

WHO WILL SPEAK FOR ALICE?

I'm sitting in my wheelchair in the hospital's outpatients' waiting area. There are various clinics today. I don't know who is in my queue or how long the wait will be this time.

The majority waiting are pensioners. Some watch the television in the corner. Several flick through old magazines. A few read the book they brought to occupy the wait. One woman is engrossed in a crossword. Others sit, occasionally catching another's eye then exchanging brief, kind smiles.

A name is called. Someone leaves. The seat is taken by the next, who has come to wait.

Alice, a small, frail figure, arrives in front of me. Her feet dangle off the incorrectly positioned footplate of the hospital wheelchair.

Her two carers sit either side of her. One is silent but watching Alice. They both laugh nervously.

The carer in charge of the wheelchair speaks to her colleague but for all hear.

"It took us twenty minutes to stop her swearing before we could bring her into the hospital. If she starts again we will put her over there".

The carer nods towards an empty area on the other side of the wide corridor.

The waiting area understands. We return to waiting.

Alice and her carers sit quietly for a minute.

"Are we at Veraton Hospital"? Alice enquires.

"Yes".

"Where's that near"?

"There're *lots* of places within half a mile", the carer replies tersely.

"Why are we here? There is nothing wrong with me".

"We told you before we came in".

"There is nothing wrong with me".

"You have trouble." The carer pauses.

"You know", she adds in a diffident tone.

"There's nothing wrong with me"

"I told you. Down below", the carer says more softly, but still audible to the waiting area.

The carer picks up a magazine and hands it to Alice.

"Here, look at this". The curtness back in her voice.

"What's that"?

"It's a magazine. You read it while you are waiting".

Alice fumbles with the magazine.

"There is nothing wrong with me."

"There is nothing wrong with me."

"I want to go home", she says with more agitation.

The carer takes the magazine off Alice, puts it back on the table, and picks up another. She starts reading it.

When she turns to Alice again her voice is different.

"Look, there's a picture of a baby".

Alice leans forwards, looks and engages in a conversation about the baby and other pictures.

Alice's face relaxes. I get a glimpse of the person sitting in the wheelchair opposite me. I watch her and wonder.

Who is Alice? Is she a mother? Was her straight, white, bobbed hair once blonde? What did Alice do when she was in her forties, the present age of her carers? Did she dance in her twenties? What did she do in the war? Did she have a fiancé who did not return. What is your story Alice?

A nurse arrives in the waiting area. Alice can't see the nurse. No name is called. The carers stand up. The nurse and carers greet each other. The carers laugh nervously.

“She was swearing in the car park”.

Fear returns to Alice’s face. She buries her face briefly in the small crocheted blanket she has kneaded into a ball on her knee.

The wheelchair is swung round and pushed to the corridor. The nurse and carers walk three abreast down the corridor talking and laughing.

The carer in charge of the wheelchair has one hand on the chair’s push-bar. But her arm is stretch behind her.

I am left with an image of fear, despair and aloneness on Alice’s face as she is pulled backwards to be examined ‘down below’.

I bite my lips so I don’t cry.

Those still waiting return to their magazines, books and crossword. I sit for another five minutes.

A man in a suit comes from behind me, turns and stands in front of me.

“Hello. How are you today?”

“Fine thanks, and I’ve got both aids in”

“Good. Are you ready to go”? the audiologist asks as he goes to the back of my chair.

“Breaks off then”.

He pushes me down the corridor towards his consulting room. We pass the consulting room where Alice is swearing loudly.

I wonder what happened to Alice in the past. Why is she so distressed?

(Name and location have been changed)