

VERBA VITAE

Issue No. 2 ...FREE.....FREE TO PRINT & DISTRIBUTE.....FREE... WORDS OF LIFE

Starting Over Again

Shirley put her keys into the lock. She opened the door to her new home, pushed the pram inside. The July sun vanished. Jack sat silent in his pram. Shirley stood in the dank hall, feeling cold. She coaxed her eyes through the dimness. This is my home, she reminded herself. She shivered. The walls were cold. The concrete floor pierced through her plimsolls, like icicles. She shook the pain off. Things were going to be okay now. She had the money to change everything. She could carpet the place with her community grant.

'Soon we'll be warm, Jack,' Shirley patted her handbag. Her community care grant money had arrived today. She had just cashed it at the post office. Jack squawked in his pram. 'Ta mama, ta!' He held his arms up. Shirley bent down. Her sweaty T-shirt clung to the bruises on her back. The salt made them sting, the parts where Mace's ring had cut her skin. She lifted Jack out of the pram and walked through to the kitchen. She dropped her bag on the dining table and plonked herself down on a chair with Jack on her lap. Jack tried to put her keys in his mouth. 'Don't do that, dirty.' Shirley pulled the keys from Jack's fingers. She put them into her handbag and searched the side pocket for the large brown envelope stashed full of cash. It wasn't there. Shirley put Jack on the floor. She tipped her handbag upside down. Its contents spilled across the table – a gardening fork, lipstick, hand cream, Jack's biscuits, three packets of flower seeds, her compact, her purse, used tissue and old receipts.

'It's got to be here,' Shirley swiped at her belongings. The gardening fork clattered onto the floor. Her compact landed beside it, spewing face powder onto the concrete. Jack crawled towards the fork. 'Look Mama, look.' He put a prong into his mouth. Shirley's mind raced through the morning's proceedings – she'd cashed the money at the post office, all £500 of it. She'd used a twenty pound note to buy the fork and seeds at the gardening centre. She phoned the post office – no money handed in. And the gardening centre – no money. She had lost it. What an idiot. Her heart pumped, fast. She had fucked up, again. She was going to have to live like this- no carpets. No cash. She wanted to be calm, but Mace. He was going to kill her. Mace didn't do mistakes. He was.... My God, he was.... Her mobile rang. Shirley jumped. She stared at her phone, lying face down on the table. It could be Mace. She couldn't talk to him. He'd know straight away something was up. Jack yelped. Shirley turned her attention to her son.

'Gimme that.' She snatched the fork out of Jack's hand. Jack rolled onto his side and wailed. 'Sssh!' Shirley picked up her phone. The missed call was from Helen, her counsellor at the refuge. She looked at the missed call, kept looking. With Jack wailing, she just kept looking, until voicemail called her back. She played back Helen's message. 'Hello Shirley, I'm calling to see if you settled in okay. Ring me back or drop me a text if you've got no credit and I'll call you. I want to introduce you to some of the local women. You'll find we're a friendly lot in this town. I am delighted for you. You and Jack have a whole new life to look forward to.'

Shirley put her phone on the table. Her hand shook. She felt alone. There was no way she could tell Helen that Mace was back in her life.

'It hurts mama, you kiss better, please,' Jack sobbed. Shirley looked down at her son. Jack held out his index finger. Guilt rushed through Shirley. She'd scraped his finger, pulling the fork out of his hand. She knelt on the floor beside him, stroked his hair and kissed his wounded finger, gently, until he stopped crying.

'Help mummy tidy up.' Shirley fetched the brush and pan from her kitchen cupboard. Jack followed her. Even though it was a hot day, he was wearing thick tracksuit bottoms so he wouldn't scrape his knees, crawling about on the concrete floors. Shirley swept up the smashed compact and face powder. She kept her voice as cheerful as marriage bells.

'Come on, baby boy. Let's get you in shorts and go play in the garden.'

Shirley dug the weeds out of her flowerbed. Jack played in his sandpit. She listened to his chatter filter through the garden like a tiny wind chime. The blazing sun faded into a warm glow. Soon, Mace would be home. Shirley opened up one of her packets of Tom Thumbs and called Jack over. She showed him the seeds.

'Aren't they small?' Jack nodded. She dropped a seed onto Jack's palm and showed him how to plant them.

These will grow big and strong. By August, they'll be climbing up our garden fence like Jack's beanstalk. We can climb up them. Go for an adventure in the sky, would you like that?

'Yes mama,' Jack smiled. Shirley heard Mace's car pull into the drive. Her hands shook. Her seeds, fell, aimlessly, onto the soil. The backdoor opened. Shirley listened to Mace's work boots thud down the lawn.

'Da da!' Jack crawled towards Mace. Shirley didn't turn round.

'Hello Jack. Feeling tickly?'

Jack giggled. 'Piggy back time. What's mummy up to, eh?' Mace's long, evening shadow loomed up the garden fence. 'Where's my kiss?' Shirley felt his big hand on her wrist. His fingers clamped her. He pulled her upwards, until she was face to face with him. She felt sick. He kissed her lips. She obliged. Shirley kept the kiss quick.

'Can you cancel the carpet fitter for me, please honey?' She needed to break the news now. She was safe in the garden.

'Why?' Mace took Jack off his shoulders and put him on the grass.

'I lost the money.'

'What?' Mace's thin blue eyes shrank, 'all of it?'

'Yes.' Shirley focused on her son, pulling out blades of grass and offering them to Mace.

Mace ignored Jack. 'How?'

Shirley took a deep breath. 'Jack was screaming in the post office. I wasn't thinking straight.'

Mace let out a low, controlled laugh. 'No wonder you was eligible for a care in the community grant. You're mad, woman, to lose five hunner quid like 'at..'. Karen had called her mad as well. 'Don't give him your new address. The refuge are offering you a fresh start, take it girl.'

'Me and Jack will just have to do without carpets.' Shirley tried to keep her voice even. Mace pushed his face into Shirley's. 'You're a cheat.'

'No.' Shirley took a step back.

'Yes you are.' Mace pulled her into to his breath. 'Where jew get the money to spend on this shit, then?' He pushed her away. He picked up the seed packets and ripped them open. He stuck his boot through the flower bed. Seeds and soil sprayed through the air, like confetti. Jack shrieked. He threw himself onto his back and banged the ground with his fists. 'Take him inside,' Mace said. A woman's face appeared at the top of the fence, in shadow underneath a floppy hat. 'Oh dear, too much sun?' Mace smiled. He picked Jack up and rocked him in his arms.

'Who's been a naughty boy, wrecking mummy's flowerbed.' The woman pulled the rim of her hat back, revealing freckled cheeks and hazelnut eyes.

'You must be my new neighbours. I'm Margaret.' Shirley introduced herself.

'He's made a right mess, ain't he?' Margaret dropped her chin to the tumultuous soil. 'Yes,' Shirley said.

'He's starving, that's why.' Mace said. 'I'll leave you ladies to get to know each other and start the tea.' He held Jack in one arm and put his free hand out to greet Margaret. 'That's a lovely hat,' he said, 'very elegant.'

'Oh,' Margaret blushed, 'thank you.'

'Don't be long, love. You know what I'm like at cooking?' Mace turned back to Margaret. 'I'm a typical man, can't cook, won't cook. Always do the dishes, though.'

'My husband can't even manage them,' Margaret tinkled. Mace returned to the house.

'What a lovely man!'

'Yes.' Shirley picked seeds out of her hair. Tears sprinkled her cheeks.

'I'm sorry, it's silly to cry over this.' She pointed at her chaotic flowerbed.

'My Tony destroyed my favourite vase,' Margaret said. 'I cried for an hour. He was only five, though, you need to forgive the little ones, eh.'

'Least I can plant the others.' Shirley gestured towards the seeds sprayed across the grass. Mace's ripped up packets lay near them. Shirley picked the seeds up. They were so small, it took all of her concentration to find them. But they weren't going to die. She was going to plant them, no matter what. She held the seeds in her hand.

'I got them,' she said. Margaret followed her gaze. 'It'll take ages to rake the soil over again.' Shirley knelt down beside the flowerbed. 'Hmmm,' she said without looking up.

'Good luck.' Margaret walked away from the fence. Shirley pulled her fork through the soil. It cut into a worm. She watched it wriggle in the dirt, directionless. Mace called her. Shirley dropped her fork. Head down, she walked into the house.

Claire Wyburn

The Amulet

Rub, squeeze, wish
with a tight grip.
Praying. Saying,
please, please, please,
bring someone to love.

Nothing. Not even
a tiny, little kiss.
Try again, in case
it did not hear.

Deeper, deeper -
the tone becomes
despair. Not beautiful.
Just bring someone
who will care.

Jel



Sleeps Mission

Tears break the dust of porous sleep -
what will that blank canvas have on it by nightfall?
Stretching, I turn and there you are;
deliciously naked,
doused with the sweat of our weeping and moshing,
your dreadlocked red hair splayed out on the sheet,
revealing the soft kissy neck I loved.

I put down a buoy marking when sleep comes to you,
my barrier reef of grief is exposed at low tide.
Unable to take the strain,
of love`s ebb and lust`s flow,
I bagged up the smell of you,
shouldered the blame,
crept silently out of your four walls.

Paul Hawkins

ABOUT VERBA VITAE

Verba Vitae - Words of Life - is a broadsheet published by Vita Nova.

It is intended to give `recovery` writers a wider audience.

We publish every three months, print on newspaper sized sheets and distribute free.

If you have an addiction problem and would like to write, the Vita Nova writers group meets every Monday 6-8pm at The Bourne Spring Centre, St. Mary`s Road, Bournemouth BH1 4QP.

This is a safe supportive place to develop your writing, build confidence and express yourself creatively.

Submissions welcome. For more details email:
broadsheet@vitanova.co.uk or phone 01202
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