

Medicine Man

“Make sure the water’s hot,” the old man calls, turning his head towards the door. He can hear shuffling in the kitchen, water running, soft drumming, repetitive sounds as the liquid hits the plastic basin.

“Yes, Granddad, it’s hot,” Sonia replies.

He sits on the hard-backed armchair, kicks off his slippers with his toes; he pauses taking a breath, bends down, gathers his slippers and places them by the side of his seat. He pulls off his socks - one sock at a time - folds them and rests them on his slippers. He rolls up his trouser legs. The material is thick and hard to roll; his fingers don’t co-operate as they used to.

He feels a twinge in his calloused feet and moans. Sharp pains shoot up his calves, settle behind his kneecaps; he rubs them with his deformed fingers, the skin dry and thick.

Sonia enters the living room, carrying an orange basin in front of her. Her neck’s bent backwards from the strain of the weight she’s carrying. She has a towel and a pair of clean socks draped over her shoulders. Propping the basin in front of her granddad, she lays the towel and the socks on the floor. Some water escapes, falls on the dark green carpet, forming black patches in the carpet’s weave.

“Here we are,” Sonia says, her lilting voice filling the stuffy room with a sing-song, springtime touch. She smiles at the old man sitting in the armchair. “It’s hot, just the way you like it.”

Sonia kneels by his side and looks into his dark brown eyes. They are milky and filmy now, like the eyes of a newborn puppy. His frame is small in the big armchair. She rests her hand on his.

“Right then, are you ready?” she asks her granddad.

“Did you put in the pills?”

“Yes, they’re in there. Can’t you smell them?” Sonia shakes her head as she takes hold of one of his feet, lifting it gently, submerging it into the hot water. “I don’t understand why you use this stuff. I mean, it’s expired.”

A deep sigh escapes from her granddad’s mouth as she places his second foot in the basin.

“Just because they say they’ve expired doesn’t mean they have, does it now?” he replies, a faint smile on his lips.

“Yes, but, they’re not even meant for your feet! There’s headache pills, cough syrup, medicine to lower your cholesterol, your heart pressure, to get the bowels moving...,” Sonia doesn’t complete her sentence, instead releases a weak laugh.

She gets up from the floor. The pungent, sharp smell that rises from the combined medicines she added to his footbath makes her feel sick.

“Shall I bring you your tea?”

“Oh, yes, please. And a biscuit, won’t you?”

Sonia laughs as she shakes her head.

“You know we’re not supposed to give you anything sweet.”

“A biscuit’s not sweet, you know that!” he smiles at her, places his knobbly hands on the armrests. They look like withered tree branches, freckled and rough.

“You’re incorrigible,” she says, “but you’re lucky Granny’s at the doctor’s and *I’m* here. You know what she’d say!”

“Well, I’d pretend not to hear her then, wouldn’t I?” he chuckles as Sonia leaves the room. Once more, he can hear noises from the kitchen: water running, boiling, teacups clinking. He rests his head against the back of the armchair and sighs. Heat rushes up his body in shivers, mellowing the pain, warming him.

“Granddad? Granddad, can you hear me?” Sonia asks softly. The old man’s fallen asleep. She puts the tray with the tea and biscuits down and shakes her granddad gently. She bends down, leans close to him; her breathing becomes faster, creases appear in her forehead. “Granddad? Your tea’s ready,” she persists a little louder.

He takes in a sharp breath and opens his eyes. Sonia smiles, the wrinkles disappear from her forehead. He stares into her eyes, struggles to recognise her.

“Your tea’s ready,” she repeats. “You fell asleep.”

He clears his throat, rubs his eyes and the sides of his head. He’s back in the room again; his eyes are more focused now.

“Yes, I did. I was having a strange dream when you woke me. Funny. I never have dreams.”

“Really? What was it?” she hands him his tea – chamomile, with one teaspoon of honey and a slice of lemon, and sits in the armchair next to his. The smell from the

footbath is overwhelming. Sonia touches the outside of the basin with her fingers – the water's still hot enough.

“I was in here, in my home, and I needed to use the bathroom. So, I got up and went there but it looked strange, you know, the same but different. The small window had turned into a huge pane of glass and there was an enormous balcony outside.”

“That's odd,” Sonia says.

“Yes, it was. But that wasn't what was peculiar about it. I knew there was something out there on the balcony so I walked out to see what it was.”

He looks down at his tea, picks up the ginger biscuit resting on the side of his saucer and bites into it. For a minute, the only sound heard in the room is him chomping on the biscuit; his gums have receded and his dentures come loose when he chews.

“That's when I saw that odd house,” he resumes.

“What? On the balcony?”

“Yes. There was a small house on my balcony and it was weird that I'd never noticed it before. There was a little old lady living in that house. She reminded me of someone, resembled my mother but not exactly like her,” he went on.

“Did you speak to her?” his granddaughter asks. She sips her tea, stares into his eyes. He has a faraway look as he shakes his head.

“No, I tried to, I really did, but she couldn't hear me. You see, she was setting the table for her guests.”

“Guests?”

“Yes, the windows of her home were open and I walked into the dining room. Nobody else was there apart from this lady. And me. But she was setting the table for many guests, maybe eighteen or twenty. She'd been expecting them to arrive for thirty-five years, but they never came.”

Sonia places her teacup back on the tray; her eyebrows rise.

“Thirty-five years? That's an awfully long time to wait for guests, isn't it?” she laughs lightly.

“Well, it is, but it didn't feel that long in my dream. And that's not where it ended,” her granddad replies.

“Go on.”

“The lady filled the room with flowers, large, brightly-coloured flowers; red, orange, purple, yellow ones. They smelt sweet, overpowering. And they were everywhere you looked.”

Sonia looks intensely at her grandfather.

“What sort of flowers, Granddad?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t know about that. But whatever they were they looked huge, larger than normal. The lady set the table, made sure the flowers were fresh and had clean water, then she sat down on one of the chairs and waited for the guests to arrive.”

“And did they?”

“Huh? Did they what?” her granddad looks confused.

“Arrive. Did her guests arrive?”

The old man shakes his head. “No. They never showed up. But she didn’t mind. She knew they’d turn up when the time was right.”

Sonia glances at her granddad’s cup. It’s empty.

“Would you like some more?” she points to the teacup.

“No. I only wanted that one cup.”

She smiles at him, takes the empty cup from his weak hold.

“It’s time to dry your feet now.” She places his cup on the tray next to hers, and kneels by his side. She takes hold of his right foot, dries it on the towel. His foot looks shrivelled, crooked, yellow.

“Would you look at that!” she exclaims. “The pills have made your feet bright yellow, as if you’re wearing coloured socks. And you still insist on these silly footbaths!”

She dries his other foot and covers them with clean socks she’d brought in earlier. She helps him place his feet in his slippers.

“You should try it first before discarding it,” her granddad says. “I tell you, it takes away the pain. And it obviously doesn’t harm me. Look at me, I’m ninety, I’m still strong and I’ve been having these footbaths for decades.”

Sonia chuckles. “Whatever you say.”

She gets up from the floor, picks up the basin with dirty water.

“I’ll just get rid of this then I’ll be back.”

Her granddad nods slowly.

She disappears to the bathroom and comes back after some minutes. She’s putting her coat on.

“I have to pick up Granny from the doctor’s now. I won’t be gone long. Is there anything you’d like before I go?” She smooths down his hair.

“No, no. You know your Granny grumbles if you’re late. Drive carefully.”

“All right, then.” She turns to leave but stops. She faces her granddad once more, bends down and gives him a kiss on his forehead. “We’ll be back soon.”

For a moment she rests her cheek on the top of his head, closes her eyes. A mixture of smells surrounds her granddad - old skin, lemon-scented soap, the rancid smell of the various pills and syrups from his footbath. He leans his head closer to her and reaches his withered hand up to his granddaughter’s; he squeezes it.

“You’ve always been my favourite,” he mumbles.

“I know,” she smiles.

The old man lets go of Sonia’s hand, rests his head back on the armchair. A faint smile is on his lips.

“I’ll be back soon,” she says, and leaves the room.

Sonia unlocks the front door and stands aside so her granny can walk in first.

“Where’s your granddad?” her granny asks. Without waiting for an answer, she calls into the silent house. “George! George!”

“He’s in the living room, Granny, in his armchair.”

She follows the old woman’s still upright, strong frame into the living room.

“George,” her granny is shouting again, “we have to talk about this Saturday. Jim wants us to go to his house for dinner, but so does Elizabeth. What should I tell them?”

She walks into the room, moves towards the armchair.

“Did you hear me, George? What should I tell them?” she bends over, looks at the old man. “George?”

She places an irritable hand on his shoulder, gives him a slight shake. “George? Why aren’t you saying anything?”

Sonia moves in front of her granddad, reaches out, takes hold of his hand. “Granddad, we’re back,” she begins, but stops mid-sentence. “Oh!” she lets out an almost inaudible gasp.

Her granny looks at her, her eyes wide, horror-stricken.

“Is he...?”

Sonia nods, tears gather in her eyes. She kneels, rests her head on his lap. Neither woman moves for a few moments.

The old man's wife breaks the silence. "I'll never forgive myself! He died all alone. My poor husband had no one here with him." She starts crying.

Sonia moves to her granny, wrapping her arms around her.

"No, he didn't," she says. "He wasn't alone. His friends were waiting for him. They prepared a big meal in honour of his arrival." She manages a smile. "They even brought him flowers."

THE END