

Nine, Ten, Begin Again

by Lou Beckerman

One, two, buckle my shoe

Three, four, shut the door

Five, six, pick up sticks

Seven, eight, lay them straight

Nine, ten, begin again

One, two, buckle my shoe. She was six. Had she dredged up from memory or imagined these tall dark uncles – his brothers? There were three. Grim, grief-troubled faces already engraved with the furrowed features of the older men they would grow into. Her mother, weeping, taking her aside into another room to tell her that her father had died. (*But what does that mean exactly?*) She knew then only that it was something terrible. A slow-growing seed is sown, almost indiscernible, which says it was her fault.

Much earlier that day, in the morning drizzling grizzle-greyness after the night's deluge, Evie holds her mother's hand in the hurry and fluster to make school on time. Skipping, splashing onwards, propelled along, she twists her upper body to look back at their row of pretty terraced houses where he was replacing a fallen roof tile. Wishing for a wave.

Three, four, shut the door. She's an adult now. *Did I shut the door? And how many times?* It's a convincing, realistic voice she hears from within her – just like her own. She's perspiring now. *Was it three or four.* It must be four in a sequence. And then each sequence four times. The palpitations begin. A knot of anxiety and dread tightens.

The voice torments her with every likely bad outcome if she hasn't got it right. Not a single loved-one will be safe today wherever they are. *I'll go back and check.*

Five, six, pick up sticks. She used to be up and out in the mornings – it might take an hour or so at the most. Now it's just so hard to do everything that must be done first and her life is crumbling - but for the wretched rituals – they're going strong. Now she rarely gets out in time to do anything worthwhile. But she will today. She promises herself. Just as soon as she has returned and checked. But then she'll need to scrub her hands four more times. She may be contaminated. Her mouth feels dry. Will she be late? She's heating up – her breath is short - panic at tipping point.

Seven, eight, lay them straight. For a while it was a game - making sure everything was seamlessly straight. In order. That the cutlery had been lined-up in the dishwasher in soldier-perfect symmetry and four pieces to each compartment. But then the other compulsions.

She watches herself – somewhat detached now. She's exhausted. So tired of the responsibility, of being the powerful controller of everything - trapped in a cruel cyclic merry-go-round. *Misery-go-round.* She sees it.

For the first time in her life Evie is seeking help.

We're sitting opposite each-other. I venture to ask what gives her a sense of peace, and reflectively she replies *I like a view but I like to sit with my back turned to it. Just to keep it safe.*

Nine, ten, begin again. And again.