

## FRIDAY'S CHILD

She attempts to ensnare my hand so I conjure it into a flatfish. It slithers from her grasp.

‘Come inside,’ she says. ‘Wait here until your daughter comes home.’

I don’t say, my daughter isn’t coming home, I killed her.

The brassy afternoon light flares on the street. I clang across it.

Inside her living room, I surf a sea-green rug. A coffee table doubles as a raft. I flick a secret peep at the corner in the hope she harbours a caged bird. I’m on the lookout for an albatross. But the only object where the walls intersect is a potted tree, a ficus. On both of us, the leaves curl, crisp and knotted into fists to fight off death.

‘She doesn’t feed me.’

‘Who doesn’t feed you?’ the neighbor says. ‘Are you hungry?’

A common blue plate simpers before me. It bears a sandwich. I drill pits in it with my fingers. The holes expose an orange layer. I tongue a sliver and recoil. Cheese.

‘I taped a note on your daughter’s door,’ she says. Her buttercup hair gleams. ‘She’ll come for you when she’s back from work.’

Sometimes I observe the old lady from afar. She’s a beanpole, a scarecrow with the sawdust trickling out, hair only fit for sparrows’ nests. Her knickers trickle out too, wrinkling coyly as they abseil down her purplish shin bones. She steps clear of the leg holes and surrenders the garment to the astonished asphalt so she can escape. Brenda, a portly redhead, fatigued and in her fifties, galumphs down the road between the pretty terraced cottages and their politely closed painted doors. Her fat flubbering.

‘Mother,’ she begs. Or shouts. ‘Mother!’

She’s not safe off the lead. That’s what Larry says when they think I’m not listening.

Brenda tethers me by the throat. I can’t release myself because my hands are flatfish and unfastening the clasp is beyond their capabilities. The key chips at my breastbone. That’s a sternum, in medical parlance. You learn these things, during the course of life and death.

‘She has a front door key so she can get in,’ Brenda says. ‘I hung it on a chain round her neck.’

‘I’ll steer her back there next time,’ she says. The jolly neighbour.

‘She doesn’t feed me!’ I bark.

The ficus clenches its fists in solidarity while my flatfish flail at the chain. Brenda’s cheeks devolve into beetroots. I engineered this, her mortification. Watery pleasure dribbles through me.

‘Of course I feed you,’ Brenda says. So defensive. She’s a dull lump, a bucket of lard. Not like my daughter. You could hold *her* in two cupped hands.

But she won’t be coming home.

‘I don’t know why she’d say that,’ Brenda says. ‘Tonight we’re having shepherd’s pie. I leave lunch for her when I go to work. She eats it.’

I suppose it’s possible. My independent observation is that Brenda is a low piece, inclined to falsehood to save herself. Yet I have no appetite, so perhaps she does feed me. I stamp my palm on the sandwich and its cheddar gorge. Some fool can puzzle the smashed fragments back together later. The slick gravy from the shepherd’s pie pools in my mind and I syphon it from between my molars.

‘Please don’t suck your teeth, mother,’ the woman says.

She’s upbraiding somebody. Who? We’re alone in the kitchen, bookended by olive green cupboard doors. I scrape my Van Gogh chair closer to the table. My cup of tea is much diminished but it’s still wet, I find.

Sunlight tilts from the brisk delphinium sky to the crinkled sea and butters the grassy curves of the land. The wind lights up the beach. The smell of the ocean is like oxygen splintering through a prism. When I lie on the sand it sticks to me. The grains of my life. So many grains, brushed off, washed away. Swallowed by the shivering sea.

I’ve ended up inhabiting this woman Brenda’s house. She tells people she’s my daughter, though why she’d invent this is beyond me. She constrains me. There’s some plan I don’t understand, although I turn it over and over in my magnolia mind. The man poses as her husband and brings vegetables from an allotment. Courgettes, carrots, and tomatoes. Or he could be a farmer. He blocks the light, as stocky as a Hereford bull with his curly topknot. At night I hear them through the wall, her mumbled hurrying *oh now oh oh now*. I remember his name and it’s Larry. He shoots waves at me with his shifty navy eyes, aiming his fraudulent position as son-in-law down the old lady’s turkey neck.

I’m not stupid. His concubine is not my child.

They park me in the living room on a black settee that starts out cool and then latches itself onto my hamstrings as I heat it with my own leathery hide. The television burbles, but I’m listening to them canoodling in the kitchen.

‘She keeps saying I’m not her daughter. She says she killed her daughter.’

‘Is this about your older sister? I thought she had her adopted.’

‘That’s what she told me. But I’ve no idea where she is.’

Oh, the lies she tells, that Brenda. He murmurs, *sotto voce* so I can’t hear. He’s probably sawing his incisors on her deceitful alabaster ear.

The scarlet phone box down the street. She hurtles from the house toward it in bare feet. Stabbing her soles on the pavement of knives. Naked and screaming. Slippery babe in arms. Shattering the soft amber cones of sodium light. The man accompanying his Dachshund on a last stroll before bedtime calls the ambulance and yanks off his shirt to

shroud her dripping Picasso skin but the old lady screeches and Brenda crouches with her supplicant palms on the sharp shelly edges of my kneecaps.

‘It’s too late.’

‘Mother,’ she says. ‘It’s all right. I’m here.’

My teeth crunch each other.

‘I hear you in the night.’

Her eyes glide flat. I did that, engineered her mortification.

‘No you don’t.’

‘I hear you grunting when that peasant has his way with you.’

Her freckles paint paw marks on her shuttered face. How boldly pain storms the walls of this creature who confines me. I offer a grunt of my own as evidence. *Oh oh now*. She trembles. Either she has the fortitude of a sow or the humpy unawareness of one. I suspect the latter, having overheard her rutting in the pre-dawn with her insatiable satyr, Larry.

‘You can’t keep this up. She needs round-the-clock care.’

He’s the one that brings the vegetables. The old lady picks the flowers on her cotton skirt and pretends not to hear. She’s concealed herself anyway, prim in the back seat while they rocket along between summer hedgerows frilly with cow parsley and ardent with bees.

I scrutinize the back of the woman’s head, her tail of fine red hair. Her foxtail.

‘She doesn’t remember who you are, babe. You’re doing the right thing.’

The carrot man’s voice is dark and gentle. His turnip hand flops off the wheel and closes over the woman’s fingers on her rounded knee. The old lady studies this, but it’s not interesting and instead she leans her face to the firmament. It spirals above her, blue as cornflowers, striated with clouds.

I depress an enigmatic button. A glass pane ascends and intercepts the rushing wind.

‘She remembers her other daughter,’ Brenda says. As if the old lady can’t hear a damn word. ‘Only she keeps saying she killed her.’

‘That’s how it goes, isn’t it, babe? Things they’ve buried coming back to haunt them, yeah?’

‘Don’t play with the window, mother,’ the vixen says.

‘Where are we going?’

‘The beach,’ the woman says. Brenda, her name is. I recognise her red hair. ‘Your favourite one.’

‘What happened, d’you think?’ Larry says.

‘She never told me. Maybe she’ll tell you, if you ask her.’

The chauffeur tosses the old lady a furtive glance over his shoulder. I can only hope he's a reliable driver. I've no way to judge, it being the first time I've had one in my employ. Not that I recall hiring him, but how else am I to explain being toured about by this stranger?

'What happened to your first daughter, love?' he says. 'Lottie.'

The old lady makes an effort to lean forward but the car hops over a pothole or a bump and tumbles her back again.

They've tied me into my seat anyway.

'Where are we going?'

'To the beach, mother,' the woman says. 'See? She doesn't remember anything. I wish she'd told me what happened when she could.'

Beyond the window the blurry velvet hedges drop from sight. Vast fields thick with hay replace them and the air is as hot as honey, replete with birdsong and the sharp scent of mowing. Hay shards stipple my arched back. His sweat tastes like a bull's. I coil my glossy legs around him as he thrusts a seed deep inside me to germinate later, blooming with joy.

'It was right after they diagnosed her, when she told me I'd had a sister. She was afraid she'd forget everything.'

'She was right about that, wasn't she?' the farmer says.

The moths detach themselves from the violet dusk and wander, drugged by summer, through the open window. White painted wood, a metal handle. I close it, even though the warmth overwhelms the room, to thwart their fitful flitting and prevent them powdering you with their floury wings. I run some water in the bath. And then I ease myself in with you to hold you and wash you, reclining in the balmy waves. I rest you on my chest and sing. *Lottie, Lottie*. You slumber as the water laps your cherub body, me stroking your back with my finger.

'She was only sixteen or something,' the woman, Brenda, that's her name, says. 'Never married the father. She said she put the baby up for adoption, my older sister Lottie, or half-sister that is, when she was four weeks old.'

'Nothing else?' the tomato man says.

'Not until she started saying she killed her daughter.'

The woman rotates her hand beneath his and entwines her geranium pink nails with his farmer's callouses.

Who is this person they're discussing?

'Maybe the baby died,' Larry says. 'Instead of being adopted, I mean.'

'What if she really did kill her baby?'

His hand squeezes hers. The old lady monitors their actions, peering between the seats, and lays out her flatfish on her meagre thighs. She chases the words, but they leave her behind.

‘Does it matter?’ the man says. ‘It was so long ago. Perhaps a cot death.’

‘I can’t stop thinking about it,’ she says.

Her skin shudders beneath the man’s shirt. Raindrops glimmer in the hydrangea light thrown out by the police cars.

‘I was going to try to find her,’ she says. ‘My sister.’

‘I need to change gear,’ he says. ‘Sorry.’ He reclaims his hand. Her petals unfurl and fall limp. ‘I love you, babe,’ he says to her bowed head.

I can’t attend to their meaningless conversation.

‘Where are we going?’

‘The beach, mother,’ Brenda says.

You swim down into the sea while I soar or snore above you. When I wake the water has sung itself cool and you aren’t lying between my gooseflesh breasts any more. I try to save you, I try, I try, and my hands slap your tiny chest, your sternum. As ineffective as flatfish. Your peacock eyes regard me with sorrow. Wednesday’s child is full of woe.

I sense a plot when my do-gooders tap buttons that open sesame the door. I seize on the numbers. Two four six eight. Two six two eight. Two eight two six. I have them fooled despite their uniforms and calculating, charming smiles. They trust I won’t remember the private code but I’m crafty. Three four five six nine.

‘These places always smell of hand sanitiser,’ the farmer says. ‘And piss.’

‘Don’t say that,’ Brenda says. ‘Look, mother. Birds.’

Powder blue, avocado green, jasmine white. They chatter and squeak and cock their friendly jet eyes my way. I’ll turn them loose to swoop about when nobody’s looking.

He springs from the armchair and bends over the cushion.

‘Dammit, somebody *peed* here,’ he says. He laughs and pinches the seat of his trousers, tenting them away from his rear. ‘I’ll have to take a dip in the sea.’

‘Here’s her room,’ a woman says. I teeter on ruby carpet. The bed, an icy counterpane, reflects the window. An odour of lemon drifts. She nods at me. Her ebony face, above an emerald dress, could be familiar. Maybe she’s the one who introduced the old lady to the budgies. Alongside her, another woman clings to the courgette man’s hand. Tears patrol her patchy cheeks. I spy silver brambles tangled in her glorious auburn hair.

‘Time for the beach,’ the weeping woman says.

She reaches for my hand, but I conjure it into a flatfish and it slithers from her grasp. She rubs the heel of her other hand along the path of her tears.

The sand papers my skin with the grains of my life. On all fours, I grovel and sieve the water but it unravels around the flatfish. I try to snatch them up. They whip away and my hands blunder into each other in the clouded shallows.

‘What the hell is she doing?’

I've no idea how Larry got here. He's the type who appears when you're least expecting an intruder. His manner indicates he's acquainted with the woman beside him. I might be too.

The sea sings itself cold and a teal wind blows across the brilliant sky. The mermaid rises from the scrambled breakers. She flees like a squall. Scudding across knives. Naked and screaming. Slippery babe in arms. The sodium lights leak soft peach blossoms into the drizzle. The Dachshund prints her ankle with his fresh chilly nose. 'I called the ambulance,' the young man says. She won't give up her baby even when he encloses them both in his shirt, even for the ambulanceman. Lottie is still, so, so still, and I can't find her in the water.

'I'm here, mother,' Brenda says. 'I'll help you up.'

The old lady's knees click, as brittle as castanets. She unfolds like a discarded beach chair, a creaky articulation teased into shape by the red-haired woman's gentle hands. We stroll along the salty, mussel-shell rim of the sea and she laughs up at me. When she spies a stripy cockle, her little sandy fingers slip from mine. She pounces on it. A golden ribbon breaks free from her red hair and flutters like bunting at the compendium of cheering gulls.

My flesh is as wicked as a mermaid's but hers is warm, forged by lovers in a sultry field to a joyous soundtrack of bees. Friday's child is loving and giving.

'Thank you, Brenda,' I say. 'You're a wonderful daughter, dear.'