

A fluffy white dog is sitting on a wooden deck. The background is a warm, golden sunset with a bright sun in the upper left corner, creating a bokeh effect. The dog's fur is illuminated by the warm light, and its shadow is cast on the wooden planks. The overall mood is peaceful and cozy.

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Toys

Averil Drummond

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by
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Christine waddled into the kitchen with her shopping bags. ‘What a lovely surprise it was meeting you again today Dorothy. It’s been years hasn’t it? I would never have recognised you if you hadn’t introduced yourself. Just let me drop off this stuff. I’ll be with you in a jiff.’

Left behind, Dorothy surveyed the neat room. A cushion- its designer label showing- heavy drapes, the tasteful, solid dining table. Some nice art work- that sketch of a nude woman was very impressive. She moved closer, yes, it was signed by Christine. She’d been exceptionally artistic at school, Dorothy remembered. Artistic as well as clever. Fine Arts had only ever been an extra subject for her, but her work had always been far superior to Dorothy’s.

It was only a modest house but in the most expensive part of Newcastle. Christine had obviously done alright for herself.

‘I knew you as soon as I saw you,’ Dorothy said to the open kitchen door. ‘Funny us never bumping into each other before, but then I don’t get over to these parts of the city very often. I had a specialist appointment and thought I may as well do some shopping, What a lovely house you have. Thanks for the coffee invitation.’

Christine re-appeared in the doorway. ‘I’m a bit lonely to be honest. Fred’s gone down to Sydney to a sales conference for a couple of days. Our son Charles is down there too, at the University, doing Engineering. We’re very proud of him, but he doesn’t seem to get home much now. All that studying. I feel a bit deserted sometimes. And I’ve got the wind up me a bit with these murders happening the last couple of weeks. I asked Fred not to leave me alone, but he called me a silly woman. “We’ve lived in this house over thirty years with not a speck of trouble”, he said, “and now you’re worried about being murdered.” I could see his point I suppose. I can be a silly woman. I texted him to tell him that I was alright a couple of hours ago, but he hasn’t replied yet.’

Dorothy smiled at her. ‘Now, I know that you are far from silly. Don’t think about the murders again. There’s only been two of them, and I’m sure the police will find out who did it soon. They’re very good these days, aren’t they? Tracking people’s transactions, social media all that stuff. CCTV. I keep off social media myself. I don’t like people knowing everything about me. Keep your doors and windows locked like me. I mean, seriously, what are the statistical chances of it happening to you? There’s so many people in this city. I’m not worried at all.’

‘You’re right, of course,’ said Christine. I’ll get our coffee, and a nice piece of chocolate cake and we can chat.’

She bustled off to the kitchen again from whence came clinking noises and delectable smells, indicating the presence of a real coffee machine. How nice, thought Dorothy, who made do with instant. Christine returned after a few minutes with a tray. Mugs, but nice china, proper plates. She had gone to some trouble. Dorothy would remember that when the time came.

She sipped her coffee. ‘You probably don’t remember me from school because we only did English together. I was in the domestic science stream in those days. You were in maths and science, weren’t you?’

‘That’s right, I’m amazed that you to remember.’

‘Did you go on to university? You were so clever. I quite looked up to you.’

‘Briefly, I was doing a Science degree. Then I met Fred at the Commerce ball. We started dating. That’s what we called it in those days, wasn’t it? All very proper. Then, after a few months – well, I may as well confess - we are school mates after all. We went to a party and both got a bit drunk, and I ended up pregnant with Charles. Fred’s parents were strict Catholics. They insisted on a wedding and that was the end of my University stay. Of course I don’t regret having Charles, but I would have liked to have been able to go back and get a degree.’

‘Never too late Christine. You could still do it, you know. You’re not that old yet.’

‘Thank you for that. I might think about what you said. Look - I don’t want to keep harping on about those murders, but the thing is you see, I think I recognised one of those women in the

newspaper photos, Debbie McMahon. Of course, she wasn't a McMahon then, and it was a long time ago. The other woman, Frances, didn't really look familiar, but I do remember being friendly with a Frances. Not such a common name really, is it? I've got a feeling they might have both been in my science class at school.'

'Have you told the police that yet? Reading between the lines, I didn't get the impression that they had got very far with the investigation. And then there's that weird thing of the soft toys being found on the doorsteps of the houses. Did you see that in the paper? Very mysterious and Agatha Christie, don't you think?'

'I haven't bothered the police yet. Do you think I should? I've got the hairdresser this afternoon. I don't want to get held up talking to policemen, and I'm not even certain that I'm right.'

'I expect they welcome any leads, but I'm sure tomorrow will do. I'll tell you what Christine. My husband died a few months ago, so I'm on my own too. A free spirit, you could say, with nobody to worry about. If you're frightened I could come over later and stay the night with you and tomorrow too, until your husband, Fred wasn't it?- comes home. Would that make you feel more secure?'

'Oh would you. It would make me feel happier to have someone else in the house. After all we were at school together. Old friends really.'

'There you are Dorothy. Come in, come in.'

'Your hair looks nice Christine.'

'Thank you so much. Yes she is a good girl, my hairdresser. Do you mind if we eat in the kitchen alcove? You can just leave your stuff for now and I'll show you up to your room later. My, you haven't brought much, but then you'll be going home for the day tomorrow I suppose.'

'That's right, I have to go to work tomorrow. Lucky I'm on day shift. I've just got my knitting bag with a few essentials for tonight. Perhaps I'd better just check that I brought everything that I need.'

She began digging around in her bag as Christine pulled things out of the fridge. 'I made a lasagne. I hope you don't mind Italian. Just need to warm it up. I'll get you a glass of wine as soon as it's in the oven.'

Dorothy wandered over to the kitchen window holding her knitting clasped in front of her. She admired the garden. The mowed lawn. The setting sun lengthening the shadows of the neatly pruned trees. 'What's that?' she asked. 'There's something out there. I haven't got my glasses on.'

Christine closed the fridge and made her way to the window. As her eyes adjusted to the afternoon sunlight Dorothy took a step back, then pointed over Christine's shoulder.

'Over there on the garden seat.'

'It looks like some kind of stuffed toy animal. Oh no, Dorothy you don't think...'

Dorothy spoke from close behind her. 'I didn't tell you about my life after school did I? You can't do much after a domestic science education except hope somebody will marry you. I couldn't get a decent job, so I had to scrape by, making things and peddling them door to door. There was no Internet for advertising in those days, of course. It was a very hand to mouth existence. I actually went hungry sometimes. I lived in one room with a gas burner for cooking. Would you like to know what I made? It was soft toys. Good quality, not like the mass produced rubbish you get these days. Dumbo Dorothy, that's what you used to call me at school. You and your smart friends Debbie and Frances. You drew a picture of me as a flying elephant once. It was very good, quite artistic. I still have it. You haven't asked me what I do now. I turned out not so dumb after all. I got into university as an adult and did nursing. I'm one of the head theatre nurses at a private hospital. I find particular satisfaction working in theatre. The scalpel blade sliding effortlessly through flesh. You learn a lot about anatomy too.. Arteries, nerves, things like that. And all those lovely sharp instruments.'

'Oh Dorothy. Dorothy please. I'm sure I would never have been as horrible as to call you that.'

'Not now maybe. You seem like quite a nice sort of woman. Much better than the other two, I can tell you. They were quite unpleasant and deserved what they got. That's why it's so lovely that I'm

in a position to help you out. You're lonely and unloved and miserable. She move closer and kissed her gently on the cheek. 'Don't worry Christine, you won't feel a thing.'