

Suze drives fast down Peckham High Street. Suze knows that time is only heat passing from one collision to the next – the past is cold, the future’s blue and somewhere in the soup of time her husband died.

“Jim.”

She still says his name out loud sometimes. Reality is a dotted line and her voice slips through the cracks.

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Suze drives fast down Peckham High Street, left hand lolling, supporting a burning Royals, its smoke tanning her fingers turmeric yellow. She’ll get through twenty, thirty Royals a day, easy, more if Lady comes round. Lady doesn’t smoke but company gets Suze excited and if she doesn’t smoke her hands shake and that’s what Jim’s did towards the end. So she stubs them out and lights another.

Suze was moved into sheltered housing six years ago, shortly after Jim’s cremation. She remains adamant she doesn't need any more assistance than what the warden is obliged to provide. Lady – a Jehovah’s Witness and seemingly the only human patient enough to offer Suze any real companionship – is convinced she does, so she comes round to the redbrick apartment block twice a week to help shop and serve as something animate for Suze to talk at. Lady notes that every floor of the housing has been painted a different colour, like a Neapolitan ice cream, and Suze lives on vanilla (the ground floor). Once every few months Lady will do her best to highlight Suze’s already porous hair.

When Lady’s not around Suze counts the days to her next visit and chats to Lady in her head, but Suze doesn’t know how to show people that she values them. She never has. She believes some things are given, like guests taking seconds from the pan without having to ask, without even having to be told.

As Suze drives fast down Peckham High Street, she will typically have at least four carrier bags attached to her power-chair. Most of the time these carrier bags will just be filled with more carrier bags and they lift in the wind like parachutes, adding to the impression Suze is on her last leg of a NASCAR circuit. She drives a burgundy mid-range power-chair made by Rascal Mobility, she’s sixty-six, a scallywag by nature and has the weathered skin of a fisherman. I couldn’t tell you how, or when, Suze lost the use of her legs, all I can tell you is what I know: matter was born from chaos and Suze drives fast down Peckham High Street. She does not slow down for man, woman, nor child ... nor bollard, nor bus – reality is a dotted line and she slips straight through the cracks.

Lady would like it if Suze didn't smoke inside, or if she did, she would like it if Suze didn't smoke while she was there, but Suze does what Suze wants so Suze lights another Royals. Lady pinches a piece of foil and leans in to examine Suze's roots; smoke from the cigarette finds one of her big eyes and makes it water.

"I'm doing half a head?" Lady asks as she blinks.

"No, do the whole lot - made me look like Worzel last time, you see, what I'm going for is Angela Dickinson in her heyday."

Lady nods, it's easier than admitting she doesn't know who either of these people are. She glances at the white plastic clock on the vanilla wall, it's already 7.45pm; a whole head of highlights will take at least two hours. She closes her eyes and feels the sting of the lingering smoke. Through the sparkling darkness of her interior, Lady can hear David Attenborough talking about Arctic hares while he is blasted by a glacial wind.

"How's your brother?" Suze asks. "And Joanne ... any word?"

Lady shakes her head so fast it's as if she's trying to shake something out of it. "Nothing I haven't already told you. Seem everyone's blind in broad daylight... You know I'd tell you if we heard something."

"I don't know that, you're mute most of the time." Lady looks a little offended by this. "Makes me wonder how many secrets you're hiding in there - always the quiet ones you got to look out for, that's what my mother always said," Suze teases.

"Well, I don't have any secrets - maybe that's why I'm not talking all the time..." She trails off and stretches to reach the bleach on the sideboard.

"What is becoming of this country, I ask you. I hope they catch him and throw away the key," Suze carries on.

"We don't know it was a 'he'. They move as fast as vanishing wolves, and the girls are as brutal as the boys." Lady says as she paints Suze's hair in thick white goo, inhaling deeply, letting the bleach scorch her airways, hoping this is the end of the conversation.

"I tell you, we need—"

"Suzey," Lady interrupts, halting the careering train, "Please. Grant and Joe, they just want to let it go now, find some semblance of peace." She sighs and rests the brush in the dish of white peroxide. "Only, they can't do that if they don't have someone to forgive, you know? It's just making this harder, unbearable really. And talking about it, whatever they say, it doesn't help. I know you don't mean no harm but, please." Lady picks the brush back up

and carries on painting Suze's head, which grunts, Suze thinks forgiveness is the coward's way out. "Yeah alright, anyway ... wretched business, whole investigation's been a farce if you ask me."

Lady's chest feels tight and something's making her eyes water, she hopes it's the cigarette. "Can you hold it down a bit please, darling."

"Didn't sleep a wink," Suze says as if the amount of sleep she gets dictates the angle at which she holds her cigarette: 90 degrees and not a wink, apparently. She ashes it on a floral-patterned plate, where once a Battenberg had been, and rests her hand on the arm of the chair. "Chap upstairs comes back from the pub, takes out his hearing aid and watches TV—explosions all night, sounds like a warzone up there! And then the game shows begin at the crack of dawn. I'd like to know who all these clapping people are. Where do they come from? Clapping, clapping, clapping as we hurtle into the abyss. Six in the morning he kept me up 'til yesterday! Wouldn't mind if it were a one off but I've already got the warden round to complain four or five times, at the very least. Think he's doing it out of spite now ... I'd retaliate but he wouldn't bloody hear it." She tilts her head towards Lady, trying to engage her in the drama. "Well, you're the closest thing I've got to an angel on my shoulder, what's the right thing to do?"

Lady doesn't know quite what to say to this so says nothing, and wraps and packs more foils with goo while they watch the television in silence for a few seconds. A flock of starlings swarm above Rome and fly towards the sun.

Lady's real name is Allison, but Lady got the nickname "Lady" because Lady's full of grace. Every move she makes is a motion in a fifty-seven year long dance, every reach for a foil is half a pirouette, each foot on the earth is sealed with a kiss. When she kneels at her nephew's grave it's like an arabesque.

The cigarette is almost at its filter and Suze steals the last urgent puffs before crushing it like a bug. "This place is a mad house," Suze decrees. "The other day I got invited to a Mark Bolan tribute night!"

"Might be good for you to get out once in a while," Lady shrugs.

"To a Mark Bolan tribute night? I'd be better off dead." Suze uses this expression flippantly and with great regularity. It makes Lady flinch.

"You might make some new friends," Lady offers.

Suze grimaces. She believes "new friends" are the companions of narcissists and liars: people who are always making "new friends" like talking about themselves too much, that or they continually make up new selves to bury the old ones. "I don't need new friends. I've got you." She looks up, "Do you believe in past lives?"

"No," Lady replies almost instinctually.

“Me neither, but don't you ever wonder what you would've been?”

“I don't find thinking that way's very helpful.”

“What's helpful got to do with it?” Suze takes a puff and doesn't wait for a response. “I'd have been a milk maid, back in the Tudor times.”

Lady smiles a little in spite of herself.

“I've dreamt about it twice now,” Suze continues, “sitting on a little three-legged stool and squeezing this udder like a stuffed velvet glove, looking out a little glassless window at the oak tree in the sun outside ... Makes you wonder if the past ever really disappears, doesn't it? Like we're supposed to believe it's a point in time that just vanishes into thin air? Nah. I think it's more like a place we don't know how to find, down a tunnel we don't know how to travel yet ... or it's just down the hall, in the cellar or something, but everything that's ever happened never stops happening.”

“Hmm...” Lady doesn't agree with this philosophy. To her, Time is like rain on a windscreen: each moment wiped away forever and replaced with more of the same. She compromises with, “Maybe.”

Suze shrugs off her disregarded philosophy, lighting another cigarette. Lady twists her lips and checks the foils, hoping Suze will stop talking for a minute and permit her to listen to Attenborough explain how bats excrete upside down.

“Absolutely batty round here!” Suze shrieks and laughs at her joke, which gurgles into a cough, and watches the reflection Lady's face in the TV expecting a smile – that was funny. But Lady isn't smiling. Her eyes look wet, as if she is about to cry again. Lady used to laugh at all of Suze's jokes, regardless of their quality, just to bring Suze some joy – back then Lady had an abundance, so she could give to others freely.

Things change.

Lady hasn't laughed since her nephew was stabbed on Peckham High Street last summer. It was late afternoon and the air was filled with the sound of the train from Victoria pulling in.

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The hardest part of leaving the home Suze had shared with Jim was leaving the Blu Tack. She wasn't sure how it started, or where it had started, but it had started when Jim's Alzheimer's snuck in the back door and stole something from him every night while they slept. To begin with, it was only flecks of life – a particularly beautiful walk to work watching thin drops of rain fall from the apparently cloudless, sunny sky, when he was only twenty-two, a moment that neither he nor Suze would notice was missing. But

before long it was ripping out whole seasons, whole years, whole decades, from his mind.

Over a period of about three years, Jim stuck Blu Tack all over their home. He stuck a constellation of Blu Tack around their bed, reflecting the arched outline of the upholstered headboard, he stuck it around most of the door frames in the house, the light switches and the loo, the cupboards and the windowsills, the television and the lamps, and the removal men commented on “A hell of a lot of Blu Tack around the trapdoor to the loft. Got grandkids have ya?”

“Jim.”

She still says his name out loud sometimes. Death is just another room and her voice slips through the cracks.

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Suze glows in the darkness of the television. The titles of *EastEnders* appear and she smiles, thinking that the river running through her city looks like a heartbeat, and wonders how or why hers keeps on beating. But beat it does, reasonless, and fast from the exertion of hauling herself into bed. Sweat is dripping from her widow’s peak, her arms are hot with a familiar ache from the day’s efforts and melancholy is tapping its silver fingers on the double-glazing. But Suze is having none of that. Suze smiles through a whole life of fighting and claims her victory over yet another day.

24096 days undefeated, here lies the heavyweight champion of the world!

The first shudders from the man upstairs’ television reverberate through the architecture of the universe, but tonight Suze is unmoved. She strokes her golden hair, blows smoke through her nose, closes her eyes and thinks of tomorrow. She imagines how she will race down the pavement as women and children run for cover. She imagines the yellow leaves that fall from the trees as fast and many as souls leave the earth. She imagines the cold wind that will lift her brilliant hair high into the endless sky. She drives fast down Peckham High Street, on her mission to the end.

Artist bio

Jade Fitton's short stories have appeared in *Somesuch Stories* and she was commissioned by the BFI to write a short story. Her essays, criticism, and poetry have appeared in *The Independent*, *Vogue*, *The Newstatesman*, *the TLS*, *The Moth* and *SMEAR*, among others. She was awarded an Arts Council for her debut novel. She is represented by Aevitas Creative Management. // w: www.jadeangelesfitton.com