

The Dance of the Seven Bath Towels

PEGGY SMART WAS NINETY PERCENT SURE IT WAS MONDAY. She squinted at the days printed on her medication pack. What an ingenious invention. Thanks to the individual bubbles, she never forgot to take her pills. And more importantly, she never missed Brian.

Armed with a fresh cup of tea, Peggy took up her usual vantage position. She cradled the steaming brew and waited. He was late this morning. She felt a wrinkle in her optimism. What if she'd missed him? What if he'd left already? It would be another twenty-four hours before she could watch him stride to his car, striped beach towel draped around his shoulders.

Peggy turned to the sugar bowl for consolation. She swirled another spoonful of comfort into her tea before returning to the kitchen window. To her surprise, there he was, standing on the footpath, holding a newspaper. He glanced up at the window. To Peggy's astonishment, Brian Cornell smiled. And waved.

Startled, Peggy slopped hot tea onto her slippers. She grasped the windowsill for support. He'd seen her. What's more, he'd waved. Months of doubt evaporated, leaving Peggy with a heady sense of possibility.

She stole another peek from behind the nets. This time, the footpath was empty. Brian and his *Morning Herald* were gone. Her disappointment, however, was tinged with exhilaration. That wave, however fleeting, signified a turning point in their budding relationship.

Smiling, she lined up Monday's tablets on the striped tablecloth – a tiny army of chemical soldiers waging war on the passing years. She still had bottles of Ted's pills in the cupboard, but couldn't bring herself to dispose of perfectly good medication. The heartburn tablets might come in handy, for digestive emergencies. The prostate pills were a different matter. She should return those to the pharmacy. Unless Brian had a thick prostate. Peggy pushed away an image of him silhouetted in the bathroom light. There was no point pretending life was perfect. At their age, relationships always came with extra packaging.

The first of the tablets disappeared with a swig of extra-sweet tea. She took a bite of toast and opened her calendar. It was last year's Christmas present from her grandchildren, each month bearing a different photograph of young Emily and Sam having fun without her. But Peggy Smart knew better than to complain. There was no point upsetting the apple tart where family were concerned.

Peggy flipped through the calendar to October. There was a lovely photo of Sam and Emily collecting eggs on a farm with her daughter-in-law's parents. *Goody*. A whole month to remind her of her place in the pecking order. Peggy

debated blacking out Geraldine's front teeth and drawing Mike a moustache. But that would be childish for a woman of seventy-nine.

Since she'd introduced the new colour-coding system last month, to her knowledge Peggy hadn't missed a single appointment. She congratulated herself daily on her ingenuity. Red for the doctor, purple for the podiatrist and blue for the hairdresser. She'd borrowed a pen from Emily's green fluffy pencil case to write a shopping list and had forgotten to return it. The gold glitter pen now took pride of place next to the calendar and was reserved for the residents' committee meetings. First Thursday of the month. With Brian as the new treasurer, however, she hardly needed to mark the dates. When it came to matters of the heart, Peggy's memory was flawless.

Brian Cornell.

The image of him tucking into one of her special baked dinners set Peggy aquiver. She pictured his slender features in the candlelight, his hand reaching for hers across the lace tablecloth. One mouthful of her sticky date pudding and the handsome widower would be smitten.

But it wasn't something she could easily drop into the agenda. 'Evening Brian. Have you approved the budget for the driveway landscaping yet? Oh, and would you care to join me for an intimate candlelit dinner?'

It was time to face facts. Four years of small talk, a compliment on her buns, and the inevitable enquiries after health was about as far as they'd ventured. Either this was slow-burning passion on a whole new level or she was flogging a dead Dodo.

Everyone knew women became invisible at a certain age, even to men in their eighties. It was as though Peggy Smart had turned completely neutral, blending in so perfectly to the tasteful décor of the retirement village that she had all but disappeared. It was hardly surprising. She was neither exciting nor glamorous. Quite unremarkable in every way. Her fantasy was just that; a fantasy.

Peggy sighed and drained the syrupy dregs of her tea. A woman could dream, couldn't she? One day, the perfect opportunity would present itself. In the meantime, she had memories of Ted to keep her company. And there was Basil too, snoring in his basket with the remnants of breakfast peppered across his snowy whiskers.

'Just you and me now, old man,' she said.

Perhaps it was all for the best. After all, if Ted were alive, he'd be turning in his grave.



Twice a week, the more adventurous ladies of Jacaranda Retirement Village disrobed together in the cramped changing room at the indoor pool. Peggy always fought to disguise her embarrassment, ensuring her gaze remained at eye-level. It was hard to reconcile the abundance of naked flesh with her mother's preaching about modesty. Sheila Martin was the only woman to have apparently shared Peggy's draconian upbringing, hiding inside a locked cubicle to change, like a Victorian lady in her beach bathing machine.

Aqua aerobics was the ultimate leveller, a reprieve from the politics and power games of village life. Here in the communal changing room, the women stood shoulder to shoulder in their unmentionables – practical, cotton, in

every shade of white, with industrial-strength reinforcement as standard. Peggy had always recognised the licence to wear sensible undergarments with impunity as one of the unexpected bonuses of ageing.

Comfy undies. Big undies. The kind that came in packs of three.

With all her decent pairs still drying on the line, Peggy hid her back-of-the-drawer smalls beneath her folded outerwear. Over time, they'd turned a nondescript grey but with the elastic still fully functional, she couldn't bring herself to consign them to landfill on the basis of aesthetics alone. Her swimsuit wasn't much better, the black fabric beginning to bag around the bottom, where the Lycra had disintegrated. It still covered the essentials, however, and if anything the expanding fabric was becoming more comfortable with each wear. Besides, Peggy wasn't in a hurry to replace the decrepit garment. She hated shopping. Underwear was challenging enough, but swimwear was in a league of its own. Nothing fitted, no matter what the label claimed. This one had been dubbed a Miraclesuit. The miracle was that she hadn't taken it back to the shop and demanded an immediate refund for false advertising. She wrapped a towel around her waist to disguise her drooping tail and tiptoed across the wet tiles towards the pool. On the dot of ten o'clock, Peggy Smart surrendered her aches and pains to the weightlessness of the warm water.

'Okay ladies, let's get started. Grab yourself a noodle and space out.'

Everyone loved the young instructor, Libby. None of the women could aspire to her lithe figure, but it made a change from the dimpled delights of the changing room. Libby was

happy to share snippets of her life with the Aqua group: the unreliable boyfriends and exotic travel plans, along with dreams of motherhood. Peggy found it a refreshing change from the usual ailment one-upmanship.

Mavis Peacock bobbed past with a pink foam noodle. ‘Morning, Peggy,’ she said. ‘Did you get my message about the Meet-and-Greet on Friday?’

As guaranteed Brian-time, it was already marked in gold glitter on the calendar. Peggy relished every opportunity to portray the role of an active, intelligent woman, magnanimously engaged in the running of village affairs. A modern woman. And the creator of the most renowned baked goods.

‘Let’s start with some jogging on the spot.’ Libby bounced on the side of the pool, her pert body defying gravity at every landing. Mavis led from the front of the class as usual, creating giant whirlpools with her breasts. Sheila Martin, her sparrow’s frame lacking in natural buoyancy, clung to a noodle for dear life.

Libby jogged over to her iPod and turned up the volume. ‘Come on ladies, let’s get those arms going.’ She clapped her hands above her head and sang along, inviting them all to walk on sunshine. The taut muscles in her upper arms tensed with each clap.

Peggy’s shoulder crunched, and she changed to a muted applause at chest height.

Mavis bounced herself level with Peggy. ‘We have several new residents this month,’ she said. With her flapping wings gaining momentum, Mavis looked set to take flight.

‘Noodles under the arms now, on your backs and kick up those toes!’

‘I’ll put you down for the nibbles?’ Mavis had a way with rhetorical.

‘I wouldn’t miss it for the world,’ said Peggy. *Was that a little too obvious?*

‘Come on ladies! Kick, kick, kick.’

‘It’s good to know we can count on you to take care of the kitchen. There are a number of new female residents this time, and with so few men as usual, I’ve asked Jim Wilde and Brian Cornell to act as social hosts for the evening. To entertain the single ladies.’

Peggy stopped kicking. The thought of her Brian cosying up to some unattached baby-boomer while she slaved away in the kitchen made her lose her footing. Before she knew it, she was sinking, her toes scrambling for something solid. The distorted music echoed. Ribbons of sunlight marbled the tranquil blue water that folded around her like a blanket. How easy it would be to stop fighting and slip away. Like Ted.

All around her were the pale thighs of women just like her, pedalling imaginary bicycles in the chlorine. Outside the pool, they bickered and gossiped; laughed and swapped photos of their grandchildren. Down here, they were all treading water.

But after four years of struggling to stay afloat, Peggy was tired. Sometimes she wondered if it would be easier to succumb. The grandkids would be sad, but they would still have Grandma Geraldine and Grandpa Mike. Her son, David and daughter, Jenny, would no doubt put up a good show of grief, only to find consolation in her will, for what it was worth. And what about Brian? Would he even notice she’d gone?

‘I haven’t seen Peggy around in a while,’ he might say. Eventually.

The last bubbles escaped from the corner of Peggy’s mouth. She pictured her overdue library book, and the wet clothes still sitting in the washing machine. No, she wasn’t ready to go yet. Peggy kicked and torpedoed to the surface.

‘I was thinking vol-au-vents,’ shouted the oblivious Mavis above the music, as Peggy breached with a splutter. ‘And something with smoked salmon if you can manage it.’

Peggy imagined herself shoving a creamy mushroom vol-au-vent into Mavis’s face and saying, ‘Would you like to try the smoked salmon too?’ Instead she retrieved her errant noodle between coughs and managed a smile. ‘How about mini sausage rolls?’

Libby removed her tracksuit top, revealing a skimpy singlet. Her pert breasts stood to attention like two steamed puddings. ‘Alright ladies, now this one’s good for the old pelvic floor,’ she said, bending the noodle in half and placing it between her honey-coloured thighs. ‘As we all know, it’s important to keep our pelvic floors toned as we get older. It’s great for the love life.’

Peggy imagined that Libby had an excellent pelvic floor. But then, she hadn’t given birth to two 9-pound babies. Not yet anyway. She could go on bus trips without the slightest anxiety about the next stop, or book the window seat on a plane.

‘Focus on lifting up your pelvic floor, drawing up inside, tightening around your front and back passages.’ Libby lay on her back, demonstrating. ‘In and out, in and out.’ Her thighs squeezed the noodle in time to the music.

This is ludicrous, thought Peggy. Every one of us over seventy, in our tummy-control swimsuits, concentrating hard on mythical muscles in the hope of a better love life.

Libby was gaining momentum with her noodle now. 'Imagine you are holding on to a full bladder . . .'

Not difficult, I'm always holding on to a full bladder. Or at least trying to.

. . . and wind at the same time.'

A titter rose inside Peggy and escaped through her nose. Behind her, she heard chuckling. Someone let out a snigger. Peggy tried to stifle the impatient giggles. Mavis's concerted efforts to recruit her sagging perineum only made it more comical. Soon, they were all in stitches. Eventually, Peggy noticed the corner of Mavis's mouth begin to twitch. Her eyes widened before she too guffawed.

Creased with laughter, Peggy's face ached, and her thighs burned as she clamped her knees together. Abandoned noodles floated away like beans in a minestrone. Peggy hadn't laughed like this in years. She hadn't dared to. Swept along in a moment of sisterhood, the women howled and roared, leaving the nubile Libby floundering on the poolside like an upturned beetle.



The Aqua girls were still laughing back in the changing room. There was an awkward moment when, slithering out of her one-piece, Mavis lost her balance and almost fell into Peggy's lap. It was a close encounter of the uninvited kind and saw Peggy marking out her territory with her elbows. It was hard to get completely dry in such a confined space. With all that wriggling and gyrating, it was like some new

style of interpretive dance. Talcum powder scented the air like cathedral incense. The whole thing felt bizarrely spiritual. A sacred bonding of elders, a celebration of womanhood, wisdom and the ability to laugh at the absurdity of their lives.

She remembered an article she'd read at the hairdresser's last week. *Why women need women friends*. Something to do with oxytocin, the hormone that bonded breastfeeding mothers to their babies. It supposedly reduced inflammation in the body and produced feelings of calmness, contentment and empathy. Jacaranda Retirement Village could certainly do with more of all three.

Yet for all that the nipple-tweaking sisterhood had to offer, what Peggy really missed was intimacy, a deeper connection with another human. She'd met so many people since she'd moved to the village, but none of them had progressed beyond the foam noodles, a mince pie at Christmas or a please-pass-the-popcorn at movie nights. Even her fellow committee members were little more than pleasant acquaintances. Sadly, that included Brian.