

Listing

The news about Gerry startled her, rattling her teacup as she placed it back slowly on its chipped saucer. The surprise was that his death hadn't happened earlier. Who'd have thought he'd hang on for as long as this? The last she'd heard — must be years ago — he was already decrepit. This was the thing about losing touch with old acquaintances. After a while they faded into a fog of the forgotten. Disconcerting to think how many, by now, had probably slipped away out of sight. Although poring over the newspaper was part of her daily routine, she always skipped the death notices; so no doubt she'd missed a number of those departures. If it weren't for occasional bits of gratuitous information in her cousin's Christmas cards, like this mention now of Gerry, Rhonda could nearly ignore the topic. Typical of Sally to bring it up again. Last Christmas it had been 'Remember Enid, next door to me? Well, her suffering is over...' — with no thought of what such reports would provoke.

All day Rhonda felt troubled. Not because of Gerry himself. She'd never been close to him; hadn't really liked him, with his droopy mouth and pink eyes and long flat grey sentences. No, the accelerated heartbeat and the breathlessness were just part of her usual reaction whenever any indirect reminder reached her, regardless of individual particulars — her usual reaction ever since *the incident* that she didn't want to think about.

A few hours later she began to do some listing. She had learnt to rely on lists, and not just for itemising chores. Back in her professional writing days, memo lists were also handy when she was drafting a piece for publication — a way of organising thoughts and phrases before she bent over the keyboard. In recent years she'd found another use for them: the effort of concentration as she compiled a list on some random topic could help to calm her down when fits of agitation shook her. It didn't matter much what the list comprised. Perhaps favourite songs from times gone by, or her firmest friends at primary school, or all the street addresses where she'd lived during her 73 years. If she put her mind to it, she could remember plenty of detail. Almost anything could be a salutary distraction.

But this time something oddly different came into her head. She was gripped by the idea that instead of using random catalogues to push the disturbing subject away, she could try to edge her way towards confronting it: she could list people affected directly by departures, disappearances, close calls. Doing so might help to dispel those long shadows that *the incident* had cast over her.

So now Rhonda opened her notebook, wrote the heading GONE, and started to jot down names underneath it. She proceeded slowly, pausing for a few minutes after each one to look up from the page and close her eyes as she tried to recall their personal qualities, their looks and mannerisms, their ways of speaking, their quirks and foibles. By the time she stopped writing and remembering, there were fourteen names on the page — each identifying a person she'd once known fairly well, a friend or colleague or neighbour or family member who was no longer alive.

A further name trembled just below the surface of acknowledgement, but she wouldn't allow it to come into full view.

Then she made a second list, comprising contemporaries who to her knowledge had already felt a grim cold hand on their shoulder, an intimation of mortality. A stroke, a debilitating injury, a brush with one kind of cancer or another. And quite a few cases of senile dementia. Rhonda once used to think nothing could be worse than losing sane self-awareness, but she'd discovered that retaining a clear sense of who you were could mean a certain pain would continue to press on your memory. Press and press, relentlessly.

After that she drew up a third memo, listing former close acquaintances whose present condition — dead or alive, sick or well — she knew nothing about. Old Gerry had been one such person until Sally's inconsiderate bit of news transferred him to a known category.

Staring at the columns of names on each page, she thought about the word 'list', and the more she thought about it the stranger it seemed. List. *LIST*. It had an uncanny look.

From a little shelf Rhonda took down her dictionary. Well thumbed, it reflected an occupational habit over several decades. In her time as a journalist specialising in feature articles, she'd needed to weigh her words carefully, make sure of each nuance, consider possible synonyms. So now she looked up LIST and checked its several definitions.

Noun: catalogue or inventory of items, especially names; field of combat.

Verb: tip sideways; listen attentively; wish or desire.

Catalogue of items, especially names. The most obvious meaning, this, and quite straightforward, though the scope of lists could vary considerably. The whole dictionary, in fact, was just an extended catalogue, while this particular entry — the word LIST and its listed series of lexical paraphrases — was itself a mini-catalogue.

Lingering over the other different senses, Rhonda found that her memory had begun to attach them one by one to particular individuals, whether their condition was unknown or in shadow or extinct.

Field of combat. Ah yes, entering the lists like a black knight: that was how Dougie Wardle started to behave after his wife died. Previously he'd seemed conciliatory, even mild-mannered much of the time; but bereavement made him belligerent. He picked fights with colleagues over trivial things and treated every staff meeting as a jousting arena. Words became swords, glances became lances. He began to look different, walking stiffly along the corridor like someone encased in chain mail, and peering at people as if through a helmet visor. Rhonda saw the sadness in it: the way death had dealt with his wife was cruel and Douglas wanted to punish everyone for that. Smite them all.

Tip sideways: this definition made her think immediately of poor Penny Carterton — of the way her views had become increasingly unbalanced after the onset of her breast cancer, tilting over into New Age superstitions and miscellaneous forms of silliness. Visiting Penny after the operation, Rhonda had to put up with a lot of barmy chatter about angels, gauze-winged and white-robed. As if in slow motion, Penny's wobbly reason had slipped until she seemed to lose her mental footing altogether. And now she was...where was she? Rhonda didn't know. Another absentee, a missing person. In the legion of the unsteady, the teeterers, the fallen.

Listen attentively: the phrase brought to mind her former boss Jim Brindle, and how he always lent a sympathetic ear to other people while keeping his own strict counsel. He would sit there quietly, nod as if to signal compassionate understanding, and hold a hand to his chin so that his mouth was clamped between thumb and forefinger. Right up to his demise a few years back he'd remained tight-lipped about himself, and so the mystery of his character expired with him. Was Jim's extreme reticence a form of shyness? Or perhaps a stingy withholding of himself from others? Or was the self-effacement an odd kind of generosity — turning into a piece of blotting paper to absorb other people's needs?

Wish or desire: she remembered the archaic wording of that biblical passage, 'the wind bloweth where it listeth' — which fitted her late husband George to a T, especially after he'd been told his lung disease was terminal. From that day onward to the end, he felt a breeze of longing to go back to his place of origin, rediscover early associations. He wanted especially to see whether the old family home in Island Bay was still standing. So Rhonda had made the trip there with him. The taxi let them out at the Melrose Street corner. They'd walked along slowly, George stopping often to lean grey-faced on his stick and suck the air in noisily. As they passed each house he whispered the name of whoever had lived there in the 1940s: Mr Kirby, Mrs Williamson, Mr and Mrs Lawless... But the place that had been his home was gone, replaced by a big modern box. He shook his head in disgust. Consolingly, the zigzag path up towards his old school was still there near the

corner; and although the pussy willow no longer stood at the foot of it, he thought he could glimpse the sycamore up there at the top of the little hill. A survivor. 'We used to pin its seeds together to make helicopters', George told her, smiling at memory's wistful fragment — his first smile since the diagnosis, and his last. Within three weeks he was in his coffin.

This was long before the... It was a long while ago. Fifteen years now she'd been a widow, and for most of that time she'd been cut off from the rest of the family. George could never have imagined that such a thing would happen to her. When he was coming to the end of his days he'd said in a hoarse rustle of reassurance, 'You'll have plenty of company, Rhonda. It's a blessing that the family is so close to you. A blessing for you and for them.' She knew he'd meant close in a physical sense as well as emotionally close: the fact that their only child and only grandchild lived nearby, just a couple of minutes' walk, meant frequent contact. Being a single parent in part-time work, Freda depended heavily on Rhonda to help with all sorts of arrangements, such as picking up young Mary after school on the days when Freda couldn't manage it herself.

But the incident had slammed a door shut on all of that. Wish? Desire? Rhonda couldn't bear to contemplate the thing she most fervently yearned for. She put the notebook aside and wiped her cheeks.

Looking slowly through her list of the dead, she drew oval rings around the names of those she was missing now so painfully that she wanted to revive them all and make amends for having undervalued her relationship with them. Then, after a long pause, at the bottom of the page she drew a large empty ellipse and stared at it. She couldn't bring herself to write the name inside it.

Remembering, Rhonda thought, was fundamentally a process of compiling items on lists. Forgetting happened through omission. Dot-point inventories, begun as a simple aide-memoire, might sometimes develop into bits of story-shaped retrospection, if you let them; but still the remembering was in the

writing. Getting vital things down on paper, remindingly: that was how to ensure they wouldn't be overlooked.

A sudden thought came in edgeways: she herself wouldn't be on anyone's memorial list. Even her persistent cousin Sally would just cross her off the Christmas card memo sheet. Almost everyone had tried to forget Rhonda's name because it triggered recollection of the terrible thing. Nobody, she was sure, would want to mention her if they could avoid it.

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'Seems an odd one, that Mrs Pringle', the young nurse said to the matron. 'Still got all her marbles, looks like, but there's something about her manner. Speak to her and she often just turns away. Likes to stay in her room, scribbling in that notebook. Not letters to anyone, not that I've seen. Keeps herself apart, doesn't she?'

'Oh well, there's a story to that.' The matron shook her head. 'I thought you'd have heard by now, though it's only a few months since you started here. None of the other nurses told you about her, then?'

'Nup.'

'She must have been with us for the best part of ten years, I reckon. Checked herself in. Nothing wrong with her physically. None of the usual problems you see here. Quite an intelligent woman, Mrs Pringle is. Educated. She just needed a refuge because of the terrible thing that put her in the public spotlight. It's a shame but there are always people who're quick to pass judgment. Her daughter shunned her and a lot of others did too. Anyway it was like Mrs Pringle decided to put herself into a sort of permanent quarantine, if you know what I mean.'

'But what was this terrible thing...?'

‘Oh the papers were full of it, the TV, everything, for weeks – until they found her.’

‘So Mrs Pringle had gone missing?’

‘No, not her. Here’s how it happened. Her daughter, single parent, used to rely heavily on her for practical support, having to manage a job and the little girl, along with the shopping and housework and the rest of it, you see. The school where the kiddy went was fairly close to her grandmother’s house, so the old lady would walk there in the afternoon and wait for her at the school gate, a seven-year-old she was, and they’d walk back together, and then the mother would pick her up from the house after she finished work.

‘But this particular day, for whatever reason, Mrs Pringle simply forgot to collect her granddaughter after school. It just slipped her mind until much later in the afternoon, and then she hurried there in a panic but the little one was nowhere to be seen. You can imagine. Desperate phone calls to the police and the hospital. Nothing. She’d vanished. It was in the news night after night. Appeals for information, all of that. Someone told the police they’d seen the child walking along a footpath near the school, would’ve been trying to make her way in the direction of her grandmother’s house, but she never arrived. An abduction. Weeks later, a couple of bushwalkers up in the hills found her body beside a track there, half-covered with branches and leaves. The life had been sucked out of the poor kid and she’d been discarded like orange peel.

‘You might think no woman could forget to collect her granddaughter from school, eh? But easy enough to get distracted and overlook anything, really. I know I couldn’t afford to rely on my memory in this job. I need reminders. Lists. I’m always listing.’

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‘Come on now, Mrs Pringle. Time to put out your light.’ The matron stood in the doorway. ‘It’s late’, she added.

'Much too late', whispered Rhonda. Setting her lists aside, she lay down and turned her moist face to the wall. The matron reached for the switch and consigned her to darkness.