

# A Note On Toby Olson's 'The Other Woman'



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In the affluent west, where good sanitation and healthcare enable us to live decades longer than our ancestors did, and where more people every year reach their century, dementia is on the rise. Dementia doesn't usually kill outright, it delegates that onerous task to one or several of the other medical conditions associated with old age. But it renders us increasingly non-functional and shuts us off from the meaningful interactions we have with family and friends; it draws us in upon ourselves, then renders us incoherent even to ourselves. Dementia goes to work steadfastly and initially with great stealth. The early stages of the disease often pass unremarked by the sufferer and those around her. Lapses of memory are far from uncommon as we grow old, and mostly they can be laughed off as 'senior moments', a brief confusion, one of life's little niggles. Words get misplaced and our vocabulary starts to shrink; old memories are jumbled together or part forgotten; many new experiences simply fail to register as memory. But in the later stages of the disease, the confusions increase in magnitude. Personality is fractured then shattered. Eventually, in the sufferer's mind, chaos rules supreme.

By then, of course, the sufferer is usually oblivious to her desperate plight. This may be regarded, in some respects, as a blessing. It is not,

however, a blessing conferred on the person caring for the sufferer. Both the sufferer and the carer languish under sentence of death, for death is the only thing that will free them from the disease. But let's be clear: Toby Olson's memoir of his wife Miriam is principally about love, not death. Love. It's about Alzheimer's Disease, too, of course: a remorselessly destructive presence in their lives, taking its toll day by day. Death waits impatiently in the wings, twitching the curtain, rattling the flats, refusing to be ignored. And is not ignored. How could it be otherwise? Toby, in a brief respite from caring for Miriam, goes to view the plots in the cemetery where he and she will one day lie, side by side, as if in a double bed. Even in respite there's no true respite.

Miriam is the woman that Toby married almost half a century ago, yet she's also the Other Woman – i.e. other than the woman she once was. It's hard to know how much she can recall of what she was. Or whether, looking in the mirror, wriggling and resisting while Toby stands behind her, reaching round and brushing her teeth, she recognises herself. Just as Toby is a floating cast of characters to her – 'my father', 'my daughter', 'my mother', 'my husband', most touchingly 'my good friend', and perhaps one of several Tobys who have come apart in her mind and assumed separate realities – so too her sense of self is inconstant. "Who are you?" she says. "There's something I want to tell you ...." But the thought falters and is gone, something that happens time after time; half sentences that say everything that can be said and leave almost everything unsaid. Whole sentences are a rare achievement, but what they communicate hardly provides cause for celebration. 'She points to her head: "I don't know who I am."'

I said that dementia shuts us off from meaningful interactions with family and friends, and generally that's correct, if somewhat presumptuous. Who am I to say how meaningful the interactions are between Toby and Miriam? Theirs is a relationship which has, like all close relationships of long standing, achieved an intimacy in which non-verbal communication almost suffices. Yes, almost. It's a default position. When words fail, we're obliged to make do with what remains, as I know from my own experience. My mother, in the final stage of her dementia, was completely inarticulate and difficult to communicate with. She seemed all but oblivious to the people around her. Her personality had been erased. Yet the way she sometimes tilted her head when spoken to, the little gestures she made, various tics and

grimaces – those were hers and hers alone. She was still my mother, though only just. Yet even then a degree of intimacy was possible, which I found meaningful, and perhaps she did too. Even if it was only the slightly puzzled look she gave me when I stroked the back of her hand, something I don't think I'd ever done before.

It goes without saying that Toby's interactions with Miriam are considerably more intimate than that. Whether they're more profound, only they know and only one of them can tell. Toby's days are marked out by routine; attending, first and foremost, to Miriam's bodily needs, the basics that keep her washed, clothed, fed and as comfortable and happy as possible. She smiles, she sways and dances in her chair when music is played, she tries to communicate verbally and occasionally succeeds. Body language offers a great deal more. Much has been lost, but not all, not all. Sometimes she's difficult and he gets angry, then swallows his anger, feeling ashamed. He loves his wife and recalls aspects of their lovemaking, tendernesses shared. But lovemaking per se is no longer an option, and the tenderness between them has assumed a different guise: 'And then with various wet and dry wipes I clean her vagina and anus. There's a little fecal matter there, and I have to take some time with it. And I must say in truth, the time is in part taken because of the intimacy.... When I look at her face in the mirror, as I wipe her, she's smiling.' And on another occasion, when he gently inserts a suppository into her anus, the sweet tingle of nerve clusters in that erogenous zone also makes her smile. Or is there more to it than that? If someone other than Toby had inserted the suppository, would it have been, for Miriam, a very different experience?

What, one wonders, would she make of what Toby has written? Hard to say, and speculation would be pointless. To those of us who never had the pleasure of meeting her, Miriam can be known only through words on a page, the sifting and shaping of Toby's memories, many of which he and Miriam once shared, that now are his alone and something of a burden, as are all things greatly cherished.