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Being Alone

by Vera Gajic

Maggie didn't like to be alone. Even more, she didn't like being with people. This was a dilemma she had been struggling with ever since her husband died fifteen years ago. She didn't like living with him particularly but she was used to him and familiarity was important. It was being with people she didn't know that she really didn't like. She didn't mind being with her daughter, Joy, but it wasn't reciprocated.

It was obvious Maggie wasn't coping alone anymore and Joy had been talking to her about moving into a home. She'd been doing research and thought she'd found the perfect Home just ten miles away so she could visit as often as she could. The thought of moving into a home full of people she didn't know, busy bodies no doubt prying into her business filled Maggie with horror but even she had to admit she needed more than the flying visit of carers helping her bathe and bringing food.

"Why can't I live with you and Adam?" asked Maggie for the umpteenth time.

"You know why," said Joy with a sigh, "Adam and I have enough trouble living with each other, if you moved in it would finish us off. You wouldn't want that would you?"

"Would it be so bad if Adam left? He doesn't treat you right and I think you would be better off without him. I'd keep you company and look after the cat."

"Mum, please, I know you don't like Adam but he is my husband and we are trying to make it work. We've got a tiny flat. You can hardly swing a cat in the spare room. Now let's go in and have a look," pleaded joy

" don't need to swing a cat Joy. I don't need much space at all."

They were sitting in the car park and even from there Maggie could feel the old people 'institutionalness' of the place. She wasn't sure what it was, maybe the key number pad on the door or the blue trimmings round the small windows. A cheap nineties building, she could tell the rooms would be small and poky.

Maggie was not giving up, the longer she pleaded the longer she put off going into the home.

"It's just five days Mum. They call it respite. Your carer is going away and it gives you a chance to see how you'll like it. No obligations. Now come on let's go." Joy got out of the car and walked around to her mother's side. She opened the car door as wide as it would go and got her Mum's stick out of the back but Maggie wasn't moving.

"I don't want to go."

Maggie felt like a five year old on her first day at school. Suddenly a memory came flooding back. She was peeling Joy off her legs and trying to offer her hand to a teacher but Joy kept a firm grip on Maggie's skirt and wasn't letting go. Maggie had hobbled into the school hall with Joy attached to her legs and standing on her feet. Finally inside Maggie and the teacher had prised open Joy's fingers and Maggie ran out of the school, late for work, with Joy's screams ringing in her ears.

"I was just thinking of your first day at school," said Maggie.

"Oh yes," said Joy, "I remember that. I hated you for a long time after that."

"So you know how I feel."

"Mum, I was five years old! I suppose you could say it was divine retribution," said Joy with a wry smile.

"That's cruel Joy - I had to send you to school."

"And I have to send you to a care home. Come on, up you get," said Joy hauling Maggie her out of the car seat and peeling her hands off the seat cover.

Five days later Joy was back in the car park. She was dreading going in to see how her Mum had got on. She'd not spoken to her at all, the staff had said it was a good idea to have a complete break otherwise Maggie would have rung every hour and that wasn't respite. She could imagine the fury on her face. Maybe she wouldn't speak to her for the next few days, much as Joy had done until she started to enjoy school and loved it more than home. Now that would be a turn up for the books thought Joy.

Joy edged around the corner of the communal living room hoping to see her Mum before she was spotted.

To her surprise there was Mum looking all spruced up and sitting next to a rather dapper looking old man holding his hand.

She had not expected this. Was this some trick. Mum hated everyone, had she developed dementia in five days.

“Joy Joy, over here,” she’d been spotted. Joy walked over slowly trying to work out what to say.

“Joy, this is Alfie, isn’t he a darling?” said Maggie. Alfie gave Joy a big grin. He reminded her of someone in the Carry on Films, a twinkle in his eye. Did he wink?

“Hello Alfie, good to meet you,” said Joy.

“Joy I’ve got some incredible news to tell you. Alfie and I are in love. I’ve never been so happy. We are going to get married.”

Joy was speechless. She mumbled something about going to the toilet and stumbled out to the reception. There she found the manager who’d shown her round weeks ago.

“Did you know about my mother and Alfie. I’ve just come to pick her up and she says she is getting married. What is the meaning of this?” Joy’s voice was rising to a sharp pitch she didn’t recognise.

“Ah yes, she asked us not to tell you. Alfie is irresistible I understand from the ladies. This will be his third marriage since he move in here,” said the manager as if nothing in the world was wrong.

“What happened to the other two?” squeaked Joy

“Oh they died sadly. He doesn’t like to be alone so he moves on pretty quickly.”