

Sorry, My Mistake

'Today is the tomorrow that you worried about yesterday, and all is well.'

Helen read it over and over again.

"It's true," she thought, and turned the page of her little book of 'Wise Sayings'.

'Good, better, best, never let it rest, 'til your good is better and your better, best.' She smiled, "That's a good one, I shall teach it to Ryan and Emma when they get older." She closed the book and looked at the kitchen clock; twenty past nine. Polly would be here soon, 'I'd better clear away,' she chided herself.

Helen was of 'middling' age, her husband Dick always called it,

"Because", as he said, "you don't look anything like your age. Who'd believe you were a grandmother of two?". She did however, wonder sometimes if she was beginning to lose 'it'; not her looks, but her mind. She found she would be introduced to someone new, and five minutes later she'd forgotten their name. She couldn't remember dates and appointments. She'd go upstairs, and stand motionless on the landing wondering what it was she was there for. She'd even been known to go downstairs again to remember, and start again. Along with all the other readily shared symptoms, she had read online that they were all very common. Memory? If you know you can't remember, then it is not a sign of dementia; the problem is when you don't know you can't remember. Anyway, why bother to remember things which are in your diary, or the 'Birthdays Book' which Polly had given her one birthday. She had a list in the kitchen which she added to every time she ran low on toilet rolls or breakfast cereal. She even kept a pad and a pencil on her bedside table, so that if she thought of something she thought she ought to remember, but knew she'd forget, and which would keep her awake all night, *worrying* that she'd forget, she could just jot it down and forget it. She coined a new word, for her problem, the 'memopause'.

She heard the car pull up and the doors opening and slamming shut. By the time Polly had gathered up the necessary baby paraphernalia, Helen had opened the front door, and found the little beaming cherub Emma, arms outstretched for a Granny-Ma pickup, kiss and cuddle.

"Hello precious," said Helen picking up her granddaughter and holding her to herself, kissing her rounded cheeks. "And how are you today?" Emma cooed and gurgled her delight.

"Morning Mum. Everything Okay. Did you and Grumpy Dick have a good weekend?" asked Polly. She was wearing fashionable, tight, dark, blue jeans, a big chunky beige sweater and brown calf-length boots. Her blonde hair was swept tightly back into a ponytail. They trooped into the lounge, and as Helen put Emma down, she ran to the toy box in the corner and began distributing its contents far and wide. Mother and grandmother laughed.

"We're both fine. Quiet. Dad brought home a load of work. I think he was timetabling again. It seems to come round so quickly, and you remember how stressed it makes him. I just keep out his way. So I didn't see much of him except at mealtimes." As she went into the kitchen, she looked back, "You look very glamorous this morning. Going somewhere special?"

"No, just the usual Mum's Gang get-together. We thought we'd try that new little place on Church Street; you know, the Italian."

"Oh yes, I hear it's quite good."

"What are you going to do?"

Mondays were Granny-Ma days to look after Emma. Polly was a proof-reader for a local publishing house, so although she had a shared desk in the office, she spent most of her time working from home where it was quieter - well sometimes, when Emma was asleep! On Mondays, she met up with some of the mums she had become friendly with from their ante-natal classes. They all managed to 'park' their offspring for a few hours over lunch-time. Polly had already delivered her four-year-old Ryan, to school, and would collect him again at three o'clock, before going back to Granny-Ma's at about three thirty for Emma.

"Well it's a lovely day. I thought after Emma's mid-day lunch, we'd take the car to the supermarket, park there, have a play on the swings in the park, take some bread to feed the ducks, have a snack in the supermarket and pick up a few things while I'm there."

"My, you are organised. Don't forget your shopping list, you know what you're like; and no impulse buying," laughed Polly.

"And don't you forget to put Emma's car seat in my car before you go. Coffee?"

"Mmm, coffee, please."

Emma being twenty months, was into everything. She was never still. She loved the telephone and the TV handsets. She played with the buttons on the oven, managing to set the timer, which Helen had to reset time and time again. She got out the box of Duplo Lego and built towers for Emma to knock over with shrieks of delight. They played with the collection of things accumulated in the toy box over time; the teddy and the tractor and the fire-engine and the farm animals and the Noah's ark, but Emma didn't concentrate for long, before a new distraction had to be found. She was saying, "Mama" and "Dada", talking in 'scribble' and having little difficulty making herself and her wants understood. She was beginning to test the boundaries. She wanted her own way. She was not to be fobbed off. She had not got to the lying on the floor screaming stage yet, but Polly and Helen had discussed whether she was old enough yet to be put on the 'naughty step'. Probably not until she had learned to talk and passed the stage of trying to express her frustration orally.

They had a drink and a biscuit, and looked at some books and talked about the pictures. They sat quietly for a short while to watch CeeBBees. Emma fell asleep nestling against her Granny-Ma. After lunch which Polly had prepared in a plastic container, Emma was changed, and strapped into her car seat for the trip to the supermarket. Automatically, Helen went through her mental check-list; Emma's baby bag and ball, *her* handbag, car keys, purse, mobile, shopping list. She shut the front door and checked that it was secure, then got into the car and started the engine. She turned to look at her little passenger,

"OK? Shall we go?" she smiled and Emma put out her arms happily gurgling her assent. "OK then, let's go." Helen parked next to a trolley return, so that when they had done the shopping, she could lift Emma straight back into the car. She locked the car and dropped the keys into her bag, whilst taking out her shopping list which she put in her pocket, and two plastic carriers which she pushed into the baby bag. The park was immediately adjacent to the supermarket. Emma sat in a bucket swing as Granny-Ma pushed it, to screams of sheer delight. They rolled and kicked the ball between the two of them. Emma ran, fell, cried, was consoled, wanted another swing, climbed the steps, down the slide, onto the lower rings of the rope ladder, in the child-sized wooden car, back to the swing.

“Come on now, Emma, let’s go and feed the ducks.” They walked the short distance to the pond, and Helen brought out a plastic bag of bread bits. As soon as they stopped by the water, the mallards and moorhens swam to meet them. Emma was delighted. She threw crumbs into their midst, to be greeted with chatterings of grateful beaks, and playful squabbles.

“All gone. Say ‘Good bye, see you again soon’. Come on let’s go shopping.” Helen picked up her little bundle of joy, and off they went. Emma was placed in the front of the trolley the baby bag in the trolley, and her brown leather bag slung over her shoulder. Helen was feeling in need of a brief respite; a cup of tea would do the trick, she thought. So she chose a table next to the service queue, put Emma into a high chair and stood in line, all the while making facial communication with her granddaughter. She brought the tray back to the table, put her bag on the floor, and arranged her purchases. Tea and a slice of fruit cake for her, a bottle of fruit juice with a straw and a packet of Hoops for Emma, which she placed on the highchair’s tray

“Hello. Excuse me. It’s Emma isn’t it?” A young mum with a push chair was looking first at Emma and then at Helen. “This is Sarah. Emma and Sarah go to the same playgroup. I’m one of the Mum’s Gang, but I couldn’t go today. I got let down with child minding at the last minute. So we’ve come out on our own.”

“Well sit down with us,” invited Helen smiling encouragement.

“Are you sure? That’s kind.” She put her mug on the table and her bag on the floor. “I can’t stop long. Sarah’s asleep and will want feeding when she wakes up.”

“So you’re friends with my Polly.”

“Yes we were at classes together. Sarah was born just a few days after Emma. Yes, we see each other most Mondays. There are about six of us in the Mum’s Gang, but never all together at the same time. There’s always someone missing. Like me today.” She seemed nervous and couldn’t stop talking. “Where’ve you been then?”

“Oh we’ve been to the swings and fed the ducks. Now we’re going to do a bit of shopping, then home.”

“Same as us really, we’re walking home now through the park.” There was a movement in the pushchair; a stretching and a moaning. “Oh Sarah’s coming round, we’d better get going.” She gulped down the rest of her drink picked up her bag and took hold of one of the handles. “Well good bye then. It was nice to meet you. Tell Polly we met. ‘Bye,” and she was gone.

Helen detected a smell of filling nappy, and decided a trip to the baby changing facility would be prudent, before proceeding with the shopping. She lifted Emma back into the trolley and once more slinging her bag over her shoulder, headed to the back of the store. Polly had stowed everything needed in the baby bag. The task achieved, she opened the door and they went in search of the shopping items. She took the list out of her pocket. In her meticulous way, the list was in the order of the aisles of the supermarket, so the mission was easily and quickly completed with no distractions. As they stood patiently in the check-out queue, Helen’s mind turned to the evening meal. Being Monday, they would have something concocted from what was left of yesterday’s joint; no problem. They were now next in line. Emma was getting restive. Helen wanted to be home now. Polly would be there in half an hour, then she could flop with a cuppa, and a peaceful hour on her own.

“Good afternoon. How are you today? Find everything you needed?” the assistant was going through the agreed set piece. As she continued to scan the items, she managed to keep up a

continuous stream of verbiage. “Oh isn’t she adorable? What’s her name? How old is she?” not stopping, or even expecting a response to her questions. Helen was bundling everything into the two plastic carriers,

“That’ll be seventeen pounds eighty. Do you have a loyalty card?” Helen was conscious that several others had joined the queue behind her, and she was unnecessarily conscious that they were waiting for her to pay. Emma had had enough, and was whimpering and trying in vain to extract herself from the captive trolley. As she swung her bag in front of her, she smiled at Emma,

“Nearly done now, then we can go home in the car. OK?” Helen drew back the zip. Panic welled up inside her. Where was her purse? She knew she had put it in, it was on her check list; and her keys. Where’s my mobile? What’s this, a diary? She didn’t carry her diary with her. What’s happening? Emma was crying with frustration. The cashier was imitating patience, whilst herself becoming agitated. Helen was beside herself with panic.

“This isn’t my bag,” she exclaimed. “Someone’s taken my bag. I haven’t got any money.” She burst out crying. “Help me,” she cried.

“Just a minute love,” the cashier had mellowed. She’d picked up her intercom ‘phone and talked to someone. “The Supervisor’s coming love, she’ll see you’re all right. Let’s just push your trolley to one side, so’s I can deal with the next customer. That’s it. Try not to worry.” Helen stood by the trolley and picked Emma out clasping her to her for their mutual comfort.

“Hello. Can I help? What seems to be the problem?” The Supervisor had a calm reassuring manner, as if this was a regular occurrence.

“This isn’t my bag. I don’t understand. I can’t pay. My phone’s gone, I can’t ring anyone for help. My keys are missing. I can’t get home.” Helen wasn’t aware, but the Supervisor was, everyone was watching the scene unfolding. She called one of the other staff and asked them to take the trolley away.

“Come on, let’s go somewhere quiet and you can tell me everything. Try not to worry, we’ll sort it out. It’s probably a mistake somewhere.” They went through a door marked Staff Only, and then into a room marked Training. Helen sat down with a somewhat placated Emma on her knee. “Tea? What would the little one like?” She ‘phoned for their requests. “Now Mrs.?”

“Evans.”

“Alright Mrs Evans. Can you think backwards to when you came into the store. Has anything unusual happened? Have you put the bag down anywhere?” Helen played over the events of the last hour in her mind.

“Of course,” she whispered. “It was Sarah’s Mum. She took my bag. They are both exactly the same. She must have taken it by mistake.”

“Who’s Sarah?”

“The little girl in the pushchair. Her mum had a drink with us.”

“Do you know Sarah’s Mum’s name?” asked the Supervisor patiently. “Do you know where she lives?”

“No. I’ve never met her before. She said she was a friend of my daughter. Their little girls go to the same playgroup. I just remember she didn’t stop talking, then Sarah began to wake up and she went. Said they were going to walk through the park. Sarah would need feeding.

That's all. She's got my bag and I've got hers." The Supervisor was on her 'phone again talking to Security.

"Yes, the café, about an hour ago. The table next to the service queue. Toddler in a high chair. Toddler in a pushchair. Yes that's it. OK. Fine. Thanks." She pressed 'end' and turned to Helen. "You're right. Security have got it all on video. Now, may I have the bag. Is there any identification in there?" She rummaged through the bag's contents, but could find nothing of any help. "OK, I guess this woman will realise what she's done and get in touch, either by 'phone or call at your house. Can you call someone to come and collect you?"

"But my mobile's in my bag," Helen sobbed.

"Not a problem, use this, it's the store's mobile. Who should you ring?"

"I'll ring my daughter Polly. She'll be worried. We should be home now, and she should be collecting Emma."

"OK" continued the calm voice, "Let me get the number for you." Helen gave it to her and she dialled and handed the mobile back to her. It rang and rang, but there was no reply and no voice mail. The panic welled again. "It's dead."

"Not to worry. Who else can we try?"

"My husband, he's the Headteacher at Woodlands Secondary School, but I don't know the number?"

"Leave it to me. Just a moment." And she left the room. Helen had found a dummy in the baby bag and Emma was now dozing, oblivious to everything.

"Here we are. Shall I dial again?" asked the Supervisor as she closed the door behind her.

"Good afternoon. Woodlands School. How may I help you?" came the efficient voice.

"Hello, I'm Helen Evans. Could I please speak to my husband?"

"Oh Hello Mrs Evans. I'm afraid the Head's in a meeting with the LEA Inspector and the General Adviser. He could be some time. Can I help?"

"Er no. Please just tell him to ring home as soon as he's free. We've got a bit of a problem."

"I'm sorry to hear that Mrs Evans. Of course I'll give him the message as soon as he is free. Good bye."

"Thank you. Good bye." There was a pause, then Helen explained that she couldn't talk to her husband. The Supervisor suggested,

"I think the best thing is for you to go home and wait to see what happens."

"But how? I have no car keys."

"I'll arrange a taxi for you."

"But I haven't any money, and I can't get in because I have no keys." The Supervisor remained unruffled,

"We can pay for the taxi, don't worry about that. Do you have neighbours who you could stay with for a while?"

When the taxi drew up outside her house, Helen saw that Polly's car was parked outside. She had a key and had obviously let herself in. There was another car which she didn't recognise. As Helen unbuckled herself, the front door flew open and Polly came running down the path.

“Oh Mum,” cried Polly embracing her mother, “Wendy’s told me all about the mistake.” She gently picked a sleeping Emma from her seat and thanked the taxi driver, who seemed pleased to witness the happy reunion. They all trooped indoors, and Helen was introduced to a supplicant Wendy.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs Evans. Our bags are identical, and I just picked up what I thought was mine and we pushed home. I busied myself preparing Sarah’s feed, and didn’t open my bag until half an hour ago, and realised what I’d done. Sorry, my mistake. It must have been awful for you.” Helen was so relieved that the nightmare had finally ended, she couldn’t do anything but smile at Wendy and Polly.

“Well that’s sorted then. Not to worry. I have my bag back thank you. However, yours is at the supermarket waiting for you to claim it. So is my car, and so are my groceries. And I owe them for the cost of a taxi. Would you like to drive me back there Wendy, and we’ll sort it all out.”

When Grumpy Dick finally arrived back and asked what all the fuss was about, he burst out laughing,

“Is that what it was. Oh you poor thing. I thought you must have forgotten something.”

“Actually, so did I to begin with,” responded his wife reluctantly seeing the funny side and joining in. I thought it was the memopause again.

When they’d eaten and Dick had taken himself off to his study, Helen opened her little book of ‘Wise Sayings’, and found,

“Don’t look for the flaws as you go through life,

And even when you find them,

It is wise and kind to be somewhat blind,

And look for the virtue behind them.”

“Quite right,” she thought to herself, “none of us is perfect. Poor Wendy.”

Howard Brayton

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