Relief. That's all I feel. My duty discharged. My obligation fulfilled. What had to be done, has been done. The end.

—

I'm approaching the revolving doors when she steps in front of me. A nurse on Gordon's ward. Bright and smiling at the start of her shift.

"Good morning, Peter," she says. "How's Gordon today?"

"Oh, well. You know …"

No need to say any more.

"I must tell you," she says, "we all think you're rather marvellous."

I look past her at the revolving doors.

"Visiting Gordon every day, the way you do. Come wind, come rain. Sitting with him for hours on end. I wouldn't have the patience myself."

"He has no one else," I say.

No, no one else.

—

I no longer walk round the park. There's no reason why I should. It did Gordon no good. Besides, walking round the park on one's own is a bleak business.

After Hazel's death, I found myself seeing Dr Woodward once or twice a month. Minor complaints mostly, but we both knew why I was there.

"I could prescribe something," he said, "but medicine's not an exact science. We try things. Sometimes they work; sometimes they don't. Taking a little exercise might be a good idea," he added, "although there's always a chance it might kill you. I'm so sorry. A tasteless joke. It's high time I retired."

Which he did. I half-hoped we might run into each other from time to time, but he and his wife moved to Cyprus, possibly to avoid his ex-patients.

Dr Woodward's successor is a brisk young woman with no time to waste. I sense it's best not to trouble her.

—

At the start, walking brought me some relief. Waking at six and reaching out for Hazel's hand. Then I'd remember.

Putting on stout shoes and my yellow waterproof, I'd climb the hill and walk my six circuits, clockwise, round the park. Then back to the house for tea, toast and Radio 4.

Walking in opposite directions — me clockwise, he anticlockwise — we'd pass each other twice each circuit. As we drew level, our eyes remained fixed on the path ahead. Later, we nodded. Later still, we exchanged good mornings.

Then, one day, he stopped in front of me.

"Walk with me," he said.

And I turned round and did.

“Gordon,” he said.

“Peter.”

And we continued walking anticlockwise.

—

Forging new friendships in your later years is difficult, particularly perhaps for men. How much of your past life do you need or wish to share? How much of it will interest anyone else?

A generalisation, of course, but it’s not very far from the truth: women share feelings; men share facts.

“Anti-clockwise,” Gordon tells me. “Widdershins. From the German ‘widersinnig’. Taking a course that’s opposite to the motion of the sun. In England it’s considered unlucky to walk widdershins round a church but, in the Buddhist tradition, travelling clockwise benefits everyone, while travelling anticlockwise benefits the individual.”

“I’m an atheist as it happens,” he said.

I felt no need to share my own threadbare theology with Gordon. Hazel was a frequent churchgoer and that was enough for me.

If we’d talked more, I don’t believe Gordon and I would have found we had much in common beyond the fact we both were widowers. Being walking companions was sufficient.

—

Hazel died peacefully at home, confident in her belief that she would be re-united with her much-loved parents and her younger sister.

Gordon never told me his wife’s name. Perhaps her long months of suffering and despair drained away some part of her presence?

“A cliché, I know,” he said, “but it was a blessed relief when she died.”

We’d completed our six circuits when Gordon grips me by the forearm. “If something happens to me … If ever you find me in a state like that … Don’t let me linger, Peter. Promise me that.”

“But, Gordon …” I said.

“Promise me solemnly, Peter. If you see me suffering, you must end it.”

“End it?”

“Yes, end it. Give me your word.”

I had no choice.

“Very well,” I said.

And we walked on.

—

One morning walk missed. I thought nothing of it. A night away. A hangover. A head-cold. A second walk missed, a third, a fourth. Something must be wrong. I made enquiries and was told to call the hospital. Gordon had been admitted with a suspected stroke. I was free to visit him whenever I wished.

—

I sit with Gordon in a cheerless side ward. “We’ll find him somewhere nicer when a bed becomes available,” says a nurse. “For now, you should talk to him. He can probably hear you.”

Silence. Not a sigh. Not a sound. Only his eyes saying over and over again: “Don’t let me linger, Peter. Promise me that.”

Days pass. Weeks. His eyes ever more accusing.

“Don’t let me linger, Peter. Promise me that.”

Sitting by his bedside, unable now to look at him. Silent and shamed. Weighed down with guilt and cowardice. Each of us as helpless as the other.

—

She’s a new nurse on the ward.

“Don’t worry, nurse,” I say. “I can see you’re busy. I know my way around.”

Shapeless under the hospital duvet. I cannot bring myself to look at him, to meet his eyes. I take the pillow and hold it down. The instinct to cling onto life is much stronger than you’d think. It’s all I can do to keep the pillow in place.

Afterwards, I sit on the bed to let my heartbeat settle. Then I leave the ward.

—

“Does Gordon like his new room?” she asks me.

His new room?

“It won’t matter much to him, of course, but we thought you’d be more comfortable sitting somewhere a bit brighter.”

I try to make sense of it. His new room? If not Gordon, then …?

“See you tomorrow, Peter,” she calls. “Take care.”

I move rapidly towards the revolving doors.

Nicolas Ridley lives in Bath (UK) where he writes fiction, non-fiction, flash fiction, and stage plays under different names. A prize-winner and three times a Pushcart Prize nominee, his short stories have been widely published in anthologies, literary magazines and journals in the UK, Ireland, Canada and the USA.