

THE MYSTERY OF BIBURY

They never called it by its name. When they were forced to talk about it, they pretended not to remember it, but not because there was a particular reason that led the few hundred inhabitants of such a small village - so insignificant that they could barely remember even their neighbors - to forget it. They did not speak of it for the simple and trivial reason that they considered that place so devoid of hope, happiness, and imagination that remembering Bibury was like remembering a dream that would never come true, not even in your own mind.

Although Bibury was so small that many even called it a neighborhood, upon that layer of stones embraced and decorated by numerous tufts of fresh grass stood many little houses. From the outside they could seem almost charming, but inside, love, sensitivity, and affection had been swept away by the limited thinking of us humans. The saddest thing was that the presence of so many grotesque little houses was due to the fact that, in that village trampled by death, people had decided to live alone: separated from one another, so that there was less risk for the inhabitants to have even the slightest contact with each other.

No one knew why Bibury was seen this way by its inhabitants... for what reason? And why, if people felt like this, did they not leave that town? The real reason is that there was no concrete explanation, and even they themselves probably did not know it. The only certain thing, which could not remain invisible even to a blind person, was that knowing how to live and surviving in Bibury did not have many different meanings.

The only thing that made that lonely and melancholic little town even slightly “interesting” was the Bibury asylum. It was located at the edge of the village, far from the houses and the main streets, as if no one truly wanted it too close. The building was ancient, with tall, dark walls, narrow windows, and iron gates that creaked at the slightest breath of wind. During the day it already seemed unsettling, but at night it became a place that no one—not even the inhabitants of Bibury—wanted to stare at for too long.

The asylum was known throughout the nation for having treated the most desperate cases in Great Britain, people considered hopeless by other hospitals. For this very reason, it attracted the attention of famous doctors and scholars. Perhaps the asylum had something to do with the citizens' state of mind. There were those who swore they had heard strange noises coming from inside and those who told stories that were never confirmed, but no one truly knew what happened behind those walls. Even though the citizens appeared emotionless, the asylum was the only thing that, just by looking at it, made them feel a trace of fear—and perhaps that was a good thing.

Among the many patients, there was one who was the most curious and frightened throughout the village and even in the surrounding area: a sixty-year-old man, his name was August, who had been locked up there since he was just a child. He had suffered from serious mental problems from an early age, and despite decades of treatment and attempts, no doctor had ever been able to “cure” him. He spent his days in silence, often sitting by a window, staring into space. Some said he spoke to himself, others that he smiled for no reason. His presence seemed to hold a secret, as if something was hidden in his mind that no one had been able to understand yet. He was 18 years old when he was diagnosed with very particular and rare brain pathologies that had most likely always accompanied him throughout his life, but which had decided to manifest only in adulthood. Inside the asylum, he was the patient who put doctors in greater difficulty, and he was also the one who had lived inside the dilapidated facility the longest. Rumors spread that he had killed someone and even fed on her body, but he had never confirmed it, or at least not out loud. He never communicated with anyone and always repeated in a low voice “I want to go home, I want to go home”.

One morning, the psychiatrist Mrs. Grace entered Mr. August's room to do one of the usual daily sessions she did to the gentleman, hoping not to spend two hours in silence like every other time. She began his speech as always with “Good morning August! How are you feeling this morning?” and he didn't answer, so the doctor, not surprised by his answer, asked the question again, then again four more times, just silence accompanied by a

light whisper in the background that said: "I want to go home, I want to go home". The doctors didn't understand why he kept repeating these words, after all he didn't have a home: his parents had died in a plane crash, he was only eight years old and so he was sent to an orphanage where they diagnosed him with the disease due to his abnormal and disturbing behavior. The doctor waited another 30 minutes for his answer until she decided to get up and as she was about to leave the room, August called her in a faint, weak voice "Grace..." she turned around almost petrified but at the same time relieved: "August...Do you want to tell me how you feel?" The gentleman turned to the small window and said: "They are the ones who have to stay in my place" and immediately after saying it he started whispering again: "I want to go home, I want to go home". The doctor, who was very good at dealing with these people, immobile and trembling said: "Thank you August, I'll see what to do", and with a hint of a smile she left the room. Grace was a woman of about 33 years old and came from Cardiff (one of the few doctors inside the Bibury asylum, she was not from that country). She had moved to a village near Bibury in her 20s to work in the asylum, because she had always been fascinated by working with this type of people. Once the psychiatrist left August's room, she felt even more confused than before: she didn't understand why the patient had suddenly whispered that phrase to her. She knew that August was someone with serious problems who didn't know what he was saying, but in any case, a booming voice inside her told her to listen to him. She decided to talk about August's disturbing and unexpected intervention with other psychiatrists and doctors inside the facility; but what Grace got from the confrontation with her colleagues was: "But yes, you know Grace, he is crazy, he doesn't have control over his words and he doesn't even know their meaning, now we shouldn't waste time with him... I think guys he'll die inside this wall... hahaha!" The doctor was surprised by the words of her colleagues. When the doctors finished giggling, Grace opened her mouth: "I don't understand what makes you laugh so much?!" reiterated the doctor in an authoritative tone. "Do we have..., do you perhaps have a "solution" to this gentleman's fate and you let it go like this? I think he wants to tell us something somehow and I think we should continue the quest..." She was interrupted by a doctor named William: "Doctor, I

understand your good intentions very well, but August has been considered a lost cause long before you came to work here. Don't be fooled by four insignificant words thrown together at random in a sentence... listen to me, go home, take a shower and read a good book, trust it". Grace felt hurt by these words, William had just told her in a way that she was incompetent... but despite these words, she still felt the need to understand what the sick man meant. The next day Grace decided to go and visit August again hoping he would tell her something else... "Hi August, how are you feeling this morning?" Grace asked him, but what she got was a long silence. So the doctor asked him the same question five more times but the answer was always the same, she didn't actually want to know how the patient was doing but wanted him to explain what he had said the day before. Dissatisfied, Grace almost walked out the door when August spoke: "Grace, it's just you and me here in the middle." There was a hint of a smile on the doctor's face, so this time instead of leaving, she turned to August, who was silent and not repeating the usual four words, as if he wanted Grace to ask him for an explanation. "August..." the psychiatrist asked him, "what do you mean?" so the gentleman didn't keep her waiting, in a reassuring but at the same time chilling tone of voice he replied: "You know Grace I wasn't very sure, I've observed you for months, I tried to grasp every detail of you, every word of you, and every belief of yours seemed so real to me, until I came to the conclusion that you are not like them, your mind is not infected..." He continued his speech: "Grace..." "August, what do you mean?" the woman asked him with eyes shining with shock. "I've been pretending for too long, I'm tired of having to pretend, I haven't had a normal conversation with a person for too long, and talking to you now in a civilized way doesn't seem real to me... Grace, I'm not sick. I have deceived everyone; remember: always one step ahead of your enemy". Grace was stunned, she didn't know what to say, she couldn't believe what she had just heard, she wanted to answer but the words remained stuck inside her head like an insect getting stuck inside a spiderweb. So she decided to answer with a look. "Grace, you have to help me," said August. From the doctor's lips came only a: "How?" followed by a "Why?" Then the fake sick man opened his mouth: "Have you ever wondered why people in Bibury are so devoid of soul?"

“No,” the girl replied. “And do you know why in Bibury the inhabitants don't interact with each other, never go out to have dinner together and never smile?...They're sick, Grace”. “Yes, but I don't understand why you pretended to be sick, they are sick of what? and why in Bibury?” the young woman asked him and then, exhausted, collapsed into a chair located next to August's. The gentleman told her with a blank stare: “When my parents died, they moved me to a small orphanage near Bibury. I was very young and at first I felt good in the orphanage, and I made friends with a sixteen-year-old boy, Nicholas. He came from Manchester and he also knew what I know and it was he who told me everything, he wanted to leave that place as soon as possible, he was afraid. I don't know why he decided to tell me all that, perhaps because he saw me as very similar to him, I only know that at a certain point they took him away from the asylum even though he hadn't come of age, it's not known where but I think the fact he knew “too much” led to his ruin. Years had passed and I couldn't stand being there anymore. With each passing day, the people in that place seemed less and less people and more and more rotten. So I decided to pretend to have mental disorders, hoping they would move me to a mental asylum, but I never would have thought of the one in Bibury, which had only recently opened at the time...” Grace interrupted him: “But why didn't you tell the truth, once you were eighteen you could leave Bibury”, “I tried, trust me” August replied. “I told the doctors the truth about how things were and that I pretended to be sick just to leave that orphanage, but you see Grace, your colleagues have the same problem, too...” as he finished the sentence the gentleman looked out of the window. The young woman, now that fear had been repressed and curiosity had ignited, asked him the crucial question: “August, but what disease is it?” He answered with an almost confused air: “See Grace, this disease which covers the inhabitants of Bibury like a thin and invisible veil, has no name, has no origin and is not known, at least not by those who don't experience it. But when an ugly characteristic unites all the people of a certain place, Grace, I don't think it's a coincidence”. So I ask you for help, to get out of this hell, and to take me home. Despite everything, the doctor didn't know whether to trust August, but those words seemed so real to her, that she decided to help him and that same

evening she took turns “keeping an eye on” the gentleman, even though the woman was only a psychiatrist, but inside the asylum they probably didn't even remember Grace's existence. That evening Grace and August ran away from the asylum. As Grace got into the car, August looked down on the four walls that had been his home for a lifetime. “And now, where do you want to go, August?” asked the young woman with a hint of a smile, “Anywhere as long as it takes me away from Bibury”.

Only a strong bond with a person you trust saves you from “diseases”. Loneliness is not the answer to evil.