

KEY

SHORT SHORT STORY NO.17

At first, we shared a key. I'd give it to her as I was leaving for work, she'd lock the front door when she left and then drop it in the postbox outside. I was the only one with a key for the postbox. But when I got home that afternoon, the key wasn't there so I took out my phone and called her.

'Hi,' I said when she answered. 'I'm outside the apartment.'

'Ok,' she said.

'The key's not here.'

She hesitated for a moment. 'Sure it is,' she said. 'I left it there this morning.'

'Well it's not there now. You must have put it in the wrong box.'

'Then I guess you'll have to wait for other people to come home and see if it is in their postboxes, won't you?'

'Oh for Christ's sake,' I said and then she hung up on me. It sounded like she'd slammed the phone down hard. There was an argument later and maybe I said some things I shouldn't have, but she said things I didn't know she felt. It made me wonder.

A few nights later she was lying in bed, reading *The Mists of Avalon*, and she didn't look at me when I turned off the light in the hallway and came into the room. She didn't say anything either. We were at a difficult moment. She was wearing pyjamas to bed which she only did when she meant *hands off*. That afternoon in work, I had considered for a moment what my life would be like without her in it and I was torn between feeling a little sick and imagining all the things I could do if I was free of her. There was a lot of love there, I knew that, but most of the time she made me feel utterly worthless.

I sat cross-legged on the bedspread and she put her book down and stared at me.

'What?' she asked.

'I got you something,' I said, laying the small box on the bed between us. I looked across at her hopefully, smiling, wishing she'd just reach across and take my hand, stroke my leg, pull the duvet up a little to let me in, something, anything to make me feel loved. She stared at the box.

'For Christ's sake,' she said. 'It's not a fucking ring, is it?'

And of course it wasn't a ring; of course it was an extra key. Of course I'd cut an extra key and put it in a box as a present, to make things right, to make a joke of it. To pretend the argument had never happened. To make sure it never happened again.

It's a silly thing, but nothing was ever the same between us after she said that.