

Edith's fingers were numb and white, and she could see her breath in the night air. What had she been thinking? She could have been sitting at home reading Women's Weekly with the heating on, but she couldn't face her empty house. She'd only taken the contents of the emergency biscuit tin and her purse, leaving her bank cards behind. These things were far too easy to trace, and she didn't want to be found.

The number five bus had taken her to the city centre, then she'd caught one of those mega buses all the way from Edinburgh to Aberdeen. It was such a pretty city with all the granite buildings and so near to the seaside. The bus stopped right outside St. Nicholas Church, the perfect place for her first night. Edith took her time reading the gravestones. Some had been taken so young, but even the old had left loved ones behind. She had been looking for God to guide her and keep her safe but instead, there was an aura of death. She couldn't sleep there surrounded by it.

A short walk around the corner and down some stairs took her underneath Union bridge. It was a hub of equally troubled souls. She wondered about their stories. What had brought them here? Folding her blanket into a makeshift pillow, she placed her shoes neatly together by her side, snuggled into her coat and drifted off to sleep. When she woke, her shoes and bag had vanished.

Realising that she needed a plan, Edith found herself a step, nestled between the book shop and the bank. The west end was a hub of lawyers and estate agents with mobile phones permanently attached to their ears. They seldom carried small change now they had credit and debit cards, but Edith smiled when she realised that her blanket held enough coins to buy a hot drink. The café blackboard promised an endless list of beverages; espressos, lattes, cappuccinos, but she ordered a nice, strong cup of tea. To take away, of course, they made it very clear that she wasn't welcome to sit inside

She decided not to resign herself to a sad and lonely existence, sitting watching people live their lives and hoping they would take pity on her. Instead, Edith promised herself that every day would hold a new adventure. The perfect ladies at the perfume counter stared aghast, as she indulged in a spritz of their newest scent. As a little treat, she made a few extra trips up and down the escalator, before gazing in awe at the vast array of clothes before her. A whole new world of pretty colours and material. She wandered around exploring everything, selecting a pretty polka-dot skirt and a turquoise, silk blouse and holding them up, so she could see herself in the mirror. She heard the young sales assistants whispering and struggling to contain their giggles. Her dearest wish was to look like herself again, but new clothes weren't the answer. After a few months on the street, rotten teeth, matted hair and a repugnant stench had become part of her essence.

Edith found some secrets which brightened her day. Hidden behind the supermarket, a row of coloured bins became her treasure trove. She filled her bag with sandwiches, tuna and mayonnaise, chicken and sweetcorn, cheese and pickle. What a find! The blue bin harboured unsold newspapers. She added one to her collection. Reading wasn't her forte, but she visited the library every week, enjoying the warmth and silence, as she looked at the pictures. Her mouth watered as she browsed through cookbooks filled with delicious food. For a moment, she could escape and visit anywhere in the world. To sunny beaches and special sights. Edith took herself to the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Empire State Building, and the Eiffel Tower. Harry had promised they would go on a cruise when they retired, but when the time came, they had little savings and they were both content with a cottage in York.

In the evening, when the church bells chimed seven, Edith made her way to His Majesty's Theatre. She watched young lovers and elderly companions with hands entwined and families filled with excitement. As she crept down the stone staircase to the stage door,

the walls were covered with graffiti and the ground was littered with cigarette butts and discarded needles. Nevertheless, the music from the performance could be heard perfectly. Anything from Mozart to musicals and not a penny to pay. Harry used to play Mozart for her. She closed her eyes and remembered.

Directly opposite Edith's step was the charity shop and she enjoyed watching the elegant older lady dress the window. She often gave her a wave, but Edith had never felt brave enough to go inside. Until one blustery autumn day, when the window was decorated with red and gold. All day, Edith gazed at the red heels beneath the mannequin. They reminded her of Dorothy in 'The Wizard of Oz'. If only it was easy as clicking your heels and finding yourself at home. The rain began as gentle droplets, but only moments later it was relentless. The business folk donned their smart, black umbrellas. Edith packed her belongings into her black bag and headed towards the window of the charity shop. The small canopy above offered a little shelter, but she longed to go inside. What harm would it do? She had no money to offer, but she could enjoy the warmth as she looked around.

Edith put her hand to her lips. There were so many shoes. Rows and rows of many different styles. Her stomach filled with a fluttering sensation that she had not experienced for a long time.

'Feel free to try them on,' Helen offered.

Edith pointed to the red heels in the window.

'I don't think they're your size, dear. How about these?'

Edith laid her bag beside her and sat on the chair. She used her skirt to rub the worst of the dirt off her swollen, painful feet, before sliding them into the stretchy slippers. They reminded her of ballet pumps.

‘Edith James, step forward please,’ said Mrs McConnachie.

Ten little girls stood in a row, with their hair in tight buns and dressed in black leotards and pink tutu skirts. Her new ballet shoes were the perfect present for her eighth birthday. Just like a real ballerina, she could point her toes perfectly.

‘Three demi pliés and one sauté please, Edith’

‘Bravo, bravo, my prima ballerina.’

Her knee cracked, as she bent down to remove the slippers. What next? Which should she choose? Helen smiled in amazement. Suddenly, the old woman was as sprightly as a teenager. Trying on the pink, summer sandals took her back to building sandcastles and splashing in the waves. They were staying in a caravan, mum, dad and her little brother, Joe. There was so much to explore. Walking hand in hand with her brother, they took their nets to the rock pools and filled their buckets with crabs and shells.

It was impossible to resist the lure of white lace bridal shoes with silver diamante. Edith felt like an ugly sister trying Cinderella’s slipper, but she persevered. The wedding march resounded in her head. Her father proudly walking her down the aisle in the quaint, village church.

‘Edith James, do you take Harry Wilson to be your wedded husband to live together in marriage? Do you promise to love him, comfort him, honour and keep him for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health and forsaking all others, be faithful only to him so long as you both shall live?’

She had meant every word. Harry was her forever love and they had enjoyed a happy marriage. She was his darling Edie and Harry was her honey. They were blessed with children, one of each. Frankie loved fishing with his Daddy and Flora loved to bake with her

Mummy. Their family would sit in church every Sunday, the envy of many. They had their fair share of troubles. Losing their parents, Harry losing his job and Frankie getting sick. Somehow, Edith always managed to find a silver lining. Later years took them to a lovely bungalow with a garden to be proud of. They would work together pruning roses and planting pansies, with a flask of tea. The children moved on and had families of their own. They had three precious grandbabies to spoil.

Harry was always the smart one. He kept abreast of the local news and completed the crossword religiously. He was the one who paid the bills and organised everything and that was the way Edith liked it. Until gradually, he couldn't find the right words and final reminders arrived in the mail. He couldn't find his glasses when they were right there on his face and he left the milk out without its lid. She told herself it was just old age. It would come to us all, but when he wandered off in his pyjamas and asked where his wife was, Edith realised that something was very wrong.

Alzheimer's was a cruel disease which stole her husband piece by piece. To the point where he was unrecognisable. Each night, she lay beside his familiar body, but he pushed her away.

'Don't touch me. I don't know you.'

She became little more than a nurse. Dressing him, brushing his teeth and cutting up his food. It was a thankless and monotonous life. The GP sent a social worker to check how they were getting on. Then they took her Harry away.

'It's for the best, Mum, you'll see.'

Best for who? Her daughter, Flora, meant well, but Edith and Harry had been muddling along quite nicely. Who gave those interfering busybodies the right to make choices for them? She'd only needed to look into his kind brown eyes and feel his strong hand squeezing hers to know that her Harry was still in there.

Admittedly, it hadn't always been easy, but they had adapted and made things work. Too many steak and kidney pies and fish suppers had taken their toll on Harry, so getting him upstairs had no longer been an option. That was why they'd taken to sleeping downstairs. Harry sprawled on the big sofa and Edith on the armchair. She hadn't worried about his little accidents. They had plenty of clean sheets.

Not safe, they'd said. A danger to himself. It wasn't as though he had planned to abseil from the bedroom window. There was that time when he relieved himself on Mrs Harold's roses, but he hadn't been allowed outside after that. Edith was almost certain that Peggy Harold was the culprit. Ever since her Jimmy went off with that young barmaid, she'd been more concerned with everyone else's business than her own. The lady from the social wouldn't give any names, but who else could it have been?

They'd come for Harry with a wheelchair, but there was nothing wrong with his legs. It was his mind that had failed him. Edith had stood in the hallway and wept. She should have fought harder, maybe paid for a fancy lawyer. Harry belonged with her, where he had been for forty-five years. Who were they to say it would end like this? Harry would have been happy at home until the good Lord called him.

The eight-thirty bus delivered her daily to Meadow bank nursing home, where she got on with her knitting and chatted to Harry. She read him the newspaper and they listened to the radio. Edith couldn't understand why he couldn't do all that at home. Her vegetable broth was so much more nutritious than the watery concoction they offered, and she wasn't even allowed to bring in the fish and chips for their Friday treat.

On Thursday the twenty-fourth of April at quarter to ten, the phone rang. Harry had aspiration pneumonia, they said, which was very common in Alzheimer's patients. All going well, he would be back in the home in a couple of days. Nobody told her what the worst-case

scenario would be. When Edith entered the room, his eyes were closed, and he was attached to all sorts of machinery. She had taken his hand and kissed it, as she always did, but there was no response. His breathing alternating between deep and slow and rapid and quiet, as if there were two people in the bed. Kind, loving Harry, fighting to come back to her and the angry stranger who was trying to steal him. Edith prayed for a miracle which didn't come. She wasn't even there when he took his final breath.

She wore a yellow dress to the funeral. It was Harry's favourite. Edith assured everyone that she was fine, but she was far from fine. The house was lonely, and she had never been alone. She'd been a young, naïve nineteen-year-old when Harry proposed, and she had left her parents for their new life together. She didn't like this at all. No one to talk to and nothing to do. Flora had insisted she move in with them, but she didn't want to be a burden. It wasn't fair to interrupt their lives. Besides, Edith had always been a free spirit.

So early one Monday morning, she took a black bin bag from the drawer and grabbed a fleecy white blanket, which still smelled like Harry. She lifted a photo frame from the hallway table but thought better of it. That was her Harry, and he didn't exist anymore. Dressed in her favourite coat and a red headscarf, she closed the door for the last time.

‘Are you alright, my dear?’ Helen asked.

Edith sat crying, surrounded by the myriad of unwanted shoes.

‘Here, have a tissue and I’ll make us a nice cup of tea.’

Edith’s voice was a whisper. It had been so long since she had spoken to anyone.

‘He was my forever and always, you know.’

‘How lovely. How long were you married?’

‘Forty-five wonderful years’

Helen was a good listener and Edith felt comfortable chatting to her.

‘Have you heard of The Hope project? I’ve heard so many stories about people getting back on their feet with their help. I’ll come with you if you like.’

The following morning, the two women walked through the welcoming doors of St. Nicholas Church. The smell of bacon butties and fresh soup was enticing, but Edith needed to do something first. She smiled, as the sun glistened through the stained glass and lit a candle, as she offered a prayer for Harry. She could say goodbye and allow herself to carry on without him by her side.

‘Are you ready?’ Helen asked and Edith knew she was. It was time to go home and be with her family again.