

An epidemic of loneliness

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This morning winter dripped damp into my bones, but I feel better now. The hospital has cheered me up. There are Christmas trees around every corner, glitzy baubles, large tin boxes gleaming full of colourfully wrapped chocolates, and an abundance of Santa hats. The consultant in charge of the ward this week is known for his efficiency, and we have finished the rounds early. Of course, there are fewer patients to see. The pre-Christmas emptying of the hospital is well underway. People want to be at home.

I take a stack of patients' notes to the doctors' desk and start writing up, but I have barely progressed when I am summoned. Doris is peering at me from the doorway to the women's bay. She came in with a flutter in her chest that came to nothing. 3 weeks later, somehow she is still with us. I finish my sentence and go towards her. "Hello, Mrs Rafferty. How can I help?"

Her blue eyes are lightly speckled with age but burning bright with mischief. "Doctor", she says, and stops to

look me up and down. "They seem to be getting younger by the day", she mutters to herself. "Anyway, I have a terrible ache, doctor, right here on my shoulder." She winces elaborately as she points to it. I sigh inwardly. Doris was due for discharge twice last week and yesterday. She has had an occupational therapy home visit and social services assessment.

"Oh? When did that start, Mrs Rafferty?" I begin my routine. Yesterday it was her arm that was hurting, before that her hip. Truth is, Doris is an incredibly healthy 82-year-old and we can't find anything. I have no doubt it will be the same today. As I come to the end of my examination, my concentration drifts to some pictures on her bedside cabinet. Doris catches me staring and smiles. "Would have been our 57th anniversary yesterday", she says. I peer at the photos and suddenly recognise the beautiful young woman looking back at me. She has the same fiery blue eyes but her hair is styled in impossibly tight pale ringlets and her face is uncreased. Doris takes a while to interrupt me. "That", she says, "is my George". Her voice is swollen with pride.

George occupies the grander of the two frames. He has a shapely face and neatly combed dark hair. He looks clean and substantial. "He's been gone 20 years", she whispers, "but it feels like yesterday we were...you know...dancing slowly together in the backyard, glass of wine, Venus twinkling away in the sky." I pause to imagine the young Doris and George, swirling around each other in warm summer sunsets, to imagine the time when they were together, a time when the world still revolved around them.

Doris reaches across me. Her shoulder doesn't seem to be hurting anymore. "This one", she says, lifting up a small pink frame, "is Jillian, my eldest. She's settled down in Malaysia. Works for the British Council." The other photo, Doris tells me, is of her son, Michael. "Michael married an American woman and moved to Florida", her voice quivers ever so slightly.

Then, Doris drifts into her memories and I feel uncomfortable stranded by her bed. I shuffle. The pressure of jobs that have to be done is mounting but there is nothing so urgent today, nothing that can't wait a few more minutes, and so I feel guilty for wanting to grasp this moment as an opportunity to escape from a woman who is introducing me to her life. But Doris is too quick for me. "Don't see them as often as I'd like. It's what happens when the world gets smaller", she says with a half-hearted cackle.

"Lots of places for you to go on holiday", I reply, trying to sound breezy. She fixes me then, with a stare so sad that I immediately wish I could take those words back. I realise I have no idea of what her personal circumstances are beyond what the occupational therapist has jotted



David Hockney/Richard Schmidt

David Hockney, *Mum* (1990)

down in her report. Safe in the kitchen, safe in the bathroom. Safe, safe, safe.

To my immense relief, my bleep goes off. I have to go, but before she lets me, Doris smuggles a chocolate éclair into my hand. She gives me one every day. “You’ll look after me, won’t you doctor?” She winks at me. I don’t know what she means but she is so enchantingly devious that despite myself I find I am relenting. “Mrs Rafferty, we’ll get an X-ray but if that turns out okay, we’ll stick to the plan for going home?” I try to be stern but it ends up half-statement, half-question. “Yes, doctor”, she replies.

As the day wears on, I send more patients home and make promises to others that they can go soon. In time for Christmas. Tomorrow the only people left will be those who are too unwell to go home. It can’t be helped. For what it’s worth, the ward throws a pretty good party. Last year we had turkey and roast potatoes and Christmas pudding. There were presents for everyone—socks and hankies for the men, scented candles for the women. There were paper hats, and crackers, and plenty of warmth. Behind the scenes, I know the preparations for this year’s do are almost finished. All the gifts are wrapped; there are always a few extra presents, just in case. Some of these empty beds will be filled in the next 2 days. There will be those who become too ill to remain at home and then there will be those who are simply not wanted.

It is late afternoon before I get a chance to see Doris again. Her radiograph is normal, except for the two watches she wears. “Because I have so much time on my hands, I couldn’t possibly keep track of it all with just one”, she’d explained one day, with a twinkle. The watches are matching gold-plated his and hers pieces. Now that I know about George I assume that one must have been his.

When I go to deliver the good news, I find Doris standing facing the window. “Mrs Rafferty?” I say, walking towards her. She doesn’t turn. Perhaps she hasn’t heard. “Mrs Rafferty”, I say again, drawing up beside her. She turns towards me a fraction before returning to face the sky. It is an impressive view of London from up here on the seventh floor. Across the horizon, concrete towers shine with life and the reflected glare of neon streetlights. I glance at Doris; she is looking but not seeing. For the first time, I notice that storm clouds have gathered in those sky-blue eyes of hers. The picture frames are gone from her bedside cabinet.

“Mrs Rafferty, how is your arm?” She says nothing. “Would you like me to come back later?” I ask. Slowly, she pulls herself out of her reverie. “No, dear. What is it?” I am a bit embarrassed. I have probably disturbed her unnecessarily; it’s too late for her to go anywhere today. Tomorrow, perhaps I can try again.

“Are you alright? You seem...” Doris shuffles from the window and turns towards me. “Doctor”, she says, “there’s 2 days to Christmas.” I nod. She sighs, and from nowhere a tear trickles down her face. “I’m sorry. Sorry.” She hides behind her hands. Awkwardly, I put my arm around her shoulder and wait. Doris struggles against her emotion

but the storm clouds are bursting and sadness escapes from her in tiny trembles that get progressively smaller till she is exhausted. “Excuse me, doctor”, she manages eventually. “Don’t know what came over me.”

I lead her back towards the bed. I ask her if she wants a cup of tea, or a chat. “No,” she replies. “I’ve taken up enough of your time with my silliness.” But she isn’t silly and I am desperate to help. Then she tries to tell me that she is prepared to go home. That’s great news, I think, but she looks down at the floor as she says it. “I don’t want to go home.”

I know that, but she cannot stay here forever. She doesn’t want to move out of her home either. We’ve discussed alternative living arrangements. Suddenly, she gathers up her rail thin arms and legs and looks at me with intent. “It’s just that I’m all alone and there are so many hours in the day.” Reflexively, we both look towards her wrists. Sure enough, she still has those two watches strapped on. She lets out a forlorn noise that is neither laugh nor cry. “Doctor”, she asks, “can you give me a cure for loneliness?” Her courage takes my breath away.

I wish I could say yes. I wish I could prescribe her some antidepressants and be satisfied that I had done my best, but the truth is she’s not clinically depressed. It’s just that she has been left behind by a world that no longer revolves around her, not even the littlest bit of it.

There are probably thousands like her. Men and women who have lived a lot and loved a lot. Men and women who are not yet done with being ferocious and bright but for whom time now stands empty as they wait in homes full of silence; their only misunderstanding to have lived to an age when they are no longer coveted by a society addicted to youth.

For now the ward is quiet. In the next 2 days there will be some celebrating, but there will also be some admissions—those who are really sick and those who are really inconvenient, usually older people, grandmothers and grandfathers who get in the way of the festivities. The hospital is the last minute resort for families that cannot cope or who do not want to. That is not to say that is how Doris sees her life, or her family, but she is nonetheless alone and it brings home to me the truth of this epidemic that we have on our hands—an epidemic of loneliness, insidiously affecting those among us who have seen the ebb and flow of countless seasons, seen the world grow smaller and then grow too large again.

The most difficult part is that I don’t know how to solve this, although I wish I could. For now, I simply retract my diagnoses. Sheepishly, I insist that Doris spends her Christmas this year on the ward, and I see her mood lift. But as I steel myself for the inevitable influx of unwanted grandparents who I know will arrive, I cannot help but wonder how it is that things could have gone so badly wrong.

This essay is based on various encounters that I had while working in hospitals as a junior doctor.

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