

FINALE

SHORT SHORT STORY NO.50

He's been writing since he was thirteen years old, stories of childhood at first, then novels about himself that nobody wanted to publish, then novels about everything but himself, which everyone did. Now, at eighty-three, he holds a copy of his thirtieth book, a collection of short stories, which has just arrived by messenger.

'A man's life becomes happier when the parking lot next to his apartment is closed down,' reads the blurb on the back. 'Two friends argue over a barbecue, their lifelong friendship built on hostility and envy. An elderly man wonders whether he should bail his nephew out of jail or use the money for a more deserving cause. And, in the title story, the victim of a stroke recuperates in the home of her ex-husband while his new wife takes care of her.'

He frowns. Who wrote this? And why didn't he see it before? There's no envy between the two men at the barbecue. They just don't have anything in common anymore. And it's not the fact that the new wife is acting as nursemaid to the patient that matters; it's how she's destroyed her garden. Do any of them even understand what he's been trying to say all these years?

Sighing, he places the collection on a shelf next to his other twenty-nine books. He hasn't read any of them in years and wouldn't want to. That one over there, he thinks, looking at his second book. Bloody awful. And that one, the one that made his name. Overrated. And the one from three years ago, his best novel, written at eighty, and it only sold a few thousand copies. No one cares anymore. No one listens.

He can imagine the reviews now for this latest collection. The usual clichés. Timeless, evocative, resonant, truthful, poignant. If he could scratch those words out of the reviewers' dictionaries, he would do so. Last year he was asked for eight hundred words on a debut by a handsome 21 year-old. "This worthless book should never have been published," was his entire review and he asked the editor to print it exactly as written, with a white space surrounding it where the other words should have been, to reflect the emptiness of the young writer's ideas. It had been rejected, of course, and the published review had been written by a TV chef instead. "Timeless, evocative, resonant, truthful and poignant," he had said.

Enough of this shit, he thinks.

I'm done.

I've said what I came here to say.

He sits down and, despite himself, picks up the stories again and starts to read. It's midnight before he finishes and he shakes his head, unsure whether the collection hangs together as well as it should.

Maybe he could try one more, he thinks.

Or not.

He throws the book on the kitchen table and goes to bed, thinking all the time of how he could have written each one better, particularly the last story.