

The Bread Crumb Dreams of Errol Doolittle

An afternoon's walk in the English city of Leeds was something I had done on many occasions. This time however, as I was walking, I came across a rather peculiar man. On first spotting this strange other worldly man, I didn't know what to make of him. He was in the park, speaking to birds. No particular birds. He spoke to whichever bird gave him its attention. Sparrows, bullfinches, the odd thrush or two. I say he spoke to birds, but really, he communicated without using words at all. He just hummed or whined. The strangest part was that the birds listened, and in their own way, replied. I watched as an unlikely conversation began, then continued back and forth for several minutes while I looked on. The birds seemed uncannily at ease in his presence. Some sat on his shoulder, others walked up and down his arms, chirping and trilling for him. It made for a rare old sight to see this man in the park, communing with his feathered friends. I would later learn his name was Errol Doolittle, though he was called Dr. Doolittle by some. Those who knew of him, thought he was quite mad, but generally harmless.

Errol was completely bald, without a tuft of hair in sight. He was in late middle-age, with sallow, strangely unnatural skin, reminiscent of the Nosferatu's, with a bloodless, wan pallidity to it. In spite of his foreboding appearance, Errol seemed anything but fearsome. He had a kindly smile and a simple gentleness of heart that made people feel at ease when they were near him, rather like the birds did. Living on the streets though, made his life hard. His clothes were ragged, damaged and old and with no real form left to them. The seat of his pants was stained with grass marks, and smudged with dirt from their last resting place. The cuffs of his

jacket were darkened and frayed, even down to threads in places, and it was clear that bathing was a rare treat for him. Errol, though, did not seem to notice the smell. He was a man beyond time, defying setting and space. He was one of God's special creatures, his very own Boo Radley.

"Three sheets to the wind that one mate," a passerby remarked, as he noticed me watching. "Bit of a bird brain himself I'd say." He chuckled, as he walked off. Intrigued, I continued on my way as well.

Two months later I began to work at St. Dougal's Crypt, a homeless shelter for men. There, to my surprise, my path would cross again with Errol's, and I would learn more about the enigma that was Errol Doolittle.

St. Dougal's Anglican Church sits in the center of Leeds and has since 1838. Concerned the location would provide no space for burial plots, the church built an above ground crypt where the ground level would normally be. The church building thus rested above a man-made burial mound. Every Sunday, the long steps leading up to the church's front door, past the crypt, provided the congregation a weekly reminder of their eventual resting place. Perhaps because of that, the good people of St Dougal's determined it would be a terrible waste of space to house dead people in the Crypt. So, by the 1930s the Crypt became a shelter for the poor and the homeless of the city instead. By now however, the only ones staying in the Crypt at night were those working hard to keep off the streets, and those looking after them. The custodian of this remarkable place was Rev. Don, a tall long bodied cleric in his fifties who'd managed the facility like a father for many years. He was that wonderfully unique combination of steel and silk found only rarely, but when found, often in places such as these. A man with

the compassion to know when to care and the strength to know when to say no. His insight and kindness were my constant teachers, though wisdom does take time to work its way into some of us.

I remember one cold November morning as my shift was about to start at the crypt. The day staff gathered in Rev. Don's office for the morning staff meeting. Don prayed for the day and then shared with us something that has stuck with me ever since.

He leaned forward in his chair and clasped his hands together as if in prayer. Then he delivered these words as meaningfully and powerfully as any homily.

"The damaged and the broken are sometimes apt to want to share the same pain with others that they have suffered." We turned to look at Don. All of us in the room were young. What did we know of such broken lives? Our mood, though, soon took on a quiet seriousness. He looked at us with great earnestness as he continued.

"Remember that those who come here are not evil men. They are looking to find their place of peace, a place to truly be themselves again." Even a few months of working at the Crypt had shown me how the harshness of the men's lives could slowly creep into our own hearts. Don was acutely aware of this.

"Guard against this as you deal with the men. Our job, amongst others, is to bring mercy and grace into our dealings with the 'least of these,' the unloved and unlovable. Always remember that."

Later, as we talked in the meeting about the different men under our care, I brought up Errol, chuckling as I shared. "Oh, Don, I saw Errol recently in the park talking with the birds again."

Don replied with absolute seriousness and sincerity. "Notice the special beauty he finds in the way he is with nature. It's a kind of sanctuary where he feels safe."

"I spose' so. I see how you could look at it that way. He does look kinda peaceful when he thinks he's talking to the birds."

"What if he is talking with them?"

"What? Wait? You think he is?"

"I am just not dismissing it because I can't. God did so in the Bible, so perhaps He gave that gift to others, for some reason that I don't understand. Perhaps he's even speaking in animal tongues?"

I looked askance. Don challenged us to think deeper and wider at every turn, but this was not what I had in mind when I thought of Errol. I looked at him to see if he was teasing.

"Well, err, okay, but it sounds a bit out there to me."

"Balaam's donkey spoke to him, so why not?"

I had to think about that one a little more.

"There are many things about Errol we don't really understand, and that would only be one," said Don.

I decided he was teasing in the end, but Don's words always had more to them than met the eye. "Do you mean wearing all those medical scrubs and things? I mean it's strange and all. Why's he always taking operating theater stuff? He spends so much time around the hospital but never takes food."

Don said nothing. He just nodded knowingly, so I let it drop. The meeting finished, and our daily assignments began without further comment. Over the weeks my interest in Errol developed

into a minor obsession, even though talking to Errol was an exercise in frustration. He received every greeting in the same way, with a hum, a whine or a vacant smile.

Working at St Dougal's Crypt allowed me to observe the pattern of life that was Errol's day. Only three places seemed to really matter to Errol, the park, the hospital, and the Crypt. Errol's whole life revolved around these three places, so at some point of the day he would be at one or the other. Each one seemed to meet a different need for Errol. The park was where he communed with nature, this was his place for society. Human interaction held no interest for him, so the birds became his outlet for communication. For a man who remained stubbornly silent for most of the day, at the park, Errol was positively verbose with birds.

Besides the Crypt and the park, the other place Errol frequented was the hospital, or rather, I should say he visited the dumpsters behind the wards at the hospital. Errol took masks and scrubs discarded from the hospital Operating Theaters. In fact, anything left in the dumpsters he wore. He wore them where they were never intended to be worn. A face mask atop his bald head, the straps under his ears keeping him warm, or at other times a pair of scrub pants with the legs tied round his neck, so the seat hung down his back like a cape.

The place, where I would see Errol the most of course, was the Crypt. There he would get food, a cup of tea and a bed where he slept for the night. Through the day he could be in the park, the hospital, or looking for food somewhere in between, but at night, he would always be at St. Dougal's Crypt.

By the end of November, my turn for the overnight shift came around. On door duty we greeted the men as they entered because no one could stay who had drunk during the day. When Errol approached, I decided to greet him with my most friendly welcome.

“Hello Errol, good evening to you.”

Silence greeted me, and Errol looked to the floor, entering with a downward stare. Shuffling quietly inside, Errol went to the food counter, waiting with the others who were clinging to the edges of society. The air was heavy, sticky with the stench of unwashed men confined within thick windowless walls. Errol took his tea and jam sandwich without a word, moving quietly to a dark part of the crypt, lying slowly down, he slept.

Designed for the dead, this was no place for the living. I wondered again why anyone would stay here if they had better options. Amid the snores and coughs of a hundred men, Errol Doolittle slept secure for another night.

The morning light seeped over the horizon, and the Crypt doors opened. The men woke up and began to leave. Slowly, groaning, stretching and with hacking coughs they headed out of the crypt to their daily routines of panhandling, and benefit office and church visiting. All except Errol, he was different. Errol was always last in and last out. He carried no bag with him. He still wore a face mask on that cue ball head of his to keep it warm, a trophy from his last dumpster dive at the hospital. *Spoils of ward*, I guessed, amusing myself. Since he was a Doolittle who wore surgical clothes and talked to the birds, it's not surprising he was called Dr. Doolittle by the other men who stayed at the Crypt. If it bothered Errol, it didn't show. He remained as Rev.

Don said, one of God's special, ever-smiling, and very silent, creatures. As Errol left that day, I didn't know that soon he would be leaving us forever.

This would be Errol's last November. Winter came soon, always hard for those on the streets, but this year especially so for Errol. As winter passed, and spring came, by May, Errol was clearly not well. Rev. Don told us he had cancer and had been hospitalized. Errol's daily three-point pilgrimage was for the first time in years, curtailed. It brought home to me how grave the situation was. Errol in a hospital bed, unable to visit his daily places of pilgrimage, seemed wrong in so many ways. I paused to consider if the birds might not miss him. I thought back to Don's remarks about Errol conversing with them, and just for a moment, I wondered.

My time working at the Crypt ended in June and I moved away. By September, I learned of Errol's death.

When I returned to the city a year later, I took some time to go to the Crypt and visit Rev. Don. He met him in his office that afternoon. He had not changed in the slightest, and welcomed me in and asked me to sit down. I sat facing him. His cozy, dark office had a small coffee table between us, his desk on the right was piled high with papers, applications and files for the men. His warm, friendly, thick-lipped smile beamed at me from across the table. We started by catching up on the many happenings in the church and mutual old acquaintances, and then, after a few minutes I asked after Errol.

"I was sad to hear that Errol died Don. I felt he was a special person. He intrigued me, and I knew so little about him. I would have so loved to have known him better."

"Ah, Errol. Yes, he was a wonderful man and so special. I never really spoke about him when he was alive because I didn't feel it was fair, but now that he has passed, I feel more at

liberty to share with you.” Don looked up a little towards the ceiling as if contemplating his next words very carefully. His fingers crossed over his chest as if in prayer. I was surprised that his response warranted such solemnity.

I leaned in a little towards him, placing my tea cup down on the table between us, then sat back in my chair. “It’s funny you say that Don, because I always thought you knew more than you said.”

He uncrossed his fingers and looked at me with a penetrating but warm gaze. “He and I were old friends you know? We had known each other for over twenty years. He was actually my bank manager once.”

I shifted in my chair, completely taken back at what I had just heard. Questions flooded my mind. In my time at the Crypt, Don had never given me any reason to think that his relationship with Errol was anything but professional and even at times, somewhat distant.

“Errol was a bank manager once?” I almost gulped the question.

“A bank manager!” Don continued.

“Yes, tragically, he and his whole family were involved in a terrible car crash. His wife, and three children were all killed. He survived, but with a terrible head injury which kept him in the hospital for weeks. He hadn’t spoken since, at least not to people, even though the doctors said there was no medical reason why. He was always a regular of St. Dougal’s, and ironically, a volunteer here at the Crypt for many years before the accident.”

That last piece of news struck me hard. Don’s face darkened, and his shoulders sagged a little as he continued.

“Seeing my old friend staying at the Crypt and living here over the years was beyond painful, I can’t even express how hard that was. I knew Errol as a strong, faithful husband and father, but you only ever saw a freakish, shadowy remnant of him. His family couldn’t help him. Friends tried to find places for him to stay, but he would run away to the streets and only ever want to go to his three places. In the end, St. Dougal’s became the only option. At least coming here every night meant I could ensure he was safe.”

“How long ago was this?”

“it must be over five years now since the accident. He raided dumpsters at the actual hospital where his family died. More eerie than that even is that, his family all died during operations to save them.”

We were both silent for a few seconds taking this in. A strange realization struck me. After a pause I said. “Perhaps in some strange way, Errol was trying to connect to his loved ones’ last hold on life here? Trying to reconnect, or even be closer to them again?” As I said this, I looked away. Errol’s story had so affected me. I couldn’t help it, my eyes welled up. Such a tragedy in this quiet man’s life and his response to it touched me so deeply. In my time with the men of the Crypt, I was sad I knew so little of the reality of his and the countless other men’s lives there, and how in an instant, a life could be shattered.

Don leaned back and began to drum his fingers on his chest as he thought through what I had said. “Yes, he may have lost his mind, his family and all that was his life, but he never lost a path to hope or a trace of the memory of those he loved. It constantly drove him back to those places he knew: the park, the crypt and the hospital. Perhaps by doing that, he kept alive the hope of recovery, like a trail of bread crumbs back to who he was.”

“If only he hadn’t got cancer, I wonder if the old Errol might have returned.” Suddenly, Don seemed to brighten. His posture shifted and straightened somewhat. His face lightened as he turned to look at me, smiling again with that kind, expansive smile of his. There was even a faint air of mischief about him as he continued.

““Do you remember that old Psalm, Chris? ‘When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.’ Don smiled wistfully as he recited it. “I said he hadn’t spoken since, because Errol did finally find his voice again, and I suppose in a way, you could say he found his way home too.”

I leaned forward in my chair, looking intently at him, “Whatever do you mean?”

“Though we’d known each other for many years, Errol had never spoken to, or acknowledged me since the accident. When the cancer entered its final stages, during my last visit to Errol, something quite wonderful happened. He had been barely conscious for two days, when he woke up. He sat bolt upright in his bed, and he turned to look straight at me. He began speaking, and he called me Don just like he used to. We talked like we had before the accident. It was as if he’d just woken *from a dream*. He asked where his family was, and I told him they had been gone for several years. I was so worried he would react badly, but it was almost as if he knew already from somewhere deep inside, they were gone. He was calm and nodded his head. He asked me why he was in hospital. I told him he was gravely ill. He asked if I would pray for him as his old friend and priest. I said I would be honored to. After I prayed for him, he whispered an Amen, closed his eyes, lay down and fell quietly asleep again. This time for good.”

As Don finished his story, I looked over at him. His face never looked more like an angel’s. I just sank back in my chair dumbfounded. I too had been silenced. Don had just

brought Heaven down to Earth. He just smiled, leaned back in his arm chair, looked up to the Heavens and whispered.

“Sweet dreams old friend, sweet dreams.”