

The Bookstore Girl

By ChronoEclipse

Part 2

~1:00pm~

With the lunch rush cleared out Doris locked the cash register and strolled out from behind the counter. The matronly woman brushed her hands together and slapped them against her pants then gave Zoe a friendly smile.

“Well then, ready to have some lunch?” She asked in a voice that no longer had a shake to it.

Doris grabbed her jacket and slipped it over her shoulder. It was a small leather jacket that looked a bit too ‘young’ and ‘hip’ for a 50-something, nevermind an old lady. It made Doris look like an aging rock n’ roller who had some wild stories from her punk days back in the mid 80s. She handed Zoe her red peacoat with a wink.

Zoe stared at her co-worker for a moment. With salt and pepper hair and a distinguished-looking face, Zoe hadn’t realized what a handsome woman Doris was. She must have been a very pretty girl when she was younger.

“Yes, that sounds lovely!” The graying blonde said with a grin causing her own lined cheeks to crinkle.

She held out a veined weathered mitt and Doris took it happily as the two 53-year-old women walked out of the shop hand in hand.

Outside the shop Julie was still hanging out at the cafe tables with her feet propped up on the chair. Her book was closed on the table next to her and she was tapping on her phone. She gave the two middle-aged women a big grin and a playful wave as they came out.

“Hey ladies...” She said in a flirtatious, amused tone.

Zoe smiled warmly at the young woman but then realized that the girl wasn't wearing a coat.

"Oh dear where is your coat! You're going to catch a cold like that!" Zoe chided Julie.

The pretty young woman smirked.

"It's cool. I've been hanging out here all day, I don't even notice the temperature now." Julie replied with a shrug.

Zoe opened her mouth to protest but just smiled and shook her head. She wasn't the girl's mother so she should just mind her own business.

"What would you like from the pizza shop?" Doris asked.

"Oh just a chicken salad for me, thanks. Anything else will go straight to my thighs! Plus my doctor wants me to ween out red meat and dairy from my diet." Zoe said with a laugh and then paused wondering where that had all come from. She wasn't on a diet and the only doctor she had seen was the family physician for her pre-semester check up.

But then she shook her head and added: "Here let me give you some money." As she reached into her pants pocket to find some loose cash.

"Oh no! It's on me! In honor of your first day!" Doris declared.

"Huh, it's still my first day isn't it? It feels like I've been working here for ages!" Zoe laughed.

"Yeah this place has a habit of doing that." Julie chimed in.

Doris flashed the girl a smirk and then jogged off to go order the food. Zoe sat down across from Julie. The two women sat in silence for a moment or two with Julie focusing on her phone and Zoe wracking her head for small-talk to

make with a college girl, obvious to the fact that she herself was one. Finally she went with:

“Sooooo how’s school?” She asked Julie.

The dark-haired girl turned to Zoe, putting down her phone.

“Oh I’m kind of on a break from school. I decided I wanted to see the world for a bit.” She replied.

“Uh huh. I see, but you’ve spent the whole day hanging around the shop here.” Zoe said not meaning to sound as judgemental as she came off to be.

Zoe shrugged the comment off.

“Yeah... I finished my book. It was great. Loved the ending. Would you mind bringing it into the shop when you’re done with lunch? And maybe grabbing me ‘Normal People by Sally Rooney? I’ve heard tremendous things!” Julie said with a compelling smile.

Zoe smiled back without saying anything and slid the book over in front of her. It was amazing how young Julie seemed to her now.

This morning she had thought this kid was so cool and put-together. She had even entertained the notion of asking her out on a date but seeing her now that felt preposterous. Julie was MUCH too young for her. She was easily young enough to be Zoe’s daughter... wait, that can’t be right. They were the same age weren’t they? Doris was the old one... but as Doris came back with the food and Zoe took a good look at the matronly woman in the black leather jacket with graying brown hair she felt much more of an age-appropriate potential partner.

“Julie... feet off the chair. C’mon we’ve been over this.” Doris scolded the girl.

Julie flashed Doris a knowing look and a mocking grin before making a show of removing her sneakers from the chair.

“Sure that’s what you’d say now....” Julie laughed rolling her eyes.

“It’s just a matter of respecting the space dear. That’s all she’s getting at.” Zoe offered.

Doris gave the graying blonde a warm smile and nod of agreement as she placed her salad in front of her. She handed over a plate to Julie as well with a couple slices of pizza on them. The girl took the plate with a look of begrudging appreciation.

“So there’s a lot of mom energy going on right now so, thank you but I think I’m going to go for a walk while I eat.” Julie said with a deep inhale signalling that she felt that the older women were being a lot.

“Okay dear! Have fun!” Doris replied jovially.

Zoe watched the girl hop over the small stone wall behind them and walk the path down toward the center of town.

“Was it something I said?” Zoe asked worried that she had offended her new young friend.

“Oh she’s fine!... She really should be wearing a coat though.” Doris said as she watched the girl disappear around a corner.

“What did you get?” Zoe asked out of curiosity looking at the platter in front of her coworker.

“I got pasta with meatballs and a coke! It just looked so good and I need the carbs and the sugar to power me through the busy afternoon!” Doris replied gleefully.

“Wow how bold of you! Women-” Zoe began to respond. She was going to say that women Doris’ age need to be careful eating that kind of junk but stopped herself wondering why she would say that.

“Well! Enjoy!” She finally managed to say with a smile.

The two women chatted about books, current events, family and a myriad of other topics as they ate their lunch. They had a lot in common. Zoe kept having to correct herself every time she used the phrase 'I read an article' to clarify that she had actually heard it in a podcast. Several times she talked about her grandmother being in a nursing home and paused to double check that she didn't actually mean her mother. But by the time lunch had ended the two were laughing and joking together like they had been friends for decades.

~2:00pm~

As the two women walked back into the shop and took off their jackets the gray completely overtook Zoe's hair. She stared at the veiny hand holding her coat up to the coat hook and thought that it looked completely alien to her.

"I'll flip the door sign!" Doris' spunky voice called from the middle of the store.

"Oh thank you Doris!" Zoe called back, clearing her throat afterward as her voice sounded uncharacteristically low and reedy.

"Please! Call me 'Doe'! Doris is such an old lady name!" Her coworker replied.

Zoe walked back out to the cash register and she realized that everything was suddenly a bit fuzzy. She could make out the form of Doris or 'Doe' but the blurry woman standing by the door now had a full head of chestnut colored hair.

"Oh I don't know. Doris is a pretty name. But Doe is nice too!" Zoe said with a smile that accentuated the new wrinkles on her cheeks.

"Doe and Zoe. If we pronounced your name without the accent we'd have names that rhyme." Doris laughed a pretty laugh.

Zoe furrowed her brow about to correct Doe and insist that her name was pronounced with the accent, but her younger self found the idea of the rhyming names really fun.

“Or we could call you ‘Doughy’ and be ‘Doughy and Zoe’ and rhyme our names that way.” Zoe said playfully sticking out her tongue.

“I hope I'm too slim to have the nickname ‘Doughy’!” Doris chuckled, pressing her hand against her soft middle-aged belly.

“Well if you keep eating pasta and sodas for lunch!” Zoe chuckled and the two women shared a laugh.

Customers began to come in and as they came up to the register Zoe realized that her blurry vision was going to be an issue. She squinted around at the register and spotted a pair of glasses. She grabbed them and fumbled to put them onto her face, discovering that it greatly improved her eyesight.

“Okay! There we go. Now we’re cooking with gas!” She said out loud as she wet her thinning lips and began to peck at the register buttons with her index finger.

The young woman she was ringing up, who was probably a few years older than Zoe had been at the start of the day, just gave the gray-haired bookstore lady a polite, if a bit patronizing, smile and then hurried out the door as soon as she signed her receipt.

“Everyones in such a rush these days. No time for common decency and human connection!” Zoe mumbled to herself.

Oscar came over and began to weave in between her legs, rubbing up against her and purring.

“Oh hello Oscar. I guess this means you’ve changed your mind about me.” She said, amused as she knelt down to pet him.

Her knees popped as she lowered herself down to his level slowly. She reached out to pet his head and the cat gratefully leaned into her hand purring loudly. The door chime jingle and Zoe lifted herself back up with a groan rubbing the

small of her back. She saw that it was just a delivery man bringing in a new shipment.

“Oof. I’ve never had that much trouble standing up before.” She grumbled as she attempted to stretch.

“It’s from carrying around all those stacks of books this morning.” Doris teased.

“Yeah I guess... watchout when you unload these boxes. You don’t want to get a hernia at your age.” Zoe warned.

What age was that? She wondered as she watched Doris lift boxes that she swore were heavier than the old woman had been this morning. Now the brunette looked to be maybe in her mid-40s.

“Oh don’t worry about me! I keep limber!” Doris said with a laugh as she restocked the shelves.

“Yeah me too! This morning I was-” Zoe began to say that she was incredibly fit but a customer entered the store. She turned and gave him a welcoming smile. “Welcome! How can I help you today?” She asked.

“Just browsing. I always walk by here but never got a chance to pop in. Good on you ladies for keeping this place going.” The man says with a smile.

“Oh well... thank you!” Zoe said, thinking that she couldn’t take too much credit for it since she had only worked here one day.

A new rush of customers began trickling in and Doris bopped around the store helping them. Zoe manned the cash register which was fine by her, feeling a bit achy and low on energy.

Zoe was wringing up a pile of books for a pretty young redhead with a lip piercing and a hand tattoo, she was the kind of girl that Zoe would have stalked on social media only a day ago. But now she smiled warmly at the girl simply thinking that she had a pretty smile.

“I like that tattoo.” She told the young woman as she handed back her purchased books.

“Oh thanks! Do you have any tats?” The girl asked enthusiastically.

“Me?” Zoe asked, blushing. “Oh no I... I was meaning to get one on the back of my shoulder but...” Zoe began to say, thinking very vividly of the Norse symbol she had been excited to get inked.

“But...?” The girl asked.

Zoe paused trying to think of what the ‘but’ was. This morning it would have been that she needed to save up the money but now she ended up responding:

“But that was a long time ago.” She said with a frown.

“Oh well... if you change your mind, I'll give you my artist's card. She's the best!” The redhead said in an upbeat manner as she reached into her wallet and pulled out a small business card.

“Thank you. That's very swee- I mean cool of you!” Zoe said as she reached over the counter to grab it.

As she did so she noticed her flabby pale bicep and cringed. This girl's body was sleek, toned and young but Zoe's was beginning to look puffy and flabby. The girl just smiled kindly at the graying bookstore lady and grabbed her bag of books.

Once the girl was out of the store Zoe held her arm up again looking at her wrinkly bingo wing. She jiggled the loose dangling skin with her fingers watching it flop back and forth. Her eyes widened in horror. That wasn't what her arms should look like.

She turned around putting her back to the door in the event any new customers walked in and cautiously lifted her shirt expecting to see a flat, toned stomach.

Instead a pale, poochy tummy of a matronly woman peaked out from underneath. Zoe quickly pulled down her shirt again.

“You okay Zoe? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!” Doris said, poking up from the side of the counter.

Zoe jumped but then gave the younger woman a calm smile.

“Fine dear, I just need to get out from behind this register. I need to do something active to get the blood flowing.” Zoe insisted.

~3:00pm~

“Whatever you say! You’re the boss!” The attractive brunette replied in a chipper tone.

Zoe blew some of her gray bangs out of her eyes and moved to walk over to the bookshelves. Her body felt very stiff and her back had a persistent ache to it. She gripped the counter with a veiny hand and moved slowly around the front counter.

When she had made her way out from behind the register she put both hands on the small of her back and stretched. Her bones made crackling sounds as she tilted backward as far as she could go. Yoga had been one of the few classes Zoe never missed in college and had considered herself quite flexible, a fact that many of her past hook-ups could also attest to but now she worried that if she bent down to touch her toes she’d never be able to stand back up again.

She lifted her right leg up to get some circulation going and as she did so her knee made a distinct popping sound. Zoe quickly lowered her leg back down and gripped the counter again for support.

“Knee’s never done that before.” She muttered, looking down at her swollen leg warily.

“Those shoes can’t be helping. They aren’t super practical to be shuffling around in...” Doris said with a helpful smile.

The two women looked down at the fashionable brown leather ankle-length heeled boots that Zoe was wearing. The gray-haired retirement age woman nodded her creased face. They felt very heavy and impractical. In fact each of the steps she had taken from the register had felt daunting and precarious, like she might topple over any moment.

‘Why didn’t I wear sneakers?’ She wondered in self-admonishment.

“I... clearly wasn’t thinking when I pulled these out of my closet this morning.” Zoe rasped, shaking her gray head.

“It’s cool. You can borrow mine. I’m gonna change into the pair of flats I keep in the back!” Doris offered.

Zoe looked over at her coworker to see a pair of smooth, fairly well-toned legs in a modest denim skirt leading down to a pair of clunky orthopedic sneakers. The kind you buy at a drug store instead of a sporting goods retailer.

“Uh... alright... thanks.” Zoe replied hesitantly.

She had a fleeting thought that she didn’t want to be caught dead in such unfashionable, clunky old-lady footwear but her soles were aching and the urge to move around the store without the fear of falling won out.

Zoe eased herself down into a reading chair with an ‘oof.’ and began the arduous process of taking off her boots. Lifting her leg up she could see squiggly purple veins gathering around her ankles and calves. She flexed her toes and noted that they seemed a bit knobby and crooked in her thin white socks.

Next to her, Doris was quickly and easily popping her sneakers and socks off to reveal young smooth feet with red-painted toes. She let out a pleased sigh and stretched down to hug her knees, gripping the tops of her feet with her hands and stretching out her legs with impressive flexibility.

Zoe looked over at the brunettes tanned, shapely leg extended in quite the enticing display. She became so distracted staring at her toned calf that she stopped midway through slipping her own foot into Doris' sneaker.

'Stop it! She's too old for you!' Zoe thought to herself sharply and then shook her head looking back over at the freckle-faced co-worker. 'Er too young for you!' She corrected but paused wondering if that was right either.

Doris slipped her feet into her flats and jumped up energetically to go man the register as Zoe finished tying the laces of her sneakers and took a few attempts to get up out of her chair. She grunted and rocked her body forward finally getting enough momentum to lift her old bones up to a standing position.

"Well then, that was a fun shoe-party. Now it's back to work!" Zoe said with a wrinkled smile to the younger woman behind the counter.

"Yes ma'am!" Doris said with a bright smile and an enthusiastic thumbs up.

The sneakers definitely helped the short-haired older woman with her balance as she shuffled back to the book stacks. But she still found herself taking slow careful steps, which made the process of tidying up the store take much longer than she had expected.

She picked up a book shoved on top of a stack of others, displaced by a customer who had grabbed it from its home and then decided not to buy it. Zoe immediately knew where the book belonged. In fact, she was impressed to realize that she had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of where every author and title was located in the mid-sized shop. She could list every used title they currently had on sight and the best-sellers that were currently out of stock. If a customer asked for a stack of every booker prize winning novel in the store Zoe would be able to locate them in 5-seconds flat but physically going around and gathering them was another story.

She wasn't up for 'running around' anymore. In fact the idea of 'running' in general made her blood pressure rise. It was a foreign feeling. The wizened, nearly 70-year-old woman had distinct recent memories of holding dance parties in her tiny apartment. The thought of jumping around and bopping her

blonde head to loud thrashing pop-rock felt like something she had just done this past Friday... but that couldn't be right.

“That must've been ages ago.” She muttered to herself, shaking her head and making her jowls quiver.

Resting against the back shelves was a sturdy wooden cane. Zoe was excited to find it as shuffling around placing books back in their homes for the past few minutes was starting to feel challenging again.

She gripped the cane in her bony hand and clomped it on the ground a couple times to feel how supportive it was. A smile crossed her wrinkled face as she found it to do the trick of keeping her steady quite well... but hadn't Doris been using this cane to get around this morning?

“Doris? Doris, dear... I found a cane resting against the back shelves... is it yours? Do you need it?” She called to the front of the store in a reedy voice.

“No, I'm cool! Thanks!” A youthful voice hollered back.

Zoe chuckled and shook her head feeling silly to have asked. She shuffled forward with a stack of books under one wrinkled arm and her trusty cane in the other.

~4:00pm~

Zoe's hair was beginning to lighten into a wispy white pixie cut while the lines on her face deepened. The books all felt heavier than they had been earlier that day. Even the paperbacks.

“How are you doing Zee? You alright back there?” Doris' perky voice called from the front of the store.

“Eh?” Zoe called back, unable to make out what her friend and coworker was asking.

Zoe squinted through her bifocals trying to read the authors on the spines of the books on the shelf in front of her. The letters were all a bit fuzzy. Finally she found the title she was looking for and lifted up a misplaced paperback up to the shelf with a trembling hand and slid it carefully to its proper spot.

She then grabbed the final book wedged between her saggy arm and saggier chest. It was a hardcover novel that this morning Zoe would have been able to toss up in the air and catch behind her back without a thought, but now was struggling to lift it up to eye level. Her spindly fingers gripped the novel tightly, if it slipped out and fell to the floor Zoe feared that she'd throw out her back leaning over to pick it up.

The 70-something woman groaned as she lifted the book up above her head to place it on the top shelf. She didn't have the strength to get it up there with one hand so she rested her cane against the bookcase and grabbed the novel with both liver-spotted hands to bring it up to where it needed to go. She swayed a bit, off balance. Her knobby knees knocked together. She almost managed to slide the book into the space that it belonged if only she could keep her shaky hands steady.

Zoe wondered for a moment why she was having such a hard time putting a single book back. She was restocking books with absolutely no effort this morning... and did the top shelf seem higher than it had before?

The elderly woman stood on her tiptoes and managed to slip the corner of the book into the slot between the two titles it was meant to go between but as she did so she lost her balance, rocking backward about to fall onto her wrinkled ass.

Zoe screamed, fearing what damage a tumble onto the hard floor of the store might do to her frail, brittle body. Concerns of breaking a hip or being unable to stand back up that had been completely foreign to her before were now palpable. In fact for a fleeting moment she remembered just the other day when she had face-planted while attempting to do a cartwheel for her friend and joked about the old 'Fallen and I can't get up' life alert commercials. She didn't see what was so funny about it now.

But rather than crumbling to the ground she found herself tumbling into a pair of smooth, strong arms. She looked back behind her to see Doris standing beside her, having caught the old woman from falling over.

“Here ya go, easy does it. Are you alright?” The young brunette asked as she helped her elderly coworker back to steadily standing on her feet.

“Oh I'm fine. Just a bit shaken.” Zoe mumbled, blushing as she stepped out of the young woman's embrace.

“I was asking if you needed any help back here.” Doris said with a good natured laugh and a kind smile.

“Oh I didn't hear you for some reason I-” Zoe began to explain.

Being this close to her formerly old co-worker Zoe got a good look at her and was taken aback at how good she looked. Her chestnut-colored hair was healthy and vibrant and her skin was so smooth. She had to crane her head up to look into Doris' young eyes. How could that be? Hadn't she been a head taller than Doris when she first started working here?

“Doris! You're- You look so good! You're so young and full of life!” Zoe gasped in disbelief.

Doris chuckled modestly, brushing some of her wavy brown locks from her pretty face.

“Aw thanks. But i'm nearly 30!” The young woman replied.

“Thirty but Doris you...” Zoe began to mutter not sure what to make of the fact that she had remembered the girl being old like her before.

Wait - not old like her, OLDER than her. But before she could press her youthening coworker about it any further there was a jingle signalling that customers had entered the shop.

“Whoops! Duty calls! And call me ‘Dee’! I hate ‘Doris’!” The girl said in a perky voice as she literally ran toward the front of the store.

Zoe paused to try and make sense of what was going on. One thing she finally decided was that ‘Dee’ was a nice girl but talked too fast and she could hardly understand her! The aged woman reached over to grab her cane again and clomped slowly back toward the main reading area of the shop.

“Excuse me ma’am... are you the store owner?” A voice called beside her.

Zoe slowly turned her head. Her loose dangling neck skin jiggling as she did so. She saw a woman who was around her mothers age... was that right? The woman looked young enough to be her daughter.

“Mmm?” She asked not really hearing what the woman had asked her.

“I-” The woman began to speak louder, about to repeat herself but then deciding just to push on with her more pressing question. “I’m trying to find a copy of a book by this author. Do you know where I can find him?”

The woman presented Zoe with an image on her phone. Zoe took the phone in her trembling hand warily. She had been so proficient with her own device just a few hours ago but now it felt like a foreign object that she wasn’t even sure how to grip properly. She raised the screen up close to her face and then adjusted her glasses trying to read the words on the screen. Finally she made out the name.

“Oh yes. We have that author... he’s in the History section... it’s right this way. Follow me!” She chirped and turned slowly to lead the middle-aged woman to the book she was looking for.

The younger woman looked at Zoe clomping along with the aid of her cane.

“Oh that’s alright. I can get it. The History section you said? Right over here? Thanks!” The woman said quickly as she left.

Zoe shrugged. If no one needed her help at the moment she would take this time to rest her eyes for a moment. She stood there against the shelves, hunched over in her still fashionable young clothes that barely fit her aged spindly body, nodding off a bit. She stirred awake at the sound of a familiar voice.

“Hey... like, did a blonde girl come in here and apply for a job?” A young red-haired girl with a nose piercing asked.

She was standing at the front counter next to another stylishly dressed young woman with an olive-colored complexion and dark hair who looked like she might be of Indian descent. Doris was looking at the two college-age girls with a bit of bewilderment on her youthful face.

“Oh uh...” Doris began to say, fidgeting nervously behind the counter.

“Zoe? That’s her name. She said she was going to come apply for a job here.” The dark-haired girl prompted Doris.

“Yes?” Zoe said as she shuffled over to them.

The two girls made judgemental faces at the 77-year-old woman with short white hair and glasses staring at them with an incredibly lined face. Zoe simultaneously was scrutinizing these two girls who looked young enough to be her granddaughters. They looked very familiar... this was... Kara wasn’t it? And Ritu... her roommates... her friends... but they look so young, they should be old women like her shouldn’t they? If they had all gone to school together... or should she be young like them?

“Uh... we were just asking if our friend Zoe came in for a job.” Ritu explained with an uncomfortable smile.

Zoe remembered a conversation they had a few weeks ago... or was it years ago? Late one night drinking sangrias in their underwear while sitting on the floor around their coffee table, Ritu had admitted that old people make her uncomfortable because of how much it creeped her out to think of how they used to be young like her and then they got old and it made her think about

how she might get old like that someday and lose her looks and her energy and her finger on the pulse of relevant things so she avoided the elderly whenever possible.

“I’m Zoe.” The hunched over woman said, giving the girls a wrinkly smile.

Kara leaned over to Ritu while staring at Zoe warily.

“Looks like *somebody* should have retired back in the last century....” The redhead whispered loudly and then gave a fake smile to her aged roommate.

Zoe couldn’t hear what she said but judging from Doris’ disapproving scowl she knew it was mean. Kara was a bit of a bitch and Zoe was sad to admit that back when she was young she often fed into the ginger’s mean girl sense of humor.

“Oh wow! What a coincidence... anyway... got to run. Sorry to bother you!” Ritu said, waving as the two girls awkwardly made their way to the door.

Zoe turned around and watched them leave, wetting her thin lips trying to remember how she knew these girls. She had a sudden urge to call after them.

“Wait!” She yelled.

The two 20-year-olds swung around and looked at the old woman nervously.

“I...” Zoe began.

There everyone silently waited to hear what the old woman was going to say. Zoe herself kept wetting her lips and raised a shaky hand up to point a bony finger at the girl.

“I’m...” She tried again.

It was right on the tip of her tongue ‘I’m your friend Zoe! I don’t know why I’m so much older now but you know me! I’m in college like you!’ But instead she finished with.

“I... what was I saying? Oh yes, that’s a lovely skirt young lady! I love the colors!” She rattled pointing at Ritu’s purple and blue skirt.

“Uh... thanks.” She said with a harrowed smile. She then turned back to her friend. “See! I told you she wasn’t going to get a job today!” Ritu said to her friend as they exited.

“Probably took one look at Grandma SoHo back there and just called her parents to borrow more money and went shopping.” Kara laughed.

When the door closed behind them Zoe turned to Doris.

“I- I think I knew them.” She mumbled, everything feeling a bit fuzzy.

“Here, Zoe, come sit down and rest a bit. You’ve had a long day.” Doris insisted, beckoning the old woman over behind the counter.

“Yes... that would be nice to get off my feet for a bit. I don’t remember ever being this tired.” Zoe muttered as she clomped over to her young co-worker.

~5:00pm~

Doris popped over to the door and flipped the sign to ‘closed’ and then bounced around the shop cleaning up while Zoe nodded off at the counter.

“So how do you feel about your first day all in all?” The 21-year-old brunette asked, her voice high pitched and girlish.

“Eh?” Zoe asked, stirring awake again.

“How was your first day Zoe?” Doris yelled louder.

“Speak up dear. I can hardly hear you!” Zoe rattled.

Doris giggled and rolled her eyes. She skipped over to the back room and came out with a hearing aid and presented it to the 85-year-old sitting behind the counter.

“Here. Try this. I used it this morning and it seemed to do the trick... don’t worry, I washed it!” The coed insisted.

Zoe reached a gnarled hand to the hearing device and then stuck it in her ear, turning it on and adjusting it so that the loud buzz dimmed.

“How’s that?” Doris asked.

“Better.” Zoe replied being able to make out what she was saying now.

“Awesome! Wouldn’t want you to have to go all week without being able to hear anything!” Doris said, giving the old woman a bright smile.

“All week...?” Zoe asked.

Now that she could hear again and was feeling a little more alert she suddenly found herself aware of just how old she was. Looking down at the wrinkled, paper-thin skin of her arms and her saggy, unrecognizable chest she gasped.

“I’m old!” She screamed.

Doris smirked and gave the elderly woman an apologetic smile.

“Yeah... that’s kind of the deal.” She said with a sheepish shrug.

“But... you were old! You were like a granny when I came in today!” Zoe wheezed pointing a finger at the young woman accusatory.

“Well, I mean technically not a ‘granny’ because I don’t have any grandkids... or kids for that matter.” Doris replied pedantically.

“You were old and now you’re young and pretty!” Zoe screamed.

“Awwww thanks! I think you’re pretty too!... I mean you were before... You look good for your age now though!” Doris said, fumbling over her compliment.

“That’s not the point... you were old and now I’m old... How old am I?” Zoe asked, feeling her aged body with her trembling hands.

“Uh like mid 80s, give or take...” Doris answered, waving her hand in an either/or gesture.

“You stole my youth!” Zoe cried.

Doris tossed up her hands in protest.

“Woah, woah that’s not fair. This was in the employee handbook. I didn’t do this. The store did.” The younger woman explained.

“I didn’t read the handbook!” Zoe bellowed.

“That’s not my fault! I told you to! I made the same mistake when I was hired.” Doris said calmly and sympathetically.

“Wait... you’re not the owner?” Zoe asked, surprised.

“Owner? Of the store? No! I’m only 21-years-old.” Doris said as if stating the obvious.

“But then... who hired you?” Zoe inquired, scratching her snowy white head.

The door jingled as it opened and Julie popped into the store.

“Hey girl! Ready for our date?” She asked with a big grin.

For a moment Zoe thought she was talking to her. She cringed at the thought of having to explain to the hot girl that there was inexplicably a 60+ year age difference between them now.

“You know I am babe! God, this is like the first night in how many months that we’re the same age?” Doris asked with a relieved sigh.

“Oh it’s been a minute since we had a chance to make-out without one of us needing denture cream Miss Doris.” Julie said with a giggle squeezing Doris’ rosy cheeks.

“Cut it out! You know I hate that name!” Doris said, smirking and rolling her eyes.

“Awww sorry ‘Dee’... and thank you Zoe!” Julie said, turning to the old woman nodding off again behind the counter.

“Thank me? For what?” Zoe asked, confused.

“If you hadn’t come in for a job today I’d be taking my girlfriend out for an early bird special!” Julie explained with a laugh.

“Ha or just taking blondie out for a night of dancing herself! Don’t think I didn’t see how you two were flirting! My eyesight might have been awful this morning but I could still catch what was going on!” Doris laughed.

“True! True! Girl’s got it going on when she’s young. I might just have to take you out on your next day off.” Julie said, winking at Zoe.

“It’s her first day and you’re already trying to bring her into a thurple?” Doris smirked.

“Like you weren’t already thinking it.” Julie said, grinning and pressing up against her young lover.

“We bonded over work. I’m just cool with being friends.” Doris said grinning back.

“Ha! Yeah right!” Julie laughed before pulling Doris into a kiss.

Zoe watched the two young women making out in the middle of the store as she leaned on her cane trying to understand what was going on.

“But wait - what about me? I’m just stuck being old now?” Zoe quavered.

“Just tonight and tomorrow, then on Wednesday we’ll switch back during our shift.” Doris pulled out from her kiss to explain.

“How am I supposed to go home like this? You saw how my roommates reacted! They’ll think i’m some crazy senile lady and have me locked up in a nursing home.” Zoe cried.

“Nah girl. You live in the apartment in the back while you’re old. It’s part of the whole deal.” Julie explained.

“I live here?” Zoe asked.

“Yeah... didn’t you show her the employee manual?” Julie asked Doris in surprise.

“I did! She skimmed it!” Doris replied defensively.

Julie smirked.

“Who does that remind me of?” She asked rhetorically as she reached out to tickle her girlfriends now flat midsection.

Doris laughed and batted Julie’s hands away.

“But how do I know what days I’m going to be young and what days I’m going to be old?” Zoe asked through labored breaths.

“It’s on the schedule... in the back. If you need to be young on a specific day just let me know and we’ll work it out.” Doris offered.

Zoe eased herself down to the chair feeling tired again.

“So you guys are going to go out dancing.” Zoe stated as if checking the score.

“Among... other things...” Julie said with a giggle, hip-checking Doris.

“... I mean, i’m happy for you but... what am I supposed to do while i’m old?” Zoe asked, thinking that all the things she normally enjoyed were off the table now.

“Uh... funny enough, when I'm that age I tend to do a lot of reading!” Doris said with a sympathetic smile.

“I took up macrame... got damn good at it too!” Julie offered.

“Fair enough.” Zoe croaked. “Well, you two kids enjoy yourselves.” She said waving at them from her chair.

“Thanks Zoe! It really does mean a lot.” Doris said with an appreciative smile as she and Julie walked to the door arm in arm.

The door jingled again as it opened.

“You have my number... I put it in your phone as a hot button because I know when you get up there in age using all this technology gets a little... daunting.” Julie said as they exited.

“And my numbers in the back too by the schedule. The apartment has an honest to god landline! So like if you forget about cell phones you can call us from there!” Doris added.

“Ah, thank you! That’s very nice of you.” She nodded tiredly.

“Oh and Zoe!... There’s no rule saying that only two of us can work here at a time... if you wanted to tell your friends... or roommates about this gig?” Doris offered with a wink.

The young couple left. Zoe thought about what Doris said and a smile crept across her wrinkled face. She pulled out her phone and began to text Kara while she still had her wits about her.

Overhead a George Gershwin song began to play filling the store. Zoe swayed in her seat to the classical music, smiling softly and humming along.

THE END