

Every Second Sunday by Gary Finnegan

Maria approaches Pat from behind as he studies the mouths of television newsreaders, his bony elbows propped up by the hardwood of his favourite armchair. He is flanked by men who no longer speak.

‘Pat, the roster’s in, I’m working Sunday night.’ Her twin taps on his shoulders spark life into heavy limbs.

‘Ah, thanks Maria, you’re very good to think of us. I’ll check with Jinny.’ A handbell summons a slow-rushing crowd to the dining room.

‘Spoke to her already – and I was on to pharmacy,’ Maria shouts, moving away. ‘Little bonus blue for you Sunday afternoon.’ And on she motions to check how many will take tea in their rooms.

Only Maria. The others, with their kind faces and hush-toned voices, cook and clean and feed and care. Only Maria understands Every Second Sunday.

‘22,000 days,’ Jinny says, as loaded white plates come to rest on their smooth-edged table for two. Their private corner of a busy room.

‘What is?’ Pat says, pushing marrowfat peas with fading intent to bring fork to mouth. ‘What’s 22,000 days?’

‘We’re together. We’re together 22,000 days. I asked Maria to calculate it on her phone.’

Their 60th anniversary having come and gone with much summer fanfare, Jinny sought out new milestones in case heart failure or dementia stole their 70th.

‘You were always great for excuses to celebrate,’ says Pat, leaning in to whisper-shout over the din, squeezing her knuckles.

The smells, woven wafts of roast potatoes, Complan and cleaning fluids, undermine the best of appetites. The medication floods Pat’s body, the body having its way with his thoughts.

‘I’m not bothered by dessert. Rhubarb and custard again... Shall we retire?’

Maria arrives, a thin tower of practicality, to steady Pat as he leverages Jinny to her feet.

Room 12 is the double at the end of a dark-carpeted corridor, fluorescently lit. A wall of nuns with roving eyes traces their path to the door, keycard in an outstretched hand. It was their room, shared, when Jinny first joined Pat in Silver Crest. Within weeks, Pat had returned to his single, after a run of humiliations that the urologist shrugged off as the price of gracing the ninth decade.

Tonight, the double is theirs again. Maria lights two candles, against health and safety protocol, and puts fresh flowers on the nightstand next to lubricant and the two satin bathrobes she brings from home every second Sunday. She rubs their arms, winks and leaves.

‘I know you like to wear the tie, but I wish you wouldn’t,’ Jinny says, her arthritic fingers working loose a knot. Pat’s belt buckle echoes against the floor. Jinny slips out of the dress that Maria had delicately unzipped.

Their bodies warm, fingers cold. Pat and Jinny stand and kiss, revisit earlier selves, before gravity takes them to the mattress. Jinny reaches for the dresser as a vacant look falls through Pat. She smiles at him, nervously, hoping this is not one of his turns.

‘What’s this, Jin?’ he says. ‘Where’s this now?’

‘Silver Crest, love. Date night. Remember?’

The present floods back in, an overdue grin filling out his face, a man in receipt of good news. Muscle memory retrieves a motor program. He puts an unsteady hand to her breast and she reaches for his leg. And there they freeze.

‘I don’t know, Pat. God, I’m sorry, I just...I just don’t know...’

‘Everything’s been done for us, Jin. We missed out last time on account of the vomiting bug. We both agreed we’d try tonight.’

‘Can’t I change my mind?’

‘I’m sorry, love. Yes, I’m sorry. To be honest, I’m not 100% myself. Sunday fortnight?’

They kiss and hug and hold on tight.

‘We’ll lie to Maria.’