

Secrets I Keep

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Abstract

My mother had many failings. Her inability to cook. Her inability to work. Her inability to love. But her two biggest failings...those were the ones that had the potential to ruin my entire life, to ruin my brother's life, to tear a family apart. More than anything, it was her inability to act.

Claire is a young woman working in Johannesburg as a PA. She has few friends barring her au pair flatmate Beth and work colleague Marge. Her nights are spent trying to overcome the trauma of her past to find sexual fulfilment in a shallow world of one night stands. Whether she can set herself on a path towards a more normal life comes down to one crucial thing – forgiveness.

One

He travelled. To my mind travelling in a way that led you to believe he was having an affair – the destinations would be vague, the time needed to get things done infinitely extending.

When I was older, I conjured pictures in my head of rough floral duvet covers, yellowed wall paper peeling from the corners and empty bottles of baby scotch strewn across some moulded, mud-stained carpet.

The woman would be blonde, Farrah Fawcett hair and smile, her lipstick hot red and smeared, gold watch visibly fake. I got them from TV, but the aptness lingered in my memory.

So when he came back, his moustache thicker, his paunch with a new layer of beer drinking fat, seeing his children was something of an event.

“A kid on Christmas,” my mom would say.

I would have a pink Barbie convertible thrust in my face, a mini plastic kitchen complete with turnable taps. Dev would get a battery-operated helicopter.

Dinner was always in front of the TV, Mom looking at him like he was some deity. Me crossed-legged on the floor, the skin of my pork viennas ripped off in curly strands around my plate, the meat a pink sponge-like shaft.

I could feel his eyes hitting the middle of my spine. Every time he shifted or let out a long breath through his nose I would clench my teeth – he was like some wart you wanted to scrape off and burn.

But she couldn't see that.

Wouldn't have wanted to.

He had this way of ripping her voice from her throat.

Never have you met a woman so soft. Like a candle burning down over the years, her strength running in warm lines to dry and crack in a puddle at her feet.

How they met is one of those events I want to freeze in time and fracture with a small stone so it shatters into unglueable pieces.

A flat tyre, how romantic.

It was back in the day when people used to stop and try help, back when you wouldn't think they wanted to strip your car down to the chassis and bite the rings off your fingers.

She got one, and he stopped. No mace in those days, just a light summer dress and a manicured hand shielding her eyes from the sun.

I know their conversation. It goes like this:

He sauntered towards her...*Crunch, crunch, crunch.*

He said, "Need some help there pretty lady?"

She thought, His eyes – shoo wee. "Oh gee, thanks, you're too kind."

He thought, Liking them legs, "Sure thing."

She thought to herself, Such a strong boy, "Are you okay? Don't need any help?"

He looked up, The view is better from down here, "Don't wanna ruin that lovely dress."

So fine. It's in an American accent. But I couldn't exactly have it like this:

He sauntered towards her...*Crunch, crunch, crunch.*

"*Howzit*, you need a hand there."

"*Ja, ta.*"

Nods.

"Should I stand on that tyre iron to loosen those nuts? This dress is pretty *kak* anyway."

"Na, I got this."

Mom's turned it into a Turner Classic movie to be told at dinner parties. The few she cooked for. The few they had.

"He had muscles boy, big arms. By the time he finished the back of his checked shirt was damp, he face a bit grimy."

This was all in Port Elizabeth, some idyllic coastal road. They got a drink after – some spit swapping milkshake, teased over who should get the cherry.

"Then he took me to his flat. I was so impressed that someone that young could have their own place. And there were surf boards by the door, how dreamy."

I assume this is where the fucking happened. It's more a word like coitus – some awful missionary, rigid thing with her hair-sprayed hair unmoving as he writhed on top of her, grease from the tyres leaking between their torsos.

"We were married exactly a year later. A beach wedding – gosh I was so tanned back then."

She was pregnant with Devon, a marriage of convenience, youth, duty, obligation, bad judgement, destruction.

"You ever regret it?"

I asked her once, was fourteen, zitty skin, braces cutting the inside of my top lip and ready to disappear forever.

I regretted it. More than anything.

“Not for one second. We’re soul mates.”

She said it at the sink, steel wool coming off in metallic strands on her palms, soap being sucked loudly down the plug hole.

“How do you know?”

Rinsing off her hands, she looked at me.

“He’s the only man who could ever make me blush.”

That was her mind-blowing answer. He could get a bit of colour in her cheeks.

My mother sees things like a horse with blinkers – tunnel vision. Dogs salivating and straining on leashes to her left, world’s imploding to her right – she remains unseeing.

Two

“Your place?”

It’s Saturday night, we’re walking out of the bar.

One of those with music so loud everyone has to shriek at one another, sticky floors, women with their tits squashed against the bar counter calling for more tequila. The wooden tables and chairs outside were littered with beer bottles and overflowing ashtrays.

My roommate Beth is home tonight, I made sure.

We go in his car.

I smell popcorn when I walk in. There’s a jar of peanut butter lying open next to the microwave, the spoon stuck proudly in the middle. Nestlé Cappuccino sachets scattered on the counter, the grains of coffee like ants.

When we first moved in the constant click of the electric fence from the perimeter wall would keep both of us up at night. Either that or the grainy music coming from our security guard’s cellphone as he patrolled.

“My room’s here,” I say, walking past the lounge and to the left.

Beth’s door is closed on my right hand side.

“Nice,” he says.

“It’s just a bedroom.” My bed is white, walls are white, curtains are white. The only colour is my dresser in a dark wood.

It feels like I’ve swallowed a kilogram of cement, slowly solidifying my insides from the feet up.

I’ve made a mistake.

“Could I have something to drink?”

I want to get out of this room.

“Sure, what do you want?”

“You got any wine?”

I drop my bag just inside the door.

“Chardonnay?”

“Perfect.”

Pressing my head against the cool of the fridge I take two deep breaths, focus on my heartbeat. Holding the bottle in my hand I let it freeze my fingers.

“God, you have a beautiful body.”

The bed is vibrating underneath me, I’m shuddering.

His hands skate over my breasts and he grips my hips, yanks me lower so he can sit on his knees on the floor, my legs dangling off the edge.

Blowing hot air over my pubic bone, he tongues my clit through my underwear.

It’s like my bones lock in place, fuse together. This shaft of heat rushes down from the top of my head. My eyes are starting to hurt from being shut so tight.

The pressure on my hips releases, the warmth between my legs replaced by nothing.

He’s sitting next to me, I can feel his weight.

“What is this,” he says.

Opening my eyes I look at him in the dim light, his dark hair floppy over his eyes.

Hovering his fingers in the air he runs them over my body.

“This looks like torture for you.”

He knows, and he will leave. Pick up his jeans, rip on his shirt, “fucking unreal” coming in bursts from his mouth.

I will lie here unmoving as he lets himself out.

The slam of the door will wake Beth.

“Hey, I’m taking to you. What the hell’s going on?”

Turning my head to the side I blink at him.

“You should have left already.”

His eyebrows shoot up, his glare icy.

“Cool, so what the fuck was the point of inviting me over then? If you’re not into it, why waste my time?”

Rolling onto my side I sit up, find my shirt on the bed and pull it on.

“Is there something wrong with you?”

My laugh is low.

“You could say that.”

“So what, I leave now?”

Sitting cross-legged I rest my hands in my lap, shrug at him.

“What the fuck do you want?”

“A lot of things. My childhood back for one.”

He reaches for his shirt and pulls it on.

“If we’re not gonna fuck...”

I make a click sound with my mouth, shake my head ‘no’.

His belt clinks as he buckles it, one of those with the embellished Texan-sized buckle.

“Psycho.”

The knives and forks in our top drawer even rattle as he slams the door, can hear he’s talking to himself as he walks down the stairs

Right on cue.

“What the hell was that?”

Beth’s in a pink and white striped tank, isn’t even wearing underwear I don’t think.

“I’m just too wild for them.”

“Is your kink a bit out of their comfort zone?”

“You could say that.”

I scoot back and get under the covers.

She flaps her hand in front of her, stifles a yawn with the other before blowing me a kiss and closing my door.

Three

“Ray is such a creepy fuck.”

Beth and I are having dinner on the Monday night – a two for one burger special – so when we got here the placemats were already greasy from someone else’s spilt onion rings and dribbly 1000 Island dressing, seats still warm under our butts.

“Whenever I go visit Mom, he always corners me in the kitchen. Stands there in the doorway like some multi-coloured voodoo man, leering at me with bloodshot eyes.”

I look down at the menu.

“I mean, what do you think his problem is?”

Desserts. The Fudge Picasso. Pre-made, refrigerated, thawed, scraped onto a plate from a polystyrene holding bay.

“Claire?”

“Ja?”

Beth has her serviette twisted into a *koeksister* strand in front of her, knife and fork resting on the oily, fingerprinted place mat.

“What do you think? It’s gross right? Him always looking at me.”

I nod, know all too well.

Beth’s mom has a new Congolese lover. Never met a man with uglier designer clothing – flamingo pink pants and lime green suit jackets – fingers blingified with diamond pendant rings, cigar smoke clinging to all that imported fabric. Involved in mining so he says, but the look on Beth’s face makes me think he’s smuggling cocaine in empty champagne bottles or duct taped to some poor immigrant’s inner thighs

“Maybe where he comes from he can have like seven wives and a harem of mistresses. You just don’t know with these fucking people.”

Our waiter comes with Crème Soda for the both of us.

“Will it be the chicken, beef or veg?”

“Beef,” we say together.

The pattie comes charred round the edges, a little too pink in the middle. My chips are anaemic.

Opening the barbecue sauce Beth sloshes it over everything, licks her fingers after she’s put the slimy, congealed lid back on.

I grimace.

“I told Mom she has to use a condom, just came right out and said it. He’s from Africa. Who knows what kind of diseases he carries.”

I shake my head and cut off the indelible circumference of my burger.

“What’s up with you tonight?”

“Nothing. Just got a lot of work to do tomorrow that’s all.”

“You seem really out of it.”

After last night...

Folding a chip over she spears it with her fork, munching with eyes narrowed at me.

Suddenly, “Oh my God.”

Her fork’s frozen in mid-air.

“Has he also been, like, slimyish with you? Looked at you all sweaty and stuff.”

I put everything down. I need the bathroom.

“I’m gonna run to the loo.”

As I’m sliding out the booth, “Has he Claire?”

Her face is a combination of contorted displeasure and a slight upward grin, blonde bangs framing her glasses.

“No, Beth, he hasn’t.”

She flops back against the pleather booth.

“Thank God for that, so I’m the only victim – ha!”

Victim. What an interesting word. Vic, that sharp ‘c’. Makes me think: vixen, victor, violent, vulnerable.

There’s clogged loo roll in the plug hole, some stray brown hairs slick against the rim of the basin. I leave my arms at my sides.

I don’t look like me in this mirror, the florescent light making the shadows on my face dark, my skin looks the colour of a cooked leek. I smile to make my cheeks crease into dimples, teeth gleaming. My brunette hair looks limp, hazel eyes dull.

I look older than twenty four, I feel older.

I start when a black woman comes in with her son – he’s in a Spiderman gown and pull-on slippers.

“Sorry.”

They go into a cubicle together.

Trust. That’s what that is. Unwavering trust. Why is it so different when a mother takes her son’s hand and carts him off to the toilet?

Beth has her hands against her swollen belly when I sit.

“I have wolfed that down. Too good.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“What?”

She flops the dessert menu back down.

“Do you have a bug or something?”

“I’m just not feeling too good. My boss is working me pretty hard.”

She smiles, “Working you in what way?”

Lacing her fingers together she props her chin on her hands, tilts her head to the side.

“The normal way.”

“She’s not bi?”

With any conversation, Beth’s mind is instantly there, sifting to find the debauchery.

“No.”

She raises her hands on either side of her face, a gesture of peace.

“Hey, no judgement. We’re all God’s creatures.”

“Unless you’re Ray, then you have diseases.”

Her face is impassive.

“If some,” she lowers her voice, leaning forward at the table, “black ‘gentleman’ started courting your mother and visually assaulting you wouldn’t you be the slightest bit apprehensive?”

I’ve never met such a racist.

Shrugging I call the waiter for the bill.

“I haven’t seen my mother in six years Beth, I wouldn’t know and I wouldn’t care.”

Four

Mom grew up surrounded by potpourri, knitting needles, the smell of burning cabbage in cheap metal pots. Nan was an avid fan of the doily and Oupa spoke like the gentle sweeping of a broom. Had a *boep* to rival the alcoholic brandy and Coke drinker, his buttons always on the verge of popping, pale skin straining out.

They had this old wedding photo on the side table as you walked into their house. They looked happy, freshly scrubbed. She had a killer perm with a fascinator and some severe, brownish looking suit with brass buttons. Oupa's tall, hair slicked back.

Their arms are laced and next to them is a stone-work church. They're both squinting a little into the camera. Nan looks shy, pulled tightly together. Oupa's face is beaming.

"Tell the story of how you met, Oupa."

Dev would groan.

"You've heard it a thousand times."

"Please," I readied myself on the worn Persian carpet in front of him, "tell it again."

This was always Oupa's time to shine. He'd sit back in his brown leather armchair, roll up his sleeves and stare at the dusty ceiling fan. It was like he was flicking through photos of his life in mid-air.

"We were under this bridge in summer. The sun baking all of us with our sweaty torsos and muddy shorts, were breathing hard from a game of cricket.

'Right Berny', they said, 'you're up. You gotta do it.' I was dreading the pain. Even more than that I was dreading your great-grandmother finding out. Woman was fierce. German. Full name a tongue twister. Anyway, they used the ink cartridge from a pen and a heated needle. That was my first and only tattoo. Lasted all these years. Just my initials. BS."

Oupa would roar with laughter here, until he coughed and had to spit into a napkin, shaking it off.

The tattoo was on the underside of his left forearm, near the centre.

"I'm weeping like a woman as they're doing it and then here comes May," he always pointed at Nan here, like we didn't know who he was talking about.

"And she arrives with all her girlies on their bikes, skidding to a halt to watch. Well, if ever there was something to make a man grow a pair, it's a bunch of ladies staring you down. Shut my lips nice and tight for the rest of the inking."

He gave Nan the biggest smile, she'd just fiddle her wedding ring and shake her head looking into her lap.

“So, I saunter over afterwards to show them the handiwork. Everyone ‘ooed’ and ‘aahed’ except my girl May. Just shook her short red curls and rode on, white dress flappin’ in the wind. Finest sight I ever saw. Knew I’d marry her then and there.”

“I’m making tea, anyone want?”

I could see Nan was blushing, always did.

I’ll admit, Oupa got uglier as he got older. The purples bruises and veins on his legs and feet, the flaky skin, the coarse knuckles. Like an old pocket watch you had to keep winding up, Nan was always lathering him with cream, ointment, elixir.

Not sure what it was but he used to shake all the time. Couldn’t write without the table jostling under his forearm.

“You see,” he’d say to us when we were small, “you’re upsetting that old Second World War bomb in my belly.”

Nan, on the other hand, was all powder and pale, her blue veins fat with sluggish blood. Nails were always yellow, cracked down the middle. Couldn’t get her wedding ring off because of the arthritis. I walked into her kitchen once and she had her hand in a bowl of olive oil, tugging, the salmon mousse next to her all but forgotten.

It went wrong somewhere, with my mother. They made some fatal error and she came out malleable like a strand of copper wire, spineless, unloving. I wonder what they did and didn’t do with her, who is to blame?

She wasn’t really allowed to date. Maybe that was the problem. She picked up the first guy she saw.

Her failings are numerous.

Pre-school food is the one. It was her speciality.

Mac and cheese with Heinz ketchup, baked in the oven so it congealed into a sticky layer. Bread soldiers with a soft boiled egg. If that wasn’t on the menu, you’d see grease-stained KFC packets and pizza boxes strewn around our lounge floor.

A house wife with no culinary skill – almost blasphemous.

But anyone could live with that, take vitamins to avoid the scurvy.

Her two biggest failings had the potential to ruin my entire life.

Five

Marge and I are making lunch in the kitchen at work. Hers is normally a take away, today's is a toasted sandwich with bacon, mozzarella, cheddar and a slice of lemon meringue pie – hope they keep a defibrillator in the garage.

I finish cutting the avo into my salad and grab my mug of black tea.

We've worked together for just over six months now. She's our CEO's personal assistant, types like she's having a seizure, complains about everything but the vending machine in our kitchen and their never-ending supply of Nik Naks.

I organise the marketing manager's life – Elaine Friedman. Called her 'fried man' on my first day, you can imagine the great start we got off to.

We go sit on our balcony. It overlooks a complex in Fourways. One of those with French doors thrown wide to the carbon monoxide wafting up from the road below.

A woman once walked out of the shower completely naked, cellulite visible from where we were, sat on her couch to watch some mid-day soapie rerun. Marge called all the guys from the IT division, had them using their Nokia Lumias to snap away.

We normally eat in silence, the smoke from her Camel Unfiltered wafting into my face, the sun tanning my legs, but it's too silent today.

"How did you and Noah meet?"

We've never discussed family.

Me for obvious reasons.

She's twirling a strand of melted cheese around her index finger, sucks it off.

"I was studying teaching at Tuks. He was doing engineering. Pretty boring really."

"What did you guys look like?"

A look of momentary insult on her face before, "What do you mean?"

"Well," I take a sip of my black tea, "did he have short hair back then?"

Noah has a slimy salt and pepper rat's tail tied with a rubber band at the nape of his neck. Sometimes coils it round in a tiny bun so it looks like an impala dropping.

"Ja, it was short, brown. He used to play rugby."

So he had a good body, not the pregnancy stretch-marked belly he currently boasts – too many times he's greeted me in track pants and nothing else when I've dropped Marge off from work.

"And you?"

A slice of hot tomato falls out of her sandwich, makes a splosh on the plate.

“Thinner obviously. Didn’t have all these fucking wrinkles.”

She kinda fans her face all round, gesturing.

Was he also the first guy she met, seems like it if they were at varsity. How did she know he was good? How does anyone know?

“So when did you get married?”

“We were still studying when he proposed, it was a yellowish diamond ring – let’s put the diamond in inverted commas – and I just thought ‘why not?’”

She takes another bite, talks with her mouth full, flapping her napkin.

“Not saying it was my wisest move, ended up dropping out, but we like each other enough. And he cooks so I’d say I’ve bagged myself a winner.”

I nod slowly. Sounds unfulfilling.

“And he’s a good guy?”

Pushing her plate aside she scrapes the meringue off the top of her slice.

“I’d say so. Pretty good with the kids. Does all the bathing, washing, lice checking.”

He gets me ready for school.

Mom broke her ankle playing tennis, is upstairs with her foot resting on a pillow.

He makes me bath, works the soap into a creamy lather and washes my back as I shiver in the luke warm, water barely above my knees.

He makes me stand to wash the front, it gets warm between my legs.

He’s never done my hair before.

Scrapes the brush across my skull too hard, stabs me with bobby pins that give me a headache. I can hear my hair snapping as he pulls it through the hairband like the candy that pops on your tongue.

Says I can wear some of Mom’s peach lipstick to school.

“Such a pretty baby. So grown up.”

“But if I can give you any advice, its wait to have kids. Best decision we ever made. Tucked Olly in right under the wire at forty.”

Taking another sip I shake my head.

“I’m not having kids.”

She rests her spoon on the plate, wipes her moustachey top lip.

“Why?”

I pull my shoulders up.

“I don’t want any.”

Tonguing her front teeth she shakes her head side to side asking for more.

“What for?”

She frowns.

“I mean, I’d have to put them through that.”

“Put them through what?”

“Me. Everything.”

She coughs.

“The choices I make. Made.”

“And what choices are those?”

Who their father is.

“Just choices.”

“I’m calling bullshit. Don’t deny yourself the greatest joy anyone can ever experience.”

It’s Dan Crystal’s 10th birthday party.

The first disco I have ever been to.

There’s a wooden dance floor in his garden next to the iron jungle gym and blow-up pool. There are Flings and Cheese Curls, pink and white marshmallows, a bowl of sour worms.

Dan asks me to slow dance.

I wipe my hands on my dress and stand still in front of him.

What will this feel like?

There are coloured lights hopping around us, a slow song comes on.

His hands are on my hips.

Mine go to his and some girls laugh.

He takes my right hand and puts it on his shoulder. I move my left to the same place.

I am sweating against his nice, new shirt.

He can feel it.

I lift my left leg up a little, then my right and we move in a circle.

There are other people but they leave a ring around us like we’re dancing in the middle of a doughnut.

I watch our feet moving, his much bigger than mine.

The song ends and I look up at Dan Crystal, his caterpillar eyebrows and splotchy freckles.

He tightens his hands around my hips and bends so his knees knock mine.

I look down again to see what our legs are doing touching like that.

When I look up I go squint, Dan's face is right there, his eyes closed. There is some orange Cheese Curl gunk on the corners of his mouth.

I take a step back but he pushes his face into mine and our lips touch.

Dan is embarrassed.

I have ruined his party.

All the boys are standing around us and talking, smacking elbows into each other's sides.

Dan has never been hit by a girl.

His mom puts her dishwasher hands on my shoulders and pulls me back.

In the kitchen I sit on a high wooden stool and watch Dan's mom phone my mom.

She's given me a cup of tea. Something I have never really drunk before. I don't like how hot it feels going down my throat.

A car hoots outside and I need to pee.

Her dishwasher hands are on my shoulders again and she is pushing me forward and out of their house, out of my very first disco.

It's warm in mom's car. The radio is playing softly.

They're talking about me, about what happened, through the open window.

"Such a shame," I hear Dan's mom say.

Mom keeps looking ahead.

I'm starting to sweat between my legs, the inside of my thighs is beginning to itch.

She turns to me in the car

"It was a waste of money buying you that dress."

One of the greatest joys, of course. How could I ever deny myself?

Six

“Do you ever see your mom?”

It’s Wednesday morning and we’re at the Maxi’s Star Stop overlooking the highway. Beth has to do a school run with some of the kids she looks after so we’ve made this pit stop a ritual, this and the two for one burgers is about the only time we spend with one another.

“Not really. I saw her in Pick n Pay once and we both just stared at each other. It was a while ago. She just turned around and left.”

“So you don’t ever really talk?”

My coffee’s left a *skuim* on the top of my palate, I put too much sugar in.

“Difficult to hold a conversation with someone who’s failed you your whole life.”

I place my empty sugar sachets around the saucer, let them soak up the spilt coffee.

“Harsh, but I get it.”

She can’t begin to get it.

She’s lost interest now, is focused on the highway, hoping for a front row seat to an impending collision I bet – wants to see the metal buckle, brakes squeal, the blood spew.

“Ready to order?” We might as well get the show on the road.

Our waitress comes, pops gum, scribbles and leaves without a word.

“And your dad, you guys don’t ever speak?”

I thought I should reciprocate. Have only ever met her step-dad, Freddie, who’s funding our flat in Centurion.

Beth puts her spoon down, sits back hard against her seat.

“He’s dead.”

My mouth is frozen in an ‘o’.

Her shrug is heavy.

“It was a high jacking.”

She looks down at the highway again.

“They were engaged. Mom was in the car with him, four months pregnant. Like something out of a horror story.”

I’m glad she’s not looking at me, I’m not sure what my expression should be.

“They didn’t even take the car, only his cellphone. Shot him right in the heart.”

She makes a gun out of her fingers, aims at a car on the highway and makes a ‘pew’ sound with her mouth.

“And it was the *kakkest* Nokia.”

Is pain relative?

“Mom just never found anyone after that...she tried with Freddie. But she’s always been searching for him. That’s why I can’t take Ray seriously. I can’t take her seriously.”

“What was he like?”

She runs her finger through the foam of her cappuccino, licks it off.

“I don’t even know. Mom never really talks about it. She told me he couldn’t wait to meet me, how he’d started building a crib for me in the garage. But who knows if it’s true. Wouldn’t you say that to your kid?”

Looking at me for the first time she raises her eyebrows, waiting for a response.

My smile is tight.

“I suppose.”

“I would. I’d build him up to be the most perfect fucking thing you could imagine. All-loving, all-caring. What drug problem, what rape charge?”

Our waitress dumps our plates down, along with the salt and pepper which she spills.

“Isn’t it better?”

She stops reaching for her serviette-wrapped knife and fork.

“Excuse me?”

“Isn’t it better that that’s what you know of him, and you have no memory of him ever hurting you...or letting you down?”

She brings her hands into her lap, stares at the spilt pepper.

“What do you mean?”

Her voice has taken on a hard edge.

“Never mind.”

“No, I think you should explain.”

I take a sip of coffee. Uncharted territory.

“It’s better, in a way, that you have a memory of someone who loved you and wasn’t able to...damage you in any way.”

Nodding quickly, she bites the inside of her left cheek.

“Yes, Claire, how dumb of me. It’s so much better that my dad is dead and instead I have a rose-tinted impression of some guy who *would* have loved me, who *would* have been able to walk me down the aisle on my wedding day, who *would* have been able to hold his grandchildren.”

She scrapes her chair back.

“You can get this one.”

Snatching her bag off the back of the chair it falls, all eyes on us.

I can imagine the kitchen. Waiters chewing in slow motion on left over fries, huddled and debating the two chicks at table nine.

Is it a lover's quarrel – “she doesn't wanna always feel like the dude, I put 50 bucks on it,” says Peter, “the one who left just wants people to know they're a couple guys,” says Yvonne.

I call for our waitress.

“Just the bill.”

She clicks her tongue at me, “You didn't eat?”

“No.”

“It's a waste.”

Taking out my wallet, “It's all a waste.”

“You know I've resigned hey?”

I finish typing an email before I look up.

“Why?”

Elaine shrugs, starts collecting files off my desk.

“I'd like to spend more time with the family. I can't do that working here.”

“I know.”

She acts like I don't work with her until 9pm.

We've shared small intimacies – a cappuccino that one time, crumbs scattered round the top of the plastic lid (evidently didn't think I'd want the biscuit that came with it), a handful of Endearmints from the bottom of her handbag (always tasting like CK perfume).

“Cool. Do you know who's taking your place?”

“They're still interviewing so we'll see.”

Can you ever really like your boss?

There were moments when Elaine seemed human to me – when she peroxided her hair with a home dye kit and it started coming off in tufts on her Pringle jacket; that one time she got a toenail infection from some cheap Chinese pedicurist in Bruma Lake; when her son got sick on the way to school and heaved a partly-digested bowl of Cornflakes onto the back seat of her car (even then, I had to take it for a valet).

But the way she would talk to me, it brushed any and all affection aside.

Pointing at one of her word documents: “There Claire, bold there. No, make that a bullet. The one below that. Go to the next page...the *next* page. Christ, must I do everything myself?”

Bear in mind my total silence and stealth like ability to avoid the French tips that threatened to pierce the LED screen as she tapped away in frustration at my clear lack of ability to bold and bullet.

“Are you gonna keep working?”

I can see Marge, leaning back in her chair, scraping the remnants out of a jar of Nutella, acting like she’s not listening.

“I don’t know. Suppose it’s important that I actually raise my own kids.”

“Well, my friend Beth is an au pair. She’s really great, so if you decide to carry on, let me know.”

Beth and I haven’t spoken since this morning. I don’t know where she’s coming from, she doesn’t know anything about my life either.

I still don’t regret what I said.

Seven

I meet him at Koi in Rosebank.

The wine he chooses is exorbitantly overpriced.

It's not even cold in here but my body keeps shuddering. I'm obviously not very well lubricated so I down my first glass of wine and refill.

He brought his Cadillac to Marge's husband for some 'retouching'. Is an accountant for some big wig.

She assured me he was 'nice'. Divorced with a two-year-old but nice.

Has an Afrikaans accent and crooked teeth. What's saving him is the Cindy Crawford mole just above his lip and the fact that he looks okay with his mouth closed.

"So, what do you do?"

I normally lie here – not like "oh, I'm a doctor." Next thing you know he chokes on his steamed chicken dumpling. I've said estate agent before, my biggest sell was a pilot, a romantic flight at dusk overlooking the glittering lights and smoggy skyline of Joburg, how 'bout it?

"Didn't Noah tell you what I did?"

He bites into the dumpling, shaking his head.

Who to be, who to be?

I don't feel like doing this again.

"I'm a PA."

He swallows, "Oh wow, cool."

I raise my glass to my mouth.

"What's cool about it?"

He falters.

"I don't know. It must just be nice I guess."

"Come to think of it, organising dentist appointments for your boss and booking their kids in for shots is quite nice."

He smacks his lips together.

"I've touched on a sore point, sorry. Could we start over?"

"What do you do in your spare time?"

I'm almost done with my second glass.

"Well, I'm an outdoorsy guy. Love canoeing, rock climbing. Hiking is my real thing though."

It was a hike in the Magaliesburg for Mom's birthday. Dad had planned it.

We went to some cheap cheese farm for breakfast first. The cheese was all waxy, dry around the edges. They didn't turn my eggs, so the yolks were water-runny.

She didn't even come with. Stayed behind at the camp site with her feet dangling in the kiddies pool.

When we got back she said a Christian cult had tried to wash away her sins with some herbal ointment that smelt like Zambuck.

They didn't succeed.

I actually wish she had come.

Devon charged ahead.

I tried to keep my eyes on his red backpack but he was just too fast.

My legs started swelling up with nettle stings, sweat running down my spine.

Dad came up behind me, grabbed the handle of my rucksack and pulled me to a stop.

"Do you hike?"

I sip my wine tightly.

"No. Never."

"That's a shame. I love it. You should get into it. I go every Sunday with a couple of friends."

"I wouldn't go."

"Not even to try?"

"Would you excuse me for a second?"

I'm wearing heels I can barely walk in, stagger to the bathroom like some new-born calf – thanks to Beth for the suggestion.

The toilet handle is slimy when I pull it open.

Some kid is crouched on the sinktop washing her hands, is wearing grey leggings with little black hearts on them.

Who does she belong to?

I shut myself in the cubicle and read the thrush advert on the back of the door.

You are a normal person. Normal people talk, they go hiking.

I wobble back, tuck my skirt under me as I sit down.

"Sorry about that."

I'm not used to fandangled food – what is an edamame bean? I order the chargrilled fillet to be safe. I hope Brian is paying the bill.

We eat our mains.

Brian and I talk about whether we're a plunger or instant coffee drinker and corruption in government.

I don't want dessert.

"I know it's still quite early but should we head out? We can have another bottle of wine at my place."

He does pay.

Brian drives an Audi convertible, seats so soft it feels like you're sitting in porridge. His house is in some complex in Douglasdale, presidential like walls and black iron gate that opens with a regal air, welcoming you gradually into a patchwork of home gyms and dogs that fit inside handbags.

I wouldn't be here if Marge hadn't pushed the issue.

Obviously does well for himself – flat screen, Mac, all the shiny, whiny things that make up a boys world of gadgetry.

"Wine?"

Nodding, I move into the living room.

Framed portraits of his son sit on a serving table to my right. Looks like he has a lazy eye. Dining table is glass with pale green columns supporting it in the four corners, red high-backed chairs with bronze studs sit round the outside.

Classy.

His couch is a white leather, can feel the back of my thighs sticking to it already.

I think Brian will sit opposite me in the armchair but he sits next to me, legs spread wide so our knees are touching.

"Sweet kid," I say, motioning to the picture with my glass.

"Takes after me," his hand moves to my knee and he starts making small circles with his stubby nail, orbiting my one beauty spot.

"You're really pretty Claire."

"Come pretty baby, jump on."

That was his special name for me. Special names and special secrets between us.

I would sit far forward, only on his knee, could feel it jutting into me from under his corduroys, the knobliness pushing into my soft flesh.

“Sit back, in Daddy’s lap.”

I’d scoot back a little, waiting for him to grip me round the middle like a bear trap and pull me back into the suffocating warmth of his lap, his Brut cologne, the sharp lead pencil poking out of his top pocket.

There was just this mess in the middle when he finally got me into his lap, a mush of soft and hard that I didn’t know how to sit on.

I kept sliding off to the side and back onto the couch but he would always pull me back. Would sometimes grab my ponytail and tug me so I rested against the coiled puff of his chest hair, the cool arc of his gold chain.

His glass is down and his lips on mine before I can say anything. Starts sucking my top lip into his mouth like the long nozzle on a vacuum cleaner.

It feels like the flesh is going to come away, his tongue fat and spitty, his hand scraping the side of my face in what’s meant to be a gentle caress, but I feel like a mozzie bite.

Pulling my face away I push him off.

He sits limply, face flushed, semi-erection straining through his chinos.

“What’s up?”

“Thanks. It was nice. I’m just gonna call a cab.”

The cab driver drops me at the McDonald’s on Oxford Road where I parked my car. Wasn’t about to pay for parking at Rosebank.

I buy a Big Mac and eat it standing outside. Lettuce and mayo dropping in globules at my feet.

I feel sick, throw it away half-eaten.

I can’t keep doing this, trying to do this and make it work. Having them close, touching me.

I’m broken.

And I blame him.

I blame her.

Eight

I'd just come back from a netball match, U16 against Redhill.

The skin on the back of my hands was red, cracked. Some girl had caught the ball above my face and brought her elbow down into my eye socket – was sporting a triangular shaped blue bruise.

Mom was sitting at the kitchen table.

“What’s for dinner?”

“Plate is by the stove.”

A fried hash brown and cold ham.

I picked up the plate anyway. “I’m going to my room.”

Dropping my bags back by the door I walked past her.

“Your dad had a hard time of it you know.”

The fork slid off my plate, the clang reverberating around the kitchen.

“Excuse me?”

“He didn’t have it easy growing up.”

“And why should I care?”

She shook her head, carried on painting her nails.

This conversation came out of nowhere.

“So what? Mommy and daddy didn’t love him? Spot ran away?”

She put the brush back in the bottle, turned in the wooden chair to face me.

“They had no money.”

I stood blinking at her, like a waiter unsure of their table number.

“His mom would have to buy the offcuts, offal – they were eating meat people bought for their dogs Claire. He shared a room with three brothers.”

“Must’ve been cosy.”

“You’ve never wanted for anything.”

“Wanted?”

She turned back round, started paging through the newspaper with the dry hand.

“What I want is him dead.”

I said it into the plate in my hand.

She was up before I had any time to react, gripped my mouth hard on both sides, my teeth cutting into my cheeks, the fumes of the nail polish gave me an instant head ache.

“Don’t you dare talk about him that way, you understand me? You have no reason to say that.”

I’m five.

My room’s dark. The air feels hot, like it’s pressing my head into my neck, heavy hanging down from the ceiling.

My nightie’s short-sleeved, the seams along the arms rough, the cuffs tight around the top.

Sitting up in bed the blankets bunch round my waist.

I’m burning.

Crossing my legs I scratch through my panties.

It makes it worse.

I get up to wee.

The toilet seat’s cold against my legs which dangle just above the floor. I wipe from front to back like Nan taught.

Going back to my room, my fingers trail against the wall to find my way.

Crawling back into my single bed I lie on my back, opening my legs with my feet together. It feels like my heart’s down there, beating.

At nap time at school, lying on those cold mattresses, crinkling like a nappy under me, I’d watch the girls humping their blankets, fiddling their little rose buds, my eyes tiny slits. They all got hidings with Mr Paddy Whack, so when the cracked shins of Thando whispered past my nose I knew to keep dead still, like I was inside a coffin.

It’s still burning, itching.

I start to whimper.

Bringing my legs up I curl into a ball, try rubbing my thighs against each other.

I go to wake mom, call out outside their door.

Dad comes out.

“It hurts,” I say, putting my small palm over my pubic bone.

Picking me up he takes me back to my bedroom.

He smells like warm and Dad, his shirt soft against my cheek.

He makes me lie on the bed.

“Take off your panties.”

I do it.

Kneeling, he makes me lie on my back, pulls my nightie up above my belly button and trails his fingers down until they're on me.

Using his index and middle fingers he starts to rub gently.

"Does that feel better?"

His fingers are a little rough. I want to cry, but Daddy's here.

"Yes."

He pushes a bit harder, still rubbing up and down and it starts to feel good, my body moving up onto his fingers until he pushes one inside me and I freeze.

It feels fat, heavy, wrong.

The hall light turns on and he stops, pulling my nightie back down and walking out.

It was a year after it happened.

She was lying up in bed and he was on another business trip.

Opening their door made my hands sweat. Their bedroom was off limits when he was home. I felt like some intruder.

They had a huge striped pink headboard, rose-patterned curtains that let in all the light. It smelt so sweet, like someone had spilt a bottle of perfume.

My body was hot, my heart pumping so hard it felt like it would burst out of my chest and hop scotch across the floor.

He'd told me before – "She'll die, you know that don't you?" I kept staring at the dirty tips of my ballet shoes. "If you tell her, her heart will stop beating and she will drop down dead."

I sat on the edge of the bed stroking the light pink silky duvet cover, the cuticle of my right index finger bleeding from having gnawed at the skin.

"What is it Claire?"

She was reading a magazine, eyes darting from page to page.

I opened my mouth and just let it hang like that for the longest time, limp and floppy like some dead thing.

The words were there but it was like a barb was stuck in my throat – some prickly, spinous thing that couldn't wrench itself free from my windpipe and come up and out.

"Are you sick?"

She lay the magazine flat against her lap, the skin on her face oily looking, her shoulders bare.

“He...”

I stopped, stared at her eyes to make sure she was still blinking. Sat so still I could feel her heartbeat through the mattress – it was mine though I’m sure.

“He? He who?”

“Dad.”

I scrunched my face up tight, praying she would still breathe.

“What about Dad?”

She yawned, could see all the way to the back of her throat, the dangly thing that looked like a punching bag.

Her cheeks still had colour, she still smelt warm and like Vaseline hand lotion.

“Dad stuck his finger in me.”

“What?”

I didn’t want to say it again, it hurt to come out, like a phlegmy cough from the bottom of my lungs.

“He did.”

There was a shudder in her shoulders. The bed shook a little, the pages of the magazine squeezed a bit tighter.

“What do you mean?”

I wanted to slide off the end of the bed and crumble into nothing.

“He put it up me.”

I showed her where with my eyes, brought them down between my crossed legs.

She looked at me for the longest time, still clutching the magazine.

“You mustn’t tell fibs Claire.”

Failing number one.

“You will not say that about your father Claire. He’s a good man.”

I rip my face from her grasp. Slam my plate down on the table so hard it cracks down the middle.

I go sit on the fading warmth of our complex tennis court, pull my knees into my chest.

Devon and I used to play this game on here for hours.

The net was the safe zone but everywhere else was molten lava and you had to walk perfectly on the white tram lines and around or you'd burn to death, fry up like a crisp against the cracked green cement.

And we acted it well.

If one of us so much as put the tip of our toe off, we'd collapse, have a mini-seizure and scream in excruciating agony until Lisa van der Bergh from number twenty came out in her high-waisted beige slacks and plaited gold belt to tell us that if we ever played such a "ghastly and wretched game again" she'd give us the hiding of our lives with the belt she wore so delicately round her waist.

Of course we played it again – she just became the devil queen we sprinted away from at the end, her belt of doom barely unbuckled.

That was the only good thing about anything – Devon. The fun we used to have. There was nothing good about Dad – his cratered face and damp brown moustache.

He was rot.

She was washing dishes when I came back in.

"Take me to Nan."

"No. It's late. They're asleep."

"Just phone her and see. Take me...please."

"Not after your little display Claire."

I walked ten kilometres at nine at night. She didn't even bother coming after me.

"What on God's earth Claire?"

Nan was standing in a pale blue kimono, an orange-embroidered dragon on the back that left red lines all over your skin. Had worn it many times playing dress up.

"Can I stay Nan?"

Her lounge was yellow and brown, soft stained carpets and velvet sofas from Checkers.

"How did you get here?"

"I walked."

Oupa was sleeping but I'm sure he heard Nan on the phone.

"She could have been raped Barbara."

I stared into my milky tea, studied the face of my Jolly Jammer. The jammy eyes and icing smile.

I spilt when she slammed the phone down.

“What did you and your mother fight about?”

She was wringing her swollen fingers, the knuckles fat like they’d swallowed a gob stopper, her wedding ring all skew.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? You walk here this late, and it was nothing?”

“I don’t want to live there.”

She knelt in front of me.

I had never seen Nan’s face this close up before. Her skin, like the softest play dough, hung slackly on her cheeks, pigmentation marks around her eyes and on her forehead. I wanted her to stay with me forever. To breathe her breath on me and pull me away.

“She is your mother. I can’t just take you away and you can’t just leave.”

“But it’s not her.”

She put her warm hands on the knees of my jeans.

“What is it Claire? What’s going on?”

“Poppet!”

Oupa emerged from the dark of the corridor shirtless, hair standing on end at the back like a cockatoo, his stomach like an overfilled water balloon. Had on tiny silk boxer shorts that barely covered his withered lower half.

“Berny, get back to bed.”

“Hey Oupa.”

“Where’s *my* tea?”

Nan stood one leg at a time.

“Must your granddaughter see you in such a state of undress Bernard?”

He scratched the back of his head, waved his hand at her. Talking under his breath he trudged back to the bedroom, his back a matted jungle of white hair.

It made me think of a silverback gorilla, with his puffed out chest and tummy hanging low and heavy.

“Claire, why don’t you go to bed? I’ll take you home in the morning.”

I sunk into my single bed in Nan’s spare room, the duvet like candy floss. I knew what it would be like in the morning. Nan would wake me with Horlicks and a buttermilk rusk.

When I was younger, Nan’s house was like magic.

I would dream about the mossy forest floors covered in tiny fairy wings and the fish-like scales of a Willamoot, the tree trunk with a trap door and stairs leading to the cove of the Cloch.

The sound of mom's engine ripped it all away.

Dad's car was parked in the driveway when Nan pulled up.

"I don't want to be here."

"Let me go inside first, just wait in the car."

As soon as her door shut, I moved into the driver's seat. The smell of her rose oil clung to the fabric of the seatbelt.

My feet could barely reach the pedals but I turned the ignition, hands sweating so badly beads were running down my wrists and dropping onto my jeans from the elbow.

I jammed it into reverse, the gears grating.

Didn't even look behind me, mounted the pavement and smacked straight into a concrete pillar.

They all rushed out, Dad running towards me his face Tabasco red. Mom's hands raised covering her mouth.

I went into first and put my foot flat on the accelerator, lurched forward and towards him, my hands slipped off the steering wheel and I smacked his side, stalled.

"Fuck!"

Hobbling now, he came towards the driver's door, Mom running after him.

I scrambled across the gear box and bolted out the passenger door and down the road.

"Get the fucking car Barbara!"

There was no breath in my lungs, everything was burning, my groin was wet.

I was almost at the complex gate when I heard him hooting.

Jump, jump over the wall.

I started climbing the face brick barefoot, my big toenail gave way and the pain seared.

The back of my shirt was seized up in his fist and he pulled me straight onto the ground, smacked my head so hard I saw black. When I could see again he was looking down at me his face puffed like a blowfish, eyes popping out.

Nan was sitting on the patio, head in her hands, grey hair hanging over her one shoulder.

My foot was bloodied, my shoulder blades aching.

Mom marched right up to her.

“I told you didn’t I? She’s impossible. Impossible! Of course she doesn’t want to live here. She’s a fucking brat!”

Nine

Dev wants to meet for dinner after work.

It's a Greek place, clichéd in blue and white. There are pale blue jugs with ice water on the tables stuffed with lemons, silhouettes of Greek statues on the wall. Greek flags hang on gut from the water-stained ceiling boards. The table cloths are paper.

We sit in the far corner next to a glass panel that surrounds the kitchen, a white tiled working area where chefs are spearing meat onto skewers.

Our waitress gives us an entire loaf of olive bread on a wooden board with olive oil, balsamic vinegar and sweating butter in a ramekin. The salt is in a small bowl, huge crystals. I tear a piece off and put everything on, sprinkle it with salt. End up biting on a crystal and I wince.

"I need to talk to you."

"Can we order the wine first at least?"

No smiles.

We get a bottle of Graça.

"So," I take a long sip, "what is it?"

"It's about Dad."

I can feel my nostrils flare.

"I'm not interested."

"I wouldn't talk to you about him unless I needed to."

"So... go."

I sit back and watch, wait.

"He has lymphoma."

"I'm not surprised."

"Claire..."

"That's what cancer is right? A build-up of guilt, hatred in your cells that keeps growing."

Shaking his head, "This is your dad we're talking about."

Taking another sip I lean forward.

"Our dad. And remember what I said to you, when I moved in with Nan at just *sixteen*? He is dead to me, dead. So why would me knowing this make a difference Devon? How could this possibly change anything?"

“It’s not about him, Claire. It’s about you, about getting the chance to say whatever you need to before time runs out.”

“Are you gonna order any dinner?”

Picking up the menu I scan the dishes.

“Can you please be serious for a second?”

Looking up, “I’m starving, that seems pretty serious to me.”

Running his hands through his hair, he glares at me.

“Will you go see him?”

“What for?”

“Just go, please. He’s at Unitas.”

I put the menu down.

“Will it help you if I go?”

“It’s not about me. I know growing up wasn’t easy.”

I scan the restaurant looking for our waitress.

“Hey, Claire?”

He covers my hand with his.

“I was there too, I know how he could be. Loving one second and a tyrant the next. But he’s still our dad.”

“You know how he could be?”

The tone in my voice is acid, I pull my hand out from under his.

“Ja,” he sits back heavily against the wooden chair.

“You know how he could be?”

Dev was playing Mario Brothers in the lounge. My thumbs were sore, the skin on the underside red. I went outside to play in our wendy house, where my mini kitchen was.

We had an old blue carpet on the floor, the two windows had yellow plastic panes – I would sing Yellow Submarine every time I walked inside.

My back was turned but I heard the door open, was ready to present Devon with my homemade grass cupcakes.

His thing was in front of my face, veiny and purple, like a finger after you’ve wrapped it tight with a rubber band.

I dropped my cupcakes on the floor.

“Shhh, don’t move.”

He grabbed my hand and put it on.

It was hot, hard.

His hand came over mine and he started making it go up and down.

There was a spider web in the corner on the floor. I counted the strands from the outside in.

My hand got wetter and wetter, the muscle in my arm started to burn and then he grunted and some hot stuff like custard shot out and hit my denim dungarees, right by the big pocket on my chest.

He let my hand go and I just held it in the air, my fingers stretched wide.

Taking a handkerchief out he wiped my clothes, folded it back up into his pocket.

His belt clicked back into place and there was sunlight coming in through the door.

Dev walked towards us on the grass.

“What were you doing?”

“Claire and I were just playing a little game boy.”

He rubbed the top of his head, went inside.

“Why didn’t you call me?”

His face was ruddy, he slapped me across the arm.

“I want to play with Dad too.”

“What did he do that was so wrong?”

I feel like I’ve swallowed a bowling ball.

“Tell me, please?”

“Dev, you just...”

His chestnut eyes search my face.

This is the person who has always loved me.

“It’s nothing.”

He cocks a brow.

“Really, it’s in the past.”

Sitting back he lets out a breath.

“Then bury the hatchet. Just talk to him and put whatever happened between you guys to rest. It’s not worth it C. It’s weighing you down, I can tell.”

Let me inside your brain Dev. Let me know what you’re thinking , what precious little thing are you imagining in there?

Ten

I've never wanted to ask Marge a favour, but I need this one. This week is not going my way, and after dinner with Devon I don't know how I feel.

So he's dying.

Am I glad?

Do I visit him?

"Marge?"

She's wrestling with a Tempo chocolate from the vending machine in the office kitchen, hand claw-like to reach up and in where's it's got caught.

"Ja," she rips it out triumphant, holds it in her fist and above her head like a trophy.

"I need a favour."

She unwraps it in one movement, nods while chewing.

"The bumper of my car fell off."

Swallowing, "The whole thing?"

"Yeah and I dragged it for a bit so it's pretty scraped. Do you think Noah could take a look for me?"

VW Golfs can keep going, but there comes a point where things start to disintegrate, toggles and buttons disappear, aerials get swatted clean off by low hanging branches, bumpers dislodge without warning.

Putting her hand behind my back she rubs up and down, "Sure. Bring it round tomorrow after work."

Marge must be the only South African without a fence, just some purple rusted mailbox resting against an acacia and tyres cut in half segmenting her lawn from the road – a perimeter of rubber half-moons.

Her house is single story thatch. The walls are burnt orange, no burglar bars.

I get out and call for her.

The only reply is a distant hardida.

I call again, and some boerboel appears from behind the house.

He lumbers towards me with a head the size of a genetically modified pumpkin, shimmering slobber dangling from his jowls. Think I understand why having a fence doesn't matter.

I'm not sure whether to get back in my car or try pretend I'm not worried I might lose an arm if I stay out here.

He makes right for my crotch, wet nose hitting the sweet spot.

I back away, call for Marge again, slightly more shrill this time.

Turning myself around I hope he'll lose interest.

It's the wrong idea.

He wraps both paws around my legs, nails digging into my shins and lunges up to start humping me.

"Marge! Maaaaarge!"

I rip open my door and blast the hooter.

She's in a colossal bathrobe that barely conceals her curves, dark hair in wet straggles on either side of her head as she barrels out the door.

"Pudding! Get down you horny bastard. Pudding!"

He retreats, leaving his foamy slobber all over my ass.

"Pudding?"

I look at her incredulous.

She shrugs, walking towards me barefoot, "Kids named him."

"Noah's not back from work so let's grab a glass of wine. You can meet my offspring."

It's quite nice inside. Wooden floors, a big burgundy couch in their lounge on the right. It feels lived in, smells like teak oil and wood smoke.

Marge pours me some red wine in a glass the size of a small vase.

"Kids! Aunty Claire is here."

Spluttering into my wine, I suck it up my nose, the cough is open-mouthed.

I stand to two sets of eyes wide on the stairs.

Raising my hand in an awkward salute I try smile.

They try smile too, but I think I've petrified them.

"Soph, Olly, come."

They actually hold hands as they come towards me.

"This is your Aunty Claire."

"Marge," I shake my head at her.

"Say hello."

“Hi,” Soph says, looking down at her pink Uggs. She must be what? Six. Olly’s no older than four.

That’s it, they walk back up the stairs and Marge and I sit on the burgundy couch.

“Please don’t call me that Marge, your kids don’t even know me.”

“My house, my rules.”

“What time do you think Noah will be back?”

“Soon, don’t worry.”

She takes a sip.

All I’ve done this week is drink wine.

“Any plans for the weekend?”

“Just my Nan on Saturday morning. I see her every week so that’s pretty much set.”

“Oh sweet, where does she live?”

“An old age home in Benoni.”

Nodding, she looks around her lounge as if for the first time, rubs her hand along the arm of the couch.

Silence descends.

There’s not much to say after you’ve spent a whole day with someone.

Her phone rings from inside the pocket of her gown.

“Yello?”

Her wine glass is immediately on the table and she’s up and walking towards the kitchen.

Her voice is low.

She comes back out crying.

“What?” I stand.

“Would you mind just watching the kids for 30 minutes? I need to go pick up my stupid fucking father.”

“What’s going on?”

I have never looked after a child in my life.

“He got drunk, again. Is passed out in the parking lot at O’Hagans, wallet lying open on the fucking tarmac. God!”

She’s scraping her hair into a bun.

“I need to change.”

I’m left to the coolness of the house, the unseeable creatures living in amongst the golden thatch, the ticking of a clock.

Clomping back down the stairs she grabs her keys off the side table.

“If Noah comes, get him to fix the bumper and tell him I’ll be back, okay?”

Nodding, I raise my glass to her in the most inappropriate show of compassion.

“The kids are playing so they should be fine.”

I sit back down on the couch after she’s left, like I’m in the principal’s office, legs pressed together, waiting for something to happen.

I knew the drill well. Was called in far too many times – homework was never done, I couldn’t listen, I was a loner after a certain point – they all wanted to know why.

Calling my parents in should have been enough of an indication.

Getting up, I look at all their family photos on the fireplace.

There’s one of Marge and Noah on their wedding day. They’re framed in a glowing circle, hazy and white around its circumference.

Her hair is blonde, curled to within an inch of its life, the sleeves of her wedding dress like two white motorcycle helmets.

Noah’s wearing a brown pinstripe suit, a single white rose in his top pocket.

They look happy, despite their styling.

The next are of the kids.

In one they’re sitting in a green, plastic wash basket on the grass, the other they’re both riding on Noah’s back.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen a photograph of myself growing up. I only have one of Devon holding me soon after I was born.

I’m in a white christening gown and bonnet, my skin rosy like I’d just come out of a hot bath. He had a bowl cut, his dimples deep, tiny pearlies on show sitting on a single bed with just a sheet.

What was it like then? What were they like? I barely have any memories that don’t involve my dad.

I haven’t heard anything from upstairs in a while.

There’s hushed talking when I do get to the top of the stairs. I follow it to what must be the play room.

They’re spread on a foam, puzzle piece carpet, Hot Wheels cars all over the show, a box of crayons and kokies on a small plastic table by the window, mounds of stuffed animals against a futon.

Most of what’s in here seems like a choking hazard.

They start when they see me pressed against the door frame.

“Sorry, just wanted to check that you guys were okay.”

Olly looks as though he may cry any second.

I have invaded their safe space, their magical haven, have ruined their fun.

“I’ll be downstairs if you guys need me.”

Should I be talking in simpler English?

A door slams before I can make it down the stairs and Marge is standing cellphone pressed to her ear.

“What did I expect, really?”

She drops her bag on the floor and goes into the kitchen.

My car will not get fixed today.

Grabbing my bag by the couch I try wave to her so I can leave.

She calls me to her.

“Can you just get home please? You need to fix Claire’s car.”

“No Marge, just leave it.”

She cuts him off.

“Did you finish your wine?”

My glass is on the fire place.

“Let’s have another while we wait for Noah.”

“How are you? What happened?”

She uncorks a bottle of red, knocks it over as she yanks it out.

“Fuck.”

It glugs across the wooden kitchen counter and starts dripping onto the floor.

I pull it upright, Marge grabs a cloth and gets on her hands and knees.

I hear sobbing, the counter is blocking her from my view.

Coming round, “Marge, what the hell is going on?”

“My whole life, this is how it has been. Ever since I could drive. Strangers phoning me. ‘We have your dad here...’”

Dropping the cloth she smacks her back against the counter.

“I haven’t ever known him sober. And he’s always pissed himself, buttons of his shirt undone, smelling so fucking foul.”

I sit next to her, can feel wine seeping into my pants.

“So why do you put up with it?”

Wiping her nose with the back of her hand, “It’s not that simple Claire.”

“It is, it really is. You shouldn’t ever let someone do something to you that you don’t want – whether it’s make you miserable or whatever.”

“But he’s family. That’s why I do it. I’m all he’s got. He’s all I’ve got.”

I shake my head at her.

“Family means nothing at the end of the day.”

“Of course it does.”

“Not in my experience.”

Sniffing, “What about Devon?”

“That’s different.”

“It’s not, he’s family.”

She pulls at some lint on her pants.

“Whether they’re good or bad you can’t just walk away when the shit hits the fan.”

I glower at her.

“Marge, you just came in here totally out of control. Wouldn’t you love to walk away from that?”

“Yes, of course.”

Standing she grabs some paper towel and violently blows her nose, wipes her eyes.

“But how would I feel about myself for walking away?”

Frowning, my arms crossed, “There are some things you have to walk away from. You can’t always stay.”

“Like what Claire?”

I am not opening myself up to this.

“For some things, Marge, it’s difficult to stay.”

Eleven

This was it. This was when I left.

I'm sixteen. We're on our way to a farm in the Eastern Cape and have to drive for whatever reason. I have been temporarily forgiven for crashing Nan's car.

Dev and I move between car sickness and stuffing as many Chappies into our mouths as possible – we've made an impressive mound of chewed, greying gum on a plastic packet next to my feet on the floor.

The roads just keep curving round and round. All these *skadonk bakkies* with rusting bonnets trying to overtake on blind rises. I always had this feeling I'd die in a car accident, crushed and compacted like a deodorant can.

Maybe I still will.

Dev's fallen asleep now, mouth hanging wide, his earphones against the side of his head.

Dark green blankets of trees layer the mountains, fill up the dips and valleys. People actually live here, make money here – with these diseased, rib-barring cows and stray dogs – they wake up, do things, eat, sleep.

Mom's quiet in the passenger seat, reading a book, her gold bangles jingling as we navigate the pot holes.

We go through King William's Town. Pass an Engen on the left and on the right is a river trickling brown with white plastic bags trapped in the straggly branches of now dead and withered trees. I can imagine the smell.

Do people drink from that?

They'd vomit if they did.

Through the centre of town there's a butchery, a liquor store, the streets look dusty and there's rubbish dried crisp in the gutters.

Putting my hand out the window I let the breeze dry my sweat, pop gum.

"Stop that," she says.

My bladder's full when we turn off the main road and go through a gate on our left, hitting bumps.

Dev's head lolls to either side like his neck is made of rubber.

I wee a little in my panties when Dad hits a big bump, it soaks through the middle and I can feel the warm.

Passing through another gate there's a clay ornament thing on a metal spoke: *Almal Welkom* (veral as jy 'n boer is!).

The house is on our right as we pull up on their lawn next to a granny flat with custard-yellow walls.

No one comes to greet us.

"I need to pee."

My dad gets out the car and starts walking around the garden, then disappears round the back of the house.

"I need to pee."

"Then pee in a bottle Claire or in the garden," she says.

"What if someone sees?"

"Too bad you can't just go anywhere sis."

Dev yawns wide, rubs his face up and down hard with his palms.

"Where are we anyway?"

Mom says nothing.

Walking back down the dirt road we've just driven on I see a white *bakkie* approaching, sun shining off the bonnet and headlights. Two black guys are sitting on the canopy.

Standing to the side I let them pass, the driver turning to look at me through Oakleys.

I start walking into the long grass to find a place to wee, have to step over tiny pellets of poo, logs.

Crouching down I pull my panties to the side and spread my legs in a wide crouch. I look away, can feel the warm splatter hit the tops of my feet, it sounds like it's bubbling as it makes a river of mud.

The worst feeling is the wetness after you pull your underwear back up.

When I get back I walk past the *bakkie* and there's blood dripping from the grooves that line the back.

"They've come back from a hunt."

My dad's grabbing our cases out the back of the boot.

"Skinning it if you want to watch."

What father says that to his daughter?

I don't want anything to do with being here.

I stand still and look at the dark red congealed in the corners of the *bakkie*, the dark brown smears and hair that's all mixed in. There's that metallic smell.

A murder happened in there.

Flies buzz round and suck up what's left.

"Go watch," he says, almost at the front door, "walk down those steps and onto the grass at the front of the house."

I don't know why I go but I do.

Walking slowly, I see them all standing in a circle.

One of the buck is strung up in a tree.

I walk up to them but stand on the outside.

They all turn to look at me and smile.

There are five men, all dressed in camo. One's wearing a peak cap – *I'd rather be hunting.*

Devon isn't here.

The buck's lying on the ground. Its throat slit, tongue pulled through the jaw, rigid. There are two impala lying to the side as well.

I walk over and look at them, their coats glossy. I stroke the one with my hand, from the neck down to the stomach. You're just sleeping. I know you're just pretending lying here. I see the coat's crawling with tiny brown fleas, the ears caked in black grime that looks like it carries on all the way to the brain.

I stand quickly, move to the outside of the circle again.

For the one that's strung up they've cut between the tendons of both its hind legs, pushing metal hooks through.

Two black guys, "boys" I hear them call them, slit the skin on the belly from the groin down to between the two front legs. While the one does that the other starts to skin the tail, work around the asshole.

What is this? Why are they doing this? It did nothing.

There's a tear as they pull, the stomach pregnant-looking and covered in a fine, white coating like a spider's web, you can see the deep red of the flesh beneath.

My dad joins the group, a Black Label in his hand.

They're all standing round, guns slung over shoulders, hands in pockets or resting on *boeps* watching this butchery. They all have wrinkly, red faces and long nose hairs.

“I shot that big boy in the middle of a flock of sheep,” one says, pointing to the stripped buck, “Got him right between the eyes. Dropped like a ton of bricks. All those *skaap* were just staring at the poor son of a bitch like ‘what the fuck just happened?’”

Snorting, guffaws, “well done *boet*”.

The boys carry on until they reach the head, then saw it off.

They put the skin, the head still attached, under the body, lay it flat like a picnic blanket. Blood carries on dripping.

What were you thinking before the bullet shot through your brain? Would you have wanted to know, have feared the crack of every branch?

They slit the flesh, use a saw to cut open the ribcage.

I move closer, blood dripping onto my white pumps. The left one has tiny splatters but there’s just one bigger drop on the right, like the flag of Japan. The wind is whipping the hair into my mouth, it tastes salty.

The stomach is growing, a white balloon. They need to pull it out intact so the stuff from the intestines doesn’t spoil the meat – that’s what the men say. The boys heave and it falls onto the skin on the floor, starts to deflate, wrinkle up and prune in the sun. The heart and liver comes out. Flies are there, rubbing their hands in glee.

Where is Devon?

“This your girl Mitch?”

Turning to face me the guy checks me up and down, takes a foamy sip of his beer, pursing his lips once he’s swallowed.

“Ja.”

My dad takes a quick look out the corner of his eye.

When did he get here?

“Let me try that rifle there Hennie.”

Dad walks up to the guy and grabs the gun off his shoulder before he can say anything. He feels the weight, squints one eye and points at the bleeding buck, finger resting on the trigger.

He swings it round past me and I duck.

Their laughing is loud.

“You think he was gonna shoot you girlie,” Hennie says, wiping the corners of his eyes.

My dad smiles, holding the rifle by the handle, pointing it towards the ground before handing it back.

Turning my back to them I walk closer to where the boys are working, in a way I want to be here for it.

Looking into the cavity I see the pale pink of the penis, tipped with a brown head. It looks like a raw pork sausage, the balls are dark brown sacs that seem to sit along the spine.

I feel short of breath.

One of the older guys comes to stand next to me.

“That’s the sex. Gotta chop it off.”

I walk away. My spit feels thick, my fingers prickle.

Devon comes down the stairs.

“What’s going on down there?”

He’s changed into black board shorts, his hair wet.

“Hey, what happened? Are you crying?”

Grabbing both my arms he squats down slightly to look into my face.

“Claire, what’s wrong?”

“They kill everything.”

Putting his arm around my shoulders he puts his hand up to shield his eyes.

“What have they done? Is it a buck?”

He squeezes me.

“They’re just culling them C, they breed too quickly.”

I shake him off.

“It wouldn’t matter.”

The farm house is single story, the outside a dark brown. It has wooden floors, beige walls on the inside. It’s typical in the way these houses are, from what I’ve seen in magazines. High ceilings, old-looking fridge in white. Gas stove. Proteas in a vase on the kitchen table.

I still don’t know who owns this house, which one of the sunburnt murderer’s wife is showing me to my room. She smells like soft things, is wearing Crocs and a brown khaki shirt, copper hair up in a scrunchie.

“There’s no lock on the door.”

I’m holding the handle.

“Is there a key?”

“Sorry, I wouldn’t know where it is.”

I have a single bed with a leopard print duvet. The curtains, a dark green, clack along the rod when I pull them open, like a train on the tracks.

The boys are outside hosing down the back of the *bakkie*, washing away the evidence. My window looks right out onto their front lawn where the car is parked.

I'm sure the grass will be greener there, nourished by the blood. A bright green patch as a memory.

Devon is bunking with their son. We all share a coral bathroom with porcelain cats that sit on the tank of the toilet.

The wife gives us lunch.

Homemade bread with homemade butter served with homemade jam on homemade plates. Bread's so fresh it just crumbles when you cut it. How different life is on the *plaas*.

We're sitting at a huge wooden table in the kitchen, knife marks scraped all over the top.

Two border collies wipe their wet noses on our legs under the table, lick spots of nothing on the kitchen floor leaving their matted, wet smell to hang in the air.

I take a bite, look at the son sitting across from me.

He's out of school, has a sunglass tan, eyes like the algae on top of a pond.

He smiles big, bread caked between his front teeth.

I look down.

After lunch his mom makes him take Devon and I on a tour round the farm on bright red quad bikes.

We walk to a corrugated iron shed, Devon and him talking sport.

The sun here is too searing, I can feel the stones trying to bruise my feet through the soles of my shoes.

There are piles of hay, mouldy on the bottom, stacked against the right hand side of the shed, rusted horse bits and spurs hanging off nails in the wall.

"Will you ride with me?"

I look at Devon and he shrugs, hopping onto one of the quads.

"I want to go with my brother."

"*Ag nee*. I'm a very good driver."

Securing his goggles, "Just go with him C. Sure he doesn't bite. I'll be right behind you."

He gets on first and I get on behind him, my jeans pulling tight across my thighs. The seat is warm from the sun.

Pushing my butt to the edge of the seat, I put my arms behind me to hold onto the metal railing at the very back.

“Hold onto me.”

I don't move.

“You'll break your neck holding on there.”

I wrap my arms round his middle. His breathing is deep, his back rising. Sweat is seeping through his shirt onto the underside of my arms.

The roads are all sand, the trip around bumpy. I crunch down on grit, my tongue feels rough with all the little bits. The heat of the engine is nipping at my Achilles. Stones like BB pellets shoot up and sting every now and then.

We stop at a dam and I jump off.

I walk forward a bit, my hand shielding my eyes. It's that time in the day when the sun hits the water directly and it becomes white out there, the reflection almost burns.

Turning round he's still sitting on the quad, looking at me.

“What's your name,” he says.

“Claire.”

He nods.

“Henry, that's me.”

A backwards way to introduce yourself.

“What do you do around here?”

“Farm.”

“Which involves?”

His brain is coated in sludge, it can't fire without a gloopy lag.

“Checking fences, giving medicine to the cows, fixing stuff.”

“Riveting.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

Devon crunches to a halt behind us.

“Man these things can move. Took a bit of a detour and almost bailed.”

He's pulled the goggles up, his fringe standing up like that makes him look like he's been electrocuted.

“Shall we swim?”

His grin is wide.

“You guys can, I'm fine.”

“Ha!”

Dev whips off his shirt, pulls at his shoes and starts sprinting like he's going for the winning try. Almost walks on water until he dives in.

Henry takes off his sunglasses, rubs his eyes, scrunches his face up real tight.

He's a big boy, one of those who played rugby in school – it had to be an Afrikaans school, he went to rugby festivals, broke bones, didn't cry. I squint to see if he has cauliflower ears.

“You coming?”

I shake my head, turn towards the dam again.

Dev's still underwater, killing brain cells while he tries to count to 60 seconds. He's never made it.

Henry takes his shirt off. Upper half like a block of cheddar, arms like turkey drumsticks. The worst farmer's tan I've seen.

He winks at me before running in after Devon.

I walk towards the edge of the water.

It's muddy and there are animal prints squelched around. Slipping my pumps off I walk in a little, recoil at the slimy bottom caressing my pale soles. I've always been scared I'll stand on the decaying ribcage of some corpse.

A hunter. Shot between the eyes. Dumped to disintegrate.

If buck could shoot for a day, we'd get rid of all five of them in one go.

Dev surfaces, gasping.

“Were you counting?”

I shrug, move away from the water.

He and Henry wrestle for a bit, grabs each other's necks and pull, twist, push – big slippery bodies writhing.

There's a whistle, calling.

“*Ag shit. Kom.*”

He kicks Devon in the chest to push him away.

Dinner is beef, probably shot an hour ago. The gravy, sitting in its little porcelain boat, has a sheen of oil on top. The carrots are sugared, the beans baconed and onioned, the potatoes crisped and salted.

The husband is here. Moustache to rival Tom Selleck. Not one of the hunters from today but I know he kills.

Went to school with my dad, Grey High School. They played first team rugby together.

“Remember when Jefferson tore his hamstring?”

“Bruce bit through his bottom lip – *jus* that was a doozy.”

We have to say grace.

Henry’s next to me.

I put my right hand in his, my left in my mom’s. Her palm is cool, soft. His is warm, harder. My fingers barely touch his, almost levitate. He looks at me side on, narrows his eyes, gripping me hard.

The prayer is in Afrikaans – *Vader* something something *Vader*.

“Amen.”

I rip my hand out of his, smack my glass of water over. Everyone pushes their chairs back loudly to avoid the dripping.

I eat everything but the beef and bits of bacon, leave it in the centre of the plate like an art work.

We sit and talk in their lounge afterwards, the walls lined with the heads of the captured. Buffalo, kudu, even a warthog. They all sit, glassy eyed staring at us above the huge flat screen TV square in the middle of the wall. The rugby’s on mute.

“Impressive collection,” Dad says, gesturing with his whiskey, the ice clinking.

“We have a guy down the road who does it, the taxidermy.”

“You shoot all these yourself?”

“Every one.”

He kills.

“You don’t do it yourself?”

“No, no, no. It smells shit man. You boil everything off the skull, fat and skin bubbling away. You need special stuff to clean out the skull, peroxide to make it white, nail polish for the teeth, all kinds of *kak*.”

The wife serves tea on a tray, a plate of *koeksisters* so sweet my cheeks shiver and my teeth feel pierced by needles. The granules linger on my tongue, my throat feels like its closing up.

After that first bite I hold it between my fingers until it feels like its melting. Grabbing a serviette off the tray I wrap it up and hold it in my palm.

My mom glares at me.

Henry's next to me on the couch, an orange beaded pillow propped between us. There's still blood on my pumps. My fingers till syrup-sticky.

Devon's in an armchair opposite me, keeps raising his brows, nudging me even from across the room with his looks.

"Excuse me," I say.

There are small decorative mirrors lining the corridor outside the lounge. It makes me think of voodoo. Some have roses round the border in a dark silver, others are bronze, some wooden. See your face lengthened, made squat, my eyes loom large, then compress.

I walk into a study, framed photos lining the walls.

I stand in front of each one. Some are of his dad in military training, athletics pictures. There's a family portrait, circa mullets and jumbo-sized glasses. What is this life like? How different to mine with a mother that cooks real things, a father who... what?

I wake to rustling outside my window, clawing up the drain pipe, the scraping of something in the gutter above the window, sharp claws pitter patter above my head. I focus my eyes on the roof, follow the movement unseeing.

There's a rooster somewhere in the distance, his crow mangled, a bit pitchy. A coolness is in the air, the icy drop off just before dawn. My spit is thick on my tongue, my eyes glued down in the corners.

I get dressed in the dark.

The door squeaks as I pull it open.

I tip toe across the hall to the bathroom.

The toilet seat is cold pressed against my thighs.

Their balcony overlooks a stone-work pool. The sun is just starting to rise and I can see the dead leaves floating on the surface. Walking down I drag my fingers through the water.

I go back inside at 6am, find mom in the kitchen wearing a dark green apron with a kudu head embroidered on it, blonde hair up in a French twist.

She smells like meat, oil, and some floral perfume, can hear the spitting on the stove.

She has such a strange figure. So tiny on the top and then her lower half just balloons. The ribbon of the apron looks like it holds together the severed halves of two different bodies.

I'm lanky. Always have been. Dev used to say I was an albino Massai.

We had to host two American exchange students when he was in high school. They were from California on a swimming tour and Dev just went to town over dinner:

“My folks were missionaries in Kenya, trying to cleanse the people of their sins, you know how it is.

And lo and behold look what they found one day while dodging tigers and venomous snakes – an albino Massai warrior princess. So they shoved her in their duffel bag and the rest is history.”

He patted me on the head, “Eat your bones Claire.”

I gnawed on a chicken bone for effect.

Have never seen two people more confused, a combination of solemn nods and twitchy eyes – I’m sure they were kicking each other under the table.

But we got to sleep in the same room while they were there – my protector for a brief spell.

“You’re up early.”

I sit at the dining table, the wood cold under my forearms.

“Connie’s making *vetkoek*. Thought we’d do bacon and syrup, some mince maybe.”

I don’t offer to help.

She hasn’t let me into the kitchen since I chopped the top of my knuckle off while trying to slice an onion, had a fifteen minute car ride with a blood-soggied piece of Carlton towel limply wrapped around the index finger of my left hand and a mother on the verge of bursting a neck vein, shouting so fiercely I could see her spit hit the windscreen – “how could you have been so stupid?!”

I head to our cat bathroom, open the door without knocking.

Henry’s brushing his teeth shirtless. There’s acne on his back in hardened pustular peaks, angry red at the bottom.

We stare at each other in the mirror for a bit. I don’t know why I don’t just leave.

I can’t stop looking at his back.

He spits, rinses his mouth with a gurgle and turns to face me, hands in the pockets of his blue mitre rugby shorts.

There’s acne on his chest as well. A few dark stray hairs around his nipples.

He takes one step towards me and I turn.

I wake up, think it's the rat on the roof again, a noise in my room.

He rests one knee on the bed behind me and I hold my breath, my stomach muscles clenching.

I am dead, a corpse.

I cannot feel.

I cannot be touched.

He takes his weight off the bed, his footsteps retreat, the floor creaking.

And I breathe.

It was the wrong thing to do.

The weight returns and I feel warm skin on the backs of my thighs as he crawls under the covers, the hair coarse and grating.

I will not move.

His hands skim round to the front and squeeze my barely there breasts.

He moves my hair off my neck and puts his breath there, kisses me once.

Licking the back of my ear he trails his hands forward over my stomach to tickle the top of my pubic bone, dumpy fingers playing.

I start to pull away but he pushes me harder into him.

I kick both my legs, try crawl across the mattress, elbowing him in the chest.

He doesn't even make a sound.

The room is still in total darkness.

He rips me back and clamps everything down with his body, pins my arms with his, has both my legs held painfully between his own.

He grips my top thigh.

Our bodies are sweating.

I hear the door on its hinges before a stream of light comes in from the corridor.

We both freeze.

My heartbeat thumps in my ears.

There's the familiar jingle of the bangles as the door closes.

Releasing everything he gets up, I can't even hear his footsteps.

The shaft of light is back and then, nothing.

We leave the next day laden with dry *wors* and homemade rusks. I shake my head when Dev offers me a fatty stick.

“How did everybody enjoy it?”

Dev's chewing with his mouth open, the brown and fat rolling around in there.

This is what makes our family tick, my brother, asking normal questions.

"Was good," Dad says, "nice to go back there."

"Ma? You have a nice time?"

She's putting her lipstick on in the compact mirror above her head.

She says it so convincingly, could almost fool herself.

"I don't know about me, but Claire and Henry seemed to have a great time together."

Failing number two.

His eyes dart from the road and lock on mine in the rear-view mirror.

He looks at Mom, then back at me.

First time I've ever seen fear in his eyes.

Twelve

“I’m going to live with Nan.”

She looks up from her All Bran, milk dripping from her bottom lip.

He made me unpack the cooler box with him after the farm, my fingers going numb in the water.

Crooking his head, he motioned me to the fridge.

Dev was in the lounge snoozing on the couch, hairy legs thrown over the side, mouth hanging open.

I moved towards Dad, the brown tiles of the kitchen cold under my feet.

I don’t know what compelled me to listen, what compels me to listen.

The fridge smelt like onion, the drop in temperature gave me goosebumps.

Pushing me so I stood in front of him he pressed against me, thrusting his pelvis forward.

I made a vow then and there: What happened at the farm will never happen again.

“No.”

“I’m going,” I say.

“Your father will not allow it.”

“Please.”

“The answer is no.”

“I don’t want to live here anymore.”

Picking up her bowl she walks over to the sink, stands there for a long while.

“You are my daughter, you do not have say.”

I stand close to her, have never been this close since I was small, can see the purple-tinged bags under her eyes, the crow’s feet, burst veins around her nose.

“Let me go.”

She won’t catch my eye, just stares at the tops of her sheepskin slippers.

“If you don’t let me go, I’ll kill myself.”

Her head shoots up, “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I will do it.”

“Then do it Claire, you’re not moving. You are not your grandparent’s responsibility.”

I abandon the plan, for now.

“Let me ask them.”

Turning the tap on she fills the sink to start scrubbing, the pipes shuddering.

“Have you forgotten how you ruined your grandmother’s car, disgraced this family?”

She looks at me side on, “It was in the newspaper.”

“I know that.”

Her name was Evan.

We were best friends in grade 8. Had a book we used to pass around between classes, wrote notes to each other, drew all kinds of pictures.

She took me to her parent’s house on the Vaal for the weekend, wanted me to learn to water ski.

I wanted to learn, needed to learn so I could have somewhere else to be.

We stopped at an Engen Steers on the way, had a day-old chicken burger for breakfast and a chocolate milkshake.

We got straight into the water, my life jacket buoying up and touching my ear lobes, the straps strapped down too tight across my chest.

I kept myself wound tight, hands gripping the handle bar with white knuckles.

The engine spluttered, shred the water and the rope went taught.

I pushed my legs against the board.

Couldn’t even make it out of the shallows, felt as though my arms were being ripped from their sockets.

Evan’s mom saw the newspaper article.

I never got a chance to learn after that.

I told Mom it wouldn’t have happened if she had let me go, let me escape my broom cupboard bedroom and his hands.

“I would rather die than stay in this house.”

“Then die.”

I move out of arms reach.

“You don’t even like me, care about me, just let me live with Nan, please.”

“We don’t care? We don’t care?”

She turns. Her chest is speckled red, her gown gaping open at the front, the tie coming loose to drag on the floor.

“Your father works his life away to provide for you, and this is the thanks he gets?”

“He takes his fucking thanks whenever he wants!”

She stops walking towards me, puts her hand against the kitchen counter, eyes shut tight.

“Get out.”

She doesn't need to tell me twice.

He comes back from his trip the next day, his skin a shade darker, a souvenir for everyone from the sunny KZN.

I get a stuffed shark on a key ring, Devon gets nothing since he went to varsity.

My one line of defence, living in another province.

Mom gets some foot scrub and a pumice stone.

“Have you heard, Mitch, your daughter plans to move out.”

I wasn't allowed to eat dinner in my room.

“What?”

His mouth is full of mash and gravy.

“I want to live with Nan.”

He gives a harsh chuckle so his stomach jiggles.

“No.”

Busying himself with his plate, he carries on shovelling.

“Why?”

“Because you're a child under this roof and as long as I pay for you you'll do as I say.”

“I'm done with doing what you say.”

He drops his cutlery to the side of his plate.

They both stare at me.

A lamb to the slaughter.

“I beg your pardon?”

My hands are hot against my thighs under the table.

“Let me go.”

“I have no reason to,” he says.

He looks at Mom, smiling.

“I'll tell them.”

Mom picks her teeth with her nail, “Tell who?”

“Whoever I have to.”

His chewing has slowed.

“And what will you say?”

Hearing myself swallow I fix my eyes on him, force myself not to look away.

“Barb, excuse us for a second,” he says.

Sipping her whiskey, “Why? What’s going on?”

“Barbara. Now.”

She’s up.

The table feels the size of a Marie biscuit, like he could haul me across by my hair if he wanted to.

Putting his knife and fork together he leans back, rests his hands behind his head.

“So, you want to leave.”

I swallow hard.

“Yes.”

“And if I don’t let you?”

“I will tell whoever I have to.”

He brings his hands back by his sides.

“You don’t love me?”

Without hesitation, “No.”

“So why do you let me do what I want?”

How could he say that?

“Why do I let you?”

I miss Devon so much I feel a hollowness below my sternum, I want to invert, crawl into a ball and be hidden.

“You never stopped me.”

My stare is blank.

“How was I supposed to stop you?”

“You could have said no. I thought you liked it.”

“So when I started to kick, punch, you thought I liked it?”

I’m sixteen. Talking to my father about our sex life. What world am I living in? Whose life is this?

He shrugs.

“I just thought you were being difficult.”

She comes back in from the lounge, puts the kettle on.

Maternal instinct. Biology: *The maternal bond that forms between a mother and a child.* Can you hate something from birth? Could she have carried me for nine months and hated that I used her body, that I was cradled in her womb?

She knows. Has always known. And she's making tea.

"I'm done," he says, motioning with his head for her to come and clear his plate. My meal still sits untouched.

She leaves it in the sink, dunks her teabag a few times and walks back out.

"Who will you tell?"

"Nan. The police."

He frowns, lips curling down, "They'll never believe you."

"Are you willing to risk it?"

It's a line I heard on TV.

"You're alone out there Claire."

He says it in a sing-song voice, like a popular little ditty.

"I have a brother."

His grin fades.

Come to me Dev, come down right now and swoop me up from the ceiling. Let's lie on our backs on the damp grass, close our eyes and listen to the crickets chirr.

"He wouldn't believe you. No one will."

"You don't know that."

"And your mother? Do you plan to ruin her life too?"

I'm not wining this, but neither is he.

"There's nothing to ruin. She's married to you."

Resting his elbows on the table he scans my face.

"And, pretty baby," I recoil at the name, "what if your grandparents don't want you?"

"They want me."

The back of my shirt is soaked through, my calves ache from being tensed.

"What will I do without you?"

"You have a wife."

"You can't get away from me. Whether you live here or live there, it makes no difference to me."

The panic is coming, zipping my windpipe closed from the bottom up.

This will not happen to me again.

“I’m not afraid to break this family apart. I was before, but I’m not now. I will scream and fight. I will tell everybody.”

“You’d hurt Devon?”

His face is inflamed, the burst capillaries even redder, his cheeks look like they’re vibrating.

“To save the sister he loves, yes.”

“You little fucking cunt.”

She drops her mug in the sink and it shatters.

“Take me now,” I say, my voice trembling, but loud enough.

Thirteen

I have to park in the fourth row of the parking lot, farthest away from the hospital entrance next to some forlorn looking shrubs and a pot plant of wilting marigolds that have become the resident ashtray – stray cigarette stubs and hard pieces of gum are strewn around the stiff soil.

Shutting off my engine I sit, listening to it cool, that gentle tick.

I wouldn't be here if Devon hadn't told me about him. I wouldn't have cared.

When I look up at the dash again it's been almost an hour.

There's an icy wind blowing. A mother and daughter sharing a massive shawl scuttle past me to their SUV, windswept and giggling.

As I walk past the reception, two nurses are talking waiting to grab a coffee at the café.

"I've never seen that before," the one says. Her shoes still squeak down the corridors, hair still up nice and tight, skin still glowing.

"Why did he rip it out?"

"Who fucking knows – there was so much blood. What a mess to clean up," the other nurse says.

This one's chewing gum, hair parted harshly down the middle, greying roots sprouting from the slicked-back do, refusing to be tamed by whatever gel she's applying.

The café has buzzing vending machines and chicken mayo sandwiches waiting forlornly behind the glass.

Before I enter the ward, I pass a table with three different boxes demonstrating where things should be thrown – paper in the blue bins, cans in the green and medical waste in the red. They've actually thrown the relevant trash around the boxes so people can see what goes where – have used red food colouring to dye some plasters with blood.

It looks like a table of real garbage.

He's in ward D, room 33.

The smell's the first thing that hits me. Food in hospital always smells the same, always seems to be delivered by tiny coloured women with osteoporosis who have holey blue hair nets and at least one hairy mole.

There are two empty beds to my left, both stripped, and a stray wheelchair stationary in the space between them, the footrests up.

On my right is a thin, white guy, liver spots all over the back of his skull. The sheet is thrown limply over his legs. The back of his hospital gown is partially open and his spine peeks through the oval hole, pushing up and out like some soft fragile thing seeking out the light. His food sits on a side table untouched – cottage pie and salad.

For a moment I wonder who he belongs to. What grandchildren has he bounced on his knee, what wife held his hand, stroked his stubble? Who has he hurt?

But he's not why I'm here.

My dad's bed is shielded by a white curtain.

Let me imagine – how frail will his body be, how emaciated? What does it feel like to have drips plunged into your veins, toxins running through your body? These are the details I want to know, the ones stored in his mind and not in some pale yellow hospital file.

I wanted him to die.

I want him to die.

Pulling the curtain back I'm greeted by his sleeping, open-mouthed face.

There's food stuck in his teeth, food and plaque all mixed up and glued to the gaps between them. Has bruised bags under his eyes. What used to be a moustache is now a fully grown beard sprouting off in different directions.

His skin has a green tinge – only thought that was something they said but he really looks it, Crème Soda milkshake colour.

Rattling my nails against the metal bed frame I step back as he sucks in breath, grunts like a warthog.

I kick the wheel of the bed and he opens his eyes immediately. Takes him a while to focus on my face before he inhales sharply.

“Why are you here?”

“To watch you die.”

His sob is feminine, a guttural spluttering and turning away of the face into his starched pillow. It's Victorian in its drama, his hand pressed over his eyes, the drip pulling tightly as he puts strain by turning his body away.

“What are you doing?”

He struggles to breathe. I feel I should offer a handkerchief.

“I'm sick. Please, I don't want you here.” It wasn't overly distinct given the pillow.

“You're definitely sick.”

He turns to face me, one fat greasy tear threatening to roll from his left eye.

“You shouldn't have come.”

I find an armchair and pull it up, put my feet up against the steel frame surrounding the bed.

“Oh, I don’t know. Seems like a nice enough place to me Mitchell.”

“Hi mam,” she comes in through the doors, has the prerequisite mole, “would you like something? Can I get him something?” He’s already in third person.

“Do you have any young children available?” I ask.

She does a one-armed shrug, the heels of her Crocs touching like a ballerina.

The look on his face is white terror, like he’s only now just realised what he’s done.

“You serve alcohol here?”

“No mam.”

“Tea will have to suffice.”

Nodding, she turns and leaves him with me.

“Thought you’d like a bit of whiskey – nothing like a cocktail of drugs and some Johnny Walker to get the party started.”

“Leave.”

He has a saggy, spitty pout on his face.

Grabbing some gum out my bag, I peel the silver foil, lick the white powder off my fingers before popping it into my mouth and flicking the foil at him.

“I just got here.”

“Your mother will be here.”

“You used to love alone time with me.”

My cheeks flush.

He covers his face with his hand, grape-sized purpled blood bruises dotted around, fingernails jagged.

“What do you want?”

He’s still hiding from me.

“Funny how you’re the one held captive isn’t it?”

Leaning forward I rest my forearms against the frame.

“How does it feel? To not be able to move, get away?”

I used to hold my breath so long my throat would feel like it was burning, my feet sweating from trying to pretend I was dead, a warm corpse shrouded in a cloud-patterned duvet.

“My mind is not here. I am outside the window. I am the burglar bars, coiled thin and tight like a piece of liquorice. I cannot be touched.”

I couldn't see anything, there was this paralytic terror knowing what would come out of the dark, what would weigh down my mattress with hot breath from hairy nostrils.

My eyes would dart side to side. I willed my pupils to swell so more light could hit them and I could see in the dark.

"I didn't eat enough carrots. I should've eaten more, stuffed my stomach full."

Taking his hand away he starts searching side to side, scrambling for the call button.

"She'll be back now, she's bringing your tea."

He sobs again, spit flicking out and clinging to his beard.

I purse my lips together.

"You don't seem happy to see me?"

"Get out Claire."

"When Devon told me you were dying, that it had spread, I said a prayer. Probably the first time I've prayed for you in my entire life. And do you know what I asked God for? What I begged him for?"

He stares straight ahead.

Coming in closer to his face I say it low.

"That he would reserve a special place in hell just for you, where the pain of your dying would be amplified and you would live on in constant unbearable agony forever."

The tray wobbles as the nurse brings it in, the shiny silver pot and porcelain tea cup.

I pull back, "Your rescuer has arrived. At least, unlike me, you're granted than one small mercy."

I hear my mother before I see her.

"Thanks Precious, I'll do that."

Her voice hasn't changed, still the same blocked-nose pitch.

I can't turn around now, there's nowhere to go.

She closes the phone, starts fiddling in her handbag, a huge bouquet of drowsy lilies wrapped in bright orange cellophane in her other hand.

I will wait until she looks up.

When she does, a tube of lipstick in her other hand, it's almost like she wants to laugh, the smile of a stroke victim – half up, half down.

We stop a little too far away from each other. Not quite a classic Western standoff but the tension is there. All we need now is for a tumbleweed to make its solemn journey somewhere behind me.

“Claire?”

“Barbara?”

She pats her hair, twiddles her bangs a bit with her nails, her short grey-blonde bob like a helmet.

“What are you doing here?”

She knows why I’m here.

“I think you know.”

“How did you find out?”

“Messenger pigeon. He just arrived at the flat, tapped on the window.”

“How did he take it...seeing you.” Her face is tight, haughty, she’s literally looking down at me.

I shift my bag to the other arm, “You look old.”

She seems bewildered, her head does a little shake side to side, hand coming up to rest on her chest.

“You haven’t changed.”

“He took it exceedingly well by the way. Nothing like a bit of family bonding.”

She bites down on the flesh of her cheeks, makes a pout out of her mouth.

If she gets the opportunity, I know what she’ll say. It’s a monologue I’ve been privy to once before, beginning “For shame Claire, for shame...” I’m the ungrateful daughter who had the neighbours talking, who ruined her family.

We stand for a few more seconds, her gaze no longer on me but fixed on a medieval medicinal display cabinet with bushy herb parcels floating in bottles of formaldehyde.

I don’t look away from her face.

She really does look old, is wearing too much make-up.

She rattles her watch so she can see the time.

“Well...”

I take a small bow and move past without touching her.

Fourteen

Sitting in my car I turn the heat on my feet, rest my head against the steering wheel.

My headache throbs from just above my eyebrows across my skull.

My lips are dry, rough under my fingers.

“What was I thinking?”

A cry splits from my lungs, surges up and out.

“What was I thinking!”

Everything comes flooding back.

Every memory of him.

When I was still in pre-school, baby fat clinging to my arms, he'd put multi-coloured marshmallows, the twisted kind that tasted like fruit and sweetness, in his front pockets and I'd have to dig to find them.

He'd squirm from side to side so my hand would wiggle further inside his pants.

I loved it, loved finding them, loved our special game.

I'd race round him, dipping my hands in, fly around to the front and really dig.

Of her.

“I am sick of you wetting the bed Claire. You're twelve! What twelve-year-old can't control their bladder?”

She stripped the bed with a fierceness, a revulsion to rival most, bundling the sheet into a black plastic bag like she was cleaning up after a murder.

“Do this again and your father will be the one dealing with it.”

Funny how she pretended not to know the cause.

I want to pause it all and snatch me out of my life.

How could she marry someone like this? Bring me into a world where someone like that had free rein, unlimited access?

Bringing my head off the steering wheel I wipe my face with the sleeve of my jersey, blow my nose on an old till slip.

Checking my phone I see a missed called from Devon.

I clear my throat, press dial.

“Hey, are you at Nan still?”

Pulling the phone away I check the time.

“Shit, I forgot.”

“Claire,” his voice is disapproving.

“I’m going now.”

Cutting him off I reverse, get onto the highway towards Benoni.

Nan shares a room with three other women.

The floors are linoleum, the beds look like they belong in a concentration camp.

You can hear the nurses laughing all the way from reception.

There’s a small whiteboard above her bed with ‘Mrs Smit’ scrawled on it.

I put the Cadbury Milk Tray I bought for her down on the bed.

The drawer would be better.

As I slide it closed I notice a photo stuck under the glass of her with a lion cub. A female trainer is holding it in her arms and Nan is standing there with her hands at her sides, not even looking at the camera.

They have a ping pong table set up in the middle of the common room. It seems like a strange place to put one, bringing into stark relief the fact that so few can hold a paddle or have the eyesight to see the ball.

There are maroon armchairs lining the walls, the ones that have those footrests that pop out when you pull a lever. Some have plastic nappy stuff on top of them. There are three wooden tables around the room with dirty board games and a scuffed box of backgammon.

Nan’s sitting in her usual spot in the far right hand corner, near the open window, light streaming in through the light fabric curtains.

Pulling a chair up in front of her I smile.

Before I can say anything, there’s a clang of symbols and a line of borderline obese women in sweat-stained pink shirts saunter in. They have jingly belts tied round their waists and form a conga line, hip wiggle into the centre of the room.

Two nurses rush in and move the ping pong table.

Indian music starts emanating from somewhere and they all stand in a circle chubby hand holding chubby hand, doing a ring-a-ring-a-rosies number, shaking their padded hips.

Once the clapping stops, the women each take an exhausted bow and make for a large tray of sliced Madeira cake to hand out to all the residents.

Nan’s face is unmoving.

They have made her life a macabre comedy.

Grabbing her hand I squeeze.

“I’m so sorry Nan. I’m so so sorry.”

One comes up to me and rubs my shoulder.

“Come my girl, let’s put some meat on those bones.”

Her hair is grey but spiked, blue eyeliner smeared under her sockets.

I take the saucer she hands me.

“Would your gran like some too?”

Shaking my head I put the plate on the floor.

I don’t think Nan knows where we’re sitting outside but I take her out anyway, let the sun warm her bones as we sit on the bench outside the reception.

“Nan, do you remember your Christmas pudding? Those swollen yellow sultanas and glacé cherries? You’d give Dev and I a thimble-full of sherry and we’d eat it round the dining room table. And Brutus would be licking our toes?”

I rub her shoulder.

Severe Alzheimer’s. I Googled every stage. This is the final leg of Nan’s degenerative trip. She stops responding to her environment, doesn’t really talk, wears a nappy.

There are parts of her life I don’t think she’d mind not remembering.

Losing Paul for one.

His picture didn’t move from on top of the TV until Nan came here.

He was struck by lightning on the beach in Port Elizabeth when he was seventeen. He and Oupa had gone surfing.

Five times hotter than the sun, that’s what I read. Could you imagine that? This flash of light cooking your blood vessels, boiling the water in all your tissue like a human kettle.

His shirt was shredded, a gaping hole with jagged edges.

I know because Dev and I were rummaging through his old bedroom when Nan and Oupa were clearing out their YOU magazine collection in the garage. Was in a box marked ‘Peter’.

Admittedly, it might not have been ‘thee’ shirt but I always thought it was.

We conjured the most hideous looking monster from it – one with melted skin and a heart pumping from an open chest cavity. Dev would chase me round upstairs and I would scream in earnest terror as he stuck his head through the shirt, bottom teeth out, hissing at me.

Pain is like a brightly coloured ball kids can't help but play with, can't help but kick around.

I remember the one and only time I asked Nan about it.

“What did Oupa do when Peter got struck?”

“He died too.”

She was stitching a button back onto one of her shirts, sitting on her favourite red velvet chair with gold tassel trim.

“But he's still here.”

“His body, maybe.”

I don't think Nan minds not remembering that, not having to see him like a marble carving lying on the gurney, his perfect eyelashes never to blink again.

When I look at pictures of Peter I see my dad. That same tanned tautness, the blond streaks in their hair.

Mom saw her brother in him, I don't doubt that now. A chance to get Peter back and keep him safe. What damage he was doing to others while she was living out her fantasy was of little consequence.

It's getting cool out.

“We should go in,” I say, making my voice high, sweet.

The arms of her yellow cardigan are dirty by the wrists, a circle of brown from her touching things, from them not washing things.

They serve dinner in a school hall, big boilers for coffee and tea lining the tables at the back. The smell of warm bodies and cold brains.

“I'll see you next week Nan.”

Depositing her in her seat I look around at all of them, her comrades in arms. Hair waxy like it's covered in a film of oil, crumpled and rumpled shirts, eye's watering like basset hounds.

To be surrounded by this, to have to live and breathe this everyday – you *would* wither, your bones would start to flake on their own.

Kissing her cheek, I whisper in her ear.

“I love you, and always will.”

I hold on to her shoulders for a few seconds, try send my youth into her body, try warm her blood and ignite her synapses.

There are things I don't want to see. Nan crumbling in on herself, becoming a pile of ash running through my fingers.

And there are things I do want to see.

I want to see someone suck what life is left out of my dad, draw it up and out through his cells and give it to her in an ornate glass vile to swallow and run through her veins like warm honey, healing every inch of her.

For someone to suck it out of my mom.

Why do they get to keep drawing breath, while someone like Nan can't stop herself from sinking? Whose fault is this?

Fifteen

It was a heart attack, in the middle of Woolworths. Nan was busy looking at the gemsquash when she heard the shopping basket drop.

Oupa didn't even make a sound, slipped to his knees as in prayer, and was gone.

Fifty-three years erased in the time it took to reach for a vegetable.

The hysteria, the sheer panic, pounding on his chest, trying to mop up his urine with her dress.

"Like he was hypnotised and someone snapped their fingers."

She kept saying it over and over.

Mom came round to the house and started clearing his things the next day, dry eyed.

I left Nan in the lounge, her crocheted blue blanket across her legs, tea growing cold on the side table.

When I went into their room, mom had boxed all of his shirts, like plaid blankets all stacked on top of one another. She was sifting through his vanity drawer in the bathroom.

"Don't you think Nan wants to keep some of his stuff? Can't you even give her a day to let it sink in?"

"Who are you, Claire Meyer, to tell me what to do?"

She had his electric razor in one hand, a bottle of Gaviscon in the other, was putting it all in a clear, plastic packet.

"Let Nan sort it, this isn't your job to do."

"Shoo wee, haven't been out of the house for more than a month and already we rule the world."

"Don't you feel anything?"

Dumping the stuff into the bag she got on her hands and knees, sliding the cupboard door open to take out cans of Doom, a whole packet of toilet rolls, some drain cleaner.

"Nan needs that stuff, just leave it."

Resting her hands on her knees she turned to face me, a look of repulsion on her face.

"You are sixteen. What do you know about anything? What do you know about loss?"

"More than you ever will."

Turning, I grabbed one of Oupa's soft grey vests from the pile in the box, pressing it close to my face, inhaling.

Sandalwood.

I sat on my bed for a while, just feeling the over-washed softness of the fabric, the small holes.

Tucking it between the bed base and the mattress, I checked on Nan.

She was still in the same place, hands still resting against her armchair.

I sat on the floor in front of her, fiddled with the tassels on her grey suede moccasins.

“I can’t even remember the last thing I said to him.”

Looking up at her she was staring at his brown leather armchair, the indentions of his back, how the seat had moulded to his shape.

“He knew you loved him Nan.”

I was just saying things I’d heard before, had no idea what a person might feel. How, after sleeping next to someone for half a century, what stretching your arm out in the middle of the night only to touch a cool crisp sheet must feel like.

I’ve knew death of a different kind, a dying of a different kind.

Putting my hand on Nan’s leg she covered it with her own.

“Would you make me some dry toast? I feel a little sick.”

I had to scrape the charred bits off into the sink, was never able to get the temperature right.

Laying it on the side table I brought the butter just in case.

She didn’t reach for it.

Just smiled at me and sat.

Mom came down the corridor in a flurry, hair in her face, plastic packets mounted on either arm.

“I’m done in there Mom. I’ll put this all in my garage and chuck what’s left.”

This was how she was, brushing things right under the rug, covering them up so she didn’t have to see.

It’s how she was with me.

She left, not even a hand on Nan’s shoulder.

I went into their room.

She’d even stripped the bed. Hadn’t bothered to replace anything.

I grabbed the stool by the dresser, opened up the cupboard and started searching for a clean sheet.

Stretching to feel on the top shelf there was something hard, slightly indented.

Standing on my tippy toes I grabbed hold of it.

The top part of false teeth.

They looked big, had to be Oupa's.

I never knew that about him.

Always wondered why he'd push on his front teeth with his tongue, make all those sucking sounds, why he cut his steak up so small and chewed for eons.

I opened the drawers of their dressing table once I'd made the bed.

It was Oupa's side, the one place she didn't touch or maybe didn't bother to open.

There was a gold cigarette case with the engraving 'To Berny' on the bottom right hand corner, a black comb, NASA nail clippers with the emblem in a big circle.

There was also a photograph of Mom and Peter.

She looked about thirteen, was sitting on the beach, a mound of sand between her legs. Peter was standing next to her, his hand on his hip, red and white striped board shorts only coming to about mid-thigh. He was smiling down at her, wind whipping his hair around.

He was my father in that picture.

I made lasagne for dinner, took it from her hand-written recipe book.

The sheets of pasta were still raw on the outside, the mince watery.

We sat at the kitchen table.

I thought lighting a candle would be a good idea but it seemed like it was burning for Oupa.

Licking my fingers I snuffed it out.

"I know you must miss him Nan. I'm sorry."

She fiddled her meal, smiling into her plate.

"You know, he was the best dancer. Have never seen a man move like that. He could just whisk me all over the dance floor and I'd feel like I was skating on ice. A total lump but he had rhythm."

I don't want to ask anything, say anything. Nan can just say what she needs to, do what she needs to.

She's saved me from my own death. I'll be here to help her through hers.

Sixteen

I arrive back from the old age home around mid-afternoon. Everything feels clogged, my hands feel grimy. After washing them in the kitchen sink I lie down on the couch and stare at our cement ceiling, all bobbled and raised in some strange designerly technique.

Grabbing a blanket off the floor I close my eyes, want nothing more than for this day to come to an end. Seeing Dad. Seeing Nan.

It's dark when I wake. That time when you're not sure whether it's late at night or early morning.

Bending I search for my bag on the floor and find my phone.

8.07pm.

I haul myself up, my back clicking as I stretch.

I'm glad Beth has gone away. This stillness is good, just the gentle shudder of our geyser, the ticking of our kitchen clock.

I busy myself.

Put a load of laundry on, hers and mine. It's still warm as it comes out of the tumble dryer, smelling like peach Sta-soft. I never use it when Beth's here, our electricity bill becomes another issue. But you just can't beat that warmth.

She asked if I wouldn't get a maid in to do a spring clean, but I'd prefer to do it.

Want to do something labour intensive.

Walking into her room I turn the light on.

There's a pile of clothes on the lime green bedspread, drying g-strings strung along her wooden headboard. She's left her radio on, the light glowing blue, the sound fuzzy.

Decided on black curtains so it looks like Dracula's lair most of the time.

I open them up, push the windows as wide as they'll go for some fresh air.

Beth has a way of forgetting she brought in a plate of spaghetti bolognese and left it on her dressing table – the pasta covered in spores and the sauce a cracked, mud-like mess around the edges of the plate.

I had to use her hairdryer once and found a used condom lying on the carpet.

Used.

I've haven't gone in again until now.

Starting with the floor I pick up her Cosmo magazines, the stray hairbands and headbands. Everything will go on the bed until I can find some place to put it.

I'm picking up clumps of her hair as I go, she's clearly been shedding in this room.

There's a pair of her boyfriend Roodey's underwear lying behind the door.

On my hands and knees I look under the bed, find four shoe boxes, grey dust bunnies in clumps on the carpet, a lip ice without its cap.

I pull all the boxes out.

One has old birthday cards, some photos from when Beth was in high school. The second is a knot of ill-treated jewellery, necklaces intertwined, earrings missing their stones. A crusty-looking gum guard and rolled up socks is in the third.

I start stacking them on top of one another.

Opening the lid of the fourth there are a few slim books inside.

I flip through the pages, not sure what these are.

As I'm going it stands out: "*Fuck, yes.*"

Flicking back I spread the pages and read:

He puts my nipple in his mouth and starts sucking, moaning against me.

He's fully clothed, his body between my legs. His hand gently skating over my pussy through my jeans.

The sounds of him sucking and the warmth of his tongue as her swirls around make my eyes close, my hips grind in a circle. I can feel the stitching of my jeans through the fabric of my thong and I want him to rip them off.

He does, pops the button and yanks them down before settling between my legs.

"Fuck, I can't wait to taste you."

He smiles and licks over my pubic bone, blowing hot hair against my wet cleft.

I bite my bottom lip, shift my pelvis closer to his face, egging him on.

"Do it," it's almost a shout.

"So impatient baby, just relax."

"I want it...now."

"I bet you do – so do I, my mouth is watering."

He pulls in suddenly and clamps his hot lips against my clit through the fabric, starts sucking, licking me.

I arch my back off the bed and push into his mouth.

"Fuck, yes."

He stops for a second, rips my thong by the pubic bone so it comes away in two.

Feeling that soft wetness of his tongue on my pussy makes me hot, weak.

“Such a beautiful cunt. Fuck.”

His words make me gush.

He’s lapping at me like a dog, his hands massaging my hips. My ass clenching trying to get my whole self inside him.

I want him to eat me out, eat me up.

I begin to shake with pleasure.

“Yes baby, fuck yes.”

He moves his hands up my abdomen and starts pinching my nipples, massaging the engorged flesh of my tits.

“Mmm.”

It’s a wet mess around my pussy, his spit, my juices all mixing into one. The sloshing and squelching – it’s the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever heard.

I drop the book on the floor. Cover my face with my hands.

My nipples are stiff, I’m wet.

But the tears come.

What it must feel like to experience that...to want someone so much that you’re begging, writhing.

Not once have I felt that.

Getting close, even having them touch me, all I can think of are his fat fingers and hairy knuckles, his greedy, disgusting hands pillaging me.

They all become him, morph into rodent eyes and a damp moustache between my legs.

He’s stopping me. Even now he has control over my body.

This can’t go on.

Seventeen

I'm back at the hospital. Back at the red brick walkway, the concrete dome in front of the entrance.

I've come back to him.

Walking past reception, everyone seems too jovial, are eating too heartily at the coffee shop. This is where people come to breathe their last breath, right above our heads someone could be lying dead on a surgical table, and yet we tuck into our croissants.

I make straight for his room, navigate gurneys and patients hobbling forward with drips in toe.

The withered old man in the bed on the right is no longer. Somehow I doubt he's been moved.

My dad's curtain is closed.

For a moment I wonder if he'll be dead when I pull it back. Hands frozen into tight fists, mouth gaping wide, jaw rigid, skin the colour of wet cement.

How would I feel knowing the one thing I've wanted my whole life has come true? Would I go downstairs and eat a buttery croissant, breathe a sigh of relief.

Pulling the curtain back I'm greeted by hands clasped together, my mother's hunched back, her bra straps visible through the thin fabric of her shirt segmenting her back into two halves of flesh.

The fear in his eyes must have alerted her because she stands and turns on her heel to face me, totally composed.

"You don't bring flowers?"

I shrug.

"Didn't see any reason for them."

Fiddling the pearls on her neck with one hand she dusts the bed spread with the other, focused on the shiny floor.

"Well this is convenient, both of you in one room."

"You're not wanted here."

She says it matter-of-factly.

"Sure I'm not, but I'm here now, so..."

Turning around I pull up another armchair and sit at his feet.

Such a familiar position.

"What are you doing here Claire?"

His voice is hoarse. I'm sure tubes and cameras have been pushed down that tender channel.

"I came to talk to you but I can kill two birds with one stone if she's willing to listen."

"You have no right to be here, none whatsoever. I suggest you leave," she says.

I look around his room, the three remaining empty beds, the few leaves that have blown in from outside the open window behind me.

"Are you planning on making me?"

She forgets I'm not sixteen anymore.

"You're a disgusting child."

"Well, look who raised me."

Shaking her head with a mouth twisted in displeasure she picks up her purse.

"I will get you kicked out of here Claire, so help me God."

Smiling, "Then you better get Him on the line 'cause I'm not sure anyone's gonna chuck me out – I'm the daughter, remember?"

She reddens easier now, despite all her foundation, the bronzer applied too liberally and too high on her cheeks.

Dad lies there wilted like spinach.

"I'm not staying to be insulted. I have nothing to say to you."

"I was planning on doing all the talking so you saying anything won't be necessary."

Holding the strap of her bag with two hands she starts to almost tip toe towards me, "Strolling back into our lives after years of silence, leaving your father to battle this on his own. Not even a kind word from you...any form of recognition."

I cross my legs and lean back in the chair.

"You're saying an awful lot for someone who had nothing to say to me."

Sneering, lip pulled in such disgust I can almost see her top teeth, she turns a final time to make a fuss of lining up the bottles of Powerade on his side table, straightening his glasses on top of a Steven King novel.

"Leaving him to fend for himself? Hardly seems a wise thing to do."

"Disrespectful," it's a mutter but audible.

"Coming to talk is hardly disrespectful."

"Mitch, I'll be downstairs."

She runs her hand along his bushy jaw, gently grabs his chin and rocks his face side to side.

"If you need me for anything, you call."

She puts a cellphone in his limp hand, like some undercover agent. I don't even know where it came from.

What flows between them I wonder? Whatever affection, love they have for one another must look like a septic river, barely flowing it's filled with so much muck, debris from a life weighed down by deceit.

She runs a hand through his hair, straightens out his hospital gown, finds something to pick off his cheek.

"This gonna take along Barbara? Thought you were heading downstairs?"

Letting him go, she squeezes what would have been his bicep before brushing past me, the cloying bouquet she's spritz herself with smacks me straight in the nostrils, sweet like nectar.

Takes me straight back to her bedroom, the striped pink headboard, her bare shoulders.

I look him up and down once we're alone. The bloodied drip in his right arm, his collar bones jutting out from his flimsy hospital gown.

"You look well Mitchell."

"Get out Claire."

A standard response between the two of them.

"I will, but there are some things I need to say before I do."

"Get out now or I will call your mother."

"She was here a second ago or did you miss it? Didn't prove to be too effective."

He starts sifting through the layers of sheet and blanket for the call button. Seems I bring it out in him.

I move to my mom's seat and pick it up off the bed, oily under my fingertips.

"Give it to me."

He says it with as much conviction as he can muster.

"This time you don't have a choice but to listen."

"Excuse me...excuse me?"

He's calling towards the door, trying to push himself into a more upright position.

Who is this shrunken tyrant, this panicked old man?

A nurse waddles in, clipboard in hand, dreadlocks down to her bum.

"Yes Mr Meyer?"

She rests her one hand on her hip.

He strains his neck up, like he can't see her, the soft folds of skin drawing monetarily tighter.

"I'd like my daughter removed please."

Smiling at her, I shake my head.

"He's a bit out of it today, sorry. My mom's downstairs grabbing a quick bite. She just didn't want to leave him alone."

Nodding like she knows, "No problem mam."

Turning to him, her voice is more forceful but her smile stays in place.

"Mr Meyer, she's here to sit with you a while. Don't you want to spend some time with her?"

I grin at him. She grins at him.

Squeezing his foot, she retreats.

"That was successful," I say.

His face is skin stretched on bone, his cheekbones almost horned, his beard the most substantial part of his body.

Closing his eyes, "Get. Out."

Standing, I walk to the side of the bed, bend at the hip so I'm hovering over him.

"It's difficult to know where to begin."

He folds his arms slowly, a sour look coming over his face as he turns it away to focus on the white of the curtain round his bed.

"The hatred I feel for you, I can barely express."

My voice is flat, a line I had been rehearsing for the past two days. Perfecting the slackness of my face, the stillness of my eyes.

"I want you to die...I wanted you to die."

His only recognition is a slight shiver.

Sitting back down I take a quick breath.

"But I can't live my life like this anymore."

I press my hands on my thighs, measure myself.

This is a speech I have said before, keep it together.

Reaching for my patchwork satchel on the floor, "I want to show you something."

I take out the photograph of Devon and I on the bed, the one where I'm only a few days old, shrivelled and rosy skinned.

"Do you see this," I point with my nail, "Do you see the two of us here."

He looks quickly before turning his head back to the curtain, lips pressed in a thin line.

“When I was born, when you held me in your arms, what did you think?”

Looking down he starts picking his nails, pulling at the dry cuticles.

“Did you think I was born for you, a vessel that you could use, violate, fuck, as and when you pleased?”

Hearing the words out loud, filling up this clinical space, has disrupted my monologue. They have rippled back, rattling my composure.

I must push on.

“Is that what you thought? Was that why I was put on this earth...for you?”

To see a man buckle, to see *him* buckle...I feel triumphant, ashamed.

He splutters into both hands, presses them over his mouth and inhales.

This man of power, ownership, a wailing mess.

I will not stop now.

Holding it close to his face, “Look at me.”

He covers his entire face with his hands now, likes he’s about to play hide-and-seek.

“Look at me.”

His fingers part minimally, a shamefaced boy.

Grabbing him at the wrist I pull his left arm down, bring the photo close so it almost touches the tip of his nose.

“Do you see that, do you see me?”

He lies back against his pillow, but keeps his eyes on the picture.

“Did you think, even then. ‘How perfect, a girl. With holes I can fill.’”

His eyes are red-rimmed, tears trail into his beard.

The sleeves of my shirt are saturated under the armpits, droplets of sweat have collected on my upper lip.

There’s a black, violent thing roiling in my stomach.

I can feel it.

This is what I have practiced, these are the words that will help me vomit this toxic sickness out, rip out the roots that have grown too deep.

Pulling back, I put the photograph down, rest it on his withered legs, on the stained, starched blanket and sit.

“I’ve come here to say one thing to you, and I will never see you again after this. When you are dead, I will not come to your funeral.”

Practice did not prepare me for this bilious burn, the wateriness in my mouth.

It's coming up.

I cannot sit for this.

Standing, I lean in close once again. Hold his chin like my mother did.

For the first time I don't recoil touching him.

He smells sour, the pores on his skin clogged with black.

I force him to look at me, force myself to look at him.

This man who has violated me in ways incomprehensible.

Bringing his face so close my lips are almost resting on his cheek, I whisper it.

Whisper what I have been practicing, repeating, believing.

"I forgive you."

He closes his eyes.

My tears drop onto his pigeon chest, all the wires and pads that come from there.

Again Claire, say it again.

"I forgive you."

Letting his face go, I leave the photograph lying on his lap.

I keep my back to him, pick up my bag and walk out keeping my eyes forward.

I pass her sitting in the cafe, legs crossed and foot bouncing. An empty coffee cup in front of her, red lipstick impression around the rim.

"It's done," I say, walking towards the exit.

"It's finished."

Eighteen

The car ride home I can't remember. The shop I stopped at to buy milk and a takeaway pie, I can't remember.

I'm sitting on my bed, the plastic packet of stuff on the floor when it feels like I blink for the first time.

What have I done, what I have set in motion?

Simultaneously, I have let go and brought back into focus everything he has ever done to me.

Climbing into bed I lie under the covers, my feet aching with cold. I rub them together, rub my legs up and down on the mattress to heat myself up.

What will happen now?

Do I need to be sick?

Is my body going to crumble inside, crumble after this weight has been released?

I need to sleep. Let me just sleep and dream of tomorrow. A normal day without the bundled pain resting in the pit of my stomach.

I don't open my eyes properly, but can see Beth's walking around my room. It's Sunday.

"What," my voice comes out in a harsh crack.

Pressing her hand on her heart she stares at my duvet-wrapped form on the bed.

"Jesus, you gave me a heart attack."

She's whispering.

"Is there a guy in there with you?"

Shaking my head I prop myself up on my elbows.

"What are you doing in here?"

"Looking for my sunglasses. Roodey's taking me to Harties."

"Why would they be in here?"

Shrugging she continues moving things around on my dressing table, drops a few earrings on the floor, accidentally turns my hair dryer on.

"Beth, they aren't in here."

"Okay, sorry. Just wanted to be sure."

She sits on the edge of the bed.

"Where were you yesterday anyway?"

"Around. I had a lot of things to do."

“Like what?”

Rummaging through the packet on the floor she pulls out the crusty pie from last night, untouched.

“Gross, how long has this been here? Did you go out?”

“I didn’t go out.”

“So…”

She sniffs it like it’s one of her shoes.

“I’d like to sleep.”

“Suit yourself. See ya.”

She puts the pie with its oily foil casing on my bed, leaves my door wide open.

Making tea in the kitchen I feel around my body. Have I let this go?

I’m thinking about things I’ve never thought about – a family, having children.

What would I be like as a lover, as a mother?

Beth makes me come out for drinks with her after work on Monday – some Irish pub with dark green wallpaper and a boar’s head mounted on the wall. You can barely see where you’re going the smoke sits so heavily in the air.

A whole bunch of Roodey’s work colleagues are sitting at a long wooden table outside under an off-white awning.

Taking my hand she pulls me in front of them.

“Everybody this is Claire.”

All of them are men, all drinking beer.

Most of them nod, I hear a distant *howzit* from the end of the table.

She squeezes me between two of them right at the top of the table, they talk across me the entire time. The combination of their deodorant, cologne, hair gel seems to push all the way down my throat.

I stand and start to walk away.

Beth pulls herself off Roodey’s lap, her beer frothing over and onto his pants.

“Babe!”

Ignoring him she comes over to me.

“Where are you going? You haven’t even had a drink?”

Shrugging, “Not really my crowd right? You carry on, I’ll get a cab home.”

She shakes her head quickly, “Wait, wait, wait. I haven’t introduced you to Tristan. You. Will. Die. He is like,” she sticks her tongue out of her mouth and fans her face with her free hand, “that good.”

“I’m actually fine, Beth. Just do your thing.”

As I turn, “Tristan! Tristan!”

Rounding on her I bite my bottom lip.

“Ja, what’s it?”

He’s half standing at the end of the table, frozen in a kind of squat unsure whether to stand or sit back down.

“This is Beth.”

His smile is a little strained.

“I know.”

Taking my elbow she leads me to the end of the table and pushes my hand out for me, before taking Tristan’s hand and putting it in mine for a limp, caressing hand shake.

“What are you doing?”

He hasn’t let go of my hand.

“Introducing you guys. Bye.”

We both follow her with our gaze as she makes her way back to Roodey, both look down at our hands still holding onto one another.

“Wanna grab a seat,” he lets go, gesturing next to him.

“After that, sure.”

The guys he was talking to are already engrossed in their own conversation.

“Can I get you a drink?”

“Just a glass of red, thanks.”

“You don’t wanna try a Guinness? Look at where we are?”

“That’s okay.”

Once my wine is in front of me he runs through a standard list of question: what do I do? How long have Beth and I lived together? What do I enjoy doing?

“You have any siblings?”

“A brother, Devon. He’s two years older.”

“Cool. I have three sisters. All married, two of them pregnant, the third trying to get pregnant. I feel like they timed their sex having, all phoned each other and did a countdown.”

Laughing he takes a gulp of his beer, foam resting on his top lip.

He's just mentioned sex.

I'm staring into the ashtray.

What would it be like to try have sex now, to try feel the pleasure I read about, to be overwhelmed by it?

"Was that a bit too much information? I'm just kidding about their timing having sex by the way, my family's not like, creepy or anything."

Snapping out of it, "What?"

"That thing about my sisters and planning their babies at the same time, dumb thing to say."

"It's fine."

I finish my red wine, focus on Tristan's face.

I wake up facing his mole-dotted back, can feel the heat of his body, his snore is light.

Climbing out as quietly as I can I make for my door, peak round to look at his face.

Mouth hanging open, right arm dangling off the edge to touch the carpet.

I didn't want him to stay, have no idea how to navigate this afterness.

I don't know what I was expecting after only giving myself a day. Was I trying to fill myself up, give myself a newer, cleaner memory?

I grab our Coke bottle of ice water out the fridge and drink. Once I've refilled it I sit on the couch, my legs tucked up under me.

Closing my eyes I play it over in my head.

"Are you okay? You seem really tense."

"I'm fine."

Looking into my eyes he dips his head, kisses from my collar bone up the side of my neck, moving to my lips.

My legs are crooked on either side of him.

My tongue is dry.

"Can I get some water quick?"

Rolling off he nods, waiting for me.

It doesn't help. As soon as I've swallowed my tongue feels sapped.

He's turned the side lamp on, is propped against my white studded head board when I walk in with a glass of water.

Patting next to him, "Come sit."

Crawling across the bed I sit leaning against the head board next to him, pull the sheet up over my boobs, fold my arms across my stomach.

Scooting closer he put his hand on my leg.

"Do you not wanna do this?"

"I want to. I do."

I've forgiven him, I have let it all go. Just let this happen Claire, let yourself surrender to it.

"I can see you're nervous so let's just take it slow."

"I'm not nervous. You make it sound like I've never done this before."

"Okay, well whether you're nervous or not I think it's a good idea."

Squeezing my knee, "Lie down."

"Let's just do this."

Crinkling his nose at me he motions to the bed with his head, "Down."

I keep the sheet pulled over me.

He should just leave, I can feel my desire curdling. Was there any there to begin with? Have I ever felt desire before?

Naked he lies on top of me, the fabric our barrier.

"What are you doing?"

Holding my head in his hands he looks at me, strokes the sides of my face.

"Taking it slow."

I've never seen a man with such smooth skin.

"Can we turn the light off?"

"Why?"

He moves his hands down my neck to stroke my shoulders.

"I just don't want you looking at me."

"You're beautiful. Why wouldn't I want to look at you?"

I will ruin this somehow.

Shaking my head, I wiggle under him a little.

"I'm not comfortable."

His face turns serious.

"Are you calling me fat?"

He looks between our bodies, checking out his chest.

I stop moving, am not sure whether to smile.

He looks so concerned.

“Am I fat, Claire? Just give it to me straight...”

Turning his head to the side he shuts his eyes tight, grimacing, waiting for my answer.

I laugh softly.

Turning to look at me, “Better.”

Pressing his lips to mine he kisses me.

This is kissing I have never felt, kissing that doesn't involve a tongue being violently thrust into me.

My mouth starts to water.

Slowly he starts moving his body on top of me, a gentle rubbing.

My hands go to his back.

Pressing his lips a little harder into me I open my mouth.

He's holding onto my shoulders, brings his hands down to cup my boobs, gently squeezing.

He's hard, can feel it against my thigh.

I turn my head to the side, “Stop, stop.”

“What's wrong?”

His fringe dangles against my forehead.

“Can you get off?”

Running his hand through his hair he pushes up onto his hands climbing off and onto the other side of the bed.

I stare up at my ceiling.

I wanted this. Wanted to feel.

There's something else here, something else I need to figure out.

Opening my eyes, there's a sharp pain in my bladder.

The bathroom door is closed, pressing my ear against it I can hear Beth humming to herself.

I rap gently against the wood.

“Beth? Are you gonna be much longer?”

“I just got in, but it's open. Do you need to pee?”

“Ja.”

I press my ankles together.

“Come in.”

Steam hits me in the face.

She was in the bath and I came in to brush my teeth.

Had to weave through everyone's shelf space, step over Devon's grass-stained rugby shorts and underwear crumpled on the tiles, could smell dad's Prep, that menthol scent, the mirrors crying fat tears from the heat.

There was just no personal space.

He could come in whenever he wanted, see me bathing. Would sometimes sit on the lid of the toilet seat and watch, bath me himself when he could.

I usually brushed my teeth over the kitchen sink but he was still in there.

She always kept cloths over her boobs, would keep redipping them to heat up and thaw her air-hardened nipples.

Her boobs were always covered, but she had this mound of pubic hair standing out the water like a freshly dug mole hill, high and proud.

I wanted to be sick seeing her body, knowing what he did to me and then what he did to her.

"Have you started your period Claire?"

I almost choked on the dampened air, my toothbrush poised and smothered in bubble-gum flavoured Colgate.

"Have you? Because it's important that you know it's perfectly natural. It's part of becoming a woman. Would you like me to explain what happens?"

I knew all about blood coming from there.

"No."

I started brushing hard.

"Just think of a perlemoen...they have this soft flesh that sits against the shell. That's your uterus and all the lining that's built up against it comes away..."

I just kicked it, one of those five litre lavender-scented bubble baths.

It dropped like an anvil and water came flooding over the side.

"What the hell Claire?!"

It's her. The something that's holding me back is her.

She allowed it to happen.

I told her and she just let it unfold.

"Thanks," I say, sitting down on the loo.

Beth's hair is in a tower of frothy shampoo, mascara from last night smeared under her bottom lashes. There are two coin-sized hickies on her neck, her nipples dark.

She sees me stare.

"From Roodey," Beth says, playfully writhing around before turning the hot water on with her foot.

Flushing I stand.

"I told him no. It looks so slutty, but he's just so..."

Closing her eyes she grunts.

I keep my arms folded across my boobs.

"You know what I mean right? I don't care what he does to me by the end of it, you're just so turned on."

I nod slowly.

"I heard you come home last night and...with a special guest?"

Wiggling her eyebrows at me, she shimmies her chest.

"So?"

Bringing one leg out of the water she starts lathering herself with mango shower gel, the smell makes me think of fermented fruit juice.

It went the same as every other man I have ever brought back here.

"It was fine."

She stops.

"Oh no. Couldn't he get it up?"

"It was fine Beth."

He's standing in the kitchen when I come out, briefs low on his hips, the milk in his hand.

"I made tea, is that fine?"

I nod.

"Do you want some?"

I nod again.

"You okay?"

"No, ja, I'm fine. It's just strange seeing you standing there."

He puts the milk back in the fridge.

"As opposed to standing somewhere else?"

Walking towards me he hands me the cup.

"How did you know how I like my tea?"

Sipping he shrugs, “Just a guess.”

We’re standing close together, he’s rocking back on the balls of his feet, holding his mug with two hands.

I can’t stop staring at him, the first man who has ever stayed.

Taking a step towards me he pulls my head into his bare chest, rests his hand at the base of my skull.

Nineteen

Tristan dropped me off at work this morning.

I'm sitting in the toilet cubicle, the phone is hot pressed against my ear.

It rings until I think it'll go to voicemail.

"Barbara, hello?"

"It's me."

"Sorry, who's calling?"

"Claire."

I can hear a budgie chittering in the background.

My parents moved out of our complex after I went to live with Nan, after Devon moved to varsity. I imagine a brown flat with plastic blinds and a kettle you have to boil on the stove, their budgie featherless in a white, rounded cage.

"Are you there?"

Clearing her throat, "What do you want Claire?"

"I need to talk to you."

She clears it again, "And what about?"

"Something that can't be discussed over the phone."

"You left your father in an absolute state, do you know that? He had to be medicated."

"He's already medicated."

"He couldn't breathe Claire. Was having a fucking panic attack."

Been a long time since I heard her use that language.

"I can meet you at the hospital."

She gasps as though she's just discovered something.

"You are not setting one foot inside that hospital. Your father has been through enough."

"That's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. What he's been through, who he's been through."

I know she's shaking her head.

"I will not entertain it."

"Fine."

Cutting her off I dial Devon straight away.

"Can you talk?"

I can hear splashing, a few shouts.

“What’s up? How are you sis?”

“Fine, fine. Can you ask Mom to please meet with me?”

“What? Since when are you seeing Mom?”

“This isn’t by choice Devon, there are things I need to address.”

Sniffing, “Such as?”

“Such as things that don’t concern you.”

“Okay, take it easy. I’ll phone her and try. Not exactly like we’re on the best terms either.”

Devon has always taken my side, put himself in the firing line countless times so I could do, be.

“When? Where?”

“Tomorrow, around 1pm. I’ll be on my lunch break from work. And I’ll meet her at the hospital in the parking lot.”

“I’ll do my best C...why in the parking lot?”

“Thought I’d try stick to the script. Most fight scenes happen in the parking lot, don’t they?”

Someone calls him.

“Ja sure, I’ll be there now.”

“What are you guys fighting about? Is it Dad?”

“Don’t worry about it Dev. We probably won’t fight.”

“Will you let me know how it goes, whatever it is?”

“I’ll do that.”

Resting again my bonnet, I study the tar of the parking lot – there’s a dark smear almost directly in front of me, gum maybe or the innards of some frog.

Every time a car pulls into the same row of parking bays, I look.

Marge wanted to know where I was going, why we couldn’t go for lunch.

“Why are you being so cryptic? Is it a man? Are you having an affair?”

I had one more call to make to this new dermatologist for my boss – she wanted to have her wrinkles lasered, the fine white hairs on her chin zapped off.

“It’s just some business.”

Sussing me, she conceded.

“Fine. But if you need me to come distract the wife while you scale down the wall just call.”

Right now, I'd take that kind of complexity over this. Over having to look at her face again, confront this person who perpetually failed me in my life.

The overdone make-up, this façade she keeps up in the hopes that what? Once he dies she can set up an online dating profile, commit herself completely to another man who fill up her vision and consume her.

Her heels clack and scrape against the tar, her walk is quick.

Turning my head, I see her squeeze between my car and the one parked next to me. She stands in front of me with her arms folded.

“How did Devon manage to convince you?”

“That's none of your business. What are we here to discuss? I need to visit your father.”

My bonnet pops back out as I stand.

“What will you do when he dies?”

“I am not here to be interrogated Claire.”

“I'm just wondering because you've had your head up his ass for so many years, sun might blind you, you might get overwhelmed by all that fresh air.”

She pulls her arms in tighter under her boobs.

“You are just revolting. A revolting child I wish I hadn't had. You've caused nothing but misery in this family.”

“Misery,” I give a little chuckle, “I think that's the perfect place for this conversation to start.”

“I'm not willing to talk to you about anything.”

“But you're here?”

She says nothing.

“I think misery is a great place to start because it sums up, in one word, my entire childhood with you.”

Scraping a pebble under her heel she stares at the tips of her pointed stilettos.

The pop-up sprinklers are on in amongst the rows of struggling plants, the smell of wet soil, the sun glinting of the windscreens of cars. Everything totally unprepared for the conversation that's about to take place.

“Tell me, why did you have me?”

Looking up, “What do you mean why did I have you?”

“It's a simple question. What was my purpose to you?”

“I had you because I wanted children Claire. But what I got given couldn’t have disappointed me more.”

“I can say the same for you, you couldn’t have failed me in any greater way.”

“I’ve never failed you.”

“Really? Amnesia maybe? Have you forgotten exactly what you’ve heard, what you’ve seen.”

This has moved too quickly. I’m barrelling into a mine field, what I hope is the final chapter, with very little care.

She acts confused, maybe she is confused, changes her handbag from one arm to the other, gives a little frazzled shrug, like she’s been mildly electrocuted.

I get close to her face.

She takes a step back.

“You don’t remember?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about?”

“Bet you do. Shall I refresh your memory?”

“That’s enough, I’m leaving.”

Turning she takes two steps before I grab her handbag from her shoulder and yank her back.

“You remember Barbara.”

Our faces are the closest they have ever been, our lips almost touching.

“He’d come in at night, shut my door, pull down my panties, put his mouth on me, his dick in me...”

Her jaw goes slack.

This close up I can see her pupils swell, the fear, disgust maybe, flooding her body. What must be going on inside her brain?

Quickly she looks down, studies the grime in the brickwork, the tiny tuft of green clovers spouting between them.

“Can you speak?”

She takes a long breath, straightens herself and takes a step back, widening the gap between us.

“You’re a liar Claire, always have been.”

“You’ve always been so good at selling yourself a version of your life, your story. This glowing example of a husband who was the ultimate provider – does the fact that he’s a paedophile, a rapist somehow not fit into that world view Mom?”

“Shut your mouth.”

All the make-up in the world couldn't conceal the hatred on her face.

“What does it feel like to know that after he fucked me, he crawled into your bed and did the same to you?”

The slap is metallic, backhanded. Her rings catch the skin on my right cheek and there's a searing sting.

Shaking my head a little I bring my shoulder up to press on the spot, my eyes watering.

Despite it all, I smile.

“That's what your life really is.”

She's turns and start walking away.

I don't move. Just raise my voice.

“I just needed you to know that, to know exactly what filth you've been living. You're weak, you don't deserve to have me and you still don't. And you can live with yourself knowing you did nothing.”

I have to shout it now.

“I'm done with you...with the both of you.”

Twenty

Dev and I drive to the Rynfield Bunny Park after visiting Nan.

We used to bring her with us, let her feed the rabbits. Normally she didn't know where she was but every now and then there would be a snippet of recognition, she would walk straight to the kiosk to get a drink.

Disorientating. That's what the nursing home says now. It would be too disorientating to move her around, for her to see buildings whipping past like rectangular ghouls, blurring what clarity she does have even further.

Her and Oupa would bring the two of us at least once every two months when we were much smaller.

I remember wearing my favourite denim jacket and turquoise Naatjie leggings. It used to be our spot – Dev and I would play on the jungle gym for so long our palms would blister like we'd been lifting weights. We'd ride the ponies again and again, giving them half our bag of carrots.

It was the first time I was ever stung by a bee.

Went to drink straight out of the tap and one crawled out and onto my lip. Nan kept buying me granadilla ice creams to hold against the swelling, my denim jacket covered in a gloopy, pippy trail by the end of the day.

We find a bench by the dam.

Ducks are swimming around. You can hear kids shrieking by the mini fairground. Families are huddled in places, snapping away.

It's all dust, wilted trees, empty Kit Kat wrappers blowing in the breeze.

"Haven't been here in years."

He looks around, "I can't remember anything really. Can you?"

"I remember when you were walking on top of the monkey bars and lost your footing. Slipped straight between them and smacked your throat on one of the metal rods."

"Shit, was that here?"

Nodding I point at the jungle gym to our right.

"You son of a bitch... Oupa kicked a whole whack of sand and stones in my eyes then too, skidded to a halt in front of me. How can you come to a kid's rescue and then kick dirt in their eye?"

He smiles, shaking his head.

"I miss him. I miss Nan."

We're quiet for a bit.

"What was it like, living with her after Oupa?"

"I don't know, it was a lot of things I guess. She just went into herself, became really quiet...it was strange watching her walk around, becoming more and more hunched. She stopped laughing, took all the photos down."

Some kids run past, throwing rabbit pellets at each other.

"What would you do if your wife died and you were in your 80s?"

He huffs, "Let's slow down. I need to get one first."

"I'm serious. What would you do?"

"I'd want to die I guess. I'd just be biding my time, waiting for it to come."

I nod, "That's why I think she got it, the Alzheimer's. I think she chose to stop using her brain. Chose to have her nerves shrink and die so she could get lost in a world that was blank, not have to remember seeing him die, not have to remember Peter dying."

"Could you choose that?"

I take my jersey off, lay it on the bench, let the sun warm my chest.

"I could, would. To be able to forget? I..."

But would I choose it? Would I want to forget? I don't know.

"She had Mom to live for though, she had us to live for."

"I don't think it was enough."

"All we can do is keep going there, reminding her of her life and us. At the least, reminding her that there are people who love her."

"What I hope is that the memories she does have are of the day her and Oupa met, the day they got married, the trip they took to Thailand – all the joy and love she ever felt compacted into a looped film of memories."

Nodding, "I hope that too, sis."

"Come," he smacks my thigh, "let's take a walk."

Linking arms we try avoid the swirled green and white duck poo, the geese that hiss and waddle after us looking for bits.

Nan and Oupa would walk just like this. Him in his tweed page boy cap and spiralled wooden cane, her in white strappy sandals, sheer stockings and straw hat.

That image, that love?

It's something I want for Devon.

Maybe even something I want for me.

"Can I ask how you got Mom to agree to come see me?"

Clearing his throat, “I just told her to go. That you deserved to have her hear you out.”

Frowning at him, “And that worked?”

He looks at me smiling, “I said other things as well.”

“Such as?”

“I told her it was enough. She needed to try mend her bridges.”

“I wasn’t interested in mending bridges or building new ones.”

“Well, she didn’t know that until she got there.”

“Devon Meyer.”

I click my tongue at him.

We get to the wooden railing that keeps all the donkeys from running rampant.

Picking splinters from the wood, the varnish comes off in dark clumps under my fingernails.

“Did you sort it all out with her?”

“I feel better.”

“And you and Mom?”

“What about us?”

“What’s gonna happen now?”

“Nothing as far as I know. I said what I needed to say, and it’s enough.”

“I’m glad, C.”

No matter what happens, this is my family, this one person who has never hurt me.

“I love you, you know that?”

He moves his hand around to cup my shoulders.

“I know. I love you too.”

“You think we’ll be okay? Considering everything.”

“Ja, we’ll be just fine. I’ve come to terms with Dad.”

“So have I.”

Tapping the railing, he eyes me up and down, “But just so you know, if it doesn’t work out, I’ll be driving the getaway car. We all know how well that turned out for you.”

After Dev drops me off, I head to the Exclusive Books down the road.

There’s the smell of coffee as I walk in, popular books stacked on spiral book shelves, people biting their nails as they read the blurbs on the back covers. I wish their thoughts could be projected onto the ceiling, a hologram of questions, exclamations.

I’ve never really been inside a book store. An embarrassing thing at my age.

I've looked from a distance, but the variety seemed overwhelming, the number of things to be said and learned exhaustive.

Nan would always read to me growing up – fairy tales with pots of gold at the end of the rainbow, pixie canoes made out of acorn husks.

The books I read as a teen all came from a rat-gnawed box in our garage, CNA price stickers reading R3.99 in a faded yellow on the back.

I remember one book, didn't even bother reading it but the title was what caught my eye: *The Dead Lifeguard* by R.L. Stine. It wasn't so much the title actually as the catchphrase – *No one can save her now*.

What a thing to read with the cement floor icy against your bum, surrounded by broken fishing rods, cans of motor oil, a dusty Kreepy Krauly – hemmed in by his world.

I keep walking around, trail my fingers against all the spines, bending my head sideways to read.

In the memoirs section I take a bit longer.

A title to sum up an entire person's life – their love and trauma, the generations that have come before them, the intimate photographs of their bedroom, their wedding, their pregnancy.

Some are just one word long: *Dry*, *Lucky*. Others elaborate a little more: *How to be a woman*, *Are you my mother?* What a job to have, what a burden to bear.

I get to the notebooks.

All of them are moleskins in different colours.

I pick one up, it's black with lined pages, a small year calendar trailing along the top of each page. The next one is lime green, about the size of my palm, the pages are also lined.

But there's a red one that catches my eye.

The edge of the pages are coated in some kind of gold film. Squeezing it between my fingers it feels slightly spongey. Opening it the pages blank.

A blank page.

“Claire?”

I'm sitting on my bed, paging through my notebook, smelling its crisp cut pages.

“Roodey's here so I'm going.”

“Have fun.”

The front door shuts, but I can still hear someone walking around.

“Beth?”

Footsteps come towards my room.

Tristan is standing in my doorway, looks like he’s ready for the beach in his T and shorts.

“I come in peace.”

He holds up two fingers.

“What are you doing here?”

I raise my notebook to my chest like a shield.

“You didn’t get my message?”

“Do you even have my number?”

His eyes dart around the room, a meerkat on guard.

“I asked Roodey to ask Beth for your number. Complicated, but true. I messaged you to ask if I could come round...you clearly didn’t get it.”

He stares at his feet.

“My phone’s in the car.”

Whistling, “So, I’ll just leave then?”

“How are you?”

It comes out faltered, like my voice has just broken.

Putting his hands in his pockets he sighs.

“A little embarrassed. You?”

“Confused.”

Resting his shoulder against my door, “I’m not surprised. I should have told Beth to tell you beforehand.”

“Is that how it normally works with you? You tell the friend to tell the girl you’ll be coming over instead of messaging her like a normal person would?”

“It’s the illogical style I prefer, ja. Generally I just ask a girl for her number but doing that with you seemed to slip my mind.”

Nodding I stare at him.

“I just don’t want you to press the panic button or anything. I know we hardly know each other and this is a little...intimate.”

He gestures with his hand from me to him.

“There’s like two metres separating us. We’ve been more intimate than this.”

“True. So, can I come in or would you like to sound the alarm.”

“Come in.”

He walks slowly, bouncing a little like there are springs in his shoes, looking around like he’s never been inside my room.

“You wanna sit,” I gesture to the stool by my dressing table but he sits on the corner of the bed, half facing me.

“So you just came to say hey or...”

“I just kinda wondered how you were. It’s been a while since last we met so I thought a bit of a catch up was in order.”

He talks in the strangest way – “since we last met”, so formal.

“What’s that?”

Leaning forward he flicks the cover of my notebook.

“The start of something new.”

How long have I kept this secret?

It has become something so a part of me it flows like blood, has made a homely black pit at the bottom of my stomach fed every time he sniffed me out, rummaged through my body. Fed every time she turned her gaze elsewhere, did nothing.

I have never let it outside of myself.

It would be like shooting a bullet to shatter the crystalline lives the people around me have created, moulded for themselves.

Devon doesn’t know. And should he ever? There’s a part of me that thinks he deserves to know the truth, deserves to see his parents in their full glory.

Another part fears what learning all of this will do to him. Will it pierce him straight through, fracture how he sees me into something unrecognisable?

Maybe he will learn the truth.

One day.

Nan had her own battles, is losing her current one. She was able to take me away, provide a refuge without needing to see the perverted underbelly.

She will be left with a carousel in her memory of Oupa’s scratchy kisses, his warm hands, his arms cradling her back as they wheel across the dance floor. That is how it should be for her.

And for me?

It's time to let these secrets I keep drain away.

Opening my notebook I smooth my hand over the first blank page, cool under my palm.

Holding my pen tight I write my first line.

He travelled.
