

Daphne lives on the top floor, and won't come down without an arm to help her. This is a compromise they've come to over the last few years. She used to meet Sam downstairs, saying it was just common sense; silly to have everyone waiting in the bus when she had two working legs and a will of steel. But she'd say this while leaning hard on the wall, her breath laboured, and not just from the fifty fags that she still insisted on smoking every day, library trips punctuated by cigarette breaks between bites of Garibaldi. *Some things you can change, given half the chance*, she would say by way of explanation, *but some things you can't*. Yet today Sam feels overwhelmingly grateful for Daphne's stubbornness, her steadfast refusal to move even one inch from her routine; it is the life raft on which her nonagenarian friend has made it through the last nine months.

Sam chaps the door, which is open a smidge and probably has been since early morning - as if she might, this one time out of hundreds, arrive at the crack of dawn. She calls in as usual - *It's me, Daphne, Sam with the library van* - though it's a formality that no longer fits, required by the volunteer guidelines but completely unnecessary, just like the laminated name tag in her pocket. Sam has heard all of Daphne's stories, has helped her into the clothes she always approaches as if they are the belongings of a total stranger. She has held Daphne's hand through a coughing fit and then gently rinsed her old friend's hanky, saying nothing about the red stain that they both saw on it. In return, Daphne's sharp questions have probed every corner of Sam's life - *is it a man friend you live with? Are you a boy or a girl? Is your hair like that because you're on tablets?* - so much so that identifying herself now seem ludicrous, and yet it's a habit she can't shake. Especially today, when she needs everything to be normal, routine; when she needs to find her stubborn old mule behind this door with the same caustic personality she's come to love.

But there is something different. The air is all stale smoke today, not cut with the cloying floral perfume that Daphne would usually surround herself with. Today it's just the cigarettes and the frying spices of a neighbour's lunch: cinnamon and bay. The window is open, something that Daphne will not stand for; the noise of the street below annoys her too much. A step further in;

off the hallway, an open kitchen door. A pack of straight razors on the stained seventies countertop. Sam's stomach lifts, a precursor to panic, and she calls out Daphne's name again. There is a moment of silence.

*In here, my love.*

She is not in her chair, by the now-vintage cassette player which Sam has offered to replace several times. The library has run out of new books on tape, but Daphne keeps taking out the ones she has listened to two, three, maybe four times before. Sam stares at the abandoned cigarette still smoking in the ashtray and her stomach lifts again, creating a space into which she is worried the whole situation might fall. There has been a shift in the way of things, and such shifts are rarely good news with the elderly. She hears a gentle cough and finds herself in the hallway, standing by bedroom door. She has never seen inside this room; even when half dressed, Daphne meets her in her sitting room chair, demanding help with her tights or the fastening of her skirt. Sam knocks, barely wanting her knuckle to meet the wood.

*Come in, love. You can come in.*

It has been nine months. Sam has found so many of them smaller, quieter than they had been before all this began. The lack of company, the fear, the silence. Every day she takes them from their perches and finds them timid, but still there. But she pushes the door and finds, on the bed, a person refreshed. Someone brand new, and still timid, but differently so - a bird on the edge of a nest, learning to trust its new wings. This new person smiles, and runs a deeply veined hand over a short back and sides. There is a moment of silence.

*I used to do my husband's, says the warm, smoky voice, no barbs nor spikes about it.*

*You're looking sharp, says Sam. I know some younguns who'd kill for those trousers an' all.*

The material is pressed, a vintage seam. A hand lands gently on them.

*His as well. Always said they looked better on me, though.*

At the foot of the bed there is a wooden chest, open. Inside, there are dresses, ironed and folded. Balled up tights and a few pairs of shoes. This chest will be closed, soon, as it has been for so long before. But it is not for Sam to close it.

*Daphnis, I reckon. Greek, and a poet. But Daph will do, out there. And if they ask, I'll just say the trousers are better for haemorrhoids.*

Sam laughs. The same person, after all. But this time, not bound. She offers her arm to her friend.

*Alright, Daph. We better get down there, or they'll have mutinied.*

A detour via the sitting room recovers the half-smoked cigarette and the tired audiotapes, played almost to their end. Daph will steal the paper from the library too, though Sam has said a hundred times that it is supposed to stay there. Some things you can change.

The flat door slams and unsettles a bird; it flies by the close window, screeching, renewed.

*Half a chance, eh?*

*Right enough,* says Daphnis.