

Operation Greyday

During my visits I would make tea and we would chat mindlessly on the sofa, held together by the illusion of a simple normality, while underneath I felt a deepening sadness at the slow erosion of her mind. That day the house was worse than usual. Cold, with dirty dishes in the sink, curtains dragged half closed, a bad smell from the bin, an empty fridge.

“Mum, we need to find you some proper live-in help. It’s getting urgent.”

Her baffled, distant expression gradually focused in on me, then a frown flickered across her vacant face.

“I don’t need help. I don’t want any nasty busybody telling me what to do. Now stop your nonsense and put the telly on, so I can watch that nice new Prime Minister.”

“Mum, you’re not coping, you need – “

In a startlingly fast movement, she reached out to pinch the flesh on the back of my hand and twisted it sharply.

“Nasty, nasty girl,” she hissed, a vicious rage contorting her face. Her eyes flashed dark, and for a second I glimpsed the desperate fear of a cornered animal hiding behind the anger.

Something about the shock and pain of that awful moment inspired me.

“Ouch! Alright mum, since you’re coping so well, maybe you could help someone else. You may not have heard about Operation Greyday, run by the Prime Minister?”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Operation what?”

“Very hush-hush. I heard about it from his great friend, your doctor.”

“Doctor McGinty knows the Prime Minister?”

“Best friends. Anyway, it’s tough running the country, and the Prime Minister wants the advice of our most senior citizens. And guess what, when Dr McGinty called me yesterday he asked if you would like to be the very first special adviser – imagine that!”

“Special adviser to the Prime Minister...?”

She tailed off, vague and uncertain, and I pressed home my advantage.

“Of course, it would mean that a top scientist, from the Prime Minister, would need to come and stay here with you. To gather information, that sort of thing.”

She stared at me for a long moment.

“I shall discuss it with Dr McGinty in person, this afternoon.”

And I was doing so well. But as I’d expressly reminded her, I was here for Mum’s dementia review. In one hour, with Dr McGinty. Too soon for her to forget this conversation. Damn.

"I need a specimen jar," I blurted out as we checked in with the receptionist, "Dr McGinty says." She frowned at me and peered at a screen.

"No. He doesn't. Not for this review."

"Please."

"What? I'm sorry, stocks are low, so, no."

I reached under the screen and grabbed one, right in front of her. She gasped, outraged.

"Miss Clarke!"

I muttered an apology before retreating to the furthest chair in the waiting room with mum. The receptionist whispered urgently into a phone, her frightened gaze on me. Desperately, I stuffed a message into the small bottle: my hastily written account of the entire fantasy, and Dr McGinty's exalted role in it.

Mum's name came up on the board. As we approached Dr McGinty's room he opened it himself. He was the senior partner in the practice, tall and distinguished, always in a finely cut suit. His noble face was marred by a frown of irritation.

"Miss Clarke, what on earth is going on? Jenny called through, she's very upset, your behaviour is frankly unacceptable..."

I thrust the specimen bottle into his hand and grabbed mum's arm.

"Mum, I left something in the waiting room. We have to go back there. We'll wait," I said, forcing Dr McGinty backwards as I slammed the door in his face.

I dragged mum, baffled and distressed, back to the waiting room and the receptionist's thunderous scowl. She picked up the phone again but replaced it without speaking. We waited. Mum's name came up again.

At his door, Dr McGinty glared at me.

"I can explain," I began, but he hushed me with a raised hand, then beckoned us both in. I cringed in the corner, shame creeping up from my toes and flushing my face.

"Mrs Clarke," he began, as mum sat down, "before we begin, there's something important I need to discuss with you. And your daughter."

My heart sank as I contemplated the mortifying likelihood of being struck off the patient list.

Dr McGinty fixed me with a disapproving gaze before turning to mum.

"Mrs Clarke," he said, "for your dedication to Operation Greyday, my good friend, the Prime Minister, thanks you."