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THE BBC NATIONAL SHORT STORY AWARD



Haywards Heath

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THE CAR RADIO issued a blast of sound so sudden and brutish that Attila nearly came to an emergency stop. It took a moment to gather himself. In his chest his heart beat wildly and his scalp had shrunk against his skull, hair follicles tightened in alarm, altogether a sign he was more nervous than he let himself believe, though in every other way he was feeling pretty good about things. The weather, for one: a cool, clear Spring day. The prospect of the drive on clean-surfaced, empty roads. An escape from the city, time to himself.

The youth at the car hire desk must have turned on the radio when he brought the car around. The new generation could not tolerate the sound of silence. This was the second car, there having been little possibility of Attila's bulk being contained by the first. The desk clerk had failed to see what a fool could not have missed. Still, had it been otherwise he wouldn't be driving a Jaguar XJ

from the Prestige range for the same price. Attila fiddled with the radio until he found something pleasing. Gradually he felt his scalp withdraw its grip on his cranium.

At Crawley he left the M23. He thought he should eat and turned off the main road towards Haywards Heath. Haywards Heath. It had been a joke between he and Rosie for a long time. The overseas students all had a hard time pronouncing it. Ay-wads 'eat. A sly tease, she would ask each new acquaintance to repeat the name of her hometown. After his turn she'd glanced at him over her sherry glass and he held her gaze until she turned away. He knew, from the way she stood, the way she walked, mostly from the way she refused to turn back in his direction, that she felt the mark of his gaze on her skin, like a touch on the back of her neck. Afterwards and perversely, many months into their affair, she denied she'd noticed him that evening. He wore a Malcolm X goatee and a suit to attend lectures. This made her feel sorry for him, she said. They were in their third year when they met, together for three more. By the time of their graduation ceremony he was already six thousand miles away.

At the London hospital where he worked as a visiting consultant – visits which had occurred twice yearly for the last five years, because of his expertise in displaced populations, in trauma – he had exhaled all the breath in his lungs at the sound

of her name. Early retirement, his colleague replied in answer to Attila's careful enquiries. The idea for the trip came to him in a moment and had taken over. He had been consumed by the details: renting the car, planning the route, driving on the left hand side of the road.

He thought again about food. At a pub he pulled over and parked. Inside he found a booth and ordered orange glazed duck, which arrived garnished with a rose of tomato peel, which he also consumed. He drew no stares. He opened the atlas out on the table. He reckoned he was less than five miles away. After he had eaten he carried the map to the publican, who jerked his head at the Jaguar and said: 'What no SatNav? Where you headed?'

'Haywards Heath,' pronounced Attila, perfectly.

Next to Attila in the passenger seat the publican pushed the buttons of the device and rubbed the tips of his fingers along the wood of the dashboard. Guided by the patient, electronic voice Attila passed through one village and then another. When he missed a turning the voice redirected him in the same even tone. Attila found himself unaccountably irked by the smoothness of her voice. He took another wrong turn, quite deliberately. She proved unflappable.

Now he knew how his patients felt. He analysed his own behaviour. Prevarication. He

drove steadily for ten minutes following the voice's orders.

'You have arrived at your destination.'

What had he imagined? A bungalow. Shelves of books and papers. A quiet, ordered existence writing for professional journals. Some vanity constrained his imagination before it could reach the point of giving her a husband.

Rosie hadn't published in years.

At the desk he asked for her by her maiden name.

'Are you a relative?' asked the woman, unblinkingly.

Attila hesitated. The woman was black herself. A young, African man in a white nurse's uniform moved noiselessly across the hall carpet. 'A friend,' Attila said, finally.

'In the day room.'

The air was over heated, filled with static and the smells of cooked food and talcum powder. Nobody minded him as he moved heavily through the building. In the day room residents slept in the pale sunlight. Others were gathered in a semi circle around a radio. He found her by the window, a newspaper on her lap. She hadn't noticed him. In that moment he was aware of the possibility of turning back, and also of all he had to say. All that had happened, the foreseen and the unforeseen. He wished now he had brought something, flowers or chocolates.

‘Hello, Rosie.’ When she didn’t respond, he moved into the line of her vision.

Now she looked directly at him: ‘Hello,’ she said and smiled.

‘Hello, Rosie,’ he repeated. He stood, his hands by his side. He smiled, too and shook his head. ‘How are you?’

‘I’m very well,’ she nodded.

‘Your former colleagues helped me find you.’ He moved to sit next to her.

‘Did they?’ She didn’t turn to him, and so he examined her offered profile for a few moments. How much beauty there was still. Spontaneously he took her hand. His greatest fear had been that an excess of courtesy would surround their meeting. The last time they saw each other she had not wanted him to leave. He told her it was a condition of his scholarship. They’d argued for weeks, months. What about us? she’d pleaded. But he went back to his country anyway, full of ideas of himself, of the future. Which one of them had been naive?

They sat in silence and the silence felt comfortable already.

‘Are you married?’

‘I was,’ replied Attila. ‘She died.’

‘Ah, I’m sorry.’ She tutted and shook her head. ‘That must have been difficult for you.’

He said nothing. The events had unfolded on news programmes around the world, he’d wondered

then why she never made contact.

Outside an elderly resident on a bench threw crumbs for a lone blackbird. Next to her a young woman turned away to speak into a mobile phone, her free hand thrust deep into the pocket of her coat. Where to begin?

In the end he said simply: 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't stay, *that* I didn't stay,' He waited for her response in silence. She must know exactly what he meant. It's what he came here to say, though he had not, until this moment, admitted it to himself.

She patted him on the arm with her free hand and the action brought him comfort. 'It's alright.' They sat once more in silence. When she spoke she said: 'I'm afraid you'll have to tell me your name again, dear.'

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply: 'Attila.'

She smiled, 'I have a friend with the same name. What a coincidence! He's coming to see me any time soon. I'm waiting for him. Maybe you two will meet.'

'Excuse me.' He rose and went in search of the men's room. Inside he leaned his back against the cubicle door until he gained some control of his breathing. The temperature in the place had brought him out in a sweat. He washed his hands and loosened the collar of his shirt. After he left the lavatory he didn't return immediately to the day room, but roamed the ground floor of the building.

Through a porthole in a door he saw the young African helper spooning food into the mouth of an elderly woman. Something about the scene stopped Attila: the hand at her back, which prevented her from slumping, the infinite care in the way the young man wiped her slackened mouth with a napkin. At one point the careworker looked up, straight at Attila. Their eyes met. The young man said nothing but bent once more to his task. Attila turned away.

To Rosie he suggested a walk in the grounds and was relieved when she accepted.

‘How long have you lived here?’

She misunderstood and replied: ‘Since I was a girl. In Hayward’s Heath. What about you?’

‘I went to university near here. It was a long time ago.’

But she was already distracted: ‘People say you can’t have two robins in the same garden, but there’s no truth in it. Look!’ And then: ‘A wren. I do believe there are more of them than there were twenty years ago.’

She held onto his arm, seemingly awash with the wonder of it all. She reached out to touch the drops of rain on the leaves, tilted her head, gazed at the sky and closed her eyes. He waited and watched her. She stretched out her arms. He had a memory of a photograph of her in the exact same pose. Where was it now? She let her arms drop back to her sides. They completed a first tour of

the garden. Rosie said: 'Shall we do another turn, Attila? Another turn?' It was a phrase she had used often in the past: at the funfair, boating on a lake, on a dance floor. She teased him for being too serious.

Attila felt light-headed and – somewhat bizarrely – youthful. It was the effect of Rosie's mood, her enthusiasm for this unremarkable, chrysanthemum bordered square of lawn, also the fact of being the youngest in the place by twenty years, excepting the staff. Fewer silver strands in Rosie's dark hair than in his own. He remembered she had no brothers and sisters.

They passed for the second time the woman on the bench, her daughter still speaking on the telephone. Rosie bent forward, plucked a sweet from the box on the old woman's lap and popped it into her mouth. Rosie gave an impish giggle, the sweet bulged in her cheek. 'She won't miss one. They're my favourite.' She gripped his arm and leaned her head against his shoulder. He inclined his head to hers and smelt the faint brackish odour of her hair, resisted the urge to kiss it. Behind them the old woman sat staring into the middle distance her hands curled limply around the box of sweets. Attila could hear the daughter finish her call.

'Promise you'll come and visit me again, won't you?' Rosie said suddenly, raising her head. 'It's deathly dull in here.'

He gave his promise and meant it. Perhaps if

he kept coming she would eventually remember him, as she almost had today. On this slender hope he hung his heart.

Two months later he returned carrying a box of Newbury Fruits. The sweets had not been especially easy to find and the packaging had changed, as might be expected after forty years. Along the way he had stopped at the same pub, where the publican remembered him or, more accurately, the Jaguar which had been replaced by a Vauxhall for this trip. Rosie wasn't in the day room, nor in the garden though the weather was fine enough to permit it. Attila retraced his steps back towards reception. The woman, a different one to before, angled her head in the direction of a corridor. Attila advanced down it, bearing the box of sweets clamped in his huge hand.

In the dining room he found an afternoon dance underway: a dozen people moved slowly to the sound of the Blue Danube. Mostly residents danced with a member of the staff. Around the room elders dozed and snored, made soporific as flies by music and heat.

There in the centre – Rosie, cradled by the arms of the young, African worker Attila had noticed during his last visit. Her forehead was pressed against his chest, her hand in his, eyes closed. The care worker had his head bent towards her. He had young, smooth skin and, Attila noticed for the first time, a small beard.

For some minutes Attila stood and watched. Then he placed the box of sweets down on a table and reached for a chair. As he did so, the music wound to a halt, people began to shuffle from the floor. He bent to pick up the box of sweets, heard Rosie say his name and looked up. The smile was already on his face.

But she was not looking his way, seemed not to be aware of his presence in the room. Rather she was looking up at the young careworker, who still held her in his arms. 'Shall we do another turn, Attila? Another turn. What do you say?'

And the young man replied: 'Whatever makes you happy, Rosie.'

Rosie nodded. The music began again. Attila replaced the box of Newbury Fruits on the table. He sat down and watched.