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THE UMBRELLA

White gravel path. Genevieve sways, like a woman on a knotted sea, coils of coppery hair slick with rain. Clutching the horror of a dead foetus in her belly, she lists toward the relief of home, and sobs with new heartbreak. Above her, potted red camellias shiver, strange lanterns in the restless light.

Hands grapple with keys. A dog pogo-sticks behind the door, then bursts onto her, swathed in familiar hallway aromas of cinnamon and clove. Overexcited wisp. He twirls prettily for a few moments; then gazes up at her with bean black eyes, wet with tears. She scoops him into her arms.

"Your hateful Daddy has been cheating on us, Grey Moses," she whispers, her sophisticated voice coarse with tears. Her forehead becomes grave and she presses a nose into the dog's silky fur. "And the ultrasound ... the ultrasound of baby shows ..." Her mouth opens; a slow silent scream.

A tiny heart throbs against her cheek; but suddenly this seems a fresh cruelty. She tips the wretch onto the floor and turns her attention to the kettle.

A door shifts somewhere.

"Simon?"

She wanders through the house, hands like stone. The back rooms are frigid, empty. Outside, loose vegetations flap raggedly in the wind.

She reaches for the phone, stabs a number. It diverts.

"Honey, it's me." The message is calm, outside her. "We need to talk. Ring me at home." The receiver clatters back onto its resting place and Grey Moses regards her solemnly.

"What *am* I going to do?" Genevieve implores, twisting and turning her twin diamond rings until her face ruptures. "Who the hell is he having this affair with anyway? Some bimbo at the office? A tennis partner?"

Stringy fingers press into her face. Trust Mum to choose today, of all days, to unveil this sordid little secret.

"They left *little* to the imagination," Mira had declared primly, her gesticulating lace-clad arm waving a cigarette. It dripped ash, like spite. "And there were teeny weenie kids in that park too!"

"You're absolutely sure it was him?"

"Sure as I'm sitting here! Couldn't see the woman though." Mira's mouth twisted, a drawstring of feigned sympathy. "Sorry love, but what can you expect when you marry a Smith? Take my advice; now there's no baby, leave him."

"Mum! Don't say that!"

"What? Don't say that I was right all along? Don't say he was always after our money?"

Genevieve grasps her hair. She sags to the floor cradling the monster in her womb. So cruel. So cruel to tell her today. Simon *did* love her once! And he'd been so excited about this damn pregnancy.

Antiseptic smells revive her. She rolls over and breathes her inner mist across the shining expanse of kitchen tiles. They could cut me open and rip it all out on this floor, she thinks savagely. They wouldn't need anaesthetic. Just do it, do it now!

She swivels her eyeballs and finds a sentinel of dog sphinxed beside her.

"Help me up, sweet Moses." He baptizes her with a sweep of his tongue.

She carries her tea, clattering over its saucer, into the sunroom, and arranges herself on the falling-down sofa, piling a rug on her knees. Amber-flecked eyes project themselves with determined blandness into the bleak garden. She tips scolding chamomile onto her lips.

An umbrella, propped on its spike, tries to melt innocuously into the sunroom wall. Genevieve comes to herself staring at it, dull light shifting and developing around her, like a black and white photograph materializing in fluid. Icy fingers tremble over her back, her scalp. An intruder? She puts a foot to the floor; then pauses. No, she's seen this umbrella before. She knows that green tartan!

Petulant now, the umbrella thrusts a dark billowy cloud onto the blue paint. Raindrops ooze from its folds; they drizzle steadily onto the slate. Genevieve lifts a hand to her forehead, her vision spinning in the eye of a raindrop.

Lunchtime in the mall, a fortnight ago: a shoal of umbrellas parted like a river to allow this one through.

"Goodness! What white teeth you have!"

"All the better to eat you with, little Red Riding Hood."

Sarah. Her friend. Opalescent eyes. Wind wafting blonde strands of hair across her face, like she'd defiantly "just blown in" from the beach instead of a dentist's chair. They had dashed to the nearest restaurant.

"I'm certain your dentist is in love with you. Someone should tell the poor chap that you're really a wolf prowling around in a young woman's clothes."

Sarah had dismissed the dentist's ardour with a wave of a freckled hand.

"He's far too old for me. I prefer them young and juicy." Her studded tongue writhed, red mullet on a hook.

"One of these days I really *must* notify the council." Genevieve had paused, hovering over her big news. "We should get you off the streets before my baby is born."

The unexpected reaction. A firecracker exploded from Sarah's chair and galloped around the table with delighted whoops and screams.

"You're kidding! But this is fantastic!"

A tidal wave of sloppy kisses washed across Genevieve's cheeks and forehead. She tried to fight off her over-excited friend.

"Shush Sarah, you're making a scene," she protested. But the sensuous warmth of Sarah's exuberance suddenly seemed better than sweet wine in summer. For a change, Genevieve let her hair down, and let out a crazy little scream too. "Oh what the hell! Give me another hug. You're right; it is amazing!"

"I can't believe it's true! After all those years of trying. How far along are you?"

"About 13 weeks; but I'm so big already. I'm shocked you didn't notice. My doctor has booked me for an ultrasound to check on things."

"Simon must be totally over the moon. No wonder he's like the cat that's swallowed the mouse lately."

"Oh, have you seen him?" Genevieve had looked up in surprise.

"Just in passing." Sarah was momentarily distracted from the conversation pulling a tissue from her bag. She waved her hands and fluttered eyelashes beguilingly. "But I absolutely knew something was up."

"Well, you're right; he's rapt. But if you do happen to run into him again you mustn't say anything about the ultrasound before next Thursday. I want to surprise him with the pictures."

"Mum's the word." Sarah had pulled a face and dissolved into the type of laughter only Sarah could pull off.

Now, Genevieve buries her head into the lumpy arm of the sofa, her mouth torn apart in silent agony. Forgetful Sarah! She needed to remind her about her umbrella as they left the restaurant that day.

"Don't leave that."

"Thanks!" Sarah had dashed it off the floor. "Wouldn't want to leave my new friend behind. Don't you love the green tartan?" She had la-de-daaed it through the restaurant; "Hideously expensive though."

"Better chain it to your wrist," Genevieve had advised. "I can't be around to remind you to pick up your toys all the time."

Genevieve spirals manicured nails into the rug. More truths were spoken that day than she knew. Sarah and Simon. Husband and best friend. How hackneyed! How jaded! This type of trite nonsense didn't happen to her!

She carries her cup to the kitchen and painstakingly scrubs tea-scrum from its glaze. Her home surrenders more: water droplets glisten in two glasses; a towel leaves damp testimonies on her hands; subtle footprints edge off the doormat.

She wanders to the front of the house and throws open the formal lounge. Air, thick with concentrated warmth, rushes around her. The plush curtains are closely drawn together; only a splinter of light edges through. Fastening the top button of her blouse, she drifts over to a mobile phone — Simon's — carelessly left on the mantelpiece. Vibrate mode, she whispers uselessly. The armchair's paunch betrays a recent encounter; a single strand of bleached hair hangs precariously over its rest.

Genevieve closes the door and rests a hot forehead on the timber. Dead baby. Cheating husband. Husband-stealing friend. When does one start hitting back? Grey Moses clacks over, skidding slightly on the wooden floorboards.

"They were here when I arrived, weren't they, Mr Grey Moses?"

His triangular face tilts, enquiringly. She rests a hand on his skull, absolving him. They amble back to the sunroom.

The atmosphere in the back room is febrile, anxious. Outside, burdened clouds flicker with webs of lightning, and grey shadows creep in irritable mosaics across the walls. Thunder explodes into the heavy air. It rolls around in the air ponderously, reverberating the house with thrilling cracks and palpitations. A ruthless wind whips up and lashes through the barren trees, tearing off branches and driving them into the ground like arrows. Curtains of water drop from the sky and, in a breath, smash to earth as torrential rain.

Genevieve, sinking into the sofa, projects herself into the centre of the storm. She rocks in wild wind, woman in a hurricane. It rips through her hair, breaks her bones. Her spinning body tears apart. The violence steadies her. She can see her feet.

Reaching for the umbrella, she splays two of the rigid segments across her pale arm, examining it like a dinosaur's wing. Then, a damp canvas is plucked from its skeleton.

Blackness descends. An eerie hush. Simon's key turns quietly in the front door. Genevieve lies like an ancient corpse in her bed, the crispness of fresh linen around her. She charts her husband's harried progress to the sunroom. Grey Moses, lolling on the bed's forbidden softness, pricks up his ears and comes to attention, adjusting his position so that his front paws point to the bedroom door.

The judge sits, Genevieve thinks, a ruddy camellia touching her lips.

Simon takes the stairs two at a time.

"Genevieve?" The question mark of his face appears at the door, a masterpiece of concern. "What's the matter with you? Are you ill?"

"Oh Simon darling." She stretches a hand to him. "You're home at last. I've been trying to call since lunchtime."

He approaches, a man coming to an electric fence.

"I must have left my phone at home," he says cautiously. He kneels beside the bed and grasps her offered hand. "What's wrong?"

Her fist is sandwiched neatly between his hands, but he is far from her, eyes restless, roving cameras, searching for information, incrimination. She touches the stubble on his chin.

"It's just the worst possible thing that could ever happen," she whispers forlornly.

Simon's tortured eyes lock onto hers. His small mouth opens.

"I ..." The face loses courage. He blinks, looks away.

Genevieve continues, a heart pulsating in her fingers, "I had an ultrasound today to check on baby."

Simon's eyes return to her face. Faint surprise.

"You had an ultrasound?"

"Yes. I wanted to surprise you with pictures of our baby; but guess what?"

Her husband shakes his head, lifts his shoulders.

"There's no baby anymore. Just a mole. A gigantic hideous hydatidiform mole."

"A wha ...?"

Her shrewd eyes wait for the forecasted emotions to pass through her husband's body. Like watching a tragic film in a bottle, she thinks. It's all here if you care to look, behind shot green glass.

"A hydatid-what?" he asks finally.

Genevieve regards him sadly and tosses a pamphlet.

"There's the spelling." She bends and retrieves something from under the bed. "I knew you'd be a bit confused, so I constructed a model while I was waiting."

She peels away the coverlet and places her showcase of twisted umbrella wire onto the pristine sheets.

"Oh, dear God." Simon's face blanches, a Geisha's eggshells.

Genevieve averts her eyes kindly. Then, sliding her hand under the pillow, she draws out a meat cleaver.

"Genevieve ..."

She stops him.

"Firstly, I must acknowledge that the materials for the majority of this project were generously donated by a Ms Sarah Walker. I believe she is your very good friend."

"Gen ..."

She holds up the meat cleaver.

"I understand your initial shock Simon. And I totally agree, this model is a bit rough, but I'll talk you through it."

She kneels beside her creation, and runs a cool index finger over the bent silvery spokes.

"Just imagine this here is my uterus," she explains, "and these are my ovaries and these are my Fallopian tubes. Aren't I so clever to remember all these names, Simon?"

She glances at him. His breathing is jagged.

"Genevieve, I need to explain."

She arrests him with a finger on his lips.

"Shush sir! I am explaining. You may comment at the end of my presentation."

He shrinks back, eyes on the cleaver. Her gaze shimmies away.

"If you take a peep inside this uterus now — yes I know it looks strangely like a cage, but look inside — you will find something. Yes, it's a piece of scrunched up tartan canvas." A radiant smile transfigures her. "Why! Don't the colours look just lovely in this light?"

Simon opens his mouth again, but Genevieve whips away his words with her tongue.

"Listen carefully now, my dear. This is the terribly serious and scary bit. You and I were somehow tricked into believing this scrunched up piece of tartan material was a baby. A real, live baby."

She lifts the cage into the air, a strange sacrifice.

"But it's not a baby!" she cries, dashing it onto the bed. "It's a dirty imposter that looks and feels like a baby from the outside; but on the inside it's really a monster, a terrible lump of parasitic tissue that smothered our special little life and grew in its place."

She draws breath sharply, acrid tear-pain in her nostrils. Her disconsolate eyes drift over Simon's face momentarily.

"A cuckoo got into our nest and chucked out our baby!"

Simon's face becomes a progression of shallow waves and inverted Us. His words crack like thin china.

"Oh God, Genevieve. I'm so, so sorry. I am such an idiot."

She cannot bear to look into his wretchedness.

"What could you possibly be sorry about, dearest? Why on earth do you say you are an idiot? These types of ridiculous marriages are a part of life. Oh God, did I say marriages? I meant pregnancies. These ridiculous pregnancies are a part of life."

She wipes her nose with the back of her hand. Then, thrusting herself forward, she takes hold of his collar, a hoarse whisper croaking from her throat.

"But the doctor says we need to chop-chop-chop it out quick-quick-quick."

She jerks up the meat cleaver. Simon gasps, eyes black, transfixed. Genevieve draws the silver blade heavily across her hand; then turns abruptly and hurls it deep into the cage of tangled wire. Grey Moses shrieks and tumbles off the bed in a flurry of fear. Genevieve laughs and licks at the blood oozing from her palm. Then, thrusting her hand into the mess of wire, she pulls out the tartan canvas with a flourish.

"Voila!" she exclaims. She tosses it into the bin and triumphantly flicks her copper curls. "But even when the abomination is gone I still might need a hysterectomy!" She lifts the meat cleaver and seems about to plunge it into her own belly.

"NO!" Simon cries, but ignoring him she thwacks the cleaver down once more, right into the heart of a red camellia. She hacks at it until the velvety petals are torn and limp; then scatters the bruised fragments over the sheets.

"Complications! Complications! They always tell you about complications. Bleeding, cancer, infection, even death." She reaches for the other camellia on the bedside table and drives the cleaver into it.

"Please stop, I can't bear any more," Simon pleads, hands in front of him, jaw rocking. He gathers up the peeled-back coverlet, burying his face in it.

Genevieve flings herself onto the soiled sheets, and lies like a dropped doll, stroking the moist vermilion of weeping petals. How fascinating it is to see men cry. Simon vibrates two thick layers of mattresses.

"I've been such a fool," he sobs. "And you've gone completely crazy. We need to talk rationally, truthfully, about all this. Please forgive me. I need you more than anything."

Genevieve slides herself up and sits cross-legged on the bed, contemplating the chestnut jumble of his hair. It falls over his ears so innocently. A young boy's flocks. How lovely it would be to touch, but her fingers would most certainly tear it out. An indistinct pain gathers, and she presses sharp nails into her belly.

"I *have* been talking rationally and truthfully, Simon dearest," she says, voice so thin it could pass through a needle. "Have you?"

She gathers up her legs and presses them into her chest.

"But we need to end our little chat now. I'm going to be in such trouble with those nice people at the hospital. I promised them that I'd return by 6.30pm so they can prep me for theatre, but will you look at that!" She taps a rose festooned Royal Doulton alarm clock urgently. "It's nearly 7. Chop, chop — be a good lad and carry my suitcase to the car."

Simon lifts his ruined face and gazes at his wife. She is a tight ball of bent limbs. Her eyes are distant, locked in infinity. The talking is over. Using the bed as a lever, he hoists himself up, shoulders shuddering with sobs. He collects her suitcase and carefully cradles it in his arms as he drags himself out of the room. A taut thread stretches agonizingly.

Genevieve, meat cleaver in hand, trails to the bedroom window, and watches him throw her bag into the backseat of the car. In the dim light his body seems

to blow around like a squashed aluminium can. The thought comes to her that from time to time earth conducts malicious experiments on humanity by randomly assigning different physical laws to different people: some she decides to fetter with a more compelling gravity, so as to crush them; while others she chooses to unfasten, so they drift helplessly unchecked into a limitless, terrifying space. In this scheme of things, husband and wife could end up light-years apart.

Thirty minutes later, nose pressed against the oily window, Genevieve still watches Simon. He stands, drowning in rain, a hopeless, melting, crumpled papier-mâché man bathed in insipid lamplight. Her gaze cannot un-stick; she cannot look away. Perhaps though, if earth's laws just bent a little more, a door might open and a moist black button of a nose might snuffle at her ankle, or a soft paw might alight on her foot. Then maybe, just maybe, she would remember to breathe, and an incandescent fog would roll across the window.

