

The Word's the Thing

The Tales

Collection 5

Background

These are (fictional) stories told to an imaginary researcher. They capture fragments of the lives of each narrator. The 'tales' are being brought together as an imagined account of social research. In the meantime, a selection is offered here to Birmingham's activities to promote wider reading in the city and beyond.

Sally's Tale

My older sister recently gave me a shoebox full of old family photos, some of which I had never seen. I don't know why she has kept them to herself all these years. Maybe she was ashamed. Maybe she felt that there was no value in letting them loose into the world. Whatever. Now she's moving into a small retirement flat, the house is sold and the money spread between her two kids and the ongoing payment of her care. Her belongings have been scattered across friends and relatives with just a few chosen personal things going with her into the flat.

The box of photos has come to me because there was no one else, I suppose. It came with no note, no explanation, simply handed over by her daughter. 'Mom wanted you to have these photos' sounding more of a command than a request or a gift. The contents, hidden for so long, were to be my responsibility from now on.

I left the box unopened for three days, until I was in the right mood. I'd decided on a small sense of ceremony: Me alone, with the box, at my large kitchen table, with a bottle of red wine. I would spread the photos out; across the grain of the table and with each glass of wine I would select a clutch of photos and decide what to do with them.

I admit that there was an immediate sense of disappointment. Many of the top pictures were ones I already had copies of. Those multiple-print snaps of weddings; the circulated studio shots of children's degree ceremonies; holidays captured on yellowing small prints taking over from the earlier holidays caught in black and white. It wasn't until I got down into the bottom layers that things got interesting. Shots I didn't understand. Views that didn't fit in with my life. No longer the standard poses – me and dad; me and mum; mum and dad; me and Jane; Jane, mom and dad; and so on. No longer the semi-detached back garden. No longer the places I linked to holidays.

These were photos of another life. Photos that could be 'read' like some anthropology project. Documentary pictures of a life of poverty. Let me describe one. Indoors. A small room. Peeling wallpaper. Large patches of what could, in black and white, be mould or damp. A living room, in which there was a small settee, crushed up against some stand-chairs. An old television set. A radio – on a shelf – with large Bakelite dials. A small table with a plastic table cloth. Tin mugs. A baby's bottle. A jar for sauce. In the corner (you are by now getting a sense of just how much was crushed and fitted into the small place) a two ring gas cooker with a small oven. Cut off by the edge of the photo, a coal fire with metal fireguard, box of coal next to the grate, poker and tongs lying in the hearth. On the mantelpiece above the fire a crockery shire horse and a simple clock showing 3.15. No pictures on the wall. No personal possessions. No sign of life other than the chubby child sitting upright, reigned into the pram on its heavy springs. The child staring at the camera. The single word on the back of the photo. Sally, 1946. Me, at one year old, in some other world.

The Best Citizen's Tale

We got into the papers recently. I have the article here somewhere but no need to bother you with all that. 'Best Citizen' award. That's what we got. Voted on by the paper's readers. I know this is a small town with only a local press so it's not exactly the Oscars but it's still something. People out there voting for us, and us not having a clue – not until the reporter came round to tell us. 'Overwhelming number of votes'. That's what she said. Nice young thing. Asked us lots of questions. How old we both were (74 and 71). How long had we been married (50 years, this year – that excited her, gives her 'an angle' she said). How we met (at a dance when the bingo place was a popular dance hall). Why we do so much for the community (we couldn't answer that one. 'We just do' was the best we came up with).

It doesn't seem so much. We open and lock up the local community hall. Annie mops it out and buys the toilet rolls and all that stuff. I do the odd bit of running repair and a spot of repainting and so on – and remove the writing from the walls. We cook midday meals three days a week and get quite a number coming for that. We arrange outings. Nothing special. To the seaside, or to a panto at Christmas, or to the local flower show. Couple of times a year it's a mystery trip where we give an amount to the coach firm and let them work out where to take us. Some of those have been marvellous days out, I can tell you. Annie has a friend from the health centre who does exercise sessions twice a week and then there's the indoor bowls and tidying up after the playgroup every morning. It keeps us out of trouble. That's what we say. It also gives us a purpose. Why get out of bed in a morning if you don't have a sense of purpose? It's what keeps us going. We don't expect to be paid; we just enjoy it all for its own sake.

To have people recognise it by voting the pair of us 'Best Citizen', now that was something special. It really was, I don't mind telling you. Best things that happened to us ever and that's a certainty. We have the plaque on the mantelpiece. In the evenings we just look at it, look across to each other, and smile. That says it all really. 'Best Citizens'. Who would have thought? I'm sure there are others just as deserving but it's nice to be thought about that's for sure.

Retiring? I am already retired from work, but I can't see either of us just retiring from this voluntary work. We'll just carry on until we can't do it any longer. I suppose we should be looking round, keeping an eye out for others to take on bits. Maybe that's how it will happen. We'll hand over one thing at a time. Spread it round, you see. Maybe that's better anyway. Everything falling on us. We love it, don't get me wrong, but if we suddenly weren't here then what? Who would step in then? Good job we're never ill, if you ask me.

And if we did give it up, even bit by bit, what then? Would we turn up for midday meals cooked by someone else, in a room kept clean and tidy by someone else, and sign up for a trip organised by someone else – and would all those someone else's always be watching us out of the corners of their eyes to try to catch an expression on our face – trying to see if we think it's all good enough done by them? Best we carry on for as long as we can I think.

The Botox-Users Tale

I think the new lips suit me. They look even better than the picture in the catalogue. The sale was on lips this month so I got a really good price.

It's all part of my five year life-plan.

I read this article once. I think it was a Conservative Party bit of local election publicity but who cares. The drift was that by some particular date in the year you have earned all the money you need to pay your annual tax and outgoings. Up to that date you effectively are working to pay money to the state. After that date you are in control of anything you earn. I liked the idea. I know that it's never as simple as party political rhetoric but immediately I could identify an amount after tax etc and label it 'Mine'. I then subtracted my guess at annual outgoings for heating, rent and so on. Then a guess at the amount spent on food (Not much), clothes (About the same) and pleasure (Hardly anything). This left me with an amount that really was all mine, 'free money', money I could do whatever I wanted with. I could:

1. Hire a lawyer to take my landlord to court for all the things he's never done for me
2. Use it to visit four new places every year. (Too much hassle deciding where to go?)
3. Give it all away to beggars or charity or really poor people. (You must be joking!)
4. Move into a better flat. (But then I'd just be giving more money to some other crappy landlord. Why would I want to do that?)
5. Buy things. (Why? I have all I want and, anyway, where would I put it?)

Or – Big idea strikes home! – I could spend that much each year on totally changing me into someone else. Look at Michael Jackson (OK, don't look if it frightens you). If he can change himself that much then I can do something more modest.

Year one was hair dye, hairstyle, contact lenses, one nice suit. Year two was more fundamental: thighs reduced, breast reduction, wrinkles removed, a health weekend (on the spur of the moment – not my thing really). Now it's more major changes – chin, eyes, nose, lips, teeth.

So I am three years into my five year plan and it's all going really well. Two more years of this and I'll hardly recognise myself.

The Faceblind Man's Tale

'They all look the same to me.' It's something you might expect from racists, or from men who are too unconcerned to notice people who work with them, but for me it's a daily reality. I have face blindness. I meet people and don't know who they are, whether or not I have met them before, whether they are 'important' or not.

I go up to strangers in the street, honestly believing them to be someone I know well. I start up conversations that have them at best confused and at worst reaching for their mobile phones and the mental health rescue squad. If I meet people out of context I simply don't recognise who they are. This blanking out of work colleagues in the street, or neighbours in the supermarket, puts me (in their long-minded books) as a cold-shoulder, an isolate, an oddbod of a guy. It makes me out as someone to be avoided. Which is fine in a way since it reduces the number of contacts made each day. Heaven knows, it's bad enough when so many people are trying not to speak to me. Think what a hell it would be if people really went out their way to be sociable.

It hasn't always been like this. It is a permanent thing for some people, I believe. People who grow up never having learnt to recognise the patterns around faces. That must be really difficult, being a child like that. Think of the rebuffs, the lack of school friends. Apparently I was fine until I had a bit of a stroke. I could recognise as well as the next man (which may not be very well but is a damn sight better than my average attempt now). Immediately after the stroke there were faces I knew in my memories, faces I could place so long as they were in context, and faces I got wrong. Sometimes a person could be in all three categories in rigid succession. I knew my daughter's face from all those years of watching her grow and meeting her often in a normal week. I would know it was her when she came in from school in her uniform and called me Dad. A few minutes later she would come downstairs having changed and I would ask who she was.

I think you can imagine how frustrating it can get. All those repeated conversations with people too polite to tell me that I've already discussed it with them and it's the rest of the team I need to be talking to. The off-kilter comments to strangers I think work in the building but who are just simply visitors. The incredulity that I haven't been excited by the visit of some minor celebrity who has just spent five minutes talking to me ('were they a celebrity – oh sorry, I didn't recognise them'). Most frustration must hang not on me but around my wife and daughter. They put up with my misrecognitions of others, but, more wounding surely, my misrecognition of them. The only saving grace to me is that, maybe for some reason of internal sanity, I can always look in the mirror and recognise myself. If that ever stopped I would be in real trouble.

The Initial-scratcher's Tale

I try to see the sense in it, but it will always only be graffiti to me I'm afraid. It's on the wall along the side of the cemetery which to some people would be the only excuse they need for condemnation. They would splutter on at bus stops about 'sacrilege' and 'shouldn't be allowed'. The end point of their rant would almost certainly be a terminal 'never happened in my day' and yet, if they peered, the evidence is there waiting to be read by anyone who cared enough to really look.

I have made a bit of a passing study of it all over these past twenty years. This is my local wall, by my local bus stop. Natural, therefore, that I notice the small daily additions and, beyond the fresh cuts of last night, the covered faded marks from recent histories and life stories.

Who was DK that endlessly felt the need to make a presence over four years and then to suddenly stop? Why did Neil love Trace but hate Kaz? Why a Pierre in this part of the world? Marks going back from today's love and boredoms, retracing the same path through dates and initials that must have been their parents' generation, and back beyond that into an almost obliterated set of emotional histories.

It's just graffiti at the end of the day, but as well, it's a kind of scratched social history. If the council came along tomorrow and blasted the surface here, a clean page for future writers, then there would be nothing of value lost – and yet there's a kind of continuum for me there. When I see the familiar names, the new additions, the sense of wanting to leave some small mark as we pass this way. I can remember the days when I stopped as a schoolboy and added my first knife gouges. I can still find the heart and the first love. The first kiss linked to that scratching, an itch that's never really gone away. Further along a linking of other initials and dates. A chronicle of my past, overscoring of those of predecessors and, in turn, being covered over by more recent coupling and declarations.

So, yes, if it was all cleared away – if all those faintly recorded memories were to be lost – then I (and probably others like me) would look at the pristine stonework with a sense of loss and a sense of regret that our marks on the world were not etched deeply enough. If we had seen what was coming we might have spent more time, scored more strongly, cut more deeply, made our presence felt more firmly.

The Helpful Shopper's Tale

There is this woman I meet in the supermarket. It started by chance. We both tried to go through the automatic door at the same time, got our trolleys entangled and took it from there.

We meet at ten o'clock every Wednesday morning. There was no formal arrangement. We just turned up at the same time the next week and there we were again, trying to get through the same space. It seemed natural to make it as close to ten every Wednesday after that. I started to get there a few minutes early so I could be sure to be there when she arrived.

I would follow her around the aisles, reaching things for her if the shelves were too high or if things looked heavy. Neither of us bought that much. So it became natural not to struggle round with two clashing trolleys but to take just one putting her things at the front and mine at the back.

She would walk slowly, pointing silently to the things she wanted. I'd reach them and line them up in the trolley. Occasionally there would be a 'That's right.' or 'No, the larger one today I think.' especially later when she no longer had to point out what she wanted, when I had her list in my head, when she walked ahead of me in a world of her own.

There were brief times when I felt taken for granted; times when I felt like rebelling and going shopping earlier, or on a Thursday, just to show her. I was always there for her, though, waiting for her taxi to draw up. I was always pleased to see her again and I mean genuinely pleased, to be able to do this one small thing for her. She must be around eighty and I admire anyone still able to get out and about at her age. So I wouldn't want her to stop coming; wouldn't want her to not to be able to keep up her weekly act of defiance against encroaching decline. So I can at least be there for her. I can add to the act not take away from it. We barely speak. We don't need to. I have the trolley ready. She nods then starts off on the same route, same purchases. I load hers into carriers before putting my own few bits through the checkout, then out to her waiting taxi. I hand her bags in to her, another nod, maybe a smile – always a grateful look in her eyes – and she's away until next time.

I don't know her name, or where she lives. Why would I want to? It's enough that she keeps coming, keeps letting me do this one small act. One day, sometime soon maybe, I'll wait with the trolley and it will get to 11.00, then 11.30, then 12.00, and I'll know that she'll never come back. I'll set off round our familiar route, picking up the few things for myself. At the cashier the trolley will seem half-empty and every Wednesday after that will have a little bit of life missing from it.

The Dying Woman's Tale

'Three more weeks,' they said. 'A month at the most.' What do you do in that short time? What could you possibly do to put right forty years of life? Where do you start? I could stop smoking but there really isn't any point in that now is there? I could 'put my affairs in order', but any affairs I might have had are well in the past now. They were only passing fancies at the best of times. They didn't mean much more than a temporary distraction. There wouldn't be any point in going back to them at this stage and, if there were, there'd be nothing to put in any sort of order. It was all mixed up then and it would still be all mixed up now.

I know it means financial affairs, I'm not that stupid. I'll go to the bank tomorrow. I'll see someone. They'll tell me what I should be doing. I should make a will I suppose, except that there's nothing much to leave and no-one really to leave it to. The money in my account will pay for the funeral I suppose. I've never bothered to check out the going rate. Never thought I'd need it. I don't suppose there will be much left over after even the most basic funeral, if anything. That's it really. No insurances. No mortgage or loans. Just the rent to be covered until I go and the funeral to be covered after I've gone.

There was a child once. A girl. She'll be twenty-three now. Would I recognise her in the street? Probably not. I only knew her for a year and her baby features didn't hold many clues about her future looks. She could find me if she had a mind to. You see it in TV programmes all the time. But she hasn't as yet, and if she doesn't soon she'll miss her chance. I'll be well gone by the time she turns up. Disappointing for her really. She'll spend ages agonising, if she's anything like me, then plump to do it, only to find that I'd died a year earlier. Then she'll start to construct some fantasy me. Maybe she has already. Maybe she carries a model in her head: 'This is what my mum was like.' Maybe she carries that mental image of me round with her wherever she goes, and talks to me just like I talk to her.

Maybe I should write a letter for her. For when she comes. An autobiography that tells her how I really was. Forty years without her, put on record for the first time. I can't imagine it will be any best-seller, but it might interest her. It might help her to understand how she was better off without me. No matter how bad her life has been (and I don't like to think of that) it would have been ten times worse with me in it. The drunkenness, the drugs, the men, the squalid squats. The dreariness, the emptiness. The hours dragged into days, the repetitiveness of it all. She would have been much worse off with me but, for all that, there wasn't a day that I didn't want her with me, and there aren't too many of those days left now.

The Armless Woman's Tale

I get by quite well. It doesn't bother me now. No, that's not true; of course it still bothers me. Losing an arm, even the left one, devastated me at the time and angers me still. Not a specifically focused anger. I don't have a burning hatred of any one specific person. After all there was no motorist knocking me off my bike, no mad axeman macheteing away at me. It was not even my own fault entirely, so I can't even hate myself. Shark attacks are rare so it's no good saying that there were no special warning notices. We all knew. The faded signs reminded us. There was a tiny risk but that risk was always assumed to apply to someone else. And it's no good hating the shark.

I know sharks get an unfair press but that's what they do – bite people's legs off when they're least expecting it. With me it was my arm, but I still wasn't expecting it. I was a good swimmer. It was a clear day. There had been no shark sightings for months. I was enjoying the strokes back to shore when I was knocked sideways. I thought it was a sudden undercurrent. Even when the sea went red all around me and I wasn't swimming properly, even then it didn't sink in. There was no pain. No sensation other than that both arms were still trying to move me forward but I wasn't making much headway.

It took a few months to learn to do everything with one hand and, as I say, I get by quite well. I don't make concessions to it. I wear the same clothes I always did. There are stares, course there are. I sense people wanting to ask me about it but not having the courage. The funny ones are the little kids who come straight up and, in all innocence tell me I've only got one arm. I pretend to be shocked and say something like, 'Oh my God, the other must have dropped off on the bus!' or just look at them kindly and say, 'Yes the other one is still at home.' Occasionally, if they are a bit older, I tell them that a shark bit it off. The adults are a lot more difficult to be straight with. The thing to do is to ignore all that and just get on with life.

It's all a matter of profile in some ways. From the right I am beautiful, witty, articulate and so on. From the left I'm this zigzag scar and a missing limb. It literally depends on how people see me. I use it to advantage at times, spinning suddenly to present the other side of myself to see what reaction I get. I put my lack directly in their face, so to speak. Most people don't handle it well. When I meet the guy who carries on speaking without even a hint of hesitation I'll ask him to marry me, Leap Year or not.

Meanwhile I get on with things. I have a good job and a reasonable salary. I have good mates. So what's a missing arm? Then, admittedly, at other times I lie there and cry and try to imagine myself with two arms and get angry; except that there's no-one to be angry with. I lie there and think about that man: the one who wasn't going to flinch and who might have said 'Yes' to my offer of marriage. If he were there in the room with me when I got like that, would he be the one I got angry with just because there was no-one else and would he finally have had enough one day and leave me to start over again? I'll just have to wait to find out about that one. Meanwhile I'll just carry on getting along quite nicely on my own, thank you.

Nathan's Mother's Tale

It's Nathan that bothers me. He's eight and whatever I do the pattern is the same, and has been for three years now. At school, according to his teacher and according to my quiet enquiries quizzing classmates through their parents, he is as normal a boy as you can get. Talkative. Takes part in everything. On the way home he's the same. He confidently tells me about his day. We discuss what to have for tea. We chat. So why does he become a different person as the front door closes behind him?

Everyday there's the same programmed routine. Door closes. He goes to his bedroom and changes clothes. Coming back down he stops at the very bottom stair and sits there with this chin resting on one knee, staring at his left foot. He will stay like that all evening except for a trip to the table to eat his tea, or a wander to the kitchen to get a drink of milk, or a stroll up to the toilet. No words, no expression, just a silent pose for the hours before bed.

You can imagine the things I tried. Wheedling; bribing; coaxing; shouting; slapping; shaking; threatening. I've brought in aunts and cousins, friends from school, educational social workers, health workers. He is equal in his blanking-out of each. There is even a bit of solace in the fact that I am in with a crowd. At least he isn't singling me out for silent avoidance. It's not me, then, but him. As a mother (and a single mother at that) this doesn't make me feel any easier, any less that it must be my fault somehow.

It's worrying, all the same. It's not natural and, whatever others say, I doubt that he will simply grow out of it. I don't see him stepping out of this 'phase' suddenly one day, coming over to sit with me and talk to me as if three years of silence and isolation were of no lasting consequence. So it's unnatural and, whatever the source of blame, there needs to be a solution – a 'cure' if you like, though I don't see him as ill. It's not that he's 'disturbed' either, or he wouldn't be so averagely normal at school. He is 'affected'. That's the closest I can get to it. I tried 'afflicted' for a while but that wouldn't do. So it's 'affected', but affected by what and for how much longer?

I can try to think my way to the bottom of it in some feeble attempt to understand. The house closes him down. He needs to stay still and silent for fear of disturbing things – things that might or might not be ever so loosely linked to his left foot. It doesn't make sense, and I don't get any further than that.