

SHAWN NAPHTALI SOBERS

Silent Witness

Mortley Grant sat in his chair. Every time he blinked it took just that little bit longer for his eyes to re-open, and each time they opened just that little bit narrower.

The etches in his ebony-tone skin fell deep with time. Seventy years previous this was virgin skin, cradled by his mother's love and untouched by breath. He was then born into this world. Age began its relentless pace. This skin has encased his soul on all its travels. Now it was time for his soul to travel alone.

Mortley was a tall heavy man. His sturdy armchair carried his weight well. Dusty green, frayed at every edge. Armchair knew Mortley well, maybe better than anyone. The wooden ends of each of its arms sported four worn spots in its varnish, from the constant drumming of Mortley's well worked finger tips. Particularly in these latter years, Mortley would sit in front of a switched-off television set and stare at the blank screen. To an observer he would appear to be waiting. Waiting for the phone to ring, the door to knock. Armchair felt it knew what Mortley waited for, even though Mortley himself never knew. Whenever Mortley sat in Armchair and thought, Armchair knew he was praying. What Mortley really waited for was God.

Mrs Grant once bought a brand-new three-piece suite. Mortley insisted that Armchair stayed. From that day onwards Armchair felt indebted to its owner, and paid Mortley back in the only way it knew how. Always be there for him. There was one day in particular that this relationship intensified considerably. This was the day the spirit of the room changed. The movement slowed. The talking stopped. Mortley Grant was now, officially, alone.

The living room stayed as it did in the time of Mrs

Grant. Her glasses still rested on the mantle-piece. Flowery slippers discreetly placed by the side of one of the new chairs, next to the wool box. Adjacent to this was Armchair.

If Armchair was ever moved for any reason, which was unlikely, the carpet would expose four dents so worn in its surface the floorboards could be felt through the underlay. Mortley never felt the need to re-arrange anything. He left that kind of activity to Mrs Grant, and she also wasn't fond of drastic change. Maybe a new vase in spring, a change of curtains in the summer. Once every couple of years she would initiate a sabbatical indulgence, the last time being, of course, the new chairs. The flowered wallpaper was the next thing on the hit list, but that was before ...

Mortley hated the wallpaper when it was first put up ten years in memory. He frowned every time he looked at the entwining pastel flower stems which repeated every third row. Mrs Grant was always the more vocal presence of the two, and simply said, 'you'll get used to it.' She was right.

Mortley found himself thinking of Tyrone, his only grandchild, whenever he concentrated on the now faded wall covering. When the child was only three or four years old, he was fascinated by the flow of the shapes and colour. He would sit and try and draw the patterns using his gnarled Crayola crayons and imagination. That was one of the reasons the wallpaper had stayed up so long. Mortley would sit forward in Armchair watching, fascinated by the child's patience and attention to detail. Mortley then began to find himself trying to search for the same interest in the wallpaper that this child so obviously found in its



patterned arrangement. There was no denying the pattern was mildly interesting in a bland way, but Mortley could never recreate the aura in himself with which Tyrone seemed to approach the wallpaper each time, with new eyes. Mortley thanked the Lord for children's innocence and sense of wonder, a trait which adults rarely possess.

The alcove of the fire-side wall was covered almost completely in old photographs and postcards. Only a hint of wallpaper could be glimpsed through the gaps in the Blu-Tak'd pictures. This was the feature which caused the most excitement in the visitors to the house, even the regulars. The tiled 1950s fireplace and mantle were framed in a wonderful overlapping array of clashing colours and images. This was something which Mr and Mrs Grant were most proud of in their home, and by which their children were most embarrassed.

Constantly the three now-adult children would try to persuade their parents to redecorate, although none of them even lived at home any more. Once Beverly, the mother of Tyrone, took it upon herself to buy ten rolls of wallpaper and went as far as hiring the decorators to do the job. Needless to say, her parents turned them away without hesitation. The wallpaper stayed in the cellar for years and the nagging continued until Mrs Grant conceded and said she would agree to have the living room redecorated, but only when she was ready. She half said it just to keep the children quiet, even though she also reluctantly admitted to herself it was probably time for a change. Mrs Grant's submission came just two weeks before she passed on. The subject has never been raised since.

The Album Wall, as it was affectionately called, could spark hours of colourful conversations and stories about Barbados and the 'old times'. This was one of the reasons the house was such a magnet for friends who were 'just passing by'. Hours later the elders would still be reminiscing and recounting the funny tales of Home.

'What did ever 'appen to ole Swing Foot Jones?'

'He mus' dead now fa true.'

'No he ain' dead yet! Aunt Lou se she pass he by Bibby's Lane when she did home de las' time.'

'Fi true? Well praise de Lord. Swing Foot mus' be in he nineties now innit? I did t'ink he did dead ever since. Praise de Lord.'

'Nineties? I hear he already pass t'rough he hundredth birt'day, ya know.'

'Fi true?'

'Praise de Lord!'

The conversations would meander and journey into the small hours of the night. When the friends had left and Mr and Mrs Grant laid down to sleep, nothing could stop dreams from entertaining the night. It was on such a night which Mrs Grant floated to her Father's Home.

Mortley relaxed in Armchair and drummed his fingers against the varnished grain. He cast his eyes over the Album Wall and closed them to meditate under the solitude and stillness of his eyelids. The thud of four fingers was the only sound.

Among the images on the wall were postcards from Barbados, Jamaica, America, Cornwall, Leicester, The Isle of Wight, Bath, Bristol, London, France, Morocco and Amsterdam. These were from their children, friends, relatives, old work-friends, and some bought by Mrs Grant herself because she simply liked the picture on them. The photographs told the story of generations. Photographs taken on the day of their wedding 48 years ago were pinned side-by-side with Tyrone's school

photographs and his mother's, aunt's and uncle's baby pictures. There was no obvious order to the wall, not as may be found in a photo album book. Images from day trips were scattered on all corners, likewise with 'event' photos such as weddings and christenings. Mortley and Mrs Grant knew exactly where each photograph was without really realising the skill involved. The wallpaper on either side of the alcove carried the repetitive pattern of flowers. The Album Wall, however, carried the fragmented chaos of sweet memories.

The last memory Mortley saw before he closed his eyes was that of his mother.

The sepia-toned photograph showed a woman heavy in stature and gentle in eyes. She stood uncomfortably straight and stiff-backed clutching a handbag. Her Sunday-hat tilted slightly as she shifted to find a natural pose.

'Mama. Keep still nuh! I wan' fi tek one more so I can sen' it back fi ya.'

'Wha I wan' pic'cha of mi self fa? You know se mi own a mirror already!'

Mama relentlessly paced over to Mortley and adjusted the collar of his shirt and blazer.

'Fru time you reach Englan' you haf' fi save ya money, ya hear? If anyt' ing you sen' back, mek it a likkle money fi ya bruddah an sista, ya hear?'

Mortley rescued his clothes from his mother's clutches and put his arm around her.

'Listen mama. I gon' miss ya, ya know dat. Tek care of ya self.'

Mama discreetly escaped her son's embrace. She was

never a person to outwardly show her emotions, particularly if she was sad. Mortley knew her ways well and wasn't offended. He kept a firm hold of her earth-hardened hands.

'Listen.'

Mama spoke in a matter-of-fact manner.

'Don't even bod' da worrying 'bout me. It's you dat ya haf' fi look afta', ya hear? The Lord protec' me in all I do, an' I pray Him will look afta' you in Englan'. Have faith an' de Lord will be wid you. You know I always tell ya dat.'

Mama snatched back her hand and rummaged around in her handbag.

'Mama, mi know dat but ...'

Mama wouldn't let him speak.

'Look 'ere! I wan' you fi tek dis. Ya know how I does treasure it, so when you done mek ya money an' come back in five years, I wan' ya fi give dis back in de same condition as mi give it to ya, ya hear?'

Mama handed Mortley a book which was as much a part of the family as anyone.

'I c'yan tek ya Bible frum ya Mama. When I reach Englan' I'll buy one, mi promise.'

'Chuh! Just tek what mi give ya an' hush ya mout'. I put ya in Jesus trust frum now. Ya bes' pray an' show your appreciation to de Father.'

Mortley was told.

'T'ank ya mama. Mi love ya.'

'Love de Lord!'

Mortley kissed his mother on the cheek and slowly parted.

'I haf' fi go now. De ship soon lef'.'

'Well tek dis now before ya lef it. God be wid ya my son.
I pray fi ya.'

Mortley took the Bible, picked up his small suitcase and left for the New World.

Armchair sat in Armchair. The trusty friend carried his weight well. The wooden varnished ends felt the texture of its master's worn, still left hand. The movement ceased. The thudding stopped. The spirit of the room changed. Armchair was now, officially, alone.

Armchair knew quietly it wasn't strictly alone. There was still one dedicated companion which Armchair had always known. A heavy book which always lived on its right arm. Mortley's hand was tightly clutched around the rough leather-bound cover. His nails were dug deep into the well thumbed pages of text. He waited no longer. Mortley had finally floated to his Father's Home.

Shawn Naphtali Sobers is a local writer and film maker. Since graduating from University of Wales College, Newport he has worked extensively with Black Pyramid Films and works as a Technical Workshop Leader at HTV Studios. Shawn drew inspiration for this writing from his own roots in Barbados. It is dedicated to his parents, his brother and sister and Cee.

Photography by Sabera Bham

