

**Theme:** Communication Hampered by Alzheimer's

**Text:** Fictional – Extract from Iris by John Bayley (1998)

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 An Alzheimer sufferer begins many sentences, usually with an anxious repetitive query, but they remain unfinished, the want unexpressed. Usually it is predictable and easily satisfied, but Iris produces every day many such queries, involving 'you know, that person', or simply 'that', which take time and effort to unravel. Often they remain totally enigmatic, related to some unidentifiable man or woman in the past who has swum up to the surface of her mind as if encountered yesterday. At such times I feel my own mind and memory faltering, as if required to perform a function too far outside their own beat and practice.

The continuity of joking can very often rescue such moments. Humour seems to survive anything. A burst of laughter, snatches of doggerel, song, teasing nonsense rituals once lovingly exchanged, awake an abruptly happy response, and a sudden beaming smile that must resemble those moments in the past between explorers and savages, when some sort of clowning pantomime on the part of the former seems often to have evoked instant comprehension and amusement. At cheerful moments, over drinks or in the car, Iris sometimes twitters away incomprehensibly but self-confidently, happily convinced that an animated exchange is taking place. At such moments I find myself producing my own stream of consciousness, silly sentences or mashed-up quotations. 'The tyrant of the Chersonese was freedom's best and bravest friend', I assure her, giving her a solemnly meaningful look. At which she nods her head gravely, and seems to act a conspiring smile, as if the ringing confidence of Byron's line in 'The Isles of Greece' meant a lot to her too.

Our mode of communication seems like underwater sonar, each bouncing pulsations off the other, and listening for an echo. The baffling moments at which I cannot understand what Iris is saying, or about whom or what - moments which can produce tears and anxieties, though never, thank goodness, the raging frustration typical of many Alzheimer sufferers - can sometimes be dispelled by embarking on a joky parody of helplessness, and trying to make it mutual. Both of us at a loss for words.

[.....]

The latest smile on Iris's face seems to come from association with another Mary. Trying to cheer her up one day I thought of an inane childhood rhyme, forgotten for years.

25 Mary had a little bear  
 So loving and so kind  
 And everywhere that Mary went  
 You saw her bear behind.

Iris not only smiled - her face looked cunning and concentrated. Somewhere in the deserted areas of the brain old contacts and impulses became activated, wires joined up. A significance had revealed itself, and it seems only to work with jokes, particularly silly jokes, which in the days of sanity would have been received with smiling but slightly embarrassed forbearance. Iris always mildly disliked and avoided what used to be called vulgar or risqué jokes. Maybe the innocence of the bear rhyme pleased her - who can say what subtle feelings and distinctions from the past can be summoned back to her mind by something as childish - but perhaps as touching too - as the bear rhyme?

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**Annotations:**

**8** doggerel - crudely or irregularly fashioned verse (Germ. Knittelvers) **11** twitter away - speak rapidly and in a tremulous manner [cognate!] **14** chersonese – peninsula **16** Byron - 1788-1824, British poet acclaimed as one of the leading figures of the romantic movement **20** embarking on – start a journey, here: using parody as a means of (relaxation) **24** inane – sth that lacks sense **32** forbearance – patience [Germ. Nachsicht] **33** risqué adj. – cp. risk

**Assignments:**

- 1) Summarize relevant information that can be found in the text proving that the protagonist is an Alzheimer's patient. [Contents] (Do not forget the introductory statement.)
- 2) Analyse the language – including literary means - that the author uses. [Analysis] (In what way does Bayley's language differ from that of a medical professional?)
- 3) Assess Bayley's qualities as a caregiver. [Evaluation] (In your answer you are expected to use your knowledge of other extracts from Bayley's memoir as well as that of communicational skills that are helpful in dealing with Alzheimer patients.)