

The shape shifts. Mum glares at it through the glass. 'You changed your tune,' she says, stepping closer, 'said you weren't coming.' 'You said it was urgent,' says the shape. She opens the door. 'Shoe protectors on, then you can come in.' The hulk-like shape of a man glides over the guarded threshold, the front door slung into its frame by her scorched, sinewy arm leading to her scorched, twisted face. 'She had a good face,' he thinks. 'You still with 'whatsername?' she says. He frowns. 'You know,' she reminds him, 'the one with the moustache that matched her roots.' He flinches, not from tension, not from the autumn chill cutting in from behind, but from rage, his quiet retort confirming that Rachel, the Bimbo Du Jour he dumped Mum for are, 'Stronger than ever.' But none of that was said. All that happened was that my Dad banged longer than required on the frosted pane and Mum let him in. The convo is just stuff in my head as I wait inside the Drobe. One thing I do know; Dad and Rachel *did* split. Things happen. Things change. You chalk it up, swallow it down, self-medicate with drink and porn. I imagine that's what my Dad would do. But what do I know? Up until the day he found me, the last time I clocked him was when I was five. He never said he was done back then. He just left. No tears, no drama, no, 'I need space', just the urge to shag Rachel. He's probably been ghosted so often after dates he should become an exorcist.

Inside my embryonic bunker, I imagine Mum in the lobby, her arms folded, inspecting Dad's feet to make sure he wraps them in the same shoe protectors they use in swimming pools and crime scenes, the same blue ones that encase my feet pressing hard against the wood.

He follows Mum down the hall. Her flip flops flap, two steps for his every one. They enter the living room. Diffuser, fish and modular furniture are all arranged with graphic design precision. She puts on music. Turns it up loud. The feature walls soak the gothic chords of The Sisters of Mercy. It is the kind of din you expect to hear blaring from bedrooms of sullen teenagers at war with the world, not prompted by your mother who calls her ex-husband out of the blue to report me, their daughter missing. I picture her posing between a

sub-woofer and a new Dyson still in its box, her flimsy tropical wrap strangling her sunburnt frame; attire for the beach not a single level dwelling.

The Drobe smells warm. Of bark and bones. It has little light and little room, but I am not alone; Nanna is with me. Through doors that don't shut, past my bedroom, across the hall and inside the living room, the holy war of The Sisters continues; Mum worshipping the altar of Mercy while I pray in Church of Sledge.

'The ceramics have grown,' Dad might shout at a glass fish, its mouth shaped like an 'O'.

'Grampee collected them, remember?' Mum might shout back, fumbling folds of fabric to fetch a fake fag. 'We moved in last year after Nanna and Gramps died.'

Sweat may roll down his neck. Stain his collar. He may be desperate to swap the deafening, Godforsaken rock for the sanctity of his bedsit where he can swig IPA, swipe left to right and poke on Tinder. 'Where's her bedroom?' he says after Mum says, 'I adta call ya, can't take 'er no more,' a polite way of explaining her zero-tolerance policy towards my moods. He follows her to the room where I am stuffed inside the Drobe. She knows I'm here so why won't she play?

'Left it in a right state,' she says, first to the folded pyjamas on my bed, then to the gap between them made by time together and time apart. *Why won't she play?* Can't she feel me stashed in bits inside a wardrobe that opens out to a room with no books, clothes, mags, posters, stereo, shoes, computer, makeup, perfume, jewellery; all the things you would expect to find in your daughter's room?

'When did she come home?' he says.

'She's *supposed* to be at Uni.'

'Not where, when.'

'Surrey. Last week.'

'How was she?'

'How d'you mean?'

'Her mood?'

Her face lights up. Soft lines of beaming love.

'That's it,' she says, clicking perfect, Shellac-ed nails.

'What is?'

'Google upgrading from upright to bagless...it's more life changing than moving house.'

'So, you're saying after years of not seeing you, that our daughter went missing over a vacuum?'

'This isn't her room.'

'Said it was.'

'It's *Herwan's*. I battled for this bungalow. Battled. Should have gone to Grampee...'

'Who's dead. Have you a photo?'

'Of Grampee?'

'*Her.*'

'She's nothing to look at. Just like you.'

He goes quiet, like a lost signal. Mum hijacks the airways. 'My award-winning plea to the council is what got me this bungalow,' she bleats, in between caramel-stenching drags. 'I gutted everyfink 'cept that wardrobe and Grampee's fish.' Her lips wrap around the metal. Make an 'O' like that fish. 'Do to me what you do to that pipe,' thinks Dad. 'For old time's sake'. After all these years, Mum is still hot. And still 'cray-cray' crazy. She brags how Grampee dying seconds after Nanna made her a special case, how being homeless with a child with special needs made her more eligible for 'Spesh-shaul-dis-pen-say-schon.'

Newsflash: I am NOT special needs. I'm special. Isn't everyone? Voices outside bubble and boil. Does Mum's guest prefer the discordant chimes of Mercy over the sublime, sibling synch of The Sledge?

'Punk is the kick back of disco,' she always says, before wrestling me to the ground to put her music back on. 'And don't forget it, fatty.'

Words warp and distort like a demented tape player. I no longer tell apart the ones outside my head from the ones inside.

‘She can’t be far,’ says Dad. Mum says a morbidly obese organic mass of secreting matter that scoffs anything with a sell by date can’t be far.

‘Why can’t you ever say anything nice?’ I always say.

‘Because nice things only happen to nice people,’ my mother’s take on three-hundred-and-sixty-degree feedback like a shit sandwich without the bread.

The Drobe is my magical, go-to place. When I was small and whenever we visited Nanna and Grampee, it was the bestest spot to hide. Mum always joined in, always dragging herself from the stiff, grown-up laughter to take extra-long to find me. The one time I begged Dad to play, my impatience flicked from thrill to fear, I gave up, came out, and Mum said he had gone. It’s been us two ever since.

My mouth feels like shifting sand. It stings to blink. My thoughts drift back to how I got here. Days ago, I tilted on a dance floor laced with lights. Eyes loud, heart bright, ‘Shake Your Body (down to the ground)’ starts. The place fills. My fave five-in-a-row will be on soon and I’m itching to collide, to lose me in the groove, retrace my steps. But not just yet. Stuff to do.

We had it down to military precision. Stretch (so called for shagging three blokes in a day) and I are in the Students’ Union. Its ‘Niles Piles’; delectably played discs mostly by the legend Niles Rodgers, all in the same order, all on twelve inch. Disco is the alternative to Prozac; a repeat prescription of upbeat tunes with side effects that make you dance your blues away.

Stretch dispenses the code. 'Busy tonight.' We take position, our cue, 'Good Times'. She dissolves into the undergrowth while I guard the cloakroom, pretend I'm staff. 'We're making more room,' I say to anyone trying to enter. 'Won't be a long.' Stretch has the length of the Chic track for her nimble digits to explore fabric landscapes. She rifles through pockets, zips and Velcro fasteners of casually strewn coats. She is always careful. Always lifts the right stuff, stuff rich students won't miss or think they've lost. Chic merges into Kelly Marie's classic, 'It Feels Like I'm in Love' and in less than three minutes forty-two seconds, she reappears. We weave beneath sweaty armpits, jostling the swamp of paisley shirts and jumpsuits to posture beneath a spinning disco ball that reflects strobing, swirling bodies expressing jumbled emotions onto a non-judging floor. My chest discharges high octane thrills. My feet stomp. The DJ lines up my favourites. I wink at Stretch. She raises a small square from her back that glints and stinks of leather. She shakes it. She winks.

'Drink?'

We eject from 'Niles Piles' into hard dark and soft rain. The cracking nights are the ones you don't remember getting home, babbling incoherent, alcohol-induced chatter, instructing a stray cab to, 'Take us to Boswick Green and don't spare the horses.' Stretch and I yell, 'Ain't Nobody' by Rufus and Chaka Khan and we sail past busted shops and shabby bus shelters, my world my bestie beside me.

She messed up. Not with the wallet. Not at first. Stretch is the only person I know incarcerated for non-payment of council tax, the services she refused to pay for; police, ambulance and fire brigade all needed the next morning to free her from the tree she ambushed in to resist arrest.

I race back to mine. Clothes line the stairs. My boyfriend hurls more down from the top. He raises a square from his back, that glints and stinks of leather. He shakes it. He scowls.

‘Recognise this from your mate, ‘Chlamydia-on-legs’?’

I explode into fragments. Piece the night together; Stretch quieter than usual in the cab, dragging me out of ‘Niles Piles’ during Donna Summer’s ‘I Feel Love’ when we normally scarper after Mary Jane Girls, ‘All Night Long’ or ‘Rapture’ depending how many Kopparbergs we’ve downed. (Overdose on the Strawberry and Limes and you tell yourself Blondie *can* do rap).

He never said I was dumped. Never said the words. Stretch had lifted a wallet from the cloakroom that belonged to his friend working behind the bar. She went to buy drinks, he spotted the distinctive logo and legged it when confronted, my now ex-boyfriend begging him when he arrived that morning to not to report us. ‘I’ll forever owe that sanctimonious prick,’ my ex said, his cold, flat eyes hovering over me as I grab my stuff, stuff that marks the end of a year of drunken sex, thrush, pregnancy scares, course deadlines, us trying to find unmarked lecture rooms at the foot of creaky, winding stairs as we navigate the ritualistic complexities of higher education. One misdemeanour and I am dissed. Why don’t people ever say goodbye? Lean on anything too much and it soon gives way. I shuffle below a brooding sky as my world caves in. Headphones on but no music plays. I catch the Megabus. ‘Last Night a DJ Saved My Life’ loops in my head. I am first greeted by Mercy then Mum, her face round, shiny and red. ‘Protectors on then you can come in,’ then, ‘Why aren’t you at Uni?’ then, ‘You’re not staying.’

‘I need time out.’

‘And I need your room for *Herwan*.’

She says his name like he is still trapped in her throat. In exchange for naked cuddles, *Juan* gets free board and lodging. I glance round. No sign of him. I ask if she is happy. She says, ‘Why do you always ask complicated questions?’ Considering the central

themes of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and comparing their different perspectives on existentialism is a complicated question. I chuck pyjamas on the bed. She handles them like Semtex, folding them ever so carefully before screaming 'Need Alert! Need Alert!' making the usual shape of the cross with her fingers. She flounces off. Makes a call. Turns Mercy up. I stuff myself and my stuff inside the Drobe. It still has space to hold the pain of me. I leave the door open, wider than usual, so Nanna and I can see out and Mum can see in.

He sizes her up like a dog with two dicks. He is how Mum described; a stumpy Kirk Douglas; tough and weathered like cliffs with the dimple to match. Years ago, he took her over the edge and the rocks fell. How dare he question *my* whereabouts? His daughter that was off from the start, no discipline, no self-control, educated to being totally unemployable with chaffing thighs and a lifetime of debt, always asking Mum if she's happy, hearing her stock answer of being tossed about, discarded by a care system that didn't, a Nanna and Grampee that decided after she 'Got in the family way,' to allow her back into their lives. 'Happiness a commodity,' Mum always says. She bided her time, became the tenant of their bungalow, erasing their existence by Zoflora and Mercy. She was OK keeping the fish but not the damp-stained dresses hung inside the Drobe like Nanna still wears them. The pink one veiling my face Nanna wore when Mum was seven, trapped between Nanna's legs, comforted by the wafts of Nanna's crotch as Nanna untangles Mum's hair. They sent Mum away after that. Reckoned it turned her OCD. Turned her odd. But underneath she's alright.

She sucks and slurps on her vape. Parades around in a scantily clad one-piece, Dad probably enticed into her skeletal arms, battling thoughts of, 'Call me old fashioned, but women should dress like ladies and men should wear starched shirts.' I suspect he only answered Mum's call because she was hysterical, he is nosey and needy women excite and repulse him at the same time.

'Turn that shite off,' he says. 'Can't hear myself think.'

Mum flops out. Music off. Flops back in. The room swoops into calm. Through low breaths, I tune into Dad who tunes into Mum. He seems to see her more clearly in the still; her slumped posture exuding the same pitiful poise from years ago when he said he would stop drinking, be more intimate, more *emotionally available*. It's not that people can't change, it's just that they won't. It was easier for Dad to disappear years ago than to tell me when hiding in Nanna's Drobe that he didn't want to play.

'Where did you see her last?' he says, voice echoing.

'Where did you?'

'When I've lost something, returning to the last place I saw it, helps.'

'You have not seen *it* for fifteen years.'

'Always over-sensitive.'

'No cards, no calls, *nothing*.'

'I told you. It was too much, my job, your obsession with cleaning...'

'You left me...'

'Our daughter never slept, remember?'

'This is *Herwan's* room.'

'You haven't changed.' Rip. Off with the protector. Rip. Then the other. *She doesn't like that*. Her stick-frame contorts with The Fear of his Dirty. Filthy. Boots. Plops and pings like the distant chimes of an ice cream van seep from my headphones. Dad surges forward, his bare soles tracing soiled tracks.

'STOP!' says Mum.

He yanks the Drobe door.

'STOP! She's in there.'

He climbs in.

Something at the back lies very warm and very still.

I can hold me in for days. At Uni I was the 'Cystitis Cween', delaying number ones and twos for an unhealthy length of time, a fact that will never secure gainful employment but handy at festivals and sieges.

My limbs are molten blocks. My head too heavy to lift is full of saliva flavoured rust. The numbing pleasure of three Twix wolfed down at the services is a distant memory compared to the unrelenting fist that pounds inside my ribs. *Find me Mum, I'm fading.* My phone displays three missed calls from my zero contract hours employer for 'Missing my shift', nothing from my ex, four unknown and seven percent battery. Outside Mum and Dad fight. *Things happen. Things change. You chalk it up, swallow it down, self-medicate with disco and dance.* Headphones on. Playlist found. Music starts. I step inside both speakers. My eyeballs thump. Outside in becomes inside out. Stretch grabs my hand. We sway and pray in holy joy, anointed by the spirit of 'Niles Piles', the weekly stomping ground for the soundtrack of our lives: Freak Out I Want Your Love We Are Family Lost in Music Thinking of You. The hypnotic vibrations of Chic and Sister Sledge, my fave five, soak my pores and flood my veins. Stretch fades. I am left holding my own hand, pulled, not here or there, not I, you, he or she, but a whirling 'it' in a disco abyss. The earth tilts. I rise above Mum who shouts 'Stop' then hugs Nanna's pink dress and sobs beside Dad. He yanks off my headphones. *Dad. Shakes me awake. Dad. You found me at last!* But no words spill out.

'You're right,' he says, staring through me, 'She *is* nothing to look at.'

Uniformed voices say I was dehydrated, passed out from days without fuel. They accept Mum's story that I arrived home that morning and collapsed. I am lifted again, my dense frame hauled inside a new transportation Drobe that is white and clean and bright.

'To the hospital,' says Mum, banging on the side. 'And don't spare the horses.'

The ambulance whirrs and whoops and whisks me away. I pulse inside its siren. Bleep. Wake on a rough bed. Bleep. Squint into bright lights. Bleep. A nurse checks my

vitals, adjusts the tubes in my arms and chest. Bleep. 'Someone to see you,' she says, pointing to the man beside a monitor. He raises a small square from his back that glints and stinks of leather. My heart stirs. My pulse raises. Bleep bleep.

'Recognise this?' says the policeman. He shakes it. He winks.

I wink back.

Bleepbleepbleepbleepbleep.

ENDS