



# Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:7:00

## Rest easy my love

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A bedraggled, wet vagrant lay on top of a plastic sheet covering the bed in cubicle 4 of the A and E department at Park Heath Cottage hospital. At 4.15am the blue paper curtain was drawn back by a thick-set nurse.

'Phew he stinks!', the curtain swung closed again, too quickly for the nurse to hear his meek apology. Neither could the tears in his eyes be seen, nor the regret in his voice be heard. He wasn't a dirty man, he was mostly clean, proud and never-ever soiled himself, at least not knowingly. This night, admittedly, he did stink, he should apologise, he wanted to explain that it wasn't his fault, that this time he was blameless.

Earlier, and as usual, he was sleeping under God's sky, as all free men are wont to do, in a place where a kitchen outlet vented slightly- warm air through a grate in the pavement. He smelled of chips or burgers most winter mornings.

They were shouting but he didn't stir, keeping quiet was best. The kicking wasn't harsh, they were obviously drunk. He didn't know whether they all urinated on him, but it was enough to soak quickly through the quilted Blacks 2-Season sleeping bag he'd found discarded, worse was the one aiming for his head. He'd experienced

before, that urine only stays warm while it's running, then the disgusting wetness sucks the warmth from you and the shivering intensifies. He should have stayed still and would have, if one hadn't persisted and tried to pull him from his cocoon, no, no more, enough.

He fought valiantly amongst the jibes and ridicule but never connected a punch. He fell and was kicked again, this time with venom and, for them, with more success. As he bled, they rejoiced.

Paul Marple was found only ten minutes or so later, in the same position that the brave band of brothers had left him, half on and half off the path, his trousers pulled to his badly grazed knees. Bleeding from a head wound and delirious, crying, softly, so as not to disturb, he struggled to recover. A kind male passer-by called the authorities on his mobile but left before they arrived, he wasn't about to touch the filthy heap. Paul's quilted sleeping bag was lifted by the next grubby witness of his plight but was quickly dropped as the realisation of its additional damp cocktail hit-home. She took his bottle instead, carefully but shakily placing it into her Sports-Max holdall, muttering obscenities and cursing her luck.

The ambulance driver's retort of; 'Yes, yes, I know mate, it never is, is it?' put a swift end to Paul's attempt to explain and to apologise for his condition. The medic attending wouldn't bring the sleeping bag along with them either.

During the journey, the medic was as nice as he could be, given the circumstances. Paul kept quiet and tried not to touch anything, other than the plastic sheet.

'What's your name?'

'Paul, Paul Marple.'

'Address?'

'No.'

'Age?'

'61.'

'Are you sure? you look older, not 71?'

'Yes, 71.'

'Thought so.' Paul wasn't 71 but didn't have the energy to argue the point. The man continued:

'What have you drunk tonight?'

'Cider.'

'Just cider?'

'Yes.'

'When did you have your last drink?'

'I'm not sure, what time is it now? The medic looked down at him.

'I'll put one hour, OK?'

'Yes, fine.' The medic mumbled under his breath as he wrote it down.

'Drugs?'

'No.'

'Sure?'

'Yes.'

Next of kin?'

'No.'

'No-one?'

'No, I did have a family, I did once.'

But you don't now?'

'No.'

'What, are they all dead then?' The medic was being flippant, he should not have been.

'Yes.' But Paul knew that in truth, of course, they weren't.

'Do you have any social or court orders out on you?'

'No.'

'Ok, the hospital staff will sort you out and then contact a charity who may help you.'

'Thank you.' Paul was glad that the interrogation was over.

'You know,' the medic paused before continuing. 'You know that you people waste our time, don't you?' The medic should not act in this manner, but Paul saw that he couldn't help himself. His body language was in frustration, not in anger.

'Yes, I am sorry.'

'Don't be sorry, do something about it.'

'I will.' Paul was as sincere as his body would allow.

The medic was careful in his work, more out of self-preservation than the wish to care. He noted Paul's pulse and blood pressure on the sheet, both were high. There was no siren until they left the town centre, Paul looked up at him in surprise.

'It isn't for you. We've had a serious call, a real call.'

As Paul was lifted from the ambulance, his attempt at initial communication with the porter was cut short. He ignored Paul and spoke over him to the medic:

'Drunk?' Asked the porter, mainly to ridicule Paul.

'Yep.'

'Name?'

'Paul'

'How many tonight?' The porter looked down at Paul.

'First one.'

'Two quid says four before end of shift.' The porter extended his hand.

'Five', said the medic, knowing his patch on a Friday night.

'You're on!' They shook hands and laughed as the porter wheeled Paul through the automatic doors, seldom had Paul felt so low. He was beaten and bleeding, but the pain came from the shame, from the stares of the staff, the cleaner holding her nose and laughing as he wheeled past. These people would once have looked up to him, asked his advice, trusted his opinion, acted upon his instruction and strived to emulate him. If they knew how he once was, who he once was, and the good that he did, things would be different, very different.

A nurse returned with a kidney bowl and sterile dressings, she was not the same nurse that reviled at the smell, thank God. She was kind and she cleaned and stitched Paul's head wound expertly, in his qualified opinion. He didn't even feel the local anaesthetic, very well done indeed. He used to ensure they were bathed, back in the day, but there was no time tonight, so he sat in the same sodden, stinking clothes while she cleaned the grit from his knees. He apologised as eloquently as he could, for his condition and for his smell, and he told her that she was a credit to her profession.

Natalie was a mature nurse, working part-time, she seemed to rise above the melees of outpatient's A and E. She was calm, efficient, technically good at the job, and Paul was right, she was

indeed a credit to her profession. In her three months at Park Heath, since transferring from St Edmund's, there was nothing but praise from all who met her. She cleaned Paul up quickly, stitching two wounds and gluing another on the left knee and she apologised that she couldn't spend too much time with him, they were, as usual, very busy. She briefly asked about Paul's past and the life experiences that led him to his current predicament and she gave him the little time she had in full concentration. She said nothing, no judgement, no rebuke, no pity. He couldn't believe it, it was wonderful, in no time at all she was like a good friend, for a long time his only friend.

When she left the cubicle, Paul said goodbye and thank you, and he really, honestly meant it. He pulled his grubby shirt sleeve down over the plaster she had carefully applied over the syringe wound, tetanus injection most probably, and made ready to leave the hospital, sober and warm, he greeted the porter with a smile.

Natalie left the A and E department and descended the stairs to the cleaners' storeroom, a place that still had mobile reception, somewhere she could call in isolation. Mark answered, Natalie spoke first:

'It's me, well done, not too damaged but enough to get him here.'

'We wanted to do much more.'

'I know but it's best you didn't.'

'And you are certain it's him?' Asked Mark.

'Yes, I checked his record, he's been here before, many times, no mistake, Dr Paul Marple MD., ex MD'

Natalie ended the phone call with the words; 'It's done, I'll let you know when.'

The Heathfield Gazette ran a small article on the homeless in their Saturday 19th December issue. It was prompted by the discovery of a body of a vagrant, in a back-alley near the town centre. A man known to social services as Paul, homeless, a former doctor, was found dead in his sleeping bag, hypothermia most probably. Dr Paul Marple was a Junior doctor whose licence to practice was removed some 22 years earlier, struck-off as it's commonly known, following a case of clinical negligence in which a small boy died of blood poisoning, sepsis in today's jargon. Dr Marple's failure to act, despite clear clinical diagnosis, was taken as a breach of duty of care. In short, he failed to do what an equally trained and qualified person would reasonably have been expected to have done in that circumstance, and that directly led to the boy's death. His scant defence didn't include the real reason for his negligence, the reason he had to leave the hospital or the loss that he too suffered that night, he reflected that there was, for him, no excuse. His heavy drinking, following a short custodial sentence, resulted in the loss of everything, family friends and finally home and dignity. A fellow street dweller said that he never forgave himself and remarked that underneath it all, he seemed a kind man.

Natalie Markham was divorced two years after the tragedy in which her 8-year-old son, Lee, had died. She never fully understood the actions of the hospital staff, yet following a move and name change, she spent the ensuing years happy and working in the very environment that spoiled her dreams and shattered her life. Natalie only later understood how Lee had died but could not forgive why. She had tried, but no.

The few words spoken over a small neat grave in a neighbouring village somehow comforted the family group of four. She ended with a goodbye:

'Rest easy my love.'

They would never discuss the incident again.

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