

## Frail

Frail stick legs shuffled down the corridor with a distinct lean to the left. The drunken, crabby walk a result of numerous minor and major strokes, my hand hovered by Dad's elbow waiting to help him in the right direction.

"Ho there, Sailor. Your steering off course".

"Humph."

Dottie came up along side us and peered hopefully at me.

"Teatime?"

"Lunch Dottie. Are you coming to the dining room?"

She stood dithering in the hallway as we continued our meander onwards.

"She's gone dotty," grumbled Dad. "Such a shame, such a shame."

Roy stood by the doorway. "Fish and chips?" He gave me a beatific grin.

"Sure Roy. It's Friday."

He followed us to the table, sat and then stood up again heading back down the corridor. I wondered if any of the residents normally at Dad's table would be there for lunch. I pulled out a spare chair from nearby and wedged myself into a corner next to him.

"Where's your mother?"

"Nurse has gone to collect her."

His shoulders began to shake. "I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do."

"What about Dad?"

"Your mother. She was such a marvellous organiser. Now she forgets everything. Yesterday she insisted she had just come back from South America." His voice waivered up and down with emotions he struggled to keep in check these days.

"Did she have a good trip?"

Humour wasn't going to work though. Sobs shook narrow bent shoulders. Gnarled skeletal hands writhed in his lap.

"Sorry Dad".

"Such a shame, such a shame."

"Bugger, Bugger Bugger..." muttered Pat from across the table. She moved the salt cellar from one side of the table to the other, backwards and forwards.

Dad stiffened; lips tight in a disapproving line.

"Can't someone shut that woman up?"

My father who had probably sworn publicly no more than three times in his life, hated the ongoing ramblings from Pat at the meal table.

“Bugger, bugger, bugger...”

Roy sat down opposite.

“Fish and chips?”

“Yep Roy. It’s Friday”

Mum was wheeled into her place beside Dad.

“I’m not hungry,” she claimed looking at me with a vacant smile.

“I don’t want fish and chips!” voiced Dad in trembling tones. “What does that do for someone with a heart condition?” Disapproval radiated from every pore. His head swayed from side to side seeking a staff member to vent to.

“Salad Mr Bell?” asked the nurse.

“Humph.”

“Bugger, bugger, bugger...” muttered Pat with the salt cellar toppling off the table. Amidst the clatter of plates and metal serving dishes in the kitchen, the chatter of residents and the moaning of a lady nearby, no one took notice of it smashing on the floor. The dining room could only be described as organised chaos. I stepped around Madge’s princess chair and nearly tripped over a walking stick as I went looking for a carer who just might be free to clean up the salt. A normal Friday lunch time for the staff.

“Lunch on board ship was much nicer” declared Mum as I returned.

“What did you eat?” I asked. Too specific a question. She gave me another vacant smile.

“How are you dear? Have you been here long?”

“All morning Mum. We sorted out your clothes remember?”

“Hmm...” she nodded with great dignity. At least she knew who I was today or was everyone ‘dear’. Hard to tell.

“Bugger, bugger, bugger...” Pat glared across the table at Dad and I couldn’t help but wonder if she knew how much it bothered him. I surmised not, but still... there was an odd gleam to her eyes today.

“How’s the fish and chips Roy?”

Another grin and a thumbs up. Residents of British birth, of which there were quite a few, had voted for more fish and chips at the last residents meeting much to Dad’s disgust. At 92 he was watching his skinny waist and cholesterol.

“Just enjoy Dad!”

“Humph.”

“South America is so beautiful” declared Mum.

“What did you like best Mum?”

“The sea and the sailing ships”

Perhaps she was thinking of her hometown of Port Lincoln in South Australia. Before dementia set in, she often reminisced about the tall ships sailing into harbour when she was a child. Peas and potatoes were pushed lethargically around her plate with no indication any were likely to make it into her mouth.

“Come on Mum you need to eat.”

“Lunch on board ship was much nicer”

“Such a shame, such a shame,” muttered Dad placing a hand across on Mums arm.

“What dear?” asked Mum nodding at him.

“I need to get going Dad.”

He reached across and grasped my hand with greater strength than I expected.

“Thanks for everything. I do love you dear girl. It’s just a shame about your mother.”

“She’s wandering in happier places Dad. It’s OK”.

His shoulders began to shake again.

“I don’t know what to do, I don’t know what to do”

His body might be frail, but his mental faculties were fully active. He didn’t understand dementia and he couldn’t fathom his wife of sixty years no longer remembered much of it.

“There’s nothing you need to do or are able to do Dad. You and Mum and both safe and everything is OK. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

I waited until his sobs subsided and gave his bony shoulders a sideways hug.

“See you next time Pat!” I called across the table.

“Bugger, Bugger, bugger...” was the response. I wasn’t sure she heard me.

“Bye Roy.” He at least waved and nodded.

As I passed down the corridor Dottie wove her way in front of me. She had clearly finished her lunch quickly or not eaten at all. I couldn’t discern her mutterings, but she started to follow me towards the front door.

“Time to head back to your room Dottie?” I asked. “Or watch TV?”

Dottie had never been one of the TV crowd, but you never knew. She had once been a nurse and part of the resistance during World War II in Europe. At 95 she was physically agile but over the past twelve months I’d watched her mental decline into a shadowy world of her own imaginings.

Clearly, she wanted to head out the door with me. I looked around for a nurse, but everyone was busy in the dining room.

“Dottie? Can you sit here for a minute?” I sat her on a chair in the foyer.

“I’ll be back later, OK?”

She nodded and I went to punch in the code to exit the building. I made it out and waited for the doors to close again to ensure Dottie hadn’t followed me.

Breathing deeply of fresh sweet air I made my way to the car rummaging around in my bag as I went. I snagged a small pack of tissues but found no keys. Where had I left my keys? I checked every pocket of the bag again then stopped to consider. I realised I had left them on the side table in Mum’s room after depositing a basket of goodies there for her.

“Bugger.” I muttered.