

## Mary's Journey

Mary had one big advantage over the others in the office. She could turn off her hearing aid, closing down the outside world and focus entirely on what she had to do. This made her accurate, quick and efficient. True, she missed out on the office gossip but she was popular and the others always brought her up to date in the lunch break. True, she missed out on the office banter but trying to keep up with a group conversation was difficult for her at the best of times and she found it must less tiring to distance herself in her silent world, a habit that was considered just one of Mary's eccentricities rather than trying to keep up with what was being bandied around the office. So if you asked her Mary would say she loved her job, she liked the people she worked with and she was very happy.

Mary was nearly 60 and not far off retiring. Sitting on the bus, watching the raindrops run down the window to the vibration of the engine, this was where her inner world had taken her; to her retirement. She wasn't looking forward to it, but she didn't dread it either; she would have enough to do to keep her busy with her evening classes, her garden and her house. She did have concerns about being able to fund her many interests on a fixed income and run her big, old house, which she wasn't going to let go of easily but there was something more. No, her really worry was the thought that she consciously kept at bay, scared that she might drown in sadness if she let it intrude. It was the memory of the retirement she had planned with her beloved Jack, the future she had lost the day she lost him. But she knew how to keep busy and was practised at preventing unwanted thoughts from invading her mind.

Mary was 15 years old when she left school and the family home to live and work in Cardiff. Memories of how her working life began seemed to be ever present in to her mind as her imminent 60th birthday and retirement loomed closer. It was very much against her parents' wishes that she left home. If they hadn't been so adamant that Mary wouldn't be able to manage she probably wouldn't have flown the nest at all. She could see why they would have been scared for her, wanting to keep her at home, safe. Mary had been born with hip problems which required extensive surgery in order for her to be able to grow and to walk unaided. She had spent much of the her childhood in Great Ormond Street Hospital separated from her family, with only an aunt, who lived and worked in London, to visit once week. They needn't have worried, Mary had loved it. It gave her a warm, nostalgic glow thinking back on that time. Home was dark and austere, full of grim and serious adults. There was her mother, a gentle loving woman, but who lived in awe of her husband. There was her father, a stern man who went to chapel three times on Sunday, and expected his family to accompany him! An avid reader, he did allow books in the house but Sundays it was only the bible that was permitted and the radio they owned was only ever for news and Sunday services. The other members of the household were her two older brothers, the youngest giving her ten years and both long gone now; two aunts, one maternal, one paternal, both spinsters and both strict and unlaughing and Lillian, her baby sister. Hospital by contrast was Eldorado! It was light, airy and full of laughter. All those children! Mary didn't go to school until she was nearly ten. Her poor hearing and mobility meant that she had to stay at home. Mary had been taught to read and write by her father who used the bible as his teaching aid. But in hospital there were other children to play with, nurses to look after her and the most fabulous food to eat! Every day a feast! Mary's thoughts flew back to the last time she was in hospital as a child. It was Christmas. She remembered her excitement at the decorations, the Christmas tree, the talk of Father Christmas and she was thrilled to think about waking up on Christmas morning with all those other children and opening her presents, eating Christmas dinner, singing carols and playing games. She couldn't wait! Then, the worst possible thing happened. She was

discharged home. She told the doctor she didn't want to go. She begged him to let her stay until after Christmas but he only laughed and sent her home anyway. Her father came to collect her, the day before Christmas Eve. She could see him now, in her mind's eye, walking through the ward door and she remembered how, as he took her hand to take her home, she was hatching a plan to return. She had paid particular attention to the details of their journey, the bus, the train, the walk from the station. The next day, rising very early, she slipped out of the dark household, nestled in the small village that was tucked away in the South Wales valley, and she retraced their steps. How her legs ached! How her hip throbbed! But she was going to spend Christmas in hospital and nothing was going to stop her! The nurses were astonished to see her. She could see now their incredulous looks that melted in to smiles; she recalled how they protested and scolded her for being so foolhardy but they let her stay and she remembers it as the best Christmas ever!

So, when she made up her mind to leave home and get a job there was nothing her family could do or say to dissuade her. Mary was a young woman who knew her own mind. She had a will of iron and was as stubborn as a mule. The day after she left school she caught a bus to Cardiff to find herself a job. Her strategy was to knock on doors and ask if the firm needed any help, a strategy which, unlikely as it seems today, was successful. She started work in the office of a printers and office work became her career from that day until this. At first she met her parents half way by living at home and travelling daily. But this became far too tiring and it wasn't long before she found lodgings with a family in Cardiff and that was that, she had fled the coup. She returned only when her parents became so infirm that they were unable to manage without constant care.

Now, here she was on the threshold of retirement. "Just as well really", she thought as it would certainly not be long before her job and that of her colleagues in the office would be replaced by one girl and a computer. How things have changed! Forty five years ago all you needed was to be able to read, write, add up, have a measure of commonsense and determination. Using the telephone had been a problem for Mary with her hearing difficulty but she was a diligent worker and she made up for it in other ways. She had always been a valued employee wherever she was working.

She had worked for this present firm for twenty years. They were good employers. When her mum and dad needed care there had been no problem reducing her hours to part time. Then, when her parents died, first mum and then dad, and she married Jack, it suited her to carry on part time, so she could at last do things for herself and make a home for Jack, who had been so patient for so long.

Life had been blissful for a while. Jack took a land job soon after they married so he could be at home. Mary always thought that he would live to regret it. The sea was in his blood but as it turned out he didn't live more than two months following their first anniversary. The short time that they were husband and wife was as happy as they had imagined it would be and Mary was always pleased that he had been at home every night for that short period of time. They had spent their weekends doing things together, wandering around gardens and stately homes, walking along the riverside or the shore, pottering around their garden, enjoying their shared home and each others company. And then Jack had a heart attack and it was over. Mary was on her own. Her parents were dead, her beloved Jack was dead, and her sister Lil, brother in law, niece and nephew were all now in South Africa. She was alone. Lil did come over for Jack's funeral and she tried to persuade Mary to go back to South Africa but Mary said "no". It didn't feel right. She needed to learn to be alone. Besides, she had no inclination to live on

foreign shores, to leave the home she had made with Jack and the world they had shared together. Mary knew that Lil felt sorry for her and taking her to South Africa would make Lil feel better; she wouldn't have to worry about her sister living on her own plus there was more than a touch of guilt about Mary spending much of her adult life looking after their parents whilst Lil had married, had children and made a new and exciting life in a new and exciting country. In truth, Mary felt quite content. Yes, she would have liked to travel; yes, she would like to have married Jack earlier and perhaps have had children but that wasn't to be. Her life was as it had been, and regrets and pangs of envy would change nothing. Mary decided to stay put and take responsibility for her own life and the shape it would take in the future. And that was how it was. Lil returned to South Africa about a week after Jack's funeral and Mary had gone back to work.

Work became Mary's salvation. She increased her hours and she developed a rigid routine to her week. Her working day started at 10am (God bless the man who invented flexi time!) and finished at 6pm. She caught the same bus every day, only having to cross the road to step on to it in the morning and stepping off the bus and straight in to her front garden coming home. Two evenings a week she attended her evening classes, Tuesday it was flower arranging and Thursday was creative writing. Friday she had as a day off, so she cleaned. Saturday was shopping. She visited the supermarket, of course, but her favourite kind of shopping was browsing the nooks and crannies of the town, looking for bargains. Sunday was her quiet day for gardening or perhaps having friends round for tea. Occasionally she would book herself a weekend away on a cookery or flower arranging course or some other arts and crafts event.

In this way she filled her silent world leaving little time to dwell on her loss. Not that she didn't grieve. Mary felt the pain of Jack's loss greatly. Those first few months when she returned to work walking out of the door gave a sense of release, like the wind blowing through your hair, it was freeing and bright but walking back through the door, in to hall, was more like shutting the door to dine with despair. With the click of the latch the tears would come like torrents of flood water.

As time passed the tears got less and less until it was unusual for her to find herself crying. Now, when she walked through her door she felt safe and secure amongst the familiar surroundings of the furniture she and Jack had bought together, the gifts and trinkets that Jack had brought back from his many trips, from all seven seas and the four corners of the world. There was the blue ceramic plate from South America, the coffee set from Japan and the dinner service from China. She would take out and hold the silk shawl from the Middle East and feel the cool cotton of the table cloths from Egypt. Each time now became less painful and more of a pleasure. Each item brought back memories of their time together that she could enjoy and more and more she found thoughts of Jack formed the back drop to her life and provided a momentum for her to enjoy each day. Jack said that one of the things he loved about her was her beautiful outlook on life, her sense of fun and the joy she found in just living. If she gave up on that now she would be letting him down.

There were times when the loss of Jack and the being alone pierced her like a sliver of glass and she felt pain like it was physical, acute and stabbing. Sometimes the pain was so overwhelming that she could do nothing else but give in to the tears until she was so drained she wondered how she would ever move again. But other times she would stem the flow with a good stiff self-talk and throw herself in to hard work, washing her curtains or digging her garden, shaking off any hint of misery or self pity. Mary knew how to count her blessings. She had good friends, good health and so many things that she wanted to learn and try,

retirement was going to be a beginning not an end. As she got off the bus and entered the building she felt the gift of time approaching with the same sense of excitement as she had that Christmas in Great Ormond Street. Mary reached her desk. She smiled to her self, switched off her hearing aid and began the day.

**Copyright © Samira Graham September 2007**