

Chapel Arts 2022 Short Story Competition Second Place – Sally Brown

Isolation

When I open my eyes, I am pleased to see it's nearly 6.00 am. Not a bad night's sleep all things considered. I go to turn the radio but hesitate with my finger refusing to push down on the button. Did I really want to hear the News? How many more people had got it now? What was the total deaths today? I roll back onto my back and feel a stirring at my feet. Then, I feel gentle prods on my legs as my cat Cabbage walks up them to sit down on my abdomen. She purrs loudly, vibrating into my chest as she pushes her face close to mine. Her amber eyes never leave my face as I tickle her behind her ears and rub a finger up and down her chin.

'Morning Cabbage' I say, taking her little face in my hands. She sits up straight and moves her paws up and down. 'Come on then'. I give her a gentle nudge and she jumps down onto the carpet, stretching luxuriously. She pads down the hall and I follow her into the kitchen and put on the kettle.

'Breakfast Cabbage' I say, under my breath as I fill her bowls. While I wait for the kettle to boil, I go into the lounge and pull back the curtains. It is so quiet I feel a panic. I have lived with Cabbage in my little bungalow for over 3 years and didn't mind being on my own. But this was completely different. Isolation was bearable if you knew you could end it any time you chose; but this was enforced, scary and with no end in sight. The day stretched ahead of me, another one to survive rather than to live. I go to turn on the television and catch sight of myself in the mirror above the fireplace.

'Hello there Mary' I say and try to give a natural smile. My voice sounds small and croaky from underuse. I want to hug myself which I know is daft, but I craved human contact. Another skin on mine, a warm embrace. I never realised how much strength and love I had taken from a hug. Without the

television or radio on, my isolation seems acute. I could be the only person alive, and I wouldn't even know it.

'Stop being dramatic' I berate myself and grabbing the remote, turn on the TV. As the screen lights up and the sound of another human being fills up the silent room, I begin to relax. A cup of tea and some toast and honey would soon lift my spirits I decide.

'To move rhythmically', 5 letters down. Well, that was easy, Dance. I fill it in. I try and do a crossword every day. My grandson Oscar, or Oz as he insists on being called, gave me a book of them. He's says it's important I keep my brain active, or I'll go doo-lally. He's a cheeky boy. Now 1 across,' to act slow, indecisive. I think it's Dawdle but that doesn't fit in with the other words. Frustrated, I throw it down on the couch. The News is predictably, depressing and I am just hunting for the Radio Times when the phone rings.

'Hi Mum', it's Sharon, my daughter.

'Oh, hi love,' I reply, trying to sound normal but not quite managing to disguise the wobble in my voice.

'Are you OK?' she asks.

'Yes, I'm fine' I say, 'Just watching the News and, well, you know'.

'I know' she says. 'But hopefully this will cheer you up, Oscar's back and wants to come over and see you with me'.

'Oh, that would be lovely!' I whisper tilting my face up to stop the tears from falling. I want to tell her he likes to be called Oz but I can't speak.

'Well, we'll be over about 11.00 am, OK' Sharon Says, 'SO don't go anywhere.'

She thinks she's being funny, but I want to scream. I am showered, dressed in my smart clothes and have tried my best with my hair and make-up. It's ridiculous when I can only communicate with them through the window, but it's so nice to have someone to make an effort for. For the last half hour, I have hovered behind the net curtains, awaiting their arrival. They are only ten minutes late, but I am getting angry and anxious at the same time. I make myself go and sit down for 5 minutes and when I look again, Sharon's red mini is pulling into the driveway.

Oz is in the passenger seat and waves madly. He never had the agony of having to 'come out' to his parents. From the moment he was out, he was out, Sharon liked to joke. He dances over to the window and places a palm dramatically on the windowpane and I press mine to his. Stretching out my arthritic hand as much as I can. I open the window just a little so we can talk. Oz is wearing a black mask with 'Fabulous' written in purple sparkly writing. Seeming them is both a boost and a heartache. It's a form of torture not being able to hold them. Just before the go, Oz takes out some disposable gloves from his pocket. He puts on a pair and then passes me some. I manage to put them on with difficulty and then reach out my hands to him. He holds mine in his and I cry with the beauty and sadness of the moment.

When I have waved them off, I allow myself a little cry. I cry for myself and for everyone living in isolation and for all those we have lost. And then I pull myself together. 'Dither' I think randomly, that's what 1 Across is! The News is still scary but Cabbage curls on my lap and I can still feel Oz's hands squeezing mine in the tingle in my fingers.