



The Linen Box

Whispers in the dark.

Move over Clarrie, you're lying on my arm.

That's your nightdress trapped under my leg, Pan, pull it out, will you, I can't get to sleep.

Both women lay still and quiet eventually. It was too strange, to be sharing a bed in the dark of this quiet house after so many years. They had slept close like this as children, camped out in tents in each of their gardens, surrounded by siblings and friends. They had cuddled up for warmth as teenagers, waiting outside the dancehall, or the bingo. The cinema for a Saturday matinee in November, comparing their new lipsticks, slicked across their mouths in secret, lest their pas caught them and made them wipe it off with a cotton hankie.

They had been friends forever. Born in adjacent houses the same summer month, both with older brothers away to war while their fathers stayed at home, too scarred and damaged by the last to be any help in this conflict. Pandora was always the beautiful one. The tall, slim sophisticated one. Clarissa had always teased her about it. She always played up what she thought was her own plainness. Pan could never convince her that she had laughing eyes, which the boys liked. Clarrie just saw her shorter legs, her more generous waist and always felt the shadow of her best friend's beauty dull the glow from her cheeks.

'Do you remember the day we tried to join the land army?' Pan whispered, careful not to disturb her sleeping husband in the next room. He was close to death, each breath hard won and a struggle to complete. These rare moments while he rested were to be treasured. Any moment, he might start coughing and panicking again and this dark quiet with her best friend would be ended.

'Do I remember? How could anyone forget, I thought your pa would have a fit!'

'Yours wasn't much better. Oh, the names he called you as he dragged you back down that lane and onto the train! Clarrie, I cried all night at the bruises on your arms.'

Impulsively, Pandora reached out and smoothed her fingers down Clarrie's cold arms, as if the ghosts of the bruises might still lie there, beneath the skin, as bold as the memories they shared. She heard Clarrie shiver and pulled her arms under the tangle of blankets.

'Come here, keep warm, what's the matter with you?'

She rubbed the skin to chafe more blood into it and held the cold fingers in her own.

'You mothering me, Pan? You not have enough children to raise?'

Pandora threw herself back against the mattress with a sigh. 'Thank God they're all grown. Mewling horrors each one of them. No wonder his first wife died of it. Six children in as many years and each of them as spoiled as the last. The youngest married a month ago. She couldn't wait to be free of this house. At least he saw her settled, before... this.'

She felt Clarrie move closer and the mattress creaked.

'Ssh, you'll wake him...'

The darkness was absolute. There was no light to give Pandora a clue how Clarrie had moved or what she was doing, but some instinct made her feel like her friend was peering into the dark, trying to make her out.

'Why did you do it, Pan? He's so much older than you, and so stern! Why did you marry him?'

Perhaps it was the darkness that made it easy for Clarrie to finally ask this question after so many years. Perhaps it was the air of anticipation that clung to the house like a mist. The walls held their breath, waiting for George to do the same this final time. Maybe it was the promise of imminent release from her marriage that made Pandora reply so honestly. Clarrie often wondered years later what made the circumstances that created the next moment. Which vibrations slid through the air to change everything forever.

'Because I knew I couldn't have you.'

The room exhaled slowly. It was as if all the tension that had lain between the two all their lives had lapped out with those spilling words. They lay breathless beside each other, unable to speak, unable to think. Unable, in those tense, perfect moments to do or say anything. Perhaps Clarrie wanted to say something to break the enervation of their silence. Maybe Pan was about to cross the blackness that lay between them to lay a hand upon her silent friend.

In the split second gap between word and deed, there was a sudden clap of noise. The darkness shuddered and the two women clasped at each other in fear. It came again. A great banging crash, at the foot of the bed. They moved close and held each other like children. Their limbs were cold and stiff and when Carrie eventually spoke, her breath was frigid on Pandora's face like frost.

'What on earth was that?'

Pandora gripped her tight. 'The linen box. The lid. It is badly hinged. It must have fallen. It does so often, when I put away the blankets.'

'*Twice?*'

The silence answered the bewildered question.

BANG

Only uneven breathing broke the darkness now. Frightened children lost in the depths of a nightmare.

BANG

'Oh, Pan, what if it is *him*?'

'Him? How can it be him? He is weak as a kitten and the sound comes from the foot of the bed. I tell you, it is the linen box, got from his aunt, who got it from her husband, a sea-captain, for a linen box. It has lain at the foot of this bed for years. Hush, Clarrie, don't be superstitious! It is merely the broken lid, agitated by a breeze. Can't you feel the cold swirling about this room like a fog?'

BANG

'Oh, Pan, just go to him, you must. If it isn't him banging, the noise will distress him so!'

Clarrie felt fingers search for her face in the darkness. 'Like he distressed me every time he reached for me? Like he pushed and pulled me about like so much clay under his fingers? Like he...'

'Pandora, no! Don't tell me! Please!'

BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG

'Pan, one of us has to go! Don't you see? Please! He is your husband!'

'He was my father's husband, not mine! My father willed this marriage. He served with him. In the Great War. The *real* war, they called it, in drink. Pa was loyal to him. He adored to serve under him. Rather *he* had married him! I would rather bleach my eyes with carbolic than go to him in his final throes. Rather light the fire with my own hair! Rather die, than ease him into his death! He has made a servant of me, a penny whore, a... a... a mule!'

Clarrie lay in the darkness and she stroked Pandora's wet hair until it lay in tight strands down the sides of her face. She had never heard such passion stir in her friend. Had never felt pain, as physical as a blow enter her body simply because another felt it.

'A mule,' she whispered.'

'Yes, a *mule!*'

They had run away at dawn. Fifteen years old, rouged, with gravy browning legs to look like women. They had put stolen curlers into their hair overnight and taken mutton and stale bread from the pantry to ease their long journey. Sugar water held their curls, bright hankies their dinner swag. With stolen pennies, they had made it to an obscure part of Wales from an obscure part of Lancashire. The first thing they saw, when they staggered off the train, sick with the smoke and the constant movement, was a dazed mule, staggering under the weight of evacuees' cardboard suitcases and a narrow blue wooden carriage full of children. The mule had its ears back flat against its head and it strained against the weight.

'Oh, the poor little creature,' Pandora breathed. Clarrie at once took her hand and held it to her throat. The two pulses beat against one another, wrist and neck, as the girls watched the beast struggle to pull its load from a standstill into motion.

'It will make, it Pan, don't you worry. The beast has heart, you can see it in its eyes. It has a great heart.'

The mule leaned back on its heels, so far back, it seemed it would simply collapse and disappear flat on the road like a folded sheet of paper. Then it made a horrible grunt in its throat and heaved itself, panting, to its feet. Lowering its head to the whip of the angry farmer who straddled the blue cart, it dragged itself on along the road.

Pandora grasped at Clarrie's arm and pinched so tight the flesh would remain marked for weeks. She did not speak of what the mule made her feel, but later, when they compared the marks upon their arms, neither were quite sure which had the hardest looking scar.

'Go to him,' Clarrie whispered against the loud banging of the linen box's lid. It had been beating now, without ease, a full five minutes. It was almost too much to bear.

'I... I can't... Really. Clarrie, I CAN'T go!'

At the panicked note in her voice, the linen box redoubled its speed.

BANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANG.

Slowly, Clarrisa pulled herself away from Pandora's grip. It felt like separating flesh from bone. Silk from lining. Breath from closed lips.

'Let *me* go to him.'

'NO! Never, not you! He is wicked in his delirium! He cries out, he is foul with his tongue! He may strike you! I will not let you go to him!'

BANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANG.

'Well, if I do not, you will have to!'

The silence engulfed the room, like water that has had an obstacle and overcome it to total oblivion.

Clarrie rose half to her knees before she was dragged back down to the mattress. Wet lips, wet cheek, wet forehead. All in the dark. All comfort, all sweetness unseen and unexplained. Then nothing. She sagged, in the void of affection. Uneasy, she rose wonderingly to her feet.

She found her way to the door on numb feet. The door handle stung her fingers with its cold slippery brass. She missed her aim several times then a single solitary *BANG* drove her fingers to find uncertain purchase. She was out, into the dour, cold corridor. Alone. In an absence of noise and friendship and air.

Clarrie made her way to the next room by feel. She made herself believe that it was only feel that got her there. In truth, she could hear his breathing now. As soon as her bare feet started to move along the painted wooden edgings of the slim corridor between the rooms, she heard it. She felt the threadbare carpet runner at her heels. Felt as the edge bruised up the cold nubs of her flesh. She smelt him now. The liniment on his bad leg. The smell of badness underlying the rich green smell of the ointment. She edged towards the door, trembling.

The bed was high. Dark wood. High at the foot to bark your shin, if you tried to climb up that way. He laboured for breath in the darkness. His candle had gone out. The wound in his leg stunk out the air around him like a miasma. He would not take help, Pan had whispered. He had done it so easily, an accident at the allotment. He never complained but never saw a doctor. During the war, he never took a scratch. He saw platoons into action, into death and came home unscraped. Untouched, except by nightmares. By twitches. By troubles unexplained and unapologised for.

Clarrie crept into his room and sat by his side.

'Mother?' he murmured, then this throat rattled to a loose cough.

'Yes, here I am, my dear,' she murmured and took his rough, dry hand in hers. She tries not to imagine this hand touching the smooth skin of Pandora's back.

Whuh

Clarrie tried not to move back from his struggling breath. It hurt her ears, hurt her heart, to hear him strain like this. She had always supposed him a great man, a kind man. She had loved him, for caring for her Pan. Yet now, she had a maelstrom of thoughts beating around her head. All contradictory to the ideas she had supposed to be true.

Whuh Whuh Pandora, my love, whuh, is that you? WHUH.

A second's pause. Then. 'It is. I am close beside you.'

Whuh... you know I always loved you, don't you? WHUH.

Clarrie closed her eyes and her hands closed around his questing fingers.

'And I you.'

WHUH... you NEVER did! WHUH... I wanted you right from the start. You were too young, so I took the next best thing... WHUH... And I waited... WHUH. And waited... WHUH... And I got you... WHUH... in the end... WHUH... Or I thought I did... WHUH.

Clarrie rested her head against his labouring chest and felt the strain of his heart to keep making his voice be heard, keep making his will be told. She felt his fingers reach for her mouth and she made herself kiss his stretched knuckles.

She waited for the next strained sound of his breath, but it never came. She waited. She lay stretched over his body until they both grew cold. Then. Slowly, she began to rise. In the next room, she had begun to hear the banging of the linen box.

'I am coming,' she said, but her voice was drowned out by the noise. 'Be still. I am coming back to her now.'