

A Bitter Pill

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The knock on the door was perfunctory, as if they knew she was home. *They probably did*, thought Edith, anxiety fluttering in her belly —she knew they had ways. There were people who tried to avoid this by having no fixed address, travelling endlessly as if to outpace the inevitable. It never worked. Edith lifted her hand to unlatch the door, her hand looked weathered, her knuckles swollen, age spots spread like spattered paint across her skin. *Perhaps it was time after all?*

Her throat felt dry as she opened the door, the sunlight that streamed into the balcony silhouetted the man and woman standing in their tasteful streetwear.

“Ms. Edith Forey?”

“Yes,” said Edith, hating the slight tremor in her voice.

“Fingerprint here please, Edith.” Edith stared at them for a moment.

She knew they didn’t see her as a person. As the child who had adored her older brother and loved each of her pets with devotion, as the girl who fell in love too easily, the mother who had tried to hold her child too close, for too long, or the wife that had felt too much resentment to stay married. She had been a gardener, and still was, if you counted the contraband flowers on her windowsill, each vying for a sliver of afternoon sun. Edith’s hand shook slightly as she held her finger against the screen activating the courier receipt. They handed her the box. It looked ordinary and she turned without saying goodbye, a small snub but a victory none-the-less.

For the rest of the afternoon the box seemed to glow like a beacon no matter where in the small flat she placed it. She wondered if she should call someone but felt conspicuous, as if they were waiting to see what she would do. It had come to this.

It started with clever media campaigns, a loosening of euthanasia laws, ‘death with dignity’ became a catch phrase. The marketing machine was superb, clever advertising was rolled out littered with words like empowered, sacrifice and choice. In the end it all came down to a pill. Issued to every citizen turning seventy and arriving by signed courier during the week of your birthday. It was up to each person when to take it, or that was the plan. Edith felt a heightened awareness and wondered if it was adrenaline she could feel coursing through her body or maybe cortisol? She always got the two mixed up but seemed to remember that one of them gave you belly fat. *As if that matters now*, she thought, *perhaps I should increase my trans fats— who needs a pill?*

At first the pill had seemed civilised and empowering, people were giddy with it, as if they had some kind of newfound freedom or hard won right. Living funerals became all the rage, ‘Live Fast, Die Young!’ was graffitied on building walls. Edith suspected now that those slogans were all part of the propaganda, she didn’t imagine that Banksy was at work there.

For years Edith's generation had fought for freedom of speech, pay and gender equality, for safety irrespective of faith, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Then a generation later those privileged, safe and entitled peoples had made laws wrapped in the flowery language of choice and dignity, devaluing the very people who had elevated them there. After a time, the tide turned, and the situation worsened, subtle pressures intensified as the housing shortage worsened, families started to hover like scavenger birds, waiting for the inheritance.

She glanced again at the box feeling as if she should lock it away, even though she knew from the briefing that it could only be opened with her fingerprint. Suddenly decided, she grabbed her coat and the plaid scarf which had once been her fathers, and left the apartment pulling the door shut firmly behind her. She walked determinedly to the stairs holding the handrail as she descended to combat the shaky feeling she still carried. As she reached the community gardens below, she scouted the lawn for Deirdre.

Deirdre had a way about her, an unflappable quality that Edith really needed right now. Edith spotted her picking snow-peas in one of the hydroponic beds. With one look at Edith's face Deirdre knew that the delivery had happened. She gathered Edith against her, her soft arms drawing Edith to her chest, resting her chin on Edith's grey hair. Edith's usual reserve slipped away and she relaxed into the comfort for a moment, before drawing back embarrassed. "Everyone will know. It's so public, I'm now just a relic, a product passed its use by." Edith looked at Deirdre, her cheeks coloured with shame.

"Chin up" said Deirdre, "Even though we know it's going to happen it still comes as a shock. You'll get through it."

"I know, I know," said Edith. "It's just so official. Like someone has set a timer for the end of my life and I can hear it ticking." Deirdre watched her for a moment with that gaze she had, so calm and accepting.

"Come to the group tonight" she urged, "It helps to connect with others that have experienced it. The Boxers we call ourselves now, it makes us feel like we're fighters, empowered, that's what we were fed after all wasn't it?" Deirdre smiled.

Edith managed a tight smile. "I might," she said. "Maybe not tonight, but soon, when I get more used to it. I think I'll head down to the canal for a walk." Edith backed away with an awkward wave, the warmth and comfort she had felt against Deirdre's chest already fading like a dream.

As she neared the canal a growing feeling of anger rose from her gut like an acidic tide. Edith passed a group of hooded young men, they didn't acknowledge her, she had become invisible to the opposite sex years before. The canals were a CCTV zone and Edith had an almost irrepressible urge to wave at the cameras. Edith paused at a break in the Perspex tunnels that ran alongside the canal, she looked into the grey water. Life had never taken off in the way she had hoped. She hadn't imagined her senior years in this tenement block, alone with the plants on her windowsill. She wondered who would water her plants when she was gone. *I may as well stop watering them now. What's the point in prolonging it?* She grimaced as it dawned on her that this was the very attitude that people now had toward the ageing population. The irony wasn't lost on her, but it was no comfort.

She thought of all the plans she had as a girl, the opportunities lost, and the experiences for her 'bucket list.' *A vulgar expression*, thought Edith shaking her head in disgust. She recalled looking in her bathroom mirror on her fortieth birthday feeling saddened by the signs of ageing reflected back at her. The laugh lines, the softening skin on her eyelids, the beginnings of soft jowls around her jawline. *Ridiculous*, I was so young and so beautiful then. I should have done all those things that were frowned upon. I should have danced until dawn, got a tattoo, kissed a man with a beard. Edith felt a yearning tight in her chest, she had almost forgotten kissing, the brief moment she had just shared with Deirdre was the most physical contact she had had, in too many years to count.

The clouds seemed to darken, the cold wind biting through Edith's thin coat. She turned to go back to the complex, her flat and the box that it held. Nobody was in the garden when she returned, in truth there wasn't enough space there for much growing at all. Reaching her flat Edith couldn't shake the feeling of being watched, she felt conspicuous. As the door swung open she noticed three slips of paper on the linoleum, that had been pushed under the door. She didn't recognise the writing and as she read them tears blurred her vision. One was a family asking to be considered for her flat in the ballot, a recommendation from the existing resident could advance an application, the second was a leaflet for cremation caskets, the third a scrawled note with the simple words: "*Don't be an oxygen thief!*"

Edith felt a surge of adrenaline. The vultures were circling, this was how it started, would she be able to withstand the pressure, to justify her existence? Edith turned to the empty corridor outside.

"It's supposed to be my choice!" she shouted. "My choice! When I'M ready!"

Sobbing she slammed the door, fingers shaking she screwed up the offending notes and threw them across the floor. She scanned the room, eyes coming to rest on the box. I can't stand this she thought. With shaking hands, she shoved the box into the cupboard below her tiny sink. Dragging her armchair to the window farthest from the cupboard she faced it out toward the sky. Sinking into the chair Edith was overcome with exhaustion, a fatigue so bone wearingly deep that she was paralysed by it. She spent the night staring out of the window watching the sky darken and then many hours later the sun peeking through the haze, shining in broken tangents through the cityscape. As the sun rose so did Edith's determination. A spark of something she didn't recognise rose from her gut. She was tired of being downtrodden, of doing what others expected.

"I'm going nineties" she smiled, "I choose life!"

Edith crossed the complex, this time with purpose and resolve, raising her chin in the air and eyeballing the CCTV cameras. She soon reached her destination in a part of town she didn't normally frequent. She grasped the handle of the shop door with her weathered hand and had a brief flashback to the previous day when she had opened the door to the delivery. It seemed like more than twenty-four hours had passed. She faltered and then with a determined push she entered the tattoo parlour. An elfin girl with auburn hair looked up from her instruments. "I'm here for a tattoo," Edith said, challenging the girl with her eyes.

“Sure thing,” the girl tilted her head. “You know that excludes you from certain medical insurances, right?”

“Yes, I know and I don’t care.” Edith lifted her chin.

The girl rose an eyebrow suppressing a smirk. “Well, hop on up then, what tattoo were you thinking of?”

“I want a date.” Edith answered. “Yesterday’s date to be exact, and make it look like a barcode.”

“A barcode?” questioned the tattooist.

“Yes, you remember those don’t you? Here on my bicep where people will see it.” Edith gestured to her arm.

The tattoo artist set to work scanning an image she created on her device. “Hold still,” she instructed as she began to tattoo Edith’s tiny arm. She looked up as she felt Edith flinch to see Edith’s eyes watering, her lips clenched with steely resolve.

“Fancy listening to some old school music?” she asked.

“Sure,” Edith agreed.

The tattooist waved her hand over a speaker and the room filled with the incongruous sound of Reggae beats. “You listen to Bob Marley?” asked Edith.

“Sure I do,” said the girl who couldn’t be more than twenty-five. “It’s old school, I like the lyrics.”

Edith leaned back closing her eyes, her racing heart slowing to the beat of Bob Marley’s ‘One Love, One Heart’. For a moment in that tired tattoo parlour Edith and the young tattooist shared a moment of synchronicity, a quiet acknowledgement of shared human experience to the sounds of a Reggae singer preaching love and unity. Without realising it they both hummed along to the chorus.

“You’re done,” the artist wiped a strong-smelling cloth over Edith’s arm.

“You know we do get a few of you in here, just after. We even thought of running a bucket list special for a while.”

“I hate that expression,” said Edith. “I have more stuff to do than would fill a bucket.”

The girl smiled as if really seeing Edith for the first time. “Why the barcode?” she asked. Edith looked at her, a smile brushing her lips.

“I’m embracing the idea of being expired. Every day I live past my use-by date I become more dangerous to consume.” The girl threw her head back laughing, and Edith joined her, her laugh feeling rusty but coming from the same place that the humming had come from.

“You’re a cool lady you know.” The tattooist rolled back her chair. Edith stood and for a moment they looked at each other before Edith turned away.

“Thank you,” said Edith. “Thank you.”