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AN HONOURABLE LIFE

By CHRISTOPHER OWEN

"I don't care," she heard him say.

There she was, in the living room, looking first at him, he with his back to her, and then at the pills scattered over the carpet where they had fallen from his dressing gown. There must have been a whole month's supply. Well, it was downright exasperating, him forgetting, not making sure he didn't take them.

"If you don't take your pills you'll die!" she said to him. "You want to die?" she asked, irritated.

"I don't care," she heard him say.

Here was this man, her husband, who had every weekday for forty five years caught the 8.03 to Charing Cross Station, had walked up The Strand to Somerset House, and taken lunch at the Kardoma and later, when Kardomas were no more, at a cafe off Catherine Street called The Mitre. Here was this man who returned home to Hither Green every evening on the

5.23. All these years he had been a civil servant, and in the fifteen years before retirement had been up there in the top ranks of his profession. He had committed himself to his work, had been proud to have been a public servant. A man of honour, truthful to the last. Fastidious. A man of habit. Every evening he had brought home The Evening Standard. Every evening he had enjoyed the dinner she had set before him. Generous to her at all times, private as a person beyond all others she had known. "I don't care," she heard him say.

He wanted to die, did he? she asked this gentleman, this kind and courteous father of two boys who'd not, at least in their mother's opinion, come up to expectations, this uncomplaining and patient husband, he with a nervous cough that preceded his arrival, he with his intermittent singing, those snatches of Gilbert and Sullivan, although she had had to rebuke him on occasion when, out of doors, he would break into soft song. 'Poor Wandering One'; 'They stole the Prince and Brought Him Here' - those were his favourites. This was the gentleman who, opening the oven door, had discovered a chicken roasting inside. "I'm so sorry," he had said to it - him not wishing to have disturbed it. This man was he, who, in order to ascertain whether or not she or his sons required additional finance, would

circumspectly enquire: "And how is the Chancellor of the Exchequer?"

He faced the wall. The pills all over the carpet. "I don't care." she heard him say.

The man had no legs to him now, which was his frequent frustrated complaint.

"My legs," he complained, "they won't move." And hadn't he always enjoyed a good brisk walk, and hadn't he often walked up on Beachy Head with her on their many summer visits to Eastbourne? And that last summer, he had hobbled there on Beachy Head, impatient at his incapacity, and had fallen down as they had begun to return to the promenade. And she had been unable to get him to his feet. Not till help had come along. It had been a frustration for her. A terrible embarrassment. For she had never been comfortable with illness.

She had set her sights on this young man from North Wales. He was a good catch for he was a professional man - a civil servant with the Inland Revenue. No tradesman, he. She had been a nurse - best years of her life, she was to say - but after she had married him, she had gone up in the world, had begun to hob nob with the professional classes. One afternoon all those years ago, she

had thrown her nursing medals and references to the back of the coal fire, and in that moment had put an end to her past. In her day, she was to say, young ladies did not go to work. She had feared her nursing career would be greeted with disapproval. When she was a small child her father had deserted the family, had gone off with another woman. Her mother as a consequence had found herself near destitute and had been obliged to put her and her brothers and sister into a children's home where they had remained for nine years. It was a time that, in later years, she was unwilling to recall.

Here was this man then, her husband, whom on their wedding night, countless years ago, she had interrupted as he had stood at the mirror in the bathroom, him wearing his dressing gown and cleaning his teeth. She had entered without knocking and he had politely and shyly asked her if she did not think that, in entering as she had, she had unwittingly exposed herself to a charge, however small, of impropriety. This had been the man who, this past year and more, could not now stand at the toilet and do what he had to do without her help. His hands had become so shaky, his penis, on account, as she assumed, of his illness, so shrivelled, that she was obliged to hold it for him so as to direct it down towards the bowl in order that he didn't splash all over the toilet floor.

Throughout their married life she had made her own clothes. She had decorated and furnished the house, upholstered the chairs, made the curtains, planted out the garden. Learnt French. Took up painting in oils. She was creative. He was proud of her. He often said so. He had become old and frail. He suffered a mild heart attack. One morning she brought him his cup of tea and found blood on his sheets. "What have you done?" she asked him.

He could not say. The blood had come from his scrotum. He had attempted in the night to get up to go to the lavatory. He had sat up with his legs over the side of the bed and had caught his testicles under him. He had impatiently yanked at them with his fingers to free them. His nails had cut into them. She, that morning of this discovery, had had him lie back on the bed, while she put a sticking plaster over the cut. The following day she found he had done the same thing all over again. She applied fresh sticking plaster. She had no way of hiding her irritation and distress. She hated the indignity. It made her ill.

They awarded him the C.B.E. in the year he retired. She bought him a gold watch to celebrate. He was so pleased and proud of her gift to him. He had a boyish smile. A boyish smile and a quiet way. Why had he

not, she had from time to time complained to him - and later in her life was to complain to her grown-up sons - why had he not taken stronger action with the boys when they had been badly behaved. He had always answered her that he had hoped the boys would learn from their mother and father's example. He believed that the character of a man or woman was with him or her from birth and was fundamentally unchangeable. At the end of life there was death. After death, he had always said, there was nothing more. He stood facing the wall with his back to her, his secret scattered at his feet, and he declined her rebuke. "I don't care," he said.

A week later he was to fall. He was blue in the face. She was unable to get him up. She tried to shove cushions under him to prop him up. The boys should be there, she lamented. She was not well herself. She angrily dialled 999. The ambulance came. As they took him away to the hospital, he kept calling her name. She did not go with him. She remained to tidy the house, to put things away. He died before the night was out. She rang the boys.

"He said he didn't care," she told them.

"I don't care," she heard him say.

And the words pierced her, and she was full with grief.

END.