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Opening Extract from...

# THE OLD YOU

Written by Louise Voss

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# The Old You

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## 1
## September 2016

Ed's condition was formally diagnosed on the same afternoon I had my interview for the job at Hampton University. A probable ending and a potential new beginning, all on the same day.

I'd rushed home and picked him up – there wasn't even time to change out of my interview suit – and now here we were, in the Memory Clinic of the local mental health centre. We were with the consultant, whose name was Mr Deshmukh; the three of us crowded together in such a small side room that our knees almost touched.

'Spell "world" backwards,' Mr Deshmukh instructed, gazing intently at Ed as though Ed was in the spotlit black chair in the *Mastermind* final, not in this tiny windowless office in Mountain Way.

'D,' Ed began, confidently.

There was a long pause.

L, I silently urged him. This was the man who did the quick crossword and the Sudoku in the *Guardian* every day without fail, rarely leaving any blanks – or at least, he had done for years. It occurred to me that I hadn't seen him even pick it up for a couple of months now.

'Um,' Ed said, and the breath stopped in my throat.

He couldn't really have dementia. It was unthinkable. He wasn't even sixty yet! My heart sank as I remembered all the qualms I'd dismissed about marrying an older man. The fourteen-year age gap hadn't seemed insurmountable back then.

'Go on.'

'Um – D, L...'

I mentally cheered. He was fine! That, surely, was the trickiest part of the task.

But then Ed corrected himself. 'Wait, no: D, R, L, O, W.'

He looked pleased with himself, like a shy child winning a prize on sports day. This was not the Ed I knew. The Ed I knew was political, clever, confrontational.

Mr Deshmukh shook his head. He was a smooth-cheeked Indian guy with the sort of thick, glossy, black hair that wouldn't look out of place on a luxury cushion. It undulated gently, like the movement of wind through a cornfield.

'Try again,' he urged.

Ed was puzzled and then annoyed. 'Why? That's correct!'

'I'm afraid not.'

My husband made his exasperated face – a face I was very familiar with. 'D, R, L, O, W! What the hell is wrong with that?'

'It's not quite right,' the consultant said. 'Let's come back to it.'

He slid a blank sheet of paper across his desk towards Ed and handed him a pencil. 'Please draw me a clock face, with the numbers, and draw the hands indicating that the time is twenty to four.'

I saw the swoop of Ed's Adam's apple as he swallowed. He thought for a moment, then, with decisive movements drew something almost recognisable as a circle. It was more of an oval, and the ends didn't meet properly, but it wasn't bad, I thought.

Then I thought, not bad? A kid in infants' school would have done a far better job.

The tip of Ed's pencil hovered over the oval. He wrote a 1 at the top, where 12 should be, then, far too close together, 2, 3, 5, 7 and 9. He'd only got as far around the clock face as 4 should be.

'There's something wrong with that,' he admitted miserably.

There was something wrong full stop, I thought. I'd never be able to take the uni admin job if I was offered it. I'd have to stay home and look after him. And how, dear God, were we ever going to break it to Ben? He adored his dad.

Mr Deshmukh scribbled something on a pad. 'In the light of the knowledge that your father died of Pick's Disease, an MRI scan would be by far the best way to diagnose you; much better than these

neuropsychological tests. Plus, it would exclude other reversible causes of dementia like hydrocaephalus or brain tumour. I'll refer you.'

'No way,' Ed said, jumping up in agitation. 'There is absolutely no chance whatsoever of me going into one of those scan things.'

'He's developed claustrophobia,' I told Mr Deshmukh. 'He can't be in small spaces, and he won't fly any more either. I don't know if that's related.' I paused. 'Is there any likelihood it might be something reversible?'

I barely remembered Victor Naismith, Ed's father. He died soon after Ed and I met, a tiny catatonic shell hunched in a nursing-home vinyl armchair, doubly incontinent, unable to recognise anybody, speak, or do anything at all for himself. Years of misery, guilt, pain and vast expense for all of their family.

Victor had only been seventy-four when he died. Was this what was in store for Ed? For me? All our plans! Travel, hobbies, the helter-skelter whiz into retirement I'd envisioned, rather than a slow plod gravewards. I would have to shelve everything and stand by watching as Ed's brain gradually shrivelled and his intellect crumbled daily, until there was nothing left but a breathing corpse that would probably cling to endless long, expensive years of a useless life … I wasn't sure I could do that, and it made me feel terrible.

Deshmukh ignored my question, which didn't make me feel any better. Instead he turned to Ed: 'If you're really adamant about not wanting an MRI, I suggest you get a lumbar puncture instead. That will also rule out any unusual infections or cancer. And an EEG, although with FTD – sorry, frontotemporal degeneration – that may be inconclusive, especially early on in the disease.'

Ed suddenly sat up straight, the light back in his eyes making them flash a startling, piercing blue. 'What are you saying? Is this a diagnosis?'

Mr Deshmukh opened a cardboard folder in front of him and didn't meet Ed's gaze – which I thought was fairly poor, as bedside manners went. He held up a sheet of paper that I hadn't seen before.

'Dr Naismith, this is your second visit. We've already diagnosed

mild cognitive impairment and that was – when? – Hmmm, yes, six months ago.'

I held up my hand. 'Wait – what? What do you mean? This isn't Ed's second visit!'

Ed looked sheepish. He reached over and gently pushed down my outstretched fingers. 'I didn't tell you, honey. I came before. I was worried because of Dad. Hugh Lark at the surgery referred me.'

I stared at him. Now he was Ed again, not a little boy with milk teeth drawing a wobbly circle, but a strong man; a medical man, wise and insightful. My husband, the man for whom I'd given up my career, my reputation, my friends...

He squeezed my fingers and a lump came to my throat.

'Why didn't you tell me? You've been worried for six months and you didn't tell me?' My voice was high and tight, veering dangerously towards being out of control as I remembered the numerous times I'd felt infuriated by him recently, accused him of 'not listening' when he repeated things or forgot arrangements or made odd claims that people had stolen personal possessions that it transpired he'd just mislaid.

'You've been worried too,' he said in a sulky voice.

This was true. But I had convinced myself that he was just being annoying – a natural corollary of his advancing age.

'If we compare the tests, I'm afraid that it's fairly obvious there has been a significant decline in mental capability since then, and in tandem with the information you have already given me, and your GP's report stating his belief that the damage has not been caused by an infection, or thyroid malfunction or vitamin deficiency, I'm sorry to say that I do believe you to be in the early stages of either Alzheimer's or Pick's Disease – most likely the latter, given your family history. Please do not assume that this is a death sentence...'

He was going to say more but Ed cut him off. 'Please remember that I was a GP myself, Doctor...' – Ed had to look at the brass nameplate on the doctor's desk – 'Dekmush. I don't need to make any assumptions. It could be a fluid build-up in my, um...' He gestured towards his head. 'Or a lump thing. Or a bleed.'

The doctor scribbled something on a pad. I noticed how hairy his knuckles were, like a werewolf. 'It's Mr Deshmukh,' he corrected gently. 'Of course, but unless you agree to brain scans then we can't find out much more, clinically.'

'Can you give him some medication, to improve his memory?' I felt desperate. 'What's that drug – Aricept?'

Mr Deshmukh gazed levelly at us both. 'I'm afraid that the usual drugs for dementia really don't work with Pick's disease; in fact they can be quite counterproductive.'

Ed snorted. 'Even when they do work, they only work for about fifty percent of parents ... patents ... patients, and only for about a year. What's the point?'

I was aghast. 'Is that the best that medical science can offer? Drugs might buy him a year if they work at all, which they probably won't?'

I had a sudden, unbidden mental image of Ed's dad the last time I saw him, being hoisted out of the wingback chair in which he spent the majority of his days, into a wheelchair to be taken to be 'toileted', as the staff euphemistically referred to it. His nappy had been clearly visible above the waistband of his stained tracksuit trousers, and there had been an enormous lump at his groin where the nappy – or 'continence aid', another euphemism – had got wet and bunched up. The brightest man Ed said he'd ever known was drooling, his hands curled into claws, his teeth turning black and dropping out because nobody had been able to clean them for weeks.

Poor Victor. Poor *Ed*. And poor me, I thought, suddenly angry. This was not what I'd risked everything for.