

Swallow Chick

By Lucy Grace

I smile when I hear my granddaughter downstairs, her tread in the hallway and her voice on the phone. How I wish I could go downstairs to greet her. I could, except that I died half an hour ago, and now I'm dead.

I hear her step on the kitchen floor cease and the stiff wooden cutlery drawer scrape open. She's wearing her work shoes. My guess is that she is making a cup of tea, passing the time until I come downstairs. She is wrong, expecting movement from me. Only my mind is alive now, swooping, young and freed like a baby bird.

The back door grinds open with a clatter of chain rattle and then undefended silence. The wood swells in wet weather and makes it stick – she'll have to learn that. I know by each careful sound where she is, what she is doing.

She is sitting on the step of the yard. How I long for that step, just one more time, to sit on the warmed stone in the sun and rest my head on the red brick feeling the heat in my temple. I think of the women that have rested there and their different trials and tribulations. Only women of course – the men are too busy being and doing to trouble sitting there. I imagine swimming darkly inside my mother as she sits taking a rest from the laundry and lonely work of a young wife in the war. I wasn't the first child but the middle one, so I add my elder sister, a toddler in cotton layers scrabbling in the yard, bringing my exhausted mother unwanted treasures of pebbles and petals.

I see my granddaughter now in her work suit, pulling the narrow pencil skirt over her knees, pressing her shined shoes together to admire them on the step. How tired she must be, I think, to sit on the step in that expensive wool. She is again on the phone, in a different tone now, murmuring familiarity with her other half. Her partner.

The words around me are slipping – once upon a time partnership inferred serious business for lawyers and doctors and funeral directors, their trades written high in gold paint

on solid black signs - now it relates to ones nearest and dearest, another half, an other half. Her wife. She is softer, at home, in love.

She is different to me. I put myself on the step, in the dusk, waiting for the end of the shift. I had to be ready – if I missed them walking home, he'd be straight in the pub, or sliding on past with his mates hoping not to be seen. Tough luck my friend. Every penny counts in this house and that means your penny too. It wasn't as bad for me as for some of the other women, waiting defiantly outside the factory gates with their pinched faces and bitten nails, but all the same I ran the money in this house. I ran the house, full stop.

Longer a widow than a wife. What a relief that had been – now I was the man in manager and I was good at managing. It must run in the family – the expensive wool and pencil skirt downstairs said as much.

I listen from my bed, our love was made and unmade in here. And then at fifty when my husband's new bed became a mortuary slab it was suddenly all mine. Nearly half a century without him, how is that even possible?

I resent my agedness. When my body began to disobey me, reducing me to the essence of the elderly, shrunken and bowed, I anticipated a hastened end, but I have been kept alive by my mind and its love for mathematical symmetrical comfort in numbers.

I asked it to survive to one hundred, just for the neatness, but in the end my brittle bones and thinning blood have not allowed it. One hundred has a solidness like binary code, decimalisation and the metric system. My headstone and funeral order of service will not be neat and precise in black and white type, 1920 – 2020; it will carry the untidy edges of oddity. I am ninety-seven, and I am dead.

I listen carefully to see if she will stop talking soon and come up to see me. She knows that I have a nap each afternoon and that since the stair-lift arrived I've been coming upstairs

instead of napping in my chair, but I'm usually up and about by 2pm, and now it's nearly half past. Something is distracting her. Maybe love.

The house is quiet now. The rattle of the door chain tells me that she is back on the step. Through the open curtain I can see the sun sharing the last of today's warmth with this house before it moves into next door's yard to shine on them. I am glad that she has this place, that it is a place she can find solace and comfort in her memories. She will find out soon that it is now hers. She reminds me of me.

I hear a beep and a whirr as the stair-lift starts up the stairs, and I know that she is coming up to see me. I do not want this – although I have chosen my best nightdress and nothing is too distressing, I do not want to be here when she finds me. I fly out of the window and down into the yard and onto the step, where I sit next to a small black and white wraithlike presence swimming in a hospital scan photograph, warming on the red bricks, with the time and the date stamped at the top, fragile bones pressing into existence.

I am thrilled.

“Hello, little one,” I breathe, finally. “Welcome to our step”.

