

## Hilary Greenleaf - 284 steps

The past has become an area of conflict, a dangerous area of uncertainty that lies extinct yet threatening, waiting to draw us all into fresh conflict and pain. As a family we are learning to sidestep it, and something that should be so natural for people with a shared history is now taboo. We talk only of the here and now, we try to maintain the present tense. It's OK to comment on the hideous patchwork owl that my sister Gwen has brought to brighten up my sofa; it is not OK to comment on the glorious prints I used to buy by the yard in the fifties and stitch into full skirted summer dresses for my girls.

I loved the times of recollection and used to begin a tale from my memory store. A 'Do you remember when..? So many events, so many choices, Bournemouth holidays and the donkey that ate the ice creams, the time Jane's teddy went over the bridge and was caught by a man in a boat, the lovely summer house up at High Elms, or when Susan's stray cat ate the Sunday roast.....

But now the past is banned and I understand why, but inside I'm still hurt and upset. I've thought about telling them that in many ways it's all I've got left. Wait till they get to my age I always think, perhaps they'll realise then. Anyway it's always the same now, they'll let me get a little way with the telling, smiling uneasily at me or at each other when they think I'm not looking. (I've noticed that you see and it hurts to be

patronised or treated like a fool). In the beginning they'd correct me too, always putting me right, telling me I was muddled, telling me I was wrong. I do accept now that it's any area we can't enter because that's how the discord started.

I do remember – (and this is an accurate memory and so sharing it is allowed), that I had become very forgetful. This was before the treatment, the long program of injections, tablets, scans and appointments just to talk, that they gave to help with what they called 'the problem'. Everyday things were confusing; I knew that there was so much I'd forgotten to do (no idea what though!). They tell me now about the things I did like taking my tablets twice or sometimes not at all. Apparently I'd stuffed slices of bread into the kettle because I thought it was the toaster and I'd often phoned Jane in the early hours thinking it was the afternoon. I remember little of it though, apart from an enduring realisation that language was becoming a mystery, the meanings of words were lost and I recall floundering when I tried to express any thought or want verbally. Thought itself became a crushing impossibility; existence was a void. But it's OK for us to mull over these events because I know that something had changed in my mind. I accept that before the treatment 'the problem' was exactly that.

The past is different though and I can't relinquish my memories, I can't just give in and accept it when they tell me that my golden years of reflection are largely false and at odds with what they remember and

call the truth. They forget that I was there and as you get older, in many ways the life gone becomes more intense and precious than that which you're coping with.

Of the two, Susan has always been less challenging than Jane, less willing to jump in with a correction or even a subtle reprimand, and now that I no longer need carers or spells away in homes, I often wish she lived nearer. So it's strange really that the major incident, barney, spat.. whatever you may call it happened with her. It seemed like a nothing to me, but it escalated into a something, and it taught me that to survive the present, the past, my past must no longer a shared memory.

It was really nothing; all I'd done was slip into one of my holiday reflections. I saw that Susan was a bit uneasy, but I thought sod it, it was only a holiday and a rambling old woman, and after all she was there! So I started a 'Do you remember when' and I told her all about the wonderful holiday we had in Italy in 1964 and our trip to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa; she'd have been nine and Jane a little younger. It was all so vivid, the drive through the Arno valley in that little Hillman of ours. Tuscany was so beautiful, so many shades of green and those wonderful nameless trees shaped like candyfloss clouds on sticks. It was a very hot day I'd recalled and the bright light made all the white stone buildings shimmer in the heat. When we got there we were a little disappointed that the tower wasn't standing alone in a huge plain (as I'd imagined!), but sitting wedged near a cathedral and other buildings. I

reminded her how I'd not dared to risk my best court shoes on the climb up, and determined to remember every painful tread, I'd counted the steps as we climbed. Two hundred and eighty four, I can still remember, two hundred and eighty four exactly. I'd smiled as I reminded her of the total - such a happy day.

Susan hadn't smiled, my dear patient Susan, always so much calmer than her sister. She'd snapped at me, she'd even looked on the verge of tears and told me that it was all false. She even said that I'd never even been to Italy! She did admit that we did have a little Hillman in the sixties and she said that she remembered me being a bit particular about some shoes if there was a chance the heels would scuff, but that everything else never happened. I was shocked, why was she doing this to me, my own daughter? 'What about the steps?' I'd asked her. If I'd made it up (which I certainly hadn't) how would I have known how many steps there were? Anyway she got out her laptop and looked it up somewhere and I was right. There were and still are two hundred and eighty four steps to the top of the tower. It was my turn to get cross with her then. 'How did I get the number right then?' I'd asked her in triumph. Surely by then I thought she'd see that I was right? After all she was only nine at the time, and I figured it was her memory that was just bad and not mine that was working overtime.

That was when she went to see the consultant. A few days later she'd tried to explain to me that most of my lovely past didn't happen

quite the way I remember it. I asked her again about the Tower of Pisa, all my memories and the steps. She said I'd probably seen something on the TV and the therapy had somehow caused an interchange between real memories and other received information. She said the mechanism wasn't clear, and then she said it was a shame but it was sort of the trade off for me being able to remember other things. Things like which day of the week it was, the name of the prime minister, how to make a cup of tea. You know those coping things.

Susan has always been the patient one (apart from the Tower of Pisa episode!). She has sat down with me armed with packets and albums of photos. She has offered to talk me through what she calls the truth. We tried one afternoon, so many images of the girls, my dear Len and myself. I think we gave up after about half an hour. It was lovely to see my family all young and happy but it was like they'd all been cropped from my past and slotted into some stage scenery. There was one of Blackpool! Honestly I thought (but said nothing), could you ever imagine that I'd ever go there!

And so there is a truce, a no man's land where none of us walk. We have no shared past; I have mine and they have theirs. We walk together in the present – and after 'the problem' that really is such a blessing. As for memories, they remain precious but they remain personal.

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