

Stopping All Stations

Now was a good time for the dead ones to pull into my station.

Without help I was never going to have enough puff to blow out the 101 candles standing like a wax forest on the cake. The red ribbon neatly bowed at its white iced waist reminded me of a knife cut to pale flesh.

But they could snuff the lot without so much as a shift in the breeze or a flutter to the flames.

‘Come on Grandma Clara, we’ll help,’ all the little ones chorused.

In the absence of my less visible guests, I was glad they were here. Already their little mouths were puckering up for the big blow. Trouble is, I didn’t know who’d add more spittle to the icing – them or me.

After the last hip, hip, hooray was shouted, I creaked my question mark spine back into the soft vinyl of my wheelchair and wondered if this year my birthday wish would come true. I couldn’t be bothered going through all this again next year.

Ah, there’s another of the little ones come to use the rubber wheel of my chair as a teething ring. There’s always one or another keen to take in the view perched up on the old relic’s lap, suffering a bristly chinned cuddle before dashing off to the next exciting adventure with a cousin.

Oh good, they’ve started arriving. There’s my sister. As I’d expect, she hasn’t wasted a minute scowling at my granddaughters in their short tops and even shorter skirts. She never did shed that none too revealing spinster grey she wore with the piety of a nun’s habit. Not even when she died.

‘Hello, Grandma Clara. Smiling at the day, I see.’

A tall man moved into blurred view through the thick smoke that hangs in front of my eyes these days. Kneeling to my shrivelled level, he gripped both my hands. The bones must feel like a bundle of small twigs held together by chiffon.

‘You look marvellous,’ said my grandson, he a grandfather himself to a one-year-old.

‘Oh, I don’t know. I think the last couple of years are the ones that spoilt my girlish good looks, don’t you?’

‘You’re still a beauty to all of us.’

We both know he’s talking a load of rubbish but I smile graciously, knowing he means well. Nobody looks good at 101.

We all start off with skin like a piece of unused paper, but crease it enough times into a smile, a laugh, a frown, a grimace and eventually those folds stay. And there’s no beauty in this wheeled contraption. My scrawny legs, scarred with brown patches of healed and healing varicose ulcers, threaten to bounce right off the supporting footplates from the tremors of Parkinson’s disease.

It's an effort to hold my head off my chest anymore. But I suppose you can only expect so many years of good posture from a spine. Bend and twist it enough in a lifetime picking up dropped coins, broken plates, dirty socks and the supports go, just like the elastic in the waistband of a pair of old knickers.

Little remains of the young girl who bounced through life as if it were a trampoline. The same girl who witnessed steam losing to diesel. The blonde hair, once thick as a horse's mane, is now white as sun-bleached bones. The contour of my pink scalp peaks through, even shaped with hair rollers (on special occasions like this) and held in unmoving waves by half a can of L'Oreal supreme hold. It's a type of nudity of the aged, a bit like glimpsing someone's body through a steamy shower-screen. My once fiery cheeks are now hollowed, angular ridges draped in folds of loose flesh the colour of over-boiled meat.

For those who bother to look into the watery blueness of my eyes, they'll see there's an ember from my youth still glowing, hinting at the mischief to be found in a day. Age can't snuff everything.

'Sorry, dear, what was that you said, you're worried?'

I do find it tiresome trying to fathom the words of faded voices.

Who is it, anyway? Ah, at last, she's come out of the fog. Janice. For someone who fought to sing above everyone else in the school choir, she sure does speak in whispers with middle age.

'Yes, it is a lovely party, Janice. So good of everyone to come.'

'The patio. I said it's warm, Aunt Clara, out here on the patio. For the time of year it's warm. Very warm.'

Got the key word now, thanks, Janice. Warm it is. Guessed that one wrong. She should've spoken up in the first place, everyone else does.

My ears were the second body part to receive a condemned notice in the doctor's demolition report. The first was delivered, years earlier, to the hammock of muscles that was supposed to stop my womb trying to visit my knees. No amount of underpinning could fix that problem. The Government saved the day on the hearing front, though, with a pair of identically unattractive hearing aides. That shrill noise they make could send dogs running. Always gets a laugh when I call, Kettle's boiled, though.

That's why I took to turning them down. Which could be where it all started. Probably answered a question one day about my memories of The Titanic sinking with a, Milk and one sugar, please, and that was that. Next thing, I've got all the do-gooders finding me new accommodation.

'Hello, Mother, Margaret here. Enjoying the day?'

Ah, speaking of do-gooders, my daughter-in-law. Seems the death of my son gives her more spare time not to visit these days. Not that I can see him here yet. He's probably still at home doing the vacuuming.

'Yes, Margaret. Couldn't be more pleasant even if Doctor Phillips had done a better job on the cataracts.'

'That's nice, Mother.'

'Children well, dear?'

'Very well, thank you. James said to say sorry he couldn't make it. Another merger, you know.'

'My, he does merge a lot.'

'Oh, there's Father Donaldson. I'll see if he'd like another of my scones.'

Poor Father, that extra dollop of whipped cream will have to be swallowed with another charitable offer. Lets hope it's to arrange the church flowers. At least I'd get a good mix at the altar when my coffin's parked in front of it.

Didn't think I'd be lucky enough to miss one of her faithful old hound pats to the head before she goes. I barked like a dog back at her once. The way she jumped kept a smile on my face for a week. I wonder if she's done the round of the display cabinet yet? She's been eyeing off that Shelley tea set of mine since her first invitation to dinner.

'Yes, it is bright in the sun. Thank you for the umbrella, my dear.'

'Sorry Mother, did you say you wanted an umbrella? I can take you inside if it's too warm.'

'No Catherine, I'm fine now, thank you. Your father's taken care of it.'

My daughter doesn't know what to make of me half the time. The look always says the same thing though, What if it's genetic?

If she could see her father beside me, now twenty years dead, holding an umbrella above my head, she'd worry less about her future, knowing that I was it.

Good, the little paper packets of birthday cake are being given out. That's their permission to leave. I hope they take the hint and start going. Not that I haven't enjoyed seeing them, but I can't help think some are only here to pick over the belongings of the not quite dead.

The dabbed kisses of farewell on my cheeks start, along with grasping handshakes and words of goodbye, laced with tones of finality these days, and rightly so. The long distance ones, the once a year visitors, are probably wondering if they'll be spared the journey this time next year. Or worse still, they'll be back in a month to bury me.

Father Donaldson pulls a chair up beside me.

'Happy Birthday, Clara.'

'Thank you, Father. Pretty well all the flock in attendance today.'

'Yes. If I had as many in church on Sundays, I'd be pleased.'

‘You need to offer tea and cake at half time.’

‘I don’t think the parish budget would stretch that far, Clara.’

‘Shame, you might see the likes of me turn up occasionally.’

‘I know you’d be there if you could.’

He wouldn’t be so sure of my devoutness if he could see my late brother standing behind him. If he could, I think he’d take the Lord’s name and use it in a way that’d have him on his knees doing ten Hail Mary’s the minute he got home.

My brother is there though, and as I last remember him – leaning nonchalantly against the verandah post, arms folded, legs crossed at the ankles with a smile full of tricks creasing his face. Such a waste him dying young at Gallipoli.

I wave back at him.

‘Is there a queue of well wishers behind me, Clara?’ asks Father Donaldson looking over his shoulder.

‘Only those visiting from the past, Father.’

I do tend to make people shift uneasily in their seats. Maybe things would be different if I’d been less honest. I’d still be the one deciding what I’d wear each day.

I wouldn’t mind if I had gone senile like Lil Baxter up the road. Not knowing how old you’ve become and the body part failures that went with it. Not so pleasant for the family though. Especially if you tried to do the weekly shop in your nightdress like she did. And poor Nance Whittaker, her husband got Alzheimer’s before he was an old man. She said he’d walk into the lounge wearing nothing but a smile. Not that that in itself was entirely unacceptable, she agreed, but he used to do it when she had a group of lady friends round for morning tea.

At last, everyone’s gone. Only my daughter and me left.

‘I’ll make a pot of tea before I ring for the taxi to take you home, Mother.’

Home took on a different definition once I couldn’t lift a kettle or peel a potato. The Midway Nursing Home (surely I’m more than halfway?) is no place to hang a hat or entice families to gather.

The dimly lit common room there reminds me of a factory assembly line. Green vinyl chairs, tastefully covered with creased incontinent sheets, are placed around the perimeter of the room in a conveyer belt of seats to the front door. As someone doesn’t get up in the morning, we’re all moved round one and someone new takes up position on the line. I’ve been at the front of the queue some time now. The bolshier ones keep getting issued their tickets ahead of me.

‘I expect even Mavis Wallis won’t keep me awake tonight,’ I said to Catherine when she came back into the room.

‘I would have kept you here with me if I could have, Mother. You know that.’

Both our husbands are here now. Leaning against the mantelpiece in their wedding-cum-funeral suits. Old friends to me, and each other.

‘We know, Catherine.’

‘There’s no third party to this, Mother. It was between you and me, remember?’

‘I remember. But third parties make such good company, don’t you think?’

‘You didn’t think any of the third parties I got in to help were good company.’

‘They were strangers. Strangers can be so intrusive.’

‘You left them in no doubt of that, what with all the fuss you made every time they came to shower you.’

‘But male community nurses? What business have they wanting to wash old women?’

‘Mother, they’re professionals. That’s their job. Accepting their help might have kept you here with me longer.’

‘Hmm...perhaps.’

The way I see it, once she got that Power of Attorney signed I was packed out the front door quicker than a Kirby salesman.

‘I see you’ve swapped a few of the paintings around.’

‘Yes, I hope you don’t mind. I felt like a change.’

‘Your father and I always liked the landscape over the fireplace.’

‘It’s in the hall now.’

‘I’ll tell him he has to go out there if he wants to look at it then.’

‘He wouldn’t mind me moving it, Mother.’

‘Oh yes he does.’

I lift the cup on its shaky course from table to mouth. The tremor in my hand leaves a brown puddle of tea in the saucer. Droplets fall down the front of my good lilac dress.

‘Does it frighten you, Mother?’ Catherine asks, dabbing at the front of my dress with a serviette.

‘Does what frighten me?’

‘Passing...away.’

‘Oh, am I frightened of dying?’

I look around the room at the people I have loved in my lifetime and we smile at each other. We all know old age is the cancer everybody gets, not measured in severity by how much time left, but how much time to go.

‘No, Catherine. Death when it comes will be like a hot water bottle in a cold bed – something cosy to look forward to.’

‘I won’t leave you alone, you know, when the time comes.’

‘Oh, I shouldn’t worry about that, Catherine. We’re never alone, not ever.’

'I'll start clearing away the mess. You rest here before you have to go back.'

'Worse things could have happened to me,' I called after her.

Typically, my words fell on ears deafer than mine.

Others have arrived now – my mother holding a newborn swaddled in a yellowed blanket, a second cousin, an old school friend.

Looking at them, I know I keep missing my train home. They've all taken their ticket to ride but I'm left sitting on the platform.

Soon I'll find the ticket master and then they'll speak to me.

'Come on, Clara, hop aboard,' is what they'll say.

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