

JOURNEYS

My niece comes into the ward looking flustered. She's wearing a green velvet coat and a felt hat that resembles a lamington. Julia was pretty as a child but at sixty she looks sensible and worn-out. I don't mean to sound uncharitable. I am eighty seven and dying, and Julia has a kind heart. Here she is, my only visitor, bearing a cheery bunch of daffodils and two ripe pears. "I missed the train!" she says, instead of hello.

"Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere." I grin and Julia looks awkward, because we both know that soon I will be going somewhere but it'll be to the morgue feet first on a trolley. We've never spoken of my death directly. Julia fusses off to get a vase. I'm glad of the pears. Ripe fruit is good for the bowels, which morphine isn't. They look beautiful too, brown-skinned and blushing, as elegant as if they are in an ancient Japanese painting.

Julia returns with the flowers in a vase that's too small for them, and two mugs of tea. Vases are in short supply around here. Sometimes she can only find a jar. I don't tell her I had a cup of tea when the dinner trolley came round because it would disturb the comfortable rhythm of the visit. We'll drink the tea and eat a piece of shortbread from the blue tin in my drawer. Julia will fill me in on the latest antics of Ginger, her beloved cat. I'll tell her

exactly what I had for dinner and whether I enjoyed it, and I'll pass along any gossip I've gathered about the staff or the other patients.

"Oh Auntie!" she'll say in mock horror, though actually she loves a wee bit of scandal. Julia leads a very quiet life involving her cat, her library job and not much else. Nothing very fascinating has happened around here this week. The new patient, Mr O'Connor, is silent all day but yells out weird things in his sleep, and they sacked Spud, the orderly, for coming in noticeably drunk. That's about it. We'll talk of this and that, then after half an hour Julia will check the time while pretending not to, by slipping her arm beneath my line of vision and surreptitiously glancing down at her watch. At 8pm she'll give me a quick, dry peck on the cheek and head off to catch the 8.15 train home. After she leaves, if I'm in the mood and there's a good show on, I'll watch television. If not, I'll let myself doze off, remembering.

I don't know why Julia and I don't speak of my dying. I want to tell her that I'm not frightened of it. I've had a long life and it's been good. I have no regrets. I've outlived two husbands and enjoyed several lovers. I've lived in the house of my dreams beside a quiet river, tending my garden and writing my books. I've travelled widely, purely for pleasure. I've flown on every major airline, capered on Cathay Pacific, been pampered on

Emirates. I've visited Firenze in the late summer; wandering down a sunny alley I chanced upon the house where Galileo lived. I've eaten sweet figs with mascarpone on a leafy terrace in Spain, devoured cheesy greasy pizza at midnight in a blues bar in Chicago. I've tasted India in all her spicy guises: celebrated Diwali in Mumbai, lazed on the beach in Goa, helped in an orphanage in Calcutta. Perhaps I am worried that Julia will think I look down upon her and her quiet orderly life if I reminisce too avidly about my own chaotic, colourful journeys. Yet if I have learned anything, it is that each life has its own pattern, its own brightness and shadow. Each life is rich in its own way, and each has its joys and sorrows. Each departure includes the loss of leaving and holds within its kernel the anticipation of homecoming. Each journey had its beginning, its middle and its ending. I'm not scared of endings. One day Julia will come to visit me and the bed will be empty. I've asked them not to phone her when my last hours come. I like travelling alone.

"Julia," I hear myself say, "you know, you don't have to worry about me. There's no problem. When the bus comes, I'm ready to get on it."

For a brief moment, she's puzzled. Then Julia smiles and I see the delightful kid she was when she was eight, her cheeky face alive with sparkle and grin.

"Auntie," she says, "tell me about India."