

What colour today?

Here I am again encouraging you to remove last week's varnish with the soaked cotton wool then washing your hands in a bowl of soapy water balanced precariously on your lap.

Here's the nail brush I say, and you reply that you *never did find a nail brush all that much use* dabbing ineffectively. *Shall I help?* I ask and obediently you relinquish the task.

Next the orange stick. You nod.

Together we pat your hands dry on the green towel.

I run the wooden point around the inside of the nail tips removing brown sludge, revealing snags and cracks.

This week it's sunny outside. Last week it was grey.

A mug of insipid tea stands for you on the table.

I'll trim the broken ones, run a file over them, I say.

Again you acquiesce. When I get to the left hand ring finger you shout out, *Ouch, don't cut me.*

I wouldn't, Mum. A beat. *Only one more to go,* I say.

I'm getting like Pam, you joke, even when she was married she'd go round to our mum's to get her nails cut.

A carer puts her head around the door to check on us. We both look up and smile. She nods. Moves on.

Have a sip of your tea before it gets too cold, I say.

One sip and you put it down again.

Try a little more I prompt. And then I get that look.

A mock frown. Exasperation. Head a little on one side.

Who am I to tell you what to do?

What colour today? I ask, showing you the bottles and you gasp. *So many to choose from.*

But you can't choose, not until offered just two.

Darker or lighter this week? In readiness I spread the towel over a cushion and tissue on top if it and ask you to hold your fingers star shaped, to keep still until it's dry. A cloud scuttles over the sun, passes on.

One finger at a time, one coat only, a pretty pink.

I'm parched, you say, lifting your hand for your tea so soon after the last brush stroke.