

## Claire

*By James Linton, HC-One*

Dennis Spencer prayed Claire would remember. Their 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary was tomorrow. She wouldn't forget, would she? He rubbed his prickly chin. Where was she? David should have brought her by now.

"Morning Den," David wheeled Claire into his bedroom, "give me a buzz if you need anything."

"Thanks a lot." Den smiled, as the carer left.

Claire was still so beautiful even with her crooked teeth, deep wrinkles, iron-grey hair. She creased her nose. "Have you not heard of a razor or a comb? And your stomach. I always told you that you eat too much chocolate."

Den rolled his blue eyes. "How are you, sweetheart?"

Claire stared at him and waved her hand to the window. "I don't know. Looks like sun today."

Den snickered at the tumbling rain. "You know it's our 60<sup>th</sup> tomorrow?"

"You want me to put £60 on trap 2? It'll have to wait until after dinner."

He nodded. "I hope something nice is in the oven. Roast pork?"

"Do you men think with anything other than your stomachs?"

Den giggled, as the laughter rumbled up from his belly. "Straight-talking as always. That's why I love you."

Claire narrowed her eyes. "Don't let my husband hear you say that. He wouldn't be happy with you."

"I am your husband."

"No, you're not," she glanced around, "where's Den?"

His stomach squirmed. "I'm right here."

"You're not my Dennis. I don't know who you are."

Den sniffed, as his voice cracked. "Yes, I am. Don't say this to me."

"You said you love me? You don't even know me. Piss off. Get out of here." Claire lashed out, striking Den in the stomach.

He stabbed down on his buzzer, as his breath caught in his throat.

David charged in. "Everything okay?"

Den waved his hand, as his chest tightened. "Take her out of here."

After the door closed, the old man scrunched his eyes shut, as his throat constricted. Breathing out, he swallowed down the lump. He picked up the paper, as his hands trembled. The emotion exploded from him and he threw it down, as the tears streamed freely, mixing with his snot. He jumped, as David walked in.

"You alright?" The lad picked up the paper.

Wiping his eyes on his sleeve, he smiled. "I'm fine."

David sighed, brushing his thick fringe from his eyes. “How are you really feeling?” He took Den’s hand.

“I love Claire, I’ve loved her for 60 years and she doesn’t know who I am. I want to know she loves me too.” He sniffled, as his body tingled.

“Of course, she does. Her mind might be failing, but her feelings are still there. It’s your 60<sup>th</sup> tomorrow. I’ll give you a shave?”

“Claire wouldn’t know any different.” Den withdrew his hand, blinking away the tears.

David disappeared into the bathroom and returned with a shaving kit and mirror. “At least we can smarten you up.”

Den sighed and closed his eyes, as David applied the cold shaving cream.

“What work did you do?”

“National Service. Served in Cyprus, except a couple weeks in the Suez.”

“You were a soldier? That must have been intense?”

“It was. When we were in Cyprus, a roadside bomb blew four of my mates to kingdom come. I went to school with these lads. We went through training together.” He trailed off breaking eye contact.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything. Anyway, I’m all finished.” David held up the mirror.

“That’s great,” Den said, as his breathing slowed.

“Tomorrow morning we’ll face Claire together. You’ll be in the lounge waiting for her.”

Den forced out a grin, as his stomach churned. Was he really going to see Claire tomorrow?

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Den yawned, as David blurred into view. Was it morning already?

“Hello mate. Shall we get you ready for Claire?”

Looking away, Den nodded, as his palms sweated. Why did the lad have to remember?

Ten minutes later, he was being wheeled into the corridor as the lift doors whooshed open. Another carer wheeled Claire into sight, hunched over, her arms folded.

His stomach squirming, Den looked away. “Take me back.”

“Den...”

“David, take me back now.”

The carer obeyed, wheeling him inside. “You can’t hide in here forever.”

“I can try.” Den spoke into his chest.

“What happened? We were going to face Claire together?”

“That’s not Claire. That’s not the woman I married, not the woman I fell in love with. She’s been stolen from me.” Gritting his teeth, he sniffed, as his chest constricted.

David took Den’s hand. “Dementia or not, Claire is still your wife. She needs you and she loves you. She’s been by your side for 60 years. That’s why you need to face her. You owe her that much.”

Den squeezed David's hand and chuckled. "It's funny. I was a soldier. But seeing my wife scares me more than fighting in a war ever did.

"Terrifying, I'm sure, but what did Dennis Spencer do? Did he run and hide? No, he stood and fought. And that's what you're going to do now. You're going to fight for your wife on your 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Do you understand me, Private Spencer?"

Dennis saluted. "Yes sir."

Taking a deep breath, he allowed David to wheel him along the corridor. His heart thudded in his chest, as his stomach somersaulted. Swallowing, he was wheeled into the lounge, where Claire waited for him.

"Thank you for everything. I mean that." He held up his hand. David shook it and headed out.

Claire looked at him, slouched in her wheelchair. Balloons hovered above her head. "Hello, my lovely. You're looking handsome."

Den grinned, as his heart soared. "You're in a good mood."

"Why not? Look at that sunshine?"

Den laughed, as thunder rumbled. Chewing his lip, he took Claire's hand. "It's our 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary today. I love you; you know that?"

Claire squinted at him. "Of course, I know that, Den. You're my husband. I love you too."