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The little pink valise

Lewis returned sooner than Maria expected. He had parked the car out of the sun, under the shade of the old apple tree along the far side of the driveway on the grass so she had not heard the soft crunch of the car tyres against the gravel. With a start, she heard the key turn in the lock with its familiar thunk.

She was not ready for his return. The air in the little room lay heavy with emotion, in the dusty half-light of the late afternoon. She felt unprepared for his inevitable reproach. It was a private activity; she did not share this experience with him.

In their everyday lives, Lewis and Maria circled round each other carefully, cautiously: each unsure of what to say, what to do. Of how they might be. But here, in this quiet room, she imagined she might find herself again. She hoped to, what exactly? She was never sure. Perhaps she hoped to retrieve the girl who had faced life with optimism, the person she had once been. She was caught in the moment of her existence, as if she might find another way, another solution.

The late sunlight glowed, pink and low in the sky, where the silhouettes of the lime trees' shadows fell, their dark shapes lengthened across the lawn. It was all

going wrong. She had planned her time carefully but now she was alert to the danger of being discovered, of being caught out. She felt the fine hairs on her arms rise. She shivered, although it was not cold.

Maria paused, glancing at the clock, as she gripped the back of the spindly gilded bedroom chair, her rigid knuckles bluey-white and taut under her skin. Catching sight of her shocked reflection in the misty mirror, she swallowed, gulping back her feelings. She made herself take deep breaths, and tried to steady herself. Lewis must not know. They must *not* find out.

She swallowed again, attempting to still her beating heart. Then very gently, with one delicate foot tipped, she quietly pushed the little pink case so that it slid softly against the mossy carpet, easing it back under the bed, until it disappeared from her view, out of sight under the folds of the faded counterpane.

In the little spare room, in the dusty light, she held back a dry sob.

“He must not know. *They* must not know about this,” she thought. “Or this will also be taken away from me. They will say it is for the best.”

Had she uttered this aloud? Sometimes she caught herself speaking her thoughts, talking to herself. These days she found it hard to distinguish between her words and the colourful images she held in her mind, like soft feathers, floating above her head, gifts from an exotic bird, one with a benevolent, and understanding eye.

As if in a dream, she managed to move. She drifted, her feet caressing the carpet, out and onto the landing. She waited until she put some distance between herself and the door to the little room.

“Hello,” she called down the staircase to Lewis.

Her voice was bright.

He, of all people, must not find out her secret. But she was thinking about the little white mittens, and the Official Letter she had received, one that awaited her answer.

Her voice echoed back up at her, as if in mockery, but he seemed not to notice.

“Hello love,” he called up to her.

He looked up at her, cautiously, his face framed in the space of the stairwell.

Fine lines were etched around his tired eyes, his tousled hair falling across his face. He was feeling his way, as he tried to gauge her mood.

These were the days of fragile shards of egg shells, both of them tiptoeing around the crushed, speckled, blue shells that had once held the pieces of their life together.

.....

*** (to indicate a space here - for change of view)

“Are you ready?” Lewis asked, as he gazed up at Maria, silhouetted against the late afternoon light from the window behind her.

“Aren’t we going round to John and Jo’s tonight?” he asked. “For supper,” he added, unnecessarily he realised, but by then the words had fallen into the stillness suspended in the air between them. He could not quite disguise the accusatory edge in his voice, despite his attempt to be careful and considerate of her feelings. “Keep it casual, kind, carefree,” he reminded himself.

Maria stiffened.

She was like a deer caught in torchlight across a field, under a crescent moon, he thought.

For a moment he longed to tell her he loved her, still, despite all that had gone between them.

But he did not say these words.

The infinitesimal moment passed him by in the still air, heavy with regret and sorrow.

*** (space)

After a long pause, steadying her voice, she said, “Yes, OK.”

She kept her voice bright; she also thought it seemed important to remain casual.

“I’ve remembered,” she replied.

But she was remembering other events and other feelings.

Her thoughts still lay with the contents of the little pink case under the bed in the room behind her. Regret and sorrow flooded through her, holding her like a

vice, as she reflected on the creamy moiré silk lining cradling the creased Polaroid of the last scan; the soft tissue paper which held the little knitted pink jacket; the tiny cream newborn's sleep suit; the little mittens; the precious cast of her foot; the letter. She could not let go of Christina's few moments of life. She would remember her for all eternity, keep her safe. In her mind's eye Maria still held her, caressed her body, touched those tiny fingers, so perfectly formed.

Maria gripped the edge of the banister rail firmly, to ground herself, bringing herself back to the present.

"Give me a minute – just looking for my pink top," she said. "You've time for a shower, if you want," she suggested to Lewis.

Maria managed to keep her voice level, as if she was someone who was still concerned about her husband's wellbeing. And in a way, she thought, she was, she did care still. If only people would leave her alone to her thoughts.

"I just need to make a quick call first," he replied.

He turned and went back, down through the hallway into the kitchen, and then out into the garden. She heard the back door. It complained with its customary little creak as he pushed it open. He was heading down the lawn.

He strode purposefully, not looking back. He was aiming for the wooden summerhouse, at the bottom of the far lawn, where he knew his voice would be muffled.

Maria watched him as he went from the upstairs landing window. His dark hair was starting to turn silver. His back was too upright – he carried himself just a shade too stiffly, in this petty deceit. She knew her husband well: she knew where he would be going to make the call. She no longer cared either way. Did he think she didn't know what he was up to?

Quietly, although she knew he would be out of earshot, she quickly returned to the spare room, careful to retrieve her pink top, before turning the key in the lock.

“This is tearing us apart,” she thought as she looked out of the window again.

Down, across the far lawn, her little hens were busy pecking around in the border, scratching up the dusty soil with their feathery-trouser legs, searching for tasty morsels, for insects and the young lettuce she had planted earlier in the year. It didn't matter – let them enjoy themselves. She could always sow more seeds someday.

It was as if she had turned a child's kaleidoscope around so that the beautiful patterns of the coloured glass pieces were now distant jagged shapes.

She had made her decision. Maria knew it would not be welcomed by her family, or by those who supposedly cared for her. Lewis would disapprove, telling her that she needed to move on. But she felt she had no choice, now that the letter had arrived.

“I will testify for the Inquiry,” she vowed. “I owe her that at least,” she added, in a whisper, as she stood upstairs, leaning against the blue sprigged wallpaper and cream panelled walls. But there was no one there to hear her.

The very walls seemed to be closing in on her. She felt as if she was trapped behind a pane of glass, she could not breathe, there was not enough air. She was uncertain as to who, or what, she was in the world.

She was quite alone.

She hid the key in her usual place: the blue and white china potpourri jar on the landing, pressing it down, hard, burying it among the dead, dried petals of long gone flowers, in its resting place.

ooOoo

Key words

Family bereavement; Maternal loss; Infant death; Depression; Coping;

Resilience; Stoicism; Mental Health; Wellbeing

Research Background:

This short story arose from previous in-depth qualitative research exploring women's phenomenological experiences after childbirth. It is based on my recently completed, not as yet published doctoral research (Biggerstaff, 2014). This research examined some of the more quotidian, often un-regarded, everyday experiences of mothers following childbirth. It is a creative attempt at imagining 'what it is like' to experience the loss of a child. This piece endeavours to recreate the psychology of a new mother's feelings, and her emotions, while she struggles to re-engage with her everyday existence in the world around her. Work for the research was originally conducted in parallel with a large scale randomised controlled trial, RCT (McArthur et al., 2013). The women I recruited therefore originally came from this study. Mothers were recruited before, or just after, they gave birth and were then followed up for twelve months after delivery.

However, a few recruited mothers who lost their baby during or after birth were later excluded, at the discretion of the midwives who were in charge of their care in the community. While I was recruiting for my sample to interview, I would come across a sad note in the research records from a midwife, which said that a mother was being withdrawn from the study due to a neonatal death or similar event. During my field work some midwives would occasionally talk to me about their experiences of managing their own feelings when trying to cope professionally with caring for mothers following a bereavement. Their feelings mirrored some of the views expressed by mothers in my research who described the misery of trying to cope with loss, depression

and anxiety. Over the years I have also had conversations with other parents following the loss of a child. These experiences have stayed with me.

Any such resemblance to their stories is entirely unintentional. Nevertheless, these narratives have remained in my mind and I dedicate this story to all mothers and their families and carers, whose stories of loss and healing, illness and stoicism in coping, have informed my research and been the inspiration for this story, In much of my research I am interested in highlighting people's experiences of events which are happening on the edge or periphery, of the seemingly main narrative.

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