Grace and Mary

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Grace and Mary

MELVYN BRAGG

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To the women who inspired this book.

The mother and son meet mostly in the middle of the last century. After the war. Her disintegrating memory can still take her there and he had been old enough to store up sharp impressions of the life around him. It gives them an illusion of equality. Together they can make that place a time to live in.

It was then that they were mother and child. Now, she is in her tenth decade, he just gone seventy, and slowly the roles are reversing.

More than sixty years have passed, but as her life enters into darkness and silence, they can still draw warmth from the embers of those days. Occasionally they chance the present. Sometimes they sing.

CHAPTER ONE

Mary's voice, thinner now, is still certain and pure, the melody steadily held as she sits up in her bed and sways to the tune, the words coming from the heart as she smiles at him.

'Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do.
I'm half crazy, all for the love of you.'

He joins in:

'It won't be a stylish marriage
I can't afford a carriage,
But you'll look sweet,
Upon the seat,
Of a bicycle made for two.'

Her laughter, delighted, crystalline, stops abruptly. 'I hope nobody heard us.'

'What if they did?'

'They would throw us out. Throw us right out!'

'They might like it. They might take a collection.'

'The worst thing your father ever did was to get that tandem!'

'Why was that?' Again. He wants the story again. He wants all her stories again.

'Tandems pull ahead of the others! I always wanted to be among them. And when he was on an evening shift, I couldn't go out!' She shrugs, mild now. 'I liked biking a lot more than your dad did.'

'Another mouthful?'

She pulls back her head and looks down on the spoon of ruby-coloured jelly.

'Just one more. Come on!' He pulls his chair a nudge closer to the bed and carefully aims the spoon at her tight lips. The rest of the meal is scarcely touched. 'The last one.' He lets the silence stretch and holds her look.

'Promise?'

'Yes,' he says.

Still she hesitates, eyes him even more intensely, and then swoops, like a bird pecking, jutting out her tongue and, as he tilts the spoon, allows the glistening ruby jelly to slide into her mouth. She swallows it slowly. 'No more!' she cries, covering her mouth with her hand. 'No more!'

He keeps his word.

She looks out of the window a while. 'Look at that beautiful tree,' she says, and adds, in sudden alarm, 'What would we do without trees?' Tears fill her eyes as she appeals to him.

'There'll always be trees.'

'Will there? Oh – will there? Oh, I hope so . . .'

He nods, suddenly overcome, as happens, by her plight, her sweetness, her helplessness, the ebbing, this dying of the light, such a light, flickering bravely still . . .

~

He visited her in her room in the nursing home. Sometimes the six-hundred-and-fifty-mile round trip ended in watching her sleep. At those times he would stay for an hour or so, then go for a walk and a smoke on the beach, hoping she might be awake when he returned.

The home had been built in 1862 as a convalescent home for the wealthy. Its location was designed to take advantage of the healing properties thought to be in the ozone from the sea no more than two hundred yards away. The building sat behind deep defensive lines of sand dunes, lush with spiky marram grass, rivuleted with a network of small half-concealed pathways, haunted by transient bathers, dog-walkers and erotic hideaways.

John never failed to enjoy the building. It had a long frontage, a vaguely Palladian aspect, a bold isolation. It faced what had once been a busy railway line but was now given over to gorse and scrub. It looked every inch a grandiose country house: save that it had only one floor. As if the ground floor had been built and then the money ran out. Was it a failed investment that could hide its shame as it stood half a mile outside the seaside town? Or just another example of privileged eccentricity?

In fact its stunted one-storey height and its extraordinary length – which held more than forty bedrooms, several sitting rooms, kitchen, dining room, offices, storerooms – were deliberate. The wide corridors, the broad walnut doorways, the multitude of long windows were specifically designed for those whose mobility was limited. Even the imitations of grandeur could be seen as healing: who could not feel better, living for a while spoiled in such opulence?

And so they had come to be healed, for more than a hundred and fifty years: the neurasthenic and the broken-limbed, the war wounded and the abandoned, the sick, the

broken-hearted, the dying and the diseased. Among those who had sought refuge were John and his mother immediately after the war when it had been a sanatorium for sufferers from tuberculosis: they had been kept in for no more than a couple of weeks.

Now it sheltered the old and the very old, the ill and the terminally ill. Those who could, paid; most did not. Each room had a small bathroom; the staff were local women. These women, through their parents and relatives and friends, knew or felt they knew those they cared for: it was a family of place.

When he read of the neglect of old people in other such homes and heard the stories of cruelty and despair, John thanked his lucky stars. It was lucky, too, that his mother had lived all her life in a small market town a few miles inland and was therefore eligible for the home; and most of all he was grateful for the goodness that could be garnered and cultivated still among local women whose caring job was a job they wanted to do.

Despite the understandable pessimism of the day, when John looked at this home and appreciated the ambition to support the entire population from the cradle to the grave in such an economically straitened island, there was a pride to be taken, he thought, in such a democratic act of decency.

His mother went to sleep and he went out for some air. When he made for the sea he would circumnavigate the great beached home, and trek through the pines to the dunes ankle deep in sand, years deep in the past. He remembered these dunes as superlative cowboy-and-Indian territory on his schoolboy day trips there with his mother and their friends, and later as subtle playgrounds on school trips and choir trips, and still later as disturbing mating grounds when he and his pals biked the ten miles in the hope of a sexual adventure. There

had been one eruptive adolescent passion, he remembered (and always would), when a wild girl, teasing, older, who knew the ways of the dunes, had maddened him, possessed him, then dumped him and left him achingly bewildered.

Visits to his mother provoked memories as strong as the surge of the sea that swept over from the Atlantic and around Ireland, and sped into the inlets and crannies, the rivers and estuaries and firths that stabbed into the body of Britain on the west coast. Along these water routes had come the settlers who had given breed and tongue to the county his mother was bound to.

When he was with her it was as if she were the tidal moon pulling up depths from his life thought forgotten, himself the willing sea, ready to race across the sands or be thrown against the rocks, not wanting it to ebb away. He felt this place course through him; this lonely area of the far north-west of England, this county of war and pillage, of unimaginable wealth and poverty alike, this, his England, once a spinning globe of red glory to the boy who had loved it with an innocent, ignorant, imperial passion that still glowed in the ashes of the present.

Across the sword of sea before him, the Solway Firth, he looked towards Scotland with its hill-line mildly matching the more massive and poetic fells of the Lake District a few miles to the south, behind him. At evening time he would, when lucky, catch the gorgeous blaze of sunset to the west, the daily death, the never constant interplay of ever-reshaping clouds, the range of colours, some so pastelly delicate it was impossible to ascribe to them their precise shade, some so lyrical, some magnificently uncompromising – gold, crimson, red; the day, the world ending in a furnace.

Or there would be sullen days, just as compelling, the pressing heaviness of grey-black mountains of bruised

clouds, a sea rippled in lead, hills across the water misted and dangerous, the wind whistling up the death wails of armies fatally believing they had the time to march across the temporarily sea-less sand to surprise Scotland, their old enemy, only to be surprised themselves by the speed of the tide as it raced in to embrace the clear border streams. They had drowned, those English warriors, in their thousands. The end of their world in this lifeless landscape. Was her loss of memory a sort of drowning? At night the little fishing boats with their tiny lights were like the lost souls of those armies, still calling for help. Like her broken sentences.

He liked to walk back at dusk to the home with its own tiny lights at a distance. He would always pause for a last cigarette. He hoped he was ready for whatever degree of wakefulness or sleepiness, of anger or love was waiting for him. He was now her pole star. Many years ago he had decided that being the only child made things simple. With his father dead, and despite his children and other relatives and friends and the nurses, he had to be her keystone.

And 'Hello?' she said, this day, questioning as she had done a couple of hours before. He sat beside her. He had about an hour left. She was still half asleep, small even in the modest bed, and puzzled.

'Hello,' he said. He took her mottled hand. It was cold. He rubbed it. 'It's John.'

'John? No, it isn't.'

'It is.'

'You're *not*.'

There was a sorrow but there was a calm also. His task was to take her away from this confused present, to lead her into the past, which could be patched up or made up or truly remembered but above all – safe. Safe, safe, safe and away from the abyss that threatened.

'Who am I, then?' He smiled. It was not a false encouragement. It suggested a game. That might help take the curse off it.

'Well . . .' She cupped and rested her chin on her left hand and considered him as if he were a dog she were judging in a show. 'Let's see your feet.'

He pushed back his chair and lifted them: black-brogue shod. She scrutinised them. 'They're very big,' she said.

'They're just normal.'

'They're *big*.'

He waited.

'You're a Johnston,' she said, 'that's who you are. You're a Johnston.'

'I'm not.' He knew about the Johnstons.

'You *are*!'

She turned her face into the pillow and he thought that she was set for sleep. But she was sobbing. He leaned over to touch her near-fleshless shoulder through the linen nightgown. She ignored his touch. He pulled up the sheet and the blanket so that she would be warmer. She murmured to herself, so low he could not hear. Then again. He leaned forward. 'I want my mother,' she said.

He heard himself ask, 'Which one?'

She stirred and looked at him – but what did she see?

'My own,' she said. 'My own mother. I want Grace to come and see me. Can you bring her? I want my mother.'

Once more she turned away and put her white head into the white pillow and this time she slept, leaving him with the burden of the request.

Maybe they could share an imagined world now. Maybe his thoughts could become her thoughts. For where was she in that dark place but still drifting forward, like a small boat on a black glass of water? Could he not in

some way reach her even there, out of his own darkness? Could he not put together a memory for her? Perhaps he could become her memory. To build it from fragments, or make it up. And most of all bring back Grace. Her own mother.