

# NOBODY THERE

A N Barden



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Lilly's always telling me to be thankful of the here and now, and not to steadfastly cling on to the past. She says that each new day is special in its own right. But is it? Is it really? For her, perhaps it is. She has the prime of her life ahead of her. But not for me. The best years of my life are well and truly over. Take my appearance for instance. Nowadays, all I see when I cast a glance in a mirror is a miserable-looking woman in her late seventies with tired bulbous eyes, a droopy saggy jaw and lines so deep they look like they've been roughly hacked out with a knife. But it wasn't always that way. Fifty years ago looking at my reflection didn't make me cringe or want to smash the glass into a million pieces.

Never a reputed beauty, back in my youth I was at least considered acceptable-looking, although my warm and vivacious personality always outshone my looks, even back then. "A caring woman of substance" would be a fitting epitaph when I'm dead and buried or perhaps "a kind-hearted plain Jane" would be another. Maybe Lilly will have that inscribed on my headstone. Lilly's my one and only child, and has recently taken up the exhilarating role as my full-time carer or, in other words, she's the one who's lumbered with looking after me now the powers that be have deemed me too frail and decrepit to take care of myself any longer. How

ironic and mortifying is that? Particularly as it seems like only yesterday that the tables were turned, and I was the one feeding, dressing and changing Lilly's nappy (not that I wear one of those, of course - not yet).

So that's where I reside these days, with Lilly, in her rather grand, five bedroomed, detached house in Tunbridge Wells. Above ground, Lilly lives with her husband, William, and their two girls, Eleanor and Nicola, and below ground - hidden away in what had once been the dark, damp cellar, but which has now been miraculously transformed into a compact one bedroomed flat - that's where I spend my days and nights. Don't get me wrong, I'm not bitter and twisted or ungrateful. Oh no - far from it. Lilly's great - a wonderful daughter - so kind and attentive in every way. And, as she points out almost on a daily basis, it makes perfect sense for me to live with them. Anyway, what would I prefer, she says, an old people's home or my own basement flat? It's just a means to an end, she adds. They have the space and I need the care. Simple. Sorted. Job done. But whether it's the sensible solution or not, I still find it impossible to accept that this is my lot in life now, and my days of independent living are well and truly over.

My main stumbling block is my limited mobility of course. Within the flat I use two sticks to move around. Outside, I'm glued to my mobility scooter (no, not literally). Then there's my Type 1 Diabetes to contend with. Three times a day, without fail, I have to inject a high dose of Insulin into my body and, as a result, my stomach now looks like a pincushion. Then, to add insult to injury, just last week the so-called medical experts decided that I may have Dementia. And that was the moment when it finally hit me that never again would I live alone. However, being mollycoddled and cosseted has never really been for me. I've always been proud of my sanguine and unflappable spirit, and working as an NHS Nurse for the best part of thirty years, that resolve was often tested to its limit. Not anymore though. Those days are long gone. Now, the only challenges I ever face are waking up in the morning and remembering to breathe in and out.

'Just enjoy taking it easy, Mum,' is Lilly's constant refrain whenever I admit to being bored out of my mind. But what exactly am I taking it easy from? Surely you have to be busy in the first place to take it easy. Otherwise you're merely taking it easy from taking it easy!

‘Take up knitting or crochet,’ Lilly suggested one morning.

After nearly spurning a mouthful of tea over her, I shook my head and lowered my eyes. ‘You know I’d hate that,’ I replied, feeling wretched.

‘Well, just relax then and watch some telly,’ she retorted, giving me one of those looks that even grown men would tremble at (and not with lust, I might add).

Relax? She’s kidding, right? Having a laugh? Yanking my chain? That’s all I ever do, day after sodding day. I’m sick to bloody death of relaxing. A change of scene is what I crave, not staring vacantly at the same four walls nonstop or dribbling and drooling in front of a rectangular television set. But when I try to explain my feelings to Lilly, she doesn’t understand. She thinks I’m being silly, and says that I deserve to put my feet up in my golden years. Little does she realise that being housebound is what I fear the most. Out in the open I still feel alive and can remember the person I once was. However, within seconds of being incarcerated inside, I begin to turn into the living dead. Besides, getting out and about in the fresh air and feeling the sun on my back has always been a large part of my daily routine,

like eating and shitting. So when you take it away, there's nothing left. Well, not for me.

'It's just part and parcel of getting old,' Lilly admonishes me sternly.

But is it though? When we reach a certain age do we really have to forget who we are? Yes, I have to admit that my body's seen better days, but deep within that battered, weather-beaten outer shell I'm still the dynamic go-getter I always was - the woman who once held down a responsible job, brought up a child all on her own, and was forever rushing here, there and everywhere. I mean to say, there's no magic switch to push, you know, when you reach your seventies, that changes your mindset or your personality.

So that's why every morning, like clockwork, I go out and about on my mobility scooter for a few hours alone. Often, I just go into the centre of Tunbridge Wells to pick up a few everyday essentials, and occasionally, I pop into my favourite pub for half a lager, but mostly, I just drive around with no real purpose other than to feel part of the human race again and watch the world go by.

And that's exactly what I was doing this morning. Yes, I admit, I stayed out longer and ventured further than usual, but isn't that simply another downside of old age: losing the track of time? Anyway, what is there to rush home for? And today felt special. The birds were singing. The sun was shining. It was warm, almost hot, and for the first time in ages I forgot about my deteriorating body and embraced the wondrous sights, sounds and smells of the great outdoors.

Perhaps, with hindsight, that was my downfall. I'd been so wrapped up in my quest for freedom, I hadn't paid attention to Lilly's repeated warnings. But listening has never been my forte. Talking - now that's something I excel in. My own dulcet tones have always bewitched me (if not others). And giving orders - that's probably why I adored being a Nurse for so long. But now the tables have well and truly turned, and I now know exactly what it's like to be on the receiving end of someone talking at you incessantly, with no response required. And then it finally dawns on me that the fixed expression I had often encountered throughout my nursing career - and which I had always believed to be rapt attention - was, in fact, a bored stupor.

And it's due to my own pigheadedness and lack of insight that I now find myself stranded in the middle of

nowhere. It's not as if Lilly hadn't warned me this could happen. Some days, it seemed to be the only thing she'd droned on about, endlessly. Well, that and keeping that silly phone thing on me at all times, just in case of emergencies. But did I take any notice? Of course not. If I had, I wouldn't be in the shit now, would I? So, as Lilly would rightly say:

'You've only got yourself to blame, mother.'

My mobility scooter came to an abrupt halt, you see, while I was trundling along this lane, heading towards some lambs I'd seen frolicking in the distance. How cute, I'd thought. What a prat I am, honestly. Why the hell didn't I take more notice of Lilly? She kept telling me that short distances on the mobility scooter were fine, longer excursions were risky, but that riding around Tunbridge Wells for hours on end was an absolute no-no. And didn't she insist that every evening, without exception, I should recharge the battery? Although isn't it a longstanding joke of the younger generation that if something electrical doesn't work you turn it on and off and again and that fixes the problem? Well, I've done that about ten times now, and still nothing. All I can assume is that the battery must be well and truly flat, unless something mechanical has broken, of course.

After grabbing my stick laying by my feet, and with great difficulty, I step off the scooter and, at a snail's pace, try to walk around it. Then I stop dead. What am I doing? Even if there was an obvious fault with the scooter, would my untrained eye notice it? Not in a million years. And if, by some miracle, I did see what the problem was, how did I expect to fix it all by myself? I'd been a Nurse, not a Mobility Scooter Technician. But then, I reasoned with myself, surely it was better to do something - anything constructive and practical - rather than remain seated on a broken-down mobility scooter like a first-rate plonker.

Pausing to catch my breath, I glanced around. Whatever possessed me to drive my scooter up here? Apart from the lambs in the adjacent field (whose relentless bleating was now starting to grate on my nerves - their frivolous cuteness long forgotten), the lane was completely deserted. No, hang on, I was wrong. Over there, further up the lane on the right, was some sort of recreational ground, and on it, playing football, were a group of young lads. Perhaps if I cried out for help, they'd hear me. But before I opened my mouth, I stopped myself. What was I thinking? I couldn't do that. How could I possibly trust *them*? Wasn't Lilly always bemoaning the youth of today, and telling me how selfish and reckless they

were. They could rob me: not that I have much to pinch, mind you, just the fifty pounds I drew out from the Bank this morning. And, anyway, the money doesn't bother me. It's the photograph hidden beneath my purse that's my priceless treasure, and therefore irreplaceable. You see, it's the only snapshot I have of my Eric, my fancy man, my bit on the side, or whatever the trendy term for a lover is nowadays.

Considered to be happily married man when he first joined the hospital, Eric was a very gifted Orthopaedic Surgeon. Why was I ever attracted to such a cad? Quite simply, carnal desire. Eric was sex on legs or the walking groin as we all liked to call him back then. He was the first and last man to make me tingle all over, and that was before he even laid a finger on me. Have I shocked you? Yes? I thought so. But why? I mean, is it really so wicked for ladies of a certain age to still have urges and desires? Anyway - whatever - the fact remains that Eric was (and in my head still is) my guilty pleasure, and the thought of some greasy-haired toerag laying their grubby hands on his photograph just doesn't bear thinking about.

Shivering, and leaning against the mobility scooter, I pulled my cardigan further across my bosom. It was getting colder. The wind was now gathering

momentum, and casting a fleeting glance upwards, I could see dark clouds scudding across the sky. Great! Just what I needed: rain. So not only was I about to be mugged by a ruthless gang of hooligans, after that hypothermia was inevitable! Hanging my head, I couldn't believe what a fool I had been. Why hadn't I grabbed my raincoat from its hook by the front door today? And again, I could hear Lilly's voice inside my head, nagging me in her high-pitched, sing-song voice:

'Always wear your coat when you go outside, mother, or one day you'll regret it.'

And she was right (again). Today was that day.

But grabbing my coat hadn't even crossed my mind this morning. Why would it? When I left the flat the sky had been blue and cloudless, the weather warm and sunny. Besides, neither the sudden chill in the air nor the risk of rain were of paramount importance in the great scheme of things, missing my lunchtime Insulin injection was. The shaking had already begun, and soon my sight would go blurry and, as if that was not bad enough, after that I was most likely to collapse and pass out - just something else to look forward to after the mugging and hypothermia!

Then, from somewhere behind me, a car horn blared, making me shriek in surprise. Glancing over my shoulder I could see that a thickset man with round, gold-rimmed spectacles, driving a black mini, had pulled up by the grass verge and was leaning out of his car window.

‘Are you all right, love? Have you broken down?’

I hesitated. What should I do? Clearly I needed help, and urgently, because if I didn’t have my next shot of Insulin very soon, I was in big trouble, and a Diabetic Hypo was unavoidable.

But how could I trust this man? He was a total stranger. Okay, yes, I admit to taking risks in my prime, but those days were long gone. Moves from the Karma Sutra were all but a distant memory. Nowadays, just putting one foot in front of the other was enough to build up a sweat.

There was nothing for it, I had to trust this man. What choice did I have? There were no guarantees that another car would drive up this lane, and even if one did, by then it could be too late.

The car door slammed, making me start and turn my head.

‘Can you hear me, love?’

It was the man speaking again. He’d climbed out of his mini and was striding towards me.

The choice was made.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘What are you doing here, love, in the middle of nowhere? Has that broken down?’ he said, pointing to my mobility scooter.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Run out of battery?’

‘Yes,’ I said, wishing I could bring myself to say something more informative or interesting.

‘Thought so.’ The man sighed. Then, after looking first at my scooter, then at his mini, he added, ‘I can give you a lift home, love, but that won’t fit in my boot.’

‘No,’ I said in a whisper. My God! What was wrong with me? Why had I suddenly become so dull and spiritless? Eric would be ashamed of me.

‘Look, you go and sit in the car, love,’ he said, pointing at his mini, as if I was in doubt as to which car he was referring to. Clearly he assumed I was bonkers, or perhaps he was merely deranged: the lane was deserted apart from us.

‘I’m just going to hide your mobility scooter in that field over there, behind the hedge,’ he went on, in a very slow, loud voice as if he was either talking to someone very hard of hearing or a two year old child. ‘Is that okay, love?’

Nodding, I picked up my handbag in one hand, my stick in the other, and hobbled unsteadily towards his mini. But, by the time I’d reached the passenger side of the car, he was back and had opened the door for me.

‘Here you go, love.’

Cringing inwardly, I wished he’d stop calling me that. I wasn’t his “love” and never would be.

Still feeling slightly anxious about my own personal safety, I squeezed myself into the passenger seat and fumbled around with the seatbelt.

‘Let me do that, love.’

‘No!’ I said firmly, pulling the seatbelt childishly out of his reach. ‘I can manage, thank you.’

He pulled a face, then shrugged. ‘Sorry, love, I was only trying to help,’ he said, turning away from me.

‘And why do you keep calling me “love”?’ I said, before I could stop myself.

He slammed the car door, and twisted in his seat, staring at me wide-eyed through his nerdy spectacles. Perhaps I’d gone too far and was out of my depth.

‘What?’

Now there was an edge to his voice that hadn’t been there before, and I shrunk down low in my seat feeling uneasy. Me and my big mouth; Lilly was always telling me to think before I speak. But, on the positive side, he’d at least stopped calling me “love” now.

‘Never mind,’ I mumbled, ‘it doesn’t matter.’

Silence followed. You could have heard a pin drop. Reaching down to seize my handbag, I placed it upon my lap and started rifling through it as if I was searching for something. I wasn’t, but I was

determined not to look at him, and wanted to keep my hands busy to stop them shaking.

‘Where do you live?’

‘Why?’ I asked, feeling startled and confused. What business was it of his to know where I lived? Did he plan to attack me the moment I set foot in my flat?

He took a couple of deep rattling breaths, his fingertips drumming on the steering wheel. ‘Because to take you home, I need to know where you live, don’t I?’ he replied.

‘Oh, yes, of course. How silly of me,’ I tittered, forcing myself to look at him once more.

He was smiling at me, but it was the false kind of smile you give when you’re humouring someone.

‘So where do you live?’ he repeated in a slightly louder voice, his smile now so strained he looked like a clown with constipation.

I hesitated. Good question: where did I live? Oh God! How could I have forgotten my address at a time like this? The man was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel again.

‘Mmm, well, it’s in Tunbridge Wells,’ I said after a long pause.

‘Yeah, I kind of guessed that,’ he said. ‘Any clues as to where exactly?’

In my opinion sarcasm is the lowest form of wit.

‘Mount Ephraim,’ I cried loudly, after a long silence, making him jump in his seat slightly. ‘It’s one of the roads branching off Mount Ephraim.’

‘The Royal Chase?’

I shook my head. ‘No, not that one.’

Twisting my hands in my lap, my handbag fell to the floor with a resounding clang. The tension was mounting: perhaps I should get out of the car now while the going was good.

‘I’m sorry,’ I murmured.

‘Don’t get yourself in a tizzy, love. I’ll just drive towards Mount Ephraim,’ he said, starting the engine and pulling off from the grass verge slowly. ‘Perhaps something will jog your memory when we get there. All right?’

He turned his head towards me and I nodded mechanically, feeling like a five year old with pigtails. 'Yes, thank you.'

We drove along the lane in silence, and not one of those relaxed silences either - oh no - this one was so tense calling it awkward didn't even come close.

But then, as we continued further along the lane, I realised I had a more pressing problem. At first I tried to ignore it. Then I crossed my legs. But the lane was so uneven that every bump and pothole made things ten times worse. Holy shit! This strange man's patience was already hanging by a thread - would it snap if left a wee stain on his pristine grey-upholstered car seat?

'Excuse me,' I said tentatively, feeling sick to the very pit of my stomach. 'I really need the loo. Urgently.'

He slammed on the brakes and I lurched forwards, my face now inches from the windscreen.

'You're kidding?' he said, glaring at me. All pretence at patience and understanding had vanished in an instant.

‘No. I’m not kidding,’ I said, my eyes welling up with tears from a combination of acute embarrassment and shame. ‘Look, it’s okay. I’ll get out here. I won’t bother you anymore,’ I said.

‘Don’t be daft,’ he said in a patronising tone, making me feel even worse. ‘You can’t do that. We’re in the middle of nowhere.’

‘I don’t mean to be such a nuisance,’ I mumbled as I bent forwards and groped around on the floor, frantically trying to recover my stick. The tears were flowing freely down my cheeks now. Lilly was right again: outside, in the real world, I was a menace. Clasp my stick, I sat up again and reached for the door handle.

‘Please don’t get out,’ the man said, his tone apologetic now. ‘I’m sorry for making you cry. Look, my house is very near here. You can use the toilet there. What do you say?’

Again, what choice did I have? It was either wet myself, and suffer the worst kind of humiliation ever or continue to take a chance on this man. I let go of the door handle, shuffled around in my seat and looked up.

He was grinning again, his yellowing teeth clearly visible, a glob of saliva dribbling down his chin.

‘Yes, all right,’ I said, my heart banging against my chest as if it was possessed and had a mind of its own.

The man took the next left turning, and a few minutes later, pulled into an expansive gravelled driveway, then stopped outside a large detached house with a gabled roof.

‘Here we are. Home sweet home.’

The house looked normal enough. Not one I’d imagine a serial killer owning. But how could I be sure? My unease continued to increase as the man got out of the car and dashed around the car to open the passenger door for me. Was that an evil glint I saw in his eyes or just the light reflecting on his glasses?

Had I completely lost my mind? What the hell was I doing? Lilly wouldn’t approve of this at all. On her “never do under any circumstances list” going into a stranger’s house must surely be at the top.

After opening the passenger door, the man leant over me and went to grab my arm. I recoiled. Was he going to hurt me? Had he finally snapped?

‘Can I help you get out of the car, love?’ he said.

Oh heck, back to “love” again, I thought miserably, as I held both my hands up in front of my body to stop him touching me.

‘It’s okay, I can manage,’ I said, trying to keep my tone as light and friendly as possible, knowing that riling him wasn’t wise, particularly now that I was entering his domain where I would undoubtedly have to abide by his rules.

With difficulty, I stepped out of the car with my handbag in one hand and my stick in the other, and hobbled behind him on the uneven gravel surface as he led me towards an imposing entrance porch. Standing on the threshold was a plump, red-haired woman, a puzzled expression etched across her puffy face.

‘Who’s this?’ she asked the man, giving me the once over, as he stepped forwards and gave her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek.

‘Her mobility scooter broke down,’ he replied, ushering me into the hallway, ‘and she’s desperate for the loo,’ he added, making my cheeks flush scarlet, my humiliation complete.

‘Sorry,’ I muttered, staring at the floor. When would this hell end?

‘Oh, I see. Well, never mind. This way my dear, and mind the step.’

For goodness sake - now it was “dear” - even “love” was better than that!

The woman steered me down the hallway by the elbow. Was she under some weird misapprehension that I was, in fact, a burglar, only pretending to be old and frail, and that was the reason she felt compelled to lead me to the bathroom in this way?

‘It’s in here,’ she said opening a wood-panelled door to her left.

For a few moments she hovered indecisively in the doorway. Was she going to follow me in, pull down my trousers, then wipe my bottom for me?

‘Thanks,’ I said, tugging my elbow out of her vice-like grip, shuffling into the bathroom and shutting the door firmly behind me.

Sighing deeply, I quickly went about my business. Then, when I'd finished and went to open the bathroom door again, I almost tripped over two pairs of different sized feet: the man and the woman were both standing just outside the door waiting to escort me out. In a moment they'd be tapping their watches impatiently and pointing towards the front door. Clearly, it was time to leave.

'Ready to go?' the man said, echoing my thoughts. 'That's if you've remembered where you live now,' he added with a smirk.

'What's this?' the woman said, smiling.

The man laughed. '*We* had trouble remembering where *we* lived, didn't *we*?'

Was that the "royal we" or just another way to make me feel even more idiotic? He really needn't have bothered, I already felt the lowest of the low.

'Molyneux Park Road,' I said suddenly, making them both turn their heads and stare at me in surprise.

'What's that, dear?' the woman said, very slowly and very loudly as if I was standing in another room.

‘That’s where I live.’

‘Are you sure?’ the man said, giving a snorting laugh which made me blush again.

‘Stop that!’ the woman said, slapping the man’s wrist playfully. ‘You’ve been through a lot of stress today, haven’t you, dear?’

Contrary to popular belief, I’m not actually deaf, blind or stupid. All along I knew that the woman was trying to suppress a giggle behind her hands - although, strangely, her comment was spot on: spending too much time with ignoramuses like these two was enough to raise anyone’s stress levels sky-high.

‘Are you ready for me to take you home then?’ the man asked.

‘Yes,’ I said nodding. ‘Yes, I’m ready to go home now.’

And for the very first time in my life I was. Lilly was right (again): being housebound in familiar surroundings with kind-hearted people who loved and cared for you, wasn’t so bad after all.