

“Just go to Grandma’s and apologise.” His mother sighed, exasperated at the length of the conversation; she bent down continuing to empty the freshly purchased frozen food from the insulated bag.

“But she’s an old witch and she was horrible to you. I’m an adult now and I have an opinion.”

She stopped unpacking and stretched her arms high in the air realigning her spine. “Look I know she can be...challenging.” She smiled knowingly at her son. That was term they had used to describe his behaviour when he had arrived. Paul wanted to remain annoyed but instead he grinned in response.

“Yeh tell me about it.”

“Look we’re both busy people I have four children to care for.”

“Four! Not another one! Mum you do too much.”

“Aren’t you the one to be so bossy, what with preparing for uni, working at the post office and helping around here too?” She beamed at his proud blushes; he relaxed as she smiled warmly. “You’re an amazing son, you accept all the waifs and strays and you help them so much, I just give them cuddles, you give them a role model and it’s a damn fine one too.”

Paul rolled his eyes, his face flushed red with embarrassment. She leaned over the mountain of plastic bags and they embraced. Her skin was soft and she smelt of cheap slightly tacky perfume. “Don’t ever underestimate cuddles mum.”

She squeezed his shoulders and as they separated she stared up at him. “Oh I don’t. So?”

She looked down and continued to unpack allowing him time to consider.

“I’m on my way.” Paul replied, knowing she was right. As he turned to leave a pair of seven year old boys burst through the back door.

“We’re hungry.” They yelled simultaneously.

Paul surveyed the scene. His mother proceeded to help the boys make an after school snack, whilst continuing to unpack the bags. ‘Just cuddles’ he thought shaking his head. His mother was truly amazing and his grandmother was a harridan. He smiled inwardly, who would have thought before he arrived here that he would have known such a word, let alone be going to university. He felt proud and that helped him to be magnanimous.

“Mum, is there milk somewhere in there?” Gesturing to the bags covering the floor.

“Oh sh.., no, sorry.”

He smiled as she blushed, just stopping herself swearing. “I’ll call on the way back from the witch.”

“Paul she’s old, when you look in the mirror and your own death stares back at you, that’s when you’ll remember this moment and how you treated her.”

Paul could not help but impressed by his mother. “You do know that sort of emotional blackmail is against my human rights.” His mother laughed loudly.

“You’re a teenage boy; no court would count you as human.”

Paul scowled and laughed as he closed the door behind him. He could see Josh, the latest stray loitering in front of the house, refusing to catch Paul’s eye. He had been the same when he arrived, introverted and withdrawn.

“Best hurry up she’s unpacking the bags, it’s always the best time to be about.”

Josh grunted. “Shouldn’t I keep away?”

Paul laughed. “No dickhead, she’ll pay you off with treats to keep out of the way. I’ll fill you in with other tips later. I’m off to see the witch.”

Josh relaxed at his banter and Paul watched him shuffle towards the door.

17:22

As Paul meandered down the street he considered buying the milk first. He really didn't want to apologise to the nasty vindictive old bag. His father worked full time night shifts, his mother fostered children and that scabby dried up shrew had accused her of wasting her life. He knew all about her world travels as a famous model, he had been forced to sit looking through the albums often enough, but what did that matter she was still going to die like everyone else, how did that fame and glamour help her? He stopped outside the tall imposing terrace.

It was impressive she was still living alone without any help, she was active with the Women's Guild too and he respected her for that. He stomped slowly up the steps and reached for the brass door knocker and gave two sharp raps.

Marissa heard a noise it must be the post dropping onto the mat, she was expecting her Readers Digest to arrive and it would be pleasant to read that with her tea. She grasped the arm of the chair to pull herself to standing. She was always surprised by the wrinkles on the hands, the saggy skin made her cringe. There was one particular brown spot which looked like Antigua; she had had a great photo shoot there. Marco the photographer was stunning, his gentle brown eyes all moist and expressive and his thick black hair, he was incredibly sexy.

Marissa felt fear build; she looked at her left hand limp on her lap, without both arms she couldn't pull herself up. Her right hand caressed her face, her cheek felt numb, it must be a stroke she thought and grasped the arm rest again with her right hand. She glanced around, what time was it? The light from the stain glass was over by the Victorian tiled fireplace now, it must be past midday, no later than that; she must have been here all day.

A thought suddenly struck her, no one would find her. She had been unpleasant to her daughter and her grandson had been so protective of her, all that pent up adolescent angst had almost made her laugh. His mother was an angel and she was a bitch, she understood that, he was right. Marissa rested her head back and sighed, this was it, if she hadn't pushed everyone away she might have had someone left to share her last minutes with.

There it was again, the sound that had startled her. She tried to shout but her mouth felt slack and immobile. She looked wildly across the room for something to wave or throw.

Paul was puzzled, she had a routine; she was always in at this time. He knocked again then he stared at the letterbox at the bottom of the door. He knelt on the step and forced open the flap pushing hard against the bristles. The hall way was clear.

"Grandma! Grandma!"

He waited letting the scent of polish waft up from the floor. "I came round to apologise but you're not in are you, you old bat." He chuckled and stood up.

17:27

Paul hopped down the steps and headed towards the corner shop to get the milk.

Marissa concentrated hard and forced her torso forward, the newspaper appeared tantalisingly close on the table. She stretched out her rigid hand moving her middle fingers, the rest of them useless arthritic claws; she could feel the paper on her skin now. The sweat on her fingertips stuck to the newspaper as she curled her fingers back and forth slowly pulling the paper towards her palm. Marissa refused to panic; she concentrated on getting each word of the print first to her

fingers and then into her hand, it was slow steady progress.

The first word to reach her palm was 'Bear Market', what had all her money got her but a large forbidding property which was expensive to heat. 'Mutuality' was next, that's what she thought they had shared, she had believed that Marco had loved her, that they were meant to be together and that was an error of judgement based purely on the sex. He had preyed on her naiveté, but she had got the best out of that deal.

'Solitary', that word was accurate too. Over the years she had pushed them all away, everyone eventually abandoned her, but on her terms; except her daughter, her kind gentle daughter. Eventually she could feel the paper touch her fingers and she squeezed her hand around it and slumped back exhausted into the chair.

Marissa had always liked afternoon cocktails. Marco liked working in the morning whilst the light was soft, then back to the villa for swimming and drinks, then a light lunch before a brief rest. She was smiling inside and she wondered if her mouth was acting in unison with her thoughts and then as she sat alone she knew it didn't matter.

She slowly rolled her newspaper with her functional hand and held it like a baton in front of her. He had looked through the letter box if she could get this newspaper into the hall he would see it and know something was wrong. If he came back, if she managed to get the newspaper into the hall, if she didn't actually just die because of the exertion. She was alert enough to know that all those ifs meant it was highly unlikely, but she liked a challenge.

Her greatest challenge had been to get Marco, the love of her life to marry her. Those weeks on Antigua had been idyllic. It had only been at the airport with the arrival of his wife and children that she had realised it would never happen. Marissa had left the island taking her broken heart and growing foetus back home as souvenirs. When she considered her daughters shambolic life, full of children and routine it made her shiver. It was the pointlessness of it, what did she achieve? Her daughter was attractive, not like she had been in her youth but more intelligent and infinitely more generous of spirit, just like Marco.

When Marissa had explained about her daughter's real father she hadn't been angry or even surprised. Her daughter's expressive eyes had been unerringly supportive as she held her tight whilst Marissa had cried. Her daughter was special, and though she would take credit for some of those genes, she was a far better person than Marissa would ever be.

Marissa squeezed the newspaper tight and lifted her arm practicing the throw backwards over her head. Her arm ached, so she rested a while. The light was moving closer to the broken clock, she hadn't dusted the clock today there was thin film of dust across its face. The big hand was pointing at the 5, it was twenty five past something. If only the little hand hadn't broken off. She hadn't wanted to spend the money to get it fixed, the small plastic one on the cupboard would do, except she couldn't see it from her chair. Had she fallen asleep and missed him? The paper crunched between her fingers. This was her only chance; one, two, she raised her arm and threw it behind her. She heard the gentle swish sound of the newspaper hitting the carpet. A tear ran from her eye, it hadn't reached the hall; even if he came back he would never see it and she closed her eyes and listened to the waves.

The elderly lady with white hair in front of Paul wasn't as old as his grandma and she couldn't reach for the biscuits. He helped her and chatted happily at the check-out. Before she shuffled off into the street she turned.

"I bet your grandma is so proud of you." She announced and smiled as she headed outside.

He paid for the milk and bit into his chocolate bar as he headed for home. Paul stopped suddenly and sprinted back towards his grandma's house, leaping up the steps two at a time.

Paul banged with closed fist on the door. There was something wrong, his mother had always said trust your instinct and for better or worse he was. He crouched down on the steps and peered in through the letter box; he reached his fingers in and made a bigger space through the thick bristles. He blinked. There was a newspaper half in the hall half in the lounge; it had been rolled into a tube. Paul let the stiff flap slowly down, his grandma was meticulous she would never roll a newspaper and crease the pages. She would also never leave a newspaper discarded on the floor and he was pretty sure it hadn't been there when he last looked. He slumped, sitting on the step.

His grandma's neighbour stopped at the gate "Is everything alright Paul?"

Paul looked up and spoke. "No, have you seen grandma today? I think she's in there and needs help. I'm going to ring an ambulance."

Mr Thomas strode towards his door. "I haven't seen her today but I have a key, you ring for an ambulance whilst I fetch it."

Paul felt sick what if she wasn't in. Should he wait for the key? He looked at the door, normally he would wait but this was different, minutes could save her life. He rang for an ambulance and then he lay down on the steps and peered through the letterbox.

17:51

He could only see the hall; he strained to see the lounge at the end. Her favourite chair with its high back was in full view but she always faced away from the front door, she might be sat there hurt and alone.

"Grandma! Grandma! An ambulance is on its way, Mr Tomas is getting a key, everything is going to be ok, I'm here." He looked at his phone, should he ring his mum or keep talking to her? "Should I talk to you grandma? Should I tell you about my day?"

Marissa smiled weakly. He had returned to help her, he was so like his mother, he wasn't even her real grandchild, how could he be so kind? She tried to swallow down the emotion and focus on his voice. She didn't feel a second tear run down her face.

17:56

Paul found her slumped in her favourite chair. She seemed so small, as if someone had punctured her body and released all her fight into the air, as if her life was being absorbed back into the atmosphere one breath at a time. He reached for her hand and tried not to cringe at the sensation of her hard claw like fingers resting in his palm. She reached up her arthritic fingers trying to stroke his face; he held her weak hand against his cheek and smiled.

"So like your mother." She whispered.

He stared into her eyes and saw his own mortality lay bare, but he didn't turn away, not now, he would stay with her to the end. He was aware of the dryness of her mouth as she tried to speak; he concentrated on her eyes. As the paramedics thundered through the door, she watched Paul turn his head and she slowly let them close, this was one challenge she had achieved.