

CAN I HELP YOU?

'Can I help you?'

Looking up from my desk, I saw that Miss Grace Kirkwood had arrived in my office. 'Can I help you', was one of her quaint methods of greeting you in whatever social situation she was in.

I'd first met Miss Kirkwood some twenty-five years ago. She wasn't a client of mine then but I was attempting to be a client of hers. I'd gone into Kirkwood and Sons bookshop at the top of the town and was browsing through the old volumes looking for some Dickens for my son. It was his twelfth birthday and he was as much a book lover as myself. Kirkwood's was the type of bookshop in which you could lose yourself if you were not careful. There were books on shelves that zig zagged everywhere and which created a veritable maze for the bibliophile to get lost in. The maze went everywhere there was space for it.

Having browsed for some ten minutes, I'd virtually made my mind up to get my son a set of the complete works of Dickens. There was a very reasonably priced set in green leather with silver tooling that I'd noticed soon after I'd entered the shop. However, my deliberations were disturbed by my first introduction to Miss Kirkwood.

'Can I help you?' she had asked.

Somewhat taken aback, I quickly explained that I was looking for a birthday present for my son and had decided on getting him the complete works of Dickens.

'A very good choice,' she had said, 'how old is he?'

'He'll be twelve,' I replied, 'he really loves books, particularly the classics.'

'I'm afraid that I can't let you have that set,' she had said. 'He's too young and won't take care of them. People just don't understand about books anymore.'

'But he's really quite bright and adores books,' I'd said. 'Besides, his mother and I wouldn't let him do anything to them, we love books too.' This middle-aged lady was now beginning to annoy me.

Miss Kirkwood had been adamant. She would not let me have the set of books that I wanted, or any other books for that matter. Whatever argument I put forward she countered with the same excuse that they wouldn't be taken care of. I even offered to pay extra but to no avail.

I eventually got the set of books that I had wanted, elsewhere. But I have to admit that as well as having annoyed me Miss Kirkwood also intrigued me. If she didn't sell any of her books, how did she manage to make a living and stay in business? Where did she get the money to buy the books that she had in her vast shop?

I'd just about forgotten about Miss Kirkwood when about a year after this incident, she was referred to me by her GP for a psychiatric assessment. In our previous brief encounter I'd considered her behaviour strange but hadn't immediately thought that there was anything psychiatrically wrong with her. But that's often the case. Those who are sick in the mind frequently manage to disguise it in some way.

Miss Kirkwood had initially been reluctant to co-operate. Over the years with persistence, probing and the help of drugs, I did eventually manage to understand her and her problem. Reading her mind was as enthralling as reading a best seller.

Born in nineteen twenty five, Grace Kirkwood had been dealt an unfortunate hand in life. Her mother died soon after Grace's birth and her father did not remarry. Her brother, who was older by some five years, was killed in North Africa during the Second World War. This was a second tragedy and one too many for the father. He was tipped over the edge and went in to a mental home from which he never emerged and he died there in nineteen fifty-two. The shop, which had been in the family for many generations, was now the sole responsibility of Grace Kirkwood.

Grace had not been an unattractive woman in her younger years and had had many suitors. She eventually became engaged to Edward Talbot but before they could marry, he was killed while on national service, a casualty of the Korean War. As far as I can ascertain, this was the trigger that had altered the life of Grace Kirkwood. Her dream had been shattered, her future happiness banished to hell. She had hoped that her life with Talbot would have produced a son and that the name of Kirkwood and Son would continue, just as it had in generations gone by.

Slowly, Grace Kirkwood regressed into another world. She shut out the reality and immersed herself deeper in her books. The books in themselves became her surrogate children. It was upon them she threw her love and that is why she could never sell one. In order to have a bigger family, she bought more books. To her, each of her books had their own character. They all had a different smell and feel to them. Some were happy, others sad. Contained within the covers of a book was its humanity; each chapter marking out some stage in it's life. To her, chapters were distinct phases like birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, courtship, marriage, and the birth of children, twilight years and death. For Grace, each book had a beginning and an end just like life did. It was immaterial to her

that the chapters in one of her books might be called something else. Sentences and paragraphs were part of the fabric of each book's life, part of the journey along the way. Punctuation was merely part of the individual character that each book had, just like one child might have freckles and another not.

Eventually, Grace seemed to reach a point of no return. Realising that she was mortal and not going to live forever, and that her offspring were not going to ever die, she decided that action was necessary to prevent her family falling into the hands of those who did not understand and who did not care. One morning she came into the shop and attempted to set fire to it. To her it was the only way to end her life with her family. Fortunately, some passers by rescued her and the fire was quickly put out.

It had been a long and arduous struggle to get Grace to face reality and come to terms with the problems she had had to face alone. The shop was not badly damaged and after a couple of years of intensive therapy, Grace went back to the shop and believe it or not, actually started to sell the books. I had managed to convince her that indeed some books were special and personal and that she could keep them and treasure them. On the other hand, there were always going to be too many books for her to look after personally, so why shouldn't she see herself as an orphanage for books? That way she could always make sure the books were going to a good home. She'd only ever be able to manage with the aid of drugs.

'Can I help you?' she said again.

Coming back to the present time, I replied as I normally do to her perpetual question. 'No, but I can help you if you let me.'

'How are you Grace?' I said, 'there's a new drug out that I thought we might try. Less side effects than the one you're on now. You never know, it just might give you a few extra chapters.'

Maybe I was getting to be as mad as her!