

A SPECIAL PLACE by David Hill

Winner of New Eastbourne Writers Short Story Competition November 2010

We are in our love nest, a small and neat one-storey house, which, like our relationship, is built on an improbable cliff-edge, a non-standard patch of ground the builders said couldn't be built on. Yet foundations were sunk, blueprints drawn, and here it is, clinging to its outcrop on the edge of the city like a little mountain monastery, the weather beating against it and us snug and warm inside.

I lie face up studying the shadow of the ceiling fan. Its edges quiver in circles in the light of the candle that sits on the edge of the spiral staircase. The angle of the light stretches the fan's blades into long legs and smears the motor housing into a thick, bulbous body. It fills half the ceiling above the bed. But it never bursts into deathly life. It remains a shadow, a memory of young fears. My imagination in that direction has ceased.

I am in a cradle of love, an infant again. The intervening years of naked and uncertain manhood collapse like a house of cards and I am clothed again, wrapped in a warm blanket and innocently investigating how things around me behave, as I suppose I used to swat at the string of coloured plastic objects suspended above my infant cot. Shanaz comes to the bedside, a warm presence in the near-dark. Her hand is cupped. I open my mouth with a smacking noise and wait, an expectant baby bird. She turns her hand upside down and claps it over my mouth. The pills rattle around my teeth and settle in the back of my throat.

I half sit up and make a tube out of my lips to suck water from the glass in her other hand. I reach out with my left hand and tickle her soft, hard belly. My supporting arm now occupied, I sustain a sit-up while I tickle. Then - *then*, a word from daylight hours with ordered lists and procedures, another remembered relic that has no place in the timeless twilight of our love nest - I gulp the pills down and crash back onto the pillows, bounce twice, and wiggle my toes in ecstasy.

She's friend, lover, carer, doctor. My back is bad and I've been walking like a duck for two days. The lower vertebrae are out of alignment and barely able to hold up the tower of bone above them, making me teeter like a failed demolition. I complained

enough about it for her to order me to bed and fill me up with pills - big yellow muscle relaxants and some red capsules she won't name.

When my back gets bad and I walk crooked she calls me 'five to six', which is how the hands of a clock telling that time would emulate my posture.

Now, even with the fire in the pit of my back licking flames of pain along both legs, my body reads six o'clock and I know I'll walk straight again in the morning because I trust her to cure me.

Nobody has ever taken care of me before. I have never felt safe in the arms of another. Whenever something became intolerable I used to drag myself to the General Practitioner for a dispensation of cookbook medicine, but here the magic ingredient that was always lacking is in abundance. With her it's the *caring* that cures, not only my inflamed back but also my raw, nervous soul.

It's only an episode of sciatica, a herniated disk, nothing serious in the grand scheme of things, but for some reason I feel like the English Patient in the novel by Michael Ondaatje, carried out of the frying desert with his mind sealed off from reality to have his burned skin wrapped in soothing ointments, and to be given time enough at last to choose his path to redemption.

My mental state as I lie contemplating the ceiling fan's shadow is that of an infant and an injured, delirious man - the two are the same because boundaries between self and world are collapsed. I know for sure that her love is doing that, making everything one.

To care for her, to love her back - how best? Defend her in a fight? No problem. Even with a completely collapsed spine, I'd crawl and bite and smash any aggressor, like the half-destroyed Terminator in another, more visceral movie. Yet those opportunities come rarely, perhaps never. No, it's the little things - turning on her heating blanket at night before she gets into bed, writing her a letter, cleaning her house, showing, demonstrating, doing.

My back is just physical, and it will pass. What she needs, admires, demonstrates and fosters is mental backbone.

Sometimes it seems to me my neurotransmitters fail to hold me up, and my mind gets the same as my back, its foundations blasted from under it. Yet something defies gravity and stops it all collapsing, and mentally I stay at five to six until I can jack

myself up again and re-pour the concrete into my honeycombed foundations.

There are pills for that, too. They lighten my mind's gravity for a few hours or days and make reconstruction quicker and easier.

At those times I feel I am cheating, giving away some of my mind's power to a swallowed capsule. But my mind *has* no power when I get depressed, there's the vicious circle. Speaking of cheating, I think *I* was cheated right at the start when my genes were handed out, and the occasional antidepressant just evens the score, like an equalizer, the shotgun every wary shopkeeper keeps under the counter in case of trouble.

I know that this place - the love given in it that makes it significant - will always be a reference point in my mind for all that is good in this life, and that its sensations and sentiments will be present at the moment I take my final breath.