

The Little Police Station in the Mountains

Rue Baldry

There is itching heat in Lottie's armpits and thighs and a strip of chill down her belly where her coat doesn't fasten anymore. Her boots crunch repeatedly through the top crust of the snow, which looks less blue now than it did when she left the house. Everything is yellowing as the morning gets going. She fixes her sights on the flat roof of the building below her, trying to tack her thoughts to her steps to stop them spiraling off. Her fingers clench inside her pockets.

Two plates of trout and potatoes lie, cold now, under a tea towel on their glass-tiled coffee table back at home. She's still not hungry, which is unusual for her these days.

Max always comes straight home after work. He gets in at quarter past one every morning (except Wednesdays, because Tuesday is his day off), takes off his uniform, showers, and eats dinner with her while they watch TV, usually science documentaries, before they go to bed. On Tuesdays they spend all day together. She books all her midwife appointments for Tuesdays so they can go together. Today is Friday.

By half past one this morning, she'd slid her plate right up to his so she could cover them both with the same red-striped tea towel. She'd gone upstairs to the room that's going to be the nursery, to stand still in the dark and stare through the window in the direction of the road down from The Castle, watching for headlights which didn't come. All their other windows face the valley.

At first, she'd told herself she was silly to worry. There could have been a problem with the car or he might have had a meeting with one of his bosses which had run late. When the ache in her knees made her find a chair, she checked the clock on the landing. Two o'clock. Some of his colleagues drank together in the Lodge after shift, but he never joined them. He would have told her if he'd known he was going to be this late. He'd never been late before.

By three o'clock, she'd decided that she would walk down to the police station as soon as it was light. The police would find him. Everything would be alright.

The flat, green roof of the little police station gets closer with every step. Most days she passes the single-story, wood-clad building on her way to the store, but she's never had any reason to go inside before. It always looked quiet. The square of flattened dirt which served as a parking lot at the back was usually as still as the moon. This morning, though, most of its spaces are filled with vehicles, the snow between them criss-crossed with parallel lines. Two more cars are passing each other along the side of the building, looking like toys from up here.

Something must have happened. She hopes it's nothing important, nothing which will make the policemen take her less seriously. Max going missing is very serious to her. She needs him. Their baby is going to need him.

She keeps walking, step after step after step, her shoulders rising and her tongue pressed hard to the roof of her mouth. The buildings get larger. The sun brightens. The village becomes real. Now she can differentiate the trucks and vans from the slick, foreign cars, all moving into the full parking lot.

Inside the police station, she joins the line that stretches from the door to the counter. Foreigners in suits, chattering nonsense into their mobile phones, are being led straight through to the doors at the back of the room. Uniformed police officers weave round the jumble of people.

By the time she reaches the front desk, her back aches from all the standing still and shuffling forward. She leans an arm against the high counter to ease it.

“My husband, Max, didn’t come home from work last night.”

“Where does he work?” asks the policewoman.

Lottie waves towards the mountain, back beyond their house, where the fish and potatoes sit greasy and spoiled under their tea towel, beyond the road she could only see from the nursery, up to the big, grey building. Where do any of the men work these days?

The policewoman nods, not looking at her anymore. “Wait here. Someone will see you when they can.”

When Lottie steps backwards, her place at the head of the line is taken by a young man with sunken cheeks who smells of sweet vomit. The policewoman looks down the length of Lottie then, and says, more softly, “Take a seat.”

A mess of stackable chairs is shunted into a corner under a noticeboard of posters about dog licenses, parking fines, and internet identity fraud. Lottie leans on the gray, plastic back of one. Back pain lifts. Her strained belly still aches, though, so she lowers herself to sitting.

She closes her eyes. If only the grey fluff of sleep could suck her under right here, in this noisy, white-lit room of heavy boots on mud-marked tiles. She is tired enough after last night. The baby flutters. White swirls, like fairy lights, like the Milky Way, spin in her vision. The sounds of her blood merge with the sea-shell cacophony of voices. The baby spins a slow summersault inside her. Max’s face forms itself against the back of her eyelids.

Heartburn rising to her throat rouses her. She opens her eyes again. The policewoman behind the counter is handing the sallow young man a tissue. He’s crying. Lottie looks away, feeling guilty for having seen that. A notice above her warns everyone to lock their cars. Nobody bothers here.

There were hardly any jobs in the valley before the new owner bought The Castle, but they'd always looked out for each other.

“Mrs. Lang!”

Her ribs contract. There's a man in a dark suit, with a crisp, cardboard file under his arm, standing in front of the door beside the counter.

She raises her hand. He sees her, beckons her. She has to grip the sides of the seat to push herself to standing. He holds open the door while he waits for her to cross the crowded reception area. Walking makes her realize how full her bladder is. She looks at the ceiling as she passes the weeping young man slumped on the floor with his back to the counter.

She steps from grubby tiles to cream carpet. The door closing behind her snaps off all the human noises. The man in the black suit smells of anti-bacterial hand gel. He marches to another door, in a corridor full of identical doors, opens it and waits some more.

Inside the room are four more gray chairs. He taps on one and sits opposite it, smiling a sad, tired, smile and looking into her eyes. Her throat dries. She sits.

He stares down at the one, clean, white, empty sheet of lined paper inside the file on his lap, while he asks, “Your husband worked at The Castle, Mrs. Lang?”

“Yes. Maximillian Peter Lang. He didn't come home last night.”

He writes Max's name at the top of the page. He asks for their address and her phone number and writes them down too. “What was his job up there?”

Her belly skin itches. Its underside is hot on top of her thighs. The baby is still now. “Security guard.”

He writes that down. “What was he guarding?”

“He doesn't know. High double doors, he says.” He stays in the gatehouse. The offices are upstairs and there are more floors above that, but he'd only been up to the carpeted levels that one time, for his job interview. “He has to make sure nobody goes through without a security pass.” It's mostly people wearing white science coats, or driving plain black vans, he says.

“Did he carry ID?”

“It's pinned to the top pocket of his uniform.” The jacket is black. Very smart. Burgundy buttons and a burgundy logo embroidered on the other pocket. He wears a bulletproof vest underneath, but just because of health and safety regulations. He says his job isn't really dangerous.

“He had a weapon?”

“A gun. He keeps it in his locker up there.” Nausea edges in. “Has something happened at The Castle?”

An accident? Please no. Her eyes prickle. Don’t let him be hurt.

“I can’t say too much. All I can tell you is that an agent from a foreign secret service has been up there. It looks as though your husband was guarding something rather...dangerous. Unlawful.”

Her heart beats as rapid as the baby’s heartbeat through the midwife’s stethoscope. Max has been arrested? But it’s not his fault. He doesn’t know anything. You don’t ask your boss questions, not when you’ve been unemployed as long as he had. Whatever was up there, he didn’t know.

“The guards on the door had to be—I’m so sorry, Mrs. Lang. The foreign agent...” He swallows, looks away, looks back at her. “He was unable to escape, or to gain entry to the—through the doors your husband was guarding, without—I am so sorry.”

Her face is wet; her thickened, crystal eyelashes blind her. He presses a tissue into her hand.

She wants to say, “no,” but she’s not sure what she’s denying and her voice isn’t working anyway.

“If his ID’s on him then we should be able to identify the—him. We’ll get back to you, Mrs. Lang. Do you have anyone who can stay with you?”

Her mother and sisters are long gone. Max’s mother? Lottie can’t face telling her what’s happened. She blows her nose. The movement judders through her, rasping her sore nipples against the inside of her bra. Deep space darkness crowds in behind her eyelids.

“Only Max,” she says.

She hears herself thanking the policeman and asking to use their toilet, feels herself standing.

She sits a while on the cold loo seat, scrolling through her contacts, seeing no name she wants to speak to. She’s not sure what she’s going to do after flushing and washing her hands. She’d like to lie down in front of one those big foreign cars coming out of the busy parking lot. But the baby. So she’ll have to keep living.

She doesn’t want to go back to their empty house still full of the smells of him. Those two plates of trout and potatoes are good for nobody now, but she won’t be able to face throwing them away. Should have done it before she left.

There's nowhere else she can go. She puts the phone back in her coat pocket. She should probably eat something.

He'll never see the second half of that program about asteroid belts now.

The baby stirs. Lottie wipes, flushes, pulls up her leggings, washes her hands with the cracked, green soap, and dries them with two paper towels from the pile on the radiator.

She walks out through the crowded reception area, past the long line, back onto the slushy pavement.

Rue Baldry lives in Yorkshire, Great Britain. Her short stories have been published in journals such as *Fairlight Shorts*, *Crossways*, *Litro*, *MIR Online*, *Ambit*, *Soliloquies*, *Postbox*, *Backstory*, *The Nottingham Review*, *Pif*, *The Incubator*, *The Mighty Line*, *The First Line*, *Mslexia*, and *The Honest Ulsterman* and shortlisted for the Reader Berlin and Odd Voice Out competitions. She has an MA in Creative Writing from Leeds University, was a 2015 Jerwood/Arvon mentee and the 2017 Bridge Awards Emerging Writer. Her novels have come second in the Yeovil, been longlisted for the Caledonian, Bridport and First Page prizes and shortlisted for the Flash 500 competition.