

My mother said: 'Tell me how old I am!' I said: 'I'll tell you how old you are if you want me to. But you do know how old you are. And you know you know. In fact ten minutes ago *you* told *me*.'

'Did I?'

'Yes, you did.'

'Well, you tell me now.'

'You're ninety-one. And when September comes you'll be ninety-two.'

'*Ridiculous!*' She spoke in a loud firm voice. Surprisingly loud and firm. I have to say that it always had been so. And the comment '*Ridiculous!*' was not out of character, either; in fact it was very much in character. I could never be sure that she was not going to apply it to me.

'*Ridiculous,*' she repeated.

I said quietly, 'That's for you to say.' I could tell she didn't hear me.

'I ought to have died ten years ago.'

What could I say to that, even quietly?

I was looking down at her, where she lay awkwardly in bed, half-propped up on a pillow and leaning to one side. If I asked the nurse to come and sit her more comfortably, she'd only slip back. On the other hand she was being kept warm, though there was a biting February wind outside.

She looked very old, very small, hollow-cheeked and frail. Her hair, scraped back from her forehead into a little knot, was very thin, yet it still gave signs, I don't quite know how, of having once been reddish brown – carrot, she saw fit to call it, herself.

She couldn't see me.

'It's no fun, being old,' she said. 'You ought to die when you're young and happy.'

I could see the point of her remark, yet I didn't feel it would persuade many people to act on it.

'Not,' she went on, 'when you're old and miserable, and lonely.'

And lonely. Nowadays I came down to the convalescent home to see her every fortnight. Once it had been every week. It was the Matron, who, taking me for a grand *affaire* Civil Servant, was concerned by my having to leave my office early in the afternoon to come down to the South Coast. Once upon a time it actually had been a bit tiresome to get away; but it happened now that my present job, this my last and final job as a quasi-Civil Servant, could scarcely be more gentlemanly. My fellow Board Members sympathised with my absenting myself, while our Chairman, if he was not using his official car at the time, would instruct his driver to take me to Victoria.

The Matron suggested the change. 'Your mother won't know the difference, Mr Lunn.' She was a youngish woman, rather coarse-fibred but very sensible. What she said was true.

My mother often said she couldn't tell one day from another. In fact she couldn't tell one year from another – she often seemed to think she'd only been in the convalescent home for a few months, sometimes even a few weeks; when it was getting on for eight years.

I looked round the room. It was always newly swept and dusted – there was no reason why it shouldn't be, as I always gave a few hours' warning of my visit. The wallpaper, patterned with sage green stripes, was fresh and unspotted; the curtains, patterned with a crisscross of pink and yellow, were clean; the blue of the frill round the edge of the bedcover was dazzlingly royal; and the carpet, patterned with huge fawn roses on a glowing turquoise background, looked – unfortunately – brand-new. My mother couldn't see the room. A room to be lonely in.

William Cooper  
*Scenes from Later life*  
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Cours de Ph. Romanski

