

Flying in the Face of God

Nina Allan

(extract)

By the time the train reached Shoreham it was almost empty. Anita stepped down onto the platform, slamming the train door shut with a hollow bang. Sallow grass grew up between the paving slabs. The sun beat down. There was an acrid reek of seaweed and brine.

Rachel had loved this place. As a child she had rarely been out of London and so the idea of the seaside had never lost its enchantment. The first time Anita had taken Rachel to see Meredith Rachel had been on her second course of injections and her hand to eye coordination was all over the place. She had spilled a cup of tea into her lap, scalding herself quite badly. Meredith had taken over, dabbing Savlon on Rachel's burns and finding her a clean shirt to put on, an outlandish thing with a high lace collar and diamanté buttons.

"I don't understand it," Anita said afterwards, when they were on the train back to London. "The clothes she wore at home were always so dull."

"Perhaps she feels she's free now," said Rachel. "Free to be what she wants instead of what people expect."

Anita had found this idea comforting. She felt humbled by Rachel's generosity of spirit, her ability to accept people simply for who they were. She turned her back on the sea. The tide was far out, and there was nothing to see but mudflats. Southwater House was only half a mile from the station but it was a stiff uphill climb. She supposed the view from the top was part of what made the place appealing. The retirement home catered for about thirty full-time residents, and with its tiled hallways and sloping lawns it reminded her a little of one of the 1920s seaside hotels in the old-fashioned detective stories her grandmother had once enjoyed, novels by Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. The staff seemed to connive in the illusion; Anita privately thought that some of them were more eccentric than most of the residents. There was something chaotic about the place, and it was precisely this that had convinced her that her grandmother would be happy there. The hallway smelled of pine detergent and fermenting grass clippings, a scent that invariably reminded her of the day Meredith had come here to live. The dismantling of the Shooter's Hill flat had been very difficult for her and she had arrived at Southwater House tearful and disorientated. When Anita tried to kiss her goodbye she clung to her and called her Melanie. The next time Anita saw her grandmother she was different, but better. Anita wondered if Rachel was right, that Meredith was finally feeling the freedom to be herself.

The reception desk was unmanned. Anita hesitated, wondering if she should ring the bell or continue upstairs. Eventually someone appeared, a young woman

with peroxide hair and glasses. She was wheeling a linen cart with one hand and clutching a sheaf of newspapers in the other. Anita thought she recognised her from a previous visit but couldn't remember her name.

"Miss Sheener," she said. "Your grandmother's in her room. She hasn't been feeling too bright today, I'm afraid."

Anita felt the usual surprise at being addressed by her grandmother's surname. It was as if in some sense she had become her grandmother. She didn't know if the staff here were ignorant of her actual surname or whether the woman had simply forgotten.

"What do you mean?" she said. "Why didn't you call me?"

The peroxide nurse took a step backwards. "There's nothing to worry about," she said. "She isn't ill or anything, just a bit down in the dumps."

Anita took this as a euphemism, that the woman was trying to tell her that Meredith was going through one of her confused periods. It had been less than a week since she had seen her but in Meredith Sheener's world Anita knew that time could be an unstable commodity. Five days might slip by without notice, or they might seem to pass as slowly as five years. She smiled vaguely at the nurse and then made her way quickly upstairs.