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The Back Room

by Holly Raber

Verity Woodbine swept a damp red curl back behind her ear and bent awkwardly to the task in hand. Milky beads of sweat freckled her pale forehead, glistening wetly on the small starfish scar above her left eye. Years of wallpaper fell soundlessly, curling up around her feet like the discarded skins of a giant reptile. As she worked the sound of children playing drifted through the open window of the small back room.

She had loved the house at first sight. Twenty nine years old and six months pregnant she had chosen to attribute the visceral pull it exerted to a mother's innate nesting instinct. The house had settled around her like a warm blanket: two months later they had moved in. While Robin was at work Verity spent the long weeks of waiting breathing life into the little house, feathering her nest

The back room where she now worked over looked a patch of unkempt grass strewn with windfalls and autumn leaves. Several times during the afternoon, Verity had caught a glimpse of a coppery head amongst the branches of the Apple tree, glinting in a shaft of sunlight then disappearing once more into the dense foliage. The still air in the room smelt of ink and green apples.

Running her hand down the doorframe in an attempt to dislodge some stubborn strips of paper, Verity noticed some marks on the wall. Leaning in closer she could make out names and dates in a familiar cursive hand: 'Verity 2/10/91' then a little higher 'Verity 16/3/92', then still higher 'Verity 8/9/93', to the right a similar scale, 'Tom 9/7/89', 'Tom 27/12/91' 'Tom 8/9/93'.

She inhaled sharply as she remembered standing with her back to this very wall in new shoes, shiny and brown like conkers. She had been standing beside a tall boy with unruly red hair who smelt of hamsters.

The accident had happened early on the morning of the 9th of September 1993, no one was to blame. A burst tyre, a sharp bend, a family destroyed. After several weeks in hospital a little girl with bright red curls the sole survivor was released into the care of foster parents. The memory loss caused by her head injury was deemed to be permanent.

Early on the morning of the 9th of September 2018 Verity stood in the sunlit back room holding her new born son with his shock of red hair. The still air smelt faintly of ink and green apples.

“ Robin” she called, “ Could you hold Tom for a moment, there’s something I need to do”

Standing beside the door with her back to the wall she drew a neat line above her head, then turning to face the wall wrote ‘ Verity 9/9/2018’. Every house has its secrets.