

It was 5:44am and Edna's curtains were open. She lay awake after an uneasy night and watched as the sun slowly coloured in the sky; the strokes of light gently brushing up and over her pillow and filling in the cracks of darkness. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to dip in and out of consciousness, catching the tail-end of her dreams in preparation for the day ahead.

At 7 o'clock, it was time to creak out of bed. 'Right', she murmured to herself with determination as she began the first of a thousand tiny steps. Once she was on her feet, she shuffled her way through her bungalow to the kitchen with her long cotton nightgown stuttering around her ankles as she moved. She made herself a cup of tea and poured a bowl of muesli before reluctantly adding a few flakes of salt to both. After picking up the paper, she wheeled her breakfast feast back to bed on her trolley and propped herself up to take a spoonful of cereal. She grimaced as the sweetness of the dried fruit once again failed to mask the salty supplement, but she dutifully swallowed it down to where it would theoretically do some good. She opened up the daily news as a distraction, but found bitterness there instead. Turning it over, she reached for a pen from her bedside table and began work on the crossword puzzle.

An hour later, the paper lay discarded on the floor, littered with dirty black scribbles of answers and corrections, and corrections to those corrections. Edna decided she would like to get ready. She sat on her chair in the shower and let the water flood over her; trickling around and in-between the places she'd almost forgotten. After rinsing the remaining white wisps of hair that had stuck with her through thick and thin, she turned off the water. Once dry, she powdered and moisturised and combed the appropriate areas before examining the reflected result. She squinted at the folds and creases, and tried to find the face underneath.

Back in the bedroom, she squeezed into her undergarments and pulled out the shirt and trousers she had planned to wear. They were simple and comfortable; the trousers were beige and loose, the shirt was soft and pretty. Now that she was up and dressed there was little else for her to do but wait. She sat in the living room and looked out at the view through her patio windows. Since the house was on a hill, she could see the edges of trees in the far off distance and the purple shadow of the moor beyond them. Closer to the house, the garden flowers were still bright and blooming, even with the threat of autumn approaching. The gardener would be coming again on Thursday. The birds were singing and Edna sat and looked and listened.

At 11am, the doorbell rang. Startled, Edna realised she had been asleep. She gave her shirt a sharp pull to smooth out the creases and went to open the door. It was her daughter Helen, as expected. Her arms strained under a pile of foil-covered dishes and she hurried past with a quick, 'Hello, Mother!' Once the plates were safely settled on the kitchen counter, she turned to give Edna a kiss, only to exclaim, 'Oh, I thought you'd be ready by now'. Edna glanced at the hallway mirror to find her hair had been squashed up into a sort of cockatoo plume from the awkward angle she had occupied during her nap. 'Oh dear,' she said, 'well, I was ready, but –' Helen hadn't stopped to listen and was busily laying out a fancy tablecloth, unwrapping the food she'd brought, and placing each dish in a mysterious pre-ordained configuration. Edna went to wet a comb in the bathroom and re-shaped her feathers. When she returned, she eyed the dishes with suspicion. Helen had a very 'modern' approach to cooking and liked to involve ingredients such as seaweed, spinach, and lentils as often as she could in countless combinations. This birthday buffet was a cornucopia of dark greens and browns and Edna's stomach emitted an anxious gurgle.

A few minutes later, a second car pulled up with Helen's husband, Helen's three daughters, and their three boyfriends. They burst from it with a great collective giggle and bustled towards the house – their father following with his signature expression of pride and resignation. Each of the girls greeted their 'Nana' with tremendous enthusiasm and affection, covering her with kisses and excitedly introducing her to their respective beaux. With a bemused smile, Edna allowed herself to be escorted to her chair and watched as they laughed and chatted and shared stories about job interviews and moving in together and travelling across the world and learning French and history and sword-fighting and sewing and national anthems and everything. In a rare, brief pause, Edna said, 'I've always wanted to go to New Zealand', but there was no time for New Zealand when Rachel had been to China and Kate's boyfriend was from Sweden, 'but he actually mostly lives in Norway' and when there was no chance that Edna would ever be well enough to fly in a plane again.

Midday rushed past and Edna's other daughter Catherine arrived just in time for Helen to tell her what to do. Her two sons took up residence in an isolated corner of the living room so as to discuss things of actual importance uninterrupted, such as how much damage a level six rogue could do to a level four troll if the rogue had injured its knee fighting an orc, while her daughter Sophie and son-in-law went to see if they could help in the kitchen. Once a selection of plates, cups, and cutlery had been assembled, all that remained to make up the party were the guests.

These trickled in steadily, either awkwardly early, politely prompt, or apologetically late. Some had trotted up from just next door, others had journeyed from opposite ends of the country, and one or two seemed to have travelled through time, stumbling out of their black and white photographs. These old friends and distant relatives each in their turn went over to greet Edna with warmth and respect. They mutually dusted off the years and spoke of misremembered things, like that walk in the woods when everything was coated in bluebells and Martha fell in a bog and ruined her newly embroidered skirt, or when William caught what seemed like a thousand tadpoles from the tarn and proceeded to squash every one of them just so he could see their inky innards pop all over his fingers, 'he was a real nightmare back then, wasn't he?', and the way Susan would eat all of the currents and none of the bun, 'or was it all of the bun and none of the currents?' As they prattled and giggled and gasped, Edna became animated, radiant – gorgeous even. She was the Grandmother, the Matriarch, the Don.

The food was announced and encouraged, so everyone dutifully queued and collected little bits of everything. They formed small circles in the living room, so that each person felt excluded from every other conversation in the room (which they naturally assumed to be more interesting than the ones they were in). Those who had never met before exchanged summaries of their lives in the rehearsed manner of adulthood, and everyone looked forward to dessert. They were not disappointed. A miscommunication over who was in charge of pudding had led to an even greater quantity of sweet courses than savoury. There were blanchmanges, meringues, tarts, mousse, ice creams, and no fewer than three birthday cakes; one chocolate, one fruit, and one lemon. In the end they sang 'Happy Birthday' three times, so that no baker would feel left out. Edna almost fainted from the effort of blowing out each set of candles.

Once the guests had settled into their own areas of the room, no one noticed that Edna, due to the solitary positioning of her very large, central seat, was sitting alone. She waited patiently and looked around invitingly, but still nobody came near. Instead, she spotted a small pile of presents that had

been deposited on the little table beside her. She had made a point of saying she did not want presents, but 'there we are', she said under her breath. No one appeared to be paying her any attention, so she saw no harm in getting them out of the way. She picked up one that felt soft and began feeling for the tape along its openings. She quickly checked to see if anyone was watching then, with a slightly wicked grin, ripped it open to reveal a large, yellow, square-shaped thing. Fortunately, Edna knew it was a banana preserver, because she already had one. She made quick work of the next few, which included a pack of flavoured tea bags and a sugar pot from Sweden. 'That's from Tom and me, Nana', said Kate, who had finally caught wind of what was happening. 'Oh mother, are you opening the presents now?' said Helen. The room turned to face Edna. 'Well, yes, I thought I ought to', she replied. There were now only a couple of cards left. Edna carefully peeled them under a watchful silence and sheepishly thanked the givers, while the sprawling sea of wrapping paper licked at her toes.

'Time for a photo', said Catherine.

'Where shall we take it?'

'In front of the house, on the bank', answered Helen. While the back of Edna's house faced down the hill towards the town, the front looked on to a grassy path that sloped up into the woods. One or two rabbits were skipping about, having a last summer celebration, but they soon hopped off as the birthday party swarmed over their dance hall. Edna sat on a chair at the front, flanked by Helen and Catherine. Beyond that, the group was a disorganised jumble of grandchildren and guests, unsure as to how their position in the photo would reflect their relative significance. Helen's husband elected himself as photographer and began his own private samba; sashaying back and forth to get everyone in shot. Catherine's sons puffed out their bellies and stood tall, while her daughter and nieces sucked theirs in and shrank under the gaze of a camera that might show something they didn't want to see. The older women, who had seen enough, stood with their feet apart, firmly on the ground, arms by their sides, fiercely present and ready to be recorded as such. The men they'd brought along didn't know how to stand and tucked themselves into their shadows. Several clicks and flashes later, the guests looked at their watches and realised it was time for things to wind down. As they had trickled in, so they trickled out.

By half-past four, only Edna's daughters and their families remained. All were busily occupied in clearing things away and packing up ready to leave. Helen and her lot were heading off to a house they owned in the Lake District for a quick holiday and Catherine's family were hoping to have a special dinner in town before the long drive home. Someone fleetingly asked, 'Isn't Granny coming?' but no one seemed to hear. Edna watched as they hurried around her. Soon the house would be quiet again. Shortly before they were due to leave, she announced that, to her surprise, she had enjoyed the party after all. 'Oh good, mother, I'm glad', said Catherine.

'Perhaps we'll have another one next year', added Sophie.

'Yes. Maybe', said Helen, a little dubiously, before heading out to the car to squash in the last of the suitcases. She and her family left first; giving assurances that they would visit again soon and wishing Edna one last happy birthday. Catherine and the others were ready shortly after and once kisses and hugging were done, Edna waved the car goodbye. As suddenly as that, she was alone again.

She defrosted a stew from the freezer and boiled some carrots and potatoes before sitting down at the table for her evening meal. After wiping up the last of the gravy, she washed the plates and pans in the sink, and felt the soapy water trying to wrinkle her wrinkled fingers. She returned to her chair

in the living room and began a second attack on the morning's crossword. No more successful than the first, she sat back and allowed the exhaustion of the day to settle as she watched the birds play among the trees and the flowers. The gardener would be coming again on Thursday. As the sun set, she reversed her morning preparations and slipped back into her nightdress. Slowly trundling into her room, she paused and quietly looked towards the empty bed on the other side, opposite her own. After a minute, she moved to close the curtains, but changed her mind. Instead, she opened a window and let the night roar in. That night, Edna lay in bed with the stars and waited for the next sunrise.