

Elderparc

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Kate Clanchy was appointed Writer in Residence at The Midland Hotel in Spring 2015, and was commissioned by The Midland and Manchester Literature Festival to write a short story inspired by her stay. The resulting piece, Elderparc, was performed at a special Afternoon Tea event in The Midland's Wyvern Room on Thursday 15th October 2015, as part of MLF's 10th anniversary Festival.

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ELDERPARC

The money was simple. The money was also huge, but for Larry, huge was no object and no problem. That was the way Larry was, and he would say so to anybody. He had made his money for his family, and, once it was pointed out to him how he could spend it on a thing, and he judged the thing to be good, he'd spend it. The question, for Larry MacManus, was not *if*, but *how many*, and *how soon*.

For instance, when his wife had needed new breasts, he'd bought them: top notch ones, in DD, with a set for his sister Sue at the same time (his mother had said thanks, but all the same). Same with teeth, nails, eyelashes, and hair extensions, wife and daughter, both (Sue had said no to everything but the teeth). Later, for his daughter's wedding, he had the teeth re-plated and the breasts shrunk, and a gastric band for Sue. Most recently, and as part of a very complex divorce deal, multi-focus lens implants and new knees all round, him included. The knees in particular were the business. Larry shifted on them as he waited in the sandstone porch of what for most of his life he had known as the Midland Hotel, and which now had the word ELDERPARC etched across the glass beneath the ornate red arch, waiting for the wince. No wince.

So, when ELDERPARC first came to town, and Sue had said Mum had been to the Memory Lane cinema, come back to herself like magic, started quoting all the lines in the African Queen, Larry had said, move her in, then. Sue had shaken her jowls at him – too much gastric band – and said the cinema was £850 one hour can you imagine the cost of a week with the works, but Larry wasn't put off. He looked into it and found that ELDERPARC really was the business, the best that could be bought, the science was settled, and he'd decided to buy.

He'd told Sue, get Mum packed, and he'd done a nice little deal with Mum's bungalow in Cheshire, (the ELDERPARC package was more affordable if you considered property values and inheritance tax.) He'd gone off to Beijing after that, though, bit of business, took a month, but Sue should remember who paid the bills and he was here now, wasn't he? Come to see his Mum, see how she was doing; and here was Hans, come shimmering out to meet him.

Hans was a tall, slim, grey-blond man in a narrow silver-grey suit, just the sort to make Larry feel at loss, honestly, with his rimless glasses and lucid, rootless, round-vowelled English. But he was the top guy, top at least of ELDERPARC Manchester, and Larry was entitled to that sort of treatment given the scale of his investment, upfront payment lump sum, so he stuck out his stumpy Manchester hand and Hans shook it with his long, middle-European one.

'Shall we go in?' said Hans, touching a fingertip to the code bar, opening the high Deco doors. There were two sets of doors beyond that, and a steel air-lock. Then they emerged in

a high, pillared, shadowy space with a wide shiny stone floor and distant glass roof. It was the atrium of the old hotel – Larry recognised it, a temple to commerce, he'd brought the Beijing connection here - but it had been reconfigured as a sort of station concourse. There were signs saying 'Waiting Room' on the pillars, and, grouped around them, ancient weighing machines; and piles of trunks; and even those collection boxes in the shape of a crippled boy with a leg brace. Round these stations, wheelchairs and high wooden benches with shapes in blankets dropped on them like leaves.

Briefly, the hall vibrated with a noise like a steam train, passing. Larry breathed in: an overpowering smell of cigarettes and leather, coal smoke and diesel, and cold hard stone.

'Do you allow smoking then?' he asked.

'Oh no,' said Hans. 'Not cigarettes. This is a tech-scent: cigarettes remade in the lab, with no poison.' He pressed those long clean fingers together again, thoughtfully, and Larry wondered if he were Swedish or Danish or Dutch. The guys Larry dealt with in Beijing were his height and his build and gambled and spat and smoked. He liked them.

'Smell,' murmured Hans, 'is tremendously important in our work. We have our own lab. The basal cortex is so often the last go in Alzheimer's. You are fully familiar with our central concept, Mr Macmanus?'

Yes. Sue had explained it to Larry on the phone. ELDERPARC worked with the intact bits of the Alzheimer's brain. Not with the hippocampus, where the new memories were made, because that was gone, gone in Rita (gone in 9 something percent of the population, demanding which paper you believed) gone for a burton; but with the long term memories, the ones stored deeper in the brain stem. ELDERPARC didn't try to convince you, the way Sue had tried to convince Rita for the last decade - remember the solar battery used as a frying pan, remember the flexi-screen scoured with a pan-scourer- that you were living in the twenty-first century: instead, using smells and sounds and old movies, it let you slip back to the twentieth. There, you could have a nice meal in the French Restaurant where Larry had taken Rita when he made his first million, and his second, and for her birthday once. ELDERPARC let you linger there, in the best bits of your life, and have a little dance, maybe, in the delightfully restored tea room which featured in the ELDERPARC promo-video, the one with the Indian dome, and the scarlet carpets.

'I'm fully on board with the ELDERPARC concept,' said Larry. 'But this is still a bit of a shock.' There was a clicking sound just then, and, looking up, Larry saw there was a huge platform notice board hanging from the ceiling, and its names and numbers were flicking over like a flock of re-settling cicada. The configuration came to rest and Larry peered at it through his multifocals, but he couldn't read the destinations.

'Please, do not try to interpret the words,' said Hans. 'They are blurred for everyone. This way, you see, each one can see the name in their mind.'

Actually, that worked. The name 'Maryport', was already forming in Larry's own vision, three rows down, and seemed to be standing at platform 5. He remembered Sue's knitted swimming cossie, suddenly, from when she was twelve and he was six, could almost feel the bucket and spade in his hand. 'That's very clever,' he said 'But don't the old people worry they'll miss the train? I mean, my mum worried, she'd miss the bus. When there wasn't a bus, I mean. When she was sat in her own lounge'

'Sometimes they do,' said Hans. 'But then, you see, we have the conductor' – he pointed to a tall man in a peaked hat, pacing the hall – who will tell them the train is delayed, please have a cup of tea. Tell them their ticket is the right ticket. They all have tickets. Tickets are important'

Larry looked at the old lady nearest him. She had a woollen hat over her wispy white head, and an overcoat, and, sure enough, a thick paper ticket in hand. She was chewing contentedly, abstractedly from left to right.

'Have you got a tea trolley, then?' asked Larry.

'Oh yes,' said Hans, 'We have fruit cake, with glace cherries, in slices, with plastic. We have done the research. The slimy top is important here in the UK.'

Hans walked through the hall, and Larry followed him. The lighting was cunning. The groups of the old – and there must have been forty people there at least – only became clear as you came close to them. From any given bench, you seemed to be sitting alone on a shadowy platform, in the past, or in a dream.

'To be frank, though, Mr MacManus' said Hans, 'most of the residents here in the Waiting Room are those more advanced in their illness.' He indicated a bald, shrivelled creature on a bench, gazing at the platform board through lashless eyes. 'These people have lost – how shall we put it?'

'Their marbles?' said Larry.

'Their maps' said Hans. 'Their bearings. Their compass. So they do not have the question about the train exactly, they have more a feeling, *where am I? What I shall do next?* And also, this urgency: *the place is wrong, I must go.*'

'Yes, said Larry, thinking of the last time he saw his mother. Urgent was the word. She had lost her teeth but that wasn't what was worrying her: she was sitting in her own favourite chair and insisting it wasn't hers, that all her chairs had been stolen and replaced in the night with replicas.

'And so,' said Hans. 'These residents choose the Waiting Room. The question comes to them, *where am I? What must I do?* The answer comes here, a good strong signal: *you are waiting, sit and wait, and the train will come.* '

'Is my mother here?' asked Larry. He didn't want her to be. Rita couldn't stand waiting. When they went on those long ago holidays to Maryport, she'd be pacing about the platform, weighing herself, weighing Sue, finding an old lady to help on to the train, a 'nice lad' for him to befriend for the week's duration.

Hans pulled his PC from his pocket and unfolded it. 'Your mother is not advanced, I think. But let me see, nonetheless. '

'She'll be more likely in the tea room,' said Larry. 'I expect. That's more her style. Or the French Restaurant. I brought her there when this place was a hotel, you see, so she'd feel at home there. Or the pool, possibly.' The pool was in the basement, and had been fitted with twentieth century strength chlorine. Sue had said it was lovely, brought it all back, she'd wanted to borrow a cossie and get in herself. But Hans was still running his fingers down his flexi-screen.

'No, he said, 'not the Tea Room. Not the French Restaurant. That is not her record. The Pub, yes.'

'The Pub?' said Larry. 'My mother doesn't drink. '

'Her record says yes,' said Hans, 'but do not worry, the pub is for singing, not drinking. In Manchester you have this beautiful tradition of singing, I admire it. Would you like to see?'

Larry followed Hans out of the Waiting Room. There was the Tea Room, on the right, lovely, just as advertised, and the French Restaurant beyond, both of them quiet, and then another set of steel doors. Hans applied his finger.

You don't spend much on the transitions, I must say,' said Larry as they stood in another air lock.

'In fact yes,' said Hans. 'We need the airlocks for security – see, here is the sensor, it will process the residents in and out so we know where each is, where each goes each day. But the steel, yes? This is not important. The consistent experience is not necessary because the Alzheimer's brain cannot process it. All that is important is to meet the question of the brain: *where am I now?* with an answer from the intact brain. From the past.'

The second set of doors swished open, and a smell of fags and beer hit Larry like a wall, making him dizzy. There was a shiny lino floor, a shiny black bar, a window to the rainy street. Someone was banging on the piano. He had his sleeves rolled up in clips, like Larry's Grandad always did. Someone was singing 'Roll out the barrel'. The room was crowded with people: sitting round the table; leaning on the bar, sipping pints; and, as in the Waiting Room, it took a moment for your vision to adjust, see that most of them were old, several in dressing gowns, one on a drip.

'And the answer, in here, for *where am I?* ' said Hans, 'is 1958.'

Rita had worked in a pub like this. Evenings, after cleaning all day. The wrought iron table legs hurt Larry's heart. He remembered hiding under a table like that with Sue with a packet of crisps. Sue said 'Dad will come back and get us'.

Aloud, he said: 'My mother wouldn't come here. This isn't her sort of place.'

The bloke at the piano started playing *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. An old lady took up the words, her old, old voice frail and pure as any choirboy. Larry tasted vomit behind his teeth. He remembered his dad, lifting him up on the bar to sing that song when he was five years old. He remembered his dad never did come back for him and Sue, not that day, not ever.

Larry said, 'I want to see my mother's room now, I'm in a hurry.'

Hans nodded. 'Certainly,' he said, 'Floor six.'

In the lift, Hans explained: Larry should be prepared, the residents' rooms were furnished in ways which made the *resident* feel at home. Some basics were never altered, of course - hospital bed; zimmers; raised toilets; showers - but other elements, such as paint, throws, chairs, and so forth were put together using in a painstaking trial and error process together with the resident and relatives using the resident's own furniture and the ELDERPARC archive until a room was arrived at which felt like home *to the resident*.

Of course he was trying to soften Larry up, but he didn't succeed. As soon as Larry opened the door and gazed around the low, dank, dark room with its single bed he was on to them. 'Luxe,' said Larry. 'I'm paying Luxe.' He remembered there was *Super-Luxe*. He remembered *Luxe* was an arm and a leg. 'That's lino,' he said, 'on that floor. That's not *Luxe*. And that's a gas fire. That isn't even flipping legal.'

(One of those barred gas fire with a ceramic grid, full of flame. Set in a dark brown tiled fireplace, the very fireplace from his grandparent's home. Their lino too, orange tiles. Their curtains, tweed. Larry wanted to sink to his knees in front of it. He wanted a marshmallow. He wanted to cry.)

Hans walked to the fire, and put his slim manicured hand into it. The flames played across it, a handful of flame. 'Hologram' he said, 'we cannot have open fires with our residents, of course. The curtains - I believe Ms McManus sourced them for us.'

'Sue,' said Larry. 'My sister Sue.' When his mum was out cleaning, Sue would put the tea on. She'd sit him down by the fire like this. She'd say she was doing the chips, she knew how. Larry sniffed, deeply.

'Damp is a requested scent, Mr McManus,' said Hans, 'I do assure you. There is nothing wrong with the room in fact. Also on the tech-scent list, chip fat, carbolic.'

But Larry had spent his life getting his mother out of the damp flat he grew up in. Out of the chip fat, into the French Restaurant. Her and Sue, both. He said: 'I didn't send her here for this. I sent her to be happy. To dance in that tea room of yours. The one with the dome.'

'Mr MacManus,' said Hans. 'Your mother had many times chances in the tea room, but this did not make her happy. Other ELDERPARC locations make her happy. I have her serotonin chart here – please have a look. In the last two weeks has recorded a steady state score of average to above average happiness – please, the graph.'

He offered the flexi-screen to Larry. Larry shook his head

'What other ELDERPARC locations? The pool? The cinema?'

'Sometimes,' said Hans, studying the flexi. 'Sometimes.'

'Where else?' said Larry.

'Her best reactions,' said Hans, 'it seems, are to the tiled stair.'

'The stair,' said Larry, 'what do you mean, the stair?'

'It is a very fine stair,' said Hans, more than a hundred years old. German style tiles. Very fine.'

'But what,' said Larry, 'is she doing there?'

'Therapy,' said Hans. 'Movement therapy.'

'Is she there now?' said Larry. 'She is, isn't she? Take me, I want to see. '

So Hans took him. Along the corridor, through a steel airlock, and into the white, bright, spiral stair with its smell of wet stone and carbolic. For the first time, he became aware of the height of the hotel. Six floors. From a hundred feet below came the rhythmic sound of scrubbing brushes scraping and women singing, five or six together: *Are we weak and heavy-laden? Cumbered with a load of care.*

Larry started to run down the stairs, bouncing from one stone edge to the next on his new knees. The soap was a real smell. They were real scrubbing brushes, and real women scrubbing, and there at the front of them was a little figure scrubbing a whole step to her and that was his mother. Rita, as he remembered her in his childhood, in a nylon overall, her head in a scarf, her tiny hands dwarfed by the huge brush.

'Mum?' he said, and she looked up. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright.

'We can let you by, sir,' she said.

'No,' said Larry, 'I can't allow it.'

But Rita had returned already to her scrubbing, and her singing. So had the other women, he could see now, five of them old, one of them young. The young one looked up. She had 'Therapist' embroidered on her overall pocket.

'The brushes are soft,' she said, quietly. 'If you are concerned. And the foam is moisturising in fact – we add the carbolic scent later.'

'What bloody difference does that make?' said Larry.

'You might want to wipe your face, Mr MacManus,' said Hans, manifesting himself at Larry's shoulder.

For Larry's face was drenched, was soaked with tears. More were coming. Hans handed him a napkin, and he wiped it down his face, twisted it in his hand. *ELDERPARC* it said, round the edge, and then the company slogan. *It doesn't matter where you're going: it matters where you've been.*