

Kind

by Mariëlle S. Smith

She hadn't set foot in the shop in years. Not since Eamon had died. She had never liked it, never been able to find anything, and now they were refurbishing too. There was dust everywhere, and the noise... And of course they had taken down the few signs they did have.

'Are you all right?' A young brunette came walking towards her. 'Are you looking for anything specific?' she continued, smiling.

'Light bulbs,' she replied, 'I need a new light bulb.' She noticed that the smile reached the girl's eyes, which was rare these days.

'Did you bring the old one?'

She nodded. The young woman waited patiently for her to retrieve the old bulb from her purse. She had wrapped it in a few sheets of toilet paper, after which she had put it in one of those patterned re-sealable plastic bags her youngest daughter got at that new Ikea. Fíona had invited her along of course, but she didn't see any reason to take a bus all the way up to Ballymun for a few flowers on her freezer bags.

The girl smiled all the way through her unfolding of the toilet paper. It made her hands shake. The logic was beyond her now, the careful wrapping of something that was already broken. She couldn't remember why she had bothered.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'That's all right,' the girl responded. 'You take your time.'

She looked up. The girl was still smiling at her. Had she missed the underlying sarcasm? Was she getting that old? You never knew, with children being as clever as they were now.

The girl took the bulb from her and led her, through the mess, towards the right department. She prepared for a little jog around the shop, but the girl made sure to keep an old lady's pace.

She looked familiar, the girl. She could have been a friend of Becca's. Maybe she was a friend of Becca's.

'How old are you?' she asked as the girl inspected the tiny writing on the broken bulb.

'I'm 23.' The girl removed a bulb from its carton and put it in the tester. After it lit up, she repackaged it and handed it to her. 'There you go.'

'So this is the same one?' She inspected the picture on the cardboard. It didn't look the same. It didn't have that wiry bit that told you whether it was truly broken or not.

'More or less,' she smiled. 'It's as bright as the old one, but cheaper in use. They don't make these' – she lifted the broken bulb – 'anymore. Because of the environment.'

'All right then. I'll have twelve.'

While the girl tested eleven more bulbs and placed them carefully in her basket, she couldn't shake the feeling that the girl knew. How she hadn't changed a single bulb in the four years since Eamon died. How the only light still working downstairs was the one over the worktop in the kitchen. How her son had lodged an official complaint against her carer because she had bruises everywhere, and she could not bear the idea of telling him the truth. How she needed him and his sisters with their father gone. Eamon would have known that bulbs were different now, that they got rid of the wiry bit. And now the girl was looking at her as if she'd figured her all out, this mess of a woman who needed all the help she could get, but didn't know how to ask for it.

Independence, her mother used to say, is the key to all. She and her sisters were taught to handle things on their own, quietly, without a fuss. So her mother had never forgiven her for marrying a registered electrician who, to make matters worse, also did a bit of plumbing on the side. And the poor woman had been right, too, of course. What did she have to show for it? Sure, she made the best

cottage pie in Irishtown, but she could not tell a wrench from a pincer and had a near panic attack each time the door handle came loose. That was the price you paid for ignoring your mother's advice, for marrying a good, skilled man with a stable job.

'Are you all right replacing these?'

'I'll be fine,' she said. *I'm a mother*, she wanted to add, *a grandmother too*. I have children, three of them. I have a grandson who wants to do something with electrics, just like his grandad. I have a daughter who hasn't noticed we never sit in the living room anymore. A son who doesn't mind the paperwork but does not dare to look me in the eye and ask whether I'm all right. And why was that? She wouldn't know how to claim their love if someone spelled it out for her.

'Are you sure? We offer a service—'

'I'm quite all right, love, quite all right.'

'Ok then. Is there anything else you need?'

The kindness of that girl... She seemed to mean every single bit of it too, which made it worse. How was anyone expected to deal with such a person? Who raised this child? What kind of mother had the audacity to bring up a daughter to be like this? This girl was not a friend of Becca's, how could she be? Her granddaughter, the only one who cared enough to visit her gran every other week, who had had as many boyfriends as she had tattoos. Who tried to be nice, but never really got it right. And then that girl came along, flaunting her pleasantries and her long enough skirt and her neatly combed hair, and rubbed it in her face. Her old lady's face. All the things she'd done wrong, all the bad choices, the things she should have said.

'No, I'm all set.' She managed to put a smile on her lips before she firmly grasped her basket and strode, as intimidatingly as she could, to the till, where a woman Fíona's age was kind enough to look past her face when she handed over the receipt. When she looked back on her way out of the shop, the girl was already helping another customer, wearing that same smile. In silence, she thanked God she didn't have to deal with such cordiality on a daily basis. Who could afford to get used to such a thing? She shook her head as the sliding doors closed behind her. The girl had been perfectly nice of course, and she decided to hate her for it.