

# **THE OLD LADY NEXT DOOR**

by Sasha Sanders

**The Old Lady Next Door**

A short story that won 3rd place in SL magazine's short story competition, judged by JM Coetzee.

Sasha Sanders

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She's short and she's got a small bald spot at the back of her head and she shuffles up and down the passage of my block of flats and I think that's her exercise.

And every now and then she comes to my door to ask me to change a light bulb or to make the TV louder or softer or to show her how to work the remote control and even though I've shown her a million times she still comes back and I don't know if it's because she's forgotten or lonely.

And she can't hear what I say so I have to shout and she's got this old lady smell like she's sprayed toilet spray all over her flat, like a whole can of the stuff and I can smell it when I leave my flat.

And once at night I went up the road to get a video and left my lights on and when I got back there she was facing the door and pleading to an empty flat for me and probably thinking that I'm ignoring her and she's saying "please help me it's me Mrs whatever her name is".

And she tells me about her son Ronnie and how sorry she is for disturbing me and if her husband were still alive she wouldn't have to and apologises again.

And then this other time I'm sitting on the toilet having a shit and she rings the doorbell and I think fuck I don't believe it and I ignore her and she knocks and then she rings and then she knocks and rings and knocks and I don't know if she's forgotten that she's already rung and knocked or if she's being persistent and so finally I shout (because I have to shout) that she should come back in 5 minutes so she shuffles back to her flat and like a minute later she shuffles back and rings and knocks and I can't believe it and I say come back in

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5 minutes so eventually I finish on the loo and I wait for her but she doesn't come so I think okay and I get into the shower and Jesus Christ would you believe it 2 minutes later she's knocking on my bathroom window so I shout again for her to come back in 5 minutes again and eventually with my towel around me we manage to synchronise our lives so I can tell her which button on the remote control makes the TV louder.

And then this other time I'm on the phone and she rings the bell and she wants to know what day it is.

\*

Harold

I love you and I miss you every day but I hate you for leaving me alone. I can't do things. I need help with things. When Ronnie isn't here I have to go next door and ask the boy who lives there to come and show me how to work the remote control for the TV. He is polite and he always helps but I think I irritate him. And when he's not home then there is no one. I don't like to phone Ronnie all the time. I wish you were here.

\*

This one evening after I've come back from a run I'm busy stretching and I hear her little shuffle steps along the passage. She doesn't lift her feet, she just sort

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of scrapes along in her old lady Stokies kind of slippers. And then there's the inevitable knock on my door and I answer it and I'm sweating and smelling worse than her flat but I wonder if her senses are even still working and if she even notices and she wants me to change a light bulb in her entrance hall. When I get there the ladder is all ready and waiting and I wonder if she was being sweet and setting it all up for me or if she tried to climb the ladder and change the light bulb herself and I'm thinking she could die like that and the miniature chandelier type thing is like the one my gran used to have, ugly and ornate and from the old days, and when I come down from the ladder I sort of half-curiously look into her lounge and down her passage and the carpets remind me of giant doilies and I get that almost sick feeling in my throat and she is apologising and thanking me and is all gratitude and I smile politely and say no problem any time and wonder if she's heard or if she's just seen my mouth moving and then I want to leave to go and put some bread in the toaster and watch TV.

\*

Harold

I think he is Jewish. The boy next door. He looks Jewish and on some Friday evenings when I see him leaving he is dressed neatly.

I call him a boy because he looks young but he lives on his own. I like to have him here, I don't know why. He only comes for a few minutes to help me

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with the TV. Ronnie bought me a new TV but I can't remember how to change channels or make it louder.

\*

I'm telling my friend about the old lady next door and he says I should help her or go visit her and I laugh a little dismissively and look at him and wonder if he's serious and if he would visit her and I think about it but what I think is that she's too old to be adopted and I'm too young to be a care giver and I'm kind of surprised and delighted that selfishness wins so easily over duty and guilt.

Then the next time she asks me to make her TV louder I wonder if she's going to ask me if I want to sit down and watch with her or if I'd like to stay for a cup of tea or something and I look around her flat again and I think about her teacups and how much sugar she has in her tea and I try to imagine what her bed looks like and if she has one single bed or two and I don't know what I would say but she doesn't ask me because she's too busy apologising for not knowing how to work the remote control and I smile politely and reassuringly and I go back to my flat wondering what jokes I missed on the sitcom I was watching.

\*

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I wonder where you are and what you're doing and if you miss me. I miss you. I miss your company. I miss watching mini series and old films on TV with you. I miss the way you used to dunk your biscuits into your tea. I even miss washing the teacups afterwards. Everything I do I do alone, wishing you were here. When Ronnie comes he only spends half an hour going over papers with me. I nod and act as if I understand but I don't. He never stays to watch TV with me. I think of asking him but I know he likes to watch with his family. Sometimes on the weekend they fetch me and we go out for the day, and then I almost forget that I'm alone but when I get home the flat feels quieter than ever.

\*

Sometimes it's on weekends that she comes and I'm trying to sleep late because I've been out late the night before or just because it's Saturday and I try to ignore her knocking but it's incessant and part of me thinks she knows I'm here and I admire her patience and perseverance and it's like a little battle as to who's going to give in or give up first, and when I win I feel a little cruel but also a little victorious.

\*

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Sometimes when I go next door to ask the boy to show me which button on the remote control makes the TV louder I can hear that his TV is also on. Then I go back and watch TV on my own and I think that he's doing the same thing. We have that in common. Two of us watching TV alone at night.

Maybe that's all we have in common. We probably watch different programmes. He's fit and independent, he goes out often. I spend days at home without leaving. He has his whole life ahead of him, mine's behind me. But it keeps me company, knowing that he's next door, also watching TV on his own.

\*

There was this time when I saw her but it was on the pavement downstairs and it was out of context or something because at first I didn't even recognise her, she wasn't in her gown and slippers, and she was carrying some Pick 'n Pay packets and it was the first time I saw her as being capable of doing something for herself and I couldn't believe that she'd managed to walk a few blocks by herself and then still carry the packets home and I wondered how long it must've taken with all those shuffle steps and I wondered what stuff she'd bought. And I was dumb or paralysed or something and I don't even know if she saw me or recognised me and I thought about offering to help her but she'd managed this far so I thought she'd be okay.

\*

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Harold

Sometimes I think how nice it would be if you came to visit just for a day. We could have some tea and catch up. We could sit on a bench on the promenade and feed the seagulls. I could show you what's changed.

Sea Point is so different these days. It's noisy at night time. Some days, especially in summer, I can't bear being inside anymore so I force myself to go out, even without Ronnie, but the streets don't feel safe. I often think about how carefree we used to be when we moved here. They really were good old days. I can still smile, Harold, just daydreaming about them.

\*

I give her half a thought sometimes when I'm running or showering or cleaning my flat except it's not so much her I'm thinking about as it is myself in relation to her. I think about what I'll be like when I'm that age because I can't imagine myself being so frail and lonely and having to ask my neighbour to help me do something silly like making the TV softer, and I can't figure out if it's a pathetic attempt at contact on her part or if she's legitimate but if it were me I think I'd be a little embarrassed about it and then I think maybe she is embarrassed. And I think about how as children we're taught to respect people older than us and now that whole thing is being turned upside down because she doesn't offer me wisdom or experience or confidence or anything to respect, only something to feel sorry for, and how it's almost like she's showing me respect, and maybe

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that's the embarrassing thing; not her neediness or dependency or that she doesn't demand or earn my respect, but that I demand and earn hers, and that she allows it and I allow it.

And then I half think about what my friend said and I have a flicker of guilt and I contemplate the possibility that maybe I'm not the kind-hearted humanistic do-gooder I always imagined I was and part of me feels bad but part of me likes not being good, and it's like a misguided rebellion even if the old lady's a soft target for my own personal passive kind of cruelty.

Then I carry on vacuuming or I look at the seagulls or I wash the shampoo out of my hair and the thoughts wash away with it.

\*

Harold

I wonder if you ever thought about how much time you had left. I find it strange now that we never spoke about it. I think about it a lot now, how much time I have. Sometimes I think the longer I have the worse it'll be, and yet if God were to offer me a place tomorrow I don't think I'd take it. I'm not ready to go, I suppose. But I'm unhappy staying. It's a terrible limbo, a kind of purgatory on earth. Funny that we never spoke about it, you and I.

There was a terrible crash in the road early this morning and for some reason I wondered if maybe the boy who lives next door was involved. He wasn't; I saw him later on. But for a moment I had a terrible sense of dread. It

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was purely selfish – I thought: “who’s going to help me change the lights?” I felt like that made me bad, thinking about myself like that. But then I wondered if he’s given as much thought to his death as I have. Youth can also be selfish; it has so much freedom and life and lightness and possibility.

\*

Then I buy a place and I start packing and organising movers and sending our change of address letters and I think fleetingly about who will move into the flat after me and I have absolutely no idea and it crosses my mind that I should go and tell the old lady that I’m moving and maybe say goodbye but there’s chaos and running around and things to remember and so the moment passes and then I leave.

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