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The Scream

by Victoria Watson

She raised her facemask and took a deep long swig of fresh air. It felt like the first breath she had taken all day. She reassured herself that she had got through it; nobody had noticed. She had smiled and comforted, she had gone through the usual banter with work colleagues, laughed at their old jokes. She had cared for her patients, she had administered, she had soothed aching limbs, checked pulses and whispered into ears of the dying. She had done her job.

The sterile white tiles moved before her, but she focused on her car keys; they would get her home. She just had to put one foot in front of the other and she would soon be in the safety of the front seat.

The security doors were familiarly hard to open and they hushed behind her like they knew all her secrets, but were sending her home anyway.

Goodnight Jean

Someone patted her shoulder and walked past. She managed not to stagger and waved them off as they walked to their car. The doors hissed behind her again and then sealed shut.

The woman's face appeared before her again. Mrs Hills, Mrs Halls, she could not remember exactly, she just remembered the hardness of her wrinkled wrist as it lay limp on her chest. She remembered the smell, the touch of a life already left, she remembered the pleading eyes looking up at her only the shift before.

She should be used to this by now she reprimanded herself; she was no student nurse puking or crying when life followed its course and vaporised before you. She should be able to take it in her stride, join in with the bad jokes and move on. But she knew she was lying; she had never been capable of that.

She had taken each hand that was given to her and held it, anything to make that final journey less lonely and more bearable for them. She carried out final wishes as best she could and she felt the weight of responsibility heavy on her shoulders. She was a fake and a phony and if she didn't get to her car fast, they would know. They would know what kind of liar she was. They would find out about her water bottle filled with vodka, they would find all the imperial mints tucked into drawers and lockers, they may even start to wonder why a non-smoker took such long cigarette breaks. Then everything would fall apart.

She found the pavement and welcomed it. Home soon, and another evening watching gameshows with Dad, and checking on Mum. She would still have to pretend, but they were both too locked into their homebound worlds to see. They never noticed all the bottles or wondered why she slept on the sofa, they were too sick to ask and she was too tired to tell.

She would make them some tea, put Mum to bed and comfortably numb in front of Countdown.

Then she saw her car and it made her giddy with relief that she had made it. She reached down for her keys and felt her foot catch on the kerb as she lost her balance. She fell backwards and landed heavily on something behind her.

She waited, once again holding her breath.

But nobody had noticed. Nobody had seen her, she had fallen again, disappeared in plain sight and it almost made her laugh that she had got away with it without being seen. She felt pain up her back but the most important thing was that she had not been found out, she would get up, she would drive home and everything would be the same.

"You alright love? You don't look too good. Hang on, and I'll get some help, the hospital is only up the road."

She could not talk; she could not move. No, this could not be happening. She had to pretend, she had to take a mint, say the right words, in the right order and not get found out. Please God no, please just walk on, leave me here, don't tell them, please, they cannot find out.

No sound came from outside of her but the screaming inside her head would not subside. It was the sort of screaming that had been imprisoned inside her for months, maybe years. Desperate to escape from the lies she had told, the shame and guilt she felt, the constant covering up she had to do every day. It was primeval, and it came from her opened mouth like a swallow escaping into the summer evening air. She wondered how it could sound so clear, so piercing, so plaintive.

Please just leave me here she prayed. Her head resting on the pavement she stared up at the passing clouds and realised with each breath that her secrets were out.