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All in the Mind

Alastair Campbell

Friday – Chapter 1

Professor Martin Sturrock was feeling stressed enough already, even before the phone call from Simon telling him Aunt Jessica had died. Now, as he sat in his office waiting for his first patient of the day to arrive, he felt a rising sense of panic mixing in with the usual Friday tiredness. He tried to quantify the panic. Was it manageable, or did it herald a plunge? Would it fade as the day passed, or was he facing a weekend of angst and insomnia? He thought it was manageable.

Just about.

Friday was usually Professor Sturrock's best day of the week because it was the day he saw David Temple, his favourite patient. But he could not recall a Friday that had started as badly as this one. He had woken up feeling low, a mood not helped when he glimpsed through a gap in the bedroom curtains a grey sky carrying a hint of rain.

Breakfast had been another silent stand-off with his wife Stella, who seemed to find something to be angry or sullen about most mornings, and today chose the fact he had opened a fresh carton of milk ahead of two cartons which had been in the fridge for three days already.

'I don't understand why you can't look at the date on the side,' she'd said on realising his error. 'You're supposed to be the one who likes everything ordered.'

'Sorry,' he replied mechanically, stuffing the carton back into the fridge.

On a good day, if his mood was up and the sun was shining through the kitchen windows, the pouring of fresh milk on to organic cereal could carry with it a sense of hope, vitality and energy for the day to come, whatever challenges it might hold. On a bad day, milk had all the emotional qualities of slurry, especially when his wife was making an issue of it.

He'd had a slight knot in his stomach ever since he woke up, and food was not going down well. The cereal lacked its normal taste and texture, and his coffee tasted burnt

and bitter. But with the number of patients he was seeing today, he knew he had to eat. He thought about slicing a couple of bananas into the mix, as they were easily eaten and digested, and a good energy hit. He glanced over to the fruit bowl, sitting on the counter a yard or so from where Stella was rearranging the contents of a cupboard, noisily, for reasons known only to her.

There were plenty of apples, both green and red. There were at least four oranges, maybe more hidden below those he could see. There were a few plums which looked as if they were beginning to go off, and a small bunch of grapes which already had. There were only two bananas, lying on top of the apples, joined together, with the attached ends hanging over the edge of the bowl. But he felt the risk was too great. He might peel them, slice them, start to eat them, and only then would Stella turn from her cupboard rearranging and say, 'I was planning to have those for breakfast myself.' So he carried on chewing, telling himself he could buy a couple of bananas from the fruit and veg stall at Brook Green tube station, and eat them when he reached the hospital. It was while Sturrock was taking his cereal bowl to the sink that the phone rang.

He thought about just allowing it to ring away in the hallway, leaving for the tube and letting Stella decide whether to answer it or not, but the milk-carton incident had left him feeling defensive. He went to pick it up.

Simon and he rarely spoke these days, so the second he heard his cousin say, 'Hello, Martin, it's Simon,' he knew what had happened. 'Hello, Martin, it's Simon. I'm afraid I have some bad news.' 'Oh dear,' said Sturrock, the formulaic tones of death already taking over the conversation.

'Yes, I'm afraid so. My mother passed away in the night.' Aunt Jessica was the youngest of three and, Martin's father having died five years before, the last of that generation of Sturrock siblings to go.

'I'm so sorry, Simon.'

It's never easy to get the words right with deaths in the family, he thought.

It was different if it was a friend telling you about the death of someone you didn't know. 'I've been at a funeral,' a colleague might say. 'My uncle died.' 'I'm sorry to hear that,' you'd reply, and it would be no more or less than your colleague expected. They'd want you to sympathise but wouldn't expect you to go over the top about someone you'd never even met. With blood relatives, the death codes were not so simple.

He had been close to his cousin as a child. Though he grew up in Hertfordshire and Simon in Somerset, they had spent all their holidays together, and he had enjoyed many happy weekends staying at his aunt and uncle's cosy farmhouse with its blue-and-white crockery and worn pine furniture. His father was an engineer, whose work often took him abroad, and his mother thought that a bit of male company in the holidays would be good for him, rather than knocking around the house with her

and his sister Jan. Fifteen months apart in age, he and Simon had played together, fought together, complained about their parents to each other, swapped ill-formed and confused fantasies about girls. But though there was kinship there, there was no lasting adult friendship. By the time he was in his mid teens, he had stopped seeing so much of Simon. The allure of trips to Somerset had vanished. Instead, he formed closer bonds with his own school friends, refusing invitations to accompany his aunt and uncle on holiday. And so, slowly, he and his cousin had drifted apart. Where once they would see each other several times a year, as young adults building their own lives, that dwindled to Christmas and Easter and now, as they neared pensionable age, it was usually weddings that brought them together, or funerals, the last of which had been Simon's father's.

Sturrock could tell that Simon had already made the call to several others. It was as though he had a script, and he was ticking off the main points.

- Passed away peacefully. Something of a release in the end.
- Good innings. Sturrock thought it odd that even people who knew nothing about cricket, and possibly had never watched let alone played the game, used this phrase to describe the life of anyone who had lived beyond eighty.
- Details of the funeral still to be decided.
- Then a couple of details from the last few days, in Aunt Jessica's case how they knew things weren't good when she refused blackcurrant crumble on Monday evening, even though it was her favourite pudding, and also the story of a row with one of the nurses at the care home who insisted on her sitting downstairs with the other residents to watch afternoon TV when she actually just wanted to stay in bed.

'She was feisty to the end then,' said Sturrock.

'Yes,' said Simon. 'Feisty to the end.'

It was strange to reflect how, in his youth, he really had thought of Aunt Jessica as 'feisty'. He'd loved her energy, the way she would bustle around the farmhouse, making everyone feel wanted and involved in everything that was going on. He'd loved her cooking and her relaxed approach to mealtimes, bedtimes, and her appreciation of his sometimes unconventional opinions and ambitions. He'd considered it one of the great mysteries of nature that his grandparents had produced two children as different as his father and Aunt Jessica. But then there'd come a moment when he wasn't sure they were so different after all.

'I'm glad it was fairly painless when she went, Simon,' he said.

‘And if there is anything we can do, just call.’ He was conscious of how trite that sounded, then taken aback by the response it provoked. ‘There is something, actually,’ said Simon. ‘I was hoping you might do the eulogy.’