



Joy Norstrom

Joy Norstrom is a Canadian writer and social worker residing in Treaty 7 territory. She enjoys sharing stories about the human experience, exploring the outdoors with her family, and reading late into the night when she should be asleep.

Whether Joy is enjoying a few minutes at the local coffee shop, working the 9 - 5 hustle, or discussing eyeshadow tips with her teenagers, she can generally be found in conversation. Why? She believes human connection and laughter keep her grounded in a muddled world.

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Flying the Nest

Joy Norstrom

Dixi Books

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Flying the Nest

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Joy Norstrom



The Voice of the New Age



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PART ONE



Chad: Fire & Ice

Uncle Martin traced his thumb over the embossed lettering on the package of disposable razors, the words a brilliant white against the emerald background. Quadruple Blades. Aloe strip for comfort. MEGA-PACK. By the way his mouth opened and closed I already knew he'd found fault in my shopping skills.

"Fifty-two friggin' razors. I'll be dead before I finish this pack, Chad."

I didn't let his comment rattle me. I'd heard it all before, besides he had more energy than most of his fellow residents at the Eldernest Assisted Living Lodge. He was a silver Lamborghini amid a collection of beige family sedans. Heck, he was a stallion; a living legend of masculinity.

Martin shook his head one last time and placed the razors beside the bottle of cologne and jar of hair pomade that rested on the cafeteria table between us. Jovan Musk aftershave, quadruple-blade razors, whey protein powder for his morning milk, and condoms. All items the onsite pharmacy didn't stock, yet Martin swore he could not live without. The man had priorities. And me? I was forever sheepish in his virile presence.

My uncle reached back into the shopping bag and pulled out a small metallic square and held it up toward the fluorescent lights.

"That one's not for the cafeteria, Uncle."

He wasn't listening. His attention was solely on the condom, turning it over in his hand, to look at the label.

"These aren't my usual brand."

"I know. The pharmacist threw it in. New product sample or something. But don't worry; there's a box of your regulars in the bag, too. Maybe you should put it away, okay?" The cafeteria was crawling with weekend visitors and I hoped the other patrons hadn't taken notice. The last thing we needed was another complaint about my uncle's moral compass. He was popular with his lady friends; he wasn't popular with their families.

Thankfully he took my advice and threw it back in the bag. I rubbed my nose, trying to block the smell of tuna casserole and industrial disinfectant, and casually looked around the cafeteria for a compact figure, black hair cut in a shining bob. She didn't seem to be working today.

"Things are moving in the right direction with Clara," Martin continued. "But I could keep things fresh with Felicity too. If I wanted. Time will tell, won't it, lad?"

I gave him a weak smile. I didn't wish Martin a life of solitude, it's just... how did he manage such a bountiful lifestyle? Whenever we walked the halls of the 'Nest, it seemed Uncle Martin had an admirer in every wing. Then there was me. I was less than half his age, yet couldn't seem to keep a single woman interested.

"Felicity... that's the one with the shapely—"

"You got it."

Felicity wore tennis skirts, shiny white runners and tight V-neck tops that displayed fleshy, tanned cleavage. Perhaps she did play tennis. Or had. Before the hip replacement.

"Decaf or regular?" At the sound of her voice adrenaline shot through my body. Where had she come from? I looked up to see a set of well-formed cheekbones and coal black hair. She held a carafe of coffee in each hand.

"Regular, please." We made eye contact and the old habit kicked in. Face on fire, I dropped my gaze.

She poured with practiced disregard. Coffee sloshed over the side of my ceramic mug and formed a puddle on the table. I took a deep breath and readied myself to thank her, but it was too late. She was off to the next table, and once again I'd blown my chance. What was wrong with me?

I made eye contact with my uncle, hoping my face wasn't as red as it felt. He ground his dentures together in a sort of jaw

twisting action and immediately started rummaging through the shopping bag again. I was not talking to him about this. No way. Instead I cleared my throat and returned to his favourite subject. "So, this Clara. Is she the one you play chess with?"

"That's the one."

"She doesn't strike me as... well... one of your regulars."

Martin nodded. "She's a class act."

When I'd met Clara, she'd been sitting across the chess board from my uncle, confidently moving her pieces from one square to another. She'd looked more interested in the game than in Martin, but what did I know?

By this time my uncle's curiosity had got the better of him. He drew the sample condom back out of the bag, held it away from his face as far as his arm would stretch and squinted his eyes. "Damn small print on this. Do you think it's lubricated?"

"Oh gawd. Let's talk about that later."

"You know, Chad, lubrication is pretty necessary at this stage of life. A little extra help in the moisture department isn't going to go amiss, especially as a woman ages." Martin tapped the table with his forefinger to emphasize his point. "You should be taking notes. You and the Missus aren't getting any younger."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm only thirty."

And as for the "Missus," Kate was no longer around. Hadn't been for several months. Not that I'd told Martin. We talked about his love life, not mine.

Anyway I couldn't blame Kate for leaving. As the lonely weeks turned into solitary months, it became clear she'd made the right choice. I had nothing to offer. It was unlikely lubricated condoms could make up for my inadequacies.

I took a sip of my coffee and looked across the dining room at the attendant's slender form. Christ, I timed my visits with my uncle to align with her damn shifts, but I lacked Martin's balls. Martin's way with women.

That gene had passed me by.

Uncle Martin called a short three days later. My phone vibrated on my desk and recognizing my uncle's number I decided to answer it. Martin did not, after all, text.

He didn't even email. If I didn't answer now, he would only

call back.

"Hi, Martin, I'm at work. I'll call—"

"I need more supplies." My uncle's plea reverberated through the phone. "That there new brand. You know, the sample you brought?"

I smiled politely as my colleague popped her big head over the half cubicle wall separating us. Janice was insufferable; she let nothing slip. I already knew I'd be getting an ear-full for breaking the unwritten code: Thou shalt not conduct personal phone calls in the office unless they involved your child's next dental appointment. I turned my back to her. "Alright. I'll bring them when I visit on—"

"No. *Tonight.*" Martin's voice cracked in a burst of excitement. "It's got to be tonight. Harold's on."

"Harold?"

"You know, the night nurse. Turns a blind eye, remember? Don't forget: that new brand. Might as well get me a big box."

So he'd tried the sample. "Are they actually better?"

"Like fire and ice, lad. Fire and ice."

I laughed, picturing the suave Martin making his way from room to room at the 'Nest. "Ha! Well I'm glad the condom met your high expectations."

I heard an in-drawn breath and turned in time to see Janice glaring at me, her eyes saying a hell of a lot more than her tightly pressed lips. I had the decency to flush. As Martin got into details better shared outside of cubicle-land, I covered the receiver. "Sorry. It's my uncle...he's quite lonely at times..."

"Whatever you think is important," Janice hissed. "Me, I would think office culture, respectful workplace—or God knows monthly sales—but what do I know?"

"But...we're the Complaints Department."

Janice narrowed her eyes. "You could at least try." She sat back on her chair, the hydraulics huffing in righteous indignation.

I returned to the phone in time to hear my uncle say farewell. "I've got to go. Walking group's starting in a few minutes and I promised Felicity I'd be there. See you tonight."

"Alright," I agreed. "See you tonight."

I stopped at the pharmacy after work to purchase Martin's

condoms. As I stood in line waiting to pay, I couldn't escape the sweet and bitter taste of random recollections that always dogged me while I waited at that till. It was a hole in the wall kind of place; nothing special. Laminate flooring, bad light. But it was where I'd picked up my mother's medications when she was too sick to come herself. I'd waited countless times in this very line, staring at magazines and waiting my turn to pay. Now, it seemed one of my only connections to her and I couldn't bring myself to stop shopping there.

Is this what Mom had meant, that I should buy her brother condoms? I shook my head at the ridiculousness of it. She hadn't left very specific instructions. Only that I should visit her brother and help him out because he wouldn't have anyone else after she was gone.

It turned out to be me who had no one else.

I paid for Martin's purchase and went home. There was no point eating out—I hated eating in public by myself and I was not interested in the visitor's special at the 'Nest. No way. So home it was to change, make some macaroni or maybe one of those instant dinners that Kate hated before taking the condoms to Martin.

It wasn't until I was washing my solitary dinner plate when I heard the key in the doorknob. It startled me with its jangling and turning, and in seconds the door traitorously gave way to her gentle pressure.

"Hello?" Her voice floated through the air.

I looked down at the old sweatpants and t-shirt I'd changed into. My work clothes were in a pile on my bed and there was no time to put them back on. She was already walking down the hall.

Kate rounded the corner and took in my pitiful joggers, my soapy hands.

"Well hello, Chad. It's good to see you." I was flooded with the awareness—both sudden and acute—of the thick layer of silence that had grown in the apartment, undisturbed, for several months.

Her hair had recently been cut and I could tell she had taken the time to apply a shimmering lip gloss. I cleared my throat. "That's a nice dress." How easily I fell back into an attempt to please.

"Why, thank you." Kate performed a quick turn on her heel, the dress flaring out from her toned legs. "I'm here for the waffle

iron.”

“Right.” She’d emailed last week about it. I turned to look at the cupboards behind me. “Where is it?”

“Up here, silly.” She reached up and withdrew the little appliance from one of the top cupboards. The sight of the iron’s aged patina brought back lazy Sunday mornings with Kate, and my chest tightened.

“I’ll bring it back.”

She’d bring it back? I’d heard that before. Last time it was my copy of *Dark Souls 3*. It stung to think of my game in his Xbox—my Kate in his bed—and somehow the loss of both seemed a deeper betrayal than either one alone.

“It’s fine. I’ll never use it. Besides, I’m cutting out carbs.” I chuckled, as though my lie were funny and attempted a relaxed smile.

Not that it mattered. Her eyes had fastened on something behind me and she broke into a grin. “Hey, what’s that?”

I turned to see the glossy box of fire and ice on the table. “Oh, those aren’t for me.”

Her eyebrows shot up.

“Really. They’re for Martin,” I said. “You remember my uncle? I’ve started visiting him on weekends. With my mom gone...well, he doesn’t have anyone else. Anyway, these are supposed to be great. Like ‘fire and ice’ he says.” A genuine smile stretched across my face thinking of what a character my uncle was.

Kate fiddled with the waffle iron cord. “You can tell me if you’re with someone else.”

“No, really. I’m not. It’s—”

“Stop, Chad. I’m happy for you. Honestly.” She reached over and squeezed my shoulder. “I’ve been worried about you. About you being alone. But here you’ve been busy all along.” The grin spread up into her eyes and wreathed her face in happiness. “See? Moving on was the right decision. You were never frisky before... and now look at you! Packets of condoms just waiting to be ripped open.”

I thought back to those final nights lying beside Kate. Wanting to touch but not touching. Maintaining as civil a distance as the queen-sized mattress would allow. Distance fueled by my

inadequacies and her charismatic colleague.

She gave me an exaggerated wink. "Have fun!"

I walked Kate, the waffle iron and her misconception to the door.

She had everything she needed and would not be back.

Martin was waiting for me on the bench out front of the Eldernest when I arrived. I collapsed down beside him and thrust the bag with the requested condoms into his lap.

"Here you go, old man."

He cuffed my shoulder in one of those improvised man-hugs before taking a quick look inside the bag. "You've done well, lad."

"Not as well as you."

"Trouble with the missus?" He gave me the once over, his eyes settling on my Star Wars T-shirt. "You've just got to get on your 'A' game. Dress the part. Act the part." He straightened his shirt collar, the indigo button-down looking vivid against his trim, white hair. I wondered who kept his shirts ironed.

I cleared my throat and changed the subject by pointing at the box of condoms now in Martin's hands. "So, are you sure these are necessary? I mean..."

Martin's eyebrows nearly hit his hairline. "Are you kidding? This place has more clap than an Allied trench in 1917. Perhaps you can rest on your laurels—you're in a committed relationship—but me?" Martin paused and looked around. Satisfied we wouldn't be overheard, he continued. "Nathan got it from Sarah, but Sarah claims she only slept with Edgar the once."

"Wait. Hold on. Isn't Edgar that guy with the two canes? At his age?"

"Sure. He's only seven years older than I am. Anyway, Herbert—the one who blares the American football in the social room—he says he got it from either Maggie or Felicity, but he's not sure which one. I've got to be careful."

"Your Felicity...the tennis clothes one?"

"You got it. But it's Clara I need the fire and ice for." Martin tapped the box of condoms. "Thanks again, lad."

"If you don't mind me asking, how did you...convince her?"

"Convince? If you've got to convince someone you're doing

it wrong, aren't you? It's like back in my postal service days. No one's convincing a person to send mail, but we posties were ready and willing if you wanted to."

What? I didn't quite understand the link to mail delivery, but somehow Martin was able to link nearly everything back to his days in the postal service. He leaned in. "I told Clara we didn't have to. Told her we could just go on playing chess."

I nodded over my confusion. What good would it do to admit I didn't understand? I wished him well and set off for the bus stop. With nothing to do and no one to talk to, it was hard not to dwell on the emptiness in my life. My brain twisted between Kate's happiness and my uncle's prowess. I sat on the metal bench inside the bus shelter and knew my life was as solitary as the setting sun.

That's when she walked into the Plexiglas enclosure. I looked up as she pushed her coal-black hair behind the curve of her ear.

"This seat," she pointed at the bench beside me. "It's free?"

"Yes," I stammered. A rush of colour hit my face and my heart hammered behind Yoda's silhouette. I inched over to make room for her.

The last golden rays of sunlight streamed through the enclosure and I closed my eyes. I would stand up when the bus arrived. I would get on the bus. I would sit by myself and I would probably never have breakfast on a Saturday morning with this beautiful woman.

Unless I could say something. Say anything.

"My name. It's Chad." The words rushed out and it was too late to choke them back.

She tilted her head and looked at me. Looked at me for what seemed the first time.



Clara: Chess Match

"Do you want to stay over?" There. She'd said it.

Clara had found enough courage to ask, but not quite enough to look Martin in the eye. Instead, she kept her gaze on the battlefield. Picking up her ivory knight (what a silly game this was) she knocked his castle over and placed her little horse in its place.

"Stay over? If you think you can tempt me into an all-night chess tournament, you're dead wrong. I give up now." Picking up his queen, Martin casually moved it forward on the board. "Check."

Clara looked around the social hall. Would anyone overhear? For once they appeared to be alone. Alone, except for Linus.

Linus sat where he'd been left. In his wheelchair, by the window overlooking the manicured lawns of the Eldernest Assisted Living Lodge. Even if Linus were listening, he certainly wasn't talking. The stroke had taken everything from him but his life.

Clara straightened her shoulders. Her heart was a staccato beat in her throat, but she swallowed it down. Picking up her one remaining pawn, she slid it forward in a half-hearted effort at protecting her king from Martin's advance. "Actually, I had something else in mind."

"Checkers? Please not checkers."

He was goading her. Of that she was certain. But why he enjoyed making it difficult, Clara wasn't sure. This had surely been on the table as clearly as the checkered squares of the chessboard. Looking up, she met the challenge in his eyes. "You know what I'm talking about."

Martin grinned, "Of course I do, darling. I wasn't born

yesterday." He reached across the board and moved his queen one last time. "Checkmate."

Martin had been adamant they wait until Thursday night as Harold would be working the evening shift. Of all the night staff, Harold was known for minding his own business when it came to discrete liaisons between Eldernest inhabitants. That left Clara two days, nearly forty-eight hours, to prepare. Prepare and vacillate.

In all her seven decades Clara had never experienced a physical relationship with anyone other than her husband. For most of her life she'd not questioned this. It was the way it was supposed to be. The way God had intended.

But had the good Lord intended Clara to feel desperately alone in her last years? Children, housework, wifely duties. All that was behind her now. Her husband was gone yet she wasn't.

So why shouldn't she live out the days she had left? Really live? Was it not time to put herself first?

Besides, she couldn't back out now. What would Martin think? Proper women did not lead men on, and Clara was proper. A woman of her word.

Opening her nightstand drawer Clara withdrew her nail file, then remembered and placed it back in its drawer. The whites of her nails had already been chewed clean off.

Like any other Thursday morning, Clara was waiting outside the sliding front doors of the Eldernest five minutes before the shopping bus was scheduled to arrive. The bus transported Eldernest residents to the closest mall on a weekly basis, barring—of course—major holidays and inclement weather.

It was always women on the bus. Women with their hair done up in stiff curls, or cut into sharp, straight angles. The short hair rained, in silvers and salt and peppers and brass dye jobs Clara did not at all fancy. She kept her own white hair long and tied back.

"Clara? Yoo-hoo!" She grit her teeth and turned in the direction of Rosie's chipper voice. Rosie was standing just inside the doorway, her arms flapping in an attempt to gain Clara's attention.

"Oh good! You've heard me."

Clara stiffened. Why Rosie thought she couldn't hear was

beyond her. A person would have to be two blocks away not to hear the woman. "Don't let the bus leave without me! I've got to take my blood thinners. Alright, Clara? Did you hear me?"

"Alrig—"

"I've got to get my blood thinners!" Rosie's eyes were huge, making her look like a nervous bug. She had large, thick framed glasses, the type that made a person's eyeballs look larger than they were.

"Yes. I'll save you a seat." Clara waved Rosie back into the building and turned her attention to the flowers growing in the cement planters either side of the entrance.

Out of the corner of her eye, Clara could see Felicity sitting on the bench with her lackey, Marg. An amused expression twisted Felicity's fuchsia lips. Clara couldn't see the top half of Felicity's face, but she imagined Felicity's eyes were narrow and hateful behind the new Jackie O sunglasses she wore.

The oversized lenses sat atop Felicity's flawlessly made-up face and Clara couldn't help but covet them. They were real sunglasses, and not the kind worn over-top prescription lenses.

Felicity and Marg were twittering like magpies, enjoying a laugh at Rosie's—and perhaps her—expense. Rosie could be exasperating, there was no arguing that. But had these women no manners? Clara thought not.

The shuttlebus pulled up and Rosie hustled out of the Eldernest, her glasses askew. Single file, the women boarded the bus and sat down. Clara and Rosie sat together, choosing a row near the driver.

"I thought I might miss the bus!" Rosie said, starting in on Clara as soon as they sat down. "What a busy morning. I barely had time to comb my hair." Clara smiled politely and didn't let her eyes wander to the other woman's untidy hair. Then she turned to the window in an effort not to encourage Rosie into more conversation. The woman could be an energy drain and today was not a day Clara intended to waste energy.

She had plans. Exciting plans! She could feel a nervous tingling in her fingertips and a spark in her chest. Not even Felicity's chic Jackie O sunglasses or Marg's look of contempt could bring Clara down.

“Shall we visit the bookstore first?” Rosie continued. “I’d like to take a look-see at the sale table. But I won’t be buying anything there, not on your life. I’ve my holds at the library.” As Rosie yammered on about books then discount sweaters then the food court, it began to dawn on Clara she might have a hitch in her plan.

She had an errand to do. An errand she did not intend to have an audience for. No. That would not do. She’d somehow have to give Rosie the slip.

But how? Clara wouldn’t be able to walk faster and ‘accidentally’ out-pace the woman. Rosie was a member of the Eldernest walking group and set a quicker pace than she did.

As the bus pulled up to the mall, Clara glanced at her watch. 10:30. She had exactly two and a half hours to shake Rosie and complete her errand before the return trip. It was possible. It had to be.

The Eldernest women disembarked from the bus, one by one by one. They set off in their little groups with their lists and walkers and pension cheques. For many, it was the social highlight of the week. It had been for Clara too...until she’d started playing chess with Martin.

“The bookstore then—oh my word! Just look at that little dog!”

Clara sighed. They hadn’t even gotten into the mall yet. Not that this was unusual. Rosie was an absolute animal lover and couldn’t manage to pass one without stopping.

As Clara waited, Rosie and the dog owner chatted about the labradoodle’s parentage. His sleep schedule. His eating habits. Clara’s gut twisted with anxiety. It was just nerves; nothing serious. But maybe it could be her ticket?

When the women finally made their way inside the mall doors, Clara rested her hand against the back of the nearest bench.

“Do you know, Rose, I’m not feeling altogether well.” She rubbed her tummy. “The eggs, I think. At breakfast.”

Rosie gasped and clutched at Clara’s arm “Haven’t I told you—don’t eat the eggs. They are laced with Metamucil! Absolutely *laced*. For goodness sake, Clara.” Rosie flapped her arms and looked around wildly as though a solution might appear to Clara’s gastrointestinal problem. “We’ll have to go back. I’ll call a cab. No,

I'll go chat with the bus driver."

"No, no. You should shop, Rosie. Go to the bookstore; enjoy yourself. I think I'll just sit here for a bit. I'm sure it will pass."

"It'll pass alright!" Rosie turned and was off like a rocket, her back-end moving energetically in her polyester slacks. "I'll find help! Hold on, Clara!"

"Er...Rosie?" Clara called after her, "I'll just sit for a bit. Don't be silly! Go to the bookstore, won't you?" But Rosie could not be stopped. She was already making her way across the parking lot to where the driver sat in his vehicle.

Perhaps that had worked too well? There was nothing for it now. Clara stood up and hustled to the department store at the far end of the mall.

The lingerie department was not hard to find. Clara wandered through the clothing racks and chose two nightgowns that seemed just about right.

The first was a vibrant turquoise. The silk fabric slipped smoothly through her fingers like sand. The second nightie was a dove's gray with a neckline trimmed in cream lace. It seemed, perhaps, more appropriate; more expected for a woman her age. But the turquoise...it sang to Clara like the first brilliant days of spring.

"Can I help you with anything?" A young saleswoman smiled sweetly up at Clara. She hadn't noticed her approaching.

"Do you think...the colour?"

"Oh, it's absolutely darling. Your husband will love it."

Clara's face stiffened but she didn't bother to correct her. "I'll take it."

Paying for her purchase was an excruciatingly slow process. Clara was acutely aware of how many Eldernest busybodies were peppered throughout the mall. Anyone might see her. The worst would be Felicity. Or Marg. And what about Rosie? She must be in hysterics, unable to find Clara on the bench where she'd left her. She felt an overwhelming urge to chew on the end of her thumb nail.

"Receipt in the bag?"

"Yes, thanks." The young saleswoman took her time, stapling the debit receipt to the sales receipt.

"We've a survey right now. If you go online, just here—" she

highlighted a web address on the stapled receipts in neon yellow. “—do you know how to use a computer?”

Clara grit her teeth. “Yes. I know how to get online.” What did this have to do with anything? Clara needed to get out of sight. Leaning over the counter she snatched both the receipt and shopping bag out of the startled saleswoman’s hands. “Have a good day, Miss,” and with that Clara turned and raced out of the department store.

Now she had a new problem: what to do with the bag? If she arrived back at the bus with it, she’d have some explaining to do. And with the volume of Rosie’s voice...Lordy, that wouldn’t do. Not at all.

But clearly she couldn’t hide it in her purse. These days Clara carried a very small handbag so the weight of it wouldn’t pain her sore shoulders.

Clara headed to the nearest washroom. Thankfully, she found it empty. Choosing the handicap stall for extra maneuvering room, she locked the door before sliding the new nightie out of the plastic bag.

With the help of the folding scissors on her keychain, Clara cut off the price tags and shoved them into the metal garbage bin attached to the stall wall. In went the plastic bag after the tags. Easy.

Harder was taking off her sweater while sitting on the edge of the toilet, but she managed it. The nightie slid over her shoulders and down her body, the fabric the softest whisper against her skin. It was perfect; softer than Clara had even imagined.

She tucked the extra fabric in the waist of her slacks and began to maneuver her arms back through her sweater sleeves. It was then the washroom door banged open.

“Clara! Are you in here, Clara?” Rosie’s frantic voice bounced off the hard bathroom fixtures.

Clara froze behind her partition, left arm half in and half out of her sweater. “I’m here. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Oh my Woooord! I’ve been searching everywhere! I thought you may’ve found yourself in a compromising situation. I was just about to contact security!”

She’d gotten away with it. Relief sprang through Clara’s body.

All she needed to do was push her arm through the tight sleeve of her sweater, and there, she'd done it!

She exited the toilet stall to find Rosie flustered and sweaty, leaning against the countertop for support.

"The bus driver *refused* to take us home early. Absolutely refused! Said he wasn't authorized to make a second trip. Can you believe that?"

Rosie cupped her hands under the faucet, catching cold water in her hands. She slapped it on the back of her neck, letting it trickle over her flushed skin. "Now that I've found you, we'll call a taxi. Get you back home in a jiffy, alright?"

"Honestly, I'm fine now. I just...well I'm fine. I'm feeling much better." Clara turned away from Rosie's sweaty hairline and pink cheeks and washed her hands under the automatic faucet. "Shall we visit that bookstore now?"

It was after 9:00 pm, and Clara's heart pattered with nervous anticipation. Waiting these last few minutes for Martin was maddening. There was nothing left to do but worry. For the hundredth time she fiddled with the neckline of her nightie. Would Martin like it? And her hair. Would he like that? She always wore it tied back in the social room, but tonight she'd left it down. The long white strands had been brushed till they were gleaming.

Clara's heart stopped.

She hadn't expected the door knock to be so loud. Or so soon.

He was here. Clara took a deep inhalation, as deep as her aging lungs would allow, and let the air out in a quick puff. Using her hands for leverage she pushed herself up from the standard issue, twin-sized bed and walked to the door. Her heart was pounding in her chest enough to make her want to pass out. *Could she do this? Could she really and truly do this?*

She placed her hand on the levered doorknob, ready to turn the handle, when a second tap, tap, tap caused her to freeze.

"Mrs. Cardinal?"

Clara gasped. It wasn't Martin. Wasn't even the night nurse, Harold. She recognized the voice of one of the female caregivers who helped the more invalid residents with grooming, eating and the like.

Clara cracked the door open a few inches and peeked out. "Hello?"

"Good evening, Mrs. Cardinal. I was wondering if you might be up for a cup of tea with Linus? He seems a bit agitated tonight." The caregiver leaned in, causing the silver crucifix on her necklace to swing forward then come back to rest against her uniform. "I think he's lonely."

"Oh." Clara swallowed, trying to keep her body hidden behind the door. She hoped the woman wouldn't catch sight of her aquamarine nightie. If she did, it would certainly draw questions. "It's rather late. Um...sorry. I—not tonight."

The caregiver's forehead wrinkled. "Alright. Are you feeling okay? You look a bit flushed."

"I'm fine." Clara said, forcing a smile. "Just tired. Goodnight."

Clara closed the door, and took several panting breaths trying to calm herself.

She listened to the caregiver's receding footsteps as she walked down the polished linoleum hallway. Would she be back to check on her? It was several minutes before Clara could make her way back to her bed.

Perched on the edge of her mattress she tried to think of something else. Anything else. Her eyes were drawn to the only other living thing in the room: the African violet on her windowsill. Its woolly leaves drooped over the yellow foil pot and the blossoms, a brilliant spark of magenta, thrust up from the center of the foliage in a showy and defiant manner.

Felicity's violets weren't nearly as perky. The trick was to not over-water. And then, once a month, an infusion of cold tea.

It was just as her mother had taught her. Her mother, that distant woman who, it seemed to Clara, had obeyed all the rules with a content and quiet heart.

It occurred to Clara she had never liked violets.

She stood up, walked to the windowsill, picked up the offending plant and dropped it in the garbage bin.

This was Clara's life, and not her mother's.

Again Clara heard someone tapping on her door. Could this be him? For the second time that night she walked to the door, opening it a fraction of an inch and peeking out.

Martin stood with his hands clasped together. He was still wearing his khaki slacks and collared golf shirt. What had she been expecting? A housecoat? Boxers and a t-shirt?

She was underdressed.

Decidedly underdressed.

“Good evening, darling.” Martin smiled, shifted his weight and then looked nervously down the women’s hallway. It was silent, except for Rosie’s steady snores from the next room over. “Er, are you going to let me in?”

“Oh, yes.” Clara opened the door a foot wider. The cooler breeze from the hallway slipped into her room and sent a shiver up Clara’s loose nightgown, instantly reminding her of her unbound breasts, loose and floating under the slippery turquoise silk.

Her skin was covered in a thick sheen of dread as Martin wedged himself around the half open door. He maneuvered around the door jam, pulling his shirt away from its metallic edges until he’d managed to sneak his whole body inside Clara’s room.

Clara was terrified. She had to shut the door. She’d have to turn around and face Martin. With all the courage she had left, Clara clicked the door latch into place, took another fortifying breath and turned around.

Her room was dimly lit; the emergency call button bathed everything in a rosy glow. Her eyes were already adjusted, but were Martin’s? The hallway had been much brighter. She felt a nervous giggle threaten in her chest.

“Clara, dear. You look an absolute dream.” Clara heard the catch in his voice and felt instant pleasure spread across her face and heart. It freed her to take three quick steps in his direction and suddenly, wonderfully, she was in Martin’s arms.

He gently kissed her with a sweetness she had long imagined. Her breath caught in her throat. It was magic. If she closed her eyes, she could be sixteen again.

In time, Martin removed his shoes. His socks. His slacks and his shirt. He folded them carefully and piled them neatly on her chair. With no small effort, they maneuvered onto Clara’s twin bed. Laying side-by-side it was a tight squeeze, but it had its advantages over any of the other options available.

His hands gently explored her body—something no one had

done in a very long time—and Clara tried to relax. It wasn't easy. She wondered what he might be thinking as her parts slid sideways into the firm, institutional mattress.

Forget it, she chided herself. At seventy-two was she really going to spend one more minute worried about her waistline?

She ran her hands gently over his back, feeling his skin soft and warm under her fingertips. It was nice feeling this close to someone again.

Clip. Clip. Clip. Clara froze at the sound of hard-sole shoes walking down the linoleum hallway. Could that woman be back?

"Who's that?" she hissed in Martin's ear.

Martin reluctantly moved his hand away from the space between Clara's waist and hip and attempted to adjust his hearing-aid. "Sounds like Nurse Harold, but I can't be sure."

"What if he walks in?"

"Does anyone ever walk into your room uninvited?"

"Only when I press the emergency-call button."

"Have you pressed it tonight?"

"Well, no!" Clara swallowed. Should she tell Martin about her earlier visitor? She didn't want to. She didn't want to dwell on it. Not tonight. Thankfully, the footsteps receded down the hall and Clara's shoulders relaxed.

"Well then, let's not worry. Besides, I put a sock on the door, so no one will bother us."

"Martin! You did not!"

He chuckled and traced his fingertips along the curve of Clara's hip, but she couldn't relax. Martin removed his hand and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "We don't have to, you know. We could just go on playing chess."

With what confidence she could muster Clara pressed her body against his. "And let Felicity get her claws into you? Forget it." She tried to laugh so he understood it was a joke. She could be funny. She could be lighthearted.

Clara reached down and grasped Martin in her hand. Was she doing it the right way? It was like riding a bicycle, wasn't it? In the red glow she gazed up into his eyes. "I'm glad you're here."

"So am I. But be careful with my hip, honey. It's still being worn in."

Rolling onto her side, Clara curled up against Martin. After so long sleeping alone the feel of his skin behind her knees and against her back sent a shiver of pleasure through her limbs. She didn't know how long he could stay, but for now he was right here beside her. His breathing heavy and slow and comforting.

She felt a familiar twinge but swallowed it down. There was nothing to feel guilty about. The kids were busy with their own lives. And why shouldn't she follow her heart? The Eldernest could be a lonely place, but it didn't have to be. Clara closed her eyes and drifted off listening to the sound of Martin's slow, steady breathing.

If it were up to Clara, she would gladly give up the Thursday shopping trips to spend more time with Martin. Yet here she was, just one week later, sitting beside Rosie on the outbound journey. As Rosie discussed the price of birdseed for her outdoor feeder, Clara replayed the short exchange she'd had with Martin after breakfast.

"Shall we play some chess this morning?" she'd asked eagerly. "It will be quiet in the social room today."

"Oh shoot, darling, I've made plans. Got to check-in on that nephew of mine. See that he's staying out of trouble. Rain check?" He'd placed a kiss on her forehead and quickly maneuvered to the cafeteria door so he could help one of the young and pretty workers who had her hands full pushing a woman in a wheelchair.

Clara was brought abruptly to the present by Rosie. Rosie was looking at her, waiting for an answer, but Clara had missed what she'd been asked. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"I said, I don't know why you do that. It's not good for the nail bed. Surely you know?"

Clara hadn't even realized she was chewing her nails. Face flushing, she lowered her hand.

"It's just...I'm just thinking about something. Can I ask you something, Rosie? What do you think about—" Clara dropped her voice but carefully enunciated so she wouldn't have to repeat herself, "Martin?"

"Martin?"

“Shhh!”

“Alright, alright,” Rosie dropped her voice to a whisper. “He’s with Felicity. You do know that, right? Everyone knows. They do the walking group together most afternoons. She can’t keep her hands off him.

“Anyway, you don’t need his attention; you’ve got Linus. He adores you. Can’t stop watching you. If I had a husband as smitten as yours—”

Clara snorted. “You’d what? He can’t do anything but sit in his chair and breathe.”

Rosie’s eyes opened wide behind her magnifying lenses. “But...he’s your husband, Clara.” Her blue irises were obscenely large, and Clara had to look away from their raw depths.

It had been a long four months playing chess. But they had been full of a sweet anticipation Clara had hardly recognized. The bus jolted to a stop; the brakes hammering into Clara’s heart.

“You’ve got Linus—”

“He’s not enough.”