

## Lockdown by Fran

Stooped over the walking frame she is walking away from me, along the hallway that I have emptied of any trip hazards on the advice of the hospital's Occupational Therapist. The left hand front frame wheel, as always, points in towards the skirting board, causing the frame to look wonky ahead of Mum's bent-over body. She is looking down at her feet, placing one very deliberately forward, and then matching it with the other, very carefully, like a small child on the stairs.

She is muttering again. I have given up trying to decipher the nonsense that comes out as muttering, she gets angry with me for not understanding, and frustrated too, and then is prone to slapping and shouting. It takes me back to being a child. Back then, pretty much as now, I didn't get much right, and her anger was quick to show..... I have a sudden, brief thought that she is probably easier to live with now.

She parks herself in her chair by the front window and raises her eyes to me, making a guttural sound, that I know means she wants something, and I guess that it might be a drink, or perhaps a biscuit. She likes biscuits. I can often win her round with one, especially a custard cream. I put the kettle on and stare out at the overgrown garden. I haven't been able to do anything to the garden since she came out of hospital. The gardener I found doesn't come anymore due to this plague. I can't go outside and leave Mum on her own, because she doesn't recognise, or remember any of her limitations, and gets up to all sorts of things if I'm not watching.

I make 2 mugs of tea, and add sugar to hers. I know she is too fat, that her diabetes isn't well controlled. She isn't supposed to have the sugar, but, honestly, when I don't add it she rages at not getting what she wants, and is unbearable, and, these days, nobody is coming here to check. Don't I deserve an easier life? I want to sit in my own living room without being berated in an unintelligible screech? I put her tea, with its plenty of milk and one spoonful of sugar, on a tea plate, with a custard cream biscuit, and place it on the table beside her. Her pale eyes rise slowly to meet mine, and she attempts a smile. Maybe today she recognises me. Maybe today she will be pleased to see me. But no, there is no recognition.

She makes a sound that could be a greeting, and reaches for the biscuit, dipping it into the tea and sucking it noisily. 'Shall we watch Bargain Hunt?' I ask her, and think that just might be a light of interest showing in her eyes. I put on the television, she flaps one hand until I turn up the volume, making it loud enough to hear in the city, and she squints at the set..... Now I shall have to go and hunt out her glasses.....

I find them by her unmade bed, the damp, wee-smelly sheets lie tangled where I have forgotten to remove them and shove them in the machine. I pull them off now, using them to wipe the plastic protector underneath, and bundle them into a ball. I can hear her grunting in the other room, and grab the glasses as well, hoping she won't get up and fall, trying to find them herself. I help her put the glasses on, ignoring her wrinkling her nose, maybe at my smelly hands, and leave her watching the television as I go to the washing machine and feed in the sheets. As I wash my hands I realise I am tired, and my back and

shoulders ache and my forehead is tense. It would be so lovely to see Dorothy, to leave her here with Mum and go outside for a walk in the sunshine. But no, Mum must be shielded, and that means she must not go anywhere, not that she shows any interest in doing so. But I would like to. No, I cannot go anywhere at all, for fear of bringing home this plague and infecting her. The doctor made that very clear. Mum must be protected. Worse, in my mind, would be me catching it, and nobody here to do the necessary for her. Nobody has mentioned that. What would happen if I caught it? Dorothy, is Mum's carer, and recently, since Mum got this way, our only visitor. Dorothy can no longer come on Monday, Wednesday and Friday for her two hours to help. So, now there is only me. Mum doesn't miss Dorothy. No, as long as she gets an occasional custard cream, and is potted and has dry knickers, she doesn't care. No, she doesn't even seem to notice who does it all..... But I miss her.

Bargain Hunt is ending, I can hear the music. Probably the whole street can hear the music. How different it used to be, when Mum could still talk, and still understood what the program was about. We would try and guess how much things were worth, and which team would win. Of course, we never really knew, because you can't anticipate who is likely to cough up how much in an auction, and anyway, we don't know anything about antiques. But it was nice to engage with her, unlike now, when she doesn't seem to understand anything, and rarely recognises me. I miss the talking, her advising me the jumper I was knitting should be a few inches longer because children grow 'uptheway' before they grow wider, and that would make it last longer.....Back then, early in the dementia, she used to say wildly inaccurate things, but I could still understand her back then, and we would laugh and make a joke out of her muddled-ness. Not like now, when she barely speaks and seems to understand nothing.

I sit back down with her. I have let my tea go cold. She has only drunk a little of hers, but the biscuit is gone. Her eyes are closed and her jaw has dropped, a line of dribble now leaves a wet trail on her blouse. I turn off the television, and drink some of my cold tea. The washing is spinning, I am waiting for it to finish so I can hang it over the clothes maiden, that seems to be life now. Waiting. I look out of the window, but there is nobody out there in the street.

I feel like there is nobody here in the house anymore, either.