Right at Home

By Catherine Robinson

Highly Commended in the Over 26 Age category

I'd been in the home for weeks but I still sometimes jolted awake wondering where on earth I was. Then remembered. It made sense. It really did. Every part of my sensible head agreed with my children that after several falls and a serious neurological problem that didn't respond to medication, it was time to admit I wasn't safe living in my own home. They'd both offered to accommodate me at their houses. It was tempting in a way but they've all got hectic careers, teenagers and not a lot of space. This was the best choice. I hadn't even really admitted to myself though, that I was grieving for my former life. Having my own front door. Eating my own food. Spontaneous trips out.

The staff did their best to keep us all amused. But in my head I was merrily yelling I DON'T LIKE BINGO! Of course, being the well-behaved woman that I am, I did it silently.

"Are we going to have that dog visiting again?" Maureen asked.

"Not today," said Emma as she wheeled the coffee trolley through the lounge, "something more…well, *unexpected*."

How unexpected exactly? I had visions of a llama. Or the Dalai Lama. I heard some suppressed giggles. A handful of small children accompanied by two teachers gingerly walked into the residents' lounge.

"Is this a kind of nice hotel or a prison and can you escape?" asked a small boy beaming up at me. He'd asked me three questions and having had a long career as an investigative journalist that had ended only a few years ago, I immediately identified him as a kindred spirit.

"Well, its a *sort* of hotel," I said, "and I suppose I could escape if I wanted to!"

He made himself comfortable on the stool next to my chair. I'd already shared more than I had with my own family. He frowned in thought. I told him my name and asked for his. Then we exchanged all the important information. He was seven. I was seventy-two. He liked chocolate ice cream and football and didn't like broccoli much.

"What's your best colour?" he asked. "Mine's a rainbow because you get *all* the colours ha ha!"

I liked his logic.

"Why are you sad?" asked my new friend Alfie.

I could feel tears beginning to prick at the back of my eyes. "I used to have my own house but I'm poorly now," I explained, "so it's better that I can be looked after here."

Alfie nodded. Funny how you can sometimes see the face of a wise old man in a child.

"That makes you a bit sad," he agreed, looking at me with concern. "But we've come on a visit from school to cheer up the people here. Is it working?"

I felt laughter bubbling up in my chest, a sensation I hadn't had for months.

"It is!" I admitted.

"I'm sad too," he said suddenly. "My hamster died."

"Oh, that is very sad. Shall we feel sad together?"

He nodded. Then pulled out a dog-eared book he had in his backpack.

"Let's read a story! We can go to another place where we don't feel sad."

So that's what we did. It felt like home.