

The Shed

By Deborah Lacey

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Helen slipped out from under the warm bed covers and stood in front of the pale curtained window that the daylight was trying to shine through. She looked back at her dozing husband. She loved to watch Clive sleep. Even after all these years, she still couldn't believe that she had landed him. When she'd first met him she thought him way beyond her league. So too did most of her friends for that matter, but she'd loved him from the start. Their wedding day was the happiest day of her life.



Helen made her way downstairs to the bright kitchen, put the kettle on, and opened the blind of the big window that overlooked the garden. She loved this house and its huge garden. It was a beautiful house, tastefully decorated, with the best sort of expensive furniture. Clive particularly loved the garden- he'd always kept it immaculate. Long gone were the days when it was furnished with swings, coloured plastic toys and a climbing frame. Both their boys were at university now. Funny, the house didn't feel empty- no empty nest syndrome here. They'd potter round the garden together in the evenings, in amiable companionship, laughing, pruning and weeding, and when the weather allowed, pour a large glass of wine, pull out a garden chair and chat about their children and their day. Life was good.

Helen made a large pot of coffee, and some toast, Clive appeared at the kitchen door, yawning, in his dressing gown and pyjamas. She walked towards him and wrapped her arms around him. She loved to hold him: "Morning, sleepy head." They always had breakfast together on Saturdays- Helen loved the weekends. He was here in the mornings, and he'd read articles aloud from the newspaper to her. Sometimes they'd laugh about the ridiculous letters people would write to the editor. They had always shared the same sense of humour; it was one of the things that had attracted him most to her. Clive asked what she had planned for the day, and she said she was hoping to do a bit of shopping in town, before meeting Jacqui for lunch. She reckoned she'd be back sometime around four o'clock. He laughed at the idea of the shopping and told her not to buy any more shoes. He said he would do a bit of work in the garden. The grass needed a trim.

They quickly dressed together the way married couples do, comfortable with each other after nearly thirty years of marriage. She put on her bright red woollen Hobbs dress, slipped her feet into the red suede LK Bennett shoes and grabbed for the Mulberry handbag he had bought her for Christmas. Clive loved to see her dressed well. He told her she looked great as he pulled on his gardening clothes. She got into the new BMW which was parked on the drive and threw her coat on the back seat. She kissed him goodbye, and drove off. He watched her leave, waved, then made his way across the garden to the shed.

The shed was right at the back of the garden. It had once been used to house the coloured plastic toys, bats and balls, footballs, dartboards, and children's garden furniture, but these days it housed different kind of things to play with. Clive unlocked the door and stepped inside. He set the carrier

bag down on the little floral armchair, then slowly took off all his clothes. He laid the clothes in a neat pile then placed them outside the shed door. He looked down at the rose pink carpet under his bare feet, slipped on the satin dressing gown which had been hanging behind the door and took the few steps towards the low chest of drawers at the other end of the shed.



He opened the top drawer and peered at the various pots, plastic containers and bottles. He lifted out Estee Lauder All Day Foundation, colour Fresco, and started to paint on “Christine’s” face. He grimaced in the large ornate gold framed mirror, feeling for a second slightly ridiculous, maybe even repulsed by his need of her, but Christine had always been here. He’d tried to deny her for a long time, but eventually she became so powerful that he was forced to acknowledge her. The acceptance was liberating: he felt free, like himself for the first time, complete even, but he knew it would be hard for some people to understand.

Helen made her way across the garden on her return from town. She averted her eyes from the pile of clothes, and cheerily opened the door of the shed. She looked into the grateful over-made-up face of her husband: “Hello, Christine dear, I’ve brought you a cup of tea.” Helen thought that Clive really could do with a makeup lesson, but she’d never want to offend Christine by suggesting it. She looked at the high necked blouse with the large bow, the neat pleated knee length skirt and Clive’s huge feet in the black patent t-bar shoes. “You look nice dear- are you planning to go out?” Christine smiled back, “Not today, I’m planning to listen to the radio for a while, and then I have a Bella magazine I’m going to read.” He fumbled in the carrier bag. Helen headed towards the door, “Great! Then I’ll see you later.”

When Helen had closed the shed door, Clive leaned back in the little armchair and closed his eyes. he began to relax completely while listening to the strains of the music on Radio 2. Several hours later, feeling refreshed, he poured himself a large gin and tonic. Christine loved gin and tonic. He read the magazine from cover to cover, and finally when he had read his horoscope he returned to the chest of drawers and removed a plastic packet of makeup wipes. He began to dismantle Christine.

Helen watched Clive open the garage where the lawnmower was stored. She was glad to see him back. She remembered the first day she met Christine. She’d had a headache and came home from work early. Clive’s car was in the drive, and she thought it was strange; the hairs on her neck were standing on end as she entered the house. She wondered if he was having an affair, if there was another woman in their bed. She made her way quietly upstairs, pushed open the bedroom door, and found Christine trying on her clothes. Clive had looked horrified through his makeup mask. Helen held her hands up to her face, realising that the noise that she had intended to make would not form in her mouth. He lurched towards her and tried to hold her, to reason. He loved her, he’d get help. She heard him scream: “Please, Helen!” as she ran out of the house.

She’d sat in the car looking at the sea for hours, numb. Her alpha male, the respectable dentist, with the perfect life, was a freak. She looked at her face in the car mirror, makeup melting down her face, until eventually she returned home. He was distraught: “What are you going to do?” In truth, she didn’t know, but she wanted to understand, and so the internet research began; she learned it wasn’t anything to do with her, just a need not met any other way, not controllable, but tolerable

she thought. Eventually, when she was sure, she told him how they could both live with Christine; Christine would stay in the shed. Clive thought he couldn't love her more than he did at that moment, her calm acceptance of what most women could never tolerate. Helen thought she might have to rethink if Christine ever wanted to leave the shed, but she'd worry about that if it ever happened. She would never want Clive to be hurt in any way by ridicule from anyone, and she was pretty sure their boys wouldn't understand, but he was such a special man, she loved him unconditionally, and he'd allowed her to see him at his most vulnerable. They had no secrets, and she felt privileged by that, by his trust. Christine was a small price to pay.

Later that evening they sat together looking over the neat lawn, sipping berry coloured red wine from huge goblets, savouring the last light of the day, Clive reached across and squeezed her hand and he asked how her day had been. She knew his tension had gone, and she was glad. She patted his arm. "I had a really nice day, thank you darling, but I have a confession: I bought shoes."