

## The Questionnaire

By Katie Grieve

The blue rope had faded quickly on the sunny window sill but the links in the choker chain were still shiny. Harry held the chain and let it slip through his fingers like a rosary. A placid dog, Ghost never needed much restraining on their daily shuffles, and the choker, a term he hated, seemed unnecessary but had become routine. Harry sighed as he felt a mild but persistent ache in his knees and held the rope with reluctance. The doorbell rang, interrupting his plans. Seeing the familiar shape through the glass Harry carefully placed the rope behind a picture frame on the sill. Adjusting it slightly to poke the chain out of sight.

The kettle whistled as they made themselves comfortable in the kitchen, a room located conveniently far from the bedroom. Harry reached for the mugs that had been recently moved to the lower shelf. Pouring the water with more care than was usual, he smiled as he dunked the teabag up and down.

‘I know Biddy, I know.’

Never patient enough to just let it sit there brewing. He wanted to slosh in the milk and drink the damn thing. But from years of experience, he knew that taking a weak cup of tea to Biddy was asking for one those looks. Secretly he didn’t mind the looks, and suspected that Biddy got an indulgent pleasure out of tutting him under her breath. When he turned, it took him a second to recognise the face staring back, one with practiced patience, and light brown not soft grey hair.

‘Mr Williams, thank you for the tea, remember it’s Madeline, I hope you’re comfortable with first names.’

He doubted she was comfortable with that at all. The unnecessarily slow voice seemed to be her attempt at friendliness. It was negated by her tapping on her iPad. No doubt noting his slip into the past. Harry had known she was there of course, it was just he sometimes stumbled into these memories. Madeline had caught him off guard.

‘Well *Maddie*, there you go, Tetley’s finest. Harry will do by the way.’

He beamed her a smile greatly enjoying the first name awkwardness and placed the mug in front of her careful not to let his hand tremble.

*I have trembling or uncontrollable movement in my limbs.*

*0- Never 1- Sometimes 2- Often 3- Almost Always*

Madeline frowned almost imperceptibly and repeated ‘Madeline’ before scratching her fingers through her curly hair. The sound made Harry imagine oily crescents of skin accumulating under her nails.

Madeline lifted the tea to her lips and gently blew on the top. Watching her through the rising steam. Harry saw her eyes scan the kitchen and pause on the old gas stove. He was still alert enough to catch her expression and see her glance at her iPad. There was a moment as they both sipped their tea, waiting for the check in to be over.

‘So, Mr Williams... Harry, how have things been since we spoke on the phone? You mentioned some trouble with your memory?’

*I find it difficult to remember people, places or everyday objects.*

*0- Never 1- Sometimes 2- Often 3- Almost Always*

Harry seethed as he reflected on the so-called trouble with memory. An offhand joke about leaving his keys in the door. Something that used to drive Biddy mad.

‘Your mind’s running a thousand miles a minute darling, one thing at a time.’

It was something he’d done for years yet Madeline had latched on to this as more evidence he needed *assisted living*. The word *assisted* made it sound so independent. More like *monitored survival*.

‘I’ve been grand actually, decided to take your suggestion. Been to the reading group at the library, you know, making connections and all that.’

An outright lie.

Madeline brightened. ‘I’m pleased to hear you’re taking my suggestions seriously Harry. Social contact at your time of life is incredibly vital. Studies show that connecting with one’s community is of paramount importance to *your* health and wellbeing.’

Had she swallowed the social worker hand-book whole? Harry nodded obligingly.

*I find it difficult to work up the initiative to do things.*

**0- Never 1- Sometimes 2- Often 3- Almost Always**

‘It’s another reason of course, Harry, that we have suggested assisted living,’

Here we go, thought Harry.

‘There are so many great programs and social events, did you have a chance to look at the booklet I left?’

Madeline looked at him with a smile that was more like the pursuing of her lips. Harry had often wondered during these visits, whether she saved moving the upper part of her face to avoid wrinkles. They’re coming for you anyway Love. Harry ran his thumb over the mug’s handle, considering the best way to avoid answering the question. He felt he had to keep a demeanour so unnaturally calm she must think he had lost his mind already.

*I find myself getting agitated and people describe me as being ‘touchy’.*

**0- Never 1- Sometimes 2- Often 3- Almost Always**

The welfare visit concluded with Madeline reminding Harry that she needed an updated mental health questionnaire from him next week.

‘Just for our records.’

The 3’s had been running through his head the minute she stepped in the door. As she left Madeline attempted to snoop through the house and Harry shuffled past doorways to inconveniently block her view. He watched her walk down the path and waved with genuine pleasure as she reached her car.

When the coast was clear, he opened the bedroom door and Ghost sidled into the corridor. Harry scratched under her chin and smiled as he felt her lean into his hand. Ghost padded around the room and snuffled at the chair that moments before had held Madeline’s self-righteousness. She looked up at him with what he knew was distaste and he nodded in agreement.

In the few weeks since the dog had entered Harry’s life he’d had more conversations, albeit one sided, than he had in the two years since Bidy had abandon him. He had shared the couch with someone again and listened to someone else’s deep breath before falling asleep at night. A modicum of the emptiness had lifted in his soul.

*I feel down hearted and blue.*

**0- Never 1- Sometimes 2- Often 3- Almost Always**

Harry slumped into his green faded armchair and thought classic old man. The chair was one that after years of relaxation had moulded to his body and his smell. Bidy’s had always been the soft yellow one, classic old lady, a pair but not twins. Slipping into his thoughts he could see people rolling their eyes at the ‘old folks’ who dawdled at the supermarket checkout. Or sparked up pointless conversations at bus stops, desperate for one more second of contact. Harry was determined not to stoop to that. But there were the days when just a, ‘Sunny out isn’t it?’ Escaped before he could stop himself.

*I am worried about situations where I might panic and make a fool of myself.*

**0- Never 1- Sometimes 2- Often 3- Almost Always**

The comfort of the chair could not hold back the dark memories. He felt the soft wrinkles of her hand and saw the milky glaze of cataracts shadowing her teary eyes.

The doctors kept remarking how she, held on, as if this was a good thing, a badge of honour. She hadn't held on she had been forcibly restrained to life. He had begged the doctor to let her go, to give the pain relief she needed, the relief from life. He thought he read sympathy on the man's face but also distrust.

'She's not suffering,' they said, and the lie of those words would resonate as her eyes would plead with him to do something, do anything, save her. The nurses would look away. Those that had a practiced hand at watching pain would shrug helplessly as if to say, 'I'm sorry.'

*I feel I have nothing to look forward to.*

*0- Never 1- Sometimes 2- Often 3- Almost Always*

Ghost unknowingly had started to share the burden of these thoughts. Her easy presence beat back the storm in his mind. He smiled giving her an affectionate scratch on the back. Glad she had followed him on his walk around the block that day.

Admittedly he'd whistled and given her pat, but he had assumed she would eventually run away. But as Harry shut the door on her waiting figure, she had bowed her head and continued wandering up the street. He had watched her from the window and thought about walking back the way he came, looking for someone. But the lure of easy companionship was too great. He'd whistled, and she had come at once, no collar or tags. One of those dogs with a miscellaneous heritage, her greatest feature was big feathery tail. He'd never gotten around to getting her a brush and her black fur remained oily and slightly matted.

Harry was glad she was here with him. He could talk to her unashamed. She would know at least and believe him when he said, that there was no relief, no end. The pain was just waiting, biding its time to hit him when his defences were down.

*I am unable to become enthusiastic about anything.*

*0- Never 1- Sometimes 2- Often 3- Almost Always*

He hated this instinct instilled into society to preserve life. To suffer. With Biddy he had almost yelled it at the doctors. 'You're not saving her, you're making her suffer.' He had said it so many times, that they had rarely allowed him to be alone in the room with her. A lifetime alone together and then at the end the intrusion of a quietly watchful doctor. That was how Biddy left the world, with the man she loved, and a robot who barely knew her.

*I can't seem to experience any positive feelings.*

*0- Never 1- Sometimes 2- Often 3- Almost Always*

In his imagination all he would have to do to save Ghost if she were suffering like Biddy had, would be to take her to the vet, say, 'she's in pain.' Sympathy would flow. The vet would sigh and say, 'it's for the best.' But for Biddy? For him? False encouragement to 'just hang in there.' Medications and idiotic questionnaires asking him to rate his suffering on a scale of 0 to 3. Harry snorted it wasn't funny, but it damn well should be. A scale for suffering. A scale implied an end or limit. He had to manufacture an end.

He and Biddy had been so insular, a world unto themselves. It had never mattered when they were young, and as they aged, they would repeat the oath to die together. Harry believed they really would. That his heart would somehow sense hers failing and slow accordingly. How disappointed he had been with his survival.

Harry watched the slow ebb and flow of Ghost's fur ripple across her back as she breathed, and his eyes wandered to the lead sitting on the windowsill. Ghost looked up hopefully. He looked back at her and smiled sadly. Did she know?

The first thing he did nowadays was look for her curled next to his bed in the mornings. He wondered if Ghost looked for him too, or if she was just there to chaperone him towards the end. Occasionally he questioned if she was an apparition.

*I feel life is meaningless.*

*0- Never 1- Sometimes 2- Often 3- Almost Always*

There was no other choice now. He knew it was just a matter of time before Madeline turned up with an ambulance and sedatives, to bundle him away to the assisted living facility. He had started to practice the climb. It felt terrifyingly high. But nothing compared to the terror of his future.

Watching Ghost in front of him licking her paws and snuffling the carpet he felt his conscience prickle. If Harry hadn't gone to get her the lead, he never would have seen the choker chains. She deserved better. But he couldn't stay for Ghost and Biddy hadn't been able to stay for him. Life wasn't about staying anymore, it was about how to leave before they could stop you.

*I feel I'm not worth much as a person.*

*0- Never 1- Sometimes 2- Often 3- Almost Always*

Returning to the plan Harry picked up the chain from the window sill. He stood up and walked to the front room, staring out into the yard, where the last drops of sunlight lit up his overgrown grass. He whistled, and Ghost appeared tail wagging. He opened the front door and she shot out into the greenery, enjoying the afternoon smells. Standing watching her Harry felt the guilt resting heavily. Afraid to make eye contact he looked down in case she saw the truth of the moment. Quietly he stepped back and closed the door.

*Ghost looked up from the grass as she heard the scraping of a kitchen chair against the lino. She cocked her head to one side, tail drooping, and lay her body flat to the earth whining softly.*

*I think about death.*

*0- Never 1- Sometimes 2- Often 3- Almost Always*