

Bourne
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workshops

Panic

by Rosalyn St Pierre

The first week, total bliss of just not having to do anything - if I didn't need to get up at sparrow's fart, I didn't; if I wanted a few beers, a whisky I had one, or two or more; if I wanted to watch the football, the rugby, the snooker, all night, I just slouched on the couch. What joy. And to think she was in a closed ward, no visitors allowed, so no trek to the hospital, no waiting for cancelled buses, just me ending a brief phone call with, 'Sorry love you're breaking up.'

But the truth was, she wasn't.

She was being mended, she was in the Repair Shop, skilled crafts people putting her back together, even fitting replacement bits and pieces, matched so you'd never guess what was hers, what was borrowed from someone else and what was new. No, it was me that was beginning to show those tiny fractures, that precursor of a landslide. I am not sure whether it was the realisation that having to put my socks and underpants in the wash with sufficient time to allow them to dry before wearing that bore into those early halcyon days like a tapeworm beginning to eat into my guts. Perhaps it was the day, the end of week two, I think, when I realised I had gone through the whole compendium of Meals-For-One offered by Charlie Bingham and Cook.

The fissure widened - a phone call -

'They're letting me out.'

I thought, better tidy up a bit, she won't be able to do much I suppose in the first few days.

'Oh great,' I say, 'next week?'

She laughs, I think she laughs, 'no love, today, can you fetch me?'

'I'm not sure, will they arrange transport?'

She doesn't laugh, 'no, you'll need to get a taxi, let me know when you'll be here and they will take me down to the main door.' She cuts me off - so orders have been given.

A taxi! The cost!

I phone her son, my stepson.

'Can you pick up your mother from the hospital? Taxis are so expensive and we might have to hang around...'

In my soul I have anticipated the answer, 'For god's sake Frank, I'm at work, I'm in Leeds. You married last year for the money, but let me tell you she hasn't changed her will so you'd take care of her, you selfish bastard.' And that is the end of that conversation.

I clean up, put the bottles in the recycle, put this week's pile of socks, underpants, the pyjamas that were getting a bit whiffy in the washing machine, she can turn it on later. I arrange a taxi for 2 o'clock. They ask if it needs to be one that would take a wheelchair. A wheelchair? What are they thinking about? She's been in hospital for an operation and in three weeks she must be back to her old self, but it is the driver who says, 'Three weeks, blimey that must be serious, you're lucky these days if they keep you overnight. Got everything ready for her?'

The fissure is beginning to develop into a crack, my structure was needing a strengthening scaffold. I stand at the reception desk while calls are made to the ward, I smile, it's like Argus waiting for the goods. A nurse leads this old lady before me, 'Hello Frank ,' a familiar voice, I look again, strewth it's her. The nurse pushes papers into my hands, 'She'll need care, be sure to give her medication at the right times, first at 6am last pills at 11pm, no lifting, no cooking.'

I gasp, 'I'm not a nurse!'

'So? You're her carer, get on with it.' says the nurse in a most unprofessional manner.

'Will they send someone?' I search in my mind for when I was a child in the village, 'A District nurse...each day?'

'You got to be joking,' a joint chorus from the nurse and my wife.

The taxi driver skilled in handling frail clients helps us into the taxi. I need as much support as her, how am I going to cope? What am I going to eat tonight? Don't tell me I have to finish my washing and perhaps, can I believe it, do hers? She leans against me, 'Did you manage on your own, I hope you've been looking after yourself?'

I think of the rather messy house, the washing up stacked the sink, the bed unmade and the chasm opens, I look into the void, I try to cling to the cliff face as panic becomes a vulture inside my body, trying to get out, pecking and flapping wildly at me.