

Dirty Secret

Priscilla woke sharply, a gasp on her lips. Sat upright, her eyes stared widely, unseeing in the beam of moonlight that cut between the curtains like a blade through the night. Her skin glistened slickly as her pounding heart began to slow. Shivering, she pulled her thin blanket around her shoulders for warmth.

The house held its breath, no scratch nor creak reaching Priscilla's ears. She closed her eyes, straining to hear any sign of life. Then, from outside, she heard a sharp, staccato scraping. Frowning, she slid her feet out from under the covers, flinching as she touched the icy floor.

Quietly, she crept across her room, avoiding the creaking patches she knew so well. She couldn't let Pappa hear her. She grabbed her dressing gown from the the bedroom door. It was short, and her pale wrists stuck out from the threadbare arms, but it warmed her as she crept to the window.

Slowly, carefully she reached out to the curtains, peering through the gap. Outside, a shadowy movement, a tall silhouette -

"Priscilla! What are you doing?" Priscilla let out a squeak of shock, spinning toward the door. It was only Mamma.

"You scared me Mamma!"

"Come away this instant!" It was difficult to see Mamma, she seemed almost translucent in the pale blue light of the moon. But there was no mistaking her commanding tone, however hushed.

"Sorry Mamma."

"Do you want to upset Pappa? Get back in bed."

"Yes Mamma. Sorry Mamma." Priscilla jumped onto her bed and clambered back under the covers.

"Close your eyes now 'Scilla. Go to sleep." Priscilla felt sleep wash over her like a rising tide.

"Yes Mamma."

"Good girl." Her Mamma whispered softly. "I love you."

"I love you too Mamma." Priscilla turned toward the door smiling, but Mamma wasn't there. She slept.

Priscilla woke to bright yellow sunshine streaming across her face. She leapt from her bed, dressed in an instant, and swept downstairs in a flurry of blonde hair. There she came to a sudden halt, gagging slightly on the thick stench of cleaning fluids that hung in the air. Pappa was on his hands and knees, scrubbing the kitchen floor.

"Pappa?" He looked up, staring at her with her wide, red rimmed eyes, his lined face taut.

"Get out of here!" he croaked, harsh and blunt. Priscilla swayed slightly in the fumes.

"I said get out!" He yelled. Priscilla stepped toward the back door. "No!" Her father grabbed her arm, pulling her roughly backward. She yelped in pain, her arm twisting awkwardly in his fierce grip.

"Pappa! You're hurting me!" He released her as quickly as he'd grabbed her, and she fell, her knee impacting painfully on the damp flagstone floor. She cried out, tears springing from her already watery eyes. "Pappa!"

"Oh God, 'Scilla, I'm sorry. I didn't ... I didn't mean ..." To Priscilla's amazement, giant tears rolled down her Father's cheeks as he towered above her.

"It's okay Pappa, I'm okay." Her voice seemed small as she got to her feet. "Honest Pappa, I'm okay."

Mamma stood by the stairs, beckoning Priscilla over. She looked at her Father, who seemed to stare right through her, tears staining his weathered face. Awkwardly she patted his arm, and went to her Mother.

That afternoon Priscilla played quietly with her dolls in her room while Mamma sat in the corner. Downstairs, Pappa prowled like a caged animal.

"What's wrong with Pappa?" asked Priscilla.

"Nothing's wrong darling," answered Mamma, slowly rocking as she knitted, the needles clacking and clicking together. "He just needs to be alone right now."

"Can we go in the garden?"

"Not now 'Scilla. It's not safe."

Lunchtime came and went. Priscilla continued to play. Mamma continued to knit. Click, clack ... click, clack. Pappa stayed below.

The quiet was shattered by the sharp rapping sound of the door knocker.

Rap, rap ... Rap, rap ...

Pappa answered the door, and Priscilla recognised the deep baritone rumble of her Uncle. She looked to her Mamma, expecting to be told to tidy up. But Mamma had already gone. Priscilla sighed, and started to pack her dolls away.

Glancing through the window, she stopped and stared. Mamma was outside, calmly sowing seeds in the recently turned vegetable patch. How did she get there so quickly?

She charged from her room, down the rickety stairs and past the two men in the front

room. She crashed into the garden, stumbling to a halt in the fresh dirt. But Mamma wasn't there. A lead weight fell heavily into the pit of her stomach, and she dropped to the ground.

Where did she go?

Priscilla's bare feet dug into the cool, soft earth. She wriggled her toes and felt something different. Something hard. She dug. Bare hands in the dark, fertile soil, wiping and scraping. A purse? She pulled it from the ground, earth scattering like seeds in the clear spring air.

But there was something else beneath. Something white.

"No!" Pappa was there. His voice trembling. "Stop it 'Scilla. No!"

Pappa reached for her, but her Uncle was there, holding him back. Priscilla didn't even hear. She just kept digging. She dug and she dug, her chest wracked with great tearing sobs as she tore the earth from the ground.

"Mamma!" She cried. A pale, bruised face gazed sightlessly up from the dirt.

Pale and still.