

On the bench

On the bench, the one between her house and the bus stop, Joyce sits for a moment and pulls the handle of her shopper closer to her shin. Its tidier that way. Besides, she doesn't want a passer-by to trip over it and smash her Baileys. Last year, Christmas coincided with her eighty-sixth birthday, and she added a celebratory measure of it to her hot chocolate and a measure every evening since. The bottle lasted until the end of May, and she is back from town after buying another. It is something nice to look forward to on the sofa next to Howard.

Opposite her, above the wall the irises have finally opened at number fifteen. Joyce has been waiting for them for a fortnight. When she gets home, his attention will be elsewhere, but she'll tell Howard about the irises, even if it's from another room.

The bus fumes away. She was the only one to get off at that stop and nobody else climbed on since. The driver sat behind the wheel with the engine running, picking his teeth. Joyce wonders what he was waiting for, these days she wonders about most things. Town for one. Along the high street it seems to be all charity and coffee shops and there's no one around familiar enough to have all these coffees with. Many years ago, she used to meet her friend Mary Green for a cuppa at the top of the large department store that was on the corner. Mary could only meet once a month because her children had after-school activities throughout the week. She would tell her about the demands of dropping them this place and that. Joyce would nod along, but if they met now, she would take the whole day to listen, to really listen to her. Mary never caught up with all the time that was hers to come. It wasn't in her schedule. When she was in her fifties and her two girls were about to fledge the nest, she had a fall, a bad one and was never the same Mary again.

Joyce doesn't go in coffee shops now, or cafes as they were called then - the chairs are hard on her sitting bones and most places won't take money anymore. The waitresses speak fast and use words that only get her flustered. Contactless, being one of them. She saw the look the girl gave to the other waitress behind the counter, as if Joyce had gone soft in the head.

Trips into town are now timed so that when Joyce gets off the bus, she meets Jake. He often walks home this way from school. He's the boy with all the hair and the smiley mum. It's difficult to understand what he says, but he does it in a way that fills Joyce for a full week. Last time, he said the funniest thing: that she was like his new-born sister. Joyce Furlong a new-born! Can you imagine? It's because she wrinkles up her face, can't see too good and doesn't notice when she farts. Joyce laughed so hard at that, it made Jake say, 'see.'

Howard heard all about that one, more than once that week, each time followed with a chuckle he didn't share.

Jake hasn't come. She fidgets on the slats of the bench and looks past the bus stop, checks her wrist, ready to smile and wave at him when he trundles down the road with muddy knees and his gym bag swinging by his side. But none of the school children have passed and its nearly four. The bottle of Baileys clinks in the bag as she moves her foot, it must have knocked against the something nice she bought for Howard's tea.

Joyce shuffles her bottom to the edge of the bench and readies herself to stand. He isn't coming. It must be half term, that's why there were more children than usual in town. Whereas one week for Joyce is much the same as the next.

She tick-tocks her way along the pavement, the weight of the Baileys pulling her to one side. At the gate, she looks up at the window. Howard's face is behind the glass, waiting for her to come home. She smiles and lifts her shopper to him as his ears twitch and his tail pulses in recognition. He wants his tin of something nice, then a long stroke on the sofa.

Later that evening over her hot chocolate, she will tell him that Jake is away having fun with his sister at that park he told her about, the one called Pippa Peg world, or something that sounded like that, and she will smile at the thought of his face on the rides. Joyce will scratch under his collar and Howard will lift his head in approval, when she shares with him her afternoon spent with the irises.