

Children in the House

“Mum, you’re smiling at nothing again.”

“Was I, Dear?” Ruth turns to her son. She can see him, the edges of him, at the table where his father used to sit. She moves her head to look at his face, but the black haze moves with her. Ruth wonders if his hair has greyed more than she remembers, if he has gained weight.

“Remember what the doctor said, Mum, when it happens, move your eyes left and right a few times.”

Stephen calls in a lot now he’s retired; visits that Ruth cherishes. Having her son in the house, where he grew up, where he played, did his homework, sat with his first girlfriend; it restores a balance. Ruth used to open the wardrobe in his old room, just to look at growth marks on the back of the door, but they are too hard to see now. She sighs; time goes too fast until it goes too slowly.

“Are you listening, Mum? These things aren’t real. It’s just the macular degeneration. Charles Bonnet syndrome. You know that, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. I’m going blind, not batty,” she says, and, she thinks, wearing out and winding down.

“It’s your brain, making up for lost sight by creating stuff to see. Nothing to worry about.”

“Why can’t you call them what they are, Stephen? Hallucinations.”

“Be careful Mum, if people think you’re seeing things, some do-gooder will send you to the old folks’ home.” His voice frays at the edges, the way men’s voices do, when they will themselves not to weep. “I have to get going,” he says.

“Turn the heater on before you leave, Dear. Set it to go off at eight, please. I’ll be in bed by then.”

Ruth closes the curtains and shuts the doors to keep in the heat. Winter evenings are her favourite. How wonderful they used to be; the whole family cocooned in this cosy little room. Dad, in the big chair, head back, snoring; the dog asleep at his feet. Her, beside him, knitting a jumper or beanie or cardigan. Stephen, lying on the floor in front of the heater, watching television, his face flushed. How old was he when he stopped doing that? Tracy on the couch, embroidering some cute cross-stitched sampler. Ruth had them all framed and hung them in Tracy’s room. They hang there still.

Sweet Tracy is there now, on the couch, with her needle and cotton in hand. She’s wearing the orange polo neck jumper Ruth knitted for her. Ruth watches as Tracy passes the needle through the linen, and back again. And through and back again. Tracy, locked ageless into memory, lost to them when she was only ten, looks up and smiles. Ruth smiles too. She wonders how this can be so real, so perfectly real, when everybody says it’s not.

Tracy stands and this time, when she holds out her hand, Ruth goes to her, and they leave together.