

It was an old manor house in South Woodford, huge, ivy-clad. The kind of place that has a drive where when you first turn in you can't see the house.

Whenever I visited my home in London, Mum would drive me over to The Home. As soon as we turned onto that long drive my stomach would knot up and sink to a place just above my pelvis. We'd park, then usually spend a few minutes in the car; reminding each other and ourselves of all the happy and good things we could talk about, making a game plan of how to change the subject when Auntie started getting morbid. I didn't mind the morbidity so much, but Mum's never been great with talking about death, even less so in recent years. I'd also quietly remind myself that Mum visits every week and does it alone, listening to my Great Aunt cry. Over the two years Auntie's mind had started to dislodge and her time curdled. My Mum listened to her funeral plans, listened to how all her friends had died, listened to how no one remembers her, listened to how awful it is to grow old. The same conversation every week.

For my mum, my coming with her was a welcome break, I could speak about how much fun I was having being young in Bristol, how full my life was. When stories of a full life are told, they fill up a space, they push out the boredom, loneliness and old age. I'd write notes on my phone, save up (sanitised) stories from nights out, work, life and youth. Auntie would remind me how wonderful it is and was to be young, she'd remind me that I wouldn't appreciate being young until I was old. I know this to be true, maybe I'll appreciate more fully when I am old, but seeing my Aunt in that place, I did appreciate my youth.

We'd walk from the car to the old manor house door and ring the buzzer. We'd wait and wait, we'd often ring again, and we'd wait some more, then a nurse would come running from some wing. She'd be wearing gloves and a mask, rush behind a desk and press an unseen button that would buzz us in. We'd open the door. The smell of dust, hand sanitiser, gravy, lavender-scented diffusers and something tangy like urine, would hit me. We'd say 'Elizabeth – second floor' She'd nod. By the time we'd signed in, she'd be gone, sucked back into a room somewhere.

We'd turn right, and walk towards the lift. Big rooms on either side, most of the older people in wheelchairs, always at least one hobbling around, you'd smile and say hello and they'd mumble at you. It was the early dementia ward, not the serious one – that was on the third floor. You wouldn't come back from the third floor. All those doors were locked and you needed a passcode just to go there in the lift. When we'd dodged the ground-floor-early-stagers and made it to the end of the corridor we were greeted with the lift. It was old and rickety, when it opened there was nearly always a nurse with a trolley who emerged to squeeze around you. When you stepped in the four-man lift another nurse with a trolley often joined you. We'd mould our bodies around the bulky metal contraption. Then we pressed the number two, no passcode needed.

Lift doors open. Long, long, long corridor stretched ahead. Auntie was at the end. The corridor was like some sort of Escher, a vertical horizontal illusion, stretching into infinity. It distorted time. Time became a non-Newtonian fluid, corn-starch and water, flowing freely along the drab carpets, rushing everything away but if you touched it, time would stop, turn to brick against your fist and knock the air from your chest.

As soon as you stepped from the sanctuary of the lift you'd be compulsively pulled into the never-ending vortex of Corridor. With every step down that hall, more colours would leak from the walls. It sapped the life from everything, everyone. Smiles plastered on thick we'd walk along. Step by step, our stomachs grew heavy and leaked into our laden legs.

Identical rooms left and right; adjustable bed, chair, dresser, bedside table, plastic shower/toilet unit, TV - always opposite the bed. and always on. In every room a shrivelled human sat in the bed or chair, eyes glazed over looking at the TV. Some of them turned their heads to watch you walk by. most didn't. They'd grown into their seated positions, their bodies had shrivelled, dissolved, and moulded into new forms. They made me think of *The Last Of Us*, I'd tiptoe past imagining clicking zombie noises and decrepit husks jumping out at us.

Occasionally we'd pass an empty room. It'd be full again the next time we came. Another shrivelled, vacant human. Halfway down the corridor, nurses sat around in chairs placed near a desk pushed against the left wall, leaving just enough space for a wheelchair to squeeze past. The nurses would have phones or cups of tea in their hands. Sometimes they would be muttering quietly to each other sometimes they'd just sit. Unlike the others, they would move but they had that same pallid, corridor-sapped colour to them. Shopping bags under their eyes and invisible tons on their shoulders. We'd nod and give them a tight smile as we passed. The British nod felt like a ritualistic token, a sign we'd got halfway, a good luck charm, a thank you. They were the rulers here, the harpies, of maybe Osiris or Anubis, guardians. protectors.

Time sprung back towards us after seeming hours of putting one foot in front of another, I'd look up and was finally greeted with a wall. We turned right, into Auntie's room. She'd be sitting in the tall armchair by the window. She was going blind and her TV didn't work anyway so she just sat. It was horrible to see; her, who used to be so vibrant and funny, cracking jokes over dinner, in there, waiting to die. But it didn't depress me when I was there. We were bringing youth and life (and usually a bottle of Sherry she'd put behind the curtain to hide from the nurses). We were making her day. Even if she couldn't stop talking about her death.

What depressed me was leaving. Knowing she'd turn back into one of the vacant ones. What depressed me more was walking back down the corridor and seeing how many vacant ones there were, just in this one building. With all the drugs and doctors, some of them would live for years. They seemed already dead, ghosts of themselves, and they could live for years. That corridor was haunted. The most real kind of haunted I know. All those old people sitting, staring. They'd all had full lives, jobs, and families. They'd all been young and drunk and fun. During their lifetime most of the medication keeping them alive had been created, the world had changed and grown smaller and bigger all at once. They'd been young and they'd been fun and now they sit and watch their TVs. Separately.

Once we hit the air outside, I always wanted a cigarette, but I was usually with my Mum who'd give me a look at the mere sight of tobacco, so nicotine gum had to do. I chew with ferocity. We'd get back in the car and sit. and breathe.

"I never want to get like that."

"I know Mum, I know."

We'd take the long way home.