

March

by Francesca Ryan

It was one of those March days when the sun shines hot and the wind blows cold: when it is summer in the light, and winter in the shade. She crossed over to walk past A&E, where three ambulances sat in the bay: patient gun dogs waiting for the off. Their yellow sides gleamed in the unexpected sunshine. She walked on, towards the main entrance busy with the usual human traffic.

“How you doin’ Shona darlin?” Jimmy the porter grinned at her, leaning into his cupped left hand, lighting his rollup with his right.

“You back on days, then?”

She smiled. Jimmy might be a bit lairy, but everyone loved him. A leathery skinned rock ‘n’ roll gypsy, you could almost see a bit of David Essex about him. His tuneless whistling gave the lie to that. Not that it mattered to the patients he ferried to and from the various departments. They loved him. Upbeat, cheeky, but with a feel for those who preferred not to listen to his patter. Occasional conveyer of contraband for favourites, he was a world class dodger of the smoking police. A little further down the wall, three more smokers huddled in dressing gowns and slippers; cliquey and defensive. She remembered Mary’s face from over Christmas. Was she back already? Her thin straggle of dyed black hair was pulled back tight, severe against her thin grey face and pinched lips. For someone with COPD, she showed a perverse stamina, faithful to her beloved cigs.

“Yes, back on days, Jimmy. See you later, lover.”

She passed through the automatic doors, catching sight of her own reflection in the glass. Who was this droop shouldered woman? Reception was lively with patients and their relatives. In the transit area, a tired old man was sunk back into his wheelchair, clutching a Tesco bag in his lap. Overflowing with belongings and paper-bagged medications, it took both his arms to keep it in place. The younger woman pushing him looked tired.

Shona was tired, too. But at least the night shifts had kept at bay the darkness left by Paterson’s disappearance. Lack of sleep and too much thinking had left her ragged. It had been a relief to work the night hours. If it was quiet, she could chat and pick through the Quality Street boxes with Asha, a Nigerian staff nurse with a megawatt smile and throaty giggle. Even old Marion who was always insisting on having “a proper nurse, that little blondie, not the dark one” succumbed to her at lights out.

When her querulous moaning disturbed the ward, Asha would prop up her pillow just how she needed it; Marion's anxious head would subside against the comfort of Asha's considerable bosom. A little quiet crooning, and Marion was soothed into silence. Asha knew how to speak to the child in an anxious adult. They can't teach you that on a degree course, thought Shona.

She hadn't told anyone about what had happened. When asked how it was going with her police beau, she gave a thumbs down and a head shake; don't ask. It was easy enough to deflect conversation into the latest gossip about sluice room romance, or a management that didn't care about staffing levels. She scanned the board. A new admittance in bay two, three discharges due to be signed off later in the afternoon. One nurse per nine patients today. She'd known it worse.

Lunchtime was in full swing. "Can you do Mrs Templar on the end? It's been kick-bollock-scramble in here." Jude her colleague rolled her eyes towards bay eight.

The smell of faeces wafted through the ward, unencouraging to those with poor appetites. Mrs Templar was a sweetie, and very apologetic about needing to be cleaned up. Shona was deft and gentle. Shit, she could deal with that. Blood was fine. It was phlegm that made her wretch inwardly sometimes. Mrs Templar's watery blue eyes appraised Shona's drawn face.

"Man trouble, dear?"

"Something like that"

She helped Mrs Templar get her legs under the covers, and smoothed the thin blue blanket.

"You keep bugging on, my lovely. It'll pass. Come a time when none of it matters anymore."

Shona gave her a half smile. She hoped that was true. Meanwhile, the blessed absorption of work was the only way through. Spring could be painful when your heart was under a cold front that showed no signs of lifting.