadmill of work with Sunday the only day of rest.

Frederick loved his children. When he was with them, it was the only time he ever showed any care or compassion. He was never very happy and he felt like he deserved a better life. He was resentful of most people and bitter about those who he would describe as scroungers or work-shy. He wanted to be someone others would look up to, to be seen as a trendy executive type. Although he was over six foot, he had never learned to carry himself well and looked gangly and clumsy as a result. His suit never quite fit him properly; he looked seedy, as though he had slept in it all night. Though he cut a rather pathetic figure, in his own mind, Frederick was a legend; at work he liked to flirt with his younger co-workers. Behind his back, however, many described him as creepy, some even called him a 'perv'.

Lidia, Frederick's wife, worked at the local shop on Sundays. He wanted his wife to stay at home, but to have enough income to afford a luxury, all-inclusive holiday every year, and enough to have the latest décor for the house to keep up with the neighbours, they needed the extra cash. He resented the people he knew who seemed to manage without having to work as hard as his family did.

Lidia greeted Frederick with a kiss on the cheek. Despite the illusion of a happy family, there were difficulties between Lidia and Frederick. Since the birth of their last child, their sex life had virtually disappeared. Lidia had never felt fulfilled with regards to the physical aspect of their relationship. She got bored with Frederick's fumbling in the bedroom and she kept a vibrator in one of her bottom drawers. The difficulty for Lidia was that she had married Frederick after he accidentally got her pregnant. She hoped that she would grow to love him, but her heart had always been with someone else.

Lidia would often try to be the model wife that Frederick wanted, and in many respects she was. At dinner parties she would dress up and many people found her very attractive; she was slim with long, dark brown hair and a gentle face. Lidia was a good hostess, a listener who wanted to be liked. She never wanted to get in arguments, chose instead to agree with a view rather than say what she thought. Some discovered, while in conversation with her, that her responses were limited to one-word exchanges and were eventually compelled to seek out someone more interesting. She was a good mother who looked after her children. For the most part, she managed to hide her irritability and ongoing irritation with Frederick, though was sick to death of the cheap, sweet-smelling aftershave he slapped on. Lidia considered there were probably many other people in worse situations, so she lived her life from day to day. Unfortunately, the façade could not always be kept up and at times she ended up depressed and angry. Lidia recently started to change, however; she now questioned and argued.

After this particularly trying day, Lidia was feeling combative. When he came in from the garden with the children, she pestered Frederick about the promotion he kept promising he would be getting soon. She was angry; he kept saying he was going to be promoted but it never happened. This was developing into a typical Sunday evening argument. He had insisted that he be the only breadwinner to her doting wife, went as far as forcing her to quit teaching. She resented him for it.

Eventually the argument died down, the children went to bed, and Frederick and Lidia, as usual, sat on the settee watching TV, a large space between them.

Samuel Booth, the Minister for Dependency and head of Frederick's department, was the focus of a news report. Booth

was saying that the Dependency Unit had saved money from the public purse; the savings were so large that there was going to be an increase in the number of Dependency Programmers. Booth went on to talk about how the privatisation of the Opportunity Planners had been successful. Lidia remarked that it didn't seem right that the Opportunity Planners were now working for Dibble, the largest multinational supermarket. Frederick snapped at her, annoyed both because she was talking while he was trying to concentrate and because he didn't think she understood the issues involved. He ranted about how she wouldn't believe that people were trying to rip off the system and getting something for nothing. He explained how hard they worked, whereas other families were just taking and taking from the State. She nodded but didn't agree with the argument.

'Don't you think it's wrong that people with no money or with limited resources have to shop at Dibble?' she asked.

Infuriated, Frederick shouted, 'Look, I'm trying to watch TV. Anyway if they're increasing posts in the Dependency Unit it could mean a promotion for me.'

They both sat silently on the settee.

Lidia hated Sunday nights; a sense of despair always came over her. Frederick never listened and treated her with contempt. She felt as though her opinions were of no value and that she was treated no better at home than at the shop, like a pretty trinket, just another commodity. At times she became so desperate and frustrated that her thoughts grew very dark. Tonight those feelings, for some reason, came to the forefront of her mind.

'It's time for bed,' Frederick said. He was treating her like a child, which she hated. He always insisted that they go to bed together and, when they were in bed, they could not get farther away from each other; they slept on opposite edges of the mattress, each in his or her own world.

Frederick was usually very tense and restless in his sleep on Sunday night. He shouted as though he were very angry. What worried Lidia was when he got out of bed in the morning he paced and shouted, as though he were preparing for battle. The truth was that Frederick was going to battle. He had a sense of satisfaction that when he went to work he was on the front line, saving thousands of pounds from those scroungers

and fakers. She found this odd, and it was difficult to sleep next to him on these nights.

As she lay in bed, she grew more and more frustrated. She could not sleep. She was upset with her situation and her thoughts grew darker than the cloudy night sky. At 4 AM, Lidia got up, tense and full of hatred towards her husband. She wanted to be finished with Frederick.

Lidia went downstairs to the kitchen, in the dark. She put the kitchen light on, opened the drawer where the cutlery was kept, and found the sharpest knife in the house. The whole time she thought about everything Frederick had done to her over the years, things that only she knew about. She grabbed the knife and pulled it out of the drawer.

