

## Tea-Time

It wasn't even that sore, really.

She looked at her new cast in the mirror. The shade of blue went well with her uniform actually – the navy knit jumper really made it pop. She shrugged the sleeve of her shirt down and tugged down the sleeve of the jumper. The longer she had to prepare her story before any questions were asked, the better.

The house was silent as she padded downstairs, bare feet sticking to cold wooden steps. The cool tiles felt nice on the soles of her feet as she hit the bottom. She grabbed her shoes from their home under the stairs, and stole warm socks from the hot-press. It was April, and not freezing, but these early mornings could be cold. Three minutes later, adorned with coat and scarf, she opened the door to a brisk, but sunny, morning.

The walk to school took longer than usual – a combination of trying not to break her contract on the slick gravel path, as well as the heaviness that seemed to settle right at the bottom of her feet, like lead in the soles of her shoes. It was as if moving in slow motion, while the rest of the world carried on around her as usual. Which she realised abruptly when she was nearly hit by a cyclist while trying to cross the road.

The gesture he made to her with his middle finger was at a perfectly normal speed.

Right, she seriously needed to calm down, it wasn't bloody rocket science. She tripped over the hose on Saturday while putting out the bins that night. Just didn't see it in the dark. Hit her arm off the step trying to catch herself. No big deal. It's not like she had a black eye or anything – now that one would be hard to pass off: 'I walked into a door' – yeah, right, sure you did love.

Jesus, she was freaking out over nothing. Pull it together you absolute nutcase.

8:47 am – perfect timing. Enough to answer a few inevitable questions from her friends and the hangers on, but not enough time to go into all the gory details of her extremely traumatic fall over the hose in the garden. She shoved her hands in the pockets of her green pea coat while walking in the front door, and made her way to room 6, shoulders braced against the weight of her backpack.

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She really need not have worried. After the initial round of questioning from the girls and a couple of jokes at Ciara's expense (she did break her arm tripping over a hose after all, what a plonker), the topic of conversation swiftly moved on to Aoife's birthday at the weekend and what they were all going to wear. Ciara would have to wear something that didn't clash with her new cast of course – Aoife was the first of the group to turn sixteen and there would be pictures.

She settled into the day and it passed like any other. None of her teachers seemed to care about her arm – it was only her left one, she could still do her homework. When that final bell rang though, that was when she knew she'd done it. She'd pulled it off, and if she could manage to do that today, the first day, then she'd be fine. They'd never guess, and she'd never tell.

She wasn't scared going home today. She had worried she would be, had worried that it would only hit her as she crossed the bridge going through the town, that she'd make it nearly all the way and then turn tail and run. But she wasn't scared, not even a little. She knew he didn't mean to hurt her.

She wasn't scared taking her keys from the front pocket of her schoolbag, or as they jingled on the ring as she slid the front door key into the lock. She wasn't scared when she pushed the door open and stepped through into the hallway, or when she slid her bag off her right shoulder to land on the ground with a thump.

She was scared when she heard crying coming from the kitchen.

Ciara closed the door slowly, holding the latch so it didn't make a sound. She didn't know if he had heard her come in yet, and didn't know if she wanted him to know she was there. She slid her shoes off on the mat, and slipped silently up the hall to the closed kitchen door. She felt like an intruder, heart hammering loud enough that it seemed like he should be able to hear it on the other side of the thick wood.

She didn't think there was anyone with him, just his small, broken sobs ringing through the walls, enveloping the house. She sighed and pushed open the door with her good hand.

He was sitting at the kitchen table, hunched over, staring at his hands. Tears that seemed to weigh as heavy as drops of rain fell onto his grey suit trousers. Red-rimmed hazel eyes looked up at her, wild and endlessly sad in that moment.

"I'm so sorry", he choked out, and then the tears overcame him and he buckled in on himself, shoulders vibrating, the wrinkled skin on his neck reddening.

She rushed over and knelt by his chair, tried to pry his hands away from his face.

"Granddad you didn't mean to, its ok, I'm fine".

"And what if I do it again? What if next time you aren't fine, what if next time I kill you?" he sobbed, grabbing her by the shoulders. His grey eyes were burning now with an anger she'd only seen in periods where he hadn't been at his fullest. At times where his strong mind played tricks on him. But he was completely aware now. "I am the adult here, I should be the one looking after you, not you looking after me. Not me hurting you. I need to call someone, to get us some help or- "

"No, no please don't. I don't want to be taken away, please don't make me leave you".

“But I can’t do this anymore, I can’t – I can’t- “the tears were gone now. Confusion, followed swiftly by fear, flitted over his face. He pushed back his chair, releasing her shoulders from a vice grip and staggered to his feet. “Who are you? What are you doing in my house?”

It was as if all the air had been knocked out of her. Ciara sagged back against the kitchen counter, and tried not to give in to the tidal wave that was threatening to drown her in this very moment. “It’s Ciara, grandad, it’s Annie’s daughter. Do you remember Annie?”

A flicker, a candle in a black hole of devouring strength. “Annie”.

“Yes grandad, Annie died, remember? I’m her daughter, Ciara, your granddaughter.”

It was as if he was finding out again for the first time, every time. Every time she told him his daughter had died, she saw the crushing pain in his eyes, quickly masked as only those who have lost much in life have learned to do. Later she would have to tell him about his wife, Marie, about how she had fought so long and so hard, about how pissed off she had been that it beat her in the end. That would come later.

“How about I make us a cup of tea grandad, how does that sound?”, she said, standing up and filling the rusted kettle with water. She glanced over. He looked confused, but not angry, and not scared, which was better than most days. He sat back down in his chair and began to study her with his eyes, as if he were trying to capture every detail, as if she might disappear at any moment.

Ciara poured the boiling water into two cups, and stood there at the counter, stirring the water, watching the teabag dance and bob.

“How did you hurt your arm, dear?”

Her tears fell into her teacup.

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