

The novelist Teresa Waugh - widow of Oldie founding father Auberon Waugh and mother of regular contributor Alexander Waugh - has contacted the Old Un with a heartbreaking tale.

While visiting an old people's home in Somerset, Teresa came across a 98-year-old lady called Patricia O'Brien. O'Brien told Teresa that she had been a poet all her life but only as she hit her late nineties did she manage to finish things. Her dearest wish was to have something published one day.

Several times, she politely asked Teresa to find a publisher for her work - and for one poem, '***This Time, Next Time...***', in particular.

With arthritic hands and bad eyesight, she couldn't write the poem down,' says Teresa, 'Or, if she could, the writing was not clear enough for her to read it. She dictated the poem for me to take home and print in large letters, which I did.

When I last saw her, she was very ill and, I feared, on her deathbed. She clasped my hand and asked me to promise to go on trying to get the poem published after her death. I had told her that, although I could promise nothing, I would try. She was thrilled.

Sadly, Patricia O'Brien died in April, the day after Teresa last saw her. At her funeral, attended by Teresa, the poem, was read out. It had been found by her bed. She had no living relations, but those who cared for her were enchanted by her.

Teresa set out to get the poem published and find out more about her. She discovered that Patricia's childhood was spent in poverty in Wales. Her father, said Patricia, 'turned into an Irish drunk' and her hardworking mother had little time for girls who wrote poetry. She ran away to London, joined the WRNS and was a civil servant. She spent time in France, married late and had no children.

'She had an extraordinary persona,' says Teresa, 'And I grew very fond of her during the short time I knew her. Only a week or two before she died, she was dancing with her Zimmer frame, as a carer in the home squeezed out old tunes on a squeezebox.

I only knew her for a short while, but she said to me, "I have so much more to tell you but I don't have much time."

'She had an intense love of poetry and could recite reams of it by heart to her dying day.' It turns out, too, that she was a poet of considerable gifts.

The Oldie is delighted to be the first magazine to publish a Patricia O'Brien poem....

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