

The Whole Truth

A young and aspiring woman artist met and fell in love with a man who came from a far away country. They laid in bed, mapping out plans for their future: the artworks she wanted to make, the garden he would plant and the home they would make together.

She was aware of his previous marriage, and four children too, but he maintained good relationships with them and visited regularly, which assured her. Eventually, she joined him on a long trip to see them. The young artist was both moved and surprised to see that her lover's first wife, living on a meagre wage, was supporting the four children, as well as two new infants and assorted other family members and their children. It was soon unanimously agreed it would be best for the three oldest children, in their teens, to return home permanently with the artist and her lover. As the travel plans got underway, it became clear that the fourth child would eventually want to join them. Though somewhat surprised at the new life unfolding before them, she and her lover agreed they could make it work.

Meanwhile, the artist, who had notched a few exhibitions into her belt before this surprising turn of events, packed up her romantic visions of a carefree and 'successful' life in a big box alongside all her art materials. She put it in a cupboard for 'later', 'when there was time'. Not long after, she found out she was pregnant and before she knew it, another boy had arrived! The house seemed to get noisier by the day and there was so much housework to do. But she figured she would never get ahead on that front, so ignored it as best she could. When she wasn't working her paid job, she instead threw herself into fixing up their large, but un-renovated house, tending their veggie patch and cooking meals for seven. All this kept her hands busy.

Still, the artist's box of materials remained unopened for many years. But then, one day, the house was quiet. All of the children but one had grown up and left home. The little boy was at school. The artist walked into her closet, reached for the box, and opened it.

When she began to make art again, she found that both she and the work had changed. She found herself, naturally, drawn to materials describing her hectic home-life – soft fabrics, old doilies, coasters, unfinished knitting, craft supplies, and clear plastic (for furniture protection). But as she handled them, they felt slight, useless, annoying. So, as a counterpoint, she began to visit tips and reverse garbage trucks, foraging for barrels and wire and metal and boxes. The contrast felt good. She covered the hard metal surfaces with stretchy elastic, flowing, hairlike strips, bits of furry yarn and prickly soft pipe cleaners. Like giant cat posts, odd elastic wigs, and soft cages, they

began to form a language for the path she felt her own, and many other women's lives had taken.

Before long, she began to make bigger and bigger things from her stockpile of goods. First, she made fences out of rope and later, covered giant wrought iron gates with yarn or adhesive strips. Like a fiercely territorial decorator, she continued to lay her feminine claim on cold, hard spaces and tight enclosures. She found she could soften both hard truths and hard surfaces. But she was doing something else too. She was marking out holes and gaps in these imposing structures. Airways, windows, tiny exits. People need to imagine there is someplace else to go.

When the artist was offered a solo exhibition, she decided to make her largest enclosure yet, a long fence-like structure, made of soft, plaited tubes of grey felt. She liked that the fabric was plain overall but had tiny flecks of coloured thread dancing throughout. She felt that was what life was like. She stood on ladders and wrestled with the weight and length of these tubes. Like slippery intestines or wiry bits of curly hair, they sometimes resisted her. But her hands were steady, and firm. Finally, standing back and assessing it she felt proud to have achieved some order. But as she was leaving the gallery, she felt a sudden urge and ran back to unravel a section in the corner. A small concession to a good struggle.

Perhaps not intentionally, when the show was up, someone told her it reminded them of the tale of Rapunzel, in which a long haired young girl grows into womanhood shut into a doorless, stairless tower with only one room and one window. Clever Rapunzel plaited her hair, using it as a ladder for her visitors. It was tight but flexible, sturdy but fragile. It was firmly twisted and yet easily undone. It offered a way in and a way out.

The artist knew then, her work must be working... for people could hear stories being told and female voices in the folds.

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