

# Don And The Deck Of Cards

By Quincy Washington

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## Chapter 1

I'll never forget the summer of 2011. The glorious Sun had cast a momentary spell on the capital, and the nation's spirits were especially high after the excitement of the Royal Wedding. My final exams were long gone. So I had all the time in the world to spend doing absolutely nothing.

Sometimes, too much freedom can be stalling. But, I guess that's the comfort with which school, a regular job or any undertaking with regular tasks provides: routine and order. By then, I was so used to the familiar hum of morning registration on a typical day in Brookvale, that all that time to myself had turned me into a fidgety, and restless mess.

Three weeks before the cold spring would draw to a much welcomed close, I secured a coveted work experience

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placement at an old hospice in the suburbs. Sancton House Residential and Nursing Home was the depot for the invisible, and for the many forsaken souls.

It was the inevitable destination for the mentally-ill and the sick, where each and every day, the spectre of death would be beckoning at the door. Sancton House, or 'Sanks' (as the nurses liked to call it) was the place where elderly patients were to spend their final months, weeks, days or hours. It was here that I first learned the term 'palliative care' (which meant that the patients there were not expected to live for a long time at all).

Such morbid thoughts would become everyday custom for the next eight weeks.

For brief periods of time – perhaps a fortnight, if we were really lucky; the four-storeyed mansion in which more than sixty decrepit, cold and Clinical-white bedrooms were enclosed, would be blessed with the silent acceptance and contentedness that peace was near. In these gracious moments of still bliss, not one word of death would enter our thoughts. And during these weeks, the younger of us: the volunteers, would seek refuge in the hope that maybe, just maybe, this seemingly abundant peace and the joy of living, could last forever. Yet, time has the habit of doing

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exactly what we don't want it to do, depending on how we treat it.

When we're looking forward to something fantastic, time will do its absolute best to make us wait for it.

When we're dreading an imminent event, it will catch us up, before we've even had time to prepare.

Any hope of life within the hospice would be swiftly suppressed, after hearing the news of a fellow patients passing. And after this, Sancton House Residential and Nursing Home would sink back to its wonted quietness.

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Back at my home, my sister and I followed a weekly rota of housework, where we alternated between scrubbing the dishes and vacuum cleaning, among other tedious chores. On most occasions it was plain sailing. We helped each other out, say, if one of us missed a week, due to school clubs or other commitments. But, as you might expect, this perfect system didn't always run so smoothly. And I'd say about 90% of our squabbles and quarrels spawned from this dreaded weekly rota.

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Nonetheless, scrubbing 150 dishes a week at home was more than ample preparation for the cleaning up of old people's vomit, wee and other colourful excretions from the human body. Needless to say – emptying catheters is not, and will never be my first choice of recreation.

On my first day at the hospice, I was assigned my own patient.

After four months at Sancton House, this frail, old man would teach me that 'cynicism is far too common to be useful'.

Except... that's not quite true.

He couldn't have possibly articulated it in that way... because he had dementia.

But, through the hours I spent with this old man, I would derive key lessons that have lasted to this day; and in particular, I would learn something quite special from the most unlikely of sources: my prized deck of cards.

And although his wrinkles; his silver, wiry hair and his lapsing memory told me that he was very old and perhaps completely absent; what I could make out from his

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captivating stories (whether real or fabricated) kept him as alive as anyone else.

I don't want to keep referring to him as 'old man', so from now on I'll call him 'Don'.

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Every visit, I was reminded by the hospice nurses and staff that Don suffered from severe dementia. Up until that point I had never really grasped the true scale to which the debilitating condition extinguishes almost entirely what most people would call their 'character' or 'who they are', as people.

When I first met him, his eyes would dart away from mine. It was as though my glare was an intensely bright orb of light.

Don's stare was piercing, yet empty at the same time. His eyes would wander the rugged carpet, as if he had just seen a rat on the floor - which later turned out to be somewhat true, after I learned about his infamous hallucinations.

Even the simplest of tasks resurfaced as daily battles for him. Don would forget how to use a knife and fork as frequently as he needed a sip of water. So he had to be

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re-taught this basic skill after every third mouthful of food – that’s over 50 times a day!

The longer I stayed at the hospice, the greater my appreciation grew for healthcare professionals, who spend hours upon hours caring for these vulnerable, but equally venerable elderly citizens.

Don was about 70 years my senior: so old, and fragile. The remaining tufts of hair decorating his crown were white and delicate, like that of a dandelion in the breeze. But it’s easy to forget that Don was once just like me, or you.

He shared the universal fact, in that however old we become, we were all once young.

And though his hair was, indeed “white and delicate, like that of a dandelion in the breeze”, it remains true that all dandelions started off as bright, yellow florets.

Don was no different in that regard.

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## Chapter 2

One rainy afternoon, I walked into the hospice as usual. Put down my coat and bag – as usual. And I headed off to the communal sitting room, where I would normally find Don slumping over a board of backgammon, waiting for an opponent to entertain him. He didn't know how to play. Then again, neither did I!

On a normal day, we would just sit together for five hours, with the faint drone of the TV noise in the background. Except, on this particular day, Don was nowhere to be found.

After scouring every single room of which I was allowed to enter, one nurse revealed to me that Don had been taken to a private room to mourn the sudden death of his wife.

Don didn't speak much, if at all, but he had never once mentioned his wife.

Not for one second did I think that I could fully alleviate the pain of his wife's passing – but I still wanted to help.

After a couple of hours, Don skulked over to my arm chair, closely followed by Nurse June. I didn't think Don could ever look any more void of character. His face was an eerie

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white and his eye sockets appeared hollow, as if he was dead on the inside.

I was informed by Nurse June that his wife had actually died six years ago, and not recently. But, due to the nature of his amnesic condition, he would relive the strife of her passing away every couple of months – and then forget about it again.

His mind would be spotless for some time, and the next, it would be flooded by a tsunami of images, sounds and feelings. Such was the nature of his porous memory.

As a child, whenever I was upset, my mother would pull out her favourite Ludo board, made of pure glass, protected by a plywood frame painted canary yellow.

My mum bought this glass board from a scruffy looking and foul-smelling old village fellow, selling hand-made toys on the side of an abandoned road in Ghana.

Apparently, my sister and I were there. And as the story goes, this old man, upon seeing two small children sleeping in the back of the car, began hammering his head against our windows, motioning and enticing us to have a gander at his vast collection of ornate works. My uncle, sensing danger, thumped his heavy foot on the pedal, to make for a

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swift exit, until my mum glanced back through the wing mirror, to see that the skilled craftsman had abnormally short arms, and at a distance, what appeared to be docked stubs for fingers.

She demanded that my uncle reverse the car, and on her second look at this Ludo board, and taken in light of the man's disability, it appeared even more elaborate and meticulously constructed than before.

My mum bought it without hesitation.

Several years since its purchase, its frequent use was made evident by the sheer number of scratches and scuff marks decorating its once pristine surface. I could always expect that after the occasional rotten day, this Ludo board would set the stage for constructive conversation and good-old quality time with my mum.

And in spite of my hardy reluctance, at times – my spirits would be well on their way to being restored, after half an hour of rolling dices.

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There is some truth to the belief that our closest neighbours and surroundings significantly affect how we feel, each and every day.

I raised my head, and took a quick glance around the communal room to see a dozen heads halfcocked in deep sleep, and a few more of the elderly residents each captivated by their own unique hallucinations performing brilliantly in front of them.

It was quite easy to get depressed in such a room. I quickly realised that a change of environment might do Don, and me, some good.

With the approval from Nurse June, I took Don down the corridor - walking stick in hand - down the lift, and into the downstairs diner which overlooked a gorgeous flower patch garden and a circle of lavender shrubs hugging the perimeter of the stone patio.

We sat there, occupied only by our own thoughts.

Somewhere, an idea was softly brewing.

I had a plan.

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I wanted to use my deck of cards as a visual escapism for Don, just as my mother had done with the game of Ludo.

Within moments, the delicate patter of Nurse June's steps from the hallway told me that she had returned to check up on us.

She provided me with the key to the pantry and store cupboards, and asked me what food I was going to serve Don.

I had no qualms about offering my assistance to Don, no matter how painstakingly arduous and repetitive the process was – after all, it was I who had signed up for this.

But, I had little intention of spoon-feeding him slimy, pummeled squash that hour – that could wait.

In a pitiful bid to evade responsibility, I tripped, tumbled and mumbled over stuttered words, and then pulled out my deck of cards with the Union Jack emblazoned on every one of them.

“O, but Quincy – you know you can't...”

“...He doesn't know a thing. He's demented”

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“He won’t be able to...”

Bla, bla, bla...

“As if I didn’t know that he’s demented?!” I thought to myself.

I had heard enough of people telling Don that he couldn’t do things. And perhaps it was naïve for me to suggest it – but, I honestly believed that Don might be able to do at least something with the deck of cards, even if he would require a bit of guidance along the way. After all, no matter how close his life was teetering on the brink of destruction, there were many things he still possessed the mental capacity to do.

Don could recognise shapes, and pick out colours from nearby surroundings and pictures which bore resemblance to other objects near him.

Sometimes, when the radio was on in the common room, I would examine Don, to see which songs he liked. He never said a word. He just sat there, inanimate, like a mannequin: engaged in deep thought, or perhaps in blissful reverie.

For weeks, I had even believed he was deaf, until.

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But, on one occasion, when I dropped a pencil on the floor, I noticed one of his feet, gently tapping the carpet to the beat of Owl City's 'Fireflies'. While the rest of his body was as still as a statue, his lone foot remained animate, just grooving along with the music, without tire.

And best of all, Don could still walk; granted, at a snail's pace – but still, he possessed a rare quality, much longed for by most of the residents.

Clearly, his mental faculties had not perished entirely. Irrespective of what Nurse June had been led to believe; in my eyes, Don was far from useless.

It was clearly wishful thinking, as Nurse June began packing up my cards at the moment I told her my plan for Don.

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I told Nurse June that Don and I were going to have our first 'proper conversation' (something I had tried and failed at doing, since working at the hospice); to which Nurse June replied:

“Don't waste your time, love”.

And then she left the diner.

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A subtle smugness was smeared across her taut mouth. She had probably seen this a hundred times before: an inexperienced volunteer thinking that he can heal the sick.

Failure imminent. Well, I never took too kindly to accepting defeat, not for myself, and not for Don either. And that day was my chance to show it

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## Chapter 3

I was a tad embarrassed, but I pretended not to be. But, just as quickly as I lost face, Don's face suddenly lit up.

Don's eyes, which had been locked onto the deck of cards, looked straight into mine.

This was the first time he had ever looked into my eyes.

And he spoke.

I don't remember exactly how he organized his words, but it was clear that the Union Jack on the back of my deck of cards had sparked some distant nostalgia in the elderly Don (who I would learn, that afternoon, should more appropriately be addressed as Lieutenant Commander).

For the first time, he was able to speak, with some passion, about his riveting experiences as a young man in the Royal Navy.

I was completely taken aback by the surprise of his illustrious past. But come to think of it, I need not have been. We all may have had lives of adventure and colourful memories, no matter where we stand or how old we are.

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And there we were, Don and I, in the communal diner, with only a deck of cards and each other's company to entertain us.

Through shaky jaw wobbles and excursive description, he told me that he never had children, but later on became a mathematics teacher at an old school in the British countryside.

Don's eyes were fixed on the Union Jack, as he slowly ambled through heroic stories about his lost comrades on war ships and other precious memories with his younger students.

Talking to him was the most absorbing experience that I never expected to have. It was bizarre and brilliant how just seeing 'one flag' could bring up a whole torrent of memories, the strange quality of which meant that they could disappear just as quickly as they had arrived.

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I felt I should capitalize on Don's lucidity, so I split the deck into piles and spread them all around the oak high table.

I flipped over a couple of cards to reveal the 'two' of Hearts and the 'four' of Hearts.

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My curiosity was glowing red hot, and my instinct told me that, beneath the veneer of dementia hardening around Don, he was still there, somewhere, deep, deep inside.

I asked Don: “What is two plus four?” and to my disappointment he incorrectly replied with the number nine.

For the next five minutes, I hopelessly tried to teach him how to add numbers again, to no avail.

At Sancton House hospice, the slogan at the front desk and in all of the pamphlets read ‘ENABLE, DON’T DISABLE’.

Nurse June had left the diner over half an hour ago by now, and I began to concede that maybe she was, in fact, right.

Perhaps it was too late, and there was no hope for Don.

We sat there for the next twenty minutes doing nothing; he just stared into space like a motionless action figure, waiting to be switched on. I don’t think I saw him blink much, if at all. After a lackluster and bitter realisation, I looked down to my phone to see that I had less than an hour left of the day at the hospice.

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I felt bored, dejected and defeated.

And then suddenly, Don picked up a card. It was the Queen Of Hearts, this time.

Without expecting a complete reply (maybe a tilt of the head, at best) I asked him whether he knew what the Queen of Hearts was.

He paused for about four seconds before he reacted:

“Well, of course the KING is more than the QUEEN?!”

I was well and truly astounded by this complete sentence, let alone how impressed I was by his grasping of one ‘thing’ being of higher value than another. I quickly pulled out the King of Hearts from the pile of cards. I asked him to lay them side by side on the table, the card of higher value being to the right of the smaller one.

I followed this up with another couple of cards from different decks, of which Don was able to point out owing to the difference in symbols. Surprisingly he had the presence of mind to place the cards on different rows according to suit, without me even prompting him.

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In that last hour, I would hold up a card and Don would indicate which of the four rows I should place the card in, and whether the card that I was holding was bigger or smaller than the card furthest to the left in that row, all the way across each row. And after observing me holding up the cards, he started to pick them up himself!

He continued doing this until he had sorted every single card into four rows, by suit, with each in ascending order, and thus successfully sorted the whole deck of 52 cards.

Don, an old man, with severe dementia, on palliative care, had done what Nurse June (and most people) would have said was impossible for someone of his state of being and condition. I wished Nurse June was there to witness such a feat.

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## Chapter 4

Shortly afterwards, Don passed away.

That was the last time I ever saw Don. I remember leaving the hospice believing that anything could be achieved with persistence and creativity.

Of all the attributes anyone can possess, I have found cynicism to be one of the worst.

So pronounced was my aversion to succumbing to the ways and mindset of cynical people that I never told Nurse June about what Don had achieved, out of fear that she would laugh it off or call me a liar.

And of course, Don, would not have been able to communicate his achievement to Nurse Jane, to any basic level of comprehension.

Cynicism is too much of a reactive way of living to bring about much good in this world...

It's easy, it's automatic and it's as common as mediocrity is prevalent. Few people have amassed great success by investing their energy and time into doubt: doubting

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themselves, other people, their imagination, their abilities or their ambitions.

If you were to tell 100 of your friends your deepest desire for yourself, and who you want to - no matter how wild and wonderful, here's what will happen:

33% will tell you outright that you can't do it;

Another 33% will point out your personal shortcomings and show you every challenge which awaits to assail you on your way to getting there;

And another 33% will enthusiastically give you a thousand thumbs up in encouragement, but secretly wait for you to miss the mark and hope for your failure.

Maybe just one percent or less, will genuinely believe that whatever it is that you want to do; you not only can do, but will actually follow through with.

I never expected to learn so much from one elderly man at Sancton House, and yet I did.

And however infrequently they practised these words, Sancton House was correct in their mantra that one should 'Enable, Don't Disable'.

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Given the choice, I would much rather be encouraged by what we could do, and at least give it a good try, than to just accept the state of things the way most people see them.

I was 17 when I had my encounter with Don, and he must have been about 70 years my senior.

He's long gone now, but no matter how old I become, his lesson will be preserved in a precious place in mind, and his legacy will last through the sharing of his story, to all those willing to lend an ear.

THE END