

Popping In

by MaryPat Campbell

Winnie rang Matt the other morning a bit too early. She needed some shampoo and asked if he could get some for her and drop it in on his way home from work.

She went on to tell Matt that she'd had a fall a couple of days ago but was ok now and not in need of any follow up with the GP, or anything like that. When Matt quizzed Winnie some more, it turned out that she had tripped in the local supermarket, hit her head and bruised her shoulder badly. The people in the shop had been very kind and offered to call a taxi to take her home, but Winnie told Matt she insisted on getting the bus home, and that she was more than capable of looking after herself. Winnie was now at home in bed, resting up and feeling much better, she said. She had everything she needed around her, her phone, books, and the TV remote control.

Matt said he would come round with the shampoo, and asked if she needed anything else; milk, bread or pain killers maybe. She never used pain killers she told him, had no need of them and wasn't going to start now. She was quite sure she'd be as right as rain in a few days. She added that it might take her a bit longer than usual to get to the front door, but that he wasn't to worry, just to ring the bell as usual and she would buzz him in. She told Matt that it might be a good idea if she gave him a key so he could let himself in next time.

The last time he went to visit Winnie, Matt told me what an extraordinary woman she was. Ninety one and still managing so well on her own. Interested in the world, in politics, a great reader, a vegetarian and full of stories about her childhood growing up in east London, her family and friends there, who are mostly dead now. Last time, he made them both a cup of tea and sat with her in her living room chatting for an hour or so.

Matt can only pop in now and then as he finds the visits increasingly difficult. He feels bad about this and told me he thinks he ought to be more generous and pop in more often. He often sees a number of empty wine bottles in the kitchen. He knows she manages things as best she can but doesn't think it's his place to talk to her about what her real needs are. He thinks neither he nor Winnie would be up to that. He laughed, telling me he thinks shampoo is way down the list of things Winnie needs.

Matt asked me what sort of shampoo he ought to buy her, as she didn't tell him what sort she likes. I said I didn't think it mattered too much what sort of shampoo he bought, and that I thought it was more about the popping in. Matt said the thing was, that the more he popped in, the more dependent Winnie became on him, especially lately, and he didn't think he could manage it much longer. He liked to think he was a good neighbour to her, but sometimes it all just felt too much.

Winnie usually waited for Matt to arrive before putting the kettle on. She liked making tea for both of them and sometimes had cake or biscuits to go with it. But lately, she preferred Matt to put the kettle on, make the tea and pour the milk. Occasionally, she was still in bed when he arrived, and it was clear she had quickly wrapped a dressing gown round her to come to the door. Matt wished Winnie had other friends who popped in sometimes too, but when he asked her about this she was evasive. Last time he visited, Winnie told him she sometimes wished she was dead, as all her friends and family had now gone. He didn't know if this was a momentary lonely thought, or if she was serious.