

Haunting Memories

by

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Haunting Memories

Albert shuffled along, puffing and panting. He had walked up this hill many times before, but each time the sheer effort became more laborious. He surveyed all he saw with a disappointment in his heart. So much had changed. He remembered when Sheffield was little more than a small town, and now the endless streets were lined with tall new buildings and grey tarmac had replaced the cobbles.

These spasmodic jaunts always depressed him. Within his being he knew that he should have stayed away but a compulsion to investigate every change and innovation would not let him rest. To make matters worse, recently he'd become so confused that when the time came to return, he had difficulty in remembering where his home was.

Digging his hands deeper into his pockets and, standing with slouched shoulders, he tried to make sense of this alien world. How he hated the screeching horseless carriages, which pumped out foul-smelling fumes. There was a time when these beloved streets were filled with horse-drawn landaus and drays with their sharp clip-clop and jingle of harness. It was much safer then.

He pictured the scenes from his youth, the capes and top hats, ladies in their crinolines and lace. And the shops! What fine shops there had been then, unlike these modern concrete giants, all lights and noise. In his day, they had windows which were small and sedate, made up of tiny panes with circles in the glass that distorted the displays into weird shapes.

He began to remember more. On display in the shops had been muffins and gingerbread piled high and the smell of homemade bread wafted through the bakery door. The confectioners sold all manner of candies, chocolates and multi-coloured humbugs. He'd bought a packet of those for Alice on the very first day they met. He could remember it clearly now. There she was, looking in the shop window with her nose against the pane and her eyes fixed on the tempting humbugs. He'd nipped unnoticed into its interior, the most expensive sweetshop in town, and bought her two ounces. Contrary to usual etiquette, she'd gracefully accepted and, as if in reward, she'd let him walk her home. Two years later she'd let him walk her down the aisle.

They had spent happy times together. Alice had a firm faith and he had often accompanied her to the little church where they had been wed. He remembered the time he had made that decision to believe in Jesus and how it had changed his life. He seemed to lose it all when she passed away. He swallowed the lump in his throat. He had loved Alice more than he could ever express. 'And now she's dead,' he mourned. A tear escaped from behind his eyelid.

He looked hesitatingly at the towering buildings, wondering if the confectioner's shop still existed and if it was easy to find. He pictured it in his mind's eye; it was a small shop, tucked away in a back street, with a bow window and tiny panes. In the window were sweets of every kind. They sold fudge and homemade toffee, boxes of chocolates and, best of all, an assortment of humbugs that would make anyone's mouth water. With one of those in his mouth he could almost make believe he was with Alice again.

He tried to remember the location of the shop. It was hidden somewhere behind the hotel, just across the road and only a stone's throw from where he was standing. Perhaps if he crossed and searched carefully he would find it?

As Albert turned and stepped off the kerb, a huge noisy car appeared from nowhere and startled him. He jumped back in terror, hovering unsteadily on the edge of the busy street. Other pedestrians were crossing but nobody took any notice of him. In the old days, young men with kind smiles would offer assistance to old folk but all

that had now changed. If he wanted the humbugs, he would have to make the trip unaided.

Clenching his fists and screwing up his courage, he looked alternatively to right and left. Vehicles rushed past at an incredible pace. There were cars of every size, lorries and vans and enormous double-decker buses full of people with vacant faces. The traffic grew thicker until he almost panicked. Just as he was about to give up, the lights on the corner changed to red and the rushing beasts ground to a halt in united obedience.

Albert lurched forward as fast as his ancient limbs could take him. There was very little time before the pandemonium started again. He dodged through the stationary cars, this way and that. The other side seemed a long way off. At last, with his eyes smarting and his breath coming in gasps, he reached the opposite kerb, unharmed but exhausted.

He rested for a moment on the pavement and looked from right to left, trying to remember the exact location of the shop. The old hotel to his left looked dirty and worse for wear. He could remember the day when it was clean and new, and was frequented by lords and ladies. He shuddered to think what kind of folk patronised it nowadays.

Looking hopefully at the crowds of shoppers who hemmed him in on every side, he wondered if anyone knew where the confectioner's was to be found. He tapped a passer-by on the shoulder. 'Excuse me please, but do you know where...?'

She hurried by, intent on her own business.

A group of people queued at a bus stop. He stopped by one. 'Ave yer seen the sweetshop round about 'ere, mate?' he said. The man ignored him and whistled to himself, pulling his coat collar closer round his neck.

He turned in the direction of the grimy hotel but was assaulted by a couple of boys chasing after each other, nearly knocking him down.

'Come 'ere, yer young rascals, I'll give yer what for.' The boys ran on, oblivious to his angry cries.

'No-one cares about old 'uns today,' he grumbled to himself, as he shuffled round the side of the hotel, through the car park where large dustbins overflowed with last night's garbage. He looked away in disgust, he wanted humbugs not rubbish.

The building at its rear caught his eye, he had been here many times before and he felt sure the shop was located nearby. Perhaps if he enquired within he might be told exactly where to search?

There was a light inside the porch, which shone through the glass doors. He pushed them cautiously. They swung open readily. It was warmer inside, he wriggled his shoulders in delight, the cold of the street had taxed his strength and he needed warmth to renew his energy. There was a cleaner in the entrance hall. He bumped into her as he pushed past. She turned with a frightened look in her eye before shivering and clasping her hands tightly around her arms, rubbing them furiously as if against a blast of cold air.

As he drifted through two more doors into a large, dark room, he luxuriated in the warmth. The room was empty but he needed its heat and energy. He was just wondering which way to take next when he heard a call. It was distant at first but grew steadily louder. Then with a shock, he realised it was for him. Reluctant at first to obey, he stood his ground. He was desperate to find the old confectioner's and he resented being told what to do.

Despite his reluctance, he was drawn irresistibly forward as the command continued and his desire for old-fashioned humbugs faded completely. Soon nothing filled his mind but the summons.

He passed out of the large room into the next and hovered for a moment near a group intent on reaching him.

‘In the name of Jesus, we banish you from this place.’ A woman’s voice rang loud and clear. ‘This is a place for the living, not the dead. Go to where you belong.’

For a moment, Albert was lost in confusion. He’d come here to buy sweets, but these people were directing him into ways far beyond himself. And then he caught his breath as he saw the light which shimmered through the walls and ceiling of the dingy room. Faces smiled and silent voices called, he could see Alice among them, and in the centre, a being who never changed, invited him to join them.

Holding out his hands in relief, Albert accepted the best life he had ever been offered and, needless to say, he never looked for humbugs again.