‘No, don’t close it! I like fresh air.’

She ignores me, slams the window shut. Her silent steps irritate, the way she carefully places each thick-ankled foot silently so it doesn’t make a sound. Her, and all the others, creeping up on me in rubber-soled shoes. I loathe their scraped-back hair and patronising manner.

‘We don’t want to catch a chill, do we, love? Besides, the heating’s on,’ she says, striding back, thumping a beaker of weak tea onto my bedside table. A beaker! I want tea in a bone china cup, with a saucer.

‘It’s Major Purseman, if you don’t mind, fresh air is good for me, I’m not your love, I can’t drink this bilge and close the door behind you when you leave -’

She’s gone and I’ll have to get up and do it myself.

Too late. George tuts, from the open doorway. ‘She says ‘love’ to everyone, you old fool. She can’t remember our names. Your door’s open, so I’m coming in.’ He laughs his nasal laugh, like a horse breathing out on a winter morning, germs streaming down his hairy nostrils and around my room. I shiver. He lowers himself into a chair – my chair – grunting.

She’s back, poking her head round the door. ‘Important day, gents. Remember who’s visiting?’

‘Prince of Bleeding Wales?’ says George.

‘George, please. Our visitor’s Mr Wynne, the Inspector from the Care Quality Commission. With his team of helpers and his iPad with boxes to tick and questions and judgements …’

I remember. I want to talk to him. I’ve made notes in my book. I tap it, to remind her.

‘Ray’s written a bloody essay for him,’ says George, seeing me.

‘No need to be rude, George. The inspector will chat to everyone. Even me, with any luck. I’ll just update my notes, then I’ll be back to help you get dressed.’ She disappears, closing the door and shutting George in with me. He shakes open his newspaper. Gutter press, tabloid of course.

I stare at the closed window, willing it open with the power of my dislike of George, the staff, this place. Of course, it doesn’t budge. I flip off the covers and swing my legs over the side.

Slowly does it, old boy. The blue veins in my white feet are like the map of a river and its tributaries, as I lower them onto the warm lino. Slightly sticky: kissing noises with each wobbling step. Using a stick is a sign of weakness and I won’t do it when they’re watching. Once I’ve crossed the room, I clutch the window ledge for security, still unsteady. I try to stand up straight. Chest out and shoulders back. How a proper man stands.

‘Attaboy. Open it. Let the sun in. That’s the spirit,’ calls George. I hear him scratch and I know without looking it’ll be his backside under his pyjamas. Now he will examine the flakes of skin under his fingernails. I remember his horse-breath, close my eyes and fight the urge to gag.

I tug at the latch – she’s closed it tight and hard – and eventually it opens, not wide enough, child locks if you please, but open. I gulp fresh outdoors air into my lungs through my mouth. It tastes cold, yet sweet. And clean. Cornwall holidays with Mary. Deep breaths of salt air. Happy days. Mary’s gone, of course. Thinking about her reignites that dull pain in my chest.

Chestnut trees stand guard by the gate. I used to know all the tree names, Latin and English, walking along clutching mother’s hand, her teaching me and testing me. ‘What’s that one with the prickly shell, Raymond?’The leaves are tinged red and yellow. The beginnings of autumn. I squint at the clear sky, and the sun.

I long to be outdoors.Today is beautiful; the sun will still have heat. It pools, warm around my feet and travels up my legs. It smoulders along my arms to my hands. I feel good again. Ready for anything. Strong and powerful, like when I was young.

‘What can you see out there?’ asks George. ‘Any conker trees? Used to love conkers.’

Me too. ‘Horse chestnut,’ I say. ‘Aesculus hippocastanum.’

‘Oooh, la-di-da.’

I push hard against the lock, and look at the mechanism. Why didn’t I think of it before? My Swiss Army knife! That’ll undo the catch.

I turn and walk more steadily, straight back to my bed. Getting the hang of it again; was simply out of practice. I marvel at my new energy.

‘What you doing?’ says George.

Nosey git.

‘Getting dressed.’

‘Without help?’

I yank open the cupboard and pull out my folded black trousers. Always fold clothes properly, they’ll last longer. Gently, I pull up my trousers, over my pyjama bottoms, but it doesn’t matter. They’re too big. Everything’s too big these days. When did I last wear them?

I’ll ask Mary to take them in.

Oh.

I tuck in my pyjama top so my trousers stay up. Put a tie in the jacket pocket, to wear later.

‘You really getting dressed yourself?’ says George.

Ignore him. Socks. Where are they? Never mind.I try to squeeze hot swollen feet into shoes. That won’t work. Can’t reach the laces, can’t bend over properly. Ask George? No. Slippers instead. Easier. Might need money. Hurry.Wallet’s in the drawer for safe-keeping. Next to the Swiss Army Knife. I weigh the knife in my hand. Good and solid. I run fingers through my hair (more hair than George and he’s younger), smooth my moustache.

‘Help me get dressed? I want to get dressed too,’ calls George.

No time, you old fool.

I open the door and look both ways. No sign of enemy movement. I won’t be ambushed. Close it behind me, wish I could lock it. Not for the first time.

‘Where you going?’

I look at George, straight in the eye, man to man. ‘Walk in the woods. Going to get some conkers. I’ll bring some back.’ If I come back.Feel sorry for him and add, ‘Keep watch, old boy?’

I march to the drumbeat in my head. It’s my heartbeat, quick, and, truth be told, not so steady. I stop and lean on the window ledge again to catch my breath, think things through.

Fumbling at the lock with the screwdriver tool on my knife takes such an effort, but finally the screws drop onto the floor and the window swings wide, squeaking. Stiffened up like me, lack of use. I steady myself and breathe in slow through my nose, out through my mouth, like in the Army. Dew-studded spiders’ webs wink from the frosty grass. Sun sparkling on the sea. God, how I long to see the sea.

It’s a struggle, but I lift my stronger left leg with both arms and wedge it through the window. Calf muscles so weak but still got strength in these arms. Now what?

‘Conkers? Can I come too?’

‘Can’t come in your pyjamas, can you?’

He grunts and I feel his eyes on my back.

‘Not like that, you fool,’ he says. ‘You won’t get though like that. Look. Sit. Sit down on the ledge then you can swing your other leg through. Always said the only way out of here was feet first.’

I sit, but it’s awkward. I have one leg sticking out and one leg inside the room. He’s right; it’s the only way through. The catch digs into my bottom.

‘Don’t jump! We’re three floors up!’ says George, sitting up straight.

I balance on the ledge, one leg dangling out and one pressed against the wall inside. I look down.

‘There’s a flat roof on the extension.’

‘Don’t be a soft lad, you’ll break something,’ he scoffs. When I look back, he is levering himself out of the chair and limping towards me, revolting yellowed toenails and hairy toes exposed where he’s kicked off his slippers. ‘I’ll come too,’ he wheezes. ‘I’ll help you down.’

Maybe he could help. Company. Summon the troops.

I force my right leg through. Painful. I slowly twist to face George. He kneels at the window and grasps my hands. He’s strong. I start to slide, belly scraping the window ledge. His hands are scaly and sweaty and mine slip through too fast. My slipper falls off. George grunts. My other slipper drops. We are at full stretch and I’m not touching the flat roof yet.

‘Letting go now, Sir,’ he grunts. I drop. Not far. Shockwaves shoot up both legs. Pain in my chest.

‘Permission to follow,’ says George.

‘Wait. Let me put my slippers on.’ I lean against the building, winded and hurting. But I am outside! I turn my face towards the sun, close my eyes and soak up its comforting warmth.

‘Pah. Don’t bother. I’ve got bare feet,’ says George. ‘Catch me. Can’t hold on any longer.’ He dangles beside me, hands grasping the ledge.

How did he get here so fast?

I reach up, not sure what to do. George slithers down. His pyjama top flaps open and I catch him in an embrace. It’s not unpleasant, warm and reassuring. We pat each other’s back and move apart.

‘My ankle hurts,’ I say, as George brushes himself down. He seems fine.

‘Are we going home?’ he asks.

‘Maybe. Wherever we want. We make a fearsome team.’

‘The dastardly duo. You’re my best mate, you know, Raymond.’

‘I, er, don’t know what to say to that.’

‘Nothing needed.’

‘You’re not so bad, you know,’ I tell him, and we smile, then quickly look away.

He sits, makes himself comfortable; propped against the wall looking out. ‘We can’t go back the same way!’ He laughs. ‘We’ve done it now!’

I peer down over the edge of the roof. It’s still a long way. The enormity of our escape bubbles through me. We’ve really done it!

‘Congratulations, soldier,’ I say, holding out my hand. George shakes it heartily. ‘Phase one successful. Well done old chap. As for phase two, well, I haven’t the foggiest yet!

He mock salutes and laughs, and I laugh too. In fact, it’s so funny I bend over laughing and clutch my stomach, which is sore from the window frame.

‘HOW did you open that window? How on earth did you get out?’

I look up, and George twists himself around to see.

‘WHAT are you doing out there?’ she shouts, her voice rising to a shriek. Her screwed-up eyes disappear into her red face. She is simply a disembodied head floating above us.

‘Collecting conkers,’ shouts George, and we both laugh harder.

‘What’s so funny? Oh God. The Inspector, he mustn’t see. Sit down. Don’t move. I’ll get help. George, Raymond, sit down, lean up against the wall. Don’t move.’

Her head disappears. We laugh again, quietly.

‘What shall we do now? Retreat?’ says George.

It’s colder. Clouds cover the sun. My energy dissolves like early mist in the sunshine. I sit against the wall next to George and close my eyes. Tears slide under my lids and trickle down my cheeks. I lift my hands to wipe them, but my hands are too heavy for my weak arms and my hands drop back into my lap.

‘How do we get down? What comes next?’ asks George.

‘I don’t know,’ I whisper. ‘I don’t know.’