

Helen was in the garden again. Counting pegs. Some days she'd count them as she put out her washing but once she had begun to put them in colour order too. Warms to cools to white. White was the coldest being the colour of snow. From then on she not only counted pegs but followed her colours too.

Sometimes she could hear the baby scream. She didn't rush inside, not until she'd finished. Then she would run, holding the washing basket in one hand and the peg basket in the other. Across the grass and the terrace, stumbling past earthenware pots crammed with Lobelias and Impatiens, and up the steps to the French doors. She wouldn't leave the unused pegs outside. Once inside she would count the pegs left over and add up the scores to make sure all pegs were accounted for. Only then would she see to the baby. Scoop him up and unhook the ugly bra, the only one that fitted. Hugo latched on and sucked noisily. Finn would start to yell at the top of his lungs. He'd spent a lot more time at home since the baby arrived.

She hadn't talked to Alan about the pegs. And the pegs were just a part of it. There were days when Helen sat at the kitchen table, holding her chin in her hands, her eyes squeezed shut. Shutting her mind to her house filled with smooth surfaces, bench tops and tables, now covered with the debris of family life.

"Are you alright, Mummy?" Finn's voice, curious but not concerned, he was only three and half after all. "Can I watch TV, Mummy?" Helen swept her hands through her hair and stopped at the matted curls which held them prisoner. She looked up at the innocent but still manipulating face of her first born. His white blonde hair cut short on the sides. The glint in his eyes told her that he knew he had won, even before she spoke softly. "Yes". She wondered if she had the energy to care whether he watched too much telly anymore. Her previous regimes seemed to belong to someone else, someone military perhaps.

How Alan hadn't noticed was astonishing to her. He must have a lot on at work, she'd stopped asking. Or he'd been screwing one of the paralegals, she had no feelings either way. Helen felt invisible, her form was completely transparent, a substance like cellophane stopped her innards from leaking onto the new carpet.

She hadn't always been like this, she thought to herself for who was there to listen. The strains of 'Bob the Builder' could be heard from the other room and Helen could weep at how her life had shrunk to this. Even the face of her angel baby didn't touch the fibres of her any more.

She had once been a girl who'd broken men's hearts, who refused to bow to convention. She'd wanted to be free but in time ended up behaving like the men she looked down upon, leaving before her one night stand awoke, drinking too much. One man did stand out, not Alan, he came

later. This one had been called Dave, they'd met at medical school. When they moved in together she swapped their traditional roles. Helen would wash the car on Sunday mornings while Dave would sweat over a roast, trying not to burn the gravy. It turned out that Dave was a terrible cook and she hated cleaning the car. Even now she drove round in a car whose bonnet was marked by rotting fruit dropped from trees, while the inside looked as if she had strewn the contents of a litter bin evenly over seats and in the foot wells. Wet food dried slowly on the baby's car seat. She hadn't even wanted children. She wanted to travel the world, save the planet, dance in Rio, and meditate in the Himalayas. At the end of the day even Helen the brave became a slave to her body, her urges, and the chemical compositions of her. When she met Alan she had recently shaved her head for charity but he saw through the stubble to the woman Helen really was. He saw what no one had seen before. She wasn't an easy lay who was great fun at parties. She was all heart and soul. And the sight of her scared the be-Jesus out of his mother which could only be a good thing.

She'd been attracted by Alan's fair hair, his face which turned pink when he was flustered. It touched her insides that he was a vulnerable man. She had no time for heroes. Helen could see in his eyes that he knew she didn't believe him when he pretended to be the tough guy.

Now Alan came home to a woman with dried milk and cereal stains on her clothes. He tried to help, bunching discarded clothing and carefully folded soiled nappies and putting them down somewhere else. When Helen made a supreme effort and showered, her lank hair curled with tongs for extra body, she had no interest in laying down her besieged self for her husband. She was the hand servant of infants and there was nothing left for anyone else. Least of all herself.

Helen's mind drifted to the women she used to welcome into her surgery, sad women with washed out faces, limp clothing. She would flash her confident and slightly smug smile at them, prescribe tablets and talk to them in her dulcet tones. "You'll be fine. Make sure you shower in the morning, it'll make you feel better. Buy flowers for yourself and don't expect to be perfect." She thought she'd got it nailed, the post-baby blues. Now Helen could only imagine how those poor women must have hated her.

After Hugo's birth but before the pegs she had made up tunes in her head, noises to shut the demons out. Helen hadn't planned the counting. She was out at the clothes line during one of those wonderfully warm and blustery days, perfect for laundry. She was attempting Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue', the notes crowding her brain when she realised that as she pegged each item of clothing numbers flew from her frontal lobe. Numbers clear and certain against a backdrop of mess and madness, they stood up tall and proud, very clean. The sounds of music and Hugo's wails slipped off beyond the mountains. Only digits ruled here.

After work Alan stormed through the kitchen, effing and blinding. “Damn, damn. I forgot to get those papers to the bank for signing.” Vague thoughts of re-mortgaging floated through Helen’s mind. They missed her doctor’s salary, had fallen behind. Alan looked over at her, a skeptical expression on his face. “I don’t suppose you...? Fuck it, Helen. You’ll have to. It’s just a case of signing them in front of the mortgage manager. Nice girl.” The rosy colour in his panicked face didn’t make her glow any more. Helen felt numb.

Alan didn’t know that it’d been a month since his wife had left the house. A month since the front door had clicked safely behind her. She’d been buying groceries on-line and festering in a range of nightwear during the day since that awful time in the post office. She didn’t want to tell him but she didn’t want to go out either. She had to keep her secret or the contempt he held in his eyes for her could well evolve into pity. Helen would not be pitied.

She planned her moves overnight, while Alan slept. She prepared the bag for the baby, spare nappies, clothes, teething gel and a rattle. She placed them in the bottom of her McLaren stroller, the Rolls Royce of buggies. Alan had bought it himself, proudly showed her its features. Yet another status symbol where the cheaper option would have done just as well. Helen placed a book and a pop gun in the basket for Finn. For herself she packed a bottle of rosemary essential oil for nerves and threw in one of those miniature bottles of scotch Alan brought home from mini-bars in hotels. He still hadn’t realised he was charged for them.

Helen sat on a dining room chair next to the stroller and heard Hugo’s faint cries, growing more frantic. She ran up to his room, Alan hadn’t wanted their newborn in their bedroom, he couldn’t sleep. If he couldn’t sleep, he couldn’t work. And someone had to. Helen felt her inner soul become less visible than it already was. She sat downstairs, baby at her breast, tears on her face. Afterwards she crawled into bed beside her sleeping husband who had no clue to the world Helen now inhabited.

Alan had left before Helen opened her puffy eyes. Finn was sitting crossed legged on the bed, poking sticky fingers at her cheeks. Alan must have given him breakfast. Helen wiped a crusty line that ran from her mouth to the pillow. “Mummy! Hugo was screaming and screaming.”

Helen only heard the sound of next doors car reversing sharply from their driveway. “No, sweetheart. He’s quiet.”

Finn grinned. “He is now. He might be dead.” He began to jump on the bed. There was no fear at the core of her, only a sense of right and wrong. It would be wrong to go back sleep before checking on Hugo. She launched across the bedroom carpet and ran into the baby’s room. Hugo was passed out on his back, his tears still wet on his cheeks. The room stank of shit.

Helen sat with her coat buttoned up and Hugo in the stroller next to her. Finn ran around with his hoodie on backwards. Surely that was dangerous. All she could think of was how she could murder a cigarette but she'd given up years ago, there were none in the house. She remembered her first boyfriend, older, who had smoked and she'd nicked one of his cigarettes and put it in her jewelry box, along with an American dollar from a childhood holiday in the States. If she still had that ciggy it would be very stale.

She shook her shoulders and wheeled Hugo out to the car, transferred the documents from the basket at the bottom of the stroller to the passenger seat. She un-strapped Hugo and placed his moist, limp body in his seat. Then she went to collect Finn who had his head in the fridge begging for orange juice. "No darling. We have to go out now. Remember, we're helping Daddy."

That seemed to work, his face split in a grin. He closed the fridge door and placed his pudgy little hand in hers, it was still covered in honey from breakfast. Why did she not feel overwhelmed with love for this cherub of hers? She didn't feel safe with him, didn't know what he was going to do next. Helen's mind drifted to the laundry she had put on early that morning and found the strength to leave the house, lock all the doors, making sure she had her front door key in her pocket.

The bank was in the centre of town, near the town hall and the library. Parking was difficult unless you got lucky or you used the supermarket car park. On the way there Finn counted trees which Helen understood. She would have counted them herself if she hadn't needed to keep her eyes on the road. It came from long car trips before Hugo was born when Finn would get bored. Alan asked him to count trees and it worked. "Two, Six, Three!" She tried not to let the jumbled sequence bother her.

"Look at the play park, Mummy. It's shiny and new."

He was right, they had stopped going to the play park because of broken and faded equipment and that awful time when Helen's friend's daughter, Freya had picked up a syringe and pricked her hand. Monica had to take Freya for a HIV test which mercifully turned out negative. Now it had a fence round it and slippery dips and swings in reds, blues and yellows, turrets around the top of the slide. Finn loved castles.

As they approached the town, Railway Street, where men and women bustled on both sides of the road, her hands became clammy and sweat beads melted in lines from her forehead. If there's no parking in the town she would go straight home, Helen didn't want to crawl curbs looking for spaces. She begged the parking fairies not to find anything, she wanted to go home and stand in the garden, the wind whipping up her skirts, the peg basket in one hand.

And there it was, opened up like a dark chasm, a shady spot where the sun didn't shine. There were no contenders. No other hurried drivers needing to get their wages from the bank, return that overdue library book, late for their life drawing class at the town hall. It was only Helen. She circled once more for luck and when no one came she slid effortlessly into the spot, as if it were made for her 2005 model Land Rover.

Her heart pounded in her ribcage, she looked at the manila envelope on the passenger seat. Her breath became shallow and the sound of waves filled Helen's inner ear. Finn stopped counting trees and Hugo began to whimper. He was still slightly pink from his screams of this morning. One whole month, four long weeks, she had stayed at home going quietly mad, becoming lonelier by the day. Friends stopped trying to visit, she'd been hostile at their attempts and couldn't blame them.

Helen's damp hands gripped the steering wheel. She knew there was no way she could get out of the car and walk into a building as austere as this bank, with a noisy toddler and fretful baby, her face slippery with sweat, dark wet spots under her arms, to meet this 'nice girl' Alan had spoken of. Helen wasn't a nice girl.

The last time she had left the house she had queued in the post office for a passport for Hugo. The line had been long and Helen held her mewling baby in one arm and restrained a restless Finn with the other. They could travel to the places they had before kids, couldn't they? Vietnam, India, Nepal. The passport papers were clamped between her teeth as she breathed through her nose. When she eventually reached the man at the counter and handed him the slightly grubby forms he raised an eyebrow and turned down his lips. "Madam, we like our forms in better order. You'll have to fill in another and re-join the line."

She didn't know what possessed her but instead of arguing assertively and getting her own way, Helen burst into tears. Not pretty tears but big globs of salty water, her eyes squeezed in on themselves. The man had shrugged. Helen was determined that today would end on a more positive note. 'I'm not doing this' an inner voice struggled to be heard. Helen started the engine and drove back along Railway Street, turned right into The Avenue.

At the park Hugo slept in her arms while Finn ran round in circles, his arms stretched out and his brain full of sugar from the doughnuts she had bought from the bakery.

"Mummy, I'm outside! I'm outside!" Helen couldn't stop a smile from creeping onto her naked face. She wiped the sugar carefully from her lips, trying not to wake Hugo. Alan would be livid about the paperwork but she would gladly swap him, the house and the Land Rover for the look on Finn's face. And somewhere at the back of Helen's mind lurked that basket of wet clothes. It was a breezy day and the sun shone brightly, another perfect day for laundry.