

CLOSET

NICK FOGG

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

I had to tell them to sod off. The so-called carers.

I rang the agency and said, 'I want to cancel the visits. Yes, all of them. Yes, including tonight's. No, I'm not going on holiday.' (Chance would be a fine thing.)

She said, 'I'm sorry, was it one of the girls? I'm afraid sometimes they get behind and miss things.'

I said, 'I've made other arrangements', and hung up.

Then, blow me, the Team Leader's ringing me, 'Is that Mrs Mertens?'

I said, 'This is Ivy Mertens.'

He said he was concerned there'd been a problem. Perhaps a misunderstanding. Was there anything he could do?

I wanted to say, 'Get better staff. People who think about what they say. They're meant to be *carers*, aren't they? Not just spoon feeders and bum wipers.'

He asked if I had any other support, whether I'd spoken to my doctor. He said it could be confusing for people in my situation, like he thought I was senile.

I said, ‘Young man, I still know who the Prime Minister is. And I’ll no longer be needing your services.’

I did try, love, but I can’t. I’ll have to go it alone.

Sometimes I wish the blasted stroke had done for me. That I wasn’t stuck here while you’re off gadding.

I can hear you saying, ‘Chin up, old girl. Don’t let the bastards grind you down.’

But they are though, love. ‘Mrs’ this, ‘your husband’ that. All their damned assumptions. Having to pretend. To hide every trace of you. Having to be a stranger in my own home. Our home.

But when that girl offered to give me a wash and came out with, ‘I help most of my ladies so I’ve seen it all - as part of the job, I mean - don’t worry, I’m not gay or anything’, that was beyond the pale.

I tried to tell myself I was being over sensitive. But I couldn’t shake the thought she might be another of those pray for your soul, cast the devil out, types. I’m sorry, love. I’m trying not to dwell on things.

I just hate that I couldn’t look after you on my own anymore. That I took you to that place, full of vacant faces; bags of skin and bone shuffling the corridors. That I couldn’t be there all the time. That I couldn’t protect you from the sidelong glances and the muttering. From the barefaced judgment, the lack of care. From how they made you feel.

I know, I know. It won't bring you back. And I am trying to remember the best of it. The twinkle in your eye. Your arms around me. Those kisses. Like you were finally in full bloom, free of the past. I wouldn't have changed that for anything. I just wish we could have been somewhere private.

I wondered if you understood why they stared at us. Or if you just felt their disapproval.

I tried to talk to the manager. She said it was difficult with dementia. Something about older people and the impossibility of trying to challenge lifelong beliefs.

I said, 'What about your staff and their beliefs?'

She got tight-lipped. Said it was illegal to discriminate against someone because of their religion. That it was sad when people lost their inhibitions and behaved inappropriately because of their mental health.

I said, 'Is holding your partner's hand inappropriate? Is giving them a kiss?'

I wanted to say it was sad that it takes having dementia for someone to be free of the shame they've carried their whole life because society has told them there's something wrong with them. I don't think she'd have understood.

And I couldn't bear to dissuade you. I couldn't deny you in those fleeting moments when your face lit up and you seemed to remember us.

But those bruises.

How they said you'd had *another* fall. That they'd notified your next of kin - your oh-so-busy daughter who couldn't be bothered to visit - and that she didn't have any concerns. Of course she had no idea what was going on.

I'm so sorry, love. I can't bear to think how scared you were.

At your funeral I pretended for Lucy, for you – that it must have been a terrible accident. The demon dementia.

When she asked me to say a few words, I wondered if the penny had finally dropped. Then she said, 'Well, you were Mum's oldest friend. You were housemates for, what, forty years?' Housemates.

I wanted to say, 'She was the love of my life. My soul mate. My partner in mischief. Waking up next to her made my heart dance. And even in the end when she'd look at me blankly, we always found a way back.'

Maybe I should have told Lucy but I knew you hadn't wanted to, even after all those years. And I didn't want to betray your trust when you couldn't speak for yourself.

Maybe I should have said, 'I blame myself for what happened. If I could have carried on looking after her at home she'd never have gone to that place. I knew something wasn't right. I tried to talk to them but I didn't have proof. What if I made things worse?'

Maybe I'm just a coward.

Do you know what I did when the hospital people said, ‘I’m afraid it’s family only’ and your clueless daughter said, ‘You go home, Ivy. There’s nothing anyone can do now. Maybe it’s a blessing in disguise - they said she hasn’t been herself for a while’? I bit my tongue.

And I came back and sat in your chair, and I tried to feel you. But I knew you’d gone.

Oh, to hell with this! I know what you’d say: ‘What’s done is done. You’ve told the carers where to go. You’re your own woman, get on with it.’

So I shall, my love. I’ve got the one good arm, and my stick, and the microwave. I’ll take things at my own pace.

And when I can’t do it anymore, there’s that bottle of whisky and some little white pills I’ve been saving. I reckon I’ve got enough to help me on my way so I can come and find you, wherever you’re gadding.

Nick lives in the wilds of Shropshire. She cares about telling stories which explore society’s assumptions, the weight of its expectations, and the choices we make. She believes in the power of stories to help us better understand ourselves and each other, and to encourage us to shape a kinder, more equitable, world.