

## **SOLITARY**

**By Jenny Morris**

As always, Janet woke early. It was the day before her eightieth birthday. Faint light had begun to penetrate the curtains of her tiny basement flat and she could hear the traffic on the street outside. A dog barked irritably, on and on.

She sighed and clambered carefully out of bed, glad that the night was nearly over. She was used to being alone and, in daytime, coped well with solitude since her husband, Ron, had died years back. But she always became nervous in the evening and really afraid in the hours of darkness. Her part of London had a lot of violent crime and the streets nearby were full of unstable drug addicts.

Although her sight was failing, her hearing was still good. She would lie in bed, scared, listening to the familiar old house creak, and imagine a stranger breaking in and attacking her. Her deaf neighbour in the flat above would never hear any cries for help, she knew. Yet there was nothing worth stealing in her place, only items of sentimental value to her: the coral beads from Ron and a shoe box full of black and white photographs.

As she made her toast, put a small amount of marmalade on and waited for the kettle to boil for her tea, she thought about her only son, Danny. He'd lived nearby years back, before he moved to Sydney to work. But he always telephoned her on Christmas Day and sometimes he remembered her birthday. Perhaps she would receive a card from him this special year. She knew better than to expect a present.

Slowly she took her breakfast back to bed. No need to get up until 6 30.

The morning wore on. As she hadn't been out for a few days, she needed to make the effort to do some shopping. Her knees were always painful, but her stick was useful and she knew all the seats and walls nearby on which to take advantage during her outings.

It took her a while to find her comb, which had fallen on the lino, then with sturdy fingers she twisted her white hair into a bun, put on her old coat and knitted scarf, fetched her basket and struggled out.

She was glad to be in the fresh air. The sun shone from a pale mackerel sky and gaudy clumps of daffodils and tulips filled buckets outside the florist's. She visited the

library to change her large-print novel and went to the little wool shop, then the last neighbourhood butcher's for a lamb chop for her next day treat. Long gone were the Sundays when she and Ron had a roast. The ancient, well-honed carving knife, in fact, had lain under her bed for ages in case of burglars. Her larger kitchen utensils remained in the cupboard, unused. She continued on to buy a loaf, a small carton of milk, one custard tart and a few vegetables from the market.

Back home, she pushed on her mock sheepskin slippers, pleased that she felt so well. She made herself a poached egg before resting on her bed for a while, listening to the local radio and exclaiming at the usual reported acts of crime and violence outside her door.

In the afternoon she discovered that the postman had left her not only a gas bill but also a birthday card, depicting a country cottage, from her remaining cousin, Mabel.

'That's nice,' she said to the air, and wished that Mabel didn't live three hundred miles away. 'I'll just do my jobs before I put the fire on.'

She washed out her blouse in the sink and hung it over the bath. She polished her outdoor shoes with the worn brushes her mother had used, and cleaned the inside of her windows with newspaper and a dab of vinegar. Then she allowed herself to put the gas fire on at low heat. She was still cold, so collected a blanket to put over her knees before settling in her chair.

For supper she enjoyed a fruit scone with a scrape of butter and a pot of tea. She read her new library book until her eyes tired, and she put the kettle on again for her hot water bottle.

First making sure that her front door was locked and her rarely opened windows were firmly closed, she went to bed.

She had only been there twenty minutes or so when the phone rang abruptly.

'I'm coming. I'm coming,' she called, hobbling to the hallway. It was a foreign person at the end of the line wanting to know if she was interested in a special holiday offer.

'No, I'm not.' She put the phone down without thanking him for his trouble.

Settling back in bed, she listened to the radio for a bit then dozed fitfully.

Her habit, when unable to sleep, was to remember her past, go in her imagination back along the country lanes of her childhood and see what she had seen then. She had been a solitary child, very shy and withdrawn at school, and unhappy at home. Her best times had been wandering through local fields and woods, so she revisited them in memory. Or she thought about the early days of her marriage, when Ron had been so attentive, and they had occasional trips to the sea. All the long-lost good times.

She woke with a start, aware of something wrong. The large-numbered clock next to the bed showed it was 10.37. As she lay rigid in the cold bed, she heard a scratching metal noise at her front door, as though someone was trying the lock. She held her breath and lifted her head from the pillow to hear better. Thief in the night, thief in the night, she thought, panicking.

The front door creaked open, then clicked shut. Something thumped down. Heavy footsteps moved into her little kitchen.

Dry-mouthed, sweating with fear, she pushed the quilt back and stood up, conscious of her rapid heartbeat. She knew she couldn't stay in bed, hiding. The burglar would quickly find her in such a small place. Quaking, she stooped, painfully, to pick up her knife from under the bed. If only she could get to the phone, but it was by the front door and to reach it she would have to pass the intruder.

In the darkness she crept, shuddering, out of her bedroom. Trying not to make a sound, she peered round the kitchen door.

The stranger was squatting in front of her small fridge. Its open door illuminated the sparse contents and left the man in shadow. She was sure it was a man, not young, slight, bony, with a dark, close-fitting hat.

His back to her made him vulnerable. She knew that once he saw her, he would attack her with his fists or some weapon he'd brought. He would shout at her like the men in her childhood. She screwed up her courage. Full of despair and hatred, she plunged her knife into the exposed side of his neck as hard as she could. Blood spurted onto her hand and arm.

Soundlessly he fell over onto his face and was still.

She had a terrible pain like a metal band tight above her eyes. She dropped the knife with a clatter, aware of stickiness on it, her arm and nightdress, and stumbled backwards

into the hall. Panting, sobbing, aware that she was pushed to her limit of endurance, she turned on the light, opened the front door, gasped for breath, grabbed the phone and blindly dialled 999.

Fifteen minutes later she was still crouching on the carpet in the same place, shaking, her hands over her face, when two policemen arrived.

It was only then that she stirred, looked around and noticed that there in the hallway lay a canvas bag with Australian airline labels attached to the handle. And lying on top was a brightly coloured birthday card, 'To Mum.'