

With a Little Faith – *Lolita Chakrabarti*

Faith Johnson had moved into St Christopher's retirement home three years ago. She remembered it vividly. She had just turned 80 and her son, Mikey, had helped her to move in. She had been desperately unhappy at the prospect of leaving her lovely flat in Clapham where she'd lived for many years. But Mikey had been insistent – she wasn't able to look after herself any more and she'd have the company of all the other residents. How she'd hated the idea of making new friends at her age, it made her chuckle now when she remembered how bad tempered she'd been.

'I've made all the friends I need,' she'd sulked to Mikey. 'What am I going to do with any more? And besides you don't make friends at my age.'

How wrong she'd been. She'd kept herself to herself for the first 6 months but then Joyanti arrived. Joyanti Patel, 85, with all her own teeth and a wicked sense of humour. Faith could see their first meeting now. Joyanti had sat next to her in the communal lounge. Everyone was doing their own thing, it was raining outside and no one was in a particularly good mood. Suddenly out of the silence came Joyanti's well intentioned but decidedly off key singing voice,

'Oh-ho all the lonely people where do they all come from, all the lonely people where do they all belong?'

No one was quite sure how to react. Most people glanced at Joyanti but said nothing. Was she making fun of them? But Faith found it incredibly funny and she began to laugh. She couldn't help it. It was so apt – all these lonely, grumpy people and she was one of them. She laughed her head off.

'Ah,' beamed Joyanti, 'at last, a soul mate and a fellow traveller with a sense of humour. Thank God!'

And their friendship began.

It wasn't long before Faith and Joyanti became known as the 'terrible twosome'. They played practical jokes on the nursing staff and any of the residents game for a laugh.

Every week Mikey would come to visit his mother. Faith had noticed over the last few months that her son who was only 45 years old, was becoming incredibly serious, a sober type and he rarely smiled.

'When was the last time you laughed, Michael?' she'd asked him.

'What sort of question is that?' he'd said barely concealing a scowl on his face.

'You seem so very.....bad tempered all the time,' she'd offered trying to be tactful.

'Mum, I am working all the hours that god sends, the kids are giving the terrible teenager years a thorough exploration and Myra is constantly upset because I'm never around. I'll laugh when something's funny, ok?'

She could see he was under pressure, so she shut her mouth and tried to talk about other things.

As soon as he'd gone, Faith consulted Joyanti.

'He never smiles anymore. I don't know what's wrong,' Faith said.

‘I must say for someone so young he does have the air of a frustrated goat,’ replied Joyanti.

Faith considered this image in relation to her son and burst out laughing – Joyanti was right, he seemed like he had his horns pushed out ready to head-butt life into some sort of shape.

‘But what can I do?’ asked Faith, feeling helpless.

‘Aha. Now you are talking the language I like,’ said Joyanti, thinking hard. ‘Action not words.’



The next week, when Mikey was visiting he was greeted by a beaming Faith.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked suspiciously. ‘You’ve got that face on, that I’m-up-to-something-embarrassing face.’

‘I was thinking of our conversation last week and I want to show you something. Sit down please,’ Faith said formally.

Mikey did what he was told feeling extremely suspicious of his mother’s intentions.

‘When I came here to St Christopher’s, I was a grumpy old thing too. Ground down by what I thought were the pressures of life. But you said that I should make some new friends and enjoy the help I was being offered. You were right, I have made some good friends here and with a little help from them, I present to you, in honour of your visit, The St Christopher’s old age, but-not-on-their-last-legs-by-a-long-chalk, Players.’

Just then, right on cue, Joyanti stepped out from behind the double doors which led into the front sitting room. She had on her shawl and held a cheap Spanish fan in her left hand, she was in performance mode. She fluttered up to Mikey, said ‘hello’ and burst into song.

‘O dear what can the matter be? O dear what can the matter be? O dear what can the matter be, Mikey’s forgotten to laugh.’

Mikey looked horrified and extremely embarrassed but before he could turn to his mother to speak, a line of four elderly gentlemen entered. They walked on in a smart line, each man wearing a hat. One of them, Bert, an ex-salesman, said, ‘Life can be so full of stresses, we seem to run all round, if we let the stresses win, our feet will leave the ground.’

With practised ease the men began to sing and they sounded really quite good,

‘Run rabbit, run rabbit, run, run, run. Don’t give the farmer his fun, fun, fun. He’ll get by without his rabbit pie. So run rabbit, run rabbit, run, run, run.’

As the four men tipped their hats at Mikey and strolled off, Terence, a retired plumber stopped and spoke directly to Mikey.

‘You’ve got to slow down my boy, or you’ll miss the best bits,’ and he was gone.

Faith looked at her son and saw him bite his lip in that way he used to when he was a little boy. Tough little Mikey, who didn't want anyone to know that he had feelings and that they got hurt. He might be 45, she thought, but he looked the same when he was two.

Before she could think anymore Joyanti entered the 'stage' followed by a bevy of elderly beauties, all wearing shawls. They burst into song,

'When the red, red robin come bob, bob, bobin along, there'll be no more sobbin when he starts sobbin his old sweet song.'

From within the depths of her shawl, Joyanti took out what looked like a stuffed bird. It was actually an old Christmas decoration which at one point in time had been a robin. Joyanti made it dance as they sang the verse again. Mikey's mouth started to twitch around the sides, he was trying not to laugh.

The four men re-entered and stood in formation with the women. This was the big finale. Joyanti spoke up,
'When things feel tough, you are feeling rough, just remember not to forget....'
Faith was extremely impressed as they broke into a four part harmony, singing,

'Blue skies smiling at me, nothing but blue skies do I see, blue birds singing a song, nothing but blue birds all day long.'

The performance was over, the artistes took their bow as Mikey clapped till his hands hurt. The performers stopped to say hello before Joyanti ushered them tactfully away.

'You're...' began Mikey.

'.....interfering?' asked Faith, waiting for him to tell her off.

'No. You're.....' he began again.

'....irritating?' she asked.

'No, if you'd just let me get two words out,' he looked at her crossly.

'Sorry, love,' she said and sat still like a chastened child awaiting punishment.

'You're...' he began and looked at her long and hard before saying, '....great!'

He hugged her hard. 'D'you mum, that's really cheered me up. I know I've been grumpy lately, I just get tired and there seems to be no time for anything. But I guess there's always time and it's up to me how I spend it.'

Faith hugged her boy tight. 'I do love you, Mikey,' she said into his ear, 'and I know all mum's say this but I really mean it, you make me ever so proud.'

That night Joyanti and Faith sat together over a forbidden cup of sherry that Bert had smuggled into the home.

'Thanks,' said Faith to her friend, 'It meant a lot what you did for me today. D'you know, it's funny, I feel like I've known you all my life.'

Joyanti looked at her with a wicked glint in her eye, 'You could say,' quipped Joyanti 'that we're old friends!'

And with that the two octogenarians spend the rest of the evening laughing.