

## STAINED

It was a new house, so there was no reason for the stain on the carpet. On the landing, just outside the master bedroom, faint but unmistakable in the cream shag pile; a darker patch, a damned splash, as if something awful had happened on that spot, a long time ago. But nobody had lived there before Hector and Wendy.

'Builder must have dropped his cup of coffee,' said Hector, the husband.

'They should have used Mr Muscle.' Wendy scrubbed the grey area with her foot; toenails still painted in bridal ivory.

He carried her over the third threshold since their wedding. He reckoned she was already putting on weight. The first threshold, on honeymoon, had been through an arch of frangipani in sandals. The second, just now on their return, through the front door of suburbia; semi-detached, blonde wood, discreet knocker.

The newly-weds' bedroom was a primordial swamp without the slime; mitochondria wiped clean with disinfectant. From pillowcase to curtains, Wendy had matched the patterns in this machine-embroidered Eden, while Hector had screwed the knobs on chests of drawers in MDF so ancient it had the face of god in its grain. Everywhere else, the house was modern and minimal but here was ivy on the headboard.

On that bed their marriage grew; a month, a term, a season. A baby started and was lost at nine weeks; its trace a deeper petal on the pattern of their counterpane. But the new-build house was light and bright and the kitchen was shaker-style and the sofa was white leather, so they tried again.

In that home their family grew; a year, a blur, an era. On the fridge, finger-painting in primary colours, hand prints gradually getting bigger. Muddy footprints on the shag-pile. Baked beans on the white leather.

He caught her, one day, staring at that stain, just outside their bedroom door. They didn't meet inside much anymore.

'I swear it's getting darker,' Wendy said.

'That's just the way you're looking at it,' he replied.

'No, objectively, it is getting darker. When we first moved in it was light coffee colour, you remember. We used to joke about a clumsy builder. Now, if you were seeing it for the first time, wouldn't you say hot chocolate?'

Children interrupted this conversation, as usual, and Hector didn't think about the stain again until some nights later, stumbling drunk to bed. He couldn't even see it but he remembered it was there because of the problem Wendy had with it. The way she wouldn't let it go. Like, the way she wouldn't let him come.

In that house all white gloss gradually became sepia-tinted, scuffed and chipped by the passage of kids. Tyre tracks and boot treads gave texture to the plain decor. Certificates and invitations graced the fridge; annual school photos with smiles and braces coming and going, hairstyles changing from primary to sixth form. 'You should give this place the once-over,' Wendy said to Hector a lot.

When he suggested she could hold a paintbrush she said her hand ached. Like, when he suggested she could hold his penis she said her head ached.

The dirtier their nice new house got, the cleaner their love lives. Where once he had squirted rainbows, her body was untouched by sunshine or shadow. Where once she had etched kisses into his skin, his flesh was immune to her ink. He did, of course, have a sketch with his secretary.

And Wendy may have had feelings for Mr Mayhew, chair of the parent/teacher committee. But then the kids left school; and they weren't parents any more in the sense that glaring proof was stuck on the fridge door and the mess of their reproduction appeared like paisley print all over the house.

The paleness of the walls and floors made the stain look even darker. Wendy was obsessed. She could not leave the bedroom without magnifying glass, log book and rosary beads. To a chant of 'oh my god, oh my god' she measured, every day, the relative darkness of the patch on the carpet. She could not go in to the bedroom without being relatively drunk. Port wine was the cure, but the killer, too; for in her eyes the stain was turning burgundy.

'It is dark red,' she said. 'I beg you, Hector, look and see. It is red.'

He met her gaze through a haze of a similar shade.

'All those years ago, we didn't joke about a drunken builder, did we?' she pleaded. 'Brickie dropped his Beaujolais. Plasterer lost his glass of Shiraz. No, sir. It was coffee then, and we were of sane mind.'

He pushed her against the door frame and pushed his face into that picture, too. 'I know what I want from you: I don't get it. But I don't get what you want from me, either.'

She'd been telling him for ages. 'I want you to look at this stain on the carpet and admit it is darker than when we moved in here, twenty years ago. It is not fading, as carpet stains should, but actually getting deeper in colour by the month.'

It was probably the menopause. That was the real issue. If not, then one of their souls was stained so bad the whole white house, the cream cushions and the beige blinds and the taupe tablecloths had been tainted too.

Before the graduation photos on the fridge door had curled up completely like scrolls, Hector and Wendy were grandparents. Their son's son's hand gradually grew to fit the ghostly imprint of a sticky mitt made in the mid-1980s.

Wendy came across as mad, as grandmothers are allowed to do if they're also loving and bake cakes. Her hair was as white as the net curtains once were; while once it was as yellow as the nets were now.

Hector had lost his marbles, only holding onto them once a week when the grandkids came round for tea. After the fishfingers had pointed the way back to Bedfordshire all over the walls, his path led again to the stain on the landing where Wendy stood, in an ivory nightgown, wringing her hands and wailing, 'tomato ketchup, tomato ketchup.'

Hector thought she was overreacting. What else could a man do, in a marriage based on hygiene and hubris, but overact too? It was the knife she'd used earlier to slice the potatoes. It hadn't even been washed up.

As he lurched towards her, she thought he was falling; but he had already fallen. The knife found a home in the heart of the household, just outside the

bedroom door. Wendy died quickly; but still had time to remember when she'd first seen the stain on the carpet, and feared that someone had been killed there, long ago.

By Alison Habens