

The Vagabond Mother

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Wild Pressed Books

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Maya

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Somebody brought them pale, sweet tea. Not *exactly* hot. Maya wondered how many corridors the tray had been carried down before reaching them. The remaining members of their family each held a cup between their shaking hands.

‘But I don’t take sugar,’ said Lola. Her eyes looked enormous to Maya, bewildered. Just like when she was a toddler and the health visitor had given her a sugar cube after a vaccination. The sugar in her tea would no more take away her pain now than the cube had done then.

A woman – a nurse, perhaps – spoke to Lola in a gentle voice. ‘You ought to drink the tea, darl. It’ll help with the shock.’

Maya saw Daisy encouraging her twin by taking the first sip. It was always Daisy’s mouth Maya had aimed for first with the feeding spoon when they were babies, as Lola would copy her sister. On Maya’s other side sat a white-faced man whom she recognised as her husband. Con’s hand lifted a

cup to his lips in a mechanical sort of way, and brown liquid leaked down his chin. Maya found that she had taken tea into her own mouth. She watched her hand reflecting Con's movements.

'Are you ready, Sir?' The officer reappeared in the room, directing his question at Maya's husband.

'Yes.' Con placed his cup somewhere to one side. He stood but his body immediately collapsed back onto the chair. He tried again.

'Where are you going?' Maya surprised herself with the loudness of her voice. She snapped her mouth shut.

'Madam, forgive me,' said the officer. *What the hell for, he hadn't killed her son, had he?* 'I'm taking your husband to identify the body.'

The book, Joe's precious book, fell from her lap as she jumped to her feet, the cup in her waving hand slopping liquid. She yelped at the sight of outspread pages on the floor. The nurse picked the book up, closed the covers and handed it back to Maya with practised tenderness, gently removing the half-empty cup from her trembling fingers.

'There you are, darl.'

Maya clutched Joe's journal to her chest with one hand and reached with her other towards Con.

'I'm coming with you,' she said. 'You're not going without me.'

'Madam, I . . .'

'Let her come.' Con spoke in a distant voice. 'She's the boy's mother. We're in this together.' He reached for her with a trembling arm.

'But Sir, it's not. . . the water, you know.'

'She's strong enough,' Con allowed his chin to rise. 'We both are. We're in this together, aren't we, darling?' He tugged gently on her arm and together they made a move towards the door.

After a few steps Maya stopped and took a shuddering breath. Turning back, she beckoned the nurse with a hand

which wouldn't quite straighten from its former claw-like grasp of the book. When she opened her mouth to speak, words at first refused to emerge. But she tried again and eventually shuffled the words on her lips until she could get them organised. 'Will you give this to my daughters to look after, please?'

The nurse nodded and came forward. She carried Joe's journal like a crown back to the twins. Placing her cup on the chair next to her, Daisy accepted the book. Lola unravelled the scarf from her neck and offered it in her two hands to Daisy, like an open shawl for a baby. Daisy placed the book in the folds of the shawl and wrapped it tightly. With the book on Daisy's lap, both girls laid a hand on it. Maya felt her mouth practising the shape of a smile, aimed at her daughters. Turning her head stiffly to face forward again, she shuffled her feet a few more steps through the doorway. Con resumed his hold of her arm.

It was cold in the pale-painted lobby. Con and Maya waited before an internal window while the officer entered the room behind it. A white-sheeted figure lay on a bed, the face covered. Maya and Con grasped each other's hands. Maya could see that Con's jaw was clenched as tightly as hers and she made an effort to loosen her muscles. They should be smiling, she and Con. When they uncovered his face, Joe would want to see his parents smiling. An attendant stood on Maya's other side, perhaps ready to catch her if she fainted.

Pause, breathe. She focussed on Con, who had turned to her. She delved into him with her eyes. The moment stretched. *Do you trust me? I trust you.* Their favourite line from a film back in the eighties. Then they both returned their searching gazes to the window.

'Ready?' asked the attendant at Maya's side. Maya replied yes as firmly as she could. The attendant nodded at the officer behind the glass, who folded the sheet back with touching courtesy.

He'd been right about the distortion from the water but it wasn't too bad, not really. He was still no more than a boy. Someone had brushed his lightish hair. His beard was so much thicker than when Maya had seen it on their last video call and the person must have brushed that too – it could never have come out of the water that neat. Maya considered the poignancy of the hairdresser's job – or whomever had to perform that task. The boy's eyes were closed of course. Something swayed beside Maya, while her feet had taken root in the tiled floor. The swaying thing was like a tree in a gale: indeed, a wind seemed to be blowing down the corridor towards them. She felt hair lifting from her neck. But when she looked up she saw that the swaying tree on her right – sighing along with the wind in its branches – was in fact her husband. It was only Con, the breath from his lungs rising to a musical note of pain.