

The sound of breaking love

“Good grief, Mr Ellis, whatever’s troubling you?”

The nurse flung back the curtain and rushed to check that the old chap was safely in bed.”

“What a racket! Keep still. I’m just tucking you in. Don’t worry, the operation’s over and you’re just coming round.”

Fenced in by safety bars, Sam Ellis looked even smaller than his 5'5", but his scream had filled the room. I was amazed to hear that cry from such a confident, composed and lucid individual. Only hours before, he had been regaling fellow patients with stories of his business achievements. He was a braggart, and not the sort you’d expect to suffer from nightmares.

“Have they gone?”

Even that sounded more like a wail than a question and the nurse was beginning to get impatient.

“I don’t know *who* you mean, Mr Ellis. You’re *OK*, the anaesthetic’s wearing off, and *I* need to get back into the corridor and help the others clear up the *mess*.”

She bustled off, leaving her frightened patient - suddenly back in a present of pain and confusion after a night visit to some trauma of his past. His eyes were open now and he noticed me watching as his features re-formed from an anxious frown, to a brief smile, and then to a question.

“She talked about clearing up... What happened? - that breaking glass and all those feet? - those thundering boots?”

“Oh, nothing major. Someone just collapsed in the corridor and knocked the dispensary trolley over. They panicked a bit, and every nurse on the ward went rushing to pick up the patient and look at the damage. I don’t think it’s all that serious, but what with drugs mixed up on the floor and the glass all over the corridor... Why? What did you think it was?”

His voice had dropped several pitches - a conversational tone now, but touched with new notes of self-awareness.

“I was in Germany. I’d forgotten I was ever there. I was very young, you see - maybe only two or three. I heard the glass, and those people rushing and shouting.”

He paused, drawing a deep breath.

“We never had shouting in our home. My parents were very loving, and they had been rich people, but times got hard. One terrible night I woke up to the sound of breaking glass: angry shouting in the street, thundering boots and so much noise.”

“Look”

I couldn’t stop myself interrupting.

“You don’t have to go through this now. You’ve had an operation. I don’t mind listening, but you’ll get more chances... Neither of us is going anywhere for a while.”

“N-no, it’s alright. I’d rather talk about it while it’s fresh in my mind.”

“You mean you didn’t know about it before?”

He fiddled with the collar of his pyjamas.

“It had all gone - forgotten - but I lived it again just now as if I was back there... The mob, the violence and those hateful faces. They smashed our windows and chased us out of the house in the middle of the night. I’d been asleep and it woke me up. I was terrified, but was too small to know what was happening.”

Yesterday's boastfulness had given way to a gentle vulnerability. I could come to like this interesting man.

"So, how did you escape, and what happened to you after that?"

"I don't know very much because my parents didn't like to talk about those times. I guess they had friends in England who helped them come over here and start again. But they never recovered their former riches. I must have been all they had. Oh dear, I didn't appreciate them enough."

He reached for a tissue from the side table.

"I had always thought of myself as a self-made man. It was a struggle to build the business but I gave it everything I'd got because I *had* to be successful. Though the past was just a fog to me, there was something driving me to become rich - to win back what my mother and father told me they'd had before the war."

"So they told you some of the story?"

"Sometimes they'd drop hints about the good times, but never about how they'd lost it all. They tried to forget everything and live as if we were ordinary English people with no bad past, and no Jewishness."

"No Jewishness? Even *I* know about that dreadful history, and I'm no Jew. Surely you realised? You must have known *something* about it?"

"I knew about the holocaust, of course, but it was nothing to do with me - though I realised my name was Jewish. The mind's very good at ignoring uncomfortable memories. But now it's come back to me. I remember being there that night. I realise what it all meant, and how it's affected me all these years."

He lay back on the pillow and relaxed.

"My family... We kept our lives, but we lost everything else. That's what's been driving me so hard all my life."

I watched him drift into sleep - a peaceful one this time. He'd struggled to build success and a kind of power on the ruins of hatred. Now the destruction of a few dispensary bottles had reminded him of love.