

Waiting for the phone call

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The room is stuffy. It has a gaudy lino floor with pattern rubbed away in front of the sofa and round the table; the walls are damp and cluttered with old calendars and pictures torn from magazines. There is a rotten stench. The mantelpiece by the fireplace is filled with china ornaments: big-eyed floppy-eared rabbits and beribboned kittens and flowery milkmaids and a porcelain doll wearing a Victorian dress and her long, golden hair in two neat plaits. The room is silent; except for the steady paced 'tick-tock' from the ancient Grand-father clock.

It is Dorothy's birthday, 12th August. She is hunched up on her old tacky sofa on an early August morning. Dorothy is startled by birdsong echoing across the garden outside and, for a long time, she stares in confused remembrance towards where the swelling orange sun is burning the faded floral wallpaper across from her old-fashioned table.

'It's my birthday,' she finally realises. 'I'm seventy-six today. Where did it go?'

Climbing painfully from a lumpy sofa, standing in a striped night dress by the window, Dorothy stares outside in her back garden. There's much too be done. Later. Much later. These days it's all weed killing, backache and sore bones.

'It's my birthday.'

Dorothy's cat slithers past a glass sharp wall and drops beside its shadow under an apple tree, stalking anxious sparrows. Under the broken birdhouse a mouse plays with a nibble of yesterday's bread. Shadows shrink in bright

shyness against all the garden fences and the last star melts into dawn rise. There's heat in the breathless August day already.

Dorothy sits in her kitchen. Silent. The house, holding its breath around her, the roof heavy and oven baked. Dorothy's thick veined hands brush toast crumbs from the plastic tabletop and when she moves her faded dainty feet dust dances giddily on the sun patched carpet. She listens to the awakening of the new day: the clock on the dresser ticks hurriedly and the letter box snaps awake.

Dorothy walks to the hall and picks up bills and ads that promise discounts and holidays abroad, Dorothy has never been out of England, never been on a plane. Her tired eyes examine the envelopes at arm's length. There are no birthday cards to sigh over - Not even from herfamily!

Returning to the familiar kitchen she slides a knife along her letters, slitting out the folded information. It's better than nothing. Even if the electricity is red and overdue - At least, they keep in touch. No longer absorbed in her letter opening task Dorothy looks at the sunlight shining blindly on her glazed, brown teapot and then she pours some lukewarm tea. She sits and thinks about birthdays back then - Cakes and drinks, songs and celebrations and her precious beloved family members spending time with her on her special day. Back when.

'Time flies,' she says.

She's talking to herself most days - who else will listen? Up in the still shadowed parlour a clock chimes the hour and Dorothy rises tiredly and

prepares to face the day. She stumbles into the living room and looks up to the mantelpiece. No birthday cards - Only a picture of her and her adorable grandchildren, Steven and Carol. Her eyes close. She becomes delirious with dreaming...

Carol skipping up the lawn with a small straw basket, picking up little daisies and carefully placing them in the basket. Steven, being 2 years old, filling the bird house with crunchy treats awaiting the magpies to glide in. Dorothy is stood under the apple tree, tip-toeing up and grabbing fresh, ripe apples for her relatives. Carol and Steven run over to Dorothy and wrap their arms tightly around her as if they were to never let go...

Dorothy smiles and wishes she could still feel their small hands around her waist, grabbing securely.

She dresses and walks to the front door and checks the windows and the bolts and all's secure. When the night time house creaks with its own age, Dorothy thinks of burglars and imagined violations and trembles in case they invade her.

Dorothy swings open the front door and sees Carol and Steven stands there, smiling like sunlight.

'Happy birthday Grandmother!'

No longer astonished, Dorothy smiles back and sighs because they aren't really there.

Her head sinks and she wonders back to living room. She notices the phone on the table. She slides over to it. Gently picks it up to check if the dial tone is there - she is reassured and drops it down. No phone calls. No phone messages. No birthday cards.

She collapses into her tacky sofa. When she turns on the television the news assaults her soul. The world is littered with dead children and pain. The world has gone mad with cruelty and nobody seems to have noticed. It was different back in her day, when children could go out and play happily on the street without anybody worrying that someone would come abruptly attack them. Back when.

She is startled by the sharp ringing of the phone. Her heart is pounding - could this be the phone call she has been waiting for all day? Is this her treasured family? She reaches over and clasps the phone. 'Hello?' she asks waiting urgently for answer. 'Hello. My name is Abigail Taylor calling on behalf of...' the woman replied. Dorothy slowly lowers the handset and replaces it back in the holder. She stands there paralysed. A tiny tear drop trickles down her wrinkly skin. She felt so much pain it was as if someone had stabbed her millions of times in the heart. What is the point of living if there is nobody who even knows you exist?

The Grandfather clock strikes six in the evening. She strolls back to the photo of her with her grandchildren. Dorothy bursts out in tears - her eyes sore and red and waterfalls of tears flowing down her face. She picks up the photo and holds it against her broken heart. Dorothy still hopes to get that special phone call from her much-loved grandchildren.