

An Empty Shell

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

In uniform. Sergeant Thomas Wood. At the back of my small room, near the window, I turn the lamp on, pick up a pen, a blank page, must keep my mother informed.

Now looking out at the first gaze of the day.

I was six then. Here comes my mother ruffling my hair. Flattering me, enhancing my prospects, wanting me to be carefree. Because of my hair I was unique in her eyes even though, as I quickly learned, red singles you out.

She shielded me, I shielded her. Why worry her. Why tell her of my small miseries which in her mind would shape into sad haloes.

As I said I was six then. I had observed something odd that had made me wonder. About Mr Helmet, our neighbour. A name I had labelled him with. My curiosity was simple but obsessive: did he have red hair? His helmet, constantly on, didn't give a strand away, not a bristle, not one clue.

I had asked him once. "That's indiscreet," he had quickly replied, a word too adult for me which I had him decode into "personal". The whole question of hair remained suspended in the air, a red haze wallowing in my head most days.

A man of another time. A prickly man with a crinkly face, a scratchy voice, rocky knuckles: words I used to describe him as he appeared to me before he abruptly ...

I was on my bike when it happened. He was washing his car. It's the way he fell ... backwards, stiff like a statue. A sudden fall. Terminal. One that sees your life expire.

The hose had turned into a rodeo whip, running wild over the small garden. I dropped my bike and under the intermittent spray knelt down, my fists ensconced in the grass next to his body. Bending over I called him to wake up. The rings petulantly drenching both of us.

Mr Helmet remained silent. As if stunned by a blow. The hose was now inert, like in sympathy. So was the half-washed car. Drops were still wriggling down my cheeks and over Mr Helmet's helmet. When the doctor took it off, I knew. Death had unveiled what life had concealed.

Still kneeling down, hypnotised by his bare head, my mother's hand on my shoulder, trying to pull me away from the glum spectacle, I called out in a broken voice, hoping he would hear my cry as it pierced and tore the air with its jagged edge.

His helmet was left behind lying there like a projected organ. Lifeless. I picked it up and looked at its inside, as at that of an empty shell, the mollusk having been extracted. I curled my arm around Mr Helmet's secret.

"We'll lay it on his grave," my mother said. "He'd like that, don't you think?"

"Yes." I let go a few more tears for my old friend.

"I tell you what ... " she suggested as we both walked back to our front door, "instead of a bunch of flowers ... well, I'll get a nice geranium in a pot, a bright red one, and place it in his helmet."

"But did he *have* red hair?" I was holding back a sob of pain and anger.

"He *might* have ... we don't know for sure ... when he was young maybe ... and before he went to war ..."

"I don't ever want to go to war."

"No, Thomas, never ever."

It had been my first gaze at a dark window.

