

Anne Phillips

There was an old woman who lived in a shoe. She was fortunate. Esmay, on the other hand only had the shoebox, without even the tissue paper.

Esmay's cardboard prison consisted of a small flat she had purchased many years ago and paid for ever since. The decadent odour of youth pervaded it when she moved in, but was soon replaced by a musty old-person smell. Life slowly seeped out of Esmay's pores like a rotten tyre releasing stagnant air, the dull hissing almost perceptible as she slowly deflated.

She hoped as she grew older and smaller, the shoe box would seem bigger. She was always told how practical it was for older members of the community to own a low maintenance home. The idea never really appealed to her, but the logic was there. She listened and regretted it. Low maintenance houses were called this as there was nothing worth bothering to maintain. Young people are allowed to grow into their houses, the aged are supposed to shrink into theirs.

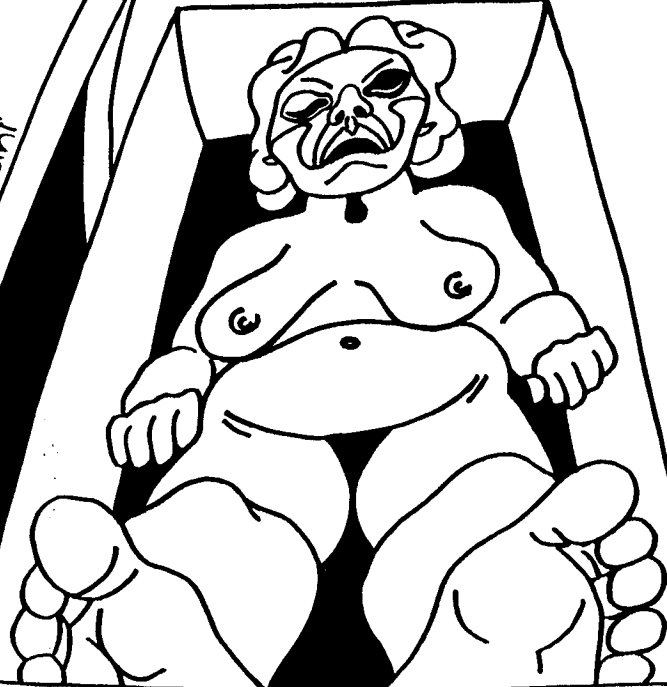
It became apparent that the size of the flat was directly proportional to the size of Esmay, like a picture frame shrinking to fit a buckled and yellowing print.

As the rooms became smaller the furnishings grew larger. Chairs stuck their legs out like playful spirits determined to trip her. Sharp corners of cupboards stabbed at her as she walked past. Even crumbs dropped on the lino floor by fumbling aged hands crunched monstrously under her feet, resonating throughout the flat.

Ornaments loomed at her. Objects on either side of the room seemed to meet in the middle as the walls closed in like a huge crush. Esmay waited, half expecting sharpened metal knives to spring out of them switch-blade style. They didn't but she still waited. "Oh, these things must be full of memories", gushed an overly concerned neighbour.

Esmay was sure they were but she was damned if she could remember which memory went with which piece. The past was a graveyard where all the tombstones had been mixed up. To sort out the confusion

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would involve excavating the lot. She preferred to leave them untouched.

Wisps of memories had become one huge rolling fog, its cold breath on Esmay's neck making her flinch. She was sure the haze was thickening.

A mischievous looking porcelain Dutch boy stood on the mantelpiece. The pipe in his mouth could be lit and he would puff away happily. The nightly ritual of lighting his pipe had ceased when the children grew out of it, though from the pleased expression on his impish face she was sure he had learnt to pack his own pipe, slyly contributing to the haze when she wasn't looking. Every now and then Esmay would whirl around half suspecting that she would catch him. She never did.

There was other evidence, though. The wallpaper behind him had started to yellow and lift. It crawled down the wall like a huge caterpillar determined to be free to roam around at its pleasure. For that matter all the wallpaper had decided to climb down from its vantage point and ham her in the centre of the room.

The clock ticked noisily. She waited for it to chime – anything to break the monotony of its methodical ticking. Tick Tock Tick Tock Tick Tock Tick.....

“Derek, I've found that hideous little Dutch figure stuffed down the back of a drawer.....It's wrapped in a piece of old wallpaper, Stupid old fool must've dropped him, his pipe is broken – couldn't bring herself to throw him out, I s'pose...I wonder if we could put the bits back together...He's probably worth a bit by now.”

Esmay was sitting, waiting, when they found her. She had wanted to be ready. The clock ticked noisily. She was slumped over a book she'd bought for her grandson's birthday – “There was An Old Woman Who Lived In A Shoe”.