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George
Irena Hill

George's complexion looked patchy, his cheekbones unnaturally pink and the rest of his face pasty grey. He was wired up the way she'd pictured him when she heard the news. She noticed that his hair had receded more than she remembered and looked like the soft grey-white tufts under the wings of small birds. She felt a pang of nostalgia for ancient gestures – running her fingers through his thick hair, touching his lips which were now concealed by the oxygen mask, reaching under the sheet for the soft skin in warm, quiet places, until the quietness was overcome by desire and urgency. And now this. And before this, the emptiness of other, newer, gestures: a rare peck on the cheek, the conversations at cross purposes, the lack of eye contact, the silence that was prelude to more silence.

She hadn't seen George looking so helpless, ever. In sleep he was restless and noisy, otherwise he was always in control. What a high price to pay, she thought, staring at the beeping machines above his bed. When she looked at him again, she saw a stranger she pitied and did not love. None the less, she rested her hand gently on his naked shoulder. Everybody deserves compassion, she thought. This could be a truce, or the end. A very small voice inside her whispered 'perhaps even a beginning'.

- Mrs Stone, I'm doctor Carlsson. I'm sorry about your husband. We're doing all we can and he seems to be responding well. We'll know more in the next 24 hours.

- Is he going to die? - Anna asked, making sure that her voice betrayed no trace of anything other than concern.

Doctor Carlsson looked at Anna, then looked away. Anna wanted to ask again but knew she didn't want to hear the answer. She held her breath and closed her eyes. When she was little, she believed that by doing that a bubble would grow around her and keep her safe.

- Mrs Stone.... - the doctor said gently after a few moments.

Anna made herself open her eyes and look at the doctor's pale, Scandinavian features.

- As I said, we shan't know more until tomorrow or even the day after, but I must be honest with you, there is a possibility that he will survive but remain in a coma of some kind. Please don't worry about it now. You need to rest and look after yourself. It won't be easy, whatever the outcome. Go home and sleep, Mrs Stone, and I'll see you tomorrow, you can visit any time.

Anna looked at her hand still resting on George's shoulder and, as the doctor's words sank in, she jerked it away as though his skin had become toxic. She looked around for a washbasin and scrubbed her hands fiercely and then, as sobs rose from the pit of her stomach, she scrubbed her face too. Each time she dried it, the sobs started up again. In the end she pressed a few paper towels hard over her eyes and cheeks until the emotions ebbed away and her breathing returned to normal. And when she opened her eyes she saw that someone, like the tooth fairy of her childhood, had quietly stolen in and left a cup of tea and a biscuit there on the side for her.