

The End Is Round

Her hands don't work as they used to. Won't work. But she'll try again. She'll concentrate harder this time, because Frank needs his pills ... or is it her?

She holds the bottle tight against her chest, tries to grasp the lid. But her fingers can't do it. Her hand shakes, and the bottle slips and lands with a plastic thwack on the bathroom floor, and rolls away.

She grips the basin, wrists wobbling. Silent tears splash the porcelain. When she looks up, it's a face she doesn't recognise. Who is this shrivelled grey woman, sallowskinned, with frightened, watery eyes?

She'll fight it. This isn't going to be the end of her. She'll fight to the end like poor Frank is doing, bless his heart. Bobby, and Tom at the grocer's, keep saying he's in a better place now. But Frank's in his rocker, so what do they mean? He can't leave, anyway; his Sydney Swans aren't up there yet, and what about his tea and Tim Tams every day at three o'clock?

It might be three. If she keeps her head down, then she won't see the clock in the hall.

Leaning back on her heels, she lets go of the basin, takes hold of the door jamb, puts her other hand on the wall, and makes it slowly up the hall – steady now – around the corner, past that sharp-cornered chair and into the kitchen. She clicks her teeth. Someone has left a mess again.

These cupboards are something she can open. Bobby changed the handles. But then, someone called Susan (or was it Suzette? Sue something) moved everything around. Said it'd be easier for her. Easier? It took her a week to find everything, and she had to drag that chair in, to find them. She'd taken Bobby to task when he'd next rung.

'She hid the Tim Tams! Up in the top cupboard! How am I meant to fix your father his tea? I don't like that woman; don't like her at all. Who is she again?'

Bobby had said something she didn't care to remember. Twice, when she told him about climbing on the chair.

There's nothing like a Tim Tam for strength. That's what Frank always said, as he'd lift his to whiskered lips with shining eyes. Dear man. He must be at work. She can't quite recall where he goes, the city most probably. She'd better have his biscuit too, for strength. She's sure Frank would think that a sensible idea.

'You've a sensible head on those pretty shoulders,' Frank's always said.

The sun slices through the kitchen venetians. They're too heavy to pull up. That Suzy woman put them down last time she was here, interfering busybody. Birds are warbling now – or is that the kettle? She can't remember if she put the kettle on yet. What's it doing in the fridge? What did she come in here for?

There's only one Tim Tam left in the packet. She has it for strength, to help her remember. Her can-open-almost-anything knife stabs the empty packet while she thinks. What was she doing?

But now she needs the bathroom. It's a slow shuffle back up the hall, placing her hands on the wall in the spots where someone has helpfully put brown fingerprints all the way. Getting undressed used to be such a problem; she couldn't unzip or unbutton. But Frank's pyjama bottoms are perfect. They're down around her ankles and the only difficulty now is – ooh dear – getting down.

Seated at last, she scans the floor. Bottles and jars, tubes of toothpaste, smooth white soaps. It's amazing how messy some people are. There are enough pills to open a candy store – look at the pretty colours! Her foot struggles to reach her hairbrush, and she almost loses her balance. Lucky the basin is there for support. Strength, that's what she needs.

She pulls herself to a stand, wavering and wobbling, lightheaded. Tries to haul the pyjamas up over her bony hips but could do with a helping hand. She pushes her raspy voice to travel to the living room. ‘Frank?’

Her thin blueing feet slide on things small and round. But it’s not a Pebbly Beach anymore, it’s not them running to the water’s edge with little Bobby, chasing the gulls, leaping the tiny waves. There’s no joy in this. No laughter any longer.

‘Frank, love? Could you come?’

He’ll be sitting in his old comfy chair in his felt slippers, cradling his tea. Perhaps he’s nodded off.

The face in the mirror looks like someone she knew. Something about the eyes. She shrugs it off, tries again to pull up her pants. Manages, but only just, and is left gasping, but eyeing all those sweets on the floor. One or two wouldn’t hurt, and it’s such a shame they’re way down there on the tiles, impossible to reach.

She runs warm water over her gnarled, veined hands. The sound is soft and nice, is a constant since she leaves it running. A small pill is glued to the edge of the basin and it’s a small victory when she wedges it loose and sweeps it into her waiting mouth. Pity there’s no taste, but aren’t there more behind the mirror? She jiggles the little door. It won’t pop open but there are sweets in there, she knows there are, if only she can—

It slides. Fancy! And there they are, a nice full box. Round, like dear little faces like man-in-the-moons, trapped behind their little bubble windows. These she *can* free: she does it with her teeth. Spits the foil, swallows.

‘Out you come, everyone.’ It takes her a while to get them all, but oh, the satisfaction. There’s a pretty tumbler here, and conveniently the water’s running.

She gives a long yawn. Maybe it’s time for a little lie down. But first, Frank will need his tea, and she definitely needs something for strength.

‘Let’s have a cup of tea, love. It’s almost three o’clock.’