

Springers

by Annaleese Jochems

You follow your dad down a corridor that smells like eggs. He passes a lot of doors before stopping outside one of them. He reads the name. “They’ve moved her,” he says and goes back the way you came.

Downstairs, he tells a receptionist your grandma’s name: Meredith. Here it smells like flowers. The receptionist smiles. “Room sixty-five,” she says. “Third floor.”

You hold the lift while an old lady shuffles in. While you wait, Dad says, “You’ve been here before, remember?” You might, the carpet looks familiar, but then it’s the sort of carpet you see in lots of places. A nondescript, muddy shade of grey with no pattern.

“Are you OK?” Dad asks.

“Um, yeah?” You feel fine.

“OK,” he says. “Good.”

On the third floor, you follow a new corridor. Room 65 is on the right, halfway down. Your dad stands for a moment at the door before knocking, maybe reading her name. You look at the side of his face and wait. Usually his cheeks are pink, but today, they’re red.

The woman who answers – your grandma, Meredith – is very small and dressed entirely in purple, though her slippers are bright green. She has a hard chin but soft-looking cheeks, and her hair is fluffy. When she smiles, you see a tooth at the front that’s a little crooked.

“Well! Haven’t you got enormous!” your grandma says to you.

You’re only as high as her, and together, you look up at your father, who really is tall.

“We’ll come in, shall we?” he says.

Your grandma looks at him a while before answering. “Yes, definitely,” she says. “Do.”

Her room is small and crowded. There’s a single bed with a bright pink bedspread and an armchair with a tartan rug.

“Now, how are you?” your grandma asks. She’s looking at you.

“Good, thanks.” She nods, satisfied, and looks at Dad. He sits on the bed and gestures for you to take the hard chair. You do. Your grandma sits in the armchair.

“What about you?” Dad asks. “All right?”

“Despite the fact someone stole my blue cardigan yesterday, I’m fine.”

“That’s good,” he says.

“Just yesterday. It was my blue cardigan with the swans.”

“I brought you a frog, Mum.”

Your father’s forgotten it was you who picked the frog. You dig it out of your bag and hand it to him. For a moment, he looks disappointed. It’s soft, a kid’s toy, but in the shop, he’d told you it was a good choice.

Your grandma leans over and takes the frog. She squeezes it and smiles brightly. “Well, that’s good ... that’s one good thing ... another frog.” She examines it for a while, then says, “Well, I guess I’d better show you my frogs.”

You don’t see any frogs.

“Get up, George. Help me move this chair.” She gets up and waits for your father to do the same. He stands with his hands on his hips and looks at your grandma’s chair. You look at it, too. There’s nowhere to move it, and why does she want it moved in the first place? Plus it’s so big. It’s an armchair.

Your dad starts to say something, but she stops him. “No need to get *logistical* about it, George. We’ll just move the chair.”

Dad scratches the back of his neck, and his belly juts out.

He has to move the chair slowly, shoving it round in incremental steps. You sit on the bed and lift your legs so he can squeeze past. Then you see it: an entire cabinet filled with frogs.



If you told your friends about this, they wouldn't understand – but when you first see the frogs, you laugh with happiness. They have the same googly eyes, fat bellies, and bobbly fingers, but each one is different. There are china frogs, metal frogs, soft frogs, and plastic frogs. Some are naked, realistic-looking frogs; others wear hats or shorts. They're mostly jolly, but after a while of looking, you see that a few of the realistic ones have a frozen sadness. Their skin looks too dry, and they're so still. At least a hundred frogs sit together on the glass shelves. You wonder how long they've been there, waiting to be seen.

Grandma's rocking backwards and forwards in her new spot by the window, beaming. "No toads," she says. "I binned the toads." She leans over to open the cabinet and instructs you to take out all the plastic ones. "My springers," she explains. You have no idea what she's talking about, but you do as she says.

"Let's see her spring them," Grandma says to Dad, who's now sitting back on the bed. She points out a frog to you – a big orange one with brown-and-white spots. She explains that if you put the frog flat on the ground and push on the plastic tab, it will jump when you let go. You try this, but the frog does more of a flop than a jump.

"That one's a dud," Grandma says. "Don't worry." She points out a smaller frog to try. This one shoots above your head and hits the lightshade.

"Bravo!" she laughs. "Do it again."

You do. The second springer lands on top of the wardrobe. When you turn to see if Dad saw, he's resting his cheek on his palm and looking at Grandma, not at you or the jumping frog. "Some more," she says.

Dad asks if he can make some tea.

"Definitely. Bags are in that bottom drawer, under my diaries." Grandma points to the small dressing table by the door.

"Under your diaries," Dad says.

"Yes, but don't bother, actually. They've taken the kettle. There was a big discussion, and they decided I wouldn't have one any more. Jane came, at least."

After four more springs, Dad says, "All right, should we go somewhere? A cafe?" He goes off without waiting for an answer, saying he'll be back with a wheelchair.

You collect up the frogs and continue springing them. Grandma reclines in her chair with her head back and her eyes half-open, watching. She's smiling a little, and when they hit the ceiling, she makes a small, satisfied noise.

When Dad gets back with the chair, Grandma's so quick getting in you're not sure why it's necessary, but Dad looks at you and comments it would be good if they had safety belts. She's looking at you, too, winking.

Your dad pushes her slowly down the corridor. One wheel squeaks with each rotation. When you get outside, on the footpath, Dad looks both ways, undecided. "Not a big town, is it? What do you reckon?"

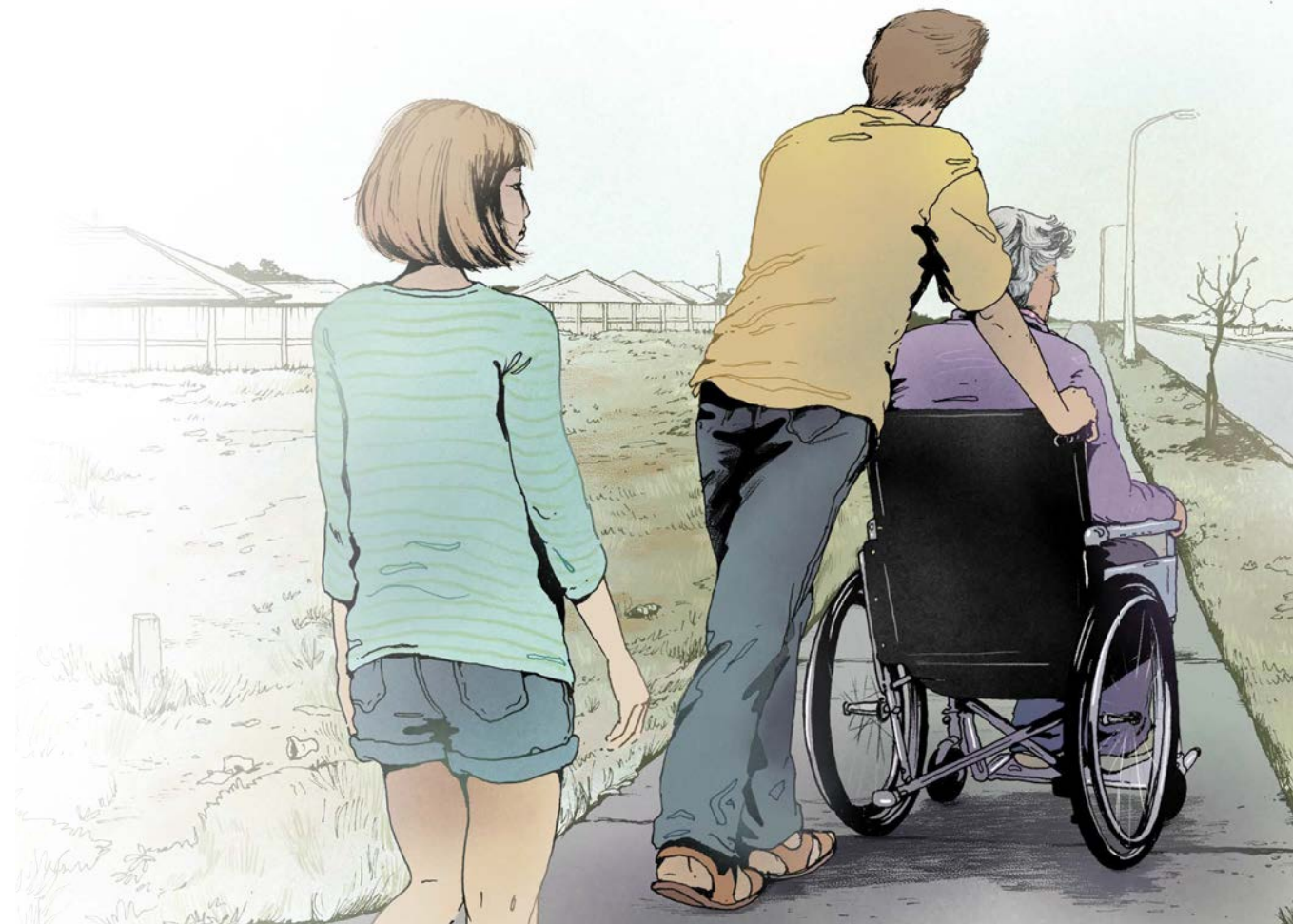
Grandma shuffles in her chair. "Doesn't make a difference."

He turns left. You would have gone right. The chair's rattly and slow, and you have to be mindful of each step so you don't catch the back of Dad's sandals.

"You do know I'd rather walk?" Grandma says. She shuffles round in the chair to face you. "Does he know I'd rather walk?" You nod neutrally. You don't really know.

Soon, Dad's puffed, but he keeps pushing, and you keep following.

"Bit of a one-way street, huh?" Grandma says.





You hear little pebbles crunching beneath the wheels and jog round to walk in front, facing backwards, so you can kick a few out of the way. Dad's breathing heavily through his open mouth. Little drops of sweat have gathered at his temples.

"How about we go home?" Grandma says.

Dad just pushes.

"If you came to visit more than once a decade," Grandma adds quietly, "you wouldn't feel the need to exhaust yourself like this."

Dad doesn't say anything. You think about offering to push but decide against it.

Back in the room, Dad picks up frogs. They've landed in strange places. You and your grandma watch and eat chocolate biscuits from a packet she keeps under her bed. Then she reaches over and touches your dad's leg. "It's all right."

"What is?"

"The frogs. Don't worry about them just yet. Have a biscuit."

There's a bird out the window. A pigeon in a gum tree. You see Dad catch sight of it, the way his head turns quickly for a second look.

"Is that the one?" he asks. "Is that the bird you're always telling me about? On the phone?"

"Oh, yes. The kererū."

"He *is* fat."

"Isn't he."

The bird swivels right, then left, lifting up and down on its legs so the whole branch shifts.



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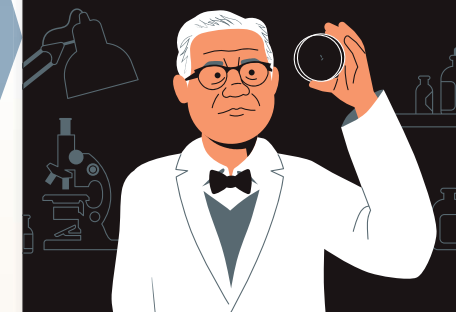


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The New Zealand Curriculum
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