

The Memory Club

WHEN I woke up that morning, everybody was dead. Not everybody was dead, of course, but everybody who mattered: my mother and father, my brothers, my wife, my best friend. Some of them had been dead for twenty years, but only when I woke that morning did I realise their deaths were absolute. Each time one of them had disappeared from my life, a period of grief had been superseded by disbelief: I could not accept that the world which they constituted had been splintered, and preserved its integrity by imagining they were suspended from play, and would reappear when an undefined threshold of higher understanding was attained. I never codified this comforting faith, never expressed it, but in my heart I held to it, and it protected me. But that morning when I woke, I knew they had all gone, as if they had never been, and I understood the nature of our existence on earth.

For some moments after I had woken, I waited for my mother to call me to breakfast, and when I remembered she would never do so again, I tried to annul the realisation, and to recapture those interludes of pleasure, after an absence of sixty years, in which I lay in the warmth of my bed, anticipating the summons which would take me away from it. Changes in the functioning of my mind were responsible for my altered perspective. Suddenly I saw with the vividness of recent memory the world on which I closed my eyes at the age of sixteen. A corollary of this changed perception of times past was that I could scarcely remember what I had done in the course of a lifetime's work. I could supply the title of my chosen profession, but I could not clearly picture of what it had consisted. And the people who had come and gone during its course – colleagues, mistresses, wives and even children – seemed like ghosts beside the bright beings of my school years.

Matron said the clear recall of childhood events was a common artefact of the ageing brain, and was quite natural. I disagreed. There was nothing natural, I

said, about a seventy-six-year-old man waking in panic because his French homework was sixty years late. She doesn't like to be called Matron any more than she likes my calling the other residents detainees, or inmates, but that's what she is.

Having realised that the cause of my anxiety was a dream had done nothing to diminish it, and I had lain awake, reflecting that even if I returned to school that very morning, I should never catch up with those who had stayed on to be properly educated, while I was thrown prematurely into the world of work. I was damned from then on, though I had gone through life pretending otherwise. I thought I'd forgotten the terror of that realisation, but I hadn't; I had interred it, and now it rose up to confront me.

Why, if she was the manageress of residential services, did she need a nursing diploma? That was a question she could not answer, though I often raised it.

'What you people need is a memory club,' she told me. She said "you people," to differentiate us from those who still had a stake in life.

'A memory club? Don't you think we have enough clubs to worry about, without starting a club to remind us which club we're supposed to be attending?'

'No. A memory club is a gathering where people take turns to recall things that happened in their lives, so they are not lost.'

'Like that lot in the sun lounge, harping on about their years as secretary to the manager of the Nelson and Colne Building Society, or chairwoman of Bognor Amateur Dramatic Society?'

'This would be more organised. Each resident would have time to talk without interruption, not so much about his or her public life, but about personal memories: things which might have been forgotten for years, which come back in old age.'

'In our second childhoods you mean. You're encouraging us to remember how much we miss our teddy bears.'

'I think you know what I mean. You're being amusing again, aren't you, Mr Morgan?'

We left it at that, and I spent the next hour turning over in my mind the terrible realisation which had arrived there when I woke. Soon, I should be dead, and quite soon after, when those survivors of my acquaintance followed, it would be as if I had never existed. I didn't mind that so much as the fact that I had betrayed

the friends of my childhood by leaving them behind to go into the world with the ambition of getting on. What was the point of getting on if the only people of value in my life were not there to see my success, such as it was? I realised that I had led a small, easily overlooked life, and at the age of seventy-six, I would give up everything I had won, everything of it that remained, to walk into a room containing the boys with whom I went bird nesting at the age of ten, or the aunts and uncles who played parlour games on my birthdays, as if they were children themselves.

A couple of days later, the following announcement appeared on the lounge notice board:

The Memory Club.

Residents are invited to activities room 3C at 2 o'clock on Tuesday afternoon (May 2) for the inaugural meeting of a new club, intended to encourage the recollection and sharing of personal memories from their earlier days.

A rota will be worked out so that everyone who wishes to participate will have the opportunity of speaking. If interested residents will sign their names below,

I will select two volunteers to begin, so they have time to prepare a talk of 30-40 minutes.

Tea will be served at 3.45pm, as per usual.

Miss N. Pretty (Manageress of Residential Services)

The usual crowd had pencilled their names in the space beneath this statement, and since I already knew their life stories by heart, I passed the afternoon of Tuesday, May 2nd, in my flat, re-reading Anton Chekhov's account of his visit to the penal settlement of Sakhalin Island. I frequently referred to the establishment in which I was condemned to pass my last days as Sakhalin, but in the course of the five years I had spent there, only one person laughed at this joke.

On Wednesday, May 3rd, Matron buttonholed me to say what an enlightening afternoon I had missed. On the contrary, I countered. My afternoon had been enlightening, and I had not missed it. As for hers, she was welcome to it, and given that it had been spent in thrall to the Mesdames Iris Rowbotham and Beattie Gannon, I had a good idea that I could more or less replicate it, word for word.

'Well that's where you're wrong, Mr Morgan,' she answered. 'Forty minutes is

too long to keep up an account of your career. Both Mrs Rowbotham and Mrs Gannon had to go further back, for stories from the times when they were girls.'

'That would be further back than I care to travel.'

'You would have found it interesting, I know. You missed some very charming memories, and since you were to some extent responsible for the foundation of our new club, I think it's unreasonable for you to stay away from it.'

'It's nothing whatsoever to do with me.'

'The reappearance of your boyhood memories, you may recall, prompted me to suggest a club.'

'Exactly: it was your idea.'

In the course of the same day, three other inmates informed me that my life had been impoverished when I missed the inaugural meeting of the Memory Club. They included a man named Ron, who claimed to have spent his professional life as a doctor. 'Dr Ron' the women called him. But I could not imagine a *bona fide* doctor allowing himself to be known as Ron. My disbelief was fortified by Ron's obsession with the weekly pottery afternoon, in which, over a period of three months, he constructed a glazed earthenware numberplate for the house where he used to live. It depicted a cottage swamped with hollyhocks, surmounting the number nine, and wreathed by honeysuckle and roses. When I asked him how he proposed affixing this plaque, in the absence of screw holes, he placed his index finger on his lips like a puzzled infant, and answered: 'I could glue it on.'

In other words, I believe Ron lacked a few screws himself, whatever his framed diploma might say. For heaven's sake, he didn't even live at the house any longer! So I received his assessment of the previous day's meeting with scepticism.

'I think I would prefer to read a good book, rather than listen to sad old ladies gathering wool from their infant years,' I told him.

'In many ways, those years are the most important of our lives,' he answered, in his doctor voice. Then he placed the tip of his reading spectacles' arm between his front teeth, and looked down ruminatively, as if privately revisiting the complete works of Freud. This was a gesture he employed when he had nothing further to say on a topic – when his mind was a perfect blank, that is.

'Speak for yourself,' I told him. When I returned to my room, however, I realised that he had confirmed what I knew to be true.

IT'S a curious truth that while men spend most of their lives pursuing women, when they reach a certain age they find themselves pursued, and are reluctant to yield to the advances of females they would have paid money to lay hands on in their predatory years. A corollary truth is that old women, finding they have worn out their husbands, have no focus for their demands, and seek to relieve the vacuity of widowhood by fastening on every man who enters their ambit. They begin again the ritual of courtship and flattery which they dimly recall from youth, and if they succeed in cornering a quarry, they progress briskly to the plateau they had attained with their spouses, resuming their persecutions as if no interruption had occurred. That, at least, is what I have observed in Sakhalin. For myself, I always lie low if a widow woman offers me a set of fairy cakes, or asks if I need help with my ironing.

'I was in the Army,' I told the last one who offered this service. 'They liked us to iron our own shirts, thank you.'

'But you're not in the Army now, are you? I dare say they liked you to wear heavy boots in the Army, but you don't have to go on wearing them when you've left. There's all sorts of things I could do for you. You only have to ask.' She toyed with the edge of my tablecloth, glancing sideways beneath eyelids which fell in three distinct folds.

I've nothing against old people doing favours for each other, but I find it absurd when they behave like teenaged coquettes. Furthermore, there is a difference between a couple's continuance of habits practised over a lifetime, and an attempt, too late, to break new ground. A man and a woman who have passed decades together still have in their imaginations their younger forms. When they close their eyes, they may kiss and touch their remembered selves. People embarking on dalliance at an advanced age must contend with the reality of unlovely flesh.

'Look at my hand,' I instructed the lady. She looked. 'What do you see?'

'Just a hand.' Then brightening, she added: 'A man's hand.'

'You see a hand which has lost its strength, and trembles,' I told her. 'You see a hand deserted by muscle, a bony, blotched hand on which the skin hangs loose. If I were to take off my shirt, you would see a body to which the same shortcomings apply.'

Her expression of dimpled sweetness hardened as if I had committed an offence, and she left without another word, taking away a Victoria sponge on a pierced doily, which she had brought as bait.

IT seemed almost that a conspiracy had been hatched to make me feel the necessity of attending the so-called Memory Club. If I happened to stop for morning coffee in the lounge, on my way back from the shops, people who formerly had been happy to conclude their anecdotes fully and logically now tailed off lazily with a reference to the new institution.

‘Well,’ said Eddie Osborne, at the end of a further recapitulation of his part in the sinking of the Scharnhorst, ‘I felt just like Mrs Haslam did when she saw her new lodger in the bath.’

‘Lodger? What are you talking about? She hasn’t got a lodger. We aren’t allowed lodgers.’

‘No, I mean the lodger she used to have: the one she told us about at the club. I felt just like she must have felt.’

‘And how, exactly, must she have felt?’

‘Well, you, know, surprised and amazed, given what she faced.’

‘So why can’t you say surprised and amazed?’

Eddie looked offended, and after going to the hatch to refresh his coffee, failed to return. Another day, a youngish newcomer whom I had been charming, wagged her finger at me and said:

‘Now Mr Morgan, remember what happened to the first Mr Merryweather.’

I continued to smile, though I had not the slightest idea what she was talking about, and it was a further week before I learned from Arthur Newcombe that Mrs Merryweather had used her forty minutes at the club to blacken the name of her first spouse, who had died of a heart attack while attempting an act of infidelity with a woman young enough to be his daughter.

‘But his name wouldn’t have been Merryweather, if she married again, would it?’

‘I never said it was,’ Arthur answered.

‘Are they allowed to talk about stuff like that?’ I asked. ‘I thought the idea was for people to rake up the distant past: childhood memories?’

'That's what they're supposed to do, but you'd be surprised how many of the women get to their first sweethearts after five minutes. Then anything can happen. I had to leave once, I was that embarrassed.'

'You're joking!'

'There were only two men there, and it seemed as if the women were taunting us: seeing how far they could go before we were stung. Every time that Caunt woman remembered something more about the dance she led her boyfriends, they all turned towards us and laughed. I don't know why, because I would never have touched her with a barge pole.'

'You should give them a dose of their own medicine, Arthur.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean you should get up there and reel off a few stories about your old girlfriends.'

'Not me.'

'Why not? What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, isn't it?'

'How long is it since you were married, George?' he asked me.

'What's that got to do with it?'

'Well, I think you've forgotten how women think, old man. If they make us uncomfortable with an off-colour story, that's a joke, a tease. It's perfectly all right. But if we tried the same thing, it would be an offence against their sex. We would be blackballed.'

He was right. Women want everything their own way.

Eventually, I realised I would have to put in an appearance at the weekly stampede down Memory Lane, unless I wished to be excluded absolutely from small talk in the establishment. I had held out for six weeks, and when at last I entered activities room 3C on a Tuesday afternoon, I did so with the air of a puzzled stroke victim, unable to understand the meaning of his surroundings, or his place in them. This subterfuge was intended to deflect the gloating of those to whom I had spoken scornfully about their club, and to undermine the satisfaction with which Matron greeted my arrival. It is a privilege of old age to appear vague when circumstances require it.

'So, Mr Morgan, you came eventually. I'm sure you'll enjoy it,' she cooed.

'What? Came where? Enjoy what? What's everybody crowding in here for? Are they handing out free cocoa again?'

Matron smiled like an indulgent parent, and I took my seat as the first speaker, Jack Crump, prefaced his talk with a record of an operatic baritone, singing a sentimental ode entitled *I Think That I Shall Never See* (deep breath) *A Thing As Lovely As A Tree*. While the arm of the record player rose and fell with the rotation of the warped disc, the seated womenfolk began swaying in unison, and joined in the singing of this song, which I had last heard on the radio in nineteen fifty-two, and hoped never to hear again. Then Jack switched off the machine and began his memory.

'It's true,' he said. 'A tree takes a lot of beating.' There were murmurs of assent from the sheep flock. 'One of my earliest memories was of looking out from the top branches of a beech tree, across the countryside. I could see for miles in every direction, to places I'd never seen before: places I couldn't see from the ground.'

It seemed to me that this memory glorified the viewing of land from a high place, rather than extolling the virtues of a tree. A church tower would have done the job just as well.

'What was I doing in the top of a beech tree, you might ask.' A couple of the women obliged him, and he continued: 'I was eight years old, and I was bird nesting.' (Well, he wouldn't find many birds' nests in a beech tree, as a boy of six could have told him.) 'But when I stuck my head out of that tree, I forgot about bird nests, and looked at my lovely nest of leaves, and the fields beyond. From then on, I climbed trees whenever I could, and when I reached an age at which it became unsuitable behaviour, I used to stand under them and look up into their branches. Sometimes, when I was out courting, and I lingered with a young lady against a tree trunk, she would say: "Jack! I'm down here, not up the tree," and I would have to apologise for letting my attention wander up the trunk, and out along the branches to the twigs and the leaves, and the little scraps of sky between.'

To cut a long story short, Jack familiarised himself with every variety of tree the country supported, and after working five years for the town parks department, achieved his dearest wish of finding employment with the Forestry Commission. When he had passed a further two decades labouring over the propagation of trees and the production of timber, he had the chance to buy a small terraced house, with a back garden you could almost span with extended arms. But it was a long garden, enclosed by walls, amounting to something like a stretched coffin.

'I had the idea of making a woodland glade in my narrow garden. I laid a path of tree bark, which zigzagged from side to side down its whole length, so when the shrubs grew above head height you could only see a little stretch of it, from one bend to the next. I planted saplings in every bed: birch, willow, alder, ash, oak: everything you'd find in a proper wood, and after ten years, when I looked out from my bedroom window, I thought I was living in a tree house. I could see nothing but leaves. And when I walked the bendy path (I'd fitted a hundred and forty feet of it into a stretch half that length), I realised I'd fulfilled the greatest hope of my life: to have my own wood, with birds and butterflies and bees.

'But the time comes, as everybody here knows, when you can't manage so well, and you can't afford what you used to, either. My tree garden started to get a bit overgrown. I couldn't keep up with it, and I knew I'd have to sell. I must have seen two dozen folks interested in buying, but after all I'd put in, I wasn't going to sell to just anybody. I wanted somebody with a definite feeling for trees. Then one day a young woman came round on her own. She wasn't much impressed with the house, but when she saw the garden her face lit up. "Oh," she said, "how lovely: a woodland glade." As soon as she said that, I knew she was the one. I even lowered the price, so she could afford it.

'Any time I wanted to go back and look at the trees I'd be welcome, she said, after I'd sold up. Of course, I never planned to do that – it's a good twenty-five miles from here. But one day last summer, I took a bus early in the morning, to make a day of it. I didn't intend knocking and asking to be let in, but there was a passage along the bottom of the gardens in that street, and I knew I could look over the wall from there. I felt the excitement welling up when I turned off the street, and down a ginnel to the passage.

'When I arrived at my garden, my old garden that is, I lifted up to look through the trellis, and saw that she'd paved everything over. She came out with a cup of tea for a chap who was mending a motor bike outside a corrugated iron shed. There was one of them rotating clothes drying poles, let into the pavers, and at my end of the garden there was a patch of bare earth, covered with grey wood-ash from a bonfire. More than one bonfire, I'd say. But there wasn't a single tree left standing.'

Jack turned to lower the arm of the record player again, and the baritone reiterated that he thought he would never see a thing as lovely as a tree, while the

seated listeners turned to each other with expressions of puzzlement. At the conclusion of the song, a lady in a fawn twinset raised her hand and asked:

‘I’m a bit up in the air, Mr Crump. Is there a moral?’

‘No,’ said Jack. ‘It’s just a memory.’

SHELTERED housing offers you the opportunity of being dragged out by the heels while you’re still warm. In each flat there’s a red button let into the wall at the side of your bed, and another in the bathroom, in case you sense the approach of death at an undignified moment. You only have to reach out and press, for Matron to burst into your private world in three minutes flat, with the aid of her skeleton key. I know, because I tried it once. If you exhibit the correct symptoms, she will give you the kiss of life, or gently close your staring eyes. I tried that too.

Sometimes, when the morning’s tasks have been completed, and the afternoon silently persists, though you’ve had your nap, and read the newspaper a second time, it’s hard to resist the pull of the button. When I sit in my chair, reading a book, I sense a presence in my room, as if somebody is standing behind my shoulder, and feel a distracting force, like the gravity of a tiny red planet. I only have to stretch and touch it in order to become the centre of attention, in order to enjoy the illusion of being once more caught up in life. They should install another button, which you could press to have somebody, anybody, bring in whatever mindless obsession they choose – ‘Dr’ Ron and his pottery mugs, Mrs Astle and her grandchildren photographs, even – anybody, so long as they give you the sense, for half an hour, that you are engaged in something, rather than being cleanly, safely, comfortably sheltered; rather than being shelved.

THE Memory Club was in its innocence then. Like leaves falling in the first days of autumn, images of childhood and youth fluttered from the unfettered minds of my coevals, to lie before us in candid beauty. Soon, the prepared talks of half an hour proposed in Matron’s prospectus gave way to briefer, random recollections, as the distant past revealed itself in mere glimpses, arising unbidden from the ranks of grey heads, and often receding, unbidden, before their completion. Sometimes, the enunciation of a word was sufficient to evoke a lost memory, as when Arthur Roberts heard one of the ladies speak fondly of the tooth fairy.

'May I?' he interrupted. 'Only I just remembered my own experience of the tooth fairy, and I thought you might like to hear it.' Nobody objected, and he continued.

'Well, it's more an experience of my mother, I suppose, but the tooth fairy played a part. She was very careful with money, was my mother, and when I was six, and one of my teeth came out, I never doubted her when she said the tooth fairy would change it for a sixpence, if I put it under my pillow that night. I knew nobody else in our house would buy an old tooth for sixpence, so it had to be somebody kind, like a fairy, didn't it? "Go to bed early, without any supper, and the fairy will change it for a tanner," she said. "But no supper, mind, and early to bed."

'The next morning when I looked under my pillow, the tooth had gone, but nobody had left any money. I went downstairs and told my mother there was no sixpence, and she said: "What? Lost it already? No breakfast for you, my lad. Get off to school and be more careful next time." The tooth fairy saved her two meals, you see, and taught me not to trust in anything I hadn't seen with my own eyes.'

The ladies looked at each other with rueful expressions, shaking their heads and clucking.

WHEN I least expected it, I was ambushed into trawling up a memory of my own. One day while I sat looking at a ceiling light, with an expression of scepticism on my face, as believers thrilled to a further episode from 'Dr' Ron's Recollections of a Great Healer, Matron caught my attention and mouthed a silent message across the room. I had not the slightest idea what she was attempting to convey, and wondered why she had altered her habit by attending a session of the Tuesday afternoon ramblings. After the so-called club's purpose had become widely known, its assemblies assumed a popularity surpassing that of the whist and beetle drives combined, and she generally left us to our own devices. Her gesticulations were supplied meaning when Ron concluded his fantasy to pattering applause, and resumed his seat. 'And now, since it's six months since we started the Memory Club, I'm going to suggest we ask for a contribution from the gentleman who was indirectly responsible for its formation,' Matron announced, as I experienced a horrid creeping sensation in my neck. 'Mr Morgan: would you?'

She held out one hand toward me in a gesture of invitation, and I displayed both of my raised palms in a gesture of refusal.

'Sorry,' I replied, 'but I don't have anything prepared. Couldn't possibly.'

'Oh, now, Mr Morgan. We've progressed beyond the stage of long recollections, needing preparation. Anybody can get up and have their say, off the cuff. If you don't have anything in mind, just stand up, look out of the window, and something will come. That's my experience.'

All of the women turned to face me, so that whichever way I looked I saw sunlight glinting off spectacles, and mouths which parroted Matron's words.

'Yes, come on, Mr Morgan. Give us a contribution. Just stand up and remember something. Come on!'

I was cornered, and all I could think of when I rose was the proximate simpering of 'Dr' Ron, who knew my view of the entire project, and delighted to see me manoeuvred into a fix.

'Just look out of the window and take a breath,' Matron advised, as I pictured myself taking her by the shoulders and shaking her.

It was November, and the trees on the open side of our lawned quadrangle were bare against the sky, their traceries punctuated by rooks' nests, and by the disconsolate remnants of bird families which had thrived there in riotous disharmony only months before. I examined the gently swaying branches, and their conglomerated homes of twig, and it seemed they floated above a different earth, that I recognised from long before.

'Well, if you insist. But don't say I didn't warn you,' I began. 'Looking out of the window at those birds in the trees takes me back more than fifty years, to a little stone village in the Pennines. My wife and I had married young, so we had to lodge with her parents for two years, in the town where we grew up. We knew nothing but that town and the people in it, though I'd been on day outings to the moors and the dales. It never occurred to me that anybody should live in the hill villages but the families which had inhabited them for generations, just as it never occurred to me that I should live anywhere but in a town, with factory gates opening on its streets, and coal mines beyond.'

'Then one day I saw a job advertised in a market town among the peaks. I applied, and when I went for an interview, they asked if I'd be interested in renting a cottage the company owned, if I was offered work. Without seeing it, I said

"yes", and when I got the job, and we moved with our few bits and pieces, we still hadn't seen the cottage. We gave the address to the van driver who came to move us, and sat in the cab with him, wondering what it would look like. Of course, it didn't matter that much what it looked like: it was our first home, the first place we should be alone together, without in-laws to-ing and fro-ing about the place.

'We left the industrial valleys and climbed small hills, then laboured up bigger hills until we crossed moorland, and when our village came in view, it was just what I'd imagined it to be: a chain of gritstone houses following the course of a stream to the brow of a hill, with a couple of pubs and several shops, a village cross, and a church, all at different altitudes.

'The churchyard was full of elms and beeches, swaying in a brisk spring wind, while rooks maintained a convoy to their tops with twigs to build their nests. And opposite the church, right across the road from its lych gate, was our cottage: a grey stone house, with a rowan and an apple tree in its front garden, and a view of hills, beyond tree-tops and birds. I lit a fire in the grate, and we sat on our rickety old settee in front of it, scorching slices of bread on a toasting fork, and drinking tea while we listened to the wireless. Though we'd been married two years, it seemed as if our lives together had only begun that day, when we first played house.

'After a week of wet weather, a spring forced its way between the flagstones of the pantry floor, ran across the kitchen, and left through a gap under the back door. The floors were all stone, without coverings, so nothing was harmed, and we thought it comical to have a stream running through the house. That's the memory those rooks bring back, in their trees.'

No sooner had I sat down than the womenfolk bayed for more.

'Oh that sounded lovely, Mr Morgan. What happened next? Were you happy there? Don't leave it at that: go on a bit. Please.' But they'd had their money's worth.

SECOND only to his fondness for manufacturing pottery objects was 'Dr' Ron's interest in questions of human nutrition. Chief among his tenets in this field was a belief that the drinking of milk, other than mothers' milk, was an unnatural practice, responsible for innumerable malfunctions of the digestive system and the skin, among others of our parts.

'Physiologically speaking,' he once told me, 'we have more in common with a pig than a cow, yet we would hardly consider collecting the exudations of a nursing sow and consuming them, would we?'

I pictured a team of milkmaids, ranged shoulder to shoulder in order to fully cover the battery of a Large White's teats.

'You can get all the calcium you need from eating spinach,' he informed me. 'It would be more logical, if we thought any benefit was to be gained from milk, to take it from other primates, our closest animal relatives. But would you be prepared every day to drink the lactation products of an orang-outang, or a gorilla?'

'That would very much depend,' I replied, 'upon whose responsibility it was to milk the gorilla.'

AFTER everyone so inclined had disburdened him or herself of memories which embraced infancy, school days, burgeoning romance, career courses, golden holidays, marriage, divorce, parenthood and (almost beyond believing) childbirth itself, the tenor of the Memory Club's narratives underwent a change. As the springs of memory began to run dry, stories were heard which contained more of wishing than of reality, and sometimes that wishing blossomed into palpable lying. Alleged memories became the tools by which certain of the silly geese imprisoned at Sakhalin competed to appear more important than other inmates, retrospectively. Thus, when Mrs Rowbotham recalled her glory days as chatelaine of a mock-Tudor residence boasting a shrubbery with thirty rhododendrons, Mrs Whetton recalled that she had presided over a similar home, with the assistance of staff. Mrs Rowbotham bristled.

'Staff? What staff?'

'We had a maid. And a gardener, of course.'

'You told me you had a cleaning woman who came in twice a week.'

'Of course. We couldn't expect a maid to do the cleaning, could we?' Mrs Whetton smiled like a gentlewoman, and graciously inclined her head toward her adversary as she delivered the counterstroke.

But only two weeks later, she discovered herself struggling for credibility in the course of a contest over the splendour of holidays. Attempting to trump an account of two weeks on Lake Garda, during which Mrs Rowbotham claimed to

have been courted by a German count, Mrs Whetton introduced spirituality into the equation by professing to have walked for ten days on blistered, if not bleeding feet, to Santiago de Postella.

'You mean Santiago de Compostella,' Mrs Rowbotham corrected, with a note of triumph in her voice.

'That's what I said,' the other lady responded, colouring slightly.

'No: you said Santiago de Postella,' Mrs Rowbotham smiled. 'I suppose Compostella sounded too smelly.'

Everyone laughed at this quip, and the generality of rosininess which had suffused Mrs Whetton's upper extremities became focused in two bright discs, sitting high on her cheekbones, like geranium petals.

Several ladies recalled meetings with famous film stars, which had slipped their memories over the months in which they listed the hordes of lesser mortals who had entered and left their lives. Not wishing to be left out, 'Dr' Ron rose with an account (which he had previously suppressed for professional reasons) of performing a tracheotomy on a member of the royal family, who had been thrown from a carriage at a country fair.

'He virtually fell at my feet,' Ron romanced. 'The moment I examined him, I knew what had to be done. Fortunately, I always carry a penknife and a ballpoint pen with me, so without hesitation, I plunged the...'

'Who was it?' a fat lady demanded.

'Was it Philip? He went in for carriage riding,' cried another. 'I bet it was him, wasn't it?'

'I'm sorry,' Ron blustered, 'but I can't say, for reasons of confidentiality. Anyway, without hesitation...'

'Was it Margaret? She was always falling down. You're saying "he" to throw us off the scent, aren't you?'

His audience was not interested in emergency surgery, and he attempted to regain its attention by outlining his reasons for declining the decoration he had been offered, in gratitude for his prompt action. Here he was on uncertain ground, and wavered so much between MBE and CBE that his plausibility evaporated entirely.

'Why not make it a knighthood, to avoid confusion?' I called.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL fantasy became an insufficient tool for the settling of scores among my fellow inmates, and they took to inventing memories of imagined persons who, in their weaknesses, resembled enemies in the establishment. Mrs Astle recalled a neighbour she once endured, who borrowed her newspaper every morning in order to spend several hours in the selection of horses likely to win races at Market Rasen, Fakenham, or Beverley.

'I wouldn't have minded if she'd had a decent bet,' she assured us. 'But after all her studying, she'd have sixpence each way on an odds-on favourite, so she was hardly better off when it won.'

Mrs Haslam, whom this characterisation perfectly fitted, responded to the new remit of the Memory Club with the ruthlessness of a tennis player punishing a weak serve. No sooner had Mrs Astle resumed her seat than the frugal gambler rose to continue the theme of fallible neighbours.

'I had a neighbour who thought she was lady bountiful. She was always loading me down with her old cast-offs, and expecting me to be grateful. What she didn't know was that I cut everything up for dusters: that's all most of it had been good for in the first place.'

Mrs Astle gasped on receiving this hurtful information, as Mrs Haslam coiled to deliver the *coup de grace*. 'Though she thought she was Lady Muck of Muck Hall, she couldn't even speak proper English. "Mrs 'Aslam," she'd say, "'Ave you seen my 'oroscope? It's 'orrifyin', absoutely 'orrifyin'. Nothing good will result if I goes out today, so I'm stoppin' 'ome". And all this with her little finger held out from her teacup, ladylike.'

Her impersonation was so accurate that the entire assembly, after at first attempting to suppress giggles, gave way to uproarious mirth, while Mrs Astle looked daggers at those whom she had considered friends, as if earmarking them for forthcoming fictions in which they would feature in their turns. Little did she or Mrs Haslam imagine that they would become allies when the Memory Club, like an uncontrollably evolving organism, became something more ugly than its members could have foreseen.

AN innocuous little man called Lidgett, who had passed his entire working life behind the counter of a sweet shop, and wore his braces over an assortment of Fairisle pullovers, made the mistake one day of blurting out the abiding highlights of his confectionary years, as a session of the club approached its close. He was a negligible sort of man, with translucent flesh, and eyes the colour of water, who lingered at the periphery of any gathering like a ghost. If addressed, he would affect deafness, or murmur an inaudible response as he slipped obliquely from your field of attention. Whatever event was perpetrated in our institution he attended distantly, as if observing it with interest, while considering it unsafe to be drawn into. But something in the affairs of the Memory Club penetrated his reserve, prompting him after months of silence to rise to his feet in confessional mood.

‘After my wife left me, the sweet shop was the only thing I had,’ he began. ‘I lived over the shop, and most nights, when I’d closed at six o’clock and had tea, I’d go downstairs again to make sure everything was shipshape. There’s a lot to look out for in a sweet shop: the jars have to be topped up, so they look inviting, you’ve to balance the till, of course, and make sure the paper bags are stocked up, in case you get a run of kiddies wanting two ounces of this and two ounces of that. Then there’s toffee hammers and ice-cream scoops to deal with – they don’t clean themselves.

‘And when all the little jobs were seen to, I’d imagine customers coming in with difficult needs, just to keep myself sharp: things like three quarters of a pound of liquorice torpedoes, at three ha’pence an ounce, or a pound bag, equally mixed, of toffee eclairs at one and six a quarter, and mint imperials at one and fourpence a quarter. Not that I’d expect orders like that, of course: I was just polishing my reckoning skills.

‘Sometimes I’d just sit there, in the dark, remembering what had happened in the day, smiling to myself over the funny things people say. And – I must tell you this – I had a little secret nobody knew about. The main display case, which served as a counter, had a glass top and glass shelves, as you’d expect, and its floor was mirrored, to make chocolate boxes and fancy baskets look more interesting. When I opened the door on my side of the case, to take something out, I could see in the mirror right up the skirts of women standing on the other side. You’d

laugh, but I sometimes opened the door and pretended to search for something I knew wasn't there, just to look up a skirt. The sights I've seen!

Numbed by Lidgett's humdrum narrative of sweet shop management, many of the ladies had fallen into reveries of their own, so they failed to register his confession at the moment of its utterance. Only when Mrs Merryweather snorted: 'Disgusting!' did they stir, consult neighbours on both sides to ascertain the nature of the disclosure, and join the growing condemnation of the tactless man's depravity.

'Filth!' and 'Typical!' led on to 'I always knew it,' 'It's what you'd expect,' and 'Should be ashamed of himself.'

Lidgett wavered, then lowered himself to his seat, staring at the floor before him with an expression of horror, as he realised the magnitude of the error he had made in breaking his rule of non-participation. It seemed at one moment that he would run from the room, and at the next that he would burst into tears. Before he could select either of these courses, however, Mrs Merryweather embarked, regardless of the hour, on a memory of her own.

'There was a peeping Tom in a street where I once lived. He had sandy hair as well, and' – she craned to check Lidgett's features – 'grey eyes, cold grey eyes. Well, one night the men gave him a good thrashing, which was what he deserved, the pervert. He suffered what I think they call a detached retina, so afterwards he could only peep at things six inches from his face. Good thing as well!'

She sat down decisively, to murmurs of approval, as Mrs Withers sprang up like Jack in a box to continue the theme.

'There was one in a block of flats where I lived. He was always hanging about at the bottom of the stairs, so he could get an eyeful when women went down. He'd pretend to be looking for a bus ticket, or his keys, or something. Then one day he went too far. I won't tell you what he did, but you can imagine. It was disgusting.' She paused, and turned to be sure that Lidgett appreciated the conclusion of her story. 'The next morning they found him dead at the bottom of the stairwell. Good riddance, I said.'

Two others rose enthusiastically, but before they could speak, Lidgett, who had sat with bowed head, bolted for the exit, his eyes fixed on the carpet. The Memory Club had become an instrument of punishment.

I DECIDED that I should not attend any further sessions of an institution which had lost sight of its purpose. There are only so many memories an assembly of the elderly can muster, before it begins imagining a past which never existed, or creates one to supply lessons.

Nobody saw Lidgett in the week after his scourging, then early one morning, as I walked down the landing *en route* to the newsagent, I saw a gaggle of people at the top of the stairs. Some of them wore dressing gowns and slippers, as if they had emerged from their cubicles precipitately, because of an unforeseen event. When I reached them and looked down, I saw another group at the foot of the stairs, forming a circle, like spectators at a flea circus, round a spreadeagled form whose braces contained a patterned pullover. Their murmuring ceased when two ambulancemen bent to roll the lifeless pensioner onto their stretcher, and as those at the stair's head dispersed, some of them looked at me over their shoulders, as if they felt guilty.

I began to be weary of life, and wondered if the reappearance of childhood memories represented a stage in its reversal, as if it were a ball returning to its point of origin after being thrown in the air. Soon, perhaps, I should sense those recollections which had existed before I possessed words to contain them: the warmth and smell of comforting things, the pangs of hunger for mother's milk. And at last, perhaps, I should recognise the approaching darkness from which I had been drawn into light, seventy-six years before, and welcome its embrace.

I outlined this notion to Matron over the sandwiches which followed Lidgett's funeral.

'It's certainly an interesting thought, Mr Morgan, but I don't know that it holds water, scientifically speaking,' she answered.

'A pity I didn't come up with it a year ago,' I said. 'It might have saved us the trouble of suffering your club.'

I regretted this remark, as I saw that it caused her pain, though she smiled and asked: 'Was it that bad?'

'Of course not,' I said, touching her arm as we were joined by Dr Ron. He stared at us blankly for a moment, and seemed lost for words, before delivering an observation which was distinctly more apropos than anything I had offered.

'None of us can win,' he volunteered. 'The question is: in what style shall we

lose? Shall we go out with splendour, or will our exits be degrading? Will they be mishandled?

Then he placed a tip of his reading spectacles' arm between his front teeth, and looked down with the familiar gesture he employed when he had nothing further to say.

Meetings of the club were discontinued, and all that had been spoken there itself became no more than a memory.
