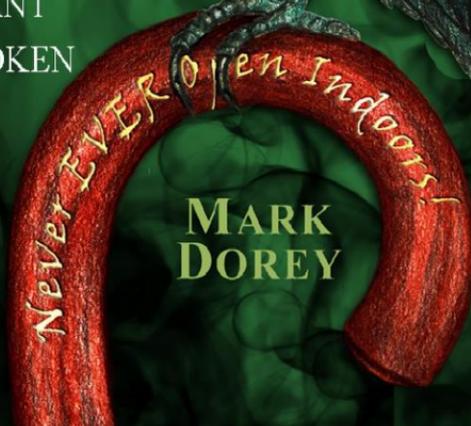


The
Extraordinary
Happenings
of
Peter
Oddfellow

THE OLD UMBRELLA

SOME RULES
ARE MEANT
TO BE BROKEN



MARK
DOREY



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Extraordinary Happenings
of
Peter Oddfellow

The Old Umbrella

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Tomser Cat Books

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To my wonderful Nan
My Rescuer and Encourager
who always Believed

and my Father
who gave Everything
and keeps on Giving

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for the brilliant cover

The world seemed Strange

Different

With a few faltering steps

He walked into the Unknown

PROLOGUE

TIME WAS SHORT.

The furtive shadow moved across the deserted road in the unforgiving chill of dawn; his strange clothing marking him as an Outsider. Moving quickly from vehicle to vehicle, he yanked the door handles, his frustration rising as each one denied him access.

He detested everything in this accursed world.

Crouching down beside the one of the cars, he retrieved a small leather-clad bottle from a hidden pocket. Carefully removing the black cork stopper, he offered the vial up to the door lock. Moments later, the slithering N'phalwerm emerged, its mottled purple-red skin slinking itself into the lock and inside the car door.

The figure glanced up and down the street.

Everything was quiet.

He pressed his ear against the door, hoping that the caustic worm would not prematurely re-emerge through the car's metal door skin on the wrong side once its work was done.

A slow, sneering smile flickered across the man's face.

Pulling at the handle, the door now opened with ease. Inside, an array of dials and switches confronted him as he slunk down out of sight in the driver's seat. Taking a steadying breath, he wrinkled his nose in disgust as the aroma of fake leather assailed him.

He hated this world.

PROLOGUE

He closed his eyes to recall the Instruction, his meditation interrupted by the N'phalwerm sizzling its way through the fake leather door panel. He berated himself for his over eagerness – he'd almost forgotten the worm! Cautiously holding out the small container and careful not to let the corrosive caterpillar touch his skin, the toxic worm slithered back into its shielded home.

Stowing the vial away, he closed his eyes again, this time the silence bringing forth the Instruction with ease.

Another sneering smile of satisfaction broke across his face.

Now, all he had to do was to wait.

Meanwhile, secret eyes observed his every move...

CHAPTER ONE

SHATTERED

PETER STRUGGLED to open his eyes. Powerful lights hovered above, shredding his blurred vision like ragged thorns. His body a dead weight, he couldn't move. A whiff of antiseptic assailed his nostrils, accompanying the coppersy cloying taste of blood in his mouth.

A masked figure eclipsed his helpless form.

Someone else.

Someone else was there – here.

Watching...

A presence, sensed rather than—

Brutal hardness covered his mouth, a stone in the shimmering light.

Peter's scream was lost to

Darkness...

The haze shifted and slouched, slow on the horizon of his vision. He could feel himself drowning as he tried to lift himself.

Fiery spikes speared his legs, an inferno, impossible in its intensity. He cried out.

A door opened.

“There, there, Peter, it’s all right.”

The words soothed the impaling fire as reality receded...

Drifting... Drifting... Drifting...

Imageless dreams.

Distant voices shouting.

Dark hands grabbing.

Legs searing, not responding.

A voice cut through the chaos, a gentle song spilling out his name, over and over, its lilt and tenor soothing and smothering the flames...

Drifting... Drifting... Drifting...

Hooves pounded the Darkness.

A blaze of shimmering white in the void, blurred and fleeting.

‘Master Thomas!’

SHATTERED

Peter woke with a start, his body drenched and sticky with the stale smell of sweat.

“It’s all right, Peter darling, we’re here now.”

Head and senses dulled, Peter tried to work out exactly where ‘*here*’ was, his eyes struggling to find anything to grab on to. The thin blurred lamppost revealed its true identity as he gradually came to – a tall stand holding a drip connected into his arm. Drab blue paint covered the walls; its sheen adorned with peeling blotches and long spidery cracks in the plaster. An antiquated radiator, painted far too many times. The faint smell of disinfectant hanging in the air like an unwanted guest refusing to leave. The small room felt more like a Victorian prison than a modern day hospital.

Maybe he’d somehow travelled back in time. Maybe this wasn’t 1985.

Peter caught sight of his reflection in the mirror screwed to the side of the bedside cabinet, its fake wood veneer topped with fresh flowers.

Definitely 1985.

His bottom lip was swollen; the left side of his face a patchwork of blood, bruises, grazes amidst the ever present landscape of spots that so doomed his adolescent features. Peter looked like he’d been in a boxing match – and very much on the losing side. A large purple-black lump loomed on his forehead, beneath matted jet black hair shot through with ominous silver threads. Peter Oddfellow, the only teenager in the known universe, cursed with grey hair and an abundance of spots. The unreal reflection stared back, blue eyes dull and lifeless.

What had happened to him?

His unspoken question was answered by an aching throb dancing in his legs. Peter winced as nausea washed over him.

His auntie’s rounded face leaned over, her usual happy-go-lucky warmth replaced with a mask of concern. “Shall I ring

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for the nurse, love?"

Peter shook his head. "Drink..." his voice cracking like broken glass.

Aunt Annie poured some water and helped him drink, the liquid cold and refreshing.

"Easy, love. I'm afraid we can't offer you anything to eat at the moment."

"Doctor's orders, young man," Uncle Freddie stood over by the window, his bushy white brows contracted, mirroring his wife's concern. His uncle's thick snowy hair gave him a wild look as it strained to free itself from under his checked cap, a look intensified by a stern mouth under a full white moustache.

"There was no need for you to dress up to come and see me," Peter quipped weakly. His uncle's tweed outfit, complete with leather patches, was an ongoing joke between them.

"Still full of cheek, I see," the old man's face softened. "You had us going there for a while." Freddie broke into a relieved smile. "But then, you always were one for taking your time over things."

Peter managed a grin, despite feeling that he might throw up at any moment, and his legs simmering like hot coals. His auntie and uncle were the only parents he'd ever known; his biological mother and father an unknown blank in the canvas of his life. Never there. Just his auntie and uncle, his only relatives who more than made up for anything else that might be absent from his life.

"What happened?"

"You were in another world, lad."

"Uh?"

"In another world." Freddie shook his head. "Typical fourteen-year-old! Daydreaming when the car hit you."

"Car?"

"There you go, point proved. He doesn't even know a—"

SHATTERED

“Yes, dear,” said Annie, “you walked out into the road and a car hit you.”

“Yes indeed,” confirmed his uncle. “That’s one heck of a bump you’ve got on your head. Reminds me of the boiled egg I had for breakfast.”

Peter lifted his heavily bandaged left hand to examine the bump, his bruised muscles creaking.

Annie smiled thinly. “You’ve certainly been through the wars, love, but thank heavens you weren’t more seriously hurt.”

“Strange about the driver though,” said Uncle Freddie, stroking his moustache thoughtfully. “One for Sherlock Holmes, I would think.”

“What do you mean?” asked Peter.

Annie shot her husband a reprimanding look, Freddie instantly fell silent under the glare of her withering gaze. Peter looked from one to the other, waiting for either to continue. The long silence was broken with a deep sigh, Uncle Freddie holding up his hand as he addressed his wife.

“Annie, the boy should know the facts.”

“But we don’t even know—”

“Enough!” Freddie rarely raised his voice, but when he did, no one dared interrupt. “There was no driver, Pete, at least not one that could be found. A number of witnesses did report seeing someone at the wheel, but after the accident there was no one.”

Peter’s fog-filled mind was struggling to make sense of things. “Most probably scarpered.”

Uncle Freddie shook his head. “The car smashed straight into a tree after hitting you, sealing all the doors on impact. The car was empty.”

“So they just vanished?”

“Dunno. As I say, it’s one for old Sherlock.”

“The police are still investigating, love,” Annie busied

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herself tidying around the edge of the bed, her mass of grey-black curls bobbling like errant springs. “They said there wasn’t much to go on, just a few minor clues.”

“Reminds me of the case of the stolen toilets,” said Uncle Freddie thoughtfully.

“Is that another Sherlock Holmes mystery?” asked Peter.

“No,” smirked his uncle, “it’s just that the police have nothing to go on!” Freddie’s blue eyes twinkled as his eyebrows bobbed up and down mischievously.

“This is no time for your silly jokes!” snapped Annie, draining the smile from her husband’s face.

Peter grinned at his discomfort.

“And don’t you go encouraging him either, Peter Oddfellow. You’re both as bad as each other,” her reprimand lost some of its force as she struggled to keep a straight face herself.

“Stranger still,” continued Freddie, playing with the edge of his moustache, “there were no fingerprints either. Just bits of fur and blood, with scratches all over the driver’s seat and steering wheel.”

“He must’ve been hurt then.”

“He, she, who knows?”

“Hang on, did you say *fur*?”

“Yup, fur, handfuls of the stuff. All very mysterious...” his uncle trailed off, deep in thought.

Annie sighed. “We’d best leave matters to the police, they’re the experts. The main thing is, you’re all right.”

“Oh, before I forget, we’ve got you something.” Uncle Freddie stooped down to pick up an old carrier bag. “Here you go, laddie...”

Peter groaned – the last thing he needed was more fruit.

“It’s not what you think,” said Freddie, an excited smile rippling below his white moustache. “Go on, take a look!”

SHATTERED

Inside the bag were a load of music cassette tapes, with his uncle's writing on the cases.

"I've recorded some of your favourite music from that record collection of yours," Freddie beamed proudly. "In particular, that *Electric Bulb Band*, but why they've got a spaceship on their records with 'ELO on it is beyond me!"

Annie gave her husband a shove. "Stop messing about, you silly old goat!"

Peter loved listening to music – but not today's 80's synthesised rubbish – he much preferred the 70's stuff, with real instruments making real sounds. Freddie often joked that Peter had inherited his 'older' musical tastes from him, but Peter put it down to his being born at the start of the Seventies.

"That's great, thanks, Unc," said Peter with a half smile. "but as far as I can see, the hospital doesn't have a cassette player."

Uncle Freddie's excited smile grew even wider. "Taa-aaa!" Freddie held out his hand with a flourish.

Peter stared in disbelief. "It's a *Sony Walkman!*"

"It's not new, but it's as good as. We were thinking of getting you one for Christmas, but..." Freddie handed Peter the *Walkman*. "It's fully loaded with new batteries, and there's more in the bag when you need them."

Peter ran his fingers over the blue and silver casing – he'd wanted one of these for ages.

"You'll need these too." Freddie tossed the headphones with matching blue foam ear pads onto the bed. "There's two headphone jacks, but it only came with one set of headphones. Why put two headphone jacks on something that to my mind is a bit of an anti-social device? One of life's great mysteries, I suppose, but at least it's portable."

"Thanks," Peter traced his finger over the word *Walkman* in its funky letters. "It's strange that I won't be doing any walking

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for a while..." Peter managed a smile; at least his auntie and uncle here, even if *here* happened to be a hospital. He cast his mind back – he vaguely remembered walking to school. "I don't suppose there was a horse anywhere?"

Uncle Freddie's eyebrows shot up. "*A horse?*"

"At the accident... I thought I heard a horse."

"You've been through a lot, dear," Annie brushed a hand against his face, her eyes brimming.

An inferno erupted in his legs as Uncle Freddie plonked himself down on the end of the bed. Peter cried out, nausea crashing over him. Freddie shot back up as if fired from a hidden catapult.

"*Freddie!*" barked his wife. "Do be careful!"

Uncle Freddie looked like a scolded cat. "Sorry, Pete."

"One accident is quite enough, thank you. Petey, are you all right?"

Peter somehow managed to nod, drawing slow deep breaths as he closed his eyes, waiting for the agony subside. Annie took the carrier bag of cassettes, hooking it over the headboard next to the bedside cabinet.

There was one big question that still remained unanswered.

"How bad is it?"

Freddie drew a long, deep breath, but it was Annie who spoke. "Your legs are quite badly damaged, love. They've put some pins in, but..." She faltered, her tears starting to stream.

Peter had never really seen his auntie cry. A lead weight caught him in the pit of his stomach.

"The truth is, laddie, we're not sure when you'll be back on your feet."

Peter's inner foreboding increased; an ominous cloud of despair threatening to consume him.

"But... I will be able to walk?"

The question hung suspended in the silence.

SHATTERED

“I will be able to walk again?” Peter’s voice was trembling. “Won’t I?”

Freddie rested a gentle hand on his shoulder as Annie began to sob openly. “Laddie, it’s too early to say.”

“So...” Tears blurred Peter’s vision; a tsunami threatening to drown him. “I... I... might never walk again?”

“Now, laddie, we—”

“It’s just too early to say, Peter, love.” Annie reached across and took his hand.

Peter slumped back into the unyielding stiffness of the hospital pillows.

His life was over.

Violent resignation and anger erupted through hot tears. “I guess that’s it then – not much point in having a stupid *Walkman!*”

“*No!*” Annie’s voice snapped, strong and determined. “No, that’s not *it!* Don’t you ever say that!”

The hospital bell rang.

Freddie glanced at the clock above the door. “Looks like visiting time is over.”

Annie, still trembling, did her best to gather herself. “Maybe we should stay...” She tried to meet Peter’s eyes as Freddie stepped forward.

Peter shot his uncle a defiant look that screamed, ‘*JUST GO!*’

Annie gave her nephew a goodbye kiss. “Take care, Petey, love. We’ll see you again tomorrow.”

The hospital bell rang again.

Freddie opened the door to leave. “Is there anything we can get you?”

Peter shook his head. *A new pair of legs for a start.*

“Okay,” Freddie offered a weak smile. “Take care, laddie.”

The door of his hospital cell clunked shut.

Peter was alone. He glanced down at the *Walkman* still in

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his lap. His vision began to blur with hot tears; he lashed out, punching the bag of cassettes in frustration.

The bell tolled one last time.

The Darkness came.

And then something else.

Something cloaked deep within.

In a flicker of movement, a star ignited.

No, not a star.

A bright tip, shimmering gold, leaving trails in the darkness like a sparkler.

Something else.

Something dangerous.

Death flooded the Darkness.

A cold ocean of dread.

Demon eyes blazed, hot coals getting larger and larger.

“MINE!”

Peter woke with a start.

Something moved in the dark.

A weight on his chest.

Green eyes pierced the gloom inches from his face.

Peter sank back as the ginger tomcat leaned in, their noses almost touching.

The cat stared intently before vanishing into the night.

CHAPTER TWO

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

THE NURSE WASN'T PLEASED with the paw-prints all over the bed covers. Plonking down Peter's breakfast, she muttered something about this being a hospital and not a vet's house as she changed the top cover. Curiously, there were no paw-prints anywhere else, almost as if a cat had dropped out of the air straight onto the bed.

When asked if his auntie or uncle had brought one in, Peter answered with a weak "No," wondering if he should say anything about the night before, which felt more like a dream than anything else. He decided to let it go and add it to the list of oddities that had somehow decided to invade his life.

The next few days followed the same routine. His auntie and uncle would visit, Annie sitting beside his bed while Freddie paced back and forth absently gazing out of the window. The only minor highlight was the removal of Peter's drip so he could eat normally again, although he didn't feel like eating much, even when Uncle Freddie brought in a large bunch of grapes.

Peter's mood continued to spiral downwards as another tedious day drew to an end – even the thought of listening to his *Walkman* did little to cheer him up. His uncle glanced at the clock above the door as the hospital bell rang. With barely a word they were gone, the door closing with an air of finality.

Peter glared at the clock: 7:28pm.

He slumped into his pillows, tears of hopelessness blurring

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his vision. The door reopened just as the second bell sounded; they must have forgotten something. Peter hastily brushed away his tears.

A strange face beneath a small hat popped itself around the half-opened door.

“Oh, there you are dear,” the face proclaimed. “It took me simply ages to find you.” The door opened fully and in marched the face, together with the rest of her.

The old woman was obviously lost.

“Sorry, I think you’ve got the wrong room.” Peter’s voice ran thick with emotion.

“No need to be sorry,” replied the woman.

“I’m not sorry. I was just saying that you’ve got the wrong room.”

“No, no, right room, right room,” said the woman, closing the door behind her.

“You have to go. Visiting is over.”

The woman clumped her way towards the bed, using her old umbrella as a walking stick. “Oh no, plenty of time, plenty of time!” Making minor adjustments to her antiquated outfit, she plonked herself into the chair beside the bed.

“I don’t know who you are, but—”

“You are Peter, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he replied, surprised that she knew his name. “I think you’ve got the wrong Peter.”

“No, no, I don’t think so.”

“But—”

“Peter Oddfellow?”

The mention of his idiotic surname stopped him dead.

“Well, yes, but you’ve still got the wrong person.”

The woman smiled disarmingly. “Nope, definitely the right person.”

“I really don’t think so!”

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

“Mmmm...” the old lady studied him intently. “Are you the same Peter Oddfellow that got hit by the big metal monster on wheelie things? Must be about a week ago now, I would’ve thought.”

“If by ‘*big metal monster on wheelie things*’, you mean a car, then yes, I was.”

“Excellent, then I’ve definitely got the right Peter Oddfellow!”

“It’s Peter.”

“That’s what I said, Peter Oddfellow.”

“Just Peter.”

“Peter it is then. Now, let’s get down to business.”

“We’re not getting down to anything. *I don’t even know you!*”

“Now, now, Peter, that’s not entirely true, now is it?” she fixed him with a searching stare.

Something stirred within as he looked at the elderly woman. There was something vaguely familiar about her, but what was it? He certainly didn’t recall knowing any old ladies, especially ones dressed in old-fashioned black clothes and carrying a tatty black umbrella, so full of holes that it was practically useless. The woman’s bright emerald eyes regarded him from under her little hat, her aged yet kind face filled with a surprising beauty. Something about her was familiar, but what was it? Time to get some information.

“What do you know about my accident?”

The woman held his gaze and smiled.

“How do you know my name? Have you been following me?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” she said, her eyes twinkling.

“You’ve been following me?”

“Why, yes.”

He was about to speak again, but she cut him off with a

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wave of her hand.

“So many questions,” she turned her attention to the bunch of grapes on Peter’s bedside cabinet. “Would you mind if I had some of those?”

“Help yourself.”

She took one of the grapes and bit it in half, holding it up to the light whilst thoughtfully chewing on the other half. “Interesting...”

“They’re seedless,” said Peter unhelpfully.

“Yes, yes, I can see that. Most unusual colour...”

“What colour grapes do you normally eat then?”

“Silver,” she replied matter-of-factly. “But we don’t *eat* them, at least not very often.”

“*Silver?* There’s no such thing as silver grapes.”

“What’s this in here?” The old woman already had her head in his carrier bag of cassettes. “Mmmm... interesting...” She started to rummage about.

“That’s my music, leave it alone!”

“Music?” She took out one of the cassettes. “How can you possibly play music on one of these boxes?” She began to blow on the box. “Not very musical are they? Maybe it’s more like a drum.” The old woman rapped on the case, causing the cassette tape inside to clatter to the floor.

“Hey, be careful!” Peter had had enough. He reached for the buzzer and pressed it, while the woman picked up the cassette and began blowing through the two holes.

He pressed the buzzer again.

No one came.

“Great, the buzzer’s broken.”

The old woman stopped blowing. “Oh, it’s not broken.”

“Of course it is. No one’s coming.” Peter snatched the cassette tape from the old woman. “Stupid buzzer! Stupid bed! Stupid hospital! Stupid everyth—!”

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

“My, my, you are in a bad mood, and here’s me thinking that you wanted visitors.”

“Visitors? I don’t even know your name!”

“Elsewhere, Eliza Elsewhere,” replied the woman. “You may call me Eliza or Ms Elsewhere, but *not*, under *no* circumstances whatsoever, Elsie.”

“Mrs Elsewhere—” began Peter.

“Ms.”

“Ms Elsewhere, I don’t know who you are or why you’re here, but—”

“My name is Eliza Elsewhere and I’m here to see you, Master Peter.”

“But... *why*?”

“To talk of course!” Ms Elsewhere munched through another grape. “These are delicious, quite delicious!”

“What could we possibly talk about?”

“Now, that’s better,” beamed Eliza. “We can talk about anything and everything.”

She stood up and walked across the room. Extracting numerous pins out of her small hat, Eliza carefully removed it and hung it on the door handle. With a shake of her head, a mane of long silver hair run through with strands of gold, cascaded half way down her back. The effect was stunning, not to mention unexpected.

“Ah, that’s better! Hats can be so restrictive, don’t you think? Now, where were we?”

“I’m not sure *we* were anywhere.”

“Peter, you really need to curb your sarcasm if we’re to be friends,” reprimanded Eliza gently. “I’ve come a long way to see you.”

“And where exactly have you come from?”

“That’s not important right now. What *is* important is *you*.”

“Me?”

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“Yes, *you!*” Eliza sat down. Reaching inside her waistcoat, she pulled out a china cup and saucer filled with hot steaming liquid. The sweet scent of strawberries and lavender filled the room. She took a sip as an astonished Peter looked on. “Oh, where are my manners? Would you like a cup a tea, dear?”

“No, no thank you,” replied Peter, still stunned.

Eliza took another sip of the fragrant tea. “Now, why don’t you tell me all about yourself?”

“I’m not sure there’s that much to tell.”

“Now, now, enough of your modesty. I’m sure there’s plenty you could tell me about your life that is fascinating,” she said pleasantly and meaning it.

“But where shall I start?”

“Anywhere you like, dear, anywhere you like.”

Before he knew it, Peter was telling her all kinds of things that he’d never told anyone before. Occasionally Eliza would ask the odd question, but mostly she simply nodded in acknowledgement, or laughed politely at any funny bits in Peter’s narrative, which was rapidly turning out to be his life story. After sipping her way through several cups of sweet-smelling tea over what seemed like hours, Eliza suddenly announced, “I think that’s enough for today. It’s time for me to leave and for you to get some sleep.”

A wave of disappointment swept over him. Eliza crossed the room, and replaced the small hat on her head, somehow squeezing her voluminous hair into it before carefully replacing all the pins. Having finished this seemingly impossible task, she picked up her tatty old umbrella and opened the door.

“Goodbye, Peter dear, it was *so* good talking to you. I look forward to seeing you again soon!” and with that, Eliza Elsewhere left.

“I look forward to seeing you again too, Eliza,” he replied, not sure if she had even heard him. An unexpected emptiness

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

filled the room. Peter knew virtually nothing about his curious visitor, although they'd just spent hours talking together, or at least he had, which perhaps was the most surprising thing of all.

Then it hit him.

Her voice...

It was Eliza's voice calling his name in the darkness after the accident, soothing away his pain.

But how?

He'd never met the woman before, or had he...?

The lingering scent of lavender and strawberries flooded his senses as tiredness swept over him. The hospital bell sounded a third time.

7:30pm.

He drifted off into a peaceful sleep, filled with vineyards overflowing with ripe silver grapes.

Lost and Found

Lost and Found

What was Lost

Has now been Found!

Peter woke the next morning completely refreshed.
He glanced at the clock: 8:20am.

He'd been asleep for nearly thirteen hours!

The old woman...

The hours talking...

The ringing of the hospital bell...

Eliza's entire visit had occurred between the rings, no more than a minute or two.

How could that be?

Had he imagined her?

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He thought back to his encounter with Eliza, her enchanting fragrance echoing through his memory once again, filling his senses. The old woman was definitely real. Maybe the hospital bell wasn't working properly but that couldn't be right either. Peter remembered looking at the time as he drifted off to sleep; definitely 7:30pm.

Maybe both the bell and the clock had both gone wrong?

That's absurd! She'd been as real as anyone he'd ever known. Peter corrected himself. Real, yes; like anyone he'd ever known? *No!*

Maybe he'd dreamt the whole thing: the bell, the clock and Eliza. His mind was racing...

There was a knock on the door. Peter's heart leapt. Hardly daring to breathe, he watched as the door drew open...

In walked the nurse, smiling. "Good morning, Peter. Breakfast is served!"

The nurse pottered about as Peter tucked in hungrily. Once he'd finished, she inserted an electronic thermometer in his ear. "I see you've eaten some of your grapes."

"Have I?" Peter stared at the grapes. *Eliza!* The old woman must have been here; at least he wasn't going mad!

The nurse removed the thermometer and smiled. "Tell your uncle those grapes are for you, not him!"

For the rest of the day, Peter was on tenterhooks. Time dragged. Annie and Freddie arrived just after lunchtime, Annie chattering about this and that, while Freddie spent most of the time staring absently out of the window, just offering the odd comment here and there. As it neared seven o'clock, Peter yawned; a deliberate, *'I'm very tired'* yawn. His visitors remained oblivious. He tried the same tactic again, without success. On his third attempt, Freddie motioned to his wife, and after some swift goodbyes, they were gone.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

7:16pm.

Peter's excitement mounted.

The seconds dragged on into minutes.

7:23

7:24

7:25

7:26

7:27

The hospital bell sounded abruptly at 7:28.

An eternity passed.

7:29 – the second ring.

Peter's heart pounded, his whole being focussed intently on the door.

7:30 – the last bell.

People were filing past outside.

Where was she?

7:35

7:45

8 o'clock

No more visitors, not even expected unexpected ones.

8:15

8:30

9 o'clock

She's not coming.

Deflated and miserable, Peter reached for his *Walkman* to listen to some music. He closed his eyes, drifting off with music still droning in his ears.

The scent of lavender and strawberries wafted on the air...

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Eliza took his hand. The old woman's hair tumbled and danced, the breeze swirling as they soared high above the city. The bright sun reflected off the magnificent buildings far below, tall spires and parapets gleaming, adorned with colourful flags. They weaved carelessly through streets teeming with people going about their everyday business, oblivious of the two companions flying hand in hand above their heads.

He looked across to Eliza, a lot younger and more beautiful than ever.

He wanted to fly with her forever...

Ear-splitting screeches filled the air. Dark forms plummeted from the sky in a flurry of rancid wings. The people scattered, screaming as giant crows, their heads crowned with cruel uni-horned spikes, picked off their hapless prey. Merciless eyes turned their attention to the two flying companions, blood dripping from murderous beaks.

Peter's stomach lurched as they accelerated, weaving through the streets at impossible speed. Still the birds were closing in...

Suddenly, they were tumbling in an expanse of blue, plunging helplessly into the void beneath the magnificent city that floated through the sky.

Down...

Down...

Down...

Peter woke with a start. Morning light filtered into the room. Tinny sounds resonated weakly from his *Walkman* earphones neatly wound on the bedside cabinet. He reached over and switched off the music as the nurse arrived with his breakfast.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

“Best behaviour today, Peter, Doctor Grump is on his rounds.”

Freddie and Annie arrived mid-morning. Peter found himself much more attentive to what they were saying, his mind no longer preoccupied with the old woman. At 6:30pm they announced that they had to leave early to complete some errands. Feeling unusually tired, Peter settled down to sleep as the door closed behind them.

He vaguely heard the hospital bell...

The second ring...

The sound of a door opening...

Peter half opened his eyes.

Eliza Elsewhere was creeping out of the room.

“Eliza! Don’t go!”

“Oh, you’re awake?”

“Yes, I guess so,” said Peter, awkwardly.

“I thought it best to let you rest.”

“I was hoping you’d come back sooner.”

“I did, dear.”

“You did? When?”

“Last night. I was a little late due to an unexpected hold up, and by the time I arrived, you were fast asleep. You had something stuck in your ears making a frightful racket – it’s a wonder you could sleep at all! Fortunately, I managed to disconnect you.” Eliza wrinkled up her nose in disapproval. “Frightful things.”

“I’m sorry I missed you,” he said, desperately wanting to add, *‘I waited for you all day’*, but instead said, “You should’ve woken me.”

“I’m not sure I could have. If you can sleep with that dreadful thumping racket, what hope do I have?”

They both laughed.

“It’s good to see you again,” Peter said, really meaning it.

CHAPTER 2

“It’s good to see you again too, Peter,” Eliza gave his hand a friendly squeeze.

“Eliza?”

The elderly woman regarded him warmly.

“I *know* you.”

She smiled again. “And I know you too, Peter Oddfellow. After all, we’re friends.”

For the first time ever, Peter didn’t mind someone using his full name. Eliza leant her raggedy umbrella against the wall and removing her hatpins, hung her small hat on the door handle. Waves of hair tumbled down her back, released once more from the captivity of her tiny hat. He marvelled at the woman’s beauty despite her advanced age, her eyes sparkling like blue sapphires. *He could have sworn her eyes were green.* Perhaps she was wearing contact lenses. It didn’t matter anyway, he was glad she was back. He didn’t know *why* he was glad. He just was.

Eliza sat down beside him, and reaching inside her waistcoat, produced a china cup and saucer filled with tea. The delicious aroma of vanilla and honey filled the room. Peter wondered how many different herbal teas were concealed in the depths of her tight fitting waistcoat. The fragrance was both relaxing and invigorating, wafting away his curiosity.

“Now, dear, where were we?”

Then he was off again, telling Eliza about anything and everything, losing all track of time.

All too soon, Eliza politely interrupted him. “Thank you, Peter, I’ve had a wonderful time listening to your stories, but it’s time for you to get some rest.”

Tiredness washed over him. Peter was nearly asleep by the time Eliza had put on her hat to leave.

The hospital bell rang one last time.

Darkness consumed the room.

The door clicked open.

A shimmering lake beckoned, a vast fountain rising high, enclosed by a beautiful glistening tower of intertwined complex webs.

The door slammed itself shut.

CHAPTER THREE

CAUTION: DO NOT WHIRL!

PETER AWOKE, AN INNER GLOW warming him inside, easing the throbbing in his legs.

He looked at the clock – 7:50am.

Stomach growling, he reached across to pull some grapes from the bunch, scattering a few loose onto the floor.

It was then that he noticed it.

The umbrella! Eliza must have forgotten it. The rickety old thing was practically useless, its black material a tapestry of rips and tears. In stark contrast, the curved wooden handle, deep and rich and the glistening gold tip at the bottom looked totally out of place with the rest of its shabby appearance.

There was some tiny gold lettering on the handle, unreadable at a distance. Peter shifted in an attempt to reach it.

Just out of reach... he shifted again, stretching, his fingertips brushing the handle...

The room exploded with blackness, demon coal red eyes blazing.

“MINE!”

The door swung open. Everything spun back to normal as the nurse entered with his breakfast.

She eyed him suspiciously. “Are you all right?”

Peter was shaken, not sure of what had just happened. “Fine thanks. What’s for breakfast?”

CAUTION: DO NOT WHIRL!

“Well, the Head Chef from the Ritz heard you were here, so he decided to come over and rustle you up a feast of scrambled egg on toast, yoghurt, with some appetising red and blue painkillers for dessert.”

Peter polished off the food in record time, curious to take a closer look at the umbrella. The nurse went through her usual routine, clearing up the grapes on the floor without comment, the umbrella somehow invisible. Collecting up the breakfast tray, she left humming a little tune to herself.

Peter grabbed his *Walkman* and unplugged the earphones. Improvising a lasso, eventually managed to hoop it over one of the spokes on his third attempt.

“Carefully does it, Pete...”

He coaxed the umbrella until it was within reach and examined the handle. The gold writing inlaid in scrawly capitals read:

NEVER *EVER* OPEN INDOORS!

The word ‘*EVER*’ was written in larger capitals, as if to emphasise the warning. Peter read and re-read the inscription, his curiosity mounting. Taking the umbrella, he opened it, hoping it wouldn’t fall apart in his hands.

“Wow!”

The inside of the umbrella shimmered silver with spokes made of gold, its material showing no trace of any damage or tears whatsoever. Thoughts of Eliza’s silver hair shot through with gold strands echoed through his mind. Peter collapsed the umbrella to check the outside; tatty, with a myriad of rips and holes. He opened it again; flawless silvered cloth with gold spokes. Peter repeated the examination several times.

How strange...

CHAPTER 3

There was another inscription further up the shaft:

CAUTION: DO NOT WHIRC!

Peter hesitated as something moved in his hand. Looking down, the curved handle had somehow straightened, almost in anticipation of what he was about to do next.

What's the worst that can happen?

He proceeded to spin the umbrella.

The air began to fill with a melodious humming sound, highs and lows blending into a beautiful symphony. The canopy of the umbrella, now spinning independently of its shaft in the opposite direction, grew bigger and bigger, the glistening silvered underside taking on a light and intensity of its own, sparkling brighter and brighter. The gold spokes flashed lightning across the silver umbrella sky as it hummed its sweet mesmeric song.

There was an almighty bang and a blaze of light...

Peter crashed to the ground.

The umbrella was gone.

Everything was gone: the bed, the bedside cabinet, the room, the hospital...

How on earth...?

He was sitting on lush grass beside a woodland path leading off into the distance.

Peter scrambled to his feet, trying to make sense of it all.

He was standing up!

No pain. Peter flexed his left arm; his elbow no longer ached and the bandages were gone. A cautious inspection of his head revealed no bumps, grazes or busted lips whatsoever.

Thank you for previewing our book
The Extraordinary Happenings
of
Peter Oddfellow

The Old Umbrella

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