**Mirage**

Avril hated her visits to Langsley House. She hated them for physical reasons, the smell, the sounds, the sights of old age. She hated them for reasons of the spirit, the defeat, crumbling, despair in the air, the imminence, the fragile optimism that was brought out like the old cracked china, failing to convince.

Each time she entered the grand front doors, columned and high, her heart would race, and she would brace herself for the confrontation with the creature who used to be her mother. Why was she so difficult? Why could she not see that it was for the best? Did she really not understand that....

But why should she understand these things, see these things, when she often did not know who she was, or worse still, who she was not.

And the wait! Every time there was a wait in the lounge while her mother was "prepared" and "brought down". This would put Avril among the other inmates, that mixture of the old, the senile, the very old..... It often conjured up an image of eighteenth century lunatic asylums, inappropriate treatment for untreatable complaints. She had, however, no complaint about Langsley House, which had taken in her difficult and dying mother, had taken off her hands and away from her eyes the slow but constant dripping away of the old, old life.

So there she stood (she would not sit), gazing out into the sunshine, feeling the indoor chill, trying not to engage the eyes of any of the inmates who occasionally looked her way, diverting their small attention from the rambling television planted in the corner of the room.

"Here is the news from the BBC."

Avril's eyes turned to the screen. A serious looking young woman read from an autocue.

"At least fourteen people have died in a coach crash on the French Riviera...."

This announcement was met by a hideous and drawn out laughter, screeched falsetto by an old man in an armchair. He kept looking round at the others in the room, pointing to the television, laughing his dreadful laugh.

Avril shuffled her feet, moved her handbag from her left arm to her right, and was for once almost relieved at the arrival of her mother in a wheel chair.

"I'll push her out into the garden for you. It's such a lovely day, don't you think?"

Mother did not appear to notice her daughter, and tried instead to catch the attention of an old man as she was wheeled past. She failed, and seemed very upset when finally her chair came to rest on the flagstones outside.

The nurse turned to Avril in a conspiratorial way. "The Matron'll want a quick word before you go," she whispered, looked at the old woman, turned and left.

Avril pulled up a chair and sat down. Her mother was talking, not really to her.

"He's a very nice man. I'd like to talk to him again. Do you know, I think he's a little bit sweet on me."

“Have you heard the news, mummy?” she broached, confident that she had a story whose frame of reference would fit with her mother’s world view. “They found an unexploded bomb in the High Street, behind WH Smith. They had to get the army in and they disabled it and carted it off somewhere safe. Imagine! All those years ago and the Germans are still causing us bother with their ordinance!”

“Well,” her mother began, without much interest. “I’ll get round to it dear. Leave it to me.”

Avril, perplexed and unsettled by the response, kept looking over her shoulder into the room behind.

She could think of little to say. Her own life centred now on Malcolm, but she knew that to mention him would simply open old arguments.

"I'd really like to go there, you know."

"What? Where? What are you talking about?"

"Over there."

Mother pointed, her crooked finger aiming waveringly down over the lawns, across the distant stream, beyond the clumps of trees to a small cluster of buildings on top of a hill. It was impossible to make out clearly what they were.

"It reminds me so much of that lovely tea room we used to go to so often in Lewes, do you remember?"

Yes. Avril remembered. She wondered, however, how her mother, who couldn’t remember on her last visit that she had three brothers and what they were called and that they never visited her because they died years ago, could now recall a trip, long ago, to a tea-room on the other side of the county.

"It doesn't look like a tea-room, mummy."

"Nonsense, that's exactly what it is. I can see it quite plainly. There's an awning, and tables outside, you know, *à la terrasse* as the French say. And such a bustle of people. It's such a popular tea-room. And it's got tea-pots lining the walls, all different designs and colours, quite a collection, worth something I'd say."

"Mummy you can't possibly see all that from here. Why it must be miles away. And I can only just make out that it has a thatched roof!"

"Nonsense, dear. It's tiled. I can see it quite clearly, can't you?"

It was useless. She'd fallen for the trap already. Here they were arguing again about nothing at all. Avril changed the subject.

"Jimmy's coming down at the weekend. I dare say he'll pop in to see his old mum."

The old woman said nothing. She seemed to be deciphering this information, and occasionally she would glance at Avril, quick, darting glances, as if she did not want to be caught looking.

"That'll be nice for you, won't it, mummy?"

Mother kept turning round, straining as if to see someone inside the building. “I should really go and speak with him, you know?” she said, in a half absent way.

“Mother!” shouted Avril, startling herself more than her mother. “You’re 92, for God’s sake!” There followed five awkward but quiet minutes broken suddenly by her mother.

“Go tell that to the Swede!”

“What?” asked Avril, visibly perplexed but stifling a giggle. “Who’s the Swede? You don’t know any Swedes, do you?”

The two women said nothing for some minutes, then, as Avril shifted her position in the uncomfortable chair, her mother asked.

"Can't you really see it?"

"See what?"

"The tea-room?"

"Oh God, mummy, it's not a tea-room. I don't know what it is. It's too far away."

Avril hoped by her emphatic tone to end the topic. She decided to change it herself with some news that might strike a chord with her ancient mother. “I see Vera Lynn’s a hundred today, mother. That’s incredible, isn’t it? And she sang a song for the news. She’s still got a voice. Not as strong as it was, but still there.”

“Well she must have had her breakfast before her dinner,” mother said opaquely. Avril chuckled, shrugged her shoulders and sat silent.

Avril had hoped to spark off some memories of the war years, often her mother’s favourite topic. It took some minutes, but then, suddenly, her mother flung back her head and launched into, “We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when but I know we’ll meet again some sunny day,” in a confident, surprisingly strong voice full of vibrato. Avril sat smiling while her mother sang the song, in part, over and over again. One of the carers whom Avril knew as Vi, ran out of the building towards them, a beaming smile on her face.

“Oh that’s lovely Clarice, you’re singing again,” she exclaimed and then to Avril, “she’s a good singer, isn’t she? She gets us all going, you know. We love our Clarrie don’t we darlin’?” And Vi enveloped Avril’s mother in her ample bosom. This was a heartening sign for Avril who had at one time wondered whether the home provided enough affection for her beloved parent. There was no doubt about it now and she felt a frisson of relief as Vi headed back to the house with, ”well, better get back to my lovelies in there, eh?”

"Aren't you excited that Jimmy'll be down at the weekend?"

"Jimmy?"

"Yes. He's coming down to see you."

"Oh goody, goody!"

Avril was taken aback by the sudden flood of delight. She knew Jimmy was her mother's golden boy, could do no wrong, but this outburst....

"He can take me to the tea-room!"

"Mummy!"

Avril gave up. She stood up.

"Do you want me to leave you here or take you back inside?"

"Oh inside, inside. I'll chat to that nice man."

Mother was craning round again, trying to look inside the house as she spoke. Avril was by now quite used to her departure not being regretted, overtly or otherwise, but she did feel hurt this time, especially as she had only visited for a quarter of an hour or so. But then, she had no right to be hurt. It was her decision to go. She could stay an hour. Two hours. She had nothing else to do.

She pushed the chair back into the sitting room and left her mother next to an old gentleman with a large moustache and a loud voice. Her goodbyes were not answered.

When she reached the front door an authoritative looking woman hurried from a side office to intercept her.

"Mrs Godwin, I'm so glad to have caught you. Can I chat on the way to your car?"

Avril felt like saying no, but smiled instead.

"Is there a problem? The fees have come through, haven't they?"

"Oh yes, no problem there. It's just that.... well, to be honest we are finding your mother a handful, Mrs Godwin. This is a rest home, not a mental home, and although we do try to cater for all...."

"What exactly is the problem?"

"It's a series of little... well, not all of them little... things. They are beginning to try our patience....."

"But we are paying for...."

"For a *care* home, Mrs Godwin. I know that there’s a premium that you pay for dementia care, but most of our inmates are here for peace and quiet in the autumn of their lives."

Sounded like a promotional video, thought Avril.

"Last night, for example, your mother got up from her bed and went right round the home collecting people's dentures from their bedsides. This morning we found them all in the one pot here in the vestibule. It's caused chaos, Mrs Godwin, I don't mind telling you!"

Avril had difficulty holding back a laugh. She looked away from the Matron to hide her twisted face.

"You must talk to her, Mrs Godwin, or we shall really have to review...."

"All right, Matron." Avril put her hand on Matron's arm in a pacifying and friendly way. "This weekend my brother's coming down from Manchester. She'll listen to him. I'll make sure he talks to her." And just as she turned to go she remembered something and asked, “By the way, Matron, is there a Swede here at the home?”

“What a strange question!” the Matron said, laughing not unpleasantly, “no, I know of no Swedes here, on the staff or among the clientèle.”

The two parted amicably, both still laughing.

That evening Avril panicked slightly at the thought that Jimmy might not after all "pop down". He'd let her down before, and this time it was too important to leave to chance. She telephoned.

"Jimmy you are serious, aren't you, about coming down on Saturday?"

"Yes of course. I promised didn't I? I'm feeling really guilty about all this, you know."

"Oh there's no need. I just had a horrible feeling you wouldn't make it."

"Is she being difficult?"

"I'll say! Apparently last night she gathered up all the false teeth and put them into a large pot."

The two started laughing uncontrollably.

"....it's almost like mum of old, if I didn't know better. But it's not really her."

Avril swallowed hard.

"Poor old mum,” said Jimmy, “the image that conjures up of a bun-fight over the dentures... that's priceless!"

Avril changed the subject. “They’ve put the fees up, by the way.” She sensed Jimmy tighten up on the other end of the line. “Jimmy? Did you get that?”

“Yes. How much are we stumping out now, then?”

“Well she’s stumping out three and a half grand a month! Would you believe it? The money’s dwindling fast. It’s five years she’s been there now.”

“How much is left? And what do we do when it’s all gone?”

“There’s enough for another full year, then we’ll be due another assessment when they’ll have to come good. They pay for all those other people in there with dementia, you know, the ones who didn’t make sacrifices and buy property so they’ll have to pay for her then. She’ll have to make a contribution, of course, from her pensions. She did have a well-paid job and her pension was very well funded.”

“Dad’ll be turning in his grave. I remember him telling me when I went off to Oz, “don’t worry son, we’re buying this little house as an investment so when we finally pop our clogs you and Avril will have a little something to be getting by on.” He was so proud of doing that. They must have struggled a bit, before mum got that job with the bank. Bet you wish you’d held out for a bit more, eh sis?”

“Let’s not start that again. I got what I got for it and everybody else thought it was a good deal. As did I. It needed a lot spending on it. It wasn’t quite rack and ruin, but not far off. Back off Jimmy. I’m not having a quarrel with you now, it’s too unfair!”

They hung up, after Jimmy had agreed to meet Avril at the home bright and early, in time for breakfast with mum. The staff at Langsley House encouraged this sort of thing, and Avril agreed to ring them in advance so everything would be in order.

Saturday began early. For some reason Avril's alarm went off at five. She had set it for six-thirty, and it was a disgruntled and angry face that looked back at her from the bathroom mirror. She wouldn't sleep now. Might as well wash and dress.

Sitting in the kitchen with her cup of tea, vacantly gazing into space, Avril began to feel pleased she'd woken early. This was a calm time of day, little noise, sunshine filling the room. Above all she would need to be calm today, as she intended to spend most of it with her mother and brother. At least with Jimmy there she'd be able to take a back seat.

She set off in good time, feeling rested and refreshed. As she drove in through the front gates she caught sight of Jimmy's black Mini coming round the bend.

"Beat him!" she said out loud, smiling to herself.

They hugged on the forecourt, but their smiles were dashed a moment later when Vi came rushing out of the home.

"Mrs Godwin! We can't find your mother."

"What?"

Jimmy laughed.

"What do you mean, you can't find her? Isn't she in her room?"

"No, sir. I've been up there several times, and we've checked all the toilets..." she hesitated "....male and female. She's not there. None of the residents has seen her all morning. We're searching the grounds now."

"We'll help," added Jimmy. "Avril you know this place better than I do."

Before they could make their plans an irate Matron stormed out of the house.

"This is the limit, Mrs Godwin! I did warn you last time you came. your mother is simply too difficult to handle."

"Matron, I really don't see...."

"Whether you see or not, the disruption to the running of this home caused by your mother is insupportable."

Jimmy tried his luck. "Please, Matron, just give me a chance to talk to my mother. I'm sure we can resolve this amicably."

"No. I don't think we can. When she turns up, I'm afraid I shall ask you to take her away with you!"

The Matron turned and strode heavily into the house, not seeing Avril collapse tearfully into Jimmy's arms.

"Don't worry, sis. It'll be all right. I'll take mum back up to Manchester with me...."

"Jimmy don't be ridiculous. You can't look after an old woman...."

"Oh and you can, can you? Don't you think you've done enough? It's my turn, sis."

"And what about Carrie? I can't see her...."

The tone of voice had changed.

"Carrie will accept it."

"No she won't."

Avril spoke these words quietly, and she stopped crying.

"We'd better find her first," said Jimmy. "Where do you suggest?"

"Oh, I don't know."

Avril looked round,

"Let's go round the back of the house and start from there."

It was a clear, bright day. You could see for miles. Standing on the verandah you could clearly make out the familiar English country pattern, with its greens and yellows, its occasional spire or crenellated tower, and trees everywhere. Several of the staff were converging on the couple, returning from their search.

"Nothing. Nowhere to be seen," shouted a man dressed all in white. "If you ask me she's done a bunk."

"Yes well no one is asking you," retorted a young nurse.

Jimmy entered into a lengthy conversation with them, and Avril, distancing herself a little, gazed at the horizon, beginning to shimmer as the day got hotter. Her eyes came to rest on a building just beyond the stream. She couldn't make out clearly just what it was, but she suddenly remembered the argument she'd had with her mother.

"Jimmy! I've an idea!"

She grabbed his hand and dragged him away from the crowd. She pulled him across the lawn, down to the hedge bordering the field beyond.

"Avril, what are you doing?"

"Just trust me. I have a feeling that I know where mum might have gone."

They walked in the heat through field after field, through corn, potatoes; they even skirted a herd of bullocks, provoking a little interest but no movement. When they reached the stream there seemed no way to cross.

"It's not very deep, Jimmy. What do you think?"

"I think we're mad, but I'm roasting. A little cool water round the ankles would be very welcome."

They waded over, the water lapping half way up their legs. Jimmy had rolled up his trousers, but they still got wet.

On the other side there was a steep climb for some time as they made their way to the top of a hill. From there they could see the buildings that Avril and mother had argued about just three days before. This had been a farm, but work was in progress to convert the collection of buildings into homes. The innards had been ripped out, and scaffolding formed a web around the shell. A thatcher had begun his work on the roof, but had a long way to go.

The pair walked slowly up to the buildings.

"Mummy thought it was a tea-house. She thought she could see people sitting out on the terrace, sipping tea. I suppose this place is alive with builders and workmen during the week. That'll be what she saw."

As they cleared a slight rise in the ground, they saw a shape, lying close to a concrete mixer near the old barn.

"Jimmy!"

They ran towards it, and Jimmy, arriving first, lifted his mother's head from the ground. She was not breathing. Avril fell to her knees and took hold of her mother's hand.

"How the hell did she make it?" asked Jimmy. "I almost felt like giving up more than once. And what the hell was she doing?"

"She must have felt like a cup of tea."

Avril looked back over the stream to where the rest home stood high on the far hill top. There were people out on the verandah, having breakfast.

"At least she won't trouble *them* any more."