

## **The Lady Without the Van**

3,000 words

They say that to make something happen, to fulfil a dream, an ambition, a hunger, it's important that a person is in the right place at the right time, but it's like I've run out of those two requirements. My days simply merge into each other, drab and unremarkable. The express train of destiny has apparently unceremoniously knocked me from life's vibrant platform and into a seemingly endless tunnel of nothing much. All I can do now is scrape my disappointments from the sidings, knowing my destiny is to fade away from an undistinguished and unremarkable existence. There will be no more exciting days, starting new jobs, meeting new friends and boarding planes to get a tan and a man. Worst of all, while I still daydream of giving TV interviews and eating dinner paid for by a reporter whose job it is to ask questions all about me because I've said or done something remarkable and unusual, I realise I am now too old to be noticed.

I've always assumed I had it in me to be remarkable given half a chance, and maybe things would have worked out differently if I'd kept off one significant branch line fifty years ago, when I found myself in a chilly church, promising a British Rail technician called Charles that I would love and obey him. A year later Charles and I had a son we named Robert, who is now a middle-aged scientist and married to Eliza.

Two years ago, when Charles died, I turned into a widow and I suppose the only consolation I can find in my unwelcome invisibility is how I've stopped being afraid of stuff.

In mid-December, Robert and Eliza tell me that the sale of their current house will complete in January at which time they will move to a bigger house located in the pretty village of Dalton. Presumably this move is so that my son and his sons can ignore me from a

shorter distance since Dalton is where I already live - in my own little thatched chocolate box.

After our Christmas Day dinner together in their sold house, and while I'm helping clear the table, I ask Robert if he would have liked me to be well-known by the world, one of those mothers who make their mark in life.

His instant response is, "Why? What have you done?"

Eliza is loading the dishwasher. "It's an interesting question," she says.

Robert sits back and takes a deep breath. "Mother," he says, "I hope you're not experiencing any protein irregularities in the brain."

"You mean losing it?" I say.

He drains his wine glass. I can tell he's going to change the subject.

"Did I mention that I hope to join Dalton's one and only golf club?" he says. "I understand they are appropriately discerning and exclusive regarding membership, which makes it all the more gratifying that the word on the village green whispers my application's up for acceptance. It's my ambition to eradicate all the Club's tiresome rural eccentrics and drag it into the future. And I think it's time you planned a move to a retirement complex. There's a state-of-the-art new one ten miles south of here." He pours himself another glassful, sips it then reaches out to pat my hand. "So what are you going to be well-known for, in your twilight years? Stealing a wild primrose from the hedgerow? Putting a recyclable package in the general refuse?"

"Lucky for you," I reply, "I do nothing. Nobody will remember me for anything."

"But we'll remember you," says Eliza. "Don't even talk about it though. Especially not on Christmas Day." She turns to Robert. "Love, can you get the boys to come back down for Granny?"

Two weeks later Robert and Eliza and the boys move to a house about half a mile beyond the top of what we villagers call Coronary Alley, the very steep hill near my thatched chocolate box.

After the move Robert works from home, researching scientific stuff. He's rarely off the internet and I know he's already joined something they call Dalton Rants, an online forum for what he terms local commentary and community. Local moaners, more like, but I rather imagine that my son enjoys that sort of thing. He becomes more like his father every day.

At 6 pm from Monday to Friday, he leaves his loft office to go downstairs and do the interesting cooking while Eliza takes care of the fish finger side of things. Their new kitchen has room for a sofa and it also has an induction hob which means you must use special pans. To me an induction was what I got on my first day in a job, when someone took me around, introducing me to people. "Welcome aboard," they'd say. I was very interested in their body language, sussing out which new colleagues I could trust, who was the grasser-upper type and which one was perhaps having it off with the boss. I've studied body language ever since I bought a book about it back in the sixties, purely because it had the word naked in the title. I remember it said something like 'beneath the veneer of culture lurks an ancestral avatar', though I've never been certain what that means. Maybe it's about instinctive, natural behaviour.

I like to read magazine articles dealing with that sort of thing. I flip through them in the newsagents because it passes the time, and this is how I see an advert for induction cookware.

As soon as I get home I order a special sauté pan suitable for Robert and Eliza, from what I call the big warehouse in the sky. Charles hated me shopping online. When I click *add to basket*, I sense his judgemental gaze.

The pan's duly delivered to my door and I choose not to unpack it because Robert's always loved undoing things. He was only seven when he prised open his late paternal grandfather's ashes. Charles predicted there and then that Robert would become a scientist.

Although today my arthritis is stabbing its sour little needles into my toes, they say exercise can help and I need to get some Christmas weight off, so I decide to carry the pan up Coronary Alley to the new house, as a surprise. I reckon carriage of the package uphill on foot is manageable.

It's 4.30 pm and chilly so I put on gloves, coat and hat. I slip a torch into my backpack because Eliza worries about people walking after dark. She's become affected by Robert, you see, because my son is a predictor of serious trouble. While I relish life's beautiful red balloon, I'm certain Robert prefers a pin.

Due to its size, carrying the package is a bit awkward, but it's not too heavy.

However, near the top of the hill I have to stop, when a car's headlights briefly blind me. My unfulfilled yearning for a bit of attention does not extend to an urge to be mown down on the highway though I'd go onto reality TV in a heartbeat and oh, how I envy the mature students on University Challenge. I wanted to do the OU but Charles worried about the effect it would have on our home life so I gave up and gave in. I'd lost quite a bit of my carefree ambition by then. I remember how Charles would sneer at people who got what he called their fifteen minutes of fame, whereas I envied any toe that made it into that particularly sparkling stream.

I still regularly buy a lottery ticket, just in case. It's not about the money because Charles left his affairs in order. It really is all about the publicity and the champagne and the interviews on breakfast TV.

When I get moving again, another car temporarily blinds me and this time the awkward package slips from my grasp, drops, and hits my foot. The impact on my tender toes has me

holding my breath and splaying my gloved fingers. When the intense burning pain subsides, I take a big gulp of cold air. My heart pounds an odd uneven beat, like a jazz drummer inside my chest and I tremble as I balance the package against my leg. I feel faint.

But then, with my eyesight still blurry, I encounter a vision, all in white. Jeans. Anorak. Boots. A big plush furry hood. All shimmering under a nearby streetlamp. If Coronary Alley's despatched me beyond the veil, I must say the other world is nothing like I imagined and furthermore I really hope I don't bump into Charles. Not just yet. He'll definitely be in residence though, having ticked all the right boxes long ago.

I stare at the vision and ask, "Are you an angel?"

"No," she says. "An angel wouldn't have escaped like I have."

"Escaped?" I say.

"From my bedroom," she replies. "'I'm sick of it. So I came out and onto the path and then I saw you drop something. Don't get me wrong, but it's a big package for a small lady. I mean, are you all right?'"

My heart's still beating hard, but I feel calmer and have no residual joint pain. I tell her I think I'm okay. Then I hear her saying again that she's sick of being shut up in her bedroom and she tells me she's doing online studies and plans to become a journalist. She asks me again, am I really absolutely okay and at this point my head totally clears and I am proud to say my response is both spontaneous and inspired.

"I'm fine," I say. "Just as well, because I have to do several more deliveries yet."

This obviously puzzles her but she says nothing, so I fill the gap.

"Yes. I have to do it," I say, then I sigh a bit. "Or my boss will sack me. They're very strict. But they do pay me minimum wage so I mustn't grumble."

I am very pleased with my newly-discovered ability to lie through my teeth.

“What?” says the girl. “Who is actually this boss of yours? Are they really expecting you to carry heavy stuff around in the dark for nothing an hour?”

I decide that if she asks my age, I’ll be honest. I’m expecting it because I reckon they teach journalism students to quote ages on their first day of the course. I don’t mind. I’m enjoying all the questions and she appears to be satisfyingly shocked by the concept of a granny pounding the pavements for a pittance. This spurs me on to gasp and pant a little as I bend to pick up the package.

“No!” she says. “Leave it. Get your breath back and tell me, if you don’t mind, who do you work for?”

I tell her it’s the big huge company that supplies everything in the world anybody could ever want and can deliver it the next day.

“Well,” she says. “We’ll see about that. But hold up, that company has drivers in vans.”

Everything aligns in my head. I know how the young go about things. I’ve watched my grandsons with their WhatsApp and their Instagram and their TickyTocky.

I do my best whipped-puppy face. “I did have a van,” I say. “But they took it away.”

“Who took it?” says the girl.

I press my gloved hands tightly together. “They took the van because I didn’t clean it properly. You see, the weather’s been so very cold and my arthritis is so painful.”

The girl is visibly shocked. “They expect you to clean your van yourself? In the middle of winter?”

I nod.

“So now you have to go on foot?” she says. “Outrageous. You might be a go-getter supergran but this masks the ugly face of capitalism gone crazy. Hang on. How many more deliveries have you got tonight?”

I pull a tissue from my pocket and mop my tearless eyes. “Only another nineteen.”

“You’re joking!” she says.

“No,” I reply, “but most of them are on the more level roads so it’s all right really. It’s my own fault for trying to do it piecemeal but I worried about clambering up into the loft to get Charles’s old sack truck thingy. I’ll do that when I get home though and I should get a good few parcels onto it.”

“Scandalous,” says the girl. “Shameful. The sorry state of a sorry state.”

I straighten my shoulders. “But let’s face it, dear, I’m lucky to have a job. And I’ll be in bed in time for the shipping forecast.”

“I’m not having this,” she says. “You must complain. You must refuse to do it.”

“Oh no,” I stammer. “I need the money. My pension’s not much. My late husband, Charles, left me quite poor.”

“But this is so wrong,” she says, tapping her phone screen.

“Please,” I say. “You mustn’t.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“I do know,” I say. “You’re going to phone the big warehouse.”

She gives a sort of hollow little laugh. “Phone that lot? You’re joking. I’d be left hanging on forever. No. I just want a picture of you. It would be so cool if you’d let me take a pic. I like to take pics of everything and everybody, you see. Can you manage to pick up your package?”

I’m confident that she hears my groan as I bend and lift. Then I smile broadly to demonstrate brave resignation to my fate. I’ve recently had a front molar recapped. A real ordeal, but this makes it worth it.

“Just a sec,” she says.

Oh no. Is she onto me? “What?” I say, making my voice sound tight, as if it hurts to speak.

She holds up her phone and asks, “Do you think you could look, you know, quite sad? Sort of like you were when the box dropped on your foot?”

I exhale and comply and hear a satisfying click from her phone.

“Why do you want my picture though?” I ask.

“Now let me help you,” she says quickly. “My boyfriend’s got a car and he can do your deliveries for you tonight. Just give me your address, then go home and we’ll come and collect them.”

“I couldn’t risk it,” I reply. “You’re very kind, but no. Did you get the picture though? As you wanted?”

“Yes.” She smiles. “I’m going to tell my Mum about you, because you’re amazing. Are you sure you won’t let me and my boyfriend help?”

“No. But thank you. It’s been lovely meeting you.”

“Yeah,” she says. “Great to meet you too. You’re a bit of an inspiration, you are, lady without a van. I’d like to think I’d be as much of a go-getter at your age.” She put a hand to her mouth. “Sorry, that came out a bit rude.”

I’m still waiting for her to ask my age. She doesn’t. Off she goes, back across Coronary Alley, all supple and young, with her life ahead of her.

I balance the package against my chest and when I’ve made it to the top of the hill, it only takes me a few more minutes to reach my destination and press the doorbell. When Robert opens up, Eliza’s standing beside him looking rather tense, and I see he’s staring at his mobile. He speaks to me without looking up.

“What’s going on, Mother?”

“Nice to see you both,” I say.

He taps his phone then holds it up, so close to my face that I can’t focus, and asks, “Any particular reason your mug’s all over this?”



“What, dear?”

“Your mug’s posted all over Dalton Rants, Mother, and somebody’s written about a poor pensioner’s plight at the hands of a certain big organisation, a certain very large warehouse. What’s all that about? Care to explain how we’re demanding help and justice for this poor pensioner? This so-called lady without a van. Because the world and his dog’s liking and sharing the living bloody daylights out of this post and there is no denying it is your face in the photo. Mother! What’s going on?”

“I don’t understand,” I say, very much in the way I’d speak to Charles when the cat had chewed the Sunday roast. “I’ve brought you a house-warming present.” I place the package on the doorstep.

“Mother!” says Robert. “What the bloody hell is going on?”

“Robert! Please don’t shout,” says Eliza. “It’s a bad example for the boys. I hope your Mum’s brought her torch. It’s terribly dark.”

My son gives his phone a sharp slap. “You’re on here, Mother!” he says. “Every bloody where. Hundreds of likes. And, oh, this is rich, some idiot’s started a GoFundMe page. For my bloody mother? I’m already a laughing stock at the golf club and I haven’t even been formally confirmed, let alone been invited to the ball-laying ceremony.”

I stifle a giggle. “Robert, please,” I say. “Open your present. I met a really nice girl on the hill who wanted to carry it but I know you always tell me not to talk to strangers because they’re on drugs so I did as you always say, and refused her help. Please, Robert. Please open your present.”

He’s still staring at his phone. “Bloody hell,” he says. “It’s all over Twitter. No! Don’t you dare @ me, you bastards.”

“I’ll just leave the parcel here then,” I say. “For when you’re ready.”

Eliza gives me a little wave, and audibly sighs.

As I turn to walk away, I sort of hug myself inside when I hear Robert say, “There’s some sodding MP involved now. Look at all these likes!”

I glance over my shoulder at Eliza and wave back at her, then I head down Coronary Alley, savouring the strange delight of today, and relishing the life-affirming uncertainty of tomorrow.