

## A Woman's Work

"I can't abide pink slippers. I'm not a tart!" Irene's mother said. It was hard enough to buy slippers for gnarled, old, arthritic feet without having to worry about colour discrimination. Now Irene would have to take them back. Impossible shopping feats were down to her now. She spent hours in town at the emporiums for the elderly looking for things like long-legged flannelette knickers and slippers that weren't pink. There was no time to shop for her own clothes.

Irene was trying to hold her marriage together, hold down her job and leave hold of her adult children, who were driving her mad with their demands. The last thing she needed was another drama at her mother's. As she put down the phone she purposefully re-constructed a memory of her mother as a kind, caring, empathetic and helpful person. It wasn't entirely as she remembered things, but Irene liked to do the right thing and she felt she should be trying to return decades of love from the older-than-old woman into whom her mother had transformed, almost overnight. Irene had hoped her mother would come to terms with the pink slippers, given a few hours and her failing eyesight.

Irene had once visited an ancient tree. It was believed to be over two thousand years old. "Nearly as old as you, Mum," she had joked that day. Her mother was only in her eighties then and still on her own two feet. Now those feet had encrustations and knobbly eruptions just like the old tree. They had contorted with age, tiny foot bones supporting shiny marble-like growths under the taut, thin skin. Other areas were callused with thick flaky skin like plaques of veteran bark.

The feet were of no use now, much like the rest of the skeletal remains that were her mother. Irene was sorry for her but sometimes she also felt a little twinge of resentment. She felt one now as she shouted to Don, "I'm just popping to Mum's on my way to work. Bye!"

Irene's mother lived in a small convenient group of old people's bungalows just round the corner. Irene picked up the milk from the step on her way into the bungalow and shouted, "Hello!" loudly. That was the routine. She did that so as not to startle the old woman who didn't always hear the door open. She looked at the carers' notes on the

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kitchen work-top left for her daily perusal. Yesterday's read: *All good. Please buy more toilet rolls.*

"Thank God you've come!" her mother said.

Irene winced. "The carer will be along soon, Mum."

"I don't like her handling me like a piece of meat. Couldn't you stay and help me get dressed? Just this once." She whined it out like a spoilt child asking for more sweets.

"Please, Irene."

"No, the carer will dress you, Mum. What was the other thing? You rang me because you said the gardener had found something."

"God, yes," said her mother, remembering the importance of the issue. "I wanted to ring you last night but I quite forgot by the time the carer had finished all her flapping and fussing."

"Tell me then. I've got to get to work," Irene said, reaching into her store of patience for just a few more grains of a scarce commodity.

"It was the boy who looks after the garden for me. He found a snake. The back door was open and when he emptied the compost bin there was a snake in it and it moved so fast he didn't know where it went. He said it might have come in the house - into the kitchen he said."

Irene sighed. "I don't think a snake would like to come into the house, Mum," she said, "but I'll have a good look-round just to make sure."

Where would a snake go? Would it go to a dark place to hide, or would it be attracted to warmth and light and try to find its way back outside? She lay on her front and looked under the fridge. It was filthy under there. Guilt welled up in Irene's throat like vomit and she had to swallow it. She hadn't cleaned under there for months – perhaps it was even years. She got a torch and looked under the washing machine too, thinking it was all very well having a cleaner but they didn't do the difficult areas. She had to do all those, dragging

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out the sofa, cleaning the windows. She didn't have time for those jobs at home but she had to do them round here.

"No sign of it in the kitchen," she shouted.

Her mother shouted back, "What are you looking for, dear?"

Irene went into the dining room where a sliding patio door led outside. She looked under the sideboard and then gave a glance around the other rooms. It was nearly eight o'clock. She needed to get going. Her mother was calling her,

"What's going on, Irene?"

"Nothing," she said, "There's no snake in the house. Nothing to worry about."

Her mobile phone was ringing in her handbag. It was Don.

"Can you get some toilet rolls on the way home?" he said.

"Can't you? I'm really busy tonight. I've got to meet the grandchildren from school and come back round here to check up on Mum's medication."

"Take the kids to the shops with you."

"I'd rather not. They'll want sweets."

She could hear the annoyance in her husband's silence.

"All right," she said, terminating the call.

"Who're you talking to?" called her mother from her bed. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, Mum," she said, making her way to the bedroom.

"I'll call in later with Jack and Jodie. That'll be nice, won't it?" She kissed her mother on the cheek and closed her ears to any more delaying tactics.

Eight hours later she let the boisterous children into her mother's bungalow. She had fuelled them with cheap lollipops and jelly frogs.

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"Hello Great Grandma!" shouted Jack while he took his shoes off. He had a favourite question for her which he always enjoyed because she never gave him the same answer twice. "How old are you today?"

Irene interpreted her mother's silence as confusion. Poor old thing had probably been asleep and didn't know how old she was. Jack continued, "I'm seven!" Then he called Irene in a different voice. It sounded panicky. Irene and Jodie followed him into the lounge where they found a large African woman face down on the floor. It was Precious, the carer from Zimbabwe who weighed in at over 20 stone. Irene's mother was nowhere to be seen. "Find Great Grandma!" she yelled. She was trying to visualise size and volume so she could work out whether her frail mother would fit under Precious without any part of her showing. The thought of it passed through her like a skewer.

Irene was relieved when the children found her mother asleep in her bed. They soon put an end to that. She woke up with a start and began complaining loudly about the carers who had not come to get her up and left her stuck in bed all day long. Irene was meanwhile trying to roll Precious over but this lady was not for turning. Not by her anyway. The soft plush black skin was warm, however, so she wasn't dead. Irene reached for her phone as her mother called, "Irene! Don't leave me in here with these children! What's going on?"

"Nothing Mum," said Irene, "Nothing to worry about," and she called an ambulance.

Irene's mobile phone was ringing. It was her daughter Hannah.

"Are the kids OK?" she asked. "Do you think you could pick up some toilet rolls for me when you bring them back? We're almost out and I shan't have time to get to the shops."

"OK," said Irene, "Must dash."

She noticed the smell as soon as she entered her mother's room. "It stinks in here," she said.

"It's Great Grandma," said Jodie.

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"The carer didn't come. I couldn't get up to go to the toilet," said her mother. "You know I can't get up out of bed without help."

Irene rang Don. "You'll have to come and get the kids," she said.

"I can't."

"Mum's wet the bed."

Jack was now standing by the dressing table. He was trying to pull the head off the little wooden ballerina on the jewellery box. Jodie was stroking her Great Grandma's hair. The old woman hated people touching her hair and was swatting at the child with a claw-like hand and snapping, "Stop it! Stop it!"

"The carer should have seen to all that," Don said.

"The carer's out cold on the floor," Irene said. "I've called an ambulance."

Don still prevaricated. "I'm in the middle of something."

Irene wasn't falling for that one. She could hear the television in the background.

"Don, please!"

He hung up, beaten for once by the drama of the circumstances.

"Nanna!" called Jodie from the bathroom. "There's no toilet paper."

When the paramedics had taken Precious off to hospital and Don had taken his grandchildren home to watch a DVD, Irene got her mother up and washed her and changed her clothes. The old woman was subdued. She had been frightened by the paramedics, with their loud voices and big bags. She thought they had come to take her away.

"I hate being old," she told Irene, not for the first time.

"I know you do," said Irene. "Let's get you in the dining room while I change the bed. It's warm in there."

She was still sorting out her mother's bed when she heard her calling, "What's going on?"

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"Nothing Mum," she replied.

"Yes there is. Something's gone wrong with the door."

Irene abandoned the half-made bed and went to the dining room. There was nothing wrong with the door.

"No, it's fine, Mum," she said, but her mother was pointing at the patio door.

"What's going on down there?" she asked.

Irene looked at the bottom of the door. She bent down to move a long thin piece of black rubber draught excluder which was lying in a wavy line along the frame. She couldn't think how the grandchildren had had time to wreck that, but she would have to try to push it back on.

"It's just the rubber strip on the bottom of the door, Mum," she said. "Nothing to worry about."

As she crouched down she saw it move. "Aaah!" she gasped. Her mother asked, "What is it? What's going on?" just as Irene began to believe her eyes.

It wasn't a strip of rubber at all. It was a small snake! It had a beautiful yellow mark like a collar round its neck and Irene remembered that meant it was a harmless grass snake. With shaky hands she got a tissue box and tried to push the snake into it as it writhed and wriggled. Harmless or not, she wasn't sure she wanted to grab it directly.

"It's nothing, Mum. Don't worry," she said.

The snake was happy to slide into the box, but equally happy, in one long fluid movement, to slither out again. Irene felt its smooth skin against her fingers, its muscles rippling, pushing for freedom, eager for the outside world. Her mobile phone was ringing. She left the box and snake while she answered it. A nurse was calling to let her know that Precious would be staying in hospital overnight as she had banged her head very badly. She was a bit confused and kept talking about a snake in the house so they wanted to keep an eye on her. They thought she was remembering a traumatic episode from her childhood.

"Who are you talking to?" her mother asked. "What's going on?"

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"Nothing Mum. Everything's all right."

Irene went back to the job in hand, caught the snake and took it out to the compost bin. As she returned to the kitchen she could hear the chimes of her mobile phone again.

"What's that noise?" called her mother. "What's going on?"

"Nothing Mum. It's just my phone."

Irene could see that it was Don ringing.

"What is it?" she sighed.

"We've run out of toilet rolls," he said. "Did you get any?"

ENDS