

All The Things We Cannot Say

The call came when I was at work. I drove for four hours without a break, covering 276 miles, arriving at the hospital just as she was being discharged.

‘Well,’ my mother sniffed. ‘You took your time.’

Back at her bungalow, we spend the morning sitting beside each other in a pair of upright armchairs. They’re from an era when one didn’t lounge around on cushioned sofas, watching 62-inch flat-screen televisions. My parents sat in this same formation, in these awkward chairs, year after year; cups and saucers balanced on the table between them, staring silently at the small screen in the corner of the room.

She looks shrunken against the worn upholstery: her body sinewy thin, the skin on her arms mottled. Her glasses slide down her nose as she dozes, the breath coming in jags through her open mouth – a wheezing that sounds like a distant cry for help.

She snorts and wakes herself up.

‘What does a CSG do?’ she asks.

I stare at her.

‘You know! The machine that beeps. They stick pads all over you.’

‘An ECG,’ I say. ‘It would have been to test your heart.’

‘Pointless,’ she mutters, rubbing the skin on her forearm, tender where the electrodes had been attached. ‘There’s nothing wrong with my heart. These people don’t know anything.’

The road outside is quiet. An occasional car drives by, a postwoman pushes batches of envelopes through letterboxes. Nothing for this house.

The phone rings. It’s one of her neighbours, who heard the news in Sainsbury’s. She’s keen to find out the details.

‘How hard did she fall?’ she asks. ‘Did she hit her head?’

My answers are vague, and I know they disappoint.

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'But was there any blood?'

She stays on the phone for several minutes, excited that disaster has struck so close to home, and she can be part of it.

'You sound just like your mother!' she says.

'Really?'

'Oh yes, the same tone of voice and everything.'

When she rings off, I go into the kitchen to make tea.

'Would you like a biscuit?' I ask, placing the cup on the table beside my mother's chair.

'There aren't any,' she says.

'I could go and buy some?'

'I don't care. I wouldn't eat them anyway. But if you want to treat yourself, then you go ahead. You always had a sweet tooth.'

She sits back in the chair, pursing her lips.

Although her fall doesn't seem to have caused any long-term issues, the doctor suggested she take it easy for a few days. One more night, I think, I'll give her one more night. Then I run through a mental list of jobs I should be doing at home, things I need to remind my husband about.

I heat some soup and we eat it in silence at the kitchen table.

There is so much clutter here, that you can't see the bare bones of the place. The wooden shelves, the side tables, the windowsills: all hidden beneath the ephemera of her life. An excess of furniture makes the rooms dark and oppressive; every surface is laden with painted plates and bowls, tarnished photograph frames, decorated pots in which lie forgotten safety pins, hair grips and elastic bands. There are coloured glass bottles, carved wooden animals, blue and white Willow pattern platters

In a cabinet against the wall of the lounge, matching sets of crystal tableware stand in strict formation. There are glasses for every occasion: sherry, champagne, beer, wine, port. I remember her polishing them when I was a child, twisting a yellow duster around the sparkling stems before replacing them on the shelves.

'Don't touch those,' she used to say. 'They were a wedding present. Too special for everyday use.'

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So, they never got used at all.

The rows of glasses are now bleary, dust clinging to the rims like dandruff.

My eyes light on a small vase, tucked away at the back. I can still picture the stall at the Christmas market, where I bought it on a school trip. Excited at having found something so beautiful to take home to my mother, I carefully counted out coins – it took all the pocket money I'd saved. The stallholder wrapped it in newspaper and I held it tightly on the coach home. The vase has sat in that cabinet for the last thirty years. I don't remember her ever using it.

My own house, where I long to be right now, contains hardly any clutter. No trinkets, no ornaments, no decorative knick-knacks. I joke that I can't be doing with the dusting.

Early-afternoon, as the spread of the sun slides towards the end of the garden, a man arrives to mow the grass. He nods at us through the window, as he drags the heavy mower out of the shed; she waves a dismissive hand in his direction.

'I didn't know you had help?' I say.

'Well, I can't do it myself,' she snaps. 'Not at my age. If no-one is going to do it for me, I have to pay someone. It's not ideal.'

Her face is set in anger, the skin moulded into downward folds, like fingers pulled through soft wax. This seems to be her default expression now. Even before this fall, there was so much anger stacked up inside her; as if hundreds of stones were packed into her chest, making it difficult for her to breathe.

Years ago, she used to smile, laugh even - a deep-bellied chuckle which is still in my head after all this time.

She doesn't laugh any more. Life has been unfair: she is old, weak and vulnerable. Her bones ache, her family neglect her, friends are dying off like summer flies. There is nothing to laugh about.

Looking down, I see that her ankles are puffy, the feet purple where the blood has pooled through lack of use. Her calves are mottled, like red wine splattered on a pale carpet. I lift her legs onto a footstool, and the paper-thin skin crinkles like satin, feeling like it might tear beneath my fingers.

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'Ouch!' she yelps. 'Be gentle. Why are you always so rough?'

Having watched the man walk the mower up and down the lawn, creating perfect parallel trails, I take him out a cup of tea.

'You look like her,' he says.

I'm momentarily confused.

'Sorry?'

'You look like your mother. It's obvious you're her daughter.'

How? I want to ask. How can you say we're similar when she is so old and so angry? Instead, I ask if he can deal with the patches of moss on the lawn.

I return to the silence in the lounge.

We have now sat for hours in these high-backed chairs. The room smells musty, as if the windows haven't been flung open for months. I ask if she's comfortable, but she closes her eyes and ignores me.

A grandfather clock ticks in the hall, the passing seconds seeming longer as I wait to hear them marked. The sun is trailing over to the other side of the house now, shadows lengthening on the pavement opposite. I can see a white line slowly drawing itself across the sky; the plane at the tip, invisible to the naked eye.

'I watch the children going past here on their way to school,' she says. 'They're going to that private place – Russell House. They look so smart in their blazers and ties. Better than the ones who go to the comprehensive. They're always scruffy, and they shout at each other. Young people today don't know how to behave properly.'

There's no point contradicting her. My own state-educated children – her grandchildren - know how to be courteous to strangers. They can also look smart when the need arises. But she sees so little of them that she wouldn't know.

Announcing itself with a yawning yowl, her cat slinks into the room, wrapping its tail around the leg of her chair.

'You!' she exclaims, leaning forward and stretching out her hand. 'Where have you been?'

The cat lifts its front paws off the ground and pushes its head upwards, as her gnarled fingers bury themselves in the black fur.

'My lovely one,' she is saying. 'My beauty.'

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The cat purrs as it twists its head around her hand. I look up at my mother and see that she is smiling.

‘You’re such a good boy,’ she whispers to the cat.

As she stretches out her arm, I notice a purple bruise on the inside, where she was spiked by the needle of the intravenous drip.

‘Does that hurt?’ I ask.

‘The nurse didn’t know what she was doing,’ she says, rubbing the bruise with her thumb. ‘Vicious she was. Foreign, of course.’

The smile has vanished.

‘I’m sure she didn’t mean to hurt you.’

‘You weren’t there!’ she snaps. ‘You don’t know.’

As we’re watching the lawnmower man drive away, my aunt rings.

‘What’s wrong with her?’ she asks.

I go through it all: the fall, the trip to A&E, the doctor’s recommendations.

‘Nothing serious then,’ says Aunt Joyce. ‘She’ll be right as rain.’

‘Of course she will,’ I agree. Neither of us can bear to think about what will happen if she isn’t. For me, the burden of responsibility; for my aunt, a reminder that life beyond the age of 80 is perilous: every step a potential broken bone, every flutter in the chest, an impending heart attack.

‘Jolly good,’ she says. ‘Carry on!’

I don’t want to carry on. I don’t want to spend any more time here, making tea, wiping surfaces, sitting beside my mother in the high-backed chairs. I don’t want to be in this cluttered, stale-smelling house.

I think of my own home: the comfy sofas, the expanse of white walls. The pretty garden at the back and the pots of herbs along the kitchen window. My children’s colourful coats and shoes lined up in the hallway.

‘You don’t need to stay,’ she says, as if reading my mind. ‘I’m fine on my own, you know.’

She’s offering me a way out, but I can’t take it.

I wander into the kitchen and phone home. My husband isn’t back from work, and my son answers in monosyllables as I ask about his day. I can hear the television blaring in the background, alongside a high-pitched screech as he plays games on his laptop.

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I close my eyes and picture the state my house will be in without me. The mess on my worktops, the un-swept floor, the overflowing bin, the rotting food in the fridge, the piles of dirty laundry that no-one will bother to put into the washing machine.

‘Have you got clean uniform for tomorrow?’ I ask.

There’s a mumble. He’s distracted.

‘Stop playing that damn game,’ I snap. ‘Are you listening to me?’

In the background an online machine gun rat-at-at-ats and a virtual woman screams. There’s a crash as something drops on my tiled kitchen floor.

‘For God’s sake!’ I’m shouting now. ‘I have to go away and look what happens. ‘You’re a lazy little sod, I can’t rely on you to do anything.’

As the words come out, I want to pull them back in again. Why am I being like this? I miss him. I love him.

There’s a shocked silence on the other end of the phone.

‘Sorry,’ I say, but it comes out as a whisper.

I imagine him standing in the middle of my kitchen; confused, not sure what to say. He bites the inside of his lower lip when he’s upset.

‘Sorry,’ I say again; it’s no louder the second time.

The cat wanders in and winds itself around my ankles.

‘Come here, my lovely boy,’ she’s calling from the next room. ‘Come back and keep me company.’

I shut my eyes and press my cheek against the phone, listening to the distant sound of gunfire and explosions.