

Short Sighted

A tale about a haunting, set in a sleepy English coastal town that had seen better days.

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She'd been stood looking at the window display, for a long time. Too long really, for even the most careful buyer of spectacles or contact lenses. Sylvia Chuntz hadn't stood in front of the optician's window for ten years and they'd only done glasses then, contact lenses were new. Or were they? At eighteen she'd used another optician in a town twenty miles away, to get tested for lenses. Was it just an excuse? Since making the appointment, her memories had been returning and some of them were quite disconcerting. Sylvia had been sixteen when something had happened in the front room of the optician's shop and she was now twenty six.

Nathaniel Rowe Opticians – It said in curly writing, which spanned the entire front of the shop. No modern aluminium shopfront for them, it was still the same green painted wood, the words hand painted in gold lettering. It was the same gold on green when she'd been sixteen, or twelve for that matter, when her mum had first brought her in to see the optician.

"The school tested her and said her eyes need testing." Her mum had told the receptionist. "I have noticed she does squint a lot for a girl her age. National health glasses of course, we're not made of money."

Everyone in the small town of Baddow St Mary seemed to be hard up then, they still were. The whole Norfolk coastline had done well in the Victorian era, the town even boasted at having a mineral spring, though the water had a disconcerting yellow tinge to it. After that there had been a steady and terminal decline, that none of the 'local initiatives,' had managed to halt. The town was dying and Nathaniel Rowe was the best opticians in town, mainly because it was the only opticians in town. One of the big chains had once opened a shop in the High Street, but that closed after eighteen months.

"Morning Sylvia, I heard you were back to look after your mum. How is she?"

"She's doing alright Carole, taking it one day at a time."

Carole Young her best friend at school, or worst bully, depending on how you viewed it. She was certain that Carole thought of them as friends, but she had been president of the 'Chunky Chuntz,' torment club. Sylvia had been fat at sixteen, though like most big girls, she didn't want to be told she was fat, from nine am, right through to four pm. She didn't like big or large either, they both really meant fat. Heavy she didn't mind so much, it didn't make her twitch if someone called her heavy, there was no feeling of instant insult. Sylvia had been a heavy girl, until she sought help while at college.

"You look so different." Said Carole. "I almost didn't recognise you."

"Yeah, I dyed my hair blonde. So fed up with the mousy look."

"Very funny, you know what I mean! What are you now, size eight?"

"About that."

Her hair was blonde now and she had the roots done very four weeks. She was wearing a red and white striped dress, which hugged her figure in all the right places. She realised that for the first time she could remember, she looked better than Carole. Mind you it's not easy to look good, pushing twin two year old boys in a double buggy, on a hot summer's day. Who had Carole married? Her mum had sent her a letter about it, before her memories began to wander.

"Are you back for good?" Asked Carole. "You must come over on Sunday, Dan remembers you."

Dan of course, Dan Fraser. Two years above them in school, with no reason to dislike her, but he'd ended up in the Chunky Chuntz gang. A real winner was Dan ! He'd once punched her on the shoulder, so hard that she'd fallen over in the playground. No clever name calling for Dan, no rapier like wit.

"Fat bitch !" He'd shouted at her.

Sylvia was certain that every girl in the school had sworn a solemn oath, that Dan Fraser must never be allowed to breed. It seemed that Carole hadn't received the memo.

"My job gave me a bit of time off." She said. "To see if mum is likely to get better, or make other long term plans."

Her mum seemed too young for Alzheimer's, but that was the name the hospital was currently giving it. She went from being her old lucid self, to barely recognising her. All in the space of a morning. The doctors were currently testing and coming up with other ideas, but Sylvia was fairly certain that they didn't know what was wrong with her mum. It kept getting worse though, that much was clear.

"Are you taking your mum back to London then ?" Asked Carole. "Do you have a big flat or something ?"

No, Carole was no longer on her mental list of people who deserved to hear personal information. Counselling had made her feel better about herself and all too aware of how nasty Carole had been to her. One of the girls at college had begun teasing her about her weight, calling her Chunky. It was as if the nightmare was going to start up, all over again. A lecturer had found her crying and referred her to a counsellor. No pushing diet pills at her, or getting her to join silly clubs, where people cheer if you lose a pound, even if it goes right back on again. None of that worked, she'd tried everything. The counsellor was different though, he talked to her about her problems. Gerald was probably a mental health professional, though no one talked about that. Who paid for him, who he worked for ? It was all a mystery to her, but Gerald had saved her life.

"I'm late already." She told Carole. "But we must meet up, one Sunday."

"Oh ok. New glasses is it ?"

"Probably."

She walked right up to the shop door, before turning and watching Carole walk away. Maybe being heavy had done her a favour ? It was so easy for pretty girls to meet someone like Dan, get married and be pushing a double buggy by the time they were twenty six. That's what small towns did to people, there was little all else to do.

Gerald had seen her once a week for two years and they'd become friends, though she hadn't thought much of his technique at first.

"We're going to treat your weight as a crime scene." He'd told her. "We'll look at means, motive and opportunity, from your past, right up to now."

Means was easy, her mum ! Anything for a quiet life, her mum had added fizzy drinks, sweets, cakes and even the occasional black forest gateau to the family shopping cart. It had to be cheap, but crap food usually is cheap. Opportunity ? Ditto, her mum ! Sylvia used to think she had a really nice mum, who never criticised her, or asked her to lose weight. It wasn't being nice, it was apathy. Motive was a little more complex.

"I guarantee you that a lot of your college friends feel pissed off a lot of the time, but couldn't tell you why." Gerald had told her.

His honesty and natural cynicism grew on her over time. There were no mindless motivational posters on Gerald's wall. No reminders that frowning used more muscles than a smile. Fuckers ! Gerald knew it was hard growing up and probably even tougher as an adult.

"Humans were designed to live in small groups, probably about twenty." Gerald had said. "Few conflicting opinions and most of your energy went into keeping a few bits of livestock alive and growing enough to eat. Then whoosh ! We've twenty four hour news on the net and social media connecting us to over two billion people, many with quite loud opinions. Is it any wonder we're dazed and confused ?"

Yeah, yeah he had a point, but there was something else in her motive list, other than the world being generally fucked up. She opened the shop door and walked inside, certain that a major incident in her life had happened in their fitting room, when she'd been sixteen.

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There was a bell on the inside of the door, which rang as she entered the shop. It looked smaller than it had when she was sixteen, but that didn't surprise her. The High Street had looked an enormous thoroughfare, until she'd been to college in London and found a job there.

"Yes, can I help you ?"

The reception desk was to the left of the door and set back a few feet. Not the rather crusty looking lady, who'd been rather rude and abrupt, but a woman with a friendly smile. Perhaps all the staff had changed, even Mr Timothy ? That thought appalled her.

"My name is Sylvia Chuntz. I have an appointment for an eye test and new contact lenses. Glasses too if they can be done at the same time ?"

Chuntz, that unusual name for Norfolk. It had been the cause of so much trouble for her as a child, yet now she loved it. Chuntz was different, people remembered it. Sylvia had no idea where it had come from though, all of her father's family looked as English as a ploughman's lunch.

"Yes of course, I'm sure Timothy can fit you in, after you've seen the optician."

"Mr Timothy is still here ?"

"I knew it, everyone who came here as a child, loved Timothy. He's older of course, but still here and making every customer feel a bit special."

He was still there, fantastic ! He probably had nothing to do with the haunting, but he'd always seemed so.... Sympathetic. Just knowing she'd soon be seeing him, cheered her up immensely.

"There was another lady on reception then. Did she retire ?" Asked Sylvia.

"Oh, you must mean Geraldine ?! Her husband worked for the local council and after he retired, they moved to Hull. I've no idea why, but it did mean that I got her old job."

"Hull ?!"

"Yes, I know ! Everyone in the town talked about it for months. She seemed far too sensible to head off to somewhere that far away."

It wasn't an attempt at irony, or said with a grin. Sylvia knew the mentality of Baddow St Mary, people really did think like that. When she'd gone to study in London, some of her mum's friends had acted as though she'd joined a satanic cult.

"And the optician, Mr Rowe, is he still here ?"

"No, sadly he passed away, about three years ago. His family still own the business though and they hired a new man, with a few modern ideas. I'm sure you'll see a few changes. Have a seat, you shouldn't have to wait long."

Oh, changes, just what she didn't want. They'd probably redecorated the front office, ruining her memories. She'd so badly wanted it all to be as it had been, even the crusty Geraldine, with her

husband who worked for the council. Sylvia sat on the leather sofa in the waiting area, which was far too soft. It enveloped her in an unwanted hug, which threatened to hold her there until she could be helped to get up.

"I'm sorry, it is far too keen on grabbing the customers. Here, let me give you a hand."

He was young and friendly, helping her up. He didn't introduce himself, simply taking her through into the room with the inevitable examination chair and eyecharts on the wall.

"Ten years since we last saw you." He said. "Sadly that isn't a record."

"I went away to college and used an opticians in London."

"Ahh, that there London, as my mum calls it. Are you back for good?"

Why was everyone so friendly and nosey? The late Mr Rowe had barely talked to her, shoving her head about, as though she was a manikin. She liked that, it was cold and professional and he hadn't asked personal questions.

"I'm not sure, my mum isn't well. It really depends on how that works out." She replied.

Why did she feel obliged to lie? There was no way she was coming back as a permanent resident of Baddow St Mary. She had the space in her house and there were better care homes in Putney, if it came to it.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Now, you probably remember how this goes, but we do have a few new pieces of equipment....."

It was a standard eye test, he even had the thing to puff air at her eye. Probably all standardised these days, even in places like rural Norfolk.

"Your left eye needs a stronger prescription for short sightedness..... Otherwise, your eyes are perfect."

It was over and she was being taken out to the reception area. It was the moment she'd been dreading and longing for, in about equal measure. Waiting in the front office, for Mr Timothy to arrive.

"I'm sure you remember where the fitting room is."

The woman on reception showed her anyway, opening the door for her.

"Timothy will be with you in a few minutes."

It was always at least ten minutes, sometimes fifteen. Sylvia had never been sure if Mr Timothy had other duties to perform, or the wait was part of a well thought out showmanship routine, like the Wizard of Oz, with his smoke and mirrors. The room had been decorated in woodchip paper, the furniture changed to something modern.

"It's horrible!" She muttered. "No lost soul will want to come here."

The expensive looking flock wallpaper had gone, to be replaced by woodchip, painted over in cream emulsion. The brown carpet had been replaced by beige carpet tiles. Mr Timothy's desk had been in the centre of the room, heavy hardwood with a green leather top. She'd loved that desk and now it had been replaced by a chrome plated steel table, with a glass top. The only object on the table, was a large oval mirror attached to a hideous chrome stand. Two hideous pods were on one side, obviously where Mr Timothy now kept his samples. The only thing she recognised, was an old hat stand in the corner.

"At least you haven't changed."

She fondled the wood, before going and sitting in the chair on the customer side of the table. It was a hideous chair, all chrome and stretched leather. Did décor really matter to whatever haunted that room? She hoped not.

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The sounds began first, it had always been the sounds. She'd been only just twelve years old the first time and hadn't been scared then. Fear would come later, if Mr Timothy, for some reason, took nearly half an hour to arrive. Sounds arrived in her mind from somewhere, sounds of a busy and bustling street, outside of the windows behind her. There had never been curtains or blinds, someone had installed frosted glass, with coloured glass decoration in the corners.

"Buses, horse drawn buses." She muttered.

Horses hooves on cobbled streets, people shouting out to one another. No sounds of petrol engines quite yet, it was the early Victorian age she was hearing, of that much she was certain. Sounds merged the seagulls might have been from a hundred years ago, or outside that very moment. Smells next, the tang of hot bodies walking past, the earthy aroma of horse manure. It was all so real, as if she could go outside and be part of it, which she knew was nonsense. It was all in her own mind, put there by whatever haunted the building.

The room altered next, a green wallpaper gradually washing over the awful woodchip. Small gold Fleur-de-lis covered the wallpaper, though they might have been just for decoration, rather than having any significance. The carpet tiles became a worn bottle green rug, surrounded by bare floorboards.

"Don't keep me waiting Mr Timothy. Get here, before 'it' does."

The desk was no longer there, Sylvia was sat on an old wooden chair, next to what might have been a bed. It was difficult to see the right side of the room, something was clouding her vision. Her heart beat faster, as she heard the door handle being turned. It wasn't it, or him, or whatever it was she'd seen that day, ten years before. It was Mr Timothy and he was smiling at her. The room and everything in it, had returned to being boring cream walls and beige carpet.

"Sylvia Chuntz, I remember you."

She imagined sixteen years old girls, fainting and falling onto the fitting room floor were rare. It was fairly certain that he'd remember her.

"Mr Timothy, it's so good to see you again. I was worried you might have retired."

"No, though I'm older of course, tempus fugit as they say. I'm only Mr Timothy to the children, to discourage too much familiarity. Please call me Timothy."

He'd had a slight stoop before, which was now more pronounced. Probably some sort of back problem, though she had no idea what. His once dark black hair, was now completely grey. His eyes were alert though, grey eyes that always had a welcoming twinkle. Timothy sat in his chair on the other side of the table, while she smiled at him. It must have looked creepy, a twenty six year old woman, smiling at him like a crazy person. He didn't seem worried by it though.

"The optician will deal with your lenses." He said. "I'm told you want glasses too, maybe two pairs?"

"Yes, one pair for everyday and another for special occasions, something a bit more fancy. I think my eyes could do with a rest from lenses occasionally."

She'd made it up on the fly, but it made sense when she thought about it. She trusted Timothy for some reason, always had, since first meeting him at the age of twelve, or it might have been eleven. Now it felt like coming home. He opened the hideous pods under the table and placed about six pairs of frames on the table, swinging the mirror towards her.

"These won't fit you, they're just to get an idea of the style that suits you. I'm sure you remember the routine."

"Yes, I do."

He helped her fit the sample frames to her head, talking her through how it looked on her face. It felt good, the attention. Soon he'd get out various measuring devices and put those against her face.

That was even better. Yes, it was attention from someone who didn't call her fat, huge or chunky. There was more to it though, everyone loves attention. A manicure, having your hair done, a massage, it was all about attention. For a few minutes, she was the centre of Timothy's attention, the only thing on his mind. That was good, it made her feel special and everyone needs to feel special for a while.

"Now for the pair for special occasions Sylvia. How wild do you want ? We have some fairly bright colours."

After choosing and the measuring, Timothy put everything into a hand written notebook. Good, she'd have hated it, if he'd brought an iPad out of the drawer.

"We'll need to see you a few times." He said. "Your lenses of course and probably two visits to make sure the glasses fit properly. One is standard, but one pair are special order only."

"I don't mind." She meant it.

The moment had come, he'd soon stand up and walk her back to the reception area. It was how small opticians remained in business, by giving that special customer experience. Geraldine might have been a bit crusty, but Timothy had always made her feel special.

"Do you have to rush off ?" She asked. "Can I talk to you about something ?"

He was neat; the sample spectacle frames had already been put away. He closed the notebook and placed his pen on top of it.

"We survive quite well," he said, "but this is as busy as we get. What do you want to talk to me about ?"

"I've seen and heard things in this room. Has anyone else ever mentioned it being haunted ?"

"Ahh, you mean the sound of horses outside and the green wallpaper ?"

"Yes, yes ! I did wonder if I was going mad."

"No you're not mad and I did wonder if you'd been scared by whatever haunts this place, when I found you unconscious that day."

"Is it dangerous ?"

"No, never ! Thousands of people have sat in this room and only a very tiny number have ever mentioned the sounds coming from outside. If there was the slightest chance of a child being harmed.....but I'm sure it doesn't mean any harm. I leave people in here for a few minutes, most seem to find it soothing."

"It is, I feel like I've arrived home. Strange, yet something terrified me that day."

"Coffee and there might be biscuits. Instant I'm afraid, but I think we need some refreshment. Then I'll tell you what I know about our haunting."

He looked old as he went to get them both some coffee. How old was he, sixties, seventies ? She was glad she'd made the appointment for new lenses, it really did feel like coming home.

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There were biscuits, half a packet of chocolate digestives. Timothy lounged back in his chair, a very un-Timothy thing to do. She sipped her instant coffee and waited for him to begin.

"We get by Sylvia, every child for miles comes here for their first pair of glasses, we have a good reputation. Whatever we talk about has to stay in this room, is that agreed ?"

"Yes, I'd never tell anyone."

"Good, or the only people through our door will be gawpers and I'll be out of a job."

"It's been ten years since I fainted in this room and I've never told anyone the truth about that day. I'm not about to start shouting about it."

He looked at her for a while and seemed to decide she was telling the truth.

“Fine, now tell me what you saw that terrified you ?”

What had it been ? At the time her mind had been blank, the terror blocked her memory, searing it closed, stopping it from causing her further fears. Over the years there had been dreams and nightmares, but was their content a real memory ?

“I’m not sure now Timothy, dreams can over write the past, especially when you’re young. I think I saw a man’s arm, dressed in a ragged black jacket. I felt so much fear though, perhaps it was something other than a man.”

“No, I think you saw a man, I’ve seen him too. Scruffy clothing, a grim look on his face, he scared me when I saw him first.”

“You’ve seen him ? Who is he ?”

“I’m here late sometimes, so used to the strange sounds and sights, that I tend to ignore them. He’s different though, you can feel the intensity coming off him in waves. He seems to be looking for someone, a wife maybe, or a daughter. He appears to see me, but leaves again when he doesn’t find her.”

“Does he call her name ?”

“He does, though I’m not sure if I should tell you, not in your highly suggestible state of mind.” She leant across the table, not quite managing to grab his hand. He moved forwards, putting his hand over hers.

“You must tell me, or I’ll worry about it, until I take my last breath.”

“He calls for a Sylvia, though it obviously can’t be you. We’re talking about an image, probably driven into the fabric of this building, over a hundred years ago. It can’t have anything to do with you.” It did though, she knew it.

“This building wasn’t always three shops with a few flats above them.” Said Timothy. “In the Victorian era, it was all one large building, a sanatorium.”

“Who came here ?” She asked.

“Not the scruffy man in the black jacket ! Only the wealthy could afford to come to a sanatorium to take the waters and breathe the sea air. Mainly people with tuberculosis, but they thought a dip in the spring and sea air cured just about anything. Polio, infections, even people suffering from syphilis, they were all sent to take the waters. As you can imagine, the mortality rate was probably high. Hardly surprising that some memories still linger in this place.”

“How do you know all this ?”

“I took an interest, after hearing the sounds and seeing the man. It’s all in the local library, the history of Victorian Baddow St Mary. The town declined, the sanatorium shut up shop and was eventually converted into three shops and a few homes.”

“He’s still looking for her, isn’t he ?”

“Or it’s just a recording, driven into the brickwork, by his feelings. Though yes, I do tend to think that the searcher is more than just some kind of Victorian VHS tape.”

Sylvia knew what she had to do, if she could talk Timothy into it.

“Poor man, over a hundred years, waiting.....”

“But not for you ! Get that out of your head. Weren’t you scared enough the last time ?”

“I was a child then, now I’m a grown woman. He’s looking for me, I know it. I want you to leave me here, on my own.”

“For how long ?”

“As long as it takes.”

Was he going to let her do it ? He didn’t seem keen.

“You were his last appointment, the optician is probably already halfway home. Paula, our new receptionist, has two children to pick up from school and feed. I’m saying that, because we’ll be the only people in the building, though I think you’d prefer it that way.”

She was actually feeling scared, but had to hide it.

“You’ll stay with me though, somewhere in the shop I mean ?”

He nodded at her.

“The frames you want have to be ordered and I’m sure you’re keen to get an exact price today. Say yes.”

“Yes, I am”

“I’ll go and make some calls then, while you wait. Might take me an hour to make those calls and place the orders.”

“An hour and a half would be better.” She said.

He looked at his watch.

“Four thirty now, I should be back with those prices by six. If you don’t mind waiting ?”

“No, that’ll be fine.”

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“I will not pass out, I will not pass out, I’m not a child anymore !”

It had taken just a few minutes for the sounds outside the window to begin, as if they were just waiting for her to be alone. Horse’s hooves and the sound of laughing children, not the sounds of anything threatening. By the time she was sat on the chair next to the bed, she knew why everything that side of the room looked distorted. It was the wall, the conversion to make Nathaniel Rowe Opticians, had broken right through what had probably been a dormitory or a ward.

“Nurse !”

Someone calling from the part of the room beyond her vision, that was new, as was the coughing that followed it. She was ready when the door began to open, more excited than scared. She was finally going to resolve the last piece of her motive, her reason for feeling unworthy of love, unworthy of anything.

“Sylvia ! Are you there child ?”

She heard the voice, before the door was fully open. An angry voice, full of stress and something else she couldn’t quite place. Then he was there, a man in worn out clothes, a look of despair on his scowling face. That had been the edge in his voice, despair. He saw her, though if anything his scowl worsened on seeing her.

“Oh child, I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Always away with the fairies, it’s a wonder the folk here put up with you.”

“I’m sorry father.”

A young voice that wasn’t hers, even if she was saying the words. The room was distinct now, row after row of beds, all occupied by people who looked seriously ill. A woman was in the bed next to her and she’d been holding her hand.

“I know you mean well Sylvia, but your mother needs you now, not some people we barely know. Come on, we need to go home. I’m sure you want to be with your mother.”

“Yes of course I do. I was going to get her something pretty.”

“No time for your messing about.”

She followed him, out of the sanatorium and onto the busy street. Horses pulling everything the smell of them filling her senses. Coal too, being delivered to a house just across the street. The

pavement was full, yet her father was setting a good pace, striding through the crowds. Sylvia, that Sylvia, was just about keeping up with him, until she saw her reflection in a shop doorway.

"I'm filthy!"

The street urchin looking back at her, was no more than eleven years old. A huge pile of dark hair covered her head, in a mess that obviously hadn't seen a brush in days, maybe weeks. Her face was grubby, a dark mark under her left eye, from rubbing at it with filthy fingers. The worst was her pinafore dress, with stains of past meals down the front. Sylvia stood, anchored to the spot by shock. Until she heard the man shouting, her father.

"Daydreaming again! While your mother lies on her deathbed!"

She expected a blow, as he strode towards her. No, he ignored the other people trying to pass and knelt in front of her, folding his arms around her.

"I know you're upset Sylvia, we all are." He said. "Your brothers are upset too, they need their big sister. I need you..... Your mother needs you."

Sylvia was no longer the grown up woman with the well paid job in London. That now felt like nothing but the dreams of an eleven year old street urchin, who was crying against her father's shoulder.

"I'm sorry! I promise to be good."

"Good girl. It'll be soon, her release from suffering will be soon."

He was up on his feet and heading across the main road, ignoring the traffic. Sylvia kept up as best she could, narrowly avoiding going under the wheels of a cart. More people on the other side of the road, more being jostled as she tried to keep up with her father. He couldn't slow down, she understood, supposing she'd already passed away when they arrived?!

"Keep up, keep up."

Down a side street, heading towards the east side of town. Almost no other people on the streets now and only one or two tradesmen encouraging weary horses, to pull over laden carts. One recognised her and called out, most people in town knew her. Sylvia simply waved, which felt inappropriate and she was glad her father didn't seem to notice. Eventually they reached the small house, where her parents had lived, since before she'd been born.

"I'm filthy!" She said.

"It doesn't matter girl none of that matters."

Their house, as she liked to think of it, but not all the house. Other families lived at the back and upstairs, while they all lived in two small rooms. Three months before, their mother had been put in a makeshift bed by the fire. She hadn't moved from it for several weeks. A smile told her that they'd arrived in time.

"Sylvia, where were you hiding?" Asked her mother.

"Not hiding..... I wanted to get you something pretty."

"I have enough pretty things. You're a good girl."

A single shelf next to the bed, with about a dozen sea shells, that her mother was handling. Sylvia collected them from rock pools, selecting only the most shiny and colourful. Then she polished them, before giving them to her mother. They looked like precious stones on the shelf, something pretty for her poor mother. Sylvia joined her two younger brothers, who were sat on the floor next to their mother's bed.

"Are you better today?" She asked.

She asked the same question every day, even though she could see the answer with her own eyes. There was barely enough left of her mother to make a dent under the bedsheet. No doctors they

were expensive, but her father had bought a few medicines. They didn't know what illness afflicted her mother, just that it seemed to be eating her away. Her face was so pale.....

"Are you hungry child ?"

"No mother."

A lie, she hadn't eaten since the previous day, but like the dirt on her face, it didn't seem to matter now. Her brothers were crying and so was her father. There was something truly dreadful about a grown man's tears.

"Don't cry girl." Said her mother.

Her mother's hand felt so cool as she held it, too cool. Sylvia held tight onto her mother's hand. So tight that she felt the moment the already feeble pulse.... Stopped. Her father tried to move her, but she held onto that hand and kept hold of it until long after it had gone cold.

"I love you....." She muttered.

Eventually Sylvia fell asleep, still holding onto her mother's hand.

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There was low lighting, coming from a lamp in the corner of the room. Coffee too, the smell reminded Sylvia of her home in London and weekend breakfast. It took her a long time to wake up and notice the man sat next to her. He'd dragged his chair round to the other side of that awful chrome table.

"Oh Timothy, it's so good to see you. What time is it ?"

"About eight. You seemed to be talking to someone and not in distress, so I left things to play out."

"Eight ! My poor mum needs her dinner. I'm glad you left me though."

The coffee had obviously been made earlier and was nearly cold, but she drank it anyway. He'd brought a box of tissues and put them on the table. Her eyes really were full of tears, which she wiped away.

"Can you tell me about it ?" Asked Timothy.

"Yes, though I don't understand much of it."

She went through it all, though the story didn't take long. More tissues were needed, as she became the other Sylvia again, reliving her memories. The feeling of being in a dream didn't last though and she was quickly herself again.

"Why me ?" She asked. "I'm not a girl of eleven, or even know the man who called me his child."

"I'm not sure, but I do have an idea. Sometimes a feeling of hopelessness can be so intense that someone will look fairly wide for comfort. I think the father was at his wits end and sought for his lost daughter everywhere, even perhaps, looking beyond his own lifetime."

"I wonder if he ever did find, his Sylvia."

Timothy looked a little awkward and held her hand. Oddly she didn't mind at all, it felt as though she'd known him all her life, which in a way, she had.

"No, he didn't." He said. "Which is why I think he called out to you. A long dead spirit perhaps, still looking for his lost child, or some kind of resolution."

"How do you know this ?"

"I know more than I told you, thought it might upset you. His Sylvia never did get home in time to see her dying mother. She'd gone to the seashore, probably looking for more shiny shells to give to her mother. Perhaps the tide changed, or she became caught up in a rock pool. We'll never know, but her body was washed up by the sea, three days later, a few miles down the coast."

"Oh, that is awful !"

"It is, but I think you've helped her father and he won't be haunting us anymore."

The small pocket at the side of her dress, felt wet. She put her hand inside and felt something hard to the touch, actually two objects. Her hand smelt of seawater, as she brought it out of her pocket. She opened her hand and dropped two shiny shells onto the glass table top. Shells that appeared to have been lovingly polished, until they were as beautiful as the best mother of pearl.

“Are you going to be alright ?” Asked Timothy.

“Yes, I actually think I’m going to be fine now.”

~ ~

~ The End ~

Sylvia was an invention and you won’t find Baddow St Mary on any map. The building is real enough, though I can’t guarantee it’s still an opticians.

Sit in that room, wait just the right amount of time and you too... might hear the horses go by....

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