**The Suitcase**

*By Moira John*

Elspeth woke up. The beige suitcase was open on the bed, small and scuffed at the corners, but big enough to hold all their clothes. On the top, were their green cardigans.

She was puzzling over this as she listened to Grandpa stirring in his bedroom. She could hear the creaking of the mattress as he rolled back and forth. He was coughing and coughing. The fire was lit in the sitting room and the pull-out bed was stored back in the settee. The mantle-piece was already dusted, and Mummy was feeding the baby in the kitchen. Susan was sitting, with her hair already combed at the table, staring straight ahead. She did not look at Elspeth. As she sat down, Mummy pushed the packet of cornflakes in front of her. Mummy’s lips were clenched. Her hair was pulled back into a turban, making her face look tight and closed. The baby was gulping the last of his bottle and Mummy sat him up, holding his chin in her hand, rubbing his back to bring up wind.

Elspeth’s cornflakes crackled in the silent kitchen. She knew that they had probably done something wrong. It was not safe to talk out loud to Susan. So, they used eyes and eyebrows, nods and shrugs. Susan’s brows were knitted together. “Say nothing at all!” Elspeth´s opened wide, “I know” and they waited quietly.

Abruptly, the baby was placed in Susan's lap. The porridge pot was given a brisk stir and the lumpy gruel poured into the blue striped bowl on the tray. Elspeth shuddered watching the last of the lumps of gruel fall into the bowl. "Take that to your Grandpa, Elspeth, and don't stop to talk!"

Mummy had stopped talking to Grandpa a long time ago. Back in the days when they still talked, he used to sit on the big leather armchair after dinner and tell stories. Mummy, Daddy and Grandpa would all smoke Senior Service. He would ask the girls if they would like a surprise and they would run to him and he would pretend he couldn't find the Five Boys chocolate bar, but it was always there. Those days were long gone. Grandpa lived in his own bedroom now and only went out to go to the Club. He would wait until it was quiet before he got up to go to the bathroom. Sometimes if Mummy came out of the living room at the same time, Elspeth got scared in case they met at the head of the stairs. There was nothing for him to hold on to if he fell.

She carried the tray through the hall to Grandpa's back bedroom. The smell of drink and smoke caught her breath. He was sitting up, waiting to receive his tray. "Have you had your breakfast hen?" She nodded. "A wee bit more milk would be nice…" She went back to the kitchen to pick up the jug.

Mummy snapped "What does he want now?"

"Just some more milk", murmured Elspeth.

 "Don't stay and don't speak!"

Back in Grandpa’s bedroom, she poured the milk into the porridge "Is that enough?"

"Aye, its fine. Are we going to do a story today?" he asked patting the bed. He would often tell her about the war and how he was hit by a shell and lost his leg.

"Ah can't." she shrugged.

"Ah well, that`s a shame isn´t it?" he sighed, shaking his head, not really surprised.

As Elspeth crossed the landing her eye caught the suitcase. She slipped into the bedroom and lifted the cardigans. There were so many clothes. Was it possible that they might be going for some time?

Her mother shouted from the kitchen "Elspeth! I told you to come right back. Did you bring the newspapers with you?" She slipped back into Grandpa's bedroom and carefully collected the papers. He looked lonely as he gave her his tray.

 "A'm done with it. A'm going down to the Club today. See you tomorrow hen.”

Elspeth felt sorry, whispered "Can't help it Grandpa" and patted his hand. He squeezed hers back.

Back in the kitchen the baby was in the pram and Susan was helping with the dishes. Elspeth set the tray down. Her mother frowned at the paper "for God's sake!" She screwed it into a ball and stuffed it into the fire, holding it steady with the poker…Elspeth could not take her eye off the poker until it was set back in the dog grate.

They listened to the tapping of the crutches as Grandpa hobbled from bed to bathroom.

Meanwhile in the kitchen, anger was chiselled into Mummy’s face as she brushed and waxed the lino. She scrubbed the table with Vim and beat the rugs on the line outside. One day she battered the rug so hard that the spokes on the carpet beater snapped.

About eleven o'clock, Grandpa appeared, with his receding hair slicked down, and limped off to the Limbless Club.

This morning when he left the house, the girls sensed that trouble was lying in wait. The cane on the back of the cupboard door clicked against the carpet beater. They moved the pram into Grandpa`s bedroom and took turns rocking it in front of the window. The leaves of the pussy willow tree rustled, and silver catkins shimmered in the morning light catching the baby's eye, soothing him.

When the baby was asleep, they tiptoed back along the hall, stopping for a moment to look at the case on the bed. Elspeth nudged Susan whispering "Where are we going?"

Susan shook her head in confusion "No idea. Don't say anything!"

Elspeth whispered in Susan's ear, “Has she gone mental?”

She often heard Katie downstairs saying to her son, “That Mary upstairs has gone mental again.”

Susan warned, "Yes. Be very careful".

Mummy shouted from the living room "Stop that whispering! Come in here right now! She was standing in the doorway, hissing through clenched teeth, fists pulled tight. The girls moved to the couch. Fortunately, their books were under the cushion and they passed time reading together.

From the kitchen, they heard brisk chopping and scraping of vegetables, the opening and closing of the cupboard door and the clicking of the cane in the background. The tension was in the rattle of the pot on the stove, the slamming of the window, and in the sharp fury of Mummy’s breathing.

There was a knock on the main door downstairs. It was the postman. He spotted their mother at the top of the stairs.

 " Hiya Mrs"

Mummy opened the door on to the landing. "Oh thanks" she smiled down at him. "I'll be right there". And she went down to collect the post and have a chat.

Downstairs she changed. Mummy was smiley and Susan was deceived. When she came back up, Susan blurted out,

"Are we going on a holiday?"

Within a second the smile hovering on Mummy's lips died.

"Ah you want to know what the case is for?" She was breathing smoky breath in their faces. Little white bits of cigarette paper clung to her lips, “I have had enough,” she almost sighed. “It has all been arranged. You are going.”

 Elspeth croaked " Going where? " .

"The children's home are coming.”."

 Her face was closed and almost dreamy,

“You’ve had your chance…That’s it.”

Elspeth nodded her head backward and forwards repeating "Who´s coming? Where are they taking us? Does Daddy know?" Frightened and shocked the only thing she knew for certain was that this was mental Mummy.

"Of course, Daddy knows. He is sick of you both. The suitcase is ready." With a triumphant look she cut the conversation dead. “The van will be here at four o'clock. “

"Oh, and by the way, there is only room for one toy each. You can pick which one after lunch before I close the case."

The twisted smirk of satisfaction was written on every crease on Mummy's forehead.

Elspeth wondered if Daddy really knew. He was never told half of Mummy’s secrets. He came home every day at five o’clock, but the van was coming at four.

They both cried. Tight knots in the back of the throat and scalding eyes. They were terrorised by all the stories and fairy tales where children could be kidnapped and disappear forever. Mummy was murmuring to the baby as she coaxed him from his sleep. "Yes, my best boy, my darling boy, Mummy’s lovely baby."

The manic atmosphere was cut by the ringing of the downstairs doorbell. The Robinson girls, Mari and Janie, called up the stairs "Can the girls come out to play?" The bedroom door opened and out came Mummy and the baby wrapped in a blanket. "Not one word!" she hissed at them.

"Yes, of course, they will be down in a minute, she trilled as she gave them two cardigans from the case. Whatever games were going to be played, those cardigans would remind them of the case waiting on the bed.

They raced past Mummy instinctively raising their hands to their heads. They told no one. The Robinson girls had brought their skipping rope. Elspeth felt alone and in an eerie place in her head, but she did what she always did. ………pretended. They were two happy sisters skipping to the street songs.

*“Down in yonder meadow where the green grass grows*

*Young Mari Robinson bleaches all her clothes.*

*She sang and she sang, and she sang so sweet*

*That she loved Tommy Campbell across the street.*

They skipped for hours, taking turns to caw or jump, concentrating on the rhythm and trying to forget about upstairs in the house. When they were done with the rope, they took to bouncing a tennis ball on the wall.

*“Robbie Burns was born in Ayr*

*Now he stands in Georges Square*

*If ye wish tae see him there,*

*Jump on a bus and pay your fare.”*

The fear hovered over them, butthe Drive was their refuge. Neighbours would give them sweets if they had them. And sometimes they would knock on doors and neighbours would bring them in. Jimmy, in Number 30, would let them ride on the running board of his car. The Drive was their den, where all their games were played, unless it was summer, when they would go to the park. If they fell in the burn, they would go to Auntie Sarah’s house and she would take off their dirty shorts and pants to wash them and let them dry by the fire so that Mummy would never know.

But now there would be no den, no park. They kept wondering what time it was.

Just after twelve o'clock the sound of the siren from the Singer's factory drifted across the wasteland. Mums called to their kids to come in for dinner and bit by bit they left the street, ropes and balls abandoned where they fell. And there was Mummy knocking the window and waving for them to come in. The house smelled of soup and the promise of sponge pudding.

Gingerly, the girls approached the table.

"There's sponge pudding and custard for afters, girls" smiled Mummy.

"That's nice" murmured Susan, looking with question mark eyebrows at Elspeth.

"What are you playing girls?" asked Mummy

Elspeth took the plunge. "Oh, just skipping and ball….".

Her voice trailed off, afraid of some trick being played.

After lunch Mummy and the baby, Susan and Elspeth all settled down on the couch. "Are you sitting comfortably?" asked the lady on the radio and for fifteen minutes they escaped into “Reading with Mother.” Mummy dozed off with her feet up on the mantelpiece, legs turning pink in diamond shapes from the heat of the fire.

Elspeth noticed that Susan was blinking. "What is it?"

"I don't know …." Susan whispered as she wiped a stray tear away. "Just please don't wake her up!"

After the programme finished, they stayed on the couch, too scared to turn off the radio. They could hear distant laughter and cries outside in the street. The baby was stirring, and Mummy woke up.

" Do you want to go out and play again?"

"Can we?" They seized their chance to escape. Elspeth glanced into the bedroom. They still had not chosen a toy to take.

"What time is it?" she asked,

"Three o'clock " sighed Susan.

It was quiet on the Drive. Susan practised doing headstands against the gate, competing with the boys to see who could keep it up the longest.

Mari was sitting quietly on the kerb with a book on her knee organising her scrap collection. Elspeth hunkered down beside her and they sorted them out together. Rich ladies from long ago with high hair and flowing gowns smiled to them. They separated the sets and put doubles in the back of the book to be traded later. Mari wanted Elspeth to go and get her own scrapbook. Elspeth shook her head. "I'm not allowed in," she said. Mari put her arm around Elspeth. She didn’t ask because she knew the rules.

Just then they heard an engine turning. At the top of the drive, a big brown van turned the corner. Elspeth squealed "Oh no!" and ran and ran, her heart thumping.

"Wait, Wait!" cried Mari. "What's the matter?" She raced behind Elspeth, catching her up at the corner. Stop Elspeth!"

Mari caught her. Horrified, she hugged Elspeth tight, but it seemed to make her worse. "Tell me! tell me!", Mari pleaded. “It’s going to be OK. Let’s go and get your mummy"

"No. No. No!" screamed Elspeth, "She'll put me in the van"

"What van?"

"The van from the children's home. It’s four o'clock!”

Mari said, "Don't be daft Elspeth. That was the bread van. Listen!" and there it was …the baker's jingle calling to the neighbours to buy his bread and cakes.

“You are not going to a children's home. You live here. Elspeth. We need help. We need a grown up. We can go and tell **my** mummy."

Reluctantly, Elspeth allowed Mari to guide her home to the Robinson house, where Mrs Robinson was ironing. Mrs Robinson was known as "Mummy Pet" on the Drive because everyone in her house was called “pet”

 "What's the matter pet?"

Mari knew Elspeth would start bawling again so she blurted out the story of the van and the home. Mrs Robinson was stunned. She kept saying "What pet!”

“But you are not going to a children's home. You have a mummy and daddy and a grandpa. Why do you think you are going to be sent away?" So, Elspeth told her about the suitcase and what Mummy had said.

Mrs Robinson sat shaking her head. "Oh no that can’t be right. She couldn’t mean that……"

"Look let's go together and we will talk to Mummy. It´s going to be ok. No more crying"

Elspeth sank back into the couch. "No, I can't go. She'll kill me.” She had broken the "Don't tell" rule and especially the "Don't tell the neighbours rule". Each time Mrs. Robinson made a move to the door Elspeth cried even harder until eventually, Mummy Pet said.

"Listen, you stay here with Mari. I won't tell your Mummy what you've said. I'll just have a wee word and see if she's all right." Mrs. Robinson took off her pinny and walked across the drive to the Jones house.

Elspeth watched from the window as she called up to Mummy that she wanted a wee word. What was said remained a secret between Mummy and Mummy Pet. They must have been talking for ages before they sent Susan to get Elspeth from the Robinson house. Mrs Robinson smiled and whispered "Bye pet" on the stairs.

As the girls passed their bedroom, they saw that the case was gone from the bed. Susan shrugged in surprise. Elspeth bit her lip.

Mummy took off her pinny and turban, combed her long dark hair and put on her lipstick in front of the mirror. Everything was ready for Daddy coming home. She ran a bath and washed their hair. When they were dried, they sat in front of the fire and she wound tight rags through the strands of their hair. They heard Daddy's key in the door and ran to the top of the stairs.

"Hey girls," he laughed

"Did you have a good day?"

Mummy came to the stop of the stairs with the baby wrapped in his shawl and he kissed them both. The tea was ready on the kitchen table and they all sat down to eat. While he drank his tea, he asked Mummy how her day had been?

"Oh grand," she said.

There was a knock on the door. Mummy Pet was there with two cardigans which had been left on the Drive. They heard Mummy Pet saying,

 “Sorry, I took the cardigans and forgot to give them back again."

"Give them here", said Daddy. “Thanks for looking after them." Mummy was standing very still; she didn't know whether Daddy was talking about the cardigans or the girls.

While Mummy cleared the dishes, Daddy read them stories on the couch. The fire had been banked up and covered in damp coal slack to stop it burning too fast.

Later in bed, in the light from the streetlamps, Princess Elspeth and Princess Susan sleepily replayed their day. They made an imaginary tent with the sheets. Wearing silken gowns and their hair dressed in cascading curls, they packed furs and satins into their suitcase. They each chose a golden shawl and travelled in a closed carriage across the sands of Samarkand.