

Suburban Waves

The room is empty, apart from the massive wall-mounted screen, the old man in the recliner chair, and me. When Sonny appears on the videocall, I can tell he's stressed; that something is bothering him. He's pacing back and forth, his shoulders stooped, and his eyes are downcast though his brow isn't furrowed. His face is in high definition on this top-of-the-line screen, an unwanted and unreturnable Christmas gift, and I notice how he's become puffier and more plasticised since the last time we saw him. *He's still following that ridiculous trend,* I think. I feel the old man's eyes on me. I sense his plea, 'Please, love, do not start one of your rants; not today'.

"Mum?"

Sonny's voice is suddenly blaring at a volume set for a large cinema audience. He did show me how to turn it down, but I can't remember how. Now, every time he rings, we're forced to listen.

"Mum?" he repeats. He only addresses me, as if the old man beside me isn't here.

"Yes, my love."

"Have you checked the drawers?"

"Yes, my love."

"And the wardrobes?"

"Yes, my love," I reply, trying to hide my irritation.

"And the- hold on Mum, I've got to take this," he says as points to the mobile phone he's taken out of his pocket. "I'll just be a minute."

He puts himself on mute, and his voice booms in someone else's ear.

How quickly our roles have reversed. Our son now the parent to his parents.

I'm cold standing here, in front of the window, watching the wind blowing a gale. With the windows closed the mustiness, a smell generally associated with the old, is obvious.

I could really do with a cuppa but there is nothing here to make one. *Never mind*, I think as I catch a glimpse of my reflection of the glass. I'm startled by my appearance, even though it has been steadily changing over the years. I look beyond, to the view, and consider how it too has changed with time.

When we moved into the neighbourhood, all those years ago, the land was bare, as if an enormous wave had covered it and in one powerful motion dragged everything that had once been on it, away, somewhere out of sight. Our home, this home, was one of the first 1960s architecturally designed homes to be built on the cleared plots of land. Now, smaller waves have been rolling in, taking our friends and their single-story terra-cotta roofed homes with them.

I watch as a young couple get into the shiny SUV parked in the driveway, where our former neighbours' home used to be and a boxy two-story house from a modern design catalogue now stands.

I smirk.

The wind rattles the window. I look to the old man. He looks warm under the crocheted blanket his mother made. His feet, snug in sheepskin slippers, protected from the draft coming through the floorboards. This weather is triggering my arthritis. The pain in my hips and knees is throbbing.

"Mum?" Sonny's voice is back.

"Yes, my love," I say, as I turn to face him.

"Sorry about that. Work is hectic. The sun has just risen here, and my workday has already started."

When will he slow down? Doesn't he realise how fast life goes? I keep my thoughts to

myself; I don't want to be accused of meddling again.

He continues with his to-do list, "Have you checked-"

I interrupt, no longer hiding my irritation at his micromanagement. "Sonny!" I say sternly.

"The removalists you organised were very thorough. They packed everything away."

"Ok, Mum," he says.

Something in his voice tells me he feels remorseful, but I can't see any sign of it on his face.

Perhaps this is difficult for him too? Perhaps he is sentimental? Perhaps he doesn't just value the new?

He tells me, "I just wanted to make sure you were ready."

My heartbeat quickens. I still have the fight or flight instinct though my body is too frail to do either. I had envisioned a different ending than the one that's about to occur. But I suppose that ending would have become too messy for a neighbourhood that prides itself on tidiness; with its trimmed hedges, leaf blown lawns, and its pristine swimming pools. We don't belong here anymore.

I shiver.

I look to the old man again. He's swivelled his chair towards the window. His eyes scanning, as if he's on patrol, monitoring the surf conditions. I don't ask him what he's thinking. He won't be able to explain his thoughts to me, not with words anyway. That part of him stopped working a long time ago. I continue to talk to him, sometimes just to fill the silence, but we don't need to speak to communicate. I wonder if, in the silence, he can still hear sounds from the past like I can; the car driving into the empty car port, squeals of delight, the patter of little feet down the hall, a fly screen door being opened and left to slam close, excited chatter, singing in the kitchen, and laughter so much laughter.

"Mum?"

"Yes, my love."

“I wanted to be there with you today.”

I’m relieved he’s not.

He’s looking down at his feet. He’s digging his right forefoot into the ground. He used to do the same thing when he was a boy, before he’d divulge his guilty conscious. I’m reminded of that hot summer’s day when he appeared in the lounge room while I was crouched down picking up pieces of broken ceramic that was previously a vase. *I’d never get back up if I tried to do that now.* His scuffed sand shoes, in front of me, the right one digging. The westerly sun was blazing in. I was hot and bothered. Sonny admitted that he was kicking the footy inside again. I looked up and told him, “I know, my love.”

I’m about to tell him the same thing now. I want to hold him in my arms, but I can only embrace him with my voice and my words.

“I know, my love,” I say gently and tenderly. I perk up and add, “But we’ll manage, won’t we, darling?” I look to the old man. He’s facing the screen again and he’s got his thumb sticking up from his rigidly curved fingers, his permanent claw. “See, your dad agrees,” I say. “Besides, it’s our job to look after you. And judging the way you turned out, we’ve done well. Haven’t we, darling?”

The old man slowly raises his arm. His thumb becomes higher. Sonny smiles at this and stops digging at the floor.

“I know you want to stay.” Sonny says with a sigh.

I nod and I bite my tongue. I don’t want to say anything objectionable; not today. I try to smile at Sonny with my eyes, so he thinks I’m fine, we’re fine, everything is fine. *The role of ‘Mother’ requires an enormous amount of acting.*

Sonny’s mobile is ringing again. He rolls his eyes, apologises, and says he’s got to go. I hold myself together as I say goodbye and the old man nods. Sonny ends the videocall, and he disappears from the screen.

I take a tissue from inside the cuff of my woollen jumper and wipe the thin creviced skin under my eyes, then I do the same to the old man's.

I desperately want to know how much time we have left, but I can't work out how to display the time on this blasted screen. My only option is to push through the pain in my joints to get myself to the reliable analogue clock in the kitchen. The removalists tried to pry the clock off the wall, but they gave up because they feared they'd damage both. *Ha! As if that matters now.*

I scoff.

Once I am on the kitchen's brown geometric patterned vinyl floor, I can see the clock's hands and its impartial face. I find myself opening one of the paint chipped kitchen cupboards out of habit. Its emptiness reminds me of our current situation.

The pain is becoming intolerable. I need to get back to the old man before I collapse.

I manage to shuffle back to the recliner chair without falling over, and steady myself against it.

"It won't be long now, darling," I say with a groan. The old man winks at me and pats the seat next to him. I pull my stiff body into the unfilled space. I rest my head on his bony chest and close my eyes. I take a deep breath, and hold it, in anticipation of the wave.

END