

Mrs Winterbottom
takes a
Gap Year



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Also by Joanna Nell

The Single Ladies of Jacaranda Retirement Village
The Last Voyage of Mrs Henry Parker
The Great Escape from Woodlands Nursing Home
The Tea Ladies of St Jude's Hospital

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Sorry, not sorry

DR HEATHER WINTERBOTTOM OFTEN JOKED THAT SHE'D fallen half an hour behind on her first day, and forty years later, she was still trying to catch up. She always apologised for keeping her patients waiting, even on the rare occasions her appointments ran to time. What's more, her face, with its harried arrangement of frown lines and down-turned mouth, had taken on an expression of permanent contrition. All that was about to change. Today, on her last ever day as a doctor, she would take back those thirty precious minutes and add them to the rest of her life. There was an entire world beyond Netherwood Medical Centre, so many things she wanted to do and see. This day marked the beginning of a whole new chapter in her life, if not a whole new life. But first, she had to remove a cotton bud from Mr Clifton's left ear.

Mrs Clifton had never trusted her husband to be an effective advocate for his own body and always accompanied

him to his appointments. Between them, they'd clocked up enough hours in Heather's waiting room for it to qualify as a second residence. Ever the pragmatist, Mrs Clifton had packed sandwiches and a thermos of tea.

The Cliftons were the kind of couple who scraped mud off the bottom of each other's boots before getting into the car. They wore matching fleeces and finished each other's sentences. Unlike Heather and her husband, Alan, who lived in the same house and worked at the same practice but were rarely seen together, the Cliftons were rarely seen apart.

Heather brought up Mr Clifton's file on the computer while the couple debated who should sit in which chair.

'You're the patient, Bob,' Cynthia Clifton insisted, her tone failing to match her smile.

'But you're the one who does all the talking.' Bob's strained smile mirrored his wife's.

'How long have you two been married again?' Heather asked as she squinted into the otoscope, forceps at the ready.

'Fifty years,' they chimed in synchrony.

'And never a cross word,' said Cynthia.

'That's because we spend so much time not speaking to each other.' Bob laughed and his wife punched him playfully on the arm.

Heather held up the cotton bud tip on the end of the forceps for inspection. 'Remember, Bob, nothing smaller than your elbow in your ear.'

'I don't know how many times I've told him, doctor, but he never listens to me.'

Bob stretched his jaw and rubbed his ear. 'Why do you think I stuffed my ears with cotton wool in the first place?'

Heather smiled. The contraction of the muscles around her eyes and mouth felt strained and unfamiliar. One of her goals for retirement, as well as getting her body into shape, was to exercise her ‘sorry’ face back into something less apologetic.

‘This is for you, Dr Winterbottom,’ Cynthia said, producing a candy-stripped gift bag.

‘We’re going to miss you,’ Bob added. ‘You’re the best doctor we’ve ever had.’

The only doctor they’d had, Heather almost pointed out, since the Cliftons refused to see any of the other doctors in the practice. On the rare occasion she and Alan managed a holiday, Bob and Cynthia would store up their collective ailments and await her return. Still, it made a change to receive a compliment rather than a complaint.

Heather opened the gift bag. At first she wasn’t sure what to make of the large padded rectangle decorated in colourful William Morris print.

‘It’s a kneeling pad,’ Cynthia added helpfully, ‘for weeding your borders.’

‘Thank you, that’s very thoughtful of you.’ Heather tried to remember if she even had any borders, herbaceous or otherwise.

‘We couldn’t imagine life without our garden, could we, Bob?’

‘It certainly gives us a reason to get out of bed every morning.’

Heather hoped she and Alan weren’t heading for the same afterlife of potting mix and not-so-dynamic lifter.

Following a teary farewell hug from Cynthia, and a stoic handshake from Bob, Heather added the kneeling pad to the growing pile of farewell cards and gardening implements

under her desk. One of her patients had given her a mug featuring a cartoon couple standing next to a blue caravan with the words 'Living the Dream', while one of her more insightful regulars had gifted her a bottle of sherry.

There was just time to swig a mouthful of cold coffee and spit it out again before she called in the next patient. It wasn't even nine and she was already running three quarters of an hour behind, a personal best. Tomorrow, however, she would drink her coffee while it was still hot. Over a leisurely alfresco breakfast on the patio, she and Alan would plan the rest of their lives. She was looking forward to having a normal conversation with her husband, rather than discussing their patients, or using words like 'framework' or 'stakeholders', things that belonged in a boardroom rather than a medical practice. Another world lay just beyond her fingertips. All she had to do was get through the rest of today's appointments and return seventy-three phone calls.

To steel herself, Heather snuck a peek at the holiday brochure she kept hidden under her stack of unread copies of the *British Medical Journal*. She hadn't had time to read the *BMJ* in years and certainly wouldn't be wasting a second of her retirement catching up. No, *Treasures of the Greek Islands*, which she'd picked up a few weeks ago from the travel agent opposite her regular hairdresser, was the only reading matter that mattered now. She flicked through, ogling the deserted beaches, olive trees and whitewashed buildings before stuffing it away out of sight.

Seeing the next name on her list, she contemplated opening the sherry. In the waiting room, Jaxon Smith was running up and down between the crowded rows of seats, pistol-whipping the knees of the other waiting patients with a plastic

AK-47. A slug trail of silvery mucus ran from each nostril, drying in a thick green crust on his top lip. When Heather called his name, Mrs Smith, sporting sausage-skin leggings, dragged him by the rat's tail on the back of his mostly shaved head towards the consulting room.

Seven minutes later, they left again, Mrs Smith shouting over her shoulder, 'Don't forget, I pay your wages!'

Heather didn't bother pointing out that the only tax the Smiths had ever paid was the unavoidable duty on booze and ciggies. She was more focused on how she was going to clean up her ravaged consulting room. An entire paper bed roll lay in ticker-tape ribbons, every cupboard had been ransacked and the curtain rail around the couch, no match for the weight of a hefty four-year-old, lay on the floor like a collapsed tent at the end of Glastonbury. Heather was almost grateful to the young hooligan and his odious mother. In the future, whenever she looked back and felt guilty about abandoning the Cliftons and the hundreds of other patients she'd come to think of as family, she would think of Jaxon Smith.

By mid-morning, the jaws of Heather's plastic hairclip were biting into her scalp, and she marvelled at how she could be simultaneously dehydrated and yet dying for the loo. She often quipped to medical students that to be a successful GP you needed a soft heart, a thick skin and a ten-gallon bladder. Unfortunately, her storage capacity wasn't what it used to be, and the next patient would have to wait. Hurrying along the corridor to the bathroom she nearly collided with Alan as he emerged from his consulting room.

'How's your last day going?' he asked.

'The usual war zone,' said Heather. 'But I did manage to clear my own printer jam for a change, so it hasn't been all bad.'

Alan glanced at his watch. ‘Don’t forget the girls are throwing us a surprise party at half past.’

The not-so-surprise party. A pair of ‘Happy Retirement’ helium balloons had been drifting around the surgery all morning, the garish foil blimps making a dash for freedom every time the waiting room door opened, only to be hauled back inside again by their trailing strings. Heather longed to open the front door and watch them float away for good. One of the balloons was already deflating while the other remained taut and bouncy on the ceiling. Wrinkled and flaccid, the first balloon was barely at head height. She couldn’t help but see it as a metaphor. Energised by what lay ahead, Heather was sprinting for the finish line while Alan was fading fast, looking as if he’d barely make it to lunchtime.

‘Are you okay with all this?’ Heather asked, searching Alan’s wan face. This was a big day for him. It was more than walking away from a job, and however grateful she was to have made it this far relatively unscathed, she knew Alan processed things differently.

‘I’m fine,’ he replied. ‘Absolutely fine.’

She believed the fine. Not so much the absolutely. ‘Sure?’

He pulled himself up straight, gaining another couple of inches. Stiffened his already stiff upper lip. ‘Never better. I’m off to do battle one last time with the Netherwood Medical Centre Patient Participation Group,’ he said, referring to the group of volunteers who met monthly to tell him how to run the practice he and Heather had been successfully running for the past forty years.



‘Surprise!’

Someone let off a party popper. The smell of gunpowder had barely reached Heather’s nose and the coloured strands hardly touched the floor before Rita, the scarily efficient head receptionist, had removed all traces with the dustpan and brush.

‘Oh, my goodness,’ said Heather, clutching her chest in a touch of BAFTA-winning melodrama. ‘I wasn’t expecting . . .’

All this. She really hadn’t been expecting the Lilliputian spread of tiny finger sandwiches and miniature wraps, mini frittatas and mini muffins; a welcome departure from the usual catering by Mr Kipling. The only nod towards tradition was a plate of Alan’s favourite sausage rolls.

‘Lovely spread,’ said Alan, licking his fingers in anticipation as he approached the buffet.

Somebody handed Heather a specimen container’s worth of warm prosecco and she helped herself to a sandwich. She sipped and looked around the smiling faces. In addition to the receptionists, practice nurses and the current medical student on attachment, the party also boasted the Big Five of endangered community professionals: district nurses, health visitors, physiotherapists, more midwives than there were currently pregnant mothers in the village, and even a psychiatric nurse, a species rarely spotted in the wild. They might all work independently, but they were one big family.

Her heart swelled as she took in all the familiar faces, these people who always went above and beyond their contracted duties, day in, day out. It wasn’t the building, the elegant Georgian facade with its modern glass extension, she was going to miss – it was the staff who made Netherwood Medical

Centre so special. The thought of saying goodbye made the egg and cress sandwich she'd just eaten feel like a sandbag. All this – the balloons, the cake, the speech Alan would have been working on – was so final. There was no room for second thoughts. No coming back from mini frittatas.

She'd been so ready to call it a day, certain she was doing the right thing. Now she wasn't so sure, her vision of the future less clear, as if the perfect watercolour picture she'd painted had been left out in the rain. She mustn't let Alan see her doubt. Instead, she mingled, smiled a lot, and helped herself to another glass of the rapidly disappearing prosecco.

After ten minutes of identical exchanges with different people, all permutations on the theme that, yes, she was looking forward to retirement, and, no, neither of them would be taking up golf, Heather looked for Alan. He'd cornered a trainee midwife who was pretending to laugh at his jokes. Luckily Pauline, the practice manager, saved her by tapping the side of her glass with a cake fork.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' she began. 'On behalf of the staff and friends of Netherwood Medical Centre, I'd like to present Alan and Heather with a farewell gift to thank them for all their hard work and dedication. I'm sure you'll all join me in wishing them the best of luck in their well-earned retirement.'

Pauline stepped forward with two identical packages, one each for Heather and Alan, both wrapped in tissue paper. *Please, not more gardening equipment.* Heather tore at the packaging, breath hitching when she saw what was inside. The rectangular name plaque that had been mounted on the wall outside the practice was cold and surprisingly heavy in her hands.

*Dr Heather Winterbottom BM BCh DCH DRCOG
MRCGP*

All those letters after her name. The once-shiny surface had weathered over the years, but someone had polished the brass until it shone like new, the engraved letters now as clear and precise as the epitaph on a freshly carved tombstone. She and Alan had been officially unscrewed, permanently removed from the building.

Knowing Rita, she would have already overseen the re-grouting of the holes in the two-hundred-year-old masonry. Heather didn't blame them. In general practice, there was no time to breathe or take stock, let alone grieve. It was impossible to outrun the growing mountain of bureaucracy. And there were always more patients than appointments.

'There's a lump in my throat,' Alan croaked.

It was reassuring to know he was only human, choked up with poignancy and nostalgia.

'Mine too, darling,' said Heather, touching his back.

'No,' he shook his head and coughed, pointing to his throat. 'Sausage.'

He tried to dislodge it with some exaggerated swallowing, while a room full of qualified medical professionals silently panicked. In the end, Alan took matters into his own hands, and chased the sausage roll down with a slice of cake.

While relieved to see her husband's face return to a more normal colour, Heather's own throat remained stubbornly clogged with anguish, uncertainty, and the beginnings of regret, like lingering catarrh after a cold. This was it, the end of an era. The end of her professional career. She couldn't wait to escape and yet, how could she leave all this behind?

There was no washing the enormity of it down with fresh cream sponge.

Pauline hadn't finished. 'We have another very special gift for you both,' she said, handing over an envelope.

Still coughing, Alan tore open the envelope.

'It's a joint membership of the National Trust! This is very special indeed,' he said, as if he couldn't wait to dive into the world of rose gardens and orangeries, plant sales and gift shops.

Heather murmured her thanks. Inside, a tiny piece of her died. Forget the olive groves and rustic tavernas of Greece, from now on it would be sensible shoes and flasks of lukewarm tea on gloomy Tuesday afternoons. Alan's idea of a perfect retirement was heritage listed and served with clotted cream.

Holding the envelope to his heart, Alan stepped forward. 'Thank you everyone. I'm lost for words,' he said. Never one to resist a captive audience, he soon found them again. Here it came. *The Speech*. All the exits were sealed. There was no escape. Heather eyed the empty prosecco bottle, remembering too late the sherry.

'As some of you may know, my father, Gordon Winterbottom, founded this practice back in 1948. That was the same year the NHS was born, the first health service anywhere in the world completely free at the point of delivery. Let me set the scene for you.'

No, Alan, no scene setting.

'It was also the year of the first hip replacement. Polio was rife and penicillin, the first antibiotic, still in its infancy. The life expectancy for a man was sixty-five years, and for a woman, seventy.'

Several pairs of eyes had already glazed over, but Alan was in his element; the most animated Heather had seen him in weeks.

‘Things have changed a lot since then. Thanks to childhood vaccination, something my father passionately advocated for, polio has been all but eradicated. Men can expect to live to almost eighty nowadays, and women eighty-three.’

‘Don’t count on it,’ Heather hiss-whispered through smiling teeth.

‘Did you know that there are ten times the number of doctors today compared to 1948, but only a quarter of the hospital beds?’

Apparently, nobody knew. Nor, Heather suspected, did they particularly care given that it was a Friday afternoon. It was beginning to sound like a party political broadcast. She cleared her throat.

Alan glanced in her direction.

‘Here’s another fact you may not be aware of. Research has shown that, on average, doctors interrupt their patients after only ninety seconds. Apparently, wives only give their husbands sixty.’ The married men in the room nodded in recognition. ‘Back to my father. He was a generous man, and I’m sure you’re all too young to remember that he was admired in the village as much for his impressive vegetables as for his bedside manner.’

Alan’s voice cracked. Heather moved to his side in comfort and solidarity, and to subtly remind him of the time.

‘I like to think of us all as one big, happy family,’ he said. ‘Heather and I have done our best to build this practice and move it forward into a new century, but now is the time to hand over the reins to the younger generation. Only the

knowledge that we are leaving the Netherwood community in such excellent hands has made it easier for Heather and me to hang up our stethoscopes for good. It's time for us to enjoy getting to know each other again.' He turned to Heather. 'Sorry, have we met?'

Cue the obligatory polite laughter. Heather released a breath she hadn't realised she was holding. Thank goodness that was over. Except that Alan hadn't finished. He unfolded a piece of paper and found his reading glasses. Heather tried miming a sawing action across her own throat, hoping he'd notice out of the corner of his eye. Apparently blinkered, he began to read aloud.

'In his much-lauded funeral oration commemorating the dead who lost their lives in the Peloponnesian War, the Greek statesman Pericles said, "What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others."'

'I think that's an excellent note to end on, don't you?' Heather interrupted, drawing the bewildered audience into what she hoped was a final round of applause.

'But I hadn't finished my speech,' said Alan, looking crestfallen as the crowd thinned. His unuttered words filled both sides of the crumpled paper in his hands.

'People are busy, Alan. They need to get back to work, not listen to you pontificating about dead Greeks.'

'But Pericles's Funeral Oration is one of the greatest speeches in history.'

'When was this exactly?'

'431 BC.'

She softened, imagining him as a small boy desperate to share his knowledge with a father who was always too busy

to listen. She pictured him as a seven-year-old who'd been dropped off at boarding school and told how lucky he was. Lucky to suffer within the same grim yet hallowed halls as his father and grandfather. Alan rarely talked about his schooldays, describing them only as miserable, character-building years, preferring to share stories of how, on exeat weekends, he'd been allowed to carry his father's battered leather Gladstone bag as he accompanied him on his rounds.

'Look, I'm all for a trip to Greece, Alan, but how about the twenty-first century version?'

Sun, sea, sand, thousands of years of history, and only three and a half hours from Gatwick airport. She just had to pick the right moment to show him the brochure.