

Coping Mechanism

TRACY FELS

MY REPLACEMENT IS early. She strides past the kitchen window, tall and willow thin, head erect, taking the path around the side of the house to the back door as if she owns the place. Why doesn't she come to the front and ring the bell like anyone else? Finn mews like a kitten from his moses basket on the floor. He's hungry, needing yet another feed, and the mewling will soon elevate to a piercing wail if I don't pick him up. But I don't want to breast-feed in front of her. I want to brew proper coffee, not flick on the kettle. I want to settle calmly at the oak table and pull out a tin of flapjacks, freshly baked that morning especially for our new houseguest. Milk is leaking through my T-shirt. I'm going to greet the au pair with damp circles around my nipples.

I call her a girl because she's ten years younger than me, recently graduated and starting her life. I call her my replacement because that's the intention: to replace the incompetent mother who can't even satisfy her baby's hunger. Finn fed less than an hour ago; I haven't had time to shower or stack the dishwasher or start a multitude of tasks I won't finish and he's hungry again.

"Hello, Mrs Cave?" The girl calls out as the back door opens inwards. She doesn't knock, just walks straight in.

Our name is Cavell, but I don't correct her.

"Hello, Agnes," I say folding my arms across soggy breasts. "Please call me Hannah."

Thankfully Finn falls silent, giant blue eyes gaping up at her.

"Hannah," says the au pair, her mouth exaggerating the 'H'. "And this must be Finn." Her accent is Eastern European. Cruelly,

I think of those feeble Hammer Horrors set in dark Transylvanian villages. Agnes smiles down at my son. "Can I hold him?"

She peels off knee high black boots, bringing her down to my height. We look each other in the eye. Hers match mine, slate-grey flecked with blue. Almost white lashes and pale skin contrasts against her flushed red lips. Agnes doesn't smile at me. Swinging off her rucksack, her only luggage, she then swoops down to gather up Finn. He gurgles, a rare signal of contentment, and plump fingers reach for Agnes's long blond hair draping her shoulders like silk.

"Be careful," I warn. "It will really hurt if he starts tugging."

"Is no worry." Agnes bounces Finn in her arms. "He is strong little boy. Little man," she coos and kisses his nose.

"Coffee?" I scuttle to the sink. Fill the kettle. Drag an opened packet of Hobnobs down from the cupboard, my earlier breakfast. She should be doing this, I realise, making me coffee. Steven has brought Agnes into our home to look after me.

"I should do this," says Agnes.

She hands Finn to me, then takes two mugs from the cupboard next to the Aga I never use. How does this girl know my kitchen?

"Steven show me all around."

I don't like how my husband's name sounds on her lips.

Steven, along with his mother, had called in and interviewed four candidates for the position of our au pair. This was the day after Finn rolled off his changing mat on the sofa when I left him, only for a second, to answer the phone. I didn't know babies could roll at that age. He didn't hurt himself, but that wasn't the point as Steven and his mother continued to point out.

"Agnes was by far the most suitable," he told me during a stilted Sunday lunch at his parents. I couldn't be trusted with cooking either.

"She spoke the best English," his mother chipped in, "and seems bright enough to cope with Finn."

Mother and son bowed their heads in unison, returning to plates of roast beef and Yorkshire puddings pooled with gravy. Their unspoken accusations congealed, conspiring with the potatoes, cold and untouched at the centre of my plate. Because I couldn't cope with Finn. Couldn't cope with keeping

my son or myself fed, clean and happy. An au pair was their perfect solution for coping with me.

Finn fidgets, fights against my cuddle. His cheeks redden as he begins to cry again.

“He needs feeding,” I tell Agnes.

She picks up her rucksack, tosses back her hair.

“Is no problem. I will go to my room.” The replacement glances around my kitchen. “Then I clean up and make us lunch.”

“Shall I show you to your room?”

Agnes shakes her head. There is still no smile for me.

“Steven show me.”

Of course he did.

“Do you think she looks like me?”

Steven doesn't look up from his iPad, flicks a finger across the screen.

“I guess. But I didn't know you then.”

“What do you mean?” I turn on my side, watch my handsome husband as he continues to work in bed, another once strictly upheld rule overthrown by parenthood. Once upon a time our marital bed was for sex and sleep, in that order.

He taps his bare chest idly.

“You know, when you were at college.”

“You mean when I was younger – when I was her age.” I slump back against the pillow. The clean T-shirt I'd put on for bed was already blotched with a milk stain. “I felt a right dairy cow when she arrived this morning. Stood there, massive udders squirting, no make-up and Finn on the floor like a workhouse baby, while she swans in, fairy tale gorgeous, swishing her hair like Rapunzel.”

Steven carefully places the iPad on his bedside table.

“Why was Finn on the floor?”

I sigh, close my eyes before answering.

“Finn was in his basket. The one your mother gave us, which I can carry from room to room so I never have to leave him alone.”

He nods, rubs the black stubble dotting his chin.

“She does look a bit like Rapunzel. Did you notice it goes

all the way down to her bum?" Steven slips down under the duvet, pushes away a loose strand of hair to kiss my cheek. "You could grow your hair long again, I'd like that."

At six months I'd cut my hair to shoulder-length; everyone said it would be more manageable when the baby came. At eight months I took it even shorter to a box cut bob, sleek and stylish. Steven said he loved the new look. Called me a 'Yummy Mummy'. Now I knew how he really felt.

His hand is snaking up inside my T-shirt.

"I also like these massive tits."

I'm trying not to let him see the tears. He hates it when I cry. Turning away I feel him press into my back. His hardness was all it used to take.

"Sorry," I mumble. "I'm still sore down there." Like most natural deliveries I'd been cut to ease Finn's escape.

Steven withdraws his hand. He lies back and I hear him pick up the iPad.

"Okay," he says quietly.

As I finally slip into sleep Finn wakes in the nursery. Despite hugging the pillow close to my ears I still hear his cries through the wall. I recognise the distinctive demand for food. He's hungry again. My body tenses waiting for the click of Agnes's door. Surely she will go to him?

Steven is sprawled across most of the bed, squeezing me to the very edge. Black lashes twitch as he dreams. Finn's cries loop into a continuous screech. Clearly Agnes, like Steven, can sleep undisturbed through Finn's vocal assaults, as there's no sign of any movement from her room.

"You're his mother," Steven had said to me when we first came home from the hospital. "You're tuned to his frequency."

Slipping out from my warm cocoon under the duvet I shiver as the cool night air slaps me fully awake. Finn's screams shake the house. Only the dead could sleep through this. Steven brushes a finger under his nose but doesn't wake. My husband and our new au pair are clearly in league with the dead.

Over the following weeks I fall into a routine with Agnes. I become Finn's wet nurse. Feed on demand, then rest and barely

eat in between. Agnes tackles everything else: changing and bathing Finn, cleaning the house, shopping, sorting Steven's dry cleaning (two suits a week) and all the cooking. She sings as she works, melodies I don't recognise and words I can't understand.

"Romanian folk songs," she tells me. "My grandmother taught me."

My guess at Transylvania was close.

One afternoon I'm curled on the sofa drifting in and out of sleep. Finn is feeding every two hours now without fail. Exhausting, but at least he's settled into a predictable pattern. With the TV chattering in the background I dream of Helen, my elder twin and spitting image. She's trying on my favourite white skinny jeans, spinning round to admire her perfect bottom in the full-length mirror of our bedroom. I swear she's wearing my Jimmy Choo heels, the crimson pair Steven bought me after the first positive pregnancy test. Her long fingers twist a necklace around her neck, pale pink pearls like the ones I wear for Steven when I want to have sex. I'm usually naked when I wear those pearls.

The dream is a lie. I can no longer squash my flabby baby belly into those jeans and they wouldn't fit Helen either. Helen died in a car accident when we were ten.

Something touches my shoulder. I smell coconut, the synthetic tang of manufactured sweetness. Agnes leans over me, long hair tickling my cheek. The coconut scent is shampoo, is she using mine? I'll check her bathroom tomorrow when she takes Finn out in his buggy. She springs back as I sit up quickly, swinging my legs off the sofa.

"You have tattoo," says Agnes.

I pull my T-shirt back in place to cover the fraying bra-strap.

"Yes, I've had it since I was a teenager."

"Just one?"

"Yes." Instinctively, I reach to scratch my left shoulder. I can't feel the tattoo, but this action is always comforting.

"And Steven does not mind?"

Agnes is wearing a pair of white jeans, clinging like a second skin to her slim legs.

"No," I answer, but then hesitate. This girl works for me. I should tell her to mind her own business. "Steven loves it."

“What is in bird’s mouth?”

I’m eye level with her crotch. Staring at the white skinny jeans. Is she wearing my clothes? I wonder how to pose this question.

“The bird – it’s a dove. In its beak is the letter ‘H’.” The dove is painted with white ink, the letter blood red. I chicken out and say, “I have the same pair of jeans.”

“‘H’ for Hannah?”

Helen had always been the better dancer. She’d been picked to dance the Sugar Plum Fairy in our ballet school’s Christmas performance of *The Nutcracker*. I’d sulked at home with Auntie Rachel, pretending I had a tummy ache so I didn’t have to watch my sister prance about in her tutu, hand-stitched with silver sequins that sparkled like diamonds. I wasn’t in the car when the lorry hit Dad’s BMW head on. Wasn’t there when the fire took hold, trapping Mum and Helen.

But I’m not going to tell her any of this.

“Yes, the H is for Hannah.”

Standing I expect Agnes to step out of my way, but she is so close I can feel her breath. She must have switched the TV off while I slept. The house is quiet. Eerily quiet. I realise why.

“Where’s Finn?” There’s a tremor of panic in my voice.

Agnes rolls her eyes towards the ceiling. “He sleeping upstairs.”

On cue the silence ends with Finn’s sharp cry. Two hours to the minute from his last feed. I sigh.

“He was sleeping.”

Agnes shrugs. “He is hungry.”

He’s always fucking hungry I want to scream in her face. I could ask her to move. Tell her to fetch Finn. Give her an order and expect instant obedience. Her grey eyes watch me for a moment. She sinks onto the sofa, picks up a magazine from the coffee table.

Breathing heavily I step over her legs. After feeding Finn I’m going to check the wardrobe, dig out my white jeans. With the constant milk production I must be losing weight. Maybe I can fit into them again.

Finn turns his head, spits out my nipple. Stubby fingers push my breast away as he screws up his eyes and screeches his frustration.

Turning him round I try the other breast and he latches on like a lamprey. The sucking reflex is immediate; his lips tug and tug pulling me further and further away from myself. Nails scratch the dimpled skin around my nipple as he rages against the slow supply. This mother-baby nursing experience is supposed to calm us, bond us close, but Finn hasn't read the baby books. This is his battlefield. After several minutes he's drained me dry and wriggles to get free. I see us in the bedroom mirror. A pink-faced baby squirms in the white arms of a boney wraith. My hair is dull and tangled, eyes aching. I'm a nightmare hag skulking in the shadows, about to steal back the changeling baby.

In the kitchen Agnes is talking on our telephone. Twisting a strand of golden hair she laughs, a low, deep laugh from the back of her throat. Finn is quiet, sucking on my finger. This has appeased his anger but I doubt it will keep him happy for long. He could be teething and not hungry for once.

Steven's mother believes I pander to Finn.

"He's just teething, Hannah. Rub a little brandy into his gums. That always worked for Steven," she shared at her last visit. "Have you tried Calpol?"

"He's too young for Calpol," I replied, glancing to Steven. But he and his father were heads down at the kitchen table, immersed in the Sunday supplements. The men have evolved their own coping mechanisms.

"Nonsense." Steven's mother snorted. She started searching through the cupboards, tutting each time the contents displayed my failings. "I'll pick you up a bottle from the chemist's next time I come over."

Agnes sees me, but continues her conversation. Several weeks under our roof and her accent is fading fast, she's starting to sound like me, a middle-class suburban housewife. In profile I imagine this is how my younger self once looked. Shining eyes. Open lips flushed and ready to devour everything life has to offer. The symmetry of her bone structure is familiar. She could be me. An odd thought makes me shiver. She could be Helen. This is exactly how Helen would look at twenty-two.

Agnes blinks slowly, looks directly at me.

"She's here now. Do you want to speak to her?" Agnes holds

out the telephone. "It's Steven," she says. Not *your* husband or even Mr Cavell, but Steven.

I snatch the phone. Before I can say anything he's gushing on about some deal he's pulled off. We need to celebrate so he's invited his parents over for dinner on Saturday night. He's giving me plenty of warning; Saturday is three whole days away, so I have time to sort out a menu for Agnes to prepare. Plenty of bubbly – the deal is a big one – we don't need to scrimp so I can get the proper stuff, not a supermarket brand. Scurrying to the lounge, the phone propped on my shoulder and Finn still in my arms, I tell him Agnes is a thief.

"Don't be an idiot, Hannah," says Steven, "of course she hasn't taken your jeans. She's just got a similar pair."

I hiss into the phone, "How could she afford the same ones? I looked in the wardrobe – they're not there! I'm sure other stuff is missing too. That cream top you like, with the diamante straps. My furry ankle boots."

"Hannah." He's using the same tone he reserves for Finn and little dogs, mock cutesy. "Have you looked everywhere? In the washing basket?"

For a pair of ankle boots? I want to shout back. Instead I drop my voice to a whisper.

"Yes, of course I have."

"If you find the top can you wear it on Saturday? It looks great with your pink pearls."

I end the call so he can't tell I'm crying. Even if I do find his favourite top it no longer fits over my double 'D' milk factories. But it would look fantastic on Agnes, along with the pearls.

Agnes is still in the kitchen; I can hear her slicing veg for dinner. Finn is asleep, but to put him down could break the spell so I hold his head above my heart, then I tiptoe upstairs to check my jewellery box.

Steven stands behind me as I brush my teeth. He throws something to the floor.

"Bloody hell, Hannah, what's going on inside your head? These were at the bottom of the washing basket."

White skinny jeans lie crookedly, like broken legs, beside my

bare feet. I don't say anything. I'm naked wearing only a string of pink pearls.

"You look exhausted," he continues more gently. "Are you getting enough rest during the day? You should use Agnes to do as much as possible. She can look after Finn."

He pinches the flesh under my arm.

"Are you eating enough? You're skin and bones. Christ, Hannah, you need to look after yourself better than this."

Using the back of my hand I wipe toothpaste from my lips.

"But she can't feed him for me. He never stops gorging. He's always hungry, Steven. Always at me." Tears plop into the porcelain sink. "He's a monster."

I expect his anger to deepen, but he strokes the back of my neck.

"Hush, sweetheart. Tomorrow morning I'll make an appointment for you and Finn to see the Health Visitor. Perhaps, there's some sort of problem..."

He means with me. There's a problem with me.

Steven's fingers hesitate over my dove tattoo then linger on the warm pearls; he fumbles with the clasp and slips them off my neck.

"I don't think either of us is really in the mood tonight," he says.

Dr Pearson is called in to see me. The Health Visitor isn't happy with Finn's progress. He's not putting on weight despite the constant feeding and the situation can't be allowed to continue.

"How are you coping, Mrs Cavell?" Dr Pearson smiles like a boy. He barely looks older than Agnes.

I promise myself I am not going to cry, but he's not playing the game by opening with such a question. Looking down at my lap, I shake my head.

"Clearly Finn is running you ragged. It's a vicious circle. He's constantly feeding because he's constantly hungry. You never recover so can't produce enough milk to satisfy him."

Steven and his mother are right. The problem is me.

Dr Pearson explains there is a solution. I could kiss his baby face. I could strip naked and let him take me right there in the

surgery because he has an answer. Formula milk will allow me to cope and I can switch Finn immediately. This means somebody else can feed him, even during the night. I can rest, sleep, even leave the house without him. My boobs can return to normal and I can start having sex with my husband again.

This time I'm crying with relief.

I wake at five o'clock having slept through since ten the night before. Seven hours of consecutive sleep! Dr Pearson, along with the manufacturer of formula milk, is a miracle maker. Turning over I stretch out for Steven, but the sheet is cold; he must be up already. I almost hold my breath listening out for Finn's cries, but hear nothing. The creak of the central heating system is the only indication that the house is stirring, preparing for the day ahead.

Steven is in the kitchen making coffee. I slip my arms around his waist, kiss his warm neck. His skin smells shower clean, feels smooth, he must have just shaved.

"You're up early," I murmur and begin to nibble at his earlobe.

He looks at his watch.

"Long day today – gotta close that deal remember. Lots of loose ends to tie up. You sound perky this morning."

I smile lazily.

"I feel great. See, all I needed was a good night's sleep."

"And Finn?"

"What about Finn?"

Steven pulls away from me, pours coffee into his travel mug.

"Have you checked on him?"

"Not yet." My good mood is wilting already. "It's all quiet upstairs so I assume he's still sleeping."

"But you didn't check?" Steven pulls on his jacket, tightens his tie. "He was crying in the night. Did you feed him?"

The tiles under my bare feet feel ice cold.

"No, I slept straight through. Agnes said she would make a bottle if he was hungry."

"So the au pair is now feeding my son?"

"That is one of the benefits of switching to formula," I say, keeping my voice calm.

His shoulders sag.

“So you’re sticking with this then? Giving up on the breast feeding for good.”

“Finn is always hungry because I’m not producing enough milk. Dr Pearson was worried about Finn’s weight, apparently he’s dropped under the growth curve.” I keep talking because Steven’s eyes are staring into me. His jaw is clenched. “Lots of women stop breast feeding a lot earlier than me, it’s perfectly normal.”

“Did Dr Pearson think your behaviour was *perfectly normal*? Did you tell him about your irrational thoughts, your weird suspicions about Agnes?”

I don’t know how to reply. Steven had insisted, demanded, I visit the Health Centre to sort out Finn. Now he was angry with me again, even though I’d done what he’d asked.

Steven’s face bounces back into a smile. I reach for his hand, but he’s looking past me, into the hallway. Agnes stands at the bottom of the stairs, Finn balanced on one hip gurgling happily. Her lemon silk robe is embroidered with crimson roses; I have one just like it.

She holds out Steven’s briefcase, saying without any trace of an accent, “Don’t forget this.”

I watch my husband stride towards the au pair. He doesn’t kiss me goodbye or even look back. For one dreadful moment I think he’s going to kiss Agnes, but he leans down to Finn and kisses the top of our baby’s head.

I often play a game with myself: imagine what Helen would be doing now if I’d been chosen for *The Nutcracker*. If I’d died with Mum and Dad on the A27 that December afternoon and she’d stayed home, then what sort of life would Helen be living in my place? I doubt her husband would hire an au pair behind her back. Nor would she meekly let a thieving, lying stranger usurp her position. Helen would look for proof and catch the bitch out.

Steven is getting the Champagne I forgot to pick up for tonight’s dinner with his parents. He’s taken Finn along, for once, and Agnes’s joined them as she’s booked an appointment with the beauty salon in the village. This means I’m alone in the house. Alone to explore Agnes’s room.

I don’t find a pair of white jeans in her wardrobe; neither

do I find any of my missing things. The top drawer of her bedside cabinet is full of underwear. The other drawers are empty. So too is the antique dressing table, squatting like a Victorian cuckoo in the small room. Disappointingly there is nothing belonging to me in Agnes's bedroom.

Having been deprived of sleep for so long my body now seeks every opportunity to lie down and sink into oblivion. Pressing my face into the clean white pillows I smell lavender. I smell long hot summer days when Helen and I splashed and giggled in our paddling pool. Dad would fill it on the patio using the hosepipe that leaked from the rusty garden tap. I can just lie down for a moment. Think through all the places Agnes could hide my pearls. Steven won't be back for hours.

When I wake the room is dark. The day has slipped by. It must be early evening. Nobody has come to find me.

In the hallway I hear voices from the dining room. The clink of crystal. The lilting rise and fall of easygoing chatter between dinner guests. Steven's parents must be here already. Oddly, the kitchen is empty. The electric oven is humming and my stomach cramps at the aroma of roasting meat. Steven's probably showing off Agnes to his mother. *This is Hannah's replacement. She cooks and cleans and never drops Finn on his head. Isn't she wonderful!*

The dining room door swings open. Steven's mother carries dishes through to the kitchen with Steven in her wake. She's in full flow.

"The au pair must be doing something right; Helen's looking absolutely marvellous. Such a clever decision of yours, darling, to get some help in."

Why did she call me Helen?

Steven sees me in the doorway. His eyes narrow, the relaxed smile vanishes.

"Where the hell have you been, Agnes?" he says sharply, pausing only to stack the pile of soup bowls he was holding on the draining board. "Helen's had to prepare everything herself."

They're both frowning at me. All I can do is stutter back,

"W-what are you talking about? I'm Hannah."

Steven's mother wipes her hands on a tea towel.

"Then why did you tell my son your name was Agnes?" She

turns to Steven. "I told you to hire an English girl. Did you check her references?"

I have to see for myself.

In the dining room Agnes sits at the head of the table with Finn on her lap. He's beaming like a Buddha, sucking on a breadstick. Her long hair has been cut into a slick short bob. She's wearing my cream top with diamante straps. A pink pearl necklace around her flushed neck.

"I can't believe what you've done to your hair," says Steven.

He knocks my elbow as he strides past to stand behind Agnes. With palms pressed against her arms he looks back at me.

"First you steal Helen's clothes and now you cut off all your hair. This is beyond a joke."

He's shouting at me. Not at Agnes. At me.

The dove tattoo on Agnes's left shoulder is clearly visible in the round mirror behind her. Then I realise I'm looking at her reflection. The tattoo is actually on her right side – the opposite shoulder to mine.

The young woman in my seat stares at me.

"Helen?" I whisper almost hopefully, calling out to the past. Her grey-blue eyes are unreadable. She doesn't smile or acknowledge me in any way.

Steven's mother joins in the shouting. Finn begins to cry. I step forward, to go to my son, but Steven's cold glare fixes me. Agnes whispers something to Finn. He drops the breadstick, whimpers and reaches for her neck.

I back out of the dining room and run to Agnes's bedroom where I trip over her rucksack, the only luggage she brought into our house.

I can cope with this, I chant inside my head. Like I coped with Helen's death. Coped without Mum and Dad.

I start packing clothes into the rucksack. Under a book on the bedside cabinet is a pile of cash – I grab it all. From the ensuite bathroom I take make-up and toiletries, even her toothbrush.

Downstairs Steven and his parents are talking loudly. Finn is no longer crying. With my hand on the door latch I feel a knot of pain in my breast, as if someone is squeezing inside, but my milk dried up days ago. My replacement is coping.