

THE QUARRY

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Mourning Sickness

Mary's collar was tight around her throat. She hadn't worn this dress in almost a decade. It was her mourning dress; black lace and buttons. It usually sat, forgotten, at the back of her wardrobe. The collar had been much looser around her neck ten years ago.

Funerals had never been easy. Her first had been the hardest by far. She had been wearing another uncomfortable dress. But it was smaller, much smaller, to fit her child's body. After the first came a slew of other, barely recognisable names that she had watched lowered into the ground. Now today. She wasn't sure what to think of today yet.

She tapped her cigarette, and watched the ash tumble into an ashtray on the windowsill. John's presence still lingered, even though she had watched his casket

being lowered into its grave barely a few hours before. It was in the silver ashtrays dotted all over the house, in the sickly-sweet scent of cigars still hanging in the air of the drawing room. Emphysema had killed him, inevitably. Mary considered the cigarette in her own fingers for a moment, before remembering that she was too old to care. She looked at her aged hand, at the wedding band around one finger. The ring was perfect. Just like everything in their house, and their lives. Almost.

A lawyer had come to see her earlier, when John was barely in his grave. He had greased hair, slicked back, and his forehead was creased in apology.

'Hello, Mrs Williams. I'm Daniel Brigham. I'm here to discuss the allocation of your late husband's estate.'

'Yes, come in.'

Mary heaved over the toilet bowl. Stomach acid burned its way up her throat and out of her mouth as tears stung her eyes. She coughed and spluttered a few more times before wiping her damp forehead. The nausea still hadn't abated. Surely there couldn't be much left in her stomach.

A knock on the bathroom door demanded her attention. She was about to answer it when her stomach heaved again. She supposed the sound of her retching was answer enough.

'This is the third morning in a row, Mary,' John's voice called through the door, 'I'm taking you to the doctor before work.'

Mary didn't answer. There was no room for discussion, she could tell as much from his tone. She got to her feet on wobbly knees and leaned over the sink. The glint of her wedding ring caught her eye. Six months. Just six months of marriage, and already his true colours were beginning to emerge.

The doctor's face beamed at her across the desk.

'You're pregnant, Mrs Williams. Congratulations.'

Mary froze. Pregnant? The doctor continued to smile at her, seeming to wait for a reaction. John squeezed her hand. She looked across at him.

‘Hear that, Mary? Pregnant!’ John was smiling at her, just as the doctor was. But his was not the smile of an expectant father. She read relief in his expression, it seemed as though a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

Pregnant.

‘How wonderful,’ Mary said through bloodless lips.

‘May I say again how sorry I am for your loss, Mrs Williams?’

‘Thankyou, Mr Brigham. I appreciate your concern.’

Books and pamphlets every colour of the rainbow spread out in front of her; *Pregnancy and Childbirth, Your First Baby, The Gift of Birth*. Mary closed her eyes and picked one at random and flipped through it until she found some diagrams. They gave her a very detailed picture of how her body was going to swell to accommodate the growth.

She touched her stomach. It had thickened only slightly in the last six weeks. She probably wouldn’t have noticed if she hadn’t spent so much time in front of the mirror every day, looking for the signs. Her morning sickness still hadn’t abated. In fact, it had become part of her routine. The nausea woke her each morning, and she spent at least a half hour over the toilet bowl. Once she felt well enough to get up, she stripped off her nightgown and studied her stomach in the mirror, from every angle.

She had tried to imagine a baby. A small, helpless creature that needed her to nurture and love it. But she could not equate the tiny, gurgling bundles she had seen so many women carrying with the invasion upon her person she was experiencing. Lethargy, vomiting, and a swelling abdomen. It was making her sick.

She continued flipping through the chapters, until a bold title caught her eye, and she froze. Her fingers brushed the lettering, but then jumped away as though they had been stung. She breathed in deeply, and the long-ago, almost forgotten memory seemed to rush back to her.

‘Labour & Birth’

Mary had heard the sounds of childbirth once before. She was five years old, and her sister was coming into the world between screams and groans.

Her mother had given birth in her bedroom, with only Mary’s father and a single midwife. Their house was decrepit and isolated, and the summer sun beat down hard upon the tin roof. Suffocating heat filled the small rooms, and the smell of childbirth hung in the air.

She was called back and forth to the bedroom with orders from her father for towels or hot water. Every time she drew near the room, the sweat and stress of three adults would hit her nostrils, and she struggled not to retch.

She caught glimpses of her mother, her nightgown nearly transparent with sweat. She saw her sitting up and crying out in pain, her face beet red and her hands clutching her swollen stomach. She saw the midwife looking between her legs, and didn’t understand why. Her mother had always taught her to sit with her knees together.

She lingered uncertainly in the hallway, until her mother started screaming.

‘Get it out! Please, get it out!’

She started to rush into the room, but her father was already closing the door. He didn’t meet her eyes, and she watched the droplets of sweat roll down his cheek.

Mary heard sounds of panic coming from behind the door. She heard more cries of pain, and eventually the sound of a baby crying. Words about ‘calming her down’ and ‘stopping the bleeding’ echoed through the door. Hours later, there was silence for a very long time. Then she heard the two, irrevocable words that changed everything.

‘She’s gone.’

Mary sat with her back pressed against the wall, and didn’t understand why.

‘So, you are the sole executor and beneficiary of your late husband’s estate.’

'Correct.'

'And your current Will and Testament states that your assets will be divided equally between your sister, Susanne Hart, and your brother-in-law Marcus Williams. Are there any changes you wish to make?'

'No. No changes.'

The dining room was silent, but for the ticking of the cuckoo clock, and the little chimes of cutlery against the plates. Mary stared at her food, but felt no appetite. The pungent smell of John's cigar wafted over to her, and she crinkled her nose. Why couldn't he wait until after dinner to smoke the stupid thing, like most people? She started when he barked something across the table at her.

'What?'

His forehead crinkled in annoyance. *'I said, the asparagus is overcooked.'*

'Oh. Sorry.'

'You know, if you can't manage to cook a simple meal, I can just hire a maid to do it for you.'

Mary sighed. It was the long hours he was working, she told herself. He had never been so harsh, so unfeeling when they were engaged, or even in the first few months of marriage. He had been charming, and courteous. He had even bought her flowers.

'No, John. It's fine. I've just had a lot on my mind lately.'

'What could you possibly have on your mind?'

Mary closed her eyes. She was feeling a little light-headed. She'd had an appointment with her doctor that day and complained of trouble relaxing. He'd sent her home with a bottle of white pills, and she'd taken two before dinner. She let their calming effect take over, and the words spilled out.

'I don't want to be pregnant.'

Her heart beat twice as fast as the cuckoo clock. John's disbelieving, uncomprehending face stared at her across the dining table. Mary was already regretting the words.

'It's a little late. You already are,' he said, and took a puff from his cigar before returning to his meal.

Mary steeled herself. She'd come this far.

'I...I've told you about my mother before.'

John sighed, and placed down his knife and fork.

'Mary, your mother lived in a dilapidated farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. She had no professional medical care, just a midwife doing some guesswork. We live minutes away from one of the finest hospitals in the country. Stop worrying. It's pointless.'

'But, I still—'

'Enough!' John pushed his plate away and stood up. 'This is what you're meant to do, and you're doing it. I'm going for a drive to clear my head. You'd best get an early night's rest. You're not acting yourself, Mary.'

He left the room without another word. Mary heard him coughing from the hallway, and watched tired eyes as the smoke rose from his cigar.

'It's a shame, really.'

'What's a shame, Mr Brigham?'

'That there are no children to inherit this beautiful home. It'd be perfect for raising a family.'

'I suppose it would.'

Mary's hands shook as she poured herself another generous measure of whiskey. Her thoughts, and her vision, were pleasantly blurred. It usually took much more to get her this drunk. She supposed the pills were helping.

She touched her stomach instinctively, irresistibly, and for the thousandth time wished it away. She decided to go upstairs and sleep until the morning sickness woke her the next morning. She didn't want to see John, whenever he got home.

She glared at the coffee table, stacked with her pregnancy books. On a whim, she lifted a high-heeled foot and upturned the table viciously, sending the books scattering and the table crashing after them. In that moment, however, she lost her precarious, drunken balance and fell to the floor. She landed hard on her stomach on the wooden floorboards. Pain shot through her abdomen, and she struggled back to her feet. She kicked off the heeled atrocities and stumbled, vision spinning, to the staircase.

A painful cramp gripped her stomach as she walked. She doubled over and clutched her stomach, gasping, until it stopped. She made it up five stairs before hunching over in pain again, heart hammering in her chest.

A strangled noise escaped her as the cramp eased and she made her way, slowly, up the rest of the stairs. Somewhere in her lethargic, disorientated mind she realised that she had options. Only a few metres away was the telephone. She could take those last few steps and call an ambulance, and let them try to save her pregnancy. But that wasn't her only choice.

She thought of her mother. She remembered her red face and sweat-soaked nightgown in the last, painful hours of her life. She remembered the last words she had heard her scream. *Get it out! Please, get it out!*

Just finish it, she thought. Mary closed her eyes. She lifted her unsteady hand from the banister, rose onto her toes, and let her stockinged feet slip off the staircase.

Her heart had finally settled to a steady thrum. She could hear it, and she could smell linen and chemicals. Her eyes flickered open. The room was as white as it smelled. Her heart seemed very loud in her ears, until she realised it was the beeping of the machine she was hooked up to. Hospital. She was in a hospital.

'Mary?' John's face slowly solidified above her.

'What happened?' she croaked. She could already see the hard lines of his face forming.

‘You drank yourself stupid and lost our child, that’s what happened.’

Relief. Quickly followed by crushing guilt.

‘I’m sorry, John.’

‘You should be. What the hell were you thinking, Mary?’

What *had* she been thinking, marrying this man? With the permanent crease of anger between his eyebrows, and the inability to comprehend anything beyond his own, narrow scope of reasoning. She looked into his grey eyes. ‘I wasn’t.’

She watched his face carefully. It didn’t soften. She knew it never would.

‘They’re going to keep you under observation for the next twenty-four hours. I’ll be back tomorrow to pick you up.’

Mary nodded, ‘I really am sorry.’

He left without answering. Mary was certain he would never forgive her.

‘Well, thank you for making my job so easy.’

‘That’s quite alright, Mr Brigham. Have a safe trip home.’

‘I will. Do take care of yourself, Mrs Williams.’

Mary finished her cigarette, and stubbed it out in the ashtray. She sat back on the lounge and placed a hand on her stomach in a way she hadn’t done in so many years. So much unexpected, uncontrollable guilt.

She thought of her mother, who she so often tried to keep from her mind. She had died sweating and bleeding, with her husband beside her. She thought of John. Of his coldness, of their empty marriage. Death had been on Mary’s mind a lot lately, but it was only then, in this cold house, with the smell of stale cigars in the air, that she acknowledged that she herself would die alone. But then, she remembered, she was too old to care.