

Shuffling Deck Chairs on the Titanic

by Sharon Hunt

He swore at her again when he woke and tried to raise himself from the bed. He looked around at the unfamiliar room, tracing the plastic tubing hanging from the IV pole, down to the spot where it met his arm, then looked at the restraints on his wrists. The morphine haze lifted long enough for him to shout.

"Bitch, you bitch."

She watched him from the other side of the room, not daring to creep closer, as he yanked on the heavy restraints. Even as a young man, when his physical strength was as frightening as it was alluring, he would not have been able to pull those restraints free of iron bed rails. Gradually he sank back into the pillows and shut his eyes. If he was thinking of anything now, it was her and how he'd make her pay for taking him to this place.

"You have to go," she'd repeated when the ambulance attendants arrived to lift him from the bed. He'd soiled himself and the sheets again, but she didn't have time to clean him up, so he left the house reeking and flailing his arms, like a child. He'd connected his fist with one attendant's upper arm before both managed to tie him down.

The young man he'd hit blushed and tried to explain, "We're taking you to get better," but he cursed him.

"You fucker," he shouted, and the young man became quiet, more efficient in his work.

"Will you ride with us then or follow after?" the attendant asked her, and for a moment the question was confusing. She stayed mute, but recovered her voice as he was being wheeled out of the bedroom.

"I'll follow," she said.

“Good enough. We'll meet you at the emergency.”

There was no time for stripping the bed so she shoved open the windows, hoping that a good breeze would air out the stench, or at least keep it from traveling through the rest of the house.

In the bathroom she dragged a comb through her hair but decided, short of a good, long scrub with hot water, not the lukewarm he'd always insisted was good enough, nothing would make her presentable.

Keep it together just a while longer she thought before putting the key in the ignition. She accelerated too quickly, nearly clipping the rose bush at the side of the drive.

It was a stupid place to plant a rose bush. That's what he shouted when he got home that day.

“Right alone, at the side of the drive. What's wrong with your head?”

She hadn't bothered replying, knowing if she explained she needed to see one beautiful thing when she turned into this drive it would only make him more belligerent.

But when he threatened to toss it on the rubbish heap she stood up to him for once in a long time.

“It's not hurting you, Liam. Let it be, just where it is or I will plant another one.”

Surprised, he laughed and went off into the house.

Now he'd left the house and would never return. The lung cancer was too advanced. He'd likely not live more than another few days, although even this morning, when she finally called the ambulance, he insisted she wouldn't be rid of him that easily.

“I'll rally,” he said. “If only to see that smirk wiped off your face.”

“There's no smirk, Liam,” she said, but he was already pounding the headboard as pain raked his body. His coughing filled her ears but all she could do was wait for it to subside.

She was minutes behind the ambulance but started to drive faster. It wouldn't do for him to languish too long alone, without someone to speak for him and try to settle him down, but when she arrived, the emergency doctor had taken charge, with the information she'd given the attendants. Liam was sedated and starting to fade off when she came into the examining room.

"I'm Doctor Roberts," he said, extending his hand. "You must be Mrs. Trevor?"

"Julia." His hand was thin and soft, like the rest of him.

"Things don't look good for your husband."

She nodded. "I tried to get him to come to the hospital weeks ago, but ..."

"It wouldn't have made a difference. It's just a matter of time now. I will admit him and run some tests but I think the best we can offer is to keep the pain under control. Do you have children who can be with you?"

"There is only him and me."

He nodded. "Why don't you get a cup of tea while I get him comfortable? We'll bring you up in a while."

"Thank you," she said. At the door she turned back. "I'm ashamed for you to see him in this mess."

"It's part of the process. Nothing new to us."

The tea was lukewarm on its own. When she added milk it was practically cold, but she sipped it nonetheless. *Tea is a good drink to keep you going* her mother would say as they sat together, waiting for Julia's father to take his last breath. There'd been many cups of tea that long week, but her father's was a different kind of death. He was at home and comfortable. Saying his good-byes. There was no rage.

For Liam all there had been was rage, rage that the end of his life was as 'shitty as all the rest of it'. He couldn't settle. Refused to let her help him any more than to wipe the mess from his arse. No gentle words would pass between them, not like with Julia and her father. There would be no thank yous, no I love yous. She'd

accepted that at the house, and knew there would definitely be none of it here, in the hospital, the place he'd made her swear she would never take him.

"By Jesus I'll haunt you if you take me to that place," he'd said just this morning.

You'll haunt me anyway she thought, like you have for twenty years. She picked up the phone and rang.

If she could have managed just a little sleep she would have kept him at home, in his bed, and seen it through alone. But the last two weeks had blurred day and night. Her nerves felt like they were on top of her skin. The slightest movement would set them to screaming for relief.

Now she would have this final guilt to bear.

His hospital room was a gentle yellow, the color she'd wanted to paint their bedroom when they were first married. But he didn't see any need of spending good money to cover good, green paint, so she'd relented and agreed that green was a good colour. Restful.

He'd made some remark about how a bedroom shouldn't be too restful, then pushed her down on the bed and got on top of her. It was the middle of the day, when she needed to be getting the dinner ready.

Early in the marriage she supposed that this was why he'd married her — this thing they did in bed. He certainly didn't think much of her cooking, and she couldn't keep a house, not that there was much in the house to keep. The few sticks of furniture he had in the place were added to sparingly over the years.

When it was thought that she might be pregnant he said he'd go to the city and buy a crib, but then she wasn't pregnant and he said it was good he hadn't wasted money on a false alarm.

She never told him that it hadn't been a false alarm, that she'd used a remedy her grandmother taught her to end the child's

life, having realized that a child would have been a trap she would never get out of.

Stupid, she thought now, since she couldn't get out of the trap anyway.

After the pregnancy she wanted to leave him, but where would she go? She had nothing. All the money was in his name. Her mother was in a nursing home, senile, and she had no other relatives, at least none close enough in blood that they'd take her in.

She wept for that lost child, but knew she'd done the right thing by sparing it Liam's rage.

She wept for the other ones, too. Four in total. Then, after that fourth time her body mercifully gave up trying to make her a mother. She buried each one where the rose bush now grew. At least there was a little colour surrounding them.

They'd met at a local dance. She was the only one he danced with all evening. He hadn't spoken much, but held her firmly around the waist. His steps were confident, and when she faltered, he slowed until she could get back in step with him. At the end of the evening he walked her home, but didn't try to kiss her.

At her front door he said, "I'll come by tomorrow to meet your parents."

She nodded, feeling she'd lost control of herself, stepped onto a treadmill and couldn't get free. This was the starting of love, she supposed.

When he arrived the next afternoon, all clean and smelling of lime aftershave, she felt a strange flutter letting him in, and an uncommon shyness around her parents as the four of them sat at the kitchen table.

"I don't believe in love at first sight," Liam had begun, staring at Julia's mother, "but I want to make my intentions known. Your daughter is for me."

"Well, Julia, what do you have to say about that?" her father asked, his fingers drumming a dirge on the table.

Julia blushed as Liam laid his hand over hers.

"I'm a bit overwhelmed," she said, and looked to her mother.

"Such things are overwhelming," her mother replied. "I'll put on the kettle."

After Liam left, Julia's father took her aside. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to. You know that, don't you?"

She nodded. I don't know what I want to do, she thought, as her mother came into the living room and hugged her tightly.

"He's a very presentable sort, isn't he? And he speaks his mind."

And never stopped speaking his mind, she thought now, in the hospital room. He was hooked up to a morphine pump and sleeping with that uneasy wheezing she'd heard for the past year.

Never one for doctors, he'd delayed going to see why he coughed all the time and couldn't catch his breath. When he finally went, he went alone, for the appointment and the subsequent tests and x-rays.

"What would I need you there for?" he said when she got ready to go with him that first time. He left her sitting on a hard-back chair in the porch, her scarf tied around her head and her gloves falling limply in her hand.

Why am I here at all, she wanted to say. What is wrong with me that you can't stand the sight of me most times?

That was the question she wanted to shout at him now, watching his mouth pull in air, but it was too late for that now.

She didn't love him anymore. Maybe she never had. Even on their wedding day, as she stood before the priest and promised to love Liam she felt the word stick on her tongue. It had come out as 'lobe', for all to hear. She had forgotten his name momentarily, too, and the priest had to repeat it for her. She sounded like she was drunk or had had a stroke; her mother chided her at the reception.

"Of all times to speak clearly, this was it Julia."

Still, her mother seemed happy in her role, sitting at the head table in a lavender chiffon dress and wide-brimmed hat that

shielded her from prying eyes, allowing her to weep without pitying stares.

He'd thought to be a writer. That was his intention. He thought he had the makings of a poet, but when, early on, his poems were sent back with form rejections gave no reason why they were unsuitable, he thought that writing was a closed shop, writing in Ireland, anyway.

"They have their favourites, their genius children, and there's no room for the new talents," he raved, after another envelop arrived in the post. So he gave up on the idea of writing, and went to work construction in a friend's company, pouring asphalt and coming home later and later after pints with his mates.

For the first few weeks into his construction job, she'd kept his suppers warm in the oven, but by the time he got home he wouldn't eat, complaining the food was more inedible than when it was first cooked.

"And that is bad enough."

He'd make himself a sandwich and she stopped cooking altogether, even for herself, as she wasn't interested in anything but picking throughout the day.

After two hours he opened his eyes again, and stared at her. He lifted his right hand as high as he could, and crooked his finger for her to come closer.

She felt exhaustion run through her legs, making them rubbery. She couldn't fall, couldn't knock her head. She had to keep herself together now, until this was over and he was decently buried.

As she swooned over the bed, he said, "My grandfather was on the Titanic. Did I tell you that?"

"No," she said.

"He got off in one of the last boats, pushed a woman away and took her place."

She blushed. All made up anyway. She never heard of this before.

"When they were rowing away from the ship, he looked back and saw the woman shuffling deck chairs. He supposed she'd gone mad by that point."

That was it. He closed his eyes and never opened them again, although it was another 36 hours before he died.

When he was gone she called the funeral home and went to make the arrangements.

"He didn't attend any church," she confessed.

"We can have a short service here, if you'd like. Did he have a faith?"

"Roman Catholic."

"Then I will contact Father Lester and make arrangements for the burial at the cemetery. You don't need to worry about anything Mrs. Trevor. Why don't you go home and get some sleep?"

Yes, she agreed, but when she got home she couldn't sleep. It was as far away from her as she could imagine.

She made herself a proper cup of tea, in the china cup her mother had given her before she went into the nursing home. The cup had pink roses around the inside, and on the saucer. Tea tasted good in it, hot and slightly sweet from the sugar she allowed herself.

She sat at the kitchen table for the longest time, wondering what she was supposed to do now. But mostly she thought about the strange story he'd told her, then remembered his box of old photos and papers at the top of the hall closet.

Inside, she found pictures of his grandfather, and one of his grandmother, neither of whom she'd ever met. His grandmother had died when Liam was a child. She also found the deed to the house, and the bank book, but no will. She would have to engage a solicitor. Maybe the man at the funeral home could help her with that.

Near the bottom of the box there was a yellowed clipping about his grandfather. Michael Trevor had been one of the survivors of the Titanic. When the iceberg hit he made his way up from the third level, and out onto the deck. He said he'd searched in vain for

his wife, Mary, before abandoning hope and the ship in one of the last row boats. He was allowed in because of his experience fishing. Manning the oars, he pulled away, and it wasn't until he looked back that he saw who he thought was Mary on the deck, but by then it was impossible to return. The ship was already splitting apart. He thought he saw Mary sit down in one of the deck chairs. His heart broke, but he had to think of himself and the others in the boat now because there was nothing left to be done, except to go on.

She sat for the longest time, holding the clipping, then put it back in the box, and went into the bedroom to strip the sheets. The open windows had freshened the room. She rolled up the bedding and put it in a garbage bag.

She wouldn't sleep in this bed again. For now she would sleep on the sofa, and keep the windows open to breathe fresh air.

When things were fixed up she would sell this place, and move closer to her mother. She could spend her days helping to care for her.

Maybe there would be enough from the sale for her to go on, for a while.

