45Don’t Look Now

*Don’t look now*

*This is not me*

*Wipe this me from your memory*

I am jarred from thought by telephone jumping into life with a shrill call, before I have mustered the energy to make the call myself. Stepping into automatic mode I prepare speak to my mother.

*Deep breath. Firm stance. Relaxed shoulders.*

*Silently repeat: She will hear my strength. I can be strong.*

*Smile widely*.

“Hello?” I answer. I am calm.

“Did it arrive?” She is not calm, but well-prepared; I am expected to play my part in her rehearsed script.

“Yes it did thank you so much.” *Super wide smile.*

“Something to remember me by. I’m glad it’s the one you wanted.”

It isn’t.

“Thank you. It’s lovely, just as I remember.”

I don’t.

The parcel had arrived this morning, wrapped with endless tape and paper. It now sits, looking out of place. How has it come to be here? Empty of tea, it is filled to the brim with emotion.  
*I know you didn’t invite me, didn’t want me here*, it says accusingly.  
It's not the first time I've heard those words.  *Why don’t you just get rid of it?* I wonder to myself, but I have no answer.

Having forgotten about it for all these years it’s actually the little blue teapot I remember, silently standing apart from the others in the dust-free cabinet.

*Don’t look now*

*This is not me*

*Wipe this me from your memory*

*Wallowing in negativity*

*Think only of another me;*

*The real, the true,*

*The kinder me, being loved by you*

*Don’t look now*

*This is not me*

Despite the noise from the hall he thinks I am asleep. Our children are busily chatting, engrossed in an imaginary game. Their Sunday started with the usual bluster, full of life and energy. He shuts the bedroom door behind him, slowly, deliberately.

I am not sleeping; I am silently spiraling through irritation and towards anger, having been excluded from the morning’s events, erased from the family scene behind the solid doorway. Unwelcome. The fury grows as I attempt to decipher the muffled sounds, unable to move, wallowing in the emotion churning through my stomach, fuelled by a mind attempting to make sense of my anger. I am not sleeping; I am seething.

“I thought you’d want a lie-in,” he’d say later, confused.

“You shut me out.”

“I shut the door.”

“Precisely. You shut the door.”

*Don’t look now*

*This is not me*

*I have travelled too far for you to see*

*And I now no longer recognise me*

*Unchartered territory*

*Yearning to be free*

*Reaching for the key*

I enter the familiar room, already feeling my blood pressure rise at the sight of the tools of the trade, breathing the stagnant atmosphere from previous visits.

“What can we do for you?” Dr. Peters enquires with characteristic false interest, browsing the screen listing my prescription history. My mind spins with where to begin. My rehearsal is instantly inadequate for this clinical environment. My confidence diminishes. I must avoid regurgitating irrelevant emotional waste onto the germ-free surgery floor.

She looks at me for the first time. We are probably the same age, similarly educated, both working mothers, juggling commitments. This connection is irrelevant today as I am lost in the imbalance of my untamed emotion and her professional manner. I wish I’d made more effort.

*You should have brightened yourself up a bit.* It’s not the first time I’ve heard those words.

“I’m struggling. Can’t really focus on work or anything. Stuck.”

She refers back to the screen, seeking an insight to replace my ineloquent paraphrasing.

“Are you taking the fluoxetine?” She relocates the thin-rimmed glasses to the end of her nose. I shrink at the question, and the intimidation of her scrutinizing expression.

“Err, well, no I’m not.” She sees only anxiety, as she considers my reasons for non-administration of prescribed medication.

“To be honest I’m concerned about side effects, addiction … and not really dealing with the problem. I don’t want to be a different person. I want to deal with it but …” I trail off as her expression remains unchanged.

She runs through the benefits once again as I adopt the role of timewaster.

“Try not to worry,” she concludes.

Her simplistic statement lights the fuse of irritation. Misunderstanding burns down towards frustration. Frustration collects, simmers and starts to boil, producing enough energy to spur me on to try, try better at being understood. But not today. Today I collapse into the sullen truculence I observed and learned early in life. Silent recalcitrance rises and expands through the air.

*Don’t look now*

*This is not me.*

*Wipe this me from your memory*

*I will keep this me away*

*From your otherwise perfect day*

*And I will stay*

*Lonely.*

*Lonely me*

*Alone in my multiplicity.*

She had phoned last week to discuss the choosing of the teapot.   
I don’t want a teapot. I think to myself.   
“The others are going to auction.”  
*Not in the skip then?* I wonder. The cine films and photographs went in the skip, but the teapots are going to auction. The brownie uniform, the games, dolls; my childhood twisted and scattered by now at the local tip.   
*Smile wide. Breathe deep.*   
”Come on, which one?” She is irritated as I search in vain, desperately scanning the memory banks to bring a teapot to mind. A thatched cottage appears unexpectedly, and blandly, in my mind; brown hues in a twee old-English style. Next, the retro silver-jacketed specimen with matching eggcups in pride of place, but I know that was spoken for decades ago, using first daughter privileges.

It should be easier; there are approximately sixty different creations aligned behind glass. They have never been poured from. The precise positioning of handle and spout never tested. Unutilised. Hollow. Empty.

A dormant image is clutched from past depths. Amongst the blur sits a one-cup pot painted in the deep blue of dusk. A scattering of simple leaves and an arching branch of blossom expertly added in subtle shades. It quietly stood out; sturdy and impossible to topple over, unless you really tried.   
“The dark blue one with leaves,” I say.  
“You like that one, do you?” I have answered incorrectly.   
“Yes I like that one.” My smile transmits an artificial light-heartedness down the phone.  
“No you can’t have that. Sarah thinks it might be worth something. You can’t have the silver one either,” she adds quickly.  
“Yes I assumed that.”

I recall a simple white one; beautifully ornate with a delicate floral pattern. Gentle.  
”The white one, please, with flowers and a butterfly. That was sweet.”  
I can hear her looking around the room. ”Ah yes, orange and blue.”  
”No. Pink and green.”  
”Oh yes I see it. No you can’t have that.” Wrong answer again. ”It’s cracked.” She's rattled, descending into dangerous unpredictability.   
I remember the crack now too. An old unexplained injury.   
“I don’t mind. Maybe I can fix it.”  
”No you don’t want that. It doesn’t look nice.” She moves on, directing me to the correct answer to her original question.  
“This one, orange and blue. Nice one that is.”  
*Wide smile to the empty room.* ”Okay thanks. That would be great.”

*When the mess of me takes over with its harsh and brutal ways,*

*Remember these are the broken parts, the ugly start*

*A festering darkness around a damaged heart*

*A bitter force that pushed with the anger of a heavy hand,  
 Jabbed with the criticism of a harsh tongue,*

*Wounded with a cold glance from otherwise averted eyes.*

She shut the door. Every day. She shut the door. I remained transfixed by a forbidden gateway, waiting like a trained puppy. The memory of the silence spins through my empty heart. She shut the door.

*Don’t look now  
This is not me  
Broken by waves of misery  
Weeping silently  
For no-one else to see  
Falling onto scarred knees  
Don’t look now  
This is not me*

The doorbell calls above the clatter of my children playing, ready to eat, close to lunchtime. Two little faces watch in excitement as I peel back the layers of tape and paper to uncover the blue teapot. I stare at its delicacy, in awe that it survived the journey.   
“Why is a teapot to making you sad Mummy?” my daughter asks.

*Don’t look now.  
This is not me.*  
“Hello?” Her voice is distant and distracted. I have phoned to thank her.   
*Breathe. Smile.*   
Today, however, is a different day. Today she has no pre-planned script to get through. There are no right or wrong answers she is waiting for. Today she has nothing to say, silence exposing her bafflement at my grateful enthusiasm. She is elsewhere, in the dark. In her thoughts and memories. I feel her silent pain and offer nothing in return.

*Don’t look now.  
This is not me.*

1486 words