

Speechless : extract from a work in progress

David H Walker

It's no use telling my story. What would be the point? The reason I remember things is because they happened to me. No one else can relive them like I did, so why make the effort?

Take Mrs Horton. She would launch into full flow if ever you let her catch your eye. She'd go jabbering on and on, and you couldn't make out a thing she was saying. She'd shrug her shoulders and even grin a bit, you know, sorry I'm not making sense, and she'd look at you while she flapped her hands to show how hard she was trying. Other times her eyes would have a beseeching look, pleading with you to give a sign that you at least understood how much she meant it as she forced the sounds out. I made an effort to be polite if I was in the mood, but in the end I knew my eyes would glaze over in spite of myself. She noticed it too, and sometimes her eyes would fill up with tears. Desperate, defeated tears, and her hands would drop into her lap and she would twist her fingers together, making the knuckles turn white.

It didn't help that she'd had a stroke that had paralysed her tongue and larynx and left one side of her face sagging. All that came out of her mouth was a breathy, hoarse gurgle from the back of her throat. She would move her lips to try and shape the flow into words, but it still came out as an incomprehensible gabble. 'Ouagh-ouagh-ouagh,' with an occasional gulping sound as she paused for breath.

When she eventually realised she wasn't getting through she would fall silent and give a lop-sided smile. As if she felt sorry for me, not being able to share in her thoughts. But she was by nature a diffident person, so she didn't insist.

It was especially awkward when she wanted you to do something for her, like open a window or close the curtain, or switch the light on, or find her glasses. I had to raise my eyebrows and point or make gestures until she nodded. Or I'd check what page her newspaper was open at, and then I'd know to give her a pencil so she could do the crossword. I used to examine the crossword afterwards, when I was taking the paper away with the rest of the litter. It was always the cryptic crossword she did. I would check the answers she had filled in. As often as not she had done them all. Her writing was clear and firm and easy to read, but when I looked back at the clues, I couldn't see any connection. I fancied she had just made up words that would fit the spaces.

Everyone felt sorry for her, hunched in her wheelchair, lifting her palsied face each time the door opened to admit a newcomer to the sitting-room. Her speech impediment, as the district nurse called it, sent everyone into contortions. The staff and other residents knew that the chances of managing a proper conversation with her were slim. Some had contrived mannerisms for avoiding her eye, like waiters in a restaurant, so they could pass by without attending to her. Others would lean in and smile, or shake their heads apologetically. Or they would speak to her without actually making sounds, miming their words as if trying to make themselves heard over the din of machinery. Mrs Horton could have heard them perfectly well, but for some reason they felt they should show sympathy by enunciating laboriously in silence, mirroring the way she struggled to get her words out. However when it was their turn to listen to her, they would say something like 'Yes, it is isn't it?' and move on. As for Mr Pickvance, he had a way of gesturing at his watch as if he was pressed for time.

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The one person who didn't do any of this was Doctor Storth.

On the day he arrived and entered the sitting-room, Mrs Dugdale the landlady introduced him with a flourish.

'This is Doctor Storth,' she announced, tucking in her double chin and thrusting out her ample bosom.

Call me Hughie,' he said.

From the way he pronounced his name it was obvious he was Scottish.

Despite that, Mrs Smith sat up at once, put on her horn-rimmed glasses, tipped her head back, and looked him up and down. You could tell by the expression on her face that she was thinking, 'At last, one of us.'

'He'll be staying with us a while,' went on the landlady. One or two people nodded, to show they were prepared to put up with his company for the duration. Mrs Smith's smile grew broader. She sat forward, anticipating a proper introduction. However, Mrs Horton's chair stood between them, and Doctor Storth came to her first.

'This is Mrs Horton. She has a sp--...' began Mrs Dugdale. But before she could finish, Dr Storth reached across in front of her and offered his hand, which Mrs Horton took in her crooked fingers.

'Hughie Storth,' he said, leaning towards her. She gurgled a greeting of her own, and he placed his other hand on hers and smiled. 'I'm very happy to make your acquaintance, Mrs Horton.' The Scottish accent made his words fall like balm. Mrs Horton gurgled again, softly, and her skewed cheeks wrinkled in a timid grin.

He turned to look around the room, directing a faint smile to no one in particular, to signify that he was pleased to be there.

Everyone was content with that, and got on with what they were doing before his arrival. All but Mrs Smith, who held herself erect in her chair and beamed up at him.

'Geraldine Smith,' she said as she proffered her hand.

There was a hint of reserve in his reaction, as if her greeting was unctuous enough for the two of them. He complimented her on the view she had through the window from her comfortable chintz-covered armchair (woe betide anyone who tried to get to it before her). His speech was precise, his sentences short and to the point, a bit like a businessman with no time to waste; though the brief conversation he had with her was perfectly cordial.

'My late husband used to play golf with a hospital consultant,' she simpered in her best cut-glass accent, her voice husky from too many cigarettes.

'Aye, well, many's the time I've watched them teeing off on the Old Links at St Andrews,' he said, 'but I've never tried my hand at it myself.'

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You come from there?' she asked.

'That I do. Born and bred in the Kingdom of Fife.'

'And is that where –' she breathed the 'h' in the word – 'hwhere you... practise?'

'Practise?' He paused. 'Oh, you mean –? Och, no, I'm not a medical doctor.' An Englishman would have ended the sentence with 'I'm afraid'. Hughie had nothing to apologize for. Nor did he owe anyone an explanation, and he ignored Mrs Smith's questioning look. He tipped his head towards her and turned to move off. 'Well, I must get on...'

As he strode across the room heading for the door, it was noticeable that he walked with a limp. And when he paused alongside Mrs Horton on his way out, to smile and say goodbye to her, Mrs Smith's eyes fell to the raised boot that he wore on his left foot.

During the days that followed, people wondered what Dr Storth was doing among us. He seemed to spend most of his time upstairs in his room. Ruth the cleaner let slip that his table was covered in papers and books, most of them in a foreign language she thought might be Spanish 'or something'. When she came in to tidy and dust, she said, he sat hunched over his documents – 'can't be very good for his eyes'. Mrs Smith said nothing, but everyone knew that she was jealous of the room he was renting – a first-floor front room with a bay window overlooking the sea. Where he got the money from was anyone's guess. Even with a widow's pension left by her bank-manager husband, Mrs Smith's finances couldn't stretch that far.

Though he spent each morning and most evenings shut away with his books and papers, no one would have called Dr Storth anti-social. He greeted the other residents cheerfully at breakfast, for example. He didn't often invite contact, preferring to eat on his own, but he was always ready to exchange comments with those at the next table, about the state of the sky or the sea beyond the window, and about the prospects for a walk later in the day. He was open and pleasant enough, though he didn't waste words; he simply said what the situation called for, with a lilt in his voice that softened his most terse remarks. He could even be curt without causing offence.

Mrs Smith always had breakfast on a tray in her room – there was no way she could arrange her hair and make-up to be presentable that early – so in the mornings Dr Storth didn't have to deal with her attempts to draw him into conversation. Not that he would have found it difficult: he had a natural gift for diplomacy and could turn aside leading questions so tactfully that no one realised when they were being rebuffed.

People did notice that he tended to spend time with Mrs Horton. At first he would pause on his way out of the breakfast-room to say a few words, then he offered to refill her teapot. Mrs Horton took all her meals alone at a table set back from the rest, because eating was a struggle for her. She found swallowing difficult, and made a noise when drinking tea, since her lips couldn't close properly on the edge of the cup. Most people pretended not to notice, and thought it best to avoid looking at her as she fumbled her food and chewed messily. But Dr Storth was ready to help. Forthright when he spoke to

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others, he didn't stand on ceremony when dealing with her. Far from embarrassing her by trying to be tactful, he simply asked if he could share her table at lunch. While eating his own meal, he helped her with the business of getting morsels into her mouth, murmuring encouragement and softly laughing with her when she spilt food or drink – which she was the first to find amusing. He would tell her when she had food on her chin, and occasionally reach over to dab at spills with a napkin.

Mrs Smith was disappointed by this growing intimacy. It was unseemly – unprofessional, even – for a Doctor to be on such familiar terms with an old lady suffering an affliction. She considered it more proper to keep her distance and observe decorum in her dealings with others, particularly when they were challenged like Mrs Horton. Millicent, who dropped by each day to share mid-morning coffee, duly pursed her lips and nodded in agreement as Mrs Smith gave her the benefit of her insights into the appropriate etiquette.

'You can see he has a good bedside manner,' she observed, reluctant to abandon the notion that Dr Storth was a clinician of some kind. 'Perhaps,' she purred, leaning in to Millicent, 'he has had a change of career...' Then with a meaning look, she added, 'I wonder what might have brought that about?'

Millicent began to imagine that Dr Storth had been demoted – or even 'struck off', as they said on the television news when reporting medical scandals.

Mrs Smith pondered, then pursued her line of thought.

'He's too young to be retired... So how can he take so much time away from work? I understand he's studying something in his room. But what kind of work is that? Does he have a proper job? Is he in work, do you think?' she added darkly.

Perhaps he had lost his job, they both agreed tacitly. And they speculated, each in her own way, about what could have caused him to be dismissed.

Meanwhile, Dr Storth and Mrs Horton got on famously. They discovered common ground when it transpired that they shared a love of crosswords. In the early evening, they would get together in the sitting room to pore over the cryptic clues. This shared activity didn't call for speech, so Mrs Horton was not disadvantaged. The two of them would read the clue, then ruminate in silence until one of them thought they had the answer. If Mrs Horton got it first, she would fill in the squares and sit back in her chair to let Dr Storth see what she had written. She would watch contentedly as he mullied it over. He would murmur so she could follow the paths his thoughts were taking, and she made encouraging sounds when he was on the right track. Finally, as he saw – or agreed – that the various enigmas contained in the clue cohered in the answer she had written, the two of them would nod together knowingly. When he got the answer first, he would take the pencil, write it in, then hand her back the pencil so she could plot the way to it, jotting down as she went, in the margin of the paper, notes which meant nothing to all but her and him. When, together, they confirmed the solution to a particularly tricky or abstruse clue, they would congratulate each other with a softly audible cheer of satisfaction, which Mrs Horton could manage quite well despite her speech impediment. And on completion of the puzzle, which between them they achieved quite regularly, they would celebrate with a handshake. When the others in the room turned to look at their antics, Dr Storth would invite them to applaud his 'partner in cruciverbalism', as he called her. Mrs Horton, they agreed, had rediscovered a sense of fun.

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The affinity between the two of them, sustained by this all but mute pastime, sometimes gave rise to a form of conversation which, to onlookers who couldn't help but hear, was as enigmatic as any cryptic crossword. They spoke in low voices, so as not to disturb those around them. Mrs Horton would mumble amorphous syllables whose pace was the only pointer to their meaning – ranging between excitement and deliberation, perhaps. Dr Storth kept up the dialogue with lilting responses or brief questions, their cadence coloured by his Scottish intonation. Occasionally he would murmur something that provoked a flow of guttural sounds only he, it seemed, could make sense of. Those around mainly pretended not to be listening, but the silence that fell over the rest of the room at certain moments gave them away: people were hanging on every word – or sound – of the strange tête-à-tête.

Their chats never went on for long – Mrs Horton quickly grew tired, and Dr Storth had work to get back to. But they made people realize that Mrs Horton could be a lively interlocutor, engaged and responsive. There was a side to her character that had been overlooked till then as the old lady sat apart, having abandoned hope of making herself understood. The others in the room were left agog at the transformation.

One day Mr Pickvance, finding himself in the hall at the same time as Dr Storth, grasped the chance to satisfy his curiosity.

'Well I take my hat off to you. I've tried listening to her, on and off, for months on end but I can't make out a word. Do you actually understand what she says?'

Dr Storth stopped and looked at him.

'Who, Mrs Horton?'

Mr Pickvance nodded, a bit shamefaced at not naming the lady.

'Well,' said the Scotsman, 'some of it escapes me – she has a strong Yorkshire accent, you see.'

He stared unblinkingly into Mr Pickvance's eyes.

'Do you... mean... you can tell that?'

Dr Storth relaxed his gaze and grinned. 'Only joking,' he said.

Mr Pickvance allowed himself a strained smile.

'So – ?'

'Actually I can more or less fill in the spaces. I used to teach Phonetics once upon a time, and I have an interest in language. If you understand how the sounds are formed you can tell how they are being deformed in Mrs Horton's mouth. She can manage some fricatives and velar consonants – voiced and unvoiced of course –, but she has problems with

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palatals, labials and dentals, consonants normally involving the tongue...' He could tell he was losing Mr Pickvance's attention. 'With the right kind of listening, you can guess at the sounds she's trying to pronounce. They form their own sort of pattern, d'ye see.' He paused, having decided it was best to drop the technicalities. 'I think she's taken to me because she can speak my name – it has no consonants in it, just the aspirate "H" that she can manage perrrfectly well, simply by breathing out.'

Mr Pickvance was following a different train of thought as they stepped out onto the front porch. Dr Storth was about to head off towards the pier when Mr Trethewey Pickvance latched onto him again.

'So you taught then, did you?'

'Yes. I gave a course in Phonetics as a temporary sideline.'

'So what do you... are you a teacher now?' He warmed to his theme. 'My sister used to teach – for 40 years...'

Dr Storth stiffened slightly.

'Actually I'm a Reader.'

Mr Pickvance fought to keep the puzzlement out of his voice.

'Reader? What – you mean you read for a living? What sort of things do you read?'

Dr Storth laughed.

'Well no, that's not literally what the word means where I work. I'm called a Reader.' He paused, and looked at Mr Pickvance. 'It's a title... it denotes a certain position in the university hierarchy.' For once he looked a bit awkward, not accustomed to explaining himself, and offered a kind of apology : 'Which means... yes, I do read, so it's no' entirely a misnomer.'

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