


Everyone has a story to tell

But does Janice have the courage
to unlock her own...

THE KEEPER OF STORIES



SALLY PAGE

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*For my Dad
With all my love*

Prologue

Everyone has a story to tell.

But what if you don't have a story? What then?

If you are Janice, you become a collector of other people's stories.

She once watched the Academy Awards acceptance speech of a famous English actor – a National Treasure. In it, the National Treasure described her early life as a cleaner and how, as a young hopeful, she had stood in front of other people's bathroom mirrors holding the toilet cleaner as if it was an Oscar statue. Janice wonders what would have happened if the National Treasure hadn't made it as an actor. Would she still be a cleaner, like her? They are about the same age – late forties – and she thinks they even look a bit alike. Well, (she has to smile) perhaps not that similar, but with the same short build that hints of a stocky future. She wonders if the National Treasure would have ended up as a collector of other people's stories too.

She can't recall what started her collection. Maybe it was a life glimpsed as she rode the bus through the Cambridge countryside to work? Or something in a fragment of conversation overheard as she cleaned a sink? Before long (as she dusted a sitting room or defrosted a fridge) she noticed people were telling her their stories. Perhaps they always had done, but now it is different, now the stories are reaching out and she gathers them to her. She knows she is a receptive vessel. As she listens to the stories, the small nod she gives acknowledges what she knows to be true: that for many, she is a simple, homely bowl into which they can pour their confidences.

Often the stories are unexpected; at times they are funny and engaging. Sometimes they are steeped in regret and sometimes they are life-affirming. She thinks maybe people talk to her because she believes in their stories. She delights in the unexpected and swallows their exaggerations whole. At

home at night, with a husband who swamps her with speeches rather than stories, she thinks about her favourites, savouring each of them in turn.

ONE

The start of the story

Monday has a very particular order: laughter to begin with; sadness towards the end of the day. Like mismatched bookends, these are the things that prop up her Monday. She has arranged it this way on purpose as the prospect of laughter helps get her out of bed and strengthens her for what comes later.

Janice has discovered that a good cleaner can pretty much dictate their days and hours – and importantly, for the balance of her Monday, the order in which they do their cleaning on a particular day. Everyone knows reliable cleaners are hard to come by and a surprising number of people in Cambridge seem to have discovered that Janice is an exceptional cleaner. She is unsure about the accolade ‘exceptional’ (overheard when one of her employers had a friend in for coffee). She knows she is not an exceptional woman. But is she a good cleaner? Yes, she thinks she is that. She has certainly had enough practice. She just hopes this isn’t going to be the sum story of her life: “she cleaned well”. As she gets off the bus she nods at the driver to distract herself from this increasingly recurring thought. He nods back and she has the fleeting impression that he is going to say something, but then the bus doors sigh as if exhaling and shudder closed.

As the bus pulls away she is left looking across the road to a long, leafy avenue of detached houses. Some of the windows of the houses gleam with light; others are shaded and dark. She imagines there are many stories hidden behind all those windows, but this morning she is only interested in one. It is the story of the man who lives in the rambling Edwardian house on the corner: Geordie Bowman. She doesn’t think her other clients have ever met Geordie, and she knows they are unlikely to meet through her (that is not how Janice thinks her world should work). But, of course, they have heard of Geordie Bowman. Everyone has heard of Geordie Bowman.

Geordie has lived in the same house for over forty years. First, he took a room as a lodger – the rents in Cambridge being considerably cheaper than they were in London, where he was working. Then, eventually, when he married, he ended up buying the house from his landlady. He and his wife could not bear to throw the other tenants out so his growing family lived alongside a mixture of painters, academics, and students, until, one by one, they moved out of their own accord. That was when the fight for the newly vacant room would start.

“John, now he was the canniest,” Geordie often recalls, with pride, “he just moved his stuff in before they had finished packing.”

John is Geordie’s eldest and now lives in Yorkshire with a family of his own. The rest of Geordie’s brood are scattered around the world but visit whenever they can. His beloved wife, Annie, has been dead for several years but nothing has changed in the house since she left it. Each week Janice waters her plants – some now as big as small bushes – and she flicks the dust from her collection of novels by American writers. Geordie encourages Janice to borrow these and occasionally she takes Harper Lee or Mark Twain home with her, to join her selection of comfort reading.

Geordie has the door open before she can reach for her key.

“They say timing is everything,” he booms at her. Geordie is built on magnificent lines, with a voice to match. “Get yourself in and we’ll start with a coffee.”

This is her cue to make strong coffee for them – with lots of hot milk, just the way Geordie likes it and exactly how Annie used to make it. She doesn’t mind. Most of the time Geordie fends for himself (when he is not in London, overseas, or in the pub) and she feels Annie would approve of her spoiling him now and again.

Geordie’s story is one of her favourites. It reminds her of the fortitude within people. There is definitely something in there too about using your talents but she does not like to dwell on this. It is too close to the Bible stories of her childhood and leads her back to her own lack of talent. So, she pushes these thoughts away and concentrates on fortitude, as demonstrated by the boy who was to become Geordie Bowman.

Geordie (unsurprisingly) grew up in Newcastle. She thinks his name is actually John or possibly Jimmy, she is no longer sure; over time he simply became ‘Geordie’. He lived in the streets by the docks, where his father worked. They had a dog that his father adored (more than his son) and a