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WIPIING the silver frame, Laura stared sadly at a picture of her and Matt skiing in the mountains. Her mind was lost in a white chill: empty, unconnected and exhausted. Too weary to feel, to think, to escape even into the usual comforting fantasy she had built for herself. This is what her world had shrunk down to.

She moved slowly and listlessly to the window without disturbing the stillness that had been her armour for three interminable years, 37 months, more than a thousand tired days and unrefreshing nights. She had seen the old pear tree at the end of the garden lose its fruits, the last of which were still rotting on the grass. Now the wind was taking its leaves and rain dripped from its branches.

This window was her eye to the world; its gentle quietness demanded nothing and spoke to her in language she could understand, especially during these winter evenings. The grey sky, the falling darkness, the approaching night...this was as much as she could cope with.

Holding her hand to her chest, she walked silently into her bedroom and buried herself in the empty bed. The room was stale and dark; the window shut, the heavy curtains drawn. The light was not welcome inside. The clock beside her bed had long since stopped. Time no longer mattered and her sleeping pills now lay where she used to put her jewellery before going to sleep.

Looking at the ceiling, she waited for sleep to come but her jumbled thoughts and feelings gave her no rest. There was no escape into the oblivion she craved which, in any case, would only last a few precious hours. She knew that the struggle for sleep would be fought again and again, tonight like every other one...

Reluctantly sliding her legs out of the bed, Laura pushed herself to stand up. This was the first battle of her day. The night hadn't brought any refreshment. Sleep had come, but not from anywhere pleasant. A heavy chemical blanket had smothered her consciousness, but had failed to conquer the dreams that had demonised her night.

Her first heavy step took her to the kettle.

Coffee.

Why do kettles have to be so bloody loud?

She reached for her morning mug and the coffee jar. Her hand trembled. The steam from the cup was the promise and the first gulp of the dark liquid was a reunion with her companion through the darkness.

Lightly stimulated, her eyes wakened as an unexpected knock alerted one of her other senses. Startled, she wrapped her dressing gown tightly around her and went to the door. Four years ago, when Matt had bought it for her as a Christmas present, they had both loved its sensuality. But now it was as ragged as she was.

She opened the door to be confronted by a fern tree. A freckle-faced boy with blonde hair peered at her from behind it. He thrust a small white envelope towards her.

"It came with the order," he explained.

"What order?" Laura asked, tearing open the envelope.

"Pay the boy and start decorating!" read the note inside.

Laura grinned at Carla's familiar tone. Stepping aside to let the boy enter, she shook her head and muttered: "I don't do Christmas."

"Where do you want me to put it?"

"Oh, right by the window."

After the boy had left, Laura stood in front of her tree. She smelled its resin, felt the chill that clung to it from outside and spotted the loose pines on the carpet that had already fallen from its branches. Why do I need this in my life? What is there for me to celebrate?

The ringing of the phone arrived like a rude poke in her ear, and she let it go straight to answer machine.

"I'm Laura, I'm not at home...so you know what to do!"

"Come on, girl, pick up, or don't because I'm coming over tomorrow anyway to take you out. I don't want any excuses. Five pm sharp!"

Carla was the only one of her friends who had defied Laura when she had stopped receiving visitors. Their pity, sympathy and inability to know her pain was too much for her to bear; their lives were continuing but hers had died, and she really didn't feel that there was any way back for her.

When she had thrown that handful of earth onto the coffin and heard its soft thud, her own existence, with its emotions, appetites and hopes, had stopped. Since then, isolation and pain were all that was left for her.

Only Carla continued to kick at the door she had locked in order to keep out the rest of the world. Carla visited her frequently, wiping away her tears, checking that she was taking her prescription medication and forcing her to have a bath and wash her hair.

Carla had kept her spare house keys ever since that day, three years earlier, when she'd used force to open the door and found Laura unconscious following an overdose. She continued to keep a close eye on her friend, adamant that such a terrible occurrence wasn't going to happen again.

Back then, a panicked Carla had shaken the thin body of the once vibrant Laura. Her lips were cracked, her eyelids were swollen and her tears and dribbles were dry on the pillow. "Come on, kid, you're not killing yourself today," she said. "I am not ready to let you die yet."

Laura's head was swimming. She was dizzy and sick, but her stomach was too empty for her to vomit.

"You have no right to do this," she lashed out. "Who told you that you could do this? Do you think you are God? Just leave me alone!"

"Come on, girl," Carla reasoned. "You can decide on a lot of things but not this, and don't imagine I will leave you like this. No way, no damn way!"

"I want to die, leave me...I can't go on any more...I can't," came Laura's heartbreaking reply.

Hot tears burned Carla's eyes before they rolled down her face. "Why my baby, why?"

What a mess Laura's life had become. Her little baby, a son, so longed for and so loved, was gone. The only ultrasound picture she had was already faded from constant handling. This precious person, with tiny fingers and toes, was all that she had wanted for her future. She had longed to be a mum for as far back as she could remember. She had even been looking forward to the labour.

Then one morning, still reeling from loss, she noticed he wasn't moving and the ordinary events of a tragedy unfolded. She called the hospital, took a cab, met the consultant, got undressed, put on a gown, took the anaesthetic, felt the nausea...

Then home, alone.

The place she had loved was now suffocating.

Getting into bed was like climbing into her coffin, and every event of that awful day was a screw on its lid.

No wonder she had wanted to end it all.

"I know it's not fair, it's horrible," Carla had said after finding her in such a bad way, following the overdose. "You just cry. Hell, even I am crying!"

Carla held Laura's almost weightless body until her tears finally stopped. "Don't you worry, kid," she said. "I'm going to be here. Death isn't getting any more out of us, not this week."

Laura's guts felt as if they were being ripped apart as everything she had and hoped for fled from her wreck of a body.

Exhausted and completely empty she sank her wet face into her pillows, drew her knees up to her empty belly and slowly drifted off to sleep. Carla tenderly pulled up her covers and lay down next to her, cuddling her back and gently stroking her head until her breathing calmed and the shaking stopped. Then she quietly reached for the bedside phone and rang for a doctor, explaining what had happened and asking for someone to come quickly.

A young Indian doctor helped Carla to sit Laura up. She examined her and made a swift assessment.

"We will have to get you to hospital," she said.

"No bloody way," came Laura's vehement response.

"Well, at least let me take some blood samples to make sure you haven't done yourself any permanent damage."

Laura let her arm be stretched out and didn't even flinch as the needle penetrated her vein.

"How are we going to make sure that you are going to be all right?" asked the doctor. "I can't leave you here on your own like this. I could actually get you detained in hospital for a short time, even if you don't want to go."

"I'm not very busy at work just now," Carla interjected. "I could easily take a week off to stay here with her."

After a lot of further discussions and instructions, the doctor left, promising to send a community psychiatric nurse daily to check on Laura's progress.

For a full week, Carla stayed with Laura, pouring life slowly back into her: bathing, dressing and feeding her, and giving her the correct medication. At first she could hardly speak or stand up. Sleep was her only escape, but even then she cried and fought, not knowing whether she wanted to live or die. Carla's stubbornness shielded the small flame that was her life. This flame wasn't enough for light or warmth or nourishment, it was merely sufficient to keep death away.

It wasn't really life.

But, as time wore on, Laura slowly and very reluctantly began to do the things that living people do. At first, just sitting up in bed was a huge effort. Gravity seemed so much more powerful than before. Carla even had to help her get to the toilet. Drinking was painful. Her tummy rebelled over cold fluids and she was only just able to tolerate warm milk. It was over a week before she could swallow any solid food. When she could eat, buttery brioche with strawberry jam was all she wanted. Even getting warm was almost impossible; her hands and feet stayed pale and cold for weeks.

But Carla and James, the Mauritian nurse, managed to pull her back into some semblance of life. After Carla returned to work she visited her every night to keep her guard against death, staying with Laura for weeks.

Thankfully, the medication Laura had taken hadn't caused any permanent damage and slowly, as the weeks stretched into months, she began showing signs of recovery. She gradually built up her days into a pattern of doing; washing, dressing and feeding herself. She was progressing, but these tasks were all achieved without thought or feeling. Her breakfast always consisted of the same thing: coffee in the same KitKat Easter egg mug, toast with strawberry jam, always made with the same knife. Lunch was either a tin of spaghetti hoops or soup, or, if she could be bothered to make it, some cheese on toast. Most days she didn't feel like eating much in the evenings. Her

stomach felt like a tightly clenched fist, but when she eventually felt hungry she would snack on skimmed milk and shortbread biscuits. Before retiring to bed every night she put the same set of dishes in the same position in the dishwasher, and whenever she became aware of their presence she would gather socks, knickers and bedding together and stuff them into the washer dryer. The only interruptions in her routine were Carla's Wednesday and Sunday visits and her twice-daily phone calls from her doctor's office to remind her to take her meds.

Radio Four, with its porridge of human sound, was the aural wallpaper of her days and she kept it on right through from the Today programme to the melodious anaesthetic of the Shipping Forecast. But the words never penetrated her thoughts; instead they formed a fence around her mind.

In bed at night she could feel the weight of her body on the mattress. It was too firm for her on her own, and the queen-sized duvet seemed to drown her. Her hands and feet hardly ever got warm and even a hot water bottle clenched between her ankles only comforted her feet. Her hands were permanently cold and yet moist. More than anything else, she missed having somebody to lean against. Her sleeping pills would eventually press her down into a kind of empty sleep, but it would still take her about two hours to quieten the thoughts and noises of her mind until the darkness took over.

Those nightly three hours, maybe half an hour more if she was lucky, formed her only mental rest. It wasn't enough for repair, let alone for refreshment, and all too quickly her slumber was cruelly invaded by frights, accusations and terrors without names. These would start to push into her resting mind like uninvited weeds poisoning her peace and bringing her too soon into her daily struggle with the wounds that had so nearly killed her...