

Closer. Further. by Kerrin O'Sullivan

'Closer please.'

The carer rolled Ray's wheelchair across the grey acrylic carpet of the communal lounge and onto the tessellated tiles. Once open to the bay breezes, the Victorian terrace's balcony was now enclosed in tinted glass. The aluminium windows were clamped shut, gusts of over-warm air-con buffeting against the glass as if trying to escape.

'Closer.'

'Please?' The carer said, jerking the wheelchair. 'Forgotten your manners Ray?'

'Please,' Ray's shoulders sagged.

'And have I got a name, Ray?'

'I'm sorry, love – is it Bev?'

'It's right *there* if you forget,' she stabbed a red fingernail at the plastic name badge on her collar. 'And you do.'

Ray leant forward, squinting at the badge. Leant back in silence, hands clasped in his lap.

'See it's Beth, not Bev,' she added. 'You just have to look.'

'Beth,' Ray repeated, craning his stiff neck. 'A bit closer to the window, please.'

She jolted the wheelchair forward, jamming Ray's felt-slipped feet hard against the window's metal base. His body flopped forward in reflex.

'Hey!' He called. 'Easy on.'

'There,' she said, patting him on the head like a two year-old. 'That close enough?'

'Yes, Beth,' he answered, his voice quivering. 'Couldn't get any closer unless I went through it.'

Closer. Further.

Beth crouched next to the wheelchair.

‘And once you’ve mastered ‘please’, Ray,’ she said, her voice lowered, ‘you can practise ‘thank you’ too.’

Ray watched the cars trawling the esplanade below, the cyclists in helmets and fluoro lycra riding along the bike lane that traced the kerb, the Sunday morning joggers in fleecy trackpants sweating and puffing their way along the boardwalk, the families strolling the pavement, the parents pushing prams and holding the hands of toddlers. Through the glass he could hear the muffled sounds of trucks honking and the swooshing squeal of air releasing from the hydraulic brakes of a bus. He heard the blunted wail of a ship’s siren splitting the air. Stifled squawks, too, as gulls rose up from the shore.

Over the bluestone seawall, a woman shook out a tartan rug while another dragged an esky across the sand. Nearby a border collie rolled in seaweed, then sniffed the kelp and flopped beside them.

‘Beth doesn’t like me, Lassie,’ Ray said aloud as if to the distant dog. ‘Or whatever her name is.’ He drummed his fingers on the wheelchair armrest. ‘And here’s a scoop, fella, I don’t like her much either...’

An electronic bell chimed through the old rooming house, chipper and cheerful, announcing midday. Soon somebody would appear and wheel him down the hall to the residents’ dining area. Push him up close to the dining table. Tuck a serviette into the neck of his shirt like a bib. ‘Anyway,’ he added, as if the dog were waiting for further explanation. ‘I can’t do a damn thing about it, can I?’

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Ray wasn't hungry. It was only an hour since he'd had tea from the trolley and a shortbread in cellophane. On Sundays, lunch was rissoles and mash with jam roly-poly for dessert. He craved a simple salad with iceberg lettuce and cherry tomatoes from his own garden.

He leaned in, resting his forehead flat against the cool hard surface of the window. The beach stretched from pier to pier, dotted with towels, stripey umbrellas, sun tents. Two boys pushed a jet-ski out through the shallows, the shore-break folding and foaming. A distant figure, genderless, paddled a canoe, Hawaiian-style. A rubber dinghy bounced through the chop.

Sliding away from the port, a cruise liner made its way across the slate-blue bay towards the Heads. Ray thought of the World War 2 troop ship he'd been packed into en route to Borneo and the Battle of Labuan, the ache of waving farewell from the deck to his mother and sister. Remembered the thrill of departure when he and Val would sail off on those big cruise ships – grey nomads with maps and dreams – off to see the world...

'Trying to get closer Ray?' Beth said, back again, jerking the wheelchair away from the window.

'No,' he said, watching the water like a lifeguard, still as stone. 'Not closer. Further.'