

Vinny's on her way out to the chiropodist. Vinny rarely leaves the house so when she does it's an occasion of some importance to her. She spends a lot of time looking forward to a glimpse of the outside world and then, when she returns, even more time complaining about the state of it.

5 "I'm a shadow of my former self," she announces, peering through the misty patina of the rust-spotted hall mirror that Debbie has long ago given up trying to clean. Vinny was a shadow to begin with, now she's a shadow of a shadow. Her bones have turned to polished yellow ivory, her skin to shagreen. Shagreen enamelled with imperial-purple veins. Warts grow on the backs of her hands like lichen. Her breath is as full of sighs as a bagpipe.

10 She takes a compact out of her ancient mausoleum of a handbag and rubs her cheeks vigorously with facepowder that looks like flour and, scrutinizing the result intently, says, "My chilblains are killing me," as if they're to be found on her face rather than on her feet. She's dressed for the outside world - a brown gabardine coat and a grey felt hat that's a strange battered shape, like old dough that's been punched. Vinny's hat has an incongruous pheasant feather poking out of the top, expressing a jauntiness somehow at odds with the woman underneath. She takes her pearl-headed hatpin and sticks it into her hat, although
15 from where I'm standing - loitering by the hallstand - it looks as if she's just stuck it through her head.

"Don't smirk," Vinny says, catching sight of my face in the mirror. "If the wind changes you'll stay like that." I loll my head on one side and make a face that Charles would be proud of. "You look like the Hunchback of Notre Dame," Vinny says, "only a lot taller," and deflates on to the hard little chair next to the telephone table. "My chilblains are killing me," she adds with feeling. "You said that already." "Well,
20 I'm saying it again." Vinny creaks forward and strokes one of her shoes consolingly. They're new black lace-ups - witch's shoes, that Mr Rice has presented to her with a flourish as a "token of his esteem".

"I'll have to wear something more comfortable," Vinny says. "Go and get me my brown brogues, they're under my bed. Go on - what are you waiting for?"

Kate Atkinson, Human Croquet, 1997