

Gazebo

It had been almost ten years since Maggie had sat by the bay windows, overlooking the garden, and her eyes moved slowly as she surveyed the damage that her husband's whore had done to it since replacing her in a bloodless coup, shortly after her fiftieth birthday. The laburnum had been trimmed back to almost nothing while the pale blue gillyflower had withered and died. Worst of all, however, was the disappearance of the aspidistra that she had grown from a cutting gathered in the Himalayas during her honeymoon.

'Tea,' said Susan, appearing beside her suddenly with a cup and saucer and placing it by her left hand, her good hand, the hand that still worked. 'I thought it might cheer you up.' Maggie stared at it with contempt before looking away; it would spill down her blouse and scald her if she tried to drink it; a simultaneously thoughtful and thoughtless gesture.

Being here was an unwelcome stop-gap but she had been offered no choice. The hospital had kept her for eight weeks after the stroke but they needed the bed. And so, until her daughter had time to prepare her flat, she was back in her husband's house for the first time since she had been forced to leave it. The irony of it was that it had been Susan's idea. *He* had said she was nothing to do with him anymore but the whore had said that they owed her this at least.

'Aspidistra,' said Maggie, raising a cautious finger and pointing out the window. 'Where?' These days, her words came out like a series of grunts and spits and shattered sibilants and she tried to limit herself to the bare essentials. A noun, a verb when necessary, an adjective if she had the energy. She who had once recited the whole of *Paradise Lost*, word perfect and without the text on the stage of the Abbey Theatre. She who had called her husband every name she could think of when he told her what had been going on.

'Kids,' replied Susan, shaking her head. 'One night when we were asleep. They ripped it out by the roots and threw it on the roof of the gazebo, the little vandals.' Maggie watched her face, wondering how she had the temerity not to blush when she said the word "we". 'You brought that back from Singapore, didn't you?' she asked, leaning over her now as if she was a child.

'Himalayas,' said Maggie, grunting out the word; it didn't even sound like English to her.

'What was that?' asked Susan.

'Himalayas,' she repeated, and this time the four syllables ran into each other like a crash on the M50. She stared at the younger woman, knowing that she still hadn't understood, but chose not to repeat herself again; instead, cold and resentful, she turned back to the peace of the garden.

Gazebo. She couldn't even imagine what would happen if she tried to pronounce that.