The Lighted Rooms

Richard Mason

Published by Phoenix

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Chapter 1

Number 17 Kingsley Gardens presided over a leafy street on the south side of the river, protected from the traffic of Wandsworth Bridge Road by its own substantial grounds and a low-rise 1950s development of flats and shops. A flight of stairs led to an imposing front door, beside which a brass plaque engraved *The Albany* was discreetly obscured by a well-pruned yew tree in a terracotta pot. Only a wheelchair ramp spoiled the illusion of an exclusive gentleman's club, though its expansive width and polished gold rails implied a superior sort of disabled access.

Eloise helped her mother from the taxi and put her arm around her shoulders. 'Here we are!' she said.

'Yes,' said Joan. 'Here we are indeed.'

They stood together on the pavement, admiring the building's exuberant exterior. As The Albany's full-colour brochure informed potential residents on its opening page, the home occupied a 'Grade II listed Victorian mansion, sympathetically restored to the highest standards and retaining many of its original period features'. Above them, the architectural fashions of a thousand years competed for prominence on a densely crowded façade across which turrets, cupolas and bay windows had been liberally scattered by an effusive architect of the late nineteenth century. Medieval arrow slits sliced through Jacobean gables; slate roofs rose steeply, dotted with *oeil-de-boeuf* windows. Gothic arches, Norman columns and Corinthian pilasters jostled for attention across a frontage of white stucco stamped, above the door, with ornately intertwined Gs and Cs.

'Goodness me,' said Joan.

'This looks like the best one so far.' Eloise spoke with the slightly hysterical optimism of one who has spent too many successive Saturdays examining residential-care facilities for the elderly.

'It's certainly better than that place in Enfield.'

'I'd never have let you live there.'

Joan squeezed her daughter's hand affectionately. She did not remotely condemn Eloise for putting her into a home. She had not brought her into the world, given her life and loved her, raised her and cared for her as best she could, in expectation of return. She reminded herself of this and gripped her hand more tightly. Aloud she said, 'No, of course not, darling.'

They rang the bell and were met in the pillared entrance hall by a smartly turned out nurse in a uniform of grey and white, whose nametag read *Sister Karen*. 'And you must be Mrs McAllister, or may I call you Joan?' She enunciated each word with sprightly professionalism. 'I am the Nursing Manager here. Welcome to The Albany!'

There was something representative, Joan thought, in the tone of Sister Karen's voice. It carried in it the well-scrubbed tiles of The Albany's entrance hall floor and suggested scrupulously tidy, air-freshened public rooms. She was amply built and moved with careful purposefulness. 'If you'd just follow me,' she said.

Joan glanced behind her to make sure that the pair of burnished brass piano pedals that had materialised in the taxi were with her now. They were. She was glad of that, for this was their first visit in a week and she was eager for their company. They had not made a single appearance at the nursing home in Enfield, a fact that had heightened the impact of its dank passageways and concrete-paved 'garden'. Buoyed by their lively presence, she followed Eloise and Sister Karen to the reception desk and waited behind them while Eloise wrote 'JOAN MCALLISTER, ELOISE MCALLISTER, 10.53 a.m.' in a Visitors' Register and the Nursing Manager asked them if they would like a hot drink.

Eloise worked long hours, Joan knew, and she was anxious that this visit should not consume more of her daughter's precious free time than was necessary. She was also eager to enjoy the pedals' unexpected reappearance in private, as one never knew how long they would remain for once they had come, or where one might find oneself without their kindly guidance. So she said, 'I'm quite all right, thank you. Perhaps we could begin the tour?' and turned expectantly towards a majestic staircase, the banisters of which appeared to end in a pair of winged mahogany angels.

Joan was quite accustomed to seeing extraordinary things in matter-

of-fact places, and the sight of these heavenly figures did not unduly astonish her. The first visit of the piano pedals had been shocking, to be sure; a little disturbing, even. They had materialised over her bed in the early hours of a dark morning three years before: an alarming spectacle at first, though once she had put away her fears and learned to befriend them, they had taken her on many adventures. She was now seldom, if ever, surprised by the curious things she sometimes saw.

'Not even a slice of cake?' Sister Karen was herself a little peckish. It was her custom to entertain potential clients to refreshments in her office, while she explained to them the advantages of the world-class geriatric care provided by the *TranquilAge*™ chain of nursing homes.

'Go on, Mum. You always have a snack around this time.'

'Do you, now?' Sister Karen smiled approvingly. 'One of the advantages of our staff-to-patient ratio', she went on to Eloise, lowering her voice, 'is that we can continue any little routines the old dears are used to. We have the personnel to treat each client as the unique individual they are.'

Joan, whose hearing and eyesight were rather more functional than her joints, pretended not to have overheard this aside. Instead she said, 'Well I do like my elevenses.'

'That's settled then. Why don't you follow me?'

The Nursing Manager led them down a corridor tiled in stylised cornflowers, its arched ceiling reminiscent of a cathedral's nave. 'We acquired this property nine years ago,' she said, beginning her routine, 'with the aim of making it TranquilAge's European flagship. Can you believe it was once a family home? Though, of course, we still think of it as such because' – here she put her arm around Joan's shoulders, and squeezed – 'each and every resident becomes a member of the TranquilAge family.' She opened a solid-looking door and ushered her guests into a large, pleasantly furnished room, lavishly adorned with silk flowers. 'Let's get some tea on the way, then. Would you prefer carrot cake, or coffee-and-walnut?'

Sister Karen's Pre-Registration Talk took around twenty minutes, sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on the self-confidence of her audience. Some prospective clients found her air of clinical omniscience so intimidating that they asked no questions at all, and very few who heard her friendly and sincere exhortation of the

'*TranquilAge*™ Experience' did not sign on the dotted line a short while later. Those who held out tended to be daunted by the exorbitant costs involved, which was why, on the whole, Sister Karen preferred having the dear old people present while she got down to basics with their younger relatives. In her experience, middle-aged professionals were reluctant to appear stingy in front of their elderly aunts, uncles and parents, and she was expert at inferring tactfully that they were welcome to look at cheaper alternatives – provided they remembered that you got what you paid for in life.

She was quite taken aback when Eloise did not once mention the expense of a private room at The Albany, and further surprised to encounter a series of detailed, technical questions that suggested an unusual familiarity with the workings of geriatric institutions. She went through, at some length, the qualifications of The Albany's staff; the extensive background checks undertaken before any offer of employment was made; the arrangements in place to deal with a wide variety of medical mishaps. As she did so, she wondered whether Eloise had, perhaps, some personal knowledge of geriatric medicine. She hoped not, because relatives with experience in the field were prone to interfere – and this, though understandable, was an aggravation and a distraction. Was she, perhaps, a medical professional? Sister Karen glanced at the file on her lap. In the *Occupation* box Eloise had written 'Fund Manager' – which was a relief. 'I do like a client who has done their research and thought about the issues,' she said, leaning forward and smiling.

Joan listened vaguely to her daughter's interrogation of the Nursing Manager, content in the knowledge that Eloise was sure to get to the bottom of things. Had she known the cost of care at The Albany, she would have intervened and chosen a different establishment; even, if necessary, that hideous place with the concrete garden in Enfield. But she knew nothing of The Albany's rates – Eloise, in any case, handled all her money now – and in blissful ignorance she composed her face into an expression of placid concentration and looked about her for the piano pedals. These materialised, moments later, on top of Sister Karen's filing cabinet.

Quite unbeknownst to Eloise, Joan inhabited a rich inner world which she disguised from her daughter, and from everyone else, with a feeling that had begun as embarrassment but was now rather closer to the delight with which certain children hoard a secret. The piano

pedals were a portal to adventure – but she should not, she knew, begin her games now; she was sure to be disturbed in the middle, which was tedious. So she drank her tea and ate a slice of over-sweet carrot cake, thinking that there was more than a little of Astrid in the Nursing Manager: they had the same, slightly damp air of unquestioned authority.

For a moment her mother-in-law came vividly to her, but a glance at the pedals banished her; and betraying no sign of this small victory she waited patiently for the conversation between Eloise and the nurse to subside. Once it had, she answered the few questions put to her as best she could and said that she would, indeed, very much, enjoy a guided tour. Then she followed both younger women out into the cathedral-like corridor and back to the entrance hall, where the winged angels remained where she had left them. Were they real? Perhaps.

'These are original,' said Sister Karen, confirming their tangibility by patting an intricately rendered wing feather. 'As is the picture window. We did our best to preserve period features, where consistent with our Health and Safety policies.'

Above the staircase, three portraits of a woman in radiantly stained glass gleamed down and made the shadows gaudy. In the first, her hands were raised in welcome above a Latin greeting, *Salve*. In the second, her arms were thrown open beneath a banner proclaiming *Hospitalitas*, and she stood before a sumptuous feast. She was sorrowful in the third, waving goodbye above the legend *Vale*. The effect of the whole was somewhat spoiled by burglar bars which interrupted the vivid shadows and suggested the sinister possibility of forced confinement, but Joan turned her back emphatically on this thought.

'Do you use a Zimmer frame?' asked Sister Karen, kindly.

'No, dear.'

'Aren't we independent! Good for you.' The Nursing Manager pointed to her right. 'The Dining Room is down there. To the left over here is the Smokers' Recreation Lounge. Are you a smoker?'

Joan shook her head.

'Well we'll just look in quickly then.'

She took them to a large door, recessed within a neoclassical pediment on which was mounted a red electric sign that read SMOKERS ONLY. 'This is one of our two Recreation Lounges,' she said grandly, leading the way into a substantial room in the centre of which a group of people on pine armchairs were clustered, as if for warmth, around

a television set. The walls, doors and ceiling were painted magnolia and the air was thick with cigarette smoke. 'Yoohoo!' she cried. 'We have visitors!' But this news attracted the attention of only one resident, an elderly man in a wheelchair who turned wide, startled eyes to Joan and Eloise and raised a hand in an enigmatic gesture that fell somewhere between a welcome and a warning. The others remained intent on the television set, which showed a haggard-faced woman screaming at a man in a pub. Sister Karen approached the elderly man and patted his shoulder. 'Hello, Lionel! And how are we today?'

Lionel nodded but said nothing. Sister Karen shook her head and took Eloise's hand, drawing her away. 'We care for people across the ability spectrum,' she said in an undertone. 'Medical science can only do so much. Often it's a case of providing emotional support and the right kind of comforting routine.' She pursed her lips in a smile of appropriately concerned resignation. To Joan she said, more loudly, 'What luck you're so sprightly! Your daughter tells me you're a pianist. Is that so?'

Joan nodded.

'Well I've got a treat in store for you, just you see if I don't.'

She led her visitors back to the staircase, which boasted an electric chair on a reinforced steel rail. 'You'll find that we combine the latest in modern functionality with respect for our heritage,' she said, helping Joan onto the grey leather seat and sending her up the stairs at a sedate pace that somewhat belied her enthusiastic talk of a 'home fairground ride!'

Noting with approval Sister Karen's deft manipulation of the equipment's safety harness, Eloise followed her mother up the steps. They were shallow and wide, carpeted in a pattern of green and puce, their banisters gleaming with polish. It would not be so bad, she thought, to live for a few years in a place like this. There was no trace of urine beneath the smell of disinfectant, a fact which distinguished The Albany from a number of its competitors, and the rooms were decently sized. The staff were excellent and there were more than enough of them. She thought of the activities schedule that Sister Karen had just shown her and tried to imagine her mother passing a happy afternoon with the Trivial Pursuit Club. She would surely settle down and make friends. She spent too much time in her flat, sitting alone all day.

Reaching the first floor, Sister Karen helped Joan down and led them both to an imposing door, identical to the one on the ground

floor except for the fact that it was painted mushroom and sported a red electric sign that said THANK YOU FOR NOT SMOKING. 'We're very proud of this room. I'm sure you'll remember it from the brochure.' The Nursing Manager stood back, ushering them inside.

The Recreation Lounge (Non-Smokers) had once been the principal reception room of 17 Kingsley Gardens, in the days when the property had been a private house. It ran the length of the building and its seven windows looked out over the 1950s development and onto the busy lanes of Wandsworth Bridge Road. At one end stood an ornate mahogany fireplace, garlanded in flowers and supported by two figures of mythic proportion; at the other, a series of classical bookcases, in the style of Robert Adam, displayed a large selection of romantic novels and ageing magazines.

'Wow, Mum!'

Eloise could not, Joan thought, be exclaiming over the grey non-slip tiles on the floor. She looked at Sister Karen, who pointed upwards. 'Have you ever seen anything like that? It's all original – we found it when we checked for asbestos.'

The ceiling above them was painted in pale blues, greens and pinks, in a floral pattern arranged around four gilded roundels. At the centre of each was a portrait of a woman – perhaps, thought Joan, the woman in the window downstairs? She looked about her for the piano pedals. She had known them to elucidate such mysteries, but they did not seem to have followed her from Sister Karen's study. She arched her neck. The lady looked contemplative, a little sad.

'Now what do you think these images represent?' asked Sister Karen.

Joan examined the panels above her. In one, the mournful figure wore a dark cloak and leaned low over a fire of burning twigs; in another, she was draped in russet against a background of falling leaves. She wore a pretty blue dress and held a posy of spring flowers in the third, and carried a sheaf of wheat in the fourth. 'The Four Seasons?' she ventured.

Sister Karen looked disappointed. 'Very good. You're the first person I've known to get that right first time.' She patted Joan's arm, encouragingly. 'Now what do you think of that?' She was pointing at a rickety upright piano that, along with another set of pine armchairs and a widescreen television set, completed the room's furniture. Joan

did not know what she was meant to think of it. 'You'll be giving us concerts before you know it! You see if you don't!'

An hour later, Joan made her way down The Albany's front steps on Eloise's arm. It did not seem to her that it would be worthwhile to spend many more Saturdays looking at old people's homes.

'What did you think?' asked Eloise.

'I liked it very much, darling. It seems extremely well run.'

Joan was seldom critical of the institutions Eloise showed her, and this forbearance had heightened her daughter's sensitivity to the subtlest nuances of tone. 'It's meant to be the best, you know,' she said.

'I can quite see why.'

'They have an excellent staff-to-patient ratio and the building, I think, is well done.'

'Oh, very.'

Eloise helped her mother into the minicab and they sat beside each other in silence as the car moved off.

'I really don't think,' said Joan, after a moment, 'that we should carry on wasting your time like this, looking at places.'

'We'll look as long as we need to look, Mum. What matters is that you're happy. We've got to find somewhere you feel at home.'

It would be unkind, thought Joan, to remind Eloise that she already had a home and did not need another. For a moment, she could remember none of her daughter's excellent reasons for deciding – or *suggesting*; to be fair to her, she had only suggested – that a live-in carer would not be practical. She looked out of the window, concentrated for an instant and remembered: there was no space at Wilsmore Street and the lease was almost up in any case; she would have to get a bigger flat to accommodate a full-time nurse, and if she was going to all that trouble she might as well move to an environment dedicated to geriatric well-being. It was Eloise's phrase, 'geriatric well-being', and Joan did not altogether like it. 'Well I—' she began, but a violent electronic rendition of Bach's *Air on a G String* interrupted her.

Eloise chased her phone determinedly through her cluttered handbag, aware that the coming conversation with her mother might be decisive and eager for any postponement. She hesitated when she saw Claude's number, but only momentarily. Joan would be cheered

by news of Claude. 'Now this is a surprise,' she said warmly, into the receiver. 'What are you doing up?'

'What is life without surprises?' Claude sounded tired. 'Anyway, I am not in Boston. I am visiting my parents in Paris, so I am in your time zone for a change.'

'I thought they hated Paris.'

'They do. But I can only be here for two days, and the journey to Toulouse is too long. One of their friends has lent us his apartment on the rue Louis David. Isn't that where you lived when you worked for those people with the awful children?'

Almost thirty years before, Eloise had indeed spent six fraught weeks living on the rue Louis David. 'Such recall,' she said.

'I thought of you when I saw the address. Is this a busy time?'

'I'm just with Mum, as it happens.'

'Oh! How is Joan?'

Eloise looked at her mother, now staring anxiously out of the window for the pedals she had last seen on top of Sister Karen's filing cabinet. 'Doing very well,' she said.

'Will you tell her I send my love?'

'Claude sends his love, Mum.'

'Are you speaking to Claude?' The thought at once soothed Joan's anxiety. The pedals sometimes disappeared for days at a time, but they always came back in the end. 'Could I say hello?'

It was an open, though unacknowledged, fact that Joan desperately wished that Eloise had married Claude. In Eloise's opinion, this had more to do with Claude's eminent suitability as a son-in-law to Joan than with any merits he may or may not have possessed as a husband for her. From the beginning, Joan and Claude had got on famously, sharing recipes like a pair of old ladies and drinking themselves dizzy while cooking fabulous dinners, exclaiming delightedly over *Aile de Raie aux Câpres*, or *Rognons de Veau flambés au Madère* as they tossed back the Sancerre.

'Claude! Dearest boy. How *are* you?'

Eloise listened to them, vaguely irritated by their enduring intimacy. At least, she thought, Joan would be in good spirits when she told her what was, after all, only the truth: that The Albany seemed to deserve its reputation, and that if she were ever to secure a place she should put her name on the waiting list now.

'How is your work on osmium going?' asked Joan into the mobile

phone, gripping the slender receiver with unnecessary force as though it might slip from her hand at any moment. 'Really? But that's *marvellous*! You know I've always had the greatest faith in you. You must let me know. Yes, of course. Well' – regretfully – 'I had better pass you back to Eloise. I'm sure this call must be very expensive.'

'I do adore your mother,' said Claude, when he was once again speaking to Eloise.

'I know. It's mutual. How have you been?'

'Oh, you know.'

But Eloise did not know and was not sure she wanted to. 'What was that you were telling Mum about osmium?' she asked, instead. 'Don't tell me you've completed your life's work?'

There was a pause.

'Well, have you?'

Claude hesitated, then said – evenly; in the tone of voice he had used, long ago, when she had wrung secrets from him – 'We're in the home straight. It's a matter of months now.'

'That's fantastic.'

'Thank you.'

There was another pause, more awkward than the first, which Eloise ended by saying, decisively, 'Give my love to Ingrid and the kids. You should bring them to England, some time. We'll celebrate your triumph.'

'Yes, I will. Good idea.'

'Great.'

'Well— Goodbye, then.'

'Thanks for calling.'

And with a beep, he was gone. Eloise put the phone back in her bag, gathering her courage; and then, hoping to divert Joan's inevitable recollections of Claude's culinary talents, she turned to her and decided that the moment had come. 'It's up to you, of course,' she began, 'but it seems to me – I mean, I think – that The Albany's really one of the best, in fact *the best*, of all the homes we've looked at. By a long way, wouldn't you say?'

'It seems excellent, darling.'

'Well I think it is, Mum. It's not easy to get into, either. There are only private rooms, no wards. It could take a very long time to get a place.'

This last detail was of interest to Joan, who intended to spend as

long as she possibly could in her cosy little flat before bowing to the inevitable. 'Really, darling?'

Why was it, wondered Eloise, that she who had such a reputation for straight talking should be so tongue-tied now? Forcing herself to make eye contact, she straightened her shoulders. 'Don't you think you should put your name down on the waiting list?' she asked, gently. 'To keep the space open, if nothing else.' She paused, and when Joan did not break the silence she went on more gruffly than she had intended: 'I would, if I were you.'

For an instant, the suggestion hung in the air, almost visible between them.

Then Joan spoke, choosing her words carefully. 'If you would, darling, then I would.'

And in this way the thing was settled.