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Abstract

You are lying in your bedroom knitting, you say, that night, the night you did it, or you think you did it. You are knitting, knitting away and thinking. Musing, as you put it, just before putting your head down and falling asleep. You are thinking about this and that, putting the day in order in your head. Everything is very quiet. Honey is in her room. She's probably already asleep. Her boy is probably asleep from before her even. You smile as you think of him. Same calm ways as his mother, as your Honey.

LINDSEY COLLEN

Honey's Mother's Confession

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Honey says she is *dead beat* today. The factory work tires her out, mentally and physically, she says. She operates a big cutting machine that cuts two hundred backs and two hundred fronts of shirts all at once, she says. So that the pattern in the material for the backs joins up exactly to the pattern in the material for the fronts, where they will get sewn together under the arms. So she tells you.

She only gets back after dark. Then the evening meal. There was, you say, nothing unusual in that. You convinced her to share *your* food and not to bother lighting her Primus and not to bother cooking for herself and the boy. Not to tire herself out, you say. Rice. And pumpkin leaf soup with the rice water and browned onions. And salt fish. Boiled first to desalinate it a bit, and then broken into tiny bits, and deep-fried until they were crisp. The boy loves that. Some chutney with raw, sour little tomatoes and chillies and pickled lemon and garlic. You say this as though you can remember the exact tastes, as if they have all stayed in your mouth from that night onwards. As though these tastes were a sign. Or as though they remain as a proof.

This is all happening one evening some time back. Maybe this time last year, in terms of the weather, you say. It is hot and stuffy then too. *Airless* is the way you put it. That night is airless. Same as in this cell tonight you say. The custard apple tree in front of your house has got new leaves on it, you add for proof. So many you remember you can't see through it when you look out of her window. As though the green of the forest is inside her room. And they are dead still, the leaves, that night.

Her boy is probably also asleep. Yes, you repeat this. Need to convince yourself that he knows nothing. No doubt already fast asleep in a cot-like thing he sleeps in at the foot of her bed. He is very bright, you say. An

affectionate, warm child. Like her, you repeat, calm. Their room is very neat. She keeps it that way. The clothes are all in a cupboard in little piles. Shirts. Underclothes. Trousers. Her skirts. Dresses. And their socks.

There is a calendar on the wall with a photograph of a grotto of some kind. A religious grotto, you say. With a candle in it. Perhaps in the Alps. Or the Pennines. You sometimes pray to this calendar or to the grotto or to the candle. When you are all alone. Pray that she and the little one will be safe. That it will look after them, the calendar.

Roderick is out at work, you tell me. Yes, her husband is called Roderick. He works night shift at the electronics factory. He prepares his own food if she's not back from the factory yet, and today their paths crossed, as you put it. She got home just before he left. Their paths crossed that night. This is not unusual. No, they don't fight. Never heard a rough word between them. They both take a drink, you say. That's all. Drink a bit. And they laugh. They are too carefree in their ways. For you, you say. Too carefree. Happy-go-lucky, you add. You say this. You also say that you are not like this, that you left your happiness behind, long ago somewhere. Maybe you buried it. In the place your navel string was buried in. *On another island*, you say. You left your carefreeness on another island.

Was it when they closed the Islands maybe, I think. But I don't know.

I don't understand what this means. I heard you saying it to Blue One, *the Islands are closed*. A man said it to you. Through a hatch, did he say it? These words mean nothing to me. Maybe you will tell me another day. Explain what it all means. We will have plenty of time in here. Perhaps too much time.

But I only say: 'What electronics does he make, your son-in-law?' Of course, I have to ask this, although I try my best not to. I just can't help it. I am too curious about the subject.

'Tiny little plates, he says. Soldering minute things he looks at through a magnifying eye-piece strapped to his head, soldering them to one another. Like a jeweller, he says. Only not jewels. Each thing has a precise other thing it has to be soldered to. He doesn't know what they make with the plates. He says he doesn't want to know either. They sacked a group of his friends who tried to find out. He said he told them not to be nosy. He warned them. He told me he had. Not our business, he said to them. We just work here, he said. He thinks maybe it's for tanks or satellites or automatic things for submarines. Weapons, arms, automatic ones. But maybe he is only a boy imagining things. Why do you ask?'

'Just wondered. I'm interested in electrics, you see, and electronics. I also do that kind of work.'

Everything is quiet, you say. You knit a last few stitches, two plain two pearl, you say, for the ankle bit, two plain two pearl, before switching the light off. Socks. You knit socks. Socks for everyone. One by one. The hotter the weather, the more socks you knit. You started knitting when

they closed the Islands and you never stopped, you say. This is an aside, you say. If you had needles, you would be knitting right now, while talking, you say. *They'll never give you needles in here*, I say. But then again, maybe I am wrong. Maybe they will now. They have changed their attitude towards such things, Tiko told me. I look, for example, at your scarf. I think of the one in our cell before us. Mopey Sue? How did she do it? Cutting or hanging, I wonder. Then I go back to listening to you again.

You hear Honey cough. Or is it a snort? Or is it just her snoring? In her sleep, you think. So you ignore the sound. Wait. Listening. Knit-knitting, knit-knitting hesitantly now. Not with the same rhythm. Having to check plain and pearl again and again. Losing concentration. But no concern in you, yet. A cough or snort or snore is the kind of thing that happens often. But still, you are alerted somewhere deep inside you. Two plain two pearl. Two plain two pearl. But watchful. Suspicious.

Then there is another sound. This time it is a loud snort. So you put your knitting down quickly and quietly, but with enough time to make sure the needles are stuck into the ball of wool carefully, and you put on your slippers and patter through the lounge to her room. You stop just outside her door, and listen with your ear almost touching her door, right to the wood of that flush-door, you say, 'Honey! You OK Honey? Sweetie?' No answer. She's asleep, and so is her little one. Because he doesn't answer either. He is big enough to answer. If he was awake, he would answer. So, you don't open the door. You turn around, leave her. Privacy demands this, you say. You turn your back on her door, and you walk slowly back to your own room. But you leave your door open now though. In case.

You take your slippers off, but leave them just where you can put your feet back into them if necessary. You go back to bed. You just sit there, leaning against the wall, your knitting on your knees. You wish you didn't knit and knit, not in this heat. But you don't even start knitting again.

You hear that sound again. You jump now. Nerves, you think. Only my nerves. But your heart is beating too fast. Maybe it's just palpitations, you say. Because of the anaemia you've got. You put your knitting aside for good now. You sit bolt upright and you wait. You listen. You wait. On edge. Your pulse thumping away at your temple. A feeling of concern is rising in you. But then again, she cooks separately. Most days anyway, and this means you have to respect a certain distance that goes with separate cooking. I don't want to interfere, you think. You hesitate. At the same time, you do your best to calm yourself down. You make yourself breathe really slowly, especially breathing out really long and hard, like the doctor said to do when you got that anxiety spell in the night for nothing once, and like your great-grandmother told you to do, when you got scared as a child on the island where there were so many ghosts they outnumbered the people. Stay still, she said to herself. Ever so still. And

breathe right out, long and slow. For god's sake, you mumble to yourself, keep calm.

Then you hear a sound so loud and so terrible, a sound so unearthly, so appalling, coming from a human being's chest cavity, that you shoot out of bed, tear out of your room, through the lounge, run barefoot up to her room, shove her door open, and find her.

You stand there.

One look, and already you know.

She is already dead, you say.

Dead.

'How do you know?' I ask.

Your sweetest one. Your closest one. Your last youngest smallest one. Your Honey. Your only one. Only one left. You touch her forehead. Is she still warm? You can't remember any more. Her nostrils and mouth are already sealed with a fine foam. Like the foam on a wave on the reef, you say. Foam you couldn't possibly breathe through. No living person, you say, could breathe through that fine foam.

Now this is when your story goes threadbare.

And it closes up on me.

And it shuts me out.

And you start to act shiftily. But I know. I know.

The child is still asleep, you say. Are you sure? Do you wake him up?

You feel tension in the air.

Dead.

Death has come into your house. Into her room. What does it mean? What are its consequences?

Her death frightens you. Frightens you so bad you don't know anything anymore. Your throat is closing in on you.

Do you just lose your mind? Do you have a bad turn?

You panic.

You feel rigid. As though you were the one who is dead. You say this. In another world, you say. As though death had come to take you. If only, you say. But, you say that you feel lucid at the same time. Clear-headed as you put it. The opposite of losing your mind, you say. Direct, right there, in the middle of your mind's eye, you see your great-grandmother, your maternal granny's mother. You look at her. Then you move into her, you say. Does this make sense? Do you revert to being her? Or do you do what you somehow learnt from your great-grandmother to do? Under such extreme circumstances.

She knew about the danger of knowledge and of the inexplicable. The danger of understanding and the deadly peril of any new mystery. She knew the risk for the witness. She knew about the dangers for the first on the scene. She taught you about all this. The danger of the answer and worse still, the danger of questions. The ill-fatedness of the unexplainable. She trained you. *Hide the unknown.* And hide from it. Hide from the

knowledge of it, itself. Cover what you do not understand. Immediately and irredeemably. Cover it up. Like a cat does after defecating. Look left and right, sneakily, and cover it. Never try to know the unknowable. Step around it. Avoid it. Never let a policeman in either, if you can help it, she had told you. Never. At times like this, never tell things. Silence. Pull the sheet over her. Pall. Rather no-one know. Not even you. But you don't actually pull the sheet. You just stand there. Studying the foam for any sign of movement.

None.

You shake like a leaf. Then make a low lulling sound. Ululations. You go blank. Under orders. Like a zombie. A female zombie. *Beware! Be shifty!* Your eyes skim around in horror. The strange singing in you comes from another world. *Beware! Sulk!* What will be the effect of any action? The song of the past gets sung slow, swing low, sweet chariot, sing slow. *Be sullen! Show nothing! Do nothing!* Just in case of catastrophe. Catastrophic effects may ensue. Quiet. Beware. Beware. Beware. Careful, tread carefully. Give nothing away in your words. Put the fingers of both hands together lightly in front of your face. Tilt your head forwards slightly. Look at your own hands. Hide all knowledge. Raise your hands, and hide behind them. Know nothing. Except one thing. You know, and you know with a deep and absolute certainty, that *anything* you do, *anything*, could provoke the end of everything everyone ever knew around you. You and everyone else could get snatched up, stolen, spirited away for ever, from everything you ever knew. Never to return.

Cataclysms.

Holocausts.

Mass deportations in irons.

Rough seas.

Be *silly*. Pretend not to understand. Go catatonic. Be a beast of burden. Embrace stupidity. It's safe. Safer. Assume silence. Silent as a tomb. A sepulchre. Confuse the others. Confuse yourself. You are rock.

Rock forwards, rock backwards.

Rock.

You are stone.

So you crouch there now. You sob dry sobs. No-one will ever know anything.

You stay still like that, you say. You don't even go and call Aunt Paquette. She might advise. You wait. Checking. You stand up and look now. Petrified. You stare. No movement of the foam. No stirring or bubbling. You look at her child. Her child still asleep. Your child dead.

You don't know how long. Too long. No use asking you about new minutes and old minutes. What's the point?

So why do you come forward and make this confession now? You didn't do anything. And they lock you up with me, an allegation, and with this young case here of effusion of blood of a police officer.

You say maybe you did kill her.

Maybe, you say.

But you didn't.

I know you didn't. You know you didn't.

Just because you don't know what happened to her. Just because you don't know why you acted like you did doesn't mean you killed her.

So, at the time she died, you thought maybe you killed her? Or now you think so? Or when you confessed? Yesterday?

You say you don't know. Maybe just yesterday.

So you go and call Aunt Paquerette. She runs over to your place, and she rushes up to Honey. And touches her. And she says, but Honey's Mother, she's already cold. In all this heat, she's already cold.

And then Aunt Paquerette catches it from you. The same thing. It moves into her and inhabits her too.

Or does this thing, whatever it is, like lightning, strike her, too? Separately? Hard to say, you say.

You move as one. The silence. The throat-constricting petrification. You both stand there. A deep and wild helplessness rises into all your joints, and makes them weak. And then this passivity moves into your joint consciousness. You and her. You want to be two *beasts*. Of burden. With no consciousness. With no knowledge. No responsibility for things you cannot change. No memory for things you'll never know. No nothing. Please, please. Let us feel no more, you say you said.

And so it comes about that together, the two of you, in silence and hurriedly, change her into a new cotton night gown, a greyish pink, and you put some newly knitted baby pink socks on her cold feet, and you arrange all the bedclothes neatly. You put a new pillowcase with yellow and orange genda flowers and a shrub of citronella of all things, embroidered on each of its four corners. You do this really quietly. Like in a morgue. Whispering strange prayers and catch phrases in some unknown tongue. Both of you. She caught the secretiveness from you, Aunt Paquerette did, you say. And then you doubt this again all over again. Is it that you both had it handed down separately, but from the same thing. You both mumble and mumble and mumble. Prayers you didn't know you knew come to your lips. The same words to both of you. If prayers they are. Maybe phrases or songs, maybe rituals or rites. Maybe ululations and variations on a tune.

Then the two of you pick up her child, fold him in your arms, and you run out, holding your heads falling backwards, away from the child, raising the alarm, and you go wailing in the street, crying out to the neighbours. 'Oh, what a terrible problem has come upon us!' You both cry this strange phrase. 'Oh what a terrible problem has come upon us!' As though divine intervention. Something sent to haunt you, it haunts you. You do not say the word death. Or illness. Or pain. Or loss, You say *problem*. You do not say *happened to us* but instead you say *come upon us*.

'Come out! Wake up! Please. Oh what a terrible *problem* has *come upon us!*'

Or are you afraid of the priest? Could you both be *that* afraid of him? To hide Honey's death? To risk her life? Could you have saved her life? Dare I ask that question? Is this why you confess? Could you have saved her? By calling neighbours and a nurse or a doctor at once? Mouth to mouth. Hit her hard in the chest. Cardiac resuscitation. Lie her head and shoulders over the edge of the bed. Physiotherapy to drain her breathing tubes. You know all about this, you do. So does Aunt Paquerette. Could she have lived? Your Honey? Maybe?

You don't know.

I can't measure all this. What is the priest to you?

What the priest could mean in your mind, or in yours and Aunt Paquerette's minds, is unknown to me. I cannot guess the exact nature of his place in your hearts. Or your great-grandmother's feelings for a priest under the circumstances she and some priest must have lived under, unmentionable circumstances.

Perhaps *he* will think it is suicide, today's priest. This is what he *will* think. And this is too much for you? Was it suicide, Honey's Mother? And refuse to let the body into the church, leave it out in its coffin in the glare of the sun, to rot the faster, right there in front of everyone's harsh eyes? Only to be buried in the *Hindu Section*? Do you think she drank something poisonous? That foam. Did it have any smell? Could it have been the result of Honey drinking poison?

No, she wouldn't. Loved life too much, to the full, you say. A hedonist, from what you say. Did that make you ashamed of her? Scared of the priest, are you? Priests are against pleasure. She loved pleasure. Honey did. She loved chocolates. Fluffy boleros. A drink. A joke. A laugh. A smoke. Sega dance. A surprise. Comic books. Jazz music. A hot stare. High heel-shoes. Hot curry. Probably sex. *Nisa*. Maybe even nirvana. She was perfect.

The doctor comes. You do send for him at some point. Eventually, later in the night, you and Aunt Paquerette have some young man half-drunk go on a bicycle and call him. Tell him to tell the doctor that *a terrible problem has come upon us*. Which is what the boy on a bicycle does say. The doctor comes quickly. He knows you and he knows Aunt Paquerette too. He walks through the silent crowd of neighbours who stand ever so still. Hovering in suspense. Words lost. Whites of eyes showing all round irises. He stops as he enters Honey's room. In the lintel. He takes one look, and you suppose he knows.

But he is a man of science. So he must check. He must check laboriously. And while he is checking, he must try and work out what has happened. With a small piercing torch that comes out of his bag, he checks in this eye, and then that one. Just in case. Some reflex closing of a pupil. Some sign. But by then it is late. Far too late. He even leans over to

see if there is some smell in the light foam that has reformed between her teeth. Then he asks everyone to leave, except you and Aunt Paquerette. He looks into your eyes and into Aunt Paquerette's and then at both of you. His eyes, you say, tell that he knows the unknown, his eyes know the unknowable. He knows me, you say. For the doctor, all this is beyond his calling. But, he is close to you, you say. Such a nice man, you say, as if this may take you away from your story. So he shares the moment with you. He asks if she has been ill. Flu last week, you say. He asks what she had had for supper. Same as you, you say. Ate *my* food today, doctor, you say. Leaf soup and dried fish and rice and some tomato chopped up with spices into a chutney. She pregnant, he asks, *been* pregnant? Not to your knowledge, you say. Where is the husband, he asks. They've gone to fetch him at the electronics factory, you say.

He shakes his head ever so slowly. Ever so sadly. For what seems like ages. Has he felt what happened to you? And to Aunt Paquerette? Does he know already that the doors to knowledge closed in front of both of you, despite both of you?

He looks at you. His eyes ask a deep question. But you won't tell him anything. Not because you don't want to. You yearn to. But because you don't know what to tell him. You have no idea what to say because you don't even know what happened. You have lost grip of things. He senses it. He knows it's all lost. All gone. All out of your reach already. Far far away.

He calls Aunt Paquerette over close by. Speaks quietly to her over his doctor's bag. And she answers quietly. You don't hear what they say. You just see their lips moving. They stand like that, the two of them. Like in a trance.

Then he comes over to you at the foot of Honey's bed. Death's bed. He says he is sorry, but he can't say what she died of, will therefore need to get a postmortem done, do you agree, he asks you.

You agree. You nod your agreement. So does Aunt Paquerette. She actually says the word 'Yes'. So does Roderick when he comes in. He can see it has to be done.

You organize the transport of her body to the hospital. Or someone does. You who know she is already dead and what's the point now. *But you want to know.* They'll cut her body up for nothing, you think, but you decide you want to let them. What does it matter if they replace her insides with bunched up bits of newspaper. Maybe even open up her head, you think, and you shudder. And yet, there is this part of you that persists, that wants to know after all. To know the truth. For sure. The modern part of you. Science. Trust in the doctor. The desire to leave the fear of the past. To move forwards. The part of you that could maybe perhaps who knows have saved Honey but didn't manage to.

A certain peace comes down on you when you know you will know.

Honey's body is out, away on a visit, a visit that will bring back know-

ledge. Certainty. A modicum of order. A glimpse of the enlightenment you want and need. The absence of her body is the promise of a parting gift from her. Temporary peace comes down. Like a shroud. In order. In harmony.

In all our history, it is so temporary this feeling of peace and of the rule of reason, I say this to you because it is the only words I can find.

You go on telling me what happens next.

Then, you say, some blue lady interferes. At the hospital while they are sitting around waiting for an autopsy. She is there for some other case, watching over some prisoner, and she just interrupts. You know her vaguely. She comes forward and says she knows the family. And she says no *need* to go through a postmortem. She says you never know what time the body will be given back. The police haven't got a case anyway, she says. So she gets some hospital doctor to sign some paper, and they bring Honey back all the way back again. Bring her back again without any answers. Just a death certificate. With some nonsense for cause of death. Burying another generation in mystery. Leaving you in doubt like this, in eternal doubt about her history.

And it is this that makes you go off your head a bit. Go slightly unstable, as you put it. Obviously it would, Honey's Mother. This is normal. You didn't do it. You didn't kill her.

'No,' I say, 'no, I *don't know* what she died of.'

How would I know? I mean if you don't know and the doctor didn't know, how on earth could I know? We never will know now. The knowledge is buried with her.

That doesn't mean you killed her, does it? Yes, you did act strange. Very strange. But it doesn't mean you killed her. You go to sleep now.

I know you haven't given me my message yet. It doesn't matter. Not tonight. Tomorrow you give it to me.