She has often suspected that her last words to herself and in this world will prove to be 'You bloody old fool' or, perhaps, depending on the mood of the day or the time of the night, 'you fucking idiot'. As the speeding car hits the tree, or the unserviced boiler explodes, or the smoke and flames fill the hallway, or the grip on the high guttering gives way, those will be her last words. She isn't to know for sure that it will be so, but she suspects it. In her latter years, she's become deeply interested in the phrase 'Call no man happy until he is dead'. Or no woman, come to that. '*Call no woman happy until she is dead*.' Fair enough, and the ancient world had known women as well as men who had met unfortunate ends: Clytemnestra, Dido, Hecuba, Antigone. Though of course Antigone, one must remember, had rejoiced to die young, and in a good (if to us pointless) cause, thereby avoiding all the inconveniences of old age.

Fran herself is already too old to die young, and too old to avoid bunions and arthritis, moles and blebs, weakening wrists, incipient but not yet treatable cataracts, and encroaching weariness. She can see that in time (and perhaps in not a very long time) all these annoyances will become so annoying that she will be willing to embark on one of those acts of reckless folly

that will bring the whole thing to a rapid, perhaps a sensational ending. But would the rapid ending cancel out and negate the intermittent happiness of the earlier years, the long struggle towards some kind of maturity, the modest successes, the hard work? What would the balance sheet look like, at the last reckoning?

It was the obituaries of Stella Hartleap that set her thoughts in this actuarial direction, as she drove along the M1 towards Birmingham, at only three or four miles above the speed limit.

The print obituaries had been annoying, piously annoying, in a sexist, ageist, hypocritical, mealy-mouthed manner, reeking of *Schadenfreude*. And just now, yet another mention of Stella on the car radio, in that regular Radio 4 obituary slot, has revived her irritations. She hadn't known Stella very well, having met her late in the day in Highgate through Hamish, but she'd known her long enough to recognise the claptrap and the bullshit. So, Stella had died of smoke inhalation, having set her bedclothes on fire while smoking in bed in her remote farmstead in the Black Mountains, and having just polished off a tumbler of Famous Grouse. So what? A better exit than dying in a hospital corridor in a wheelchair while waiting for another dose of poisonous chemotherapy, which had recently been her good friend Birgit's dismal fate. At least Stella had nobody to blame but herself, and although the last minutes couldn't have been pleasant, neither had Birgit's. Not at all pleasant, by all accounts, and without any complementary frisson of autonomy.

Birgit wouldn't have approved of Stella Hartleap's end. She might even have been censorious about it. She had been a judgmental woman. But that was neither here nor there. We don't have to agree with anyone, ever.

Her new-old friend Teresa, who is grievously ill, wouldn't be censorious, as she is never censorious about anyone.

I am the captain of my fate, I am the master of my soul. A Roman, by a Roman, valiantly vanquished.

There is a truck, too close behind her, she can see its great dead smeared glass underwater eyes looming at her in her driving mirror. In the old days, Hamish used to slam on his brakes in situations like this, as a warning. She'd always thought that was dangerous, but he'd never come to any harm. He hadn't died at the wheel. He'd died of something more insidious, less violent, more cruelly protracted.

She chooses the accelerator. It's safer than the brake. Her first husband Claude had believed in the use of the accelerator, and she was with him on that.

Francesca Stubbs is on her way to a conference on sheltered housing for the elderly, a subject pertinent to her train of thought, but not in itself heroic. Fran is something of an expert in the field, and is employed by a charitable trust which devotes generous research funds to examining and improving the living arrangements of the ageing. She's always been interested in all forms of social housing, and this new job suits her well. She's intrigued by the way more and more people in England opt to live alone, in the early twenty-first century. Students don't seem to mind cohabitation, even like it, and cohabitation is forced upon the ill and the elderly, but more and more of the able-bodied in their mid-life choose to live alone. This is making demands on the housing stock which successive governments are unable and possibly unwilling even to try to satisfy.

Fran is in favour of a land tax. That would shake things up a bit. But the English are extraordinarily tenacious of land. They hate to relinquish even a yard of it. The word 'freehold' has a powerful resonance.

No, there is nothing heroic about the housing stock and planning policy, subjects which currently occupy her working life, but old age itself is a theme for heroism. It calls upon courage.

Fran had from an unsuitably early age been attracted by the heroic death, the famous last words, the tragic farewell. Her parents had on their shelves a copy of Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, a book which, as a teenager, she would morbidly browse for hours. One of her favourite sections was 'Dying Sayings', with its fine mix of the pious, the complacent, the apocryphal, the bathetic and the defiant. Artists had fared well: Beethoven was alleged to have said 'I shall hear in heaven'; the erotic painter Etty had declared 'Wonderful! Wonderful this death!'; and Keats had died bravely, generously comforting his poor friend Severn.

Those about to be executed had clearly had time to prepare a fine last thought, and of these she favoured the romantic Walter Raleigh's, 'It matters little how the head lies, so the heart be right'. Harriet Martineau, who had suffered much as a child from religion, as Fran had later discovered, had stoically remarked, 'I see no reason why the existence of Harriet Martineau should be perpetuated', an admirably composed sentiment which had caught the child Fran's attention long before she knew who Harriet Martineau was. But most of all she had liked the parting words of Siward the Dane who had commanded his men: 'Lift me up that I may die standing, not lying down like a cow'. She didn't know why this appealed to her so strongly, as she was herself very unlikely to die on a battlefield. Maybe it meant she had Danish blood? Well, she probably had, of course, as many, perhaps most of us in England have. Or maybe she had liked the mention of the cow, which she heard as strangely affectionate, not as contemptuous.

She was much more likely to die on a motorway than on a battlefield.

The Vikings hadn't approved of dying quietly and comfortably in bed. Unlike her first husband Claude, who was currently making himself as comfortable as he could.

She has pulled away from the truck, and is now overtaking a dirty maroon family saloon with an annoying sticker about its 'Baby on Board'. There is an anonymous dirty white van just behind her now. It isn't raining, but it's dirty weather, and there's grimy February splatter and spray on her windscreen. There's worse weather on the way, the forecast warns, but it hasn't reached her yet. It's been a grim winter so far.

Why the hell is she driving, anyway? Why hadn't she taken the train? Because, like all those people who insist on living alone when they don't have to, she *likes* being on her own, in her own little space, not cooped up with invasively dressed strangers eating crisps and sandwiches and clutching polystyrene coffee and obesely overflowing their seat space and chattering on their mobiles. She is hurtling happily along to the car park of a Premier Inn on the outskirts of Birmingham, guided by her satnav, and looking forward to her evening meal. Some of the other delegates will be staying at the Premier Inn, and she is looking forward to seeing them. She'll be able to get away from them if she wants to and take herself off to her anonymous bedroom to watch some regional TV.

Fran loves regional TV. You find out a lot of odd things, watching regional TV up and down the land. She's glad she's still got the energy and the will to drive around England, looking at housing developments and care homes. She's a lucky woman, lucky in her work. Sometimes, in her more elevated moments, she thinks she is in love with England, with the length and breadth of England. England is now her last love. She wants to see it all before she dies. She won't be able to do that, but she'll do her best.

The charity that employs her doesn't cover Scotland and Wales.

She wouldn't mind dying on the road, driving around the country, though she wouldn't want to take any innocent people with her.

The dirty white van is far too close. The bad name of white van drivers is well deserved, in Fran's opinion.

There'd been another section in Brewer's, called 'Death from Strange Causes'. It wasn't as good as 'Dying Sayings', but it had its charms. Memorable recorded deaths, most of them occurring in antiquity, had involved the swallowing of goat-hairs, grape stones, guineas and toothpicks. According to Pliny, Aeschylus had been killed by a falling tortoise. Many have been killed by pigs. Some choke to death with laughter. Nobody, as far as she knows, has yet thought to keep the white van tally, which must be high.

She is looking forward to seeing her colleague Paul Scobey again. As she checks in at the Premier Inn reception desk, having parked in the allotted space in the subterranean metal car cage, there he is, sitting on an orange and purple couch in the foyer, nursing half a pint and watching a super-coloured soccer match on a giant overhead TV. He waves when she spots him, and she goes over to say hello, begging him not to interrupt his viewing. Paul is her friend and ally. He is far too young to share her first-hand empathetic familiarity with some of the needs of the elderly, but he has a pleasantly sardonic manner, a detachment that she finds enabling. He doesn't expect people to want what they ought to want. So many in the geriatric business can't understand the perversity of human beings, their attachments to or impatience with irrational aspects of their old homes and neighbourhoods, their sudden detestations of members of their family with whom they had rubbed along without protest for years, their refusal to admit that they were old and would soon be incapable. Paul seems unusually accepting of the changing vagaries of human need. He's in favour of community living and co-operative schemes, but he understands those who refuse to downsize and need at the end to die alone in a five-storey building, fixing the threat of a mansion tax with a cold eye.

Carrots and sticks, says Paul. If you want to get them out, you have to tempt them out.

Fran doesn't like that phrase, 'carrots and sticks'. Old people aren't donkeys. But he's got the right ideas.

He has a mother living stubbornly alone in the house where he had been born, in the low-rise Hagwood 1950s estate on the western edge of Smethwick. He speaks of her sometimes, but not very often. He talks more about the merits and failings of corporation and council housing than he speaks of his mother, but Fran knows that thoughts of his mother inform his thinking. And he also has an elderly and long-demented aunt, his mother's older sister Dorothy, living very near to where they are now. A visit to see her is on his two-day agenda, and Fran has agreed to accompany him, to see the small care home where she has lived for years. This was his neck of the woods, not Fran's, although he himself now lives down south in Colchester.

Paul pats the couch by him, suggests she sit, and she sits. The leathery fireproof hollow-fill foam of the couch sinks deeply under her modest weight. She'll have to struggle to get up.

Paul is a gingery fellow, sandy-haired and lashed, lightly freckled, strikingly pale-skinned, pleasantly featured in a snub-nosed boyish way, in his mid forties she supposes, a little younger than her son Christopher. Hazel eyes, not Viking blue. He had wanted to be an architect but the qualifications took too long, he'd needed to start earning, and he had settled for planning and housing. His views on aesthetics (not often requested) are surprising. He has a nostalgic private weakness for Modernism, but recognises that most old people in England detest Modernism (not that they get asked much about their preferences) and prefer a post-modern pseudo-cottage, bungalowesque, mini-Tesco mix. You can get all those features into a housing estate quite easily, as he knows from the avenues and crescents of Hagwood.

His expertise lies in adaptation. He really knows, or thinks he knows, how features of a dwelling space ought to be adapted to the ageing and disabled, to the increasingly ageing and increasingly disabled. He relies on Fran, who is well ahead of him on the road of ageing (though as yet far from disabled) to advise him and offer him her insights. He had been fascinated by her account of the woman who had died because she hadn't been able to open the bathroom door. There was nothing much wrong with her, apart from her loss of grip. She'd been unable to turn the doorknob, couldn't get out to the phone to dial 999 after a very minor stroke, and had passed away on her cold bathroom floor.

If she'd had a lever-type doorknob instead of an old-fashioned screw doorknob, she'd have been alive today. If she hadn't shut the door after herself (and what on earth was the point in doing that, as she lived alone?), she'd have been alive today.

Killed by a doorknob.

For the lack of a nail the battle was lost.

You have to be careful, when you're old.

And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

Fran declines a beer. I'll see you down here at seven, she says. And up she goes to her room, to kick off her boots and lie on her bed and gaze at the rich daily life of the Black Country and the West Midlands. It's on the chilly side in her bedroom, there must be a thermostat somewhere, but she can't find it. Never mind, you can't die of hypothermia in a Premier Inn.

She likes her bedroom. She likes the whiteness of the pillows, and the rich loud purple of the Inn's informative boasts about its reliable facilities and its notable breakfasts. It's very purple, the Premier Inn branding.

There are several items of soothingly mild interest on the regional news – a promotional chat by some staunchly upbeat florist's about a Valentine's Day event, an interview with a volunteer at a food bank, a report of a non-fatal knifing at a bus stop in Bilston, and, most unexpectedly, an item about a small earthquake which had hit Dudley and its neighbourhood at dawn that day. It had caused little consternation and most people had not even noticed it, although one or two said their breakfast crockery had rattled or a standard lamp had fallen over. Cats and dogs and budgerigars hadn't liked it, and had wisely seen it coming, or so their owners said. This was routine stuff, but Fran's attention is caught by a lively account by an unlikely young woman who claims that she had been rocked on her moored narrow boat by a not-so-small and inexplicable wave. 'It wasn't a *tsunami*,' says this spirited red-cheeked person, posing picturesquely and entirely unselfconsciously in a purple woolly hat, a padded red jacket and cowboy boots on the wharf just along the canal from the Open Air Museum, 'but it was definitely a *wave*, and *I* thought it was coming out of the limestone caverns, I thought the quarry sides had given way, or the mining tunnels had collapsed, or maybe a great river beast was making its way out of there, been there for millennia waiting just for me!'

Fran likes this person very much, she admires her relish and her imagination and her Wolverhampton accent, and she admires the interviewer and the cameraman for realising how eccentrically photogenic she is. 'To tell you the truth,' says this robust young person, 'I'm always hoping something really really terrible is about to happen, like the end of the world, you know what I mean? And that I'll be right there? You know what I mean?' And she smiles, gaily, and then pronounces, 'But it was only a very small earthquake, they say it was very low on the Richter scale, so it's not the end of Dudley after all! I'm not

saying I *wanted* a bigger one, but it would have been interesting. You know what I mean?'

Fran does know exactly what she means. She too has often thought it would be fun to be in at the end, and no blame attached. One wouldn't want to be *responsible* for the end, but one might like to be there and know it was all over, the whole bang stupid pointless unnecessarily painful experiment. An asteroid could do it, or an earthquake, or any other impartial inhuman violent act of the earth or the universe. She can't understand the human race's desire to perpetuate itself, to go on living at all costs. She has never been able to understand it. Her incomprehension isn't just a sour-grapes side effect of ageing. She is pleased to see that this healthy and happy young person shares some of her metaphysical defiance. It is an exoneration.

One wouldn't mind dying of a cataclysm, but one doesn't want to die young by mistake, or possibly by human error, as her son's latest partner had recently done. Untimely death is intermittently on Fran's mind, alongside housing for the refusing-to-die elderly and her more-or-less-bedridden ex-husband's dinners. Christopher's glamorous new love Sara had died aged thirty-eight of a rare medical event and Christopher believes that the doctors had done her in. Fran is not to know if this is true or not, as she has never heard of the rare condition that had killed Sara, but she feels that Christopher's current mindset of blame is doing him no good. Maybe he needs it to get by. It is not much comfort to reflect that, like Antigone, Sara has escaped getting old by dying young, and she has not offered this palliative reflection to Christopher. It does not seem appropriate. She had not disliked Sara, but could not disguise from herself the knowledge that it is Christopher she grieves for, not Sara.

So it is, with degrees of kinship and of mourning. If her son

Christopher, bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh, had died, that would have been another matter.

She had not been confident that Christopher and Sara had a long future together, but had not expected it to be quite so brief. Their mutual past had also been brief. They hadn't been together for long.

Fran doesn't meddle with her children's lives, but she'd liked what she'd seen of Sara. Though she suspects that in Christopher's life Sara had embodied something of what we now call a mid-life crisis. Mid-life crises, in Fran's ageing view, are a luxury compared with what she has seen of end-of-life crises. But Sara hadn't even had time for a mid-life crisis.

Sara had been taken ill very suddenly in a very large bed in a large luxury hotel on the Costa Teguise on the island of Lanzarote. Christopher had been in bed with her and had witnessed the crisis and been landed with the consequences. She had been rushed to hospital in Arrecife, then flown back to a private hospital in South Kensington, where she had died twenty-four hours later, having been given, according to Christopher, the wrong medication. If she had stayed in Lanzarote, where he was told the medical services were first class, he believed she would not have died. The wrong decision had been made in repatriating her. He had not trusted the good advice offered by the islanders.

Sara and Christopher had not been on holiday in the Canaries, as most visitors to those tourist islands are. They had been working, but who would believe that? Well, all those who knew the serious-minded and ambitious Sara would have known it, but it was true that Christopher had been there on a semi-freebie, as a freeloading partner, while Sara was engaged with her team in research for a documentary film about illegal immigration from North Africa. And, more or less fortuitously and it had at the time seemed fortunately, she had hoped to record an

interview about the political goals of a woman from the Western Sahara who happened to be on hunger strike on the polished tiles of the departure lounge of Arrecife airport when they arrived. She was a surprising sight, holding court in the departure lounge, and was a gift to a film-maker. Or so Christopher had told his mother.

Christopher had been keeping Sara company, being himself temporarily unemployed, and his presence in that bed that night during her attack had been for her a blessing, in its way. It would have been worse for her had she been alone. But on paper his role could not look heroic.

Fran knows that Christopher is shortly to return to the Canaries, to find out what has happened to the Western Saharan contingent, to tie up loose ends, to sort out questions of medical insurance, to see some of the ex-pats who, he said, had gone out of their way to help in the crisis. She gathers that there was one elderly couple who, in the emergency, had been more than kind. Theirs was the advice he should have followed and did not.

Fran had not at first been able to follow the politics of Christopher's confusing account of the Sahrawi woman's airport protest, which she was holding against the allegedly brutal Moroccan domination of a largely unrecognised North African state which called itself the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Fran had never heard of this state, and finds it hard to retain its name, but it does indeed exist. She has looked it up. It is a cause of little interest to the British or, initially, to Fran, but after Sara's death, out of respect to Sara and Christopher, Fran has tried to get to grips with its unrecognised existence. It is a story of nationalism and political activism, and the heroine of it is a Sahrawi woman called Ghalia Namarome who is fighting for the independence of her homeland. Christopher's film-maker partner Sara, who specialised in human rights documentaries

for an independent company called Falling Water, had been taken by the manner in which Namarome had materialised at the airport before her very eyes.

Fran's son Christopher, when he is in work, is, more frivolously, a television arts presenter, known for his colourful clothing and his idiosyncratic manner, which had, of late, gone a bit too far.

How Namarome had landed up in Lanzarote airport was a convoluted tale, involving the confiscation of her passport and her deportation from the airport of her home town of Laayoune. On arriving at Laayoune on her return from the US, where she had been presented with some kind of peace prize, she had refused to tick the citizenship box that said 'Morocco'. She identified herself as Sahrawi and Western Saharan and would not acknowledge the Moroccan label. So she sat there in limbo, in the Spanish Canary Islands, in a modern holiday airport in no man's land, this stylish protesting woman in her large dark glasses, with her shimmering headscarves and robes of turquoise and pink and gold, amidst the red-faced sunburnt British and German and Scandinavian tourists in khaki shorts and cotton dresses, queuing as they waited to check in for their flights home. She sat there, on a mosaic of patterned oriental carpets, of less than magic carpets, refusing to budge and accepting no sustenance but sweetened water.

Namarome was the same age as Sara. Sara, although British-born, was of émigré Egyptian descent and spoke Arabic. Sara had been struck by the would-be martyr and her passive resistance. They had, Christopher told his mother, conversed, and Sara had managed to film a brief interview. They had spoken of the Oasis of Memory, the Wall of Shame. Apparently, Fran had learnt from Christopher, there is a great dividing wall of sand and berm and brick built across North Africa, rather like the barrier wall that separates Israel from the West Bank

but much much longer. Few in the West know or care about it.

It is ironic that Sara, who had seemed to be in such good health, was now dead of a rare tumour of the nervous system, whereas Namarome was courting a public death by hunger strike. No, 'ironic' is too light a word for the contrast.

Fran is not at all sure how Christopher's relationship with Sara had been faring before this abrupt end. He'd been with her, on and off, and a little tempestuously, for a couple of years: his first lengthy and publicly admitted affair since he and his long-term wife Ella had split up. But something in his most recent communications, both before and now after her death, had suggested they were already drifting apart.

Christopher doesn't talk to Fran all that much about his emotional life, but he drops hints, makes black jokes. She'd sensed he wasn't very happy before Sara's death, but he must surely be even more unhappy now.

The melodrama of the present situation is unpleasing, distressing. Sudden death and a hunger strike. Fran is more at home with the real low-key daily world of sheltered housing, and yet she cannot deny that she had also been morbidly attracted by the aspect of public martyrdom attached to the Western Sahara case. Was Namarome preparing, had she perhaps already uttered her last words to the press? Would they rival those of Walter Raleigh, of Danton?

She's worried about Christopher, she's upset about Christopher, but she's not sure how deep her sorrow goes. She keeps forgetting about it. She can't tell whether that's good or bad, natural or unnatural.

Some believe that our emotions thin out as we grow old, that we are pared back to the thin dry horn, the cuttlebone of selfishness. That is one well-recognised theory of ageing. Fran often wonders if this will happen to her, if it is already happening

without her marking it. It seems to have happened to Christopher's father Claude, Claude, her first husband, but that for him is excusable, in his present slowly deteriorating physical condition. Claude has retreated into comfort and laziness and selfishness. Into the search for comfort, which he cannot always find, though he does better than most of his age. He's lucky not to be in pain. He knows he's lucky.

Claude does not seem to have fully grasped what has happened to Christopher, and he never really took in the colourful but distanced existence of Sara.

Cuttlebone isn't a good metaphor for Claude as he is now quite plump, but that's partly the steroids.

Occasionally Fran exercises herself by trying to recall the passionate and ridiculous emotions of her youth and her middle age, the expense of spirit in a waste of shame. Or in a waste of embarrassment, or of envy, or of anxiety, or of wounded vanity. The attempt to cheat in the sack race, the red bloodstain on the back of the skirt, the fart on the podium, the misunderstanding about the ten-pound note, the arriving too early at the airport, the mistake over the visa, the table where there was no place name for her, the overheard remark about the inappropriate cardigan, the unforgivable forgetting of a significant name. She doesn't worry about some of the things she used to worry about (she doesn't need to worry about bloodstains on the skirt, though she worries now about the soup stains on her cardigan, the egg yolk on the dressing-gown lapel), but she certainly hasn't achieved anything resembling peace of mind. New torments beset her. Her relentless broodings on ageing, death and the last things are not at all peaceful. Lines of Macbeth, from *Macbeth*, repeat themselves to her monotonously, even though they are not particularly applicable to her lowly estate:

> And that which should accompany old age,
> As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
> I must not look to have.

I must not look to have.

What comfort would they be to her: honour, love, obedience and troops of friends: as night fell?

La notte e vicina per me.

Those were the words that an elderly Italian woman, an old crone who swept the stairs, had uttered to Fran when she was working as an au pair girl in Florence, a hundred years ago.

La notte e vicina per me.

But old age has its comforts, its recognitions.

Fran's Freedom Pass is a comfort, but they are threatening to take that away from her. She values it disproportionately. It is a validation of work, of worth, of survival, of taxes gladly paid over a lifetime. It is her Golden Bough, her passport from the world of work to the uselessness of old age.

Venerable old age. *Valued* old age.

My God, the bullshit and the claptrap.

Honour, love, obedience, troops of friends.

I must not look to have.

La notte e vicina per me.

The egg yolk on the dressing-gown lapel.

~

The dining area of the Premier Inn is geared to dispel elderly apprehensions, not to reinforce them. It is noisy and colourful and full of large busy middle-era middle England middle-aged people talking loudly and cheerfully and eating highly coloured meals, most of them from the hot red end of the spectrum. The flagship paperwork of the Inn is purple, but its food, at least

on this month's menu, is red. Red-orange battered fish, scarlet spaghetti, tomato-red pizza, prawns and peppers and paprika, chilli and chorizo and cajun. Pale Paul, after some joshing with waitress Leila, has ordered a brave black bottle of dark red Merlot, which Leila pours with a generous flourish into vast globular glasses for the four of them assembled at the table. They will be needing another bottle in no time. Fran settles into her chair and inspects the menu with anticipation. She'll go with the flow. She orders scampi and chips and a propitiatory side salad, which, when it arrives, features jolly surgical sections of not-quite-deseeded red pepper.

Sipping her Merlot, Fran feels a transfusion as of the redness of young blood begin to course through her hardening veins and arteries, pumping life and youth back into her, flushing her cheeks and warming her stiff fingers and her cold, gnarled and bunioned feet. A transfusion of ketchup and wine, of colour and vigour. It is good to be with the younger people, and in a dining area full of mid-life folk tucking unashamedly into large plates of fodder. Paul himself, although full of a restless energy and powered by a sharp brain, is in person rather a pallid, bloodless, colourless man, a celery and endive man, but Graham and Julia give out a warmer physical glow. Graham, a heavy-weight fifty-something avant-garde architect from Sheffield, is almost gross, in a handsome kind of way – his hair is swept back in dark untidy old-fashioned waves, his thick neck bulges within his open-necked red shirt (he is more than a bit of a leftie, an heir to the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire) and a purple spotted handkerchief pokes its familiar and suggestive way out of his jacket pocket. Barbecued ribs had been his main order. Forty-year-old Julia is red of lip, with cheeks heightened by blusher as well as by wine: her thick glossy bell of dark hair has a henna sheen to it and her dimples are engaging. She is in the process of trying to wipe some startlingly orange curry

sauce from her shiny white silk blouse, where it has spattered her bulky but shapely left breast. This mishap has hardly interrupted her animated gesticulatory discourse on the estate she'd visited the week before, an ageing high rise which boasted (as do so many) the highest proportion of trapped and isolated old folk in Europe – the usual story, non-functioning lifts, unlit stairwells, disabilities, gangrene, graffiti: children, grandchildren and great grandchildren all in jail: gangs in the shopping precinct, carers who didn't care and didn't show or wouldn't stay more than five minutes.

Asking for demolition, asking for a blow-down, the Heights, some of the old folk had said, but others had been loyal to them, didn't want to budge, were fond of the view over the new shopping centre and the graveyard of the foundry where their men had worked. In the good old days when men *had* work. Most of those left stranded up there are women, the men died off early.

Women live too long, says Fran, spearing a scampi tail and dabbing it into the tartare sauce. We need a plan to get rid of us. A magic lozenge.

Fran, somewhat perversely, lives in a high rise herself these days. She knows about high rise.

We *all* live too long, says Paul politely, diplomatically, nibbling at his buffalo wings.

A magic lozenge, a suicide booth, a one-way ticket to Switzerland, agrees Julia lightly, to whom old age and death are as yet unimaginable, although she knows so much theory about geriatric care.

But care is for other people, it would never be for her.

What do you think they put in it to make it this colour, Julia asks, staring in admiration at the napkin-resistant splatter on her chest. Agent Orange, Sunset Yellow, Allura Red, Carmoisine?

Are those real words, asks Fran, and Julia says yes, they are,

they are the names of food colourings, apart from Agent Orange, of course, and had any of them ever sampled the Bilston Chip? There's a fish and chip shop in Bilston with the most brightly coloured orange chips you've ever seen. Lurid. Technicolor. Delicious. Best fish and chips in the Black Country. We ought to give them a whirl.

Do you think preservatives make you live longer, or do they kill you off, asks Fran. She has often wondered about this. The environmentally correct answer is that they are really really bad for you, but maybe, in their own way, they are contributing to our disastrous longevity. E-agent manufacturers must be doing research on this, but they haven't yet dared to start boasting about their findings.

She tries to avoid cooking with preservatives, and takes care to provide wholesome meals for Claude.

Fran, well turned seventy, has to her own surprise become a carer of sorts and a provider of sorts for her husband Claude, whom she had divorced in a fit of self-righteous rage nearly half a century ago. She spends a lot of time running across London to his flat with plated meals. Now, as she tucks into her scampi and chips, he will be enjoying a deliciously pure portion of fish pie on a bed of wilted organic spinach, topped with parsley sauce. He'll probably be listening to Maria Callas, because that's what he does.

That night, in the comfortable Premier Inn bed that rashly guarantees a sound night's sleep to all sojourners, Fran has a curious and interesting dream about Tampax. It is decades since she's had to remember to supply herself with tampons, and these days she never gives them a conscious thought, but in her dream she was struggling to arrest with an inadequate bung a

constant thin pale and surprisingly watery flow of menstrual blood: the blood flowed through the tampon and through her fingers and onto her bare legs. This sensation, this dream experience, was strangely undistressing in its mood and flavour and texture, indeed pleasant rather than unpleasant, and when she wakes and tries to question it, she wonders whether it has sprung from the redness of the meal of the night before, or from her motorway thoughts about Macbeth, or from some new and about-to-be-apprehended aspect of time and the ageing experience.

For ageing is, says Fran to herself gamely as she presses the lift button to go down for her breakfast, a fascinating journey into the unknown. Or that's one rather good way of looking at it. The thin flow was the blood of life, not of death, reminding her that she is still the same woman, she who had once been the bleeding girl.

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Over breakfast, her good mood continues, indeed intensifies. She has had to dodge the rain and pop out over the road to buy her newspaper, as the hotel doesn't seem to cater for that kind of extra, but she likes the Asian mini-store and the bearded young chap behind the counter and his fine display of fizzy drinks and spicy snacks and sweeties. His friendly greeting is in itself a little adventure. And when she gets back and settles at her table by the window, she finds herself to be almost entirely happy. Fresh newsprint, good coffee, assorted texts, some messages on her BlackBerry, what more could the modern world offer? She has selfishly forgotten, for the moment, Christopher's distress. As we age, yes it is true, it is true, we become more and more selfish. We live for our appetites. Or that's one way of looking at ageing. Old people are very selfish, very greedy.

One of the personal messages is from her old and onetime friend Teresa, who has re-entered her life after decades of separation and forgetfulness, and with whom she is enjoying a curious last fling of intimacy. Teresa is dying, but she is dying with such style and commitment that Fran is deeply impressed and encouraged by this last passage. The message is to confirm a meeting in a week's time. Fran looks forward to it, and replies to say so. Yes, she is on for lunch as agreed, and will bring sandwiches.

Teresa is uplifting. She isn't greedy, like Claude, she is too ill to be greedy, but she does still enjoy a smoked salmon sandwich, and, if Fran gets round to it, she would take well to a little home-made chicken soup.

There is something robust and cheering about the sight of the Premier Inn Full English Breakfast and those who are devouring it. It is even better than the bright red dinner. Fran doesn't go for the Full English herself, but requests a soft-boiled egg with toast. She would quite like to go over to the side table to make her own toast, but the not-so-young young woman labelled Cynthia, Cynthia with her chalk-white face and her raven-black hair, is so helpful and eager to please that Fran surrenders and allows herself to be waited on. All around Fran, younger people in their thirties and forties and fifties tuck into fried eggs and bacon and beans and hash browns and mushrooms and fried tomatoes and fried bread, all wielding their cutlery with an air of gusto. Condiments flow, the red and the brown and the mustard-coloured, and loud piped music resounds. Both Claude and Hamish would have hated the piped music, but Fran doesn't mind it at all.

Her egg, when it arrives, is perfection. The yolk is soft, the white is firm. How is it, how is your egg, my angel, tenderly asks the kindly not-so-young woman.

Perfect, says Fran, with emphasis. Perfect, she repeats.

Yes, perfection. She reads the headlines and the lead story, moves to the continuation of the story on page two. She feels a powerful surge of happiness, a sense that all is well with the world, that she is in the right place at the right time, for this moment in time. She has had a good night, comfortable, pain-free, in a big white wide premier bed. And now she is at one with these munching people, she enjoys their enjoyment, as she spoons her chaste and perfect egg. And she is at one, through her almost-reliable friend of a newspaper, with the miscellaneous events of the turning world.

The conference is not quite as jolly as the Premier Inn, but it has its highlights. The paper on the long-continuing fallout from the Thatcher 'Right to Buy' in the 1980s and the affordability of social housing and the chequered history of Housing Choice and the motivation of registered social landlords is routine, and routinely depressing, but the paper on the new technologies is fun, and is meant to be fun. It is light relief, the comic slot. It ignores finance, decay, demolition and death, and goes for the future. The lecturer is young and sparky and fast-talking and mid-Atlantic of accent, although his CV claimed he'd been born in Walsall. He'd studied in the States and in South Korea, and he is an enthusiast for the robot. Robots would save the elderly from the woes of the ageing flesh. He runs through some of the more familiar low-tech gadgets with which the elderly can already defend themselves from starving amid plenty or perishing on the cold tiles of the bathroom floor. Screw tops and tins and jam jars, bath taps and door knobs, socks lost under the bed, telephones and remote controls could all be attacked by humble devices available to all. But, Ken says, the Brave New World offers electronic and digital wonders that could achieve much, much more.

On Ken Walker's screen, darling little green articulated, not-quite-anthropoid monkey climbers with agile prehensile sensitive fingers mount walls and retrieve objects from high shelves, or bustle beneath chairs, beds and sofas to recover possessions dropped or mislaid (mobile phones, medication, peppermints, e-readers? Cigarettes, death lozenges of Nembutal from Brazil, marked for Veterinary Use only? Half bottles of whisky?). The delegates are shown an old-fashioned pack of playing cards being eased and pincered out from beneath a bookcase, a scenario that gives out a perplexing cultural message: surely nobody plays with a canvas deck these days? A discreet little scarlet ground-level scooting saucer, a flying saucer of the floor, launches itself from a dock under a comfy automated reclining armchair and bustles around the skirting boards and fitted carpet, ingesting crumbs and fluff. A more sophisticated bright lime-green highly laminated robot cleaner with a smiley face is seen vacuuming dust from every orifice of a superbly high-tech upmarket elderly person's apartment, as the elderly person lies serenely in bed doing a jigsaw of Windsor Castle on a tray. Is there an allusion here to the extraordinary longevity of the royal family? And we do know that our poor Queen likes doing jigsaws.

There is a robot to feed your cat or groom your dog. We are all aware, says young Ken, that having a pet adds years to your life. They are studying the neuroscience on this even as I speak, says keen Ken.

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Fran, at this point in the presentation, has a very clear picture of her ex, Claude Stubbs, settled plumply on his day bed, with his handsome tabby cat Cyrus upon his knee. Cyrus is good for Claude, but Fran has taken on some responsibility for both

man and cat, and they are a worry to her. Fran likes Cyrus, indeed she often says to Claude that she prefers Cyrus to Claude, and she would have liked to have a loyal cat of her own, but on balance she prefers driving restlessly around England, from conference to conference, from housing estate to housing estate, from sheltered home to sheltered home, from gadget to gadget, from Premier Inn to Premier Inn, from soft-boiled egg to soft-boiled egg. She is not ready to settle yet, with a cat upon her knee.

She's not very good at concentrating on one subject at a time. She never has been. Her mind wanders, in an endless stream of consciousness. Perhaps everybody's does, but she suspects not. Some people have an ability to concentrate, to focus. She lacks this. Her mind wanders now, back to Claude, back to her early married life, and onwards to a never-ending succession of plated meals.

Her mind never or hardly ever wanders now to sex, as it once did, though the fact that she is able to make this inner observation means that she has not forgotten about sex altogether. The menstrual dream had been a reminder, a link to the past of sex and the tampon.

She has read in newspapers, indeed in an article in her favoured upmarket newspaper, that 'surveys' show that some men, many men, think about sex every three or four minutes of their waking lives, whatever they may be doing. At work, at play, in transit, writing reports, giving public lectures, studying in libraries, waiting at tables, unblocking drains, mowing lawns, shouting in the stock exchange, fitting new tyres to old cars, changing in the locker room, climbing mountains, at the checkout in the supermarket, they think about sex. Not about love, or a loved one, but about sex, sex in the abstract, sex as an act, sex as sensation.

She doesn't think that even at her most libidinous she had

thought about sex per se that often. Women are different from men, although we must not say so.

She now finds herself thinking far too often about food. She blames Claude for this, perhaps unjustly.

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Fran frequently finds herself newly and repeatedly astonished to have become, so late in the day, Claude's minder and carer. She can hardly believe that she has slipped into this stereotypical womanly role. She had been married to Claude so briefly and for most of their marriage so acrimoniously, and they had both lived so many other variant lives since their four embattled procreative years together. And yet she finds herself imprinted, enslaved, *imprisoned*, and in more ways than one. The habits of her body and mind had been marked forever by those four short early years.

No, she says to herself sharply, as she doodles snowdrops and daffodils in the border of Ken's robot notes, *imprisoned* she is not, no, far from it, but this restless wandering, this inexplicable wandering she surely owes something of that to those four years. Imprinted yes, *imprisoned* no.

Claude has no rights in her at all, no claim on her at all.

It's the cooking and catering that have done her in. Claude, who is indeed physically somewhat imprisoned, thinks about food most of the time, although he wouldn't admit it openly. And as a consequence Fran thinks about it too. She has been infected by his greedy dependence. She is thinking about food even now, even while watching Ken's robots and listening to statistics about mobility problems in the over-nineties. She is infuriated by the way food, shopping for food, and cooking the stuff she's bought have re-infiltrated and taken over her consciousness. It's not that she doesn't enjoy eating, she'd quite

enjoyed her scampi and had been in love with her soft-boiled egg, it's just that she doesn't want food to be on her mind so much. How has this happened to her? Is it guilt, greed, reparation, preparation for her own death, an attempt to salvage the past?

Prepare your ship of death for you will need it. Prepare it, O prepare it. Stock it up with viands and with wines.

Chicken soup, if she has time, and a smoked salmon sandwich for Teresa.

Here in the Black Country they call good food 'bostin' fittle'. Fittle means vittles. Good vittles, bostin' fittle. They have their own language here. It hasn't been knocked out of them yet.

The orange Bilston chip, the fluorescent nasturtium-coloured deep-fried potato chip. The pure and perfect egg.

She wonders briefly about Namarome's hunger strike, and what is happening to her now. Had Namarome thought with longing about food, as she sat there defiantly on the polished tiles of Lanzarote airport, watching the queues of holiday-makers from northern Europe, many of them very large, some of them obese, with their plastic bags full of crisps and snacks and duty-free? Had visions of deliciously spiced North African meals, of couscous and lamb, of chermoula and harissa, of coriander and cumin and pickled lemon, floated deliriously past her as she sat there starving, or had her mind been on higher things?

Fran sometimes thinks of trying some Moroccan cookery, but she's not sure if Claude would like it.

She thinks Namarome has by now been deported to the Spanish mainland. Christopher had tried to explain that Namarome had no quarrel with Spain. Her quarrel and her country's quarrel were with Morocco, not Spain or the Canary Islands.

Fran's thoughts flit very quickly and briefly to the last meals

of those on Death Row, a subject too recent and perhaps too indecent to be catalogued by Brewer, though she supposes it may feature in the *Guinness Book of Records*. As far as she can recall, cheeseburgers and pizzas feature high on the list. You really wouldn't want your last meal on earth to be a cheeseburger, surely?

Last time Fran had visited Claude, she'd left him six plated cling-filmed meals in the freezer, to be eaten in the correct order, marked with big red numbers on white freezer labels. 1 Chicken Tarragon, 2 Potato Anchovy Bake, 3 Kedgeree, 4 Lamb Casserole, 5 She Forgets, 6 Chick Peas with Bacon. She's not always so organised. Claude can't quite rely on her good will and her bounty, and it's better that way.

Call no man happy until he is dead. Claude can't be very happy these days, cooped up as he is, although she has at times suspected that something in him gets a bit of a kick from being able to bully his ex-wife. But that had been an ignoble thought, and when she had aired it to her friend Josephine, one of the few survivors to have known her in the early days, Josephine had ticked her off, telling her that, on the contrary, she, Fran, was getting a kick out of being able to bully the old boy in bed, from playing Lady Bountiful to a chap who could hardly move for steroids and other medications. And maybe this was true.

Josephine's role as long-standing friend has involved some putting-down of Fran, and Fran, most of the time, has for many years appreciated and accepted this.

Teresa is both older and newer in Fran's life. But Josephine has been more consistent.

Josephine had known Fran and Claude when Claude had been a junior house doctor and had been working the strange long late hours that had been so trying to Fran's sleep patterns, career plans, social life, sex life and digestion. Fran had resented the demands of his profession with what now seems to her to

be disproportionate rage, as the hours had not been of his choosing and had laid the foundations for a distinguished and lucrative career, but she can still remember that she had been driven nearly out of her mind with solitude, claustrophobia and baby-minding, stuck in the flat in Romley with two babies and no friendly human being in reach except Josephine, who was similarly isolated with her own two little ones. Romley was the back of beyond and neither of them had regular access to a car. Fran loved her babies, as most (but not all) mothers do, but although they were hard work they didn't fill the time, and the evenings were very long and very lonely. You weren't allowed to say so, but they were. The intensity of those years had scarred her for life, and seeing more of Claude in these his latter days brings it back to her, the anger, the sense of splitting, the giddy loss of identity, the waves of terror and inadequacy, the clinging to little splinters of her past more youthful more hopeful self. It hadn't been post-natal depression, no, nothing as medical or nameable as that, it had been a kind of existential anguish, a terror in the face of adult life. Now, in the very different panics of old age, she comforts herself occasionally by reminding herself that she was even unhappier, more intensely unhappy, when she was young.

It's cold comfort, but it is a comfort. She wouldn't want to go back there, into those swirling storms, that cosmic turbulence. She must be further on than that, in the long journey of existence. She must have moved on from there. She *has* moved on from there.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead. There's a thought. A strong thought. The Way of the Bardo. The journey after death. She has a DVD somewhere, with commentary by Leonard Cohen, which she's been meaning to watch for a long time, but she's a bit apprehensive about it.

She cannot help but see a lifespan as a journey, indeed as a

pilgrimage. This isn't fashionable these days, but it's her way of seeing. A life has a destination, an ending, a last saying. She is perplexed and exercised by the way that now, in the twenty-first century, we seem to be inventing innumerable ways of postponing the sense of arrival, the sense of arriving at a proper ending. Her inspections of evolving models of residential care and care homes for the elderly have made her aware of the infinitely clever and complex and inhumane delays and devices we create to avoid and deny death, to avoid fulfilling our destiny and arriving at our destination. And the result, in so many cases, has been that we arrive there not in good spirits, as we say our last farewells and greet the afterlife, but senseless, incontinent, demented, medicated into amnesia, aphasia, indignity. Old fools, who didn't have the courage to have that last whisky and set their bedding on fire with a last cigarette.

Julia and Paul and Graham, in their middle age, are they happy, confident? They look it. She hopes they are. Paul is a bit of a worrier about small things – train times, punctuality, vouchers, that kind of thing – but he knows what he's doing.

Ken with his robots? Ken is a bit manic, she considers.

Perhaps you need to be manic, to imagine his kind of future.

Claude is walled up in the red-brick Kensington flat he's lived in for some years, first with his second wife and now, ultimately, alone with Cyrus. Well heeled, well padded, well attended, well pensioned and retired from stress: bored, with the unalleviated boredom of inert old age, but comfortable. Or that's how she sees him, she, forever on the move. A self-made man, a re-made man. If you met Claude these days, if you'd met him a few years ago in his prime, you'd never have guessed the lower-middle-class world that he'd come from. He'd been a striver, he'd made himself into a successful West Londoner, and as a Kensingtonian he would die. In red-brick Kensington, in a second-floor mansion block apartment with polished floors and

brass fittings, where the lifts always worked. There would be hell to pay if they didn't. With maintenance fees like those that Claude paid, of course the lifts worked. There was a concierge to see to that kind of thing.

Fran's only Romley friend Josephine, bizarrely but perhaps boldly, has recently moved to what Fran considers an extraordinarily quaint development in Cambridge, where, she says defiantly, she is very happy and very busy. It is a pretentious and expensive retirement home, built to give its residents the illusion that they are living in a Cambridge college. Its architecture is inauthentically but allusively Gothic, with pointed leaded windows and arches. The brick is a sober yellowish grey, the paintwork a crisp and holy white, and a church-like tower rises up over a recreation complex which houses exercise machines and an indoor swimming pool. The gardens are landscaped as though they were college courts or quads, with tidy lawns and weeping willows and little box hedges edging not very imaginatively planted parterres, and in the centre of the main quadrangle there is a stone-imitation plaster fountain with a boy holding a dolphin which spouts water. It looks as though it ought to be a copy of a Renaissance original, but it isn't, Josephine says, it's modern.

Jo's attitude to her new residence is an interesting mixture of haughty deprecation and proud affection. Fran believes and trusts that Jo may well be happy there, in a way that she herself could never be. She has visited Athene Grange a few times, from her hideout in Tarrant Towers in Cantor Hill, and been introduced to some of the more congenial neighbours, with whom Jo occasionally takes a morning coffee or an evening drink (though never, Jo says emphatically, a *meal*), and she has seen the games room where Jo not very often plays bridge.

Josephine and her late husband had spent ten of their middle years in Middle America, in academe in Missouri, and Jo claims

to have been impressed by the manner in which Americans are so much readier than the British to accept the concept of Twilight and Sunset Homes. They are far less attached to property and privacy than we are, she had asserted. They move house and home more readily, are much more realistic about their needs. They don't stand on their rank and dignity, they go for what's comfortable, for whatever works well.

I'm much more comfortable here than I was in that big house in Norwich, says Jo. I didn't like Norwich, I didn't like the university, I never had any real friends there. I know more people in Cambridge than I ever did in Norwich. I've always had friends in Cambridge, and I used to have family here. We used to have Christmas here. I've known Cambridge since I was a child. Anyway, I couldn't afford to go on living there on my own, the house was too big. I downsized, and now I'm living as I like. I've got selfish in my old age. I live as I like.

Some retired dons in Cambridge still live in comfort and dignity in college properties, Fran knows. And she knows that Jo knows that Athene Grange is mimicking that comfort and dignity. But if it mimics them to her comfort and satisfaction, so what?

Fran is fond of her flat in Tarrant Towers, although it is a bad address, a bad postcode, and the lifts often break down. But the view is glorious, the great view over London. She likes to watch the cloudscapes assemble from afar, the great galleons of cumulus sailing her way on the approaching storm; she likes the red-streaked clouds of evening, the pierced and the torn caverns beyond the beyond of the everlasting blue, the rents and the gashes and the intimations. She endures the lowering blanketed greys of winter, the monotonous dull skies of February, and waits for the opening drama of the spring. Elevate, sublimate, transcend, that's what the view tells Fran. And climbing up the concrete stairwell once or twice a week is good for the heart.

She likes Tarrant Towers. She likes its insalubrious garage space. She couldn't do without a garage. She needs her car, she needs to keep moving.

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Imagine Claude Stubbs. Imagine him released from Fran's controlling vision of him, if we can. Yes, he is there, he is occupying his own space. Cyrus the stout tabby is settled on the end of Claude's day bed, his softly rounded white-tipped front paws curved comfortably inwards towards one another in a slightly camp submissive gesture that Claude finds deeply endearing. The claws are sheathed and amply padded. Cyrus is not a young cat and he enjoys the circumstances of Claude's confinement, he is pleased that Claude is not well. Claude hardly ever goes out now, except on forays to the hospital, so Claude is almost always there to be with Cyrus. Cyrus approves of this regime. The radio is playing, the television is on although the sound is mute, and Claude's mind moves towards the next plated meal, which he thinks is potato, egg and anchovy bake, a dish he believes to have been invented by Fran, though in fact it is a debased version of a recipe she once read in a Jane Grigson book in the 1970s, in the far-off days when she used to hope that one day she would learn how to cook.

Claude has little notion of Fran's increasingly vexed relationship with food. He has never had to cook anything, ever, except toast and an egg. He likes the anchovy bake, so he won't have it for lunch, he will save it up for supper. Something to look forward to. His minder, who is called Persephone, has already been in to see to him and has left him a plastic box containing chicken and avocado sandwiches on brown and an M&S tropical fruit salad. Claude is supposed to like mangoes, and most of the time he does, though perhaps not quite as often as they