

Claire stares at her life - a painted brick box, 8ft by 10 ft. It's small but at least it means she can shut out the world; almost pretend she isn't there. Instead, she is on a palm-tree beach, the sun on her face, a cocktail in her hand, warmth beneath her bare feet. Or she is staring out over a calm blue ocean: seals are soft, curved and shiny on the rocks, dolphins arc through the air, spray falls in rainbows. If she's lucky, there's a baby in her arms. And if she's not? Well, she's still somewhere else, anywhere but here.

Rubbing her shadow-sunken eyes, Claire looks at the cream tiles around the basin. They are all straight-edged, squaring. On close observation - she has plenty of time to notice - there is the dark creep of mould along the grouting. Also, some shading, and faded colour. Or perhaps this is just the play of light from her window hiding their sameness, trying to turn the room into some kind of monotoned kaleidoscope. One day, she tells herself sometimes, a tile will twist in its grouting and twirl itself into a diamond...

Or maybe not. Claire examines her bare fingers; there are no diamonds in her life, not any more. Her finger doesn't even have a ridge, no sign of something that was but isn't now. Still, better not to look at this. Claire looks at her other hand instead: thin-skinned, bony, ridged with vein hills and stained with ink. One of the psychiatrists, call me Sue, has

told Claire to try writing. Claire thinks, no, knows, it is a waste of time. When she asks Sue what she is supposed to write about, Sue's reply is over-generous. In direct correlation, Claire thinks viciously, then guiltily, to Sue's waistline.

"Anything you like, Claire. What about your childhood? How you feel?" Claire shrugs her shoulders.

"What you remember about the events that brought you here? Anything you want to discuss next session...?"

Claire nods mechanically, her eyes on the door two strides away. Then she looks up at the clock: 10:59 - two strides and sixty seconds of heavy silence away. How can one minute stretch longer than the 30 odd years behind her? This thought has pre-occupied Claire every second of every minute of every hour she has had to spend in this sterile rectangle of a...

"I know you're reluctant to do a timeline," Sue adds finally, her eyes also on the clock. The long hand stretches bolt-upright, like Sue's back. "Perhaps you could try writing some poetry. You might be surprised what comes out.

"Poetry? Writing? As if these can change anything. Claire shrugs contemptuously again now. They won't bring Ju back - nor make Claire admit to something she didn't do. But already she resists the urge to argue back. Denial, she has been told repeatedly, is a stage. She knows it would be pointless telling Sue again that this time they're wrong, that she really didn't do it.

So, Claire does as she's been told, literally to the letter: word after word of scratching, scrawling, cramped - then scrawled, crossed-out, cramped - until finally something that might be called flowing handwriting. Not poetry, not confession, but what she sees on the walls, what she hears filter through from outside, random sentences and phrases that seem to come from weird subconscious places. As she stabs at the page, she creates friction, cartoon characters, doodles from her head, fiction, wordplay, games with thoughts, ideas, possibilities...

The doctors can put each letter under the microscope for all she cares, Claire thinks, with little faith in Sue's promise that she need not share it. She will set down everything for the woman to peer at if that is what she wants, if that might make them leave her in peace.

Claire scribbles across the notebook page, then rules thick lines through it until she has created a block of dented black.

She starts again. First, the wall: plain, drab, bare..

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Pink Sheep Nursery Border - £15 [Item 23495 - Perfect Mothers' Accessories]

"Three blind mice...in the treetops... Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird ...twinkle, twinkle, little star...sing a song of sixpence...hush, little baby, don't say a word...see how they run..."

Pink sheep dance above Claire, in mid-jump over bouncing balls of cotton wool. Or maybe they are balancing on them? It's a stupid pattern, Claire thinks. Sheep would fall through clouds. And whoever heard of pink sheep anyway? But if Claire can focus on the border, the hardness of the wall behind her back, the scratch of the carpet on her bare legs, then the crying will stop.

The crying WILL stop - it has to. The baby in Claire's arms is still and silent, but she can still hear it crying. She rocks backwards and forwards against the wall, sings to herself: "Baa, baa, black sheep...the wheels on the bus go round and round...like a diamond in the sky...have you any wool...round and round...how I wonder what you are..."

Splinters of plastic gleam on the floor. The jagged edge of the cracked kaleidoscope smiles up at her with sharp teeth. The tiny shapes that bled from it - flowers, triangles, rectangles - have clotted into a sparkling pool of tacky gems: red and yellow and pink and green, purple and orange and blue... More colour than she can cope with. But still no diamonds; only shaped beads, the kind of mess created by a girl rummaging through her jewellery box. But there is no girl, no child, only Claire and the baby: the motionless, silent baby that still keeps on crying, while pink sheep dance on clouds and flying fish swing round and round on the mobile above her head.

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Intelligent Baby Mobile - £39.99 [Item 83465 - Perfect Mothers' Accessories]

Claire's childhood is full of colour: the sea's changing silks, that bold purple of her mum's coat, the pastel smudges of her dad's flowerbeds, autumn leaves crisping and curling into redness. But colour is not always good. Too many colours can distract. And some shades clash, will always clash together, no matter what.

It is winter and Claire is three. She is sitting by the washing machine on the cold kitchen tiles. More tiles, see, and square again! They've softer, rubbed-away corners but they're square - multi-coloured squares, still no diamonds.

The washing machine is making a loud whirring sound. Claire gazes through the plastic window, as the splodges of colour turn round and round. Her thumb is in her mouth. She looks at the hole. In it, she can see part of her face, with wispy, light brown hair and big eyes. She is wearing a red pinafore dress and hooded jumper. It is one of the windows on Play School. Soon Claire will go through the round window and Mummy will tell her a story. Then she remembers, Mummy isn't here, just Nanna.

"Come and help me, Claire." Nanna is folding washing from the line.

"Me fold, my turn now." Claire grabs one of her daddy's shirts and tries to roll it into neatness. Two arms dangle like limp tails from the bundle.

"Not like that, you'll crease them." Nanna shakes her head at Claire, then chuckles. Nanna's dark brown curls dance round her smiling face and Claire can't help feeling light and bubbly inside, like soap suds floating up towards the sky. Even without Mummy, being with Nanna is better than the beach, crisps, her birthday party. And Nanna is tall, like Mummy, and she hugs like Mummy: big and warm. She smells different, but that's all right because she has all Mummy's nice bits, and she never shouts.

Claire buries her face into the unfolded pile of washing. It smells so fresh and soapy that she sneezes. She waits for Nanna to say, "Bless you." But, when she looks up, Nanna is looking at the kitchen clock.

Claire hasn't yet learned how to tell the time. For her, the clock's thick black hands always seem to move slowly and its tock is ugly. Boring too! She'd rather look at the pretty flower pictures on the lounge wall. She cannot understand why big people find the black lines, curves and numbers so rushing.

Nanna places the last shirt onto her neat pile of clothes and glances down now at her watch. "Come on, let's put these away. Daddy will be here soon."

Nanna wiggles her big nose as if she too is going to sneeze, then blows a strand of hair off her face and tucks her curls behind her big ears. There is a small streak of grey in Nanna's brown hair, Claire notices suddenly. Nanna smiles. Her teeth look all yellow and the front two at the top are a little

pointed, like the wolf fangs in Claire's fairytale story. Nanna picks up the clothes.

"Help me with these, please, Claire. There's a good girl. Quick! Before Daddy gets here." Nanna walks out the kitchen. Claire hears her footsteps thudding up the stairs.

Yes, quick, before Daddy gets home. He will be here soon and then it will be time to go. Claire scowls and pulls up her red hood. The wool is soft, but it has pushed her hair across her face and mouth. She feels too hot; she can't breathe! Claire tears the hood off again and picks up her rag dolly, Jemima. She cuddles it tightly in her arms, squashing it to her chest. Then she stamps her foot.

"I don't want to go," she screams and throws her dolly across the room after Nanna. "I hate you!"