

## Curtains

Staleness permeated the air, curtains sealed the windows. She huddled over the gas stove and prayed that there would be enough gas left for at least one more saucepan of water.

'Nice cup of tea dad. There now that should warm you up. Keep the blanket over you love, its cold in here.'

Sitting in his armchair, slippers on his feet, she could see that he was shivering and silently cursed the threadbare blanket.

'Can't get the bloody telly to work girl. Wanted to see the news. Can we open the curtains today? Let in a bit of light?'

'No dad, not today. We need to keep the curtains closed. We need to keep some warmth in here don't we?' Her voiced trailed off, she would have to distract him.

'Here dad, I've found a magazine for you to read. Gardeners' World, you like the garden don't you?'

'I'd like to see the bloody garden girl, not read about it. Why can't we open the bloody curtains? And what's wrong with the telly?'

She would have to try a different tactic.

'I've got a bit of headache dad, the light from outside it would only make it worse. You don't mind really do you?' She smiled at him, hoping he would take the bait, besides it was only a small lie, her head was aching.

He huffed and snatched the magazine from her hand, but she did not mind. He would soon be lost in the world of Monty Don and she would have some peace for a few hours.

She made her way upstairs. The hair brush tugged at her scalp, she gazed at the large clumps of hair in her hand.

'Soon I wont need a hair brush at all, just some polish. What do they call that particular brand of humour? That was it, gallows humour – ha bloody ha.' She spoke aloud to her reflection, nobody else to hear her. Only dad and he was lost.

Eaking out the toothpaste on to her brush, she knew she should save what little water they had, but the thought of cleaning her teeth without water was a step she was so far unwilling to take and so she rinsed her mouth and spat in to the sink.

A solitary tooth smiled back up at her from the basin, a tooth in a sea of red.

'Ah shit.'

*'Hannah, Hannah!'*

She ran down to him.

'Dad, it's alright love. I'm here. Don't fret now.' She tried to sooth him, tried to make it better.

He pushed her hands roughly away, looked at her with the terrified eyes of a stranger.

'Who are you!' Where's Hannah - *Hannah, Hannah!*' He shouted.

She stepped back from him. Her head ached, her limbs felt heavy and alien. She was not just tired, she was sick and if she was sick she could not help him, she could not keep him safe.

Angrily she swiped away the tears that had traitorously begun to fall.

'In the kitchen,' she kept her voice low and gentle, 'I'm going to go in to the kitchen and I am going to make you a cup of tea. That will make everything alright, and then we will open the curtains. Would you like that?'

He wrung his hands together, turned his face away from her and for a fleeting moment she was afraid he would start to shout again.

'Curtains.' He said.

'Tea first, okay?'

He nodded.

The blue flames flickered, the water in the pan began to bubble and with a hiss the gas went out.

'No more gas, not much water and only one tea bag left.' Her tongue found the newly acquired gap in her mouth. 'And one less tooth to clean. Shitty bloody gallows humour.'

She threw the mug across the kitchen, sending it crashing against the wall.

'Shit, shit, *shit, shit shit.*'

She held her hands across her eyes and willed the tears to stop. She wanted to curl in to a ball, to lie foetal on the floor, to shut out everything, once the sickness started she would not have long and then what would happen to him? There would be no one else to help, not now.

There was only one thing she could do.

The tablets weren't difficult to crush. She stirred the tea and added a good measure of whisky.

He was sleeping and she almost did not wake him, but that would be the cowardly thing to do. She had to keep him safe.

'Dad,' she shook him gently, 'dad, cup of tea love.'

He opened his eyes and she was relieved to see that he had come back to her.

He sipped it and grimaced.

'What have you put in this girl? Can I taste whisky? It's not my birthday is it?' He smiled up

at her and she almost grabbed the cup from his hands.

'Thought it would help keep you warm love.' She said.

His breathing became laboured, his heart slowed. He had gone, she had kept him safe and this time she let the tears flow freely.

She turned his chair slightly so that it was facing the window and pulled back the curtains.

Buildings jagged and broken, black tendrils of smoke rising in the distance, craters where the streets once stood. Nothing left.

She sipped her tea.

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