

THERE WERE ALWAYS ROSES

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

It's hard work pushing the wheelchair, what with the gravel and Mother's weight. I stop and lift her left foot back onto its rest, but the chair jolts as she shifts and for a dreadful minute I think she's going over.

Brake next time, Nigel, I say to myself before she does. Not that she's likely to anymore. Grunts and exclamations are mostly what I get from her now. There's no shade in this part of the garden and sweat's running into my eyes already. I pull out my handkerchief but she's agitating.

'Not far to the tea room, Mother,' I say, though I have no idea where it is. The place is a maze, and the map they gave me with the tickets is tiny; I can't see it properly without my spectacles, and if I stop again I'll only get hotter and mother more fractious. We press on.

I'm beginning to think it was a bad idea to bring her out. I say 'beginning' – I've been thinking so for the past hour. Getting her from the car park to the entrance took a herculean effort.

'Wheelchairs available for all who need them,' the advertisement had said. 'Advance booking not required.'

Sounded ideal. Making arrangements in advance with Mother is impossible, what with the unpredictability of her bowels, to say nothing of whether she'll decide she's going to die on any particular day, so she'll say there's no point in getting out of bed. Anyway, today she cooperated, said it would be 'alright' to go out – I'm past expecting any 'thank you's. We get to the car park and it's half full already but never mind, I have confidence in the advertisement, goodness knows why after all the disappointments I've had. I leave her strapped in while I look for a wheelchair. There are no wheelchairs.

There's a sign with an arrow: 'This way to the garden,' it says. '500 metres. Wheelchairs available at the garden gate.'

500 metres! I do a calculation in my head: 8 kilometres is 5 miles, so 500 metres is... I can't work it out exactly, but far enough, and definitely too far with my mother. But we're here and I'm not turning back now. I manoeuvre her out of the car. Then I remember the shooting stick.

'Hold on a mo,' I say, and leave her clinging to the car door swaying as I dash round to the boot.

'Right,' I say, 'Take my arm,' and for once she's compliant. Off we set, step by painful step, and that's mine I'm talking about. My varicose veins give me hell in this weather, not that I complain. Who am I going to complain to apart from Mother and what's the point of that? Thank goodness for the shooting stick, is all I can say. Gives us time to 'regroup' along the way, isn't that what people say these days?

There's another arrow: 'This way to the tea room.'

'Told you,' I say. 'We'll be there in a jiffy. Tea and scones.'

Mother twists her head and there's an expression on her face which is very nearly a smile, though it could be wind. There's no-one else in this part of the garden and I can hear the swish of the swifts and the chinking of tea cups beyond the box hedge. Perhaps the day out wasn't such a bad idea after all.

I push the wheelchair through an archway and it's then that I feel it, like a blow to my chest. For a minute I think This is it, I'm having a heart attack. But I don't fall down. I stand there, pulling on the brake of the wheelchair as the past rushes up at me and I'm on the side of the swimming pool, looking for bodies.

Breathe, Nigel, I say to myself, just breathe.

'Please could you move forward.'

There are people behind us. I'm aware of their bulk.

'Are you okay, dear?' says one, peering at me, getting closer than I like.

I pull out my handkerchief again and tell her it's only the sweat trickling into, my eyes. 'If we could get past then, lovely,' she says. 'The tea room closes in half an hour.'

That shakes me firmly back into the present. I release the brake on the wheelchair and Mother jolts awake.

'Where are we?' she calls out in a clear voice.

'This is the sunken garden,' I say. 'It was a swimming pool once. Now there are roses. Can you smell them?'

But her moment of lucidity has passed and she slumps in the chair again.

In the tea room, we squeeze into a corner table and Mother eats the last scone with extra cream. I eat nothing, watch the cream spread round her contented face and think about the swimming pool again, the shouts, the merriment, the being left out. Of course there were no bodies in the morning. Only a few rose petals. That memory floats up now.

'Actually, there were always roses,' I say, but Mother isn't listening, she's busy masticating her scone.

I sip my tea. Mother finishes her scone. There are crumbs everywhere but not a spot of cream. They don't hurry us out of the tea room. I get Mother back into the wheelchair. There's no-one at the gate.

To hell with it, I think, or perhaps I say it out loud because Mother looks alarmed.

I push her in the wheelchair all the way back to the car park. When we get there, I realise I've left the shooting stick at the garden entrance, but it feels a small price to pay.

Mother's nodding off as soon as I've got her into the car and belted up.

As I drive off, I look back at the wheelchair sitting in the middle of the empty car park. Then I think about what I'll have for my tea; I'm hungry, what with everything that's happened.

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