

The Tea Tin

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

It occurred last night. Today, in plaster and bandages, Mrs James lies still. Only her eyes and mouth move. She mumbles, whispers, about premonition. If she believed regrets were of any help to her now, she would deplore having set foot outside her door. She would deplore the moment she had spent staring at the clouds and predicting rain. Those brief seconds, in her opinion, should have been better spent on not worrying about the weather and locking up her cottage.

Yesterday she went to the nursery to buy three marigolds which she planted in a round bed below the letter-box. On her knees, on a cushion, she worked the hard dry soil. Her hips sorer than usual, and trailing nimbuses, confirmed her predictions: there would be a late storm.

Her new feature added, she dragged herself in and sat down at the dinner table with a boiled egg and some ham in front of her. The incidents she had read of in the paper at breakfast, and the more mundane ones that had filled her day, paraded in a slow and repetitive manner common to the very old.

By evening the marigolds had taken on the furry outline of sitting cats. With dusk they appeared to have drawn closer to the window, having pushed, in the process, the concrete border and the gnome against the cottage wall. Amused by her own fancies, leaning forward against the open window, she stretched out a hand as if to tousle her plants, to bid them goodnight.

Retracting it, her hand lightly brushed a woolly surface. Startled, she held it out again for a moment as if to feel the air with quick waves. Then she drew her arm back in, shut the window and thought no more of it.

The time had come to settle in, to enclose herself in her cocoon and the peace she always felt from her soft lamplight. Her evening round began with the tightening of all taps and the drawing of all curtains. Her cottage was small. From one end to the other she had once counted twelve of her own short steps. In a measuring mood, she had more than once stood on her step-ladder, raised her arm and fingered the ceiling.

The kettle's whistle stopped her half-way through the width of her room. Attending to it, she realized she hadn't yet turned the key. Immediately she attributed this oversight to her long afternoon in the heat and the forthcoming rain - the latter, in particular, having, so she had observed, a curious tendency to make her forgetful. She thought she must complete her interrupted task which, all of a sudden, seemed quite urgent. A hand on her hip, she limped towards the door, her eyes fixed on the handle as if, just in case, this might keep it paralyzed for one moment longer.

On her hospital bed, Mrs James switches from regrets to hypotheses. If she hadn't planted the marigolds, she speculates, if it hadn't been so hot. She would have, undoubtedly, locked up her cottage before even washing her hands and taking off her straw hat. Her eye-lids twitch. A new pain comes to life under the gauze. She moves her hands and longs for a cup of tea. She longs to go back in time when only her hips were sore, when her quiet pet, as she refers to her cottage, breathed peace and security. Her fingers fumble for the bell.

The intruders flung the door open, pushing, almost flattening, Mrs James against the wall, and falling on her with kicks and yells. So many hours after the ordeal, she still isn't sure whether she forgot to scream or whether the shock had blocked her vocal cords.

"Where do you hide it?" asked one of the men, poking a stick in her cheek. She could only point sideways, with her mouth and her eyes, at the tea tin on the shelf.

Her predictions had proven to be true. It was raining. It was raining crockery and cutlery on the kitchen floor, kicks and blows on her bones.

"Lounge room!" the same man ordered.

Her wrists were being tied, and robust thighs were squeezing her hips with rhythmic bouncing. Lying face down, Mrs James felt generous. She would for safety's sake give them all she owned - her house, her belongings and her imaginary millions. She cherished her life now much more than all the mementos she had, through the years, put away in her drawers. She tried to speak, to make promises, to spill her meagre wealth into the hands of her intruders. Only a short cry escaped, followed by a groan that oozed out like clotted blood.

"Stuff the turkey!" the man with the stick shouted.

Her mouth now permanently open in a misshapen 'O' let itself helplessly be gagged with a rag. Half-conscious, Mrs James was reading the lines in the morning paper. She didn't think it all that odd that her name was in bold print.

"Fifteen dollars!" the man with the stick cried, spitting on the carpet. "It's a joke!"

"It's a joke!" the other echoed, kicking Mrs James in the head.

Stepping on his victim's smashed belongings, he spread his legs and opened his fly. Mrs James thought she was dead, even though she could see and hear. She looked up through one eye at the shape of

the urinating man. Its shoulders were padded with dark patches. She was a little confused and thought she could feel something unpleasant tickling her fingers.

In the small room, the width of which, six of her short steps, she hadn't had time to cross, the man with the padded shoulders was swearing, spitting, laughing like a schoolboy, playing rodeo with his spray. His anger resuming with the last drop, he pressed his foot against the bundle of bones and pushed it into the wet stain.

"Smell that, you old bitch!"

When Mrs James woke up it was raining. It was a soft rain. She could hear its reassuring voice tapping on her tin roof. Her eye-wrinkles deepened. At first it might have been a smile, because she was thinking of her marigolds. But only to begin with. When she opened her eyes wide, she noticed through the open door her disarrayed bed without her body in it. Next to the door, on the kitchen floor, squashed and shapeless, her tea tin lay amidst the rubble of plates, pots and jars.

Her stillness puzzled her. She had so many urges - standing up for one, and others of a more private nature. Remembering her sore hips, she tried to locate the pain but couldn't distinguish soreness from numbness. It all being too strenuous, she let her head roll into the wet hollow of a broken souvenir.

