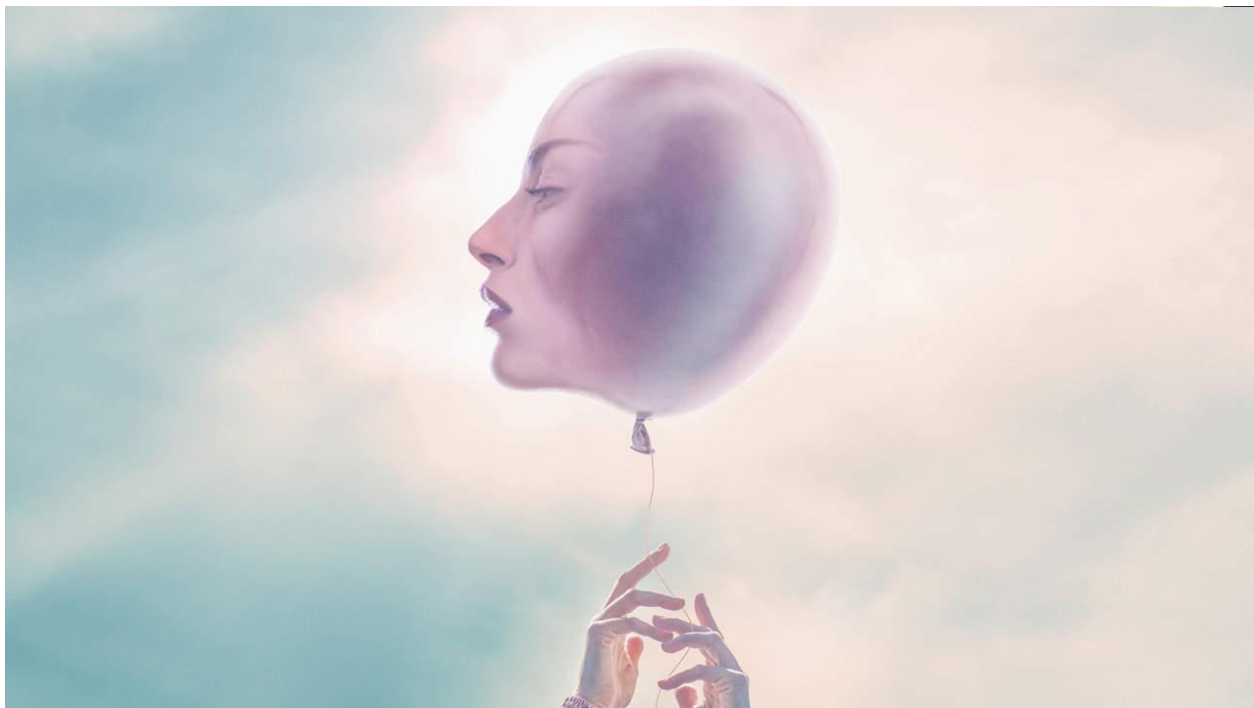


The Last Breath: A Short Story [C1]

Una cronaca familiare di tensioni, tragedie e trionfi all'ombra delle tensioni causate da un'eredità inaspettata.



My father-in-law never liked me much, even before I married his only daughter. After the marriage his dislike turned to hatred, which increased over time. Nothing I could do was right for him or could ever make me good enough for his daughter, his adored Rose. At every family dinner he would tell long anecdotes about what a wonderful husband he himself had been to Rose's mother; how he'd treated her like a queen and **ferried** her to and from the hospital every day during her last illness. Rose's mother **gazed mournfully** down from photographs **hung** on every wall and placed on every shelf in the house. He was present in all of them, his arm protectively even controllingly **hooked** around his wife's shoulders. The wardrobe was still full of his wife's clothes. Her **hairbrush** still lay on the bedside table, next to, **of all things**, a **blown up** party **balloon** that got a little smaller every time I saw it. Apart from that one incongruity, the place was like a mausoleum. **Creepiest of all** was a teacup with a **smudge** of red lipstick on the **rim**: "That was the last cup of tea I made for her, the day she went into hospital for the last time," my father-in-law told me. "She always

put her lipstick on before going out, my poor Lily. That's where her lips were, see." He held the cup out to show me. "I give it a little kiss on the same spot every night." I think he saw me [shudder](#), for he added, "Of course you wouldn't understand." I thought things might get better when our own daughter was born, but if anything they got worse. He became incapable of mentioning my wife's name without adding, with an acid [glance](#) at me, that Rose was a lovely English name. We had called our daughter Aisha after my own mother. Whenever he took our baby in his arms he would always [whisper](#), "Come to Grandad, you poor little thing." I think his hatred deepened as he became increasingly [infirm](#), and therefore increasingly [reliant](#) on us. A powerful, bullying man like that resented having to ask us for help. Every time I had to drive him somewhere, he would ask me if I had my driving licence in case I had an accident; if I knew where the dentist or [doctor's surgery](#) was; if they drove on the left where I came from. I assured him that things were just the same in Fulham, the part of West London where I was born, but he still asked me every single time. So it was with some apprehension that I accompanied Rose to her father's house the day we had to move him into the [care home](#). He didn't want to go, of course, but he really couldn't manage on his own any more. Rose had [begged](#) me to be patient and I had promised, but as we walked into the house my apprehension became anxiety. My father-in-law was sitting in his armchair with two suitcases beside him. Rose went upstairs to check nothing had been left behind. I went to sit down in the armchair opposite my father-in-law but saw that there was a pile of old papers on the cushion and, weirdly, the old party [balloon](#), [limp](#), with most of the air blown out. "You can move that stuff," said my father-in-law [gruffly](#). "It's all to be thrown out." I put the papers on the floor and sat down, feeling a [slight](#) pop beneath me as I [landed](#) on the [balloon](#) and the last of the air expelled. "What was that?" He [eyed](#) me suspiciously. "Nothing!" Did he think I'd [farted](#)? "You've got all your stuff together then?" I pointed to a box on the floor near the suitcases containing all his wife's photographs plus the teacup with the lipstick [stain](#). [Unnervingly](#), my father-in-law proceeded to take out one photograph after another, telling me, for the hundredth time, where each had been taken and what marvellous thing he had done for his wife on each occasion. The teacup with its own story came last and he gave it a little kiss. "But you haven't seen

my prized possession," he concluded triumphantly. "You'll never guess what it is. You wouldn't be able to." I tried to look interested. "It's poor Lily's breath." "Her what?" "Her breath... captured forever." My heart sank. "Not long before she passed away some friends came over with their little grandson and she blew up a balloon for him." Now I was feeling really sick. "I found it some weeks after she'd gone. Every now and then I undo the knot and breathe in a little of her breath. There's not much left. I'm saving it for when I'm near the end myself. When I know my time has come I shall undo it again and take my last breath together with hers. It's round here somewhere. Have you seen it? It's the most important thing I have and I can't possibly leave without it."

Glossary

- **balloon** = palloncino
- **glance** = sguardo
- **reliant** = dipendente
- **doctor's surgery** = clinica
- **care home** = casa di riposo
- **gazed** = fissare
- **hairbrush** = spazzola
- **limp** = floscio
- **stain** = macchia
- **breath** = respiro
- **mournfully** = con dolore
- **of all things** = tutte le cose
- **gruffly** = con tono basso
- **undo** = disfare
- **knot** = nodo
- **Creepiest of all** = la più inquietante di tutte
- **rim** = bordo
- **blown up** = gonfiare
- **farted** = scoreggiare
- **shudder** = rabbrivire
- **landed** = atterrare
- **eyed** = osservare
- **Unnervingly** = in modo inquieto
- **ferried** = trasportare
- **hung** = appendere
- **hooked** = aggrappare
- **begged** = pregare
- **slight** = leggero
- **My heart sank** = il mio cuore sprofondò
- **smudge** = sbavatura
- **whisper** = sussurrare
- **infirm** = indisposto
- **prized** = prezioso