

Perseveration

Lisa Kenway

The bed has a dodgy wheel. It trundles, *ker-thump, ker-thump*, down the corridor—like a heartbeat. I hover over her. She tugs at the mask and pierces me with squally eyes.

“What happened to my baby?”

I adjust the mask with one hand and hold her gaze as we weave around the empty beds and x-ray machines. *Ker-thump, ker-thump*.

“I’m sorry. He didn’t make it.”

Her brows fold inward.

“The baby died. I’m so sorry.”

She rests her head on the pillow. A single tear edges its way down her cheek. She flicks the mask off.

“Keep the mask on, you’re just waking up.”

We turn into the Recovery Room and wind slowly towards the quiet corner—*ker-thump—ker-thump*—and stop. She looks up at me.

“What happened to my baby?”

“I told you, a second ago.”

She stares, blankly.

My voice cracks, distant like an echo. “I’m so sorry. He didn’t make it.”

She scrutinises the ceiling. I tilt backwards. I can’t see what she sees. The nurse is fussing, applying monitors, checking her uterus is contracting, that the bleeding is minimal. All the while, she peers at the ceiling, the repeating pattern of white squares.

“What happened to my baby?”

The nurse catches my eye, her face twisted into a question mark.

“I’m so sorry . . .”

She watches me, interrogating me wordlessly. I turn heel and retrace my steps, back to the operating theatre. The monitors are mute. They’ve mopped the floor, turned off the oppressive radiant heater. No music, no chatter, no footsteps—suffocating silence.

“She needs to see him, hold him.”

The theatre nurse slides her body between me and the child. “It’s a coroner’s case. We can’t touch anything, Doctor.”

“Is it?”

“Just in case.”

I advance, inserting myself into her personal space. “She needs to see him, to hold him.”

“She might dislodge the endotracheal tube.”

“Do you know what it feels like, to lose a child?” *To constantly resist the vortex, dragging you under?*

I grab the tube and tug. She opens her mouth and the slightest sound escapes, not a word, an exhalation.

“It fell out in transit,” I say, and she almost imperceptibly nods her head.

The baby trolley is light and careers down the corridor, whisper quiet. I swaddle him and cover the top of his head, still sticky, with the bunny rug. He’s cold and tiny, floppy, inert. I lower the bundle into her arms.

“I’m so sorry.”

Her tears wash over her cheeks and spill over onto his head, connecting them like a *Bit.Fall* installation, the droplets configured precisely to create ephemeral words. I can see them, for a split second, as they fall. *Loss. Void. Love.*

She leans forward, her lips pressed gently to the soft spot over his fontanelle, then tilts her head back, examining me. Her face is blurry, my cheeks wet.

“You too?” she whispers.

I nod.

She smiles thinly, casting a net, drawing me into her realm.

“Thankyou. I’m so sorry.”