

WITHOUT A CARE

A cautionary tale



Lynda Franklin

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I put the ad in the Lady magazine to ensure nationwide coverage but Sonya arrived before I had time to take many other calls. That's probably what the aim was. She rapped loudly on the front door and there she was, elegant, resplendent in a faux fur gilet, tailored trousers and heavyweight jewellery. Despite a deeply leathered face, nose practically touching her prominent chin and short grey hair like a gym mistress, she was vivaciously attractive. However, I was shocked to hear she was only 64; not much older than me.

Her voice alternated between a foghorn and a corncrake and I could imagine others, like me, initially mistaking her for a man on the phone. Despite such a voice, she was one of those people who talked with her hands, and as she waved them imperiously around the room I noticed how her nails resembled talons, being painted a deep blood red colour. And that, combined with her penetrating steel grey eyes, briefly put me in mind of a bird of prey sizing up its victim. But I brushed aside all such thoughts. After all, she had turned up, she seemed eager and obviously wanted the job, and she was neat and tidy. In her husky voice, she called us "darling" and explained it was because she had an appalling memory for names. Mmm.

'Do you smoke?' I enquired, "no, no, no darling". 'Good', I said, the ad clearly stated a non-smoker and car driver. I had spoken to her for about ten minutes to qualify her for the position before she turned up, and she seemed to fit the bill quite well. We needed someone rather urgently to look after my frail, elderly father.

It would be good to have Dad looked after by someone so well-bred and respectful, the qualifications were right, she'd been part owner of a residential nursing home in an 'nice' area of Bournemouth.

A few things puzzled me. On the phone we'd discussed money, but when I mentioned it again, the amount had gone up by £10 a day. I must have mis-remembered. When we left to go to my father's flat, I noticed a packet of cigarettes on the top of her gaping handbag. I said, 'I thought you said you didn't smoke'. Quick as a flash she said, "I am keeping them for a friend".

The interview with Dad went well (his first words, 'am I in love with you?') especially as she could start 3 days later, on the Sunday. Dad seemed pleased. She phoned later to say that she'd forgotten that she had several dental appointments booked so couldn't start for another week. This, plus the cigarette incident and the increase in money, made Paul keen to tackle her, as by anyone's standards, it was a strange start. Almost as though once she got the job, she then set about changing the parameters.

Here I go again, being paranoid. Paul and Sonya had a 'full and frank' discussion and she caved in once she grasped he was not for turning – simply if she didn't start on Sunday, she wasn't starting at all. We couldn't risk Dad being disappointed.

Norma had died nearly four months previously and after 34 years he was having difficulty coping alone, and although he could get around on sticks, his mobility was limited and his grasp on reality flickered, along with his memory.



Neighbours had found him wandering outside trying to get into someone's car, and then there was the time he left a pan on and started off the smoke alarms. Charming as they were, and loathe as we were to interfere with his independence, we had to step in. Though in the early days, it didn't stop sister Steph and I from feeling like interlopers.

For about three of weeks Paul and I had taken him to our house every day and we all had a lot of laughs, special meals and fun. Then came the day when out of the blue he turned on us, eyes blazing, full of vitriol and spite. I remember one remark very clearly, 'Norma would turn in her grave if she saw how badly you are treating me'. He finally stumped out of the house after offering to empty his cup of coffee over my head, and he ended up inveigling a passer-by to find him a taxi. We watched from a safe distance to make sure he was ok. We found out much later that this inexplicable behaviour was symptomatic of a severe water infection, but that day marked the end of our cosy little time. We needed help.

The stern ones he resisted, the kind ones he charmed. Barbara was marvellous and she gave Dad time and love, but she could only help us over the short term. He became anxious, telling us that a man with a beard was coming in every night and wandering around the flat. Paul changed the locks. One strange lady started well but didn't turn up for a few days for no apparent reason and no apology, I dread to think how he coped during that time. Another lady found him slumped on the kitchen floor one morning and summoned an ambulance; there was the possibility he might have had a mini-stroke. We now needed live-in help.

Back to Sonya. Following that seminal phone conversation, she was a tough old bird all right, grasping and manipulative, economical with the truth, who loved the good things in life. A three month trial would suffice instead of references and if we could keep one step ahead of her then we reckoned she would look after Dad well, keep him clean and amused. And so what if she smoked.

So it was that on 19th December Sonya appeared with a clutter of tailored suitcases, bedding - "I can't sleep without my special duck down duvet, darling, or my pillows; got them in the Bahamas and I never travel without them" - things stuffed into bulging plastic bags, smart looking hangers holding assorted finery, hair drier, vanity case, several handbags and other necessary odds and ends. Dumping it all unceremoniously on her bed, she rushed in to see Dad (a good sign), "how are we, this morning, darling?", the talons grasping his bony little hand as he looked up in amazement at this grey tornado that entered the room. In the blink of an eye and before he could protest, she had deftly put on all of Dad's outside gear; scarf, hat, gloves, coat, in readiness for lunch - Sunday lunch at the local pub, mmm.

"Where's the wheelchair, darling?" she enquired before realising that that the 'w-word' was something that Dad would not even talk about, let alone use. She looked disparagingly at his two sticks and muttered something about "we'll see about that". Dad always seemed blissfully unaware of the wait endured by anybody who was accompanying him. 20 minutes was normal to get him from flat to car, as he doggedly put his good leg in front and then dragged his uncooperative leg behind it. Someone always had to go ahead and open the door, while someone had to make sure the other door didn't slam shut on him, but he usually managed to strategically place his stick.

Once inside the pub, the smell of the carvery got our juices flowing but we couldn't get to our table any quicker.



Like us, a crowd of jostling people had arrived on the dot of 12 but luckily we were in pole position.

Steph and son Ben joined us, the introductions over, so far so good. Everyone was beaming and Dad looked as though he was the cat that got the cream. Sonya seemed to talk rather too much about herself and it was surprising how many achievements one could introduce into a two-hour conversation, not least of which was crossing the Atlantic in her yacht with a two-girl crew in the 1960s. She alternated this with wiping Dad's chin, cutting up his beef, gulping Asti while simultaneously monitoring his intake of red wine, "sorry darling, only one glass; here's some water, oooh, isn't that Yorkshire lovely – just taste a bit", and hanging on to his every word which, once uttered, was brushed aside in favour of resuming her potted history. So what if she treated him like a naughty child, she seemed to have his best interests at heart.

The next week Steph and I had a 'girly' Christmas dinner with Ben, Sonya and Steph's friend Sue who were daggers drawn from the outset. Both were smart, what I would call 'polished' ladies, but Sonya did not like competition. Sue tackled Sonya about the smoking issue but Sonya held firm. 'But I can smell it all over you', Sue said, getting nowhere. Sonya must have been gasping for one when Sue and Steph had their regular breaks, but she took a consolation prize – treating Ben and I to a selection of stories already sounding rather familiar. The evening wasn't a success.

She was always immaculate, make up on, rings sparkling. Dad, once up, looked as though he had just been through a car wash and had an interior vacuum. So, with all the linen folded beautifully and everything seeming perfect, it was a shock when I went into her bedroom – every surface was covered with clutter, even her bed, piles of papers, boxes, magazines, shoes, trinkets and ... an ashtray with a crumpled packet of cigarettes. So I wasn't surprised when Steph appeared one day and Sonya dragged her out to the garden for "a ciggie break", puffing away as though nothing had ever been said.

Sonya had an antipathy towards Dad's walking sticks. We needed to buy a four-wheeled walker, she pronounced, and the disability aids shop was a spectacular forum to showcase her negotiating skills. I'm not averse to having a go myself, but I felt a bit squeamish about the poor woman being battered into submission. But it was a point of honour for Sonya and she would not give up until another £15 had been knocked off the sale price. Would Dad use it? Would he hell. Over the next days she totally ignored his repertoire of angry silences, disparaging one-liners, and snarls. "Walter, it's much easier than those sticks, you know. Look, you can steer it like a car. No, Walter, stand up straight. You're so tall and strong when you stand up properly. No, tuck your bottom in, darling!" (tapping it). One morning, in what turned out to be his last stand, he decided on firm action. When he refused to budge, she left him in the lounge with his hands gripping the handlebars. She watched through the crack in the door as in a final act of vengeful anger, he threw the walker to one side, sank to his knees and then in a well-controlled movement, he arrived in a heap on the floor.

Sonya whispered for me to come and flashed a triumphant look as she strode into the room, "what's happened, darling?". Dad growled, 'I've fallen over because of that damned thing'. "No, you haven't darling" she said. He attempted to argue, getting more angry but Sonya was not someone you argued with. "No, darling, you didn't fall.



I was watching you and you deliberately did that, very slowly”, Dad then tried moaning with pain, ‘I’ve hurt myself’, “no you haven’t Walter, now are you going to get up?”. “OK, darling, if you don’t want to help me to get you up, I’ll leave you there and come back later”. And that’s where she left him for about 15 minutes, but not without a rudimentary check to make sure nothing was broken.

I guess I should have realised that he was becoming a little detached from reality when he began sharing his home with a complete stranger, calling her ‘dear’ and ‘darling’ and acting for all the world like he was in a long-standing relationship. Not once did he ask the question about who or what Sonya was which was curiously amusing; it was as though she had apported from outer space! The doctor had no worries about his state of mind, merely it was as a result of mourning for his long-term partner.

Dad was probably being looked after better than he had been for years, and without Sonya, we could never have gone back to Spain. So, after six months of uncertainty, it was time for us to go.

I phoned as often as I could. She was always most reassuring about his mental and physical wellbeing – the latter enhanced by some new £4,500 hearing aids that he “needed to have” but had Dad realised the cost he would have carried on using his old ones. She always put Dad on the line, but was it worth it? Long pause then he managed a lacklustre hello. I lost count of the times I would say, ‘it’s Lynda, Dad, hello’, and the times he would say, “who?”. “It’s just a bit of senility, darling”, she would say, “and no, no, no, it’s certainly not Alzheimer’s”.

During my frequent trips back I would stay in the tiny third bedroom - the monastic cell – where even at that early stage I only emerged when I thought the coast was clear. It was no way to go on, but I was starting to dread her footsteps. She seemed to have a sort of sixth sense as to when I was ‘out’ and then I was fair game. Luckily, she stopped short at my door.

She talked about the Atlantic, her care home and its high-status “guests”, how wonderfully she looked after them and how wonderful they all thought she was. Stories about partner Dave “we never married, darling”, her house in Barbados, yacht in Marbella, “big house” in Dover, her beloved Alsatian, her little Jag. But how was it that she now lived in a “mobile” on a “beautiful plot, darling, with a big garden, the only one next to the golf course” and drove a nondescript 10 year old Toyota? She even took us there once and showed us her treasured pictures and ornaments. Dad stayed in the car.

Could she talk! We hadn’t ever experienced anything like this. Even more annoyingly she would lock her steely eyes onto you, and if your eyes strayed or looked in danger of glazing over, she would then up the ante, increasing pace, volume and such a showcase of gesticulations that you had to succumb to the greater force, be patient and listen.

Her mother gave her away, her adoptive mother was cruel and taunted her, but her adoptive father was kind. She was very self-reliant, having two jobs while still at school and leaving home as soon as practicable. I admired her self-reliance. She was at the forefront of the IT revolution, gaining rapid promotion with IBM, in her spare time a model with Marks & Spencer. She left Dave and married a millionaire alcoholic but left after a few months and didn’t take “a penny” from him. Luckily Dave had her back.



Having developed a deep love of fashion and fabrics, a lot of her day centred around washing, ironing and looking after her clothes and we soon had to buy a new washing machine to keep up. She was very fond of 'labels' and was a whizz at stain removal. It wasn't unusual to do three washes a day, "oh, no darling, we can't mix your father's towels and sheets with our stuff" and neither was it unusual for her to put the machine on for one single item. She made an art form out of folding the sheets, towels etc – "corner to corner, like this..." only to unfold them once she'd got to the washing line where they'd flap around for a while until she brought them in, folded them and draped them all around the radiators.

She did everything faster, better, quicker. While I was 1,800 miles away, she justified her existence by relaying in minute detail every part of Dad's day and how, despite all the odds, she always stepped in and saved it. "Did only two washes as it was a bad drying day - chemist was late in delivering tablets - turned off television because he needed to concentrate on his breakfast and then he only ate 6 bran flakes and threw his toast on floor – he hasn't had a movement (*sotto voce*) for 3 days now - electricity went off for an hour but I kept Dad warm – your sister rang this morning - he loves boiled egg with little soldiers, darling, I make them my special way by getting some bread, toasting it and cutting it into...".

One day, after ten minutes' account in real-time of Dad's morning ritual we arrived at the bit when she got him into the shower. Congratulations, Sonya, is that it? There was a sudden, unexpected silence as she sensed she was losing her audience. Drawing a large breath, she delivered her coup-de-grâce in husky *sotto-voce*, "well, darling, everything works...". "Sorry, Sonya?" "Well, you know, darling, down below, you know, everything works."

There were a few pointers that, although Dad was fit and physically well, Sonya was not content, but she made out that it was he who was "unhappy" with me holding the purse strings; he "wanted" her to take charge of the debit card; he "wanted" to buy her a sofa because that one hurt her bum, and last but not least, he "needed" to buy her a car. I said that Dad requested me to have full control of his affairs and if and when he spoke to me about it I would do what he wished. After all, it was Dad's money and anything he wanted he could have – all he had to do was ask.

Then out of the blue we had a phone call from Dad's old friend Gerald. Dad was in love and wanted to marry Sonya. Gerald had come across 'her type' before and there was no way that she ever owned a care home. We must get rid of her and if necessary he and his wife would have Dad until we made alternative arrangements. It was worse than we thought. Paul made arrangements to fly home and in the interim, my brother Don and Ben would do a 'stake out' just in case they emerged from the flat in wedding-type clothes. They didn't.

Sonya professed to be just as amazed as we'd been, blubbing, "no, no, no, I've no intention of getting married, and I don't know who told you this. I promise on my honour that this isn't true and I hope it won't affect my position ...". Better the devil you know, we thought, as we decided to give her another chance. And so it was that with this thinly-disguised broadside across her bows, Sonya's probationary period ended and another chapter in our life together commenced. From then on, though, Paul made sure she kept comprehensive records of her spending. She was never to forgive us for blocking her endeavours. The first act of defiance? She continued to shave him sitting on his lap in her pyjamas. I took a photo.



It was a huge shock to find that she had started to share her cigarettes with Dad. Dad, who had given up years ago, was once again hooked and she used that as a means to control him. The manipulation was very disturbing. They smoked inside the house with the windows closed, but there was no way of disguising the smell under the front door. I had to ask her to smoke outside and she looked at me in a very cold way.

Her job became less of a breeze and although she was given carte blanche to keep him in the manner he had been accustomed, it was at a price. Urinary infections were commonplace and within his now-enhanced earshot she would whisper loudly that he “leaked” all the time and “last night, darling, I had to change his sheets and vest 3 times”. Proud men don’t like their secrets told to strangers.

The solution was eventually found in “nappies” - incontinence pads - but not before she had managed to get him across to France on the passenger ferry. Apart from the usual luggage, she took a basket containing a plastic bottle draped in a tea-towel for those occasions anytime, anywhere when Dad wanted a pee. Photos showed a relaxed Dad at her house in Brittany, basking in the warm sun, glass of red wine in hand, posing for the camera. Sonya’s friend Angela was also in paid attendance “but darling, it’s because I can’t manage on my own.”

The timely introduction of nappies marked another phase in Dad’s life. However unaware he was of the world around him, he felt uncomfortable at the sensation, “but it’s alright, darling, you’ve got a nappy on. See? (twanging it). That’ll keep you nice and dry and snug. No-one can see it”. But of course, when they were out anywhere plenty of people would hear about it, “you’re perfectly safe, darling, you’ve got a nappy on”. She would repeat these words as a mantra, thirty to forty times or more a day. Try as she might, getting Dad to keep the nappy on at night became something she could not control and more often than not it would be ripped to sodden shreds by the morning.

The day off became two days off but Sonya found a local lady with some nursing experience, Pat, who brought generosity and warmth into the house. She looked after Dad diligently. He basked in her attention and seemed particularly drawn to her ample bosom. So much so that Sonya demanded that Pat cover up by wearing a tabard overall! And do the ironing, and the cleaning! I noticed that Sonya now put the soiled nappies outside the back door for someone else to take to the garage. Pat was a lovely girl, but she seemed to be becoming a little awkward in my company but I just brushed off such a silly notion.

I noticed that more and more was being spent on ‘eating out’, and less and less on the weekly shopping, but how wonderful for Dad to go out and about. Just as the local pub became a permanent fixture for them each Sunday (“Walter only has a child’s portion, darling; and no coffee”) so did the weekly trip to the market and farmers’ market which had a café attached, ‘fish and bloody chips’, he used to say. Trips to Weymouth were getting more frequent, where she bundled Dad and wheelchair into the same Chinese restaurant for lunch. I marvelled at her energy and how she managed to convert recalcitrance into compliance.

Retreating more and more into the monastic cell, it was fortunate that they did go out so often! When I heard the front door slam, I used to run around from room to room in a frenzy of freedom.



One wet day I looked out of the window and caught sight of Sonya grimly pushing Dad through enormous puddles to the car, his face a thunder-cloud, as it soon became apparent that no, he didn't enjoy being aimlessly pushed about for hours, getting wetter and wetter. The good feelings I had that he was being indulged started to gnaw away a little. I found out that she was well known by the relevant stall-holders at the market where she could indulge her passion for buying 'designer' clothes – some having been bought specifically for an evening out and then returned the next week.

She loved buying and, apart from herself, Dad was the main beneficiary. Trousers, shirts, silk long-johns, and cashmere jumpers; "looking after my gentleman" she used to call it. He'd never worn cashmere in his life, but she was determined that he shouldn't let her down during their excursions. She also stockpiled everything that he'd ever been prescribed from the doctor, no item was ever cancelled, drawers and cupboards bulged with thousands of calcium tablets, various painkillers, huge pots of E45 cream, laxatives, vitamins, medical gloves. Perhaps she was saving them up for a rainy day?

She could never get used to the idea that being the sole able-bodied occupant of a dwelling, from time to time it would need some sort of cleaning and tidying. In fact, I overheard her tell someone on the telephone, "no darling, we don't do cleaning". She didn't seem to do cooking either. During my phone calls she would explain every detail of what she'd bought, how she cooked it and how Dad just loved it. It occurred to me that their trips out minimised the possibility of her nail varnish getting chipped by too much exposure to the washing up bowl.

However, despite all the foregoing, she remained firmly in charge of the kitchen and all things culinary. By 10 in the morning a boil in the bag fish would have been taken out of the freezer, some frozen peas were defrosting nicely in a pan, with some exquisitely peeled potatoes in another, and in a third pan floated some cabbage and sliced carrots. Dad wolfed it down, and I don't really remember her eating much of what he had. I had some of the left-over veg one day and was shocked by the salt; it made my tongue shrivel up. There was usually ice cream (plain) and three peaches to follow; in fact one cupboard was full of tins of peaches. The fillet steak, Brie and prawns remained in the fridge. "My little treats, darling; I always pay for them myself."

Apart from introducing Dad to smoking, the family continued to feel a debt of gratitude to Sonya and whenever back in England, Paul and I would take them out on day trips. Sometimes with sister Steph and Ben (safety in numbers) we would join them for the Sunday carvery. On one occasion Dad became very flushed, all his movements slowed down and he ground to a halt. Completely unperturbed she just loosened his tie and fanned him with her serviette. Ignoring our alarmed looks, she continued to hold court and within ten minutes Dad came back to life. At another lunch we had all been chatting amicably for an hour or so when Dad leant over and asked her, 'darling, who are these people?'

I couldn't do her job for all the tea in China. The key to her success was that she would allow nothing to get in the way of her daily timetable. She had an astonishingly varied repertoire of entreaties and threats which she delivered with the skill of a surgeon that wrong-footed Dad every time, not a bad thing as he was very stubborn. On the one hand she seemed devoted to him and gave him a lot of time, but at the drop of a hat he was abandoned to his fate as soon as a listening ear came into orbit.



One time she ambushed me when I had just got in from walking the dog in a cloudburst. I stood dripping on the kitchen floor as she began the all too familiar, “did I ever tell you about...?”. Her eyes never left my face, her mouth a clockwork toy as she regaled me with a few more stories from her ‘best of ...’ series. Attempts to say ‘yes you did, actually’ were brushed aside as she gathered momentum. It was as if she went into some sort of variety routine while Dad languished, corps-like, awaiting her ministrations.

The only way I could make sense of this was to think that maybe she had a number of quite serious problems at the heart of a narcissistic personality. Because her craving for attention was so acute, I seemed to be providing a valuable crutch enabling her to live her life and look after Dad. But it was having a detrimental effect on me.

Following on from her success taking Dad to France, it seemed a nice idea to offer them a holiday near us in Spain. Meeting them at the airport I again marvelled at her ability to arrive composed and unruffled having juggled Dad, suitcases, wheelchair, handbag, etc.

At the lovely 5* hotel it was her turned to be waited upon. The room they shared was splendid, Dad only managed a few tantrums, I had a guided tour of the shower where he was washed, the balcony where they sat, the cups from which they drank. I was surprised how many cocktail dresses she had got into her suitcase. “Darling, is this one a bit fussy, perhaps I should wear the black and white with silver tassels – actually this one shows off my tan better?”

Dad was on the ball and glowing with health. Sonya was in her element. After a few days when everyone got to know who she was and who Dad was, for the rest of the holiday they were greeted at dinner by the entire waiting staff led by the Maitre d’ lining the entrance and saluting him. She would brush past them majestically, giggle coquettishly and give a regal wave of her hand. I loved to see Dad indulged in this way; as befitted a Spitfire pilot hero.

After their return to Dorset, life continued very much as it had done before, although there was an edge to Sonya’s voice when she reported that Dad was so well he had had taken to following her everywhere on his sticks - she felt under siege, obviously time to start planning her next holiday...

It was once Paul and I got back to England that Dad started running a temperature. The doctor came, and Dad still managed to ask, ‘have you got a fag?’. Looking uncharacteristically ragged, Sonya was having little sleep in between washing and changing and tending him. She always said she wanted to stay with Dad until “the end”. Now she was handing me a list of local care homes. “I love him” she said tearfully, “but he needs to go into residential care”.

I had already discussed ‘what ifs’ with Paul, and whatever happened Dad wasn’t going in a home. ‘I’ll make a pact with you, Sonya. If I commit to staying here with you, doing the cleaning, helping with Dad and whatever I can to make your life easier so you can concentrate on him and also get lots of rest, will you do this and help me keep him out of a home?’ I had called her bluff. She tearfully agreed but she didn’t like it one bit and from that day I took up permanent residence in the monastic cell.



Dad got worse. He was so weak and rambling that it was a two-woman job to clean him up and wash him down. So it was that I learned about getting close and personal with my own father and luckily he wasn't really aware it was my deft touch on his buttocks, my presence at the foot of the bed. Every conversation with Sonya now centred around nappies, waterworks (yes, he also had another water infection), and bowels. He was in a bad way and it turned out that he had some sort of intestinal blockage. He lost interest in ciggies.

Sonya would bark orders at her clumsy assistant, "gloves please, run the hot water, plenty of soap on the flannel, rinse it, that's fine darling, get a plastic bag ready, clean one to rinse him, more water please, kitchen towel now ... hold him there". But it was when Dad and the laxatives failed to perform and we went on to the very strong stuff that the fun really began. When Dad's poor little rear end finally cooperated and we had a 3-day eruption of the worst sort, Sonya rolled up her sleeves and showed not the slightest squeamishness. Although I knew the routine by now, nothing prepared me for this. The sights, the smells, the suffering, the indignity.

Two things stood out from that episode. The first was that for some of this time I had a migraine with tummy bug which coincided nicely with the worst of Dad's eruption. Head pain excruciating, bent double with stomach cramps and nausea, I somehow managed to man-handle him without vomiting, but crept off to my bed once he was cleaned up, ready for the next call. Talk about mind over matter! The second was how well Sonya got stuck into her task. I mean 'stuck in', because for some reason she developed what seemed like an unhealthy interest in Dad's poos. She began poking and prodding each stool and examining it intently. "What's this?" she cried, having isolated what looked like an intact tablet amongst the mess. I rinsed that and others she kept finding. This prompted more discussion as to what these tablets were, why they hadn't dissolved, how long they had been there ("he hasn't had a motion for three weeks, darling").

She rummaged through all his tablets and it was none of those. "Well, I didn't give them to him" she kept insisting, "perhaps they were vitamin pills that he took before I came." We found about ten in all and she pronounced she would take them to the doctor for identification. A curious tale really as I never heard about it again.

This was probably the worst period of my life. The illness took a lot out of all of us, particularly Dad, but even with the assistance of Pat (minus tabard) on Sonya's days off, it was very demanding. Especially as he kept asking 'got a fag' and I was almost relieved when Sonya came back so she could give him one. She continually bitched about Pat and told me things which I found surprising. At the other end of the country, Paul's father was in hospital and he rushed up there to be with his mother. When the inevitable happened, and I needed a few days to attend the funeral Sonya was adamant that she "couldn't possibly spare" me, "oh no, no, no darling, I need you here". What about her friend Angela who would usually come and help out at the drop of a hat? "No, darling, Angela can't possibly come, she's too busy."

If I didn't know before, I now knew that she had never forgiven me for foiling her plans all those months ago.

Dad improved in time, but I just could not escape my captor; she'd even started to come into my room. She would call me to point out that I'd done this, or forgotten to do that. Once I left a gas ring on; "it couldn't have been me, darling".



She explained that it would be useful if I were to adopt her method of checking the knobs after cooking, “they all go to the left, you see. Top back one off, bottom front off, top right off, bottom right off... you see, all the knobs face to the left and that’s how you know, darling. Check and double check”. On another occasion she invited me into the kitchen to view another purchase and I stood there dutifully while she carefully unwrapped ... an omelette pan. Obviously it had some very special qualities because I was told how to use it, how to look after it, how to wash it and how to put it away. I will never forget what she said to me at the end of her guided tour, “if you damage it, I will kill you”. A little over the top, especially as I’d just caught sight of the price - £3.75.

Surge of relief, she asked to take Dad to Brittany again. Did I mind? It was not the first time that she questioned me in this way - as if I was jealous of her position with Dad. ‘Great idea; thank you so much’, I said. Every day she would remind him of the Big Adventure and I must admit he was getting caught up in the euphoria. Of course I would pay for the tickets plus Angela and another girlfriend who lived out there. And of course Dad needed swimming trunks, undies and some light trousers.

But something happened to change her mind. Having thought about it, she said, sorry but it would be impossible to take Dad. He wasn’t well enough, and besides, she needed a proper break. Then the bombshell, “I’ll be going for three months, darling, because I have a lot to do.” Wrong-footed, I tried hard not to show my displeasure. Of course she wouldn’t get any pay while she was away. I wallowed around for a few days wondering what on earth I could do as I couldn’t think of anyone who could help until she got back. The next thing I knew was that she arranged for Vicky, a friend living in Spain to fly over and help. Obviously I would need to reimburse her and of course Sonya would lend Vicky her car. “It’s ok, she and her husband are separating so she needs a break.” I felt manipulated and anyway, by then I had put a few advertisements in the papers, so I churlishly said please cancel but ate my words later when no candidate had appeared on the horizon.

All the preparations worked like clockwork. A few days before her trip Sonya brought Vicky who was immediately introduced to Dad, ‘got a fag?’ he asked. We said our hellos and it took two days for Vicky to be tutored in minute detail. Was it my imagination or did I just see Vicky roll her eyes? Once Sonya had gone, the pace was less frenzied. Vicky was good with Dad but he sensed her lack of confidence and played up. She talked glowingly of husband Rich who she had left at home. We spent a lot of time together and slowly things began to unravel. Sonya seemed anxious to keep her job, but it didn’t occur to her that Vicky and I would talk.

And talk we did. It turned out that once Sonya had picked up Vicky from the airport she then demanded £34 to pay for the temporary car insurance, driving Vicky to a cashpoint in the pouring rain. She was interested to hear that we had been paying for her car bills anyway! She’d been dreading meeting me because she thought I was some sort of ogre. I listened to a catalogue of things and I was really, really hurt. Everything had been twisted so grotesquely that it bore no resemblance to the truth. How Paul had tried to get her house in France off her, how she and Dad spent 3 weeks in Spain and we hadn’t gone to see them once. Blah, blah, blah.

Before Vicky arrived Sonya told me Rich had invited Sonya on a cruise and tried his utmost to get her into bed. It was Vicky’s turn to be shocked.



We really, really bonded and agreed that Sonya was an extremely persuasive and ill woman and there was no way I could ever have her back.

A by-chance meeting with Pat after Sunday lunch was enlightening for all three of us. Pat opened up as soon as she realised Sonya was history. Amongst all the things Sonya had told her about me, by far the worst was that Sonya had gone off to her house in France for a week, leaving him alone from early evening to about 9 in the morning – and that was when he was still reasonably mobile with sticks. Surely, she couldn't possibly have left him to wander outside again, or fall out of bed, or set the kitchen alight? Joanne had resisted such a huge responsibility but was reassured when Sonya said he'd be fine and anyway, none of the family were really bothered about what happened to him. Pat was given no contact numbers for us, so she did as she was bid.

Pat's turn: Sonya was great friends with the landlady at the pub and being a local girl, Pat had worked there and knew many of the staff. She corroborated what Gerald had said, that Sonya and Dad were 'an item', and planned to marry. She'd overheard Sonya euphoric because Walter was going to buy her a huge great diamond ring. Perhaps Pat knew too much so Sonya started to concoct those stories she told me about Pat stealing garden tools, cooking meals for her family with our ingredients, and using the drier regularly for her own clothes. Pat couldn't understand why she had been cold-shouldered at the pub but finally all was revealed. I don't know who out of the trio was most shocked.

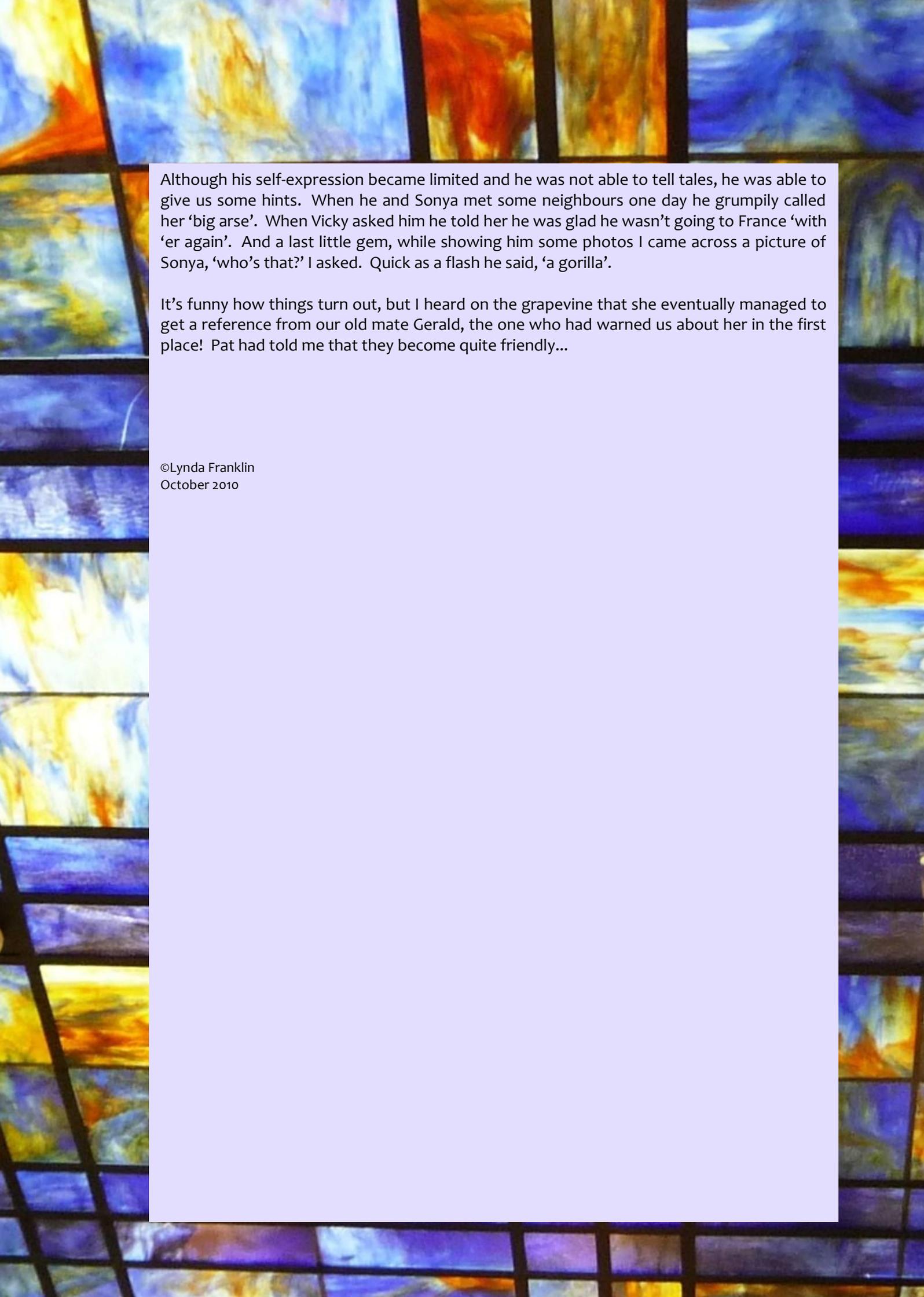
We hugged each other, there in the street, while Dad looked on from his wheelchair. When we got back to the flat, I began the laborious task of checking through two years of accounts. Sure enough, there were no purchases for the week she went to France, but an enhanced payment going to Pat. During the run up to each holiday there were bulk purchases of coffee, tea, spirits, soap powders, cleaning products, etc. I was shocked to see that she only ever bought budget food for Dad, while her own taste was more refined. The petrol receipts per week were staggering, and she could afford to play Lady Bountiful with very generous tips for their lunches, plus Christmas presents to all and sundry.

True, I boasted at the beginning that we were keeping ahead of her and we always thought she'd be on the take, but we didn't know the extent of it. The summary pages cleverly masked the detail but there in front of me was the evidence of a lavish lifestyle, totally funded by a disabled, disorientated octogenarian.

A month before Sonya was due to return I finally came across Ann, a youthful 70 year old, 6 ft, no-frills farmer's daughter from Cumbria who had lived in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe since the 1970's. Dad hit the jackpot. 'Got a fag?' he'd ask and Ann would produce a cigarette and push him outside to enjoy it together. She was a happy soul, content to spend her days cooking pickles and preserves for no one in particular, making wonderful meals and watching Sport on Sky tv. Of particular note was the way she would pick up Dad bodily by the tops of his trousers to transfer him to and from the wheelchair! She kept herself to herself and was a joy to have around.

I rang Sonya in Brittany and explained I didn't want her to come back. She was outraged and blustered a bit, but didn't once ask why and I certainly wasn't going to tell her.

There can be no doubt that, for a little while, she gave Dad the time of his life, but things changed.



Although his self-expression became limited and he was not able to tell tales, he was able to give us some hints. When he and Sonya met some neighbours one day he grumpily called her 'big arse'. When Vicky asked him he told her he was glad he wasn't going to France 'with 'er again'. And a last little gem, while showing him some photos I came across a picture of Sonya, 'who's that?' I asked. Quick as a flash he said, 'a gorilla'.

It's funny how things turn out, but I heard on the grapevine that she eventually managed to get a reference from our old mate Gerald, the one who had warned us about her in the first place! Pat had told me that they become quite friendly...

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