

DUST

by Mair de Gare Pitt

The air is already stuffy when I wake up. I can hardly breathe. This is the day. Come on, Julie. Smart pale blue blouse and navy skirt hanging up. Good job I did my nails last night. The navy glitter looks good.

Showered and dressed (oh, the waist-band feels loose) I scuttle downstairs and out through the front door, remembering not to let it bang. Ben is still asleep. As the door clicks I realise I don't have my bag. Stupid. My purse is in it and my key. Stupid. Stupid. I'll have to wake Ben after all.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Julie!" Then, in a kinder voice, but still annoyed. "You're not ready, love. You don't have to go back yet."

Yes I do. I blow him a kiss, grab the bag and skitter off, sweating already.

A blue Peugeot, sporty type, races towards me. Tanking the speed-limit. What if he'd hit me? I'd be lying in the gutter now, bleeding to death. I'd hear the siren; see a glimmer of blue light. There'd be people lifting me, sliding me onto a stretcher.

"Don't worry, Julie," they'd be saying. "You're going to be fine. Just talk to me, Julie. Stay with me."

I join the crowd at the stop as the bus pulls up. We surge on, close enough to smell each other's deodorants. Fifteen minutes' walk to the surgery. Get into position behind the reception desk.

"Morning Dr Hampton. Morning Dr Patel. Morning Dr Davies."

"Grunt."

"Morning, Julie. Welcome back."

"Mm. Coffee, if you've got it."

Open up for the early patients. They shuffle in. Some haven't showered. I log them and they settle for a long wait. If that Peugeot had hit me, I'd be in a cool bed now. I'd see summer clouds through tall hospital windows. Peaceful. Just the distant jingle of a tea-trolley.

There hasn't been much abuse today. And anyway, it's not personal. But you can't say the same for Dr Hampton, so it must be personal as far as she's concerned. I caught her saying something about my nail varnish.

As I walk home I think of that Peugeot again. Blue as the sky.

When I get in, Ben's already home. He's made me a cup of tea. "Have you heard?" he says.

"Heard what?"

"About Rhys Price? Jacko's little'un?"

"No." I put my tea down and slide into an armchair. "What about him?"

"He's had an accident."

I go cold. "It wasn't a blue Peugeot, was it?"

Ben gives me a funny look. "No. He ran out from behind the school bus. A taxi hit him."

I gasp.

"It's serious, but not critical, Jacko said. Good of him to let us know. They'll have to do something about the speed limit now. We've been on at them long enough..."

It's a lovely evening. After tea we stroll round the lake. All the usual things — roses, cut grass, children's voices wafting in from the playground.

"I hope little Rhys will be all right," I say.

Ben squeezes my arm. "Me too."

No speeding cars the next day. The man who hurls himself beside me on the bus has one of those summer colds. If I breathe in close to him, maybe I'll get it, too.

Apparently, bubonic plague is endemic in the USA. I heard that on the radio. I wonder where this guy is from.

This morning I get a migraine; the computer screen goes all ziggedy-zaggedy. Dr Hampton's talking about me again. "She's not right," she is saying. "She double-booked me."

"I've got a headache," I say. "I'll have to go home." I think I must have caught something from that man this morning. My eyes are streaming.

As I open the front door, the phone is ringing. It's Auntie Jean. "Hello, Julie, love," she says. "It's bad news, I'm afraid. Uncle Eric. Pneumonia. They don't think it will be long. I'll let you know."

I crumple onto the stairs in the hall. It could be bubonic plague.

There's a thought in the air, whirring its tiny black wings. It's forcing its way down my throat. It tastes of dust. It's your fault, it's whispering. Rhys Price. Uncle Eric. Were you thinking bad stuff when your...?

I crawl into bed and pull the duvet up over my shoulder. The pillow case is cool on my cheek, but even when I close my eyes I can still see the orange glare of the afternoon sun. I make pretty pictures behind my lids. I'm lying on a beach wearing a purple bikini. But what's that speck on the horizon? A dark smudge rushing over the surface of that blue, blue sea? It's a tsunami. Of course it is.

The doorbell rings. I ease my legs over the side of the bed. It will be someone to tell me Ben has drowned, won't it? A sudden flood in his office. I know it's stupid. I know, but...

I hear the whispering of tiny moth wings, and catch a faint tang of something sharp and grubby.