

## No particular place to go

It's one of those days when daylight hides behind the duvet. Stella can just about make out a fine drizzle, through windows that haven't seen a rag in years.

She removes her spectacles, reaches tentatively, picks up a cloth, then wipes each lens with laboratory precision.

Yes, definitely drizzling. Best wear a raincoat.

Stella operates a switch to her right. Her chair begins its slow, upward progress.

Laced-up feet - a small victory - contact the floor.

The carer, whose name Stella struggles to recall, spoke to her in that tone reserved for the very young, or very stupid:

'But Stella, love...'

*I'm not your love. My fees help pay your wages. And if my son was able to take care of me, I wouldn't need you!*

'...you don't need your outdoor shoes on today. The visit to the mall was last week, remember?'

'Yes, that's right, it was, wasn't it?' Stella responded meekly, turning her head upwards with an innocent smile. 'But I'd like them on all the same, if you don't mind.'

She held out her feet in front of her - both legs, and jaw, set like dry concrete. And so, sighing, the carer placed a shoe on each of Stella's feet, pulling the laces into a double bow.

Stella feels a pang of guilt, remembering her carer. Did she say she had recently lost a brother to the virus? It's hard to recall details like that, these days. She didn't mean to be unkind, about the wages. Poor woman is only doing her job, and compassionately at that.

She's the one that gives Stella a kiss goodnight, and tucks her in bed before she goes off shift. Stella wonders where or who the carer goes home to. It occurs to her, that the carer probably sends money overseas when she can spare it, to pay school fees and suchlike. And let's face it, the wages aren't ever going to pay a mortgage, or fund exotic holidays.

Pushing empathy to the recesses of her mind, Stella wriggles her toes, enjoying the solidity of proper soles, and leather support. She claws at her walker. Pulling herself fully upright, she turns to face the wardrobe. A familiar hot-poker pain in her right hip brings unwelcome tears.

*Damn! I meant to get my painkiller off her when she came to get me dressed.*

Stella clutches the handles, simultaneously pressing downwards and raising her shoulders. She tries hard to remember the visualisation she was taught by a volunteer who did Reiki: warm olive oil being lovingly poured into spaces between bones. As she pictures it, she breathes with studied evenness, and walks as if on a tightrope, towards her next measured goal.

Positioning herself to one side of the wardrobe door, and steadying herself with her left hand, Stella reaches her right hand forward to pull the handle, revealing her coat. It's an inadequate affair in anything more than the lightest of rain, and too short to protect her legs, but at least it has a hood. She lifts the coat down, using both her hands, leaning her abdomen and thighs against her walker to steady herself. Breathless, she lets the hanger drop. Then, taking hold of the walker once more, she backs up to the bed, as if inching herself over stepping stones, in reverse.

She sits down heavily.

*Oh, bother! That's taken the stuffing out of me. Breathe. You'll be OK, Stella. You'll be fine.*

Stella eases first one arm, then the other into her coat. It takes several goes before she is able to locate the second sleeve, despite putting her more painful left arm in first, but eventually she pulls up the zip. Then, she once again reaches for her walker, wincing. The bed offers no resistance, as she presses her hips down.

*Oh, why did you back up to the bed, Stella? Why not go the extra few feet to your chair?*

She beats her fists on the bed, tears once more threatening her resolve.

*Pull yourself together, Stella. You'll just have to find the strength. You're not one for giving up, remember?*

Stella pulls her walker towards her, her lips pursing, then pushes down hard, bone grinding on bone. Simultaneously, she plants her feet on the floor, defying gravity. Her bottom lifts a few inches off the bed. Stella's arms begin to tremble, but she focusses on visualising herself upright. A ghost of a smile passes over her face as she finds herself standing.

Stella steps into the corridor, pulling her spine up as straight as she can. Then Babs appears, at her own doorway.

'Will you get me a cup of tea, please?'

Babs is always asking for a cup of tea. She can't remember having had one only ten minutes ago. Stella focusses determinedly on her forward progress. At the lift, she presses the call pad.

*Please mother God, don't let me bump into any staff.*

The lift door opens at the same slow pace as everything, and everybody in this place. For once, Stella is grateful. She has time to get inside and turn around, before pushing the button for the ground floor.

Once downstairs, the lift opens right opposite her route out of the building. All she has to do is open one door. A heavy door. Once more, Stella fights the temptation to give up, determined to find the extra strength she needs.

As she nears her gateway to the Big Outdoors, she notices a middle-aged man approaching the building, carrying flowers. She smiles indulgently at him, and he holds the door open with a cheery:

‘Have a nice walk. I see you’re wrapped up warm for it.’

She is free.

A perfume of honeysuckle, mixed with damp earth, flows seductively into her nostrils. She breathes in so greedily, she starts coughing. Not wishing to draw attention to herself, she scuttles on thin legs, out of the car park, and into the street.

The sense of being alone is at once liberating, and terrifying. Realising she hadn’t formed a plan beyond getting out, her feet move with a life of their own, as if she were a wound-up Coppélia. Stopping to rummage in her coat pocket with her ‘good’ hand, Stella finds her bus pass, and a few pounds. She never carries a lot of money. She has heard tales of old people being killed for less than the price of a round of drinks.

The bus stop is a few yards away. She dares not sit down on the bench, for fear of not getting up again, so Stella boards the first bus that comes along. Thankfully, the platform lowers, so she can position her walker on first, then step inside. But once having boarded the bus, Stella realises there is no vacant seat near the front. She looks around, acid rising in her throat as the bus begins to move. A young man, who Stella thinks looks about twelve but is probably a brain surgeon, stands up for her. She is just able to nudge her walker into the space in front of her as she sits down with a painful bump, looking up at the gallant youth.

‘Thank you so much.’

The man smiles, pushing his spectacles back onto his broad nose. He has corn rows. Stella has always had a soft spot for boys with corn row hair, and her stomach begins to ease. She lets out a breath, only then realising she has been holding it.

Stella looks up at the route map, showing the area she grew up in, and she knows now where she will get off, if only she can recognise it. As the bus hurtles round corners, Stella's eyes scan the terrain, clutching her handbag to her.

'Where you going, lady? D'you want some help?'

Stella turns towards the young woman seated next to her. She has strong black hair, straightened and gathered into two bunches so that her face seems open, trustworthy. Stella notices with an echo of girlhood envy the girl's long lashes, and smooth, even skin, the colour of milky coffee.

'Thank you. I want to get off at Plumstead Common. Opposite the Links if you know where that is? I think it's probably only a couple of stops.'

'Yeah, that's right. Next stop, as it happens. I'm getting off there, too. Let me help you.'

'Thank you so much, young lady. That's very kind of you.' Stella relaxes her hold on her handbag, just a little.

'Hey, driver! This lady's getting off! Make sure you give her time to exit, know what I mean?'

The driver's 'Mm-hmmm' reminds Stella of Sundays, her dad toasting bread and dripping round an open fire.

Two minutes later, she is raising one hand to wave, as the young woman bounds off across the common. Stella sighs. Once upon a time, that would have been her, running off. She used to dance, too. And do gymnastics. She could walk on her hands, in fact. At least, she thinks she could. These days, it's hard to be sure what is real, and what she dreams.

Just two streets away, behind the Co-op is where she grew up. Stella stands at the zebra crossing, uncertain how she got here. A car stops, then speeds away in front of her. Stella falters, wobbling, then steadies herself, gripping her walker.

‘You wanna make your mind up, silly old cow!’

Maybe today is not the day to visit the old house. There will be other days. She turns her walker to face the common, and spots a wooden seat, under a tree. In the distance is her old school, where she learned to dream beyond the usual expectations of working-class girls. The seat looks dry. She backs up to it, then lowers herself as gently as she is able. She is in no rush.

A woman walks by, pushing a buggy with twins. One of the toddlers has her leg casually draped over the side, her hips enviably flexible. Stella can see dark hammocks under the mother’s eyes. She wants to call out and say she knows what it feels like, but instead, she sits, a spectator on other people’s lives.

Some children, boys and girls together, are playing football a little way off. In Stella’s day, girls didn’t play football. It was rounders in the park. But she has walked here, on this common, holding hands with her beau, and later, pushing a big Silver Cross pram. She had a life.

Stella feels a hand on her shoulder, then someone sits down beside her.

‘The rain’s stopped, I see.’

Stella remains silent, as hot tears cloud her vision. She looks straight ahead, battling with herself. She wishes him gone, but never gone.

She feels his hand reach out and touch her own, his fingers curl around hers, then his other hand lay across their two. The weight of it feels reassuring. Her lower lip trembles. He knew not to pull her hand into his lap, so as not to cause pain in her shoulder. She wants to wrap this moment in brightly coloured tissue paper, and store it in a forever place.

‘There’s no rush, Mum. I’m here now. We can stay as long as you like.’

She squeezes her son’s hand with the fingers he holds, wondering when it was that he started looking after her, rather than the other way round. But it doesn’t matter now. All that matters is he is here, with her, sitting on the common and watching the world, as if they were still a part of it, together.

1,939 WORDS (excluding title)