

Laid Bare

It's funny, but I can see Lulu more clearly now that she's been dead seven years than I did when she was alive. The pale blue eyes, the short-cropped red hair turned white like bleached coral, the sideways look she'd give you when she was amused.

'I think about her a lot,' I tell Tony.

It's almost 9am and we're still in bed, he and I. Tony's the fattest man I've ever been with. The fattest and the nicest, and I've known plenty – men, that is, not nice ones. I feel like a small bird in his arms, even though I'm hardly petite.

'How come you called her Lulu?'

'Her name was Louisa,' I tell him.

'Why not Gran, though? Or Nan or something?'

'I don't know. Never thought to ask,' I say, feeling a pinch of regret. So many unasked questions.

The sun pulses in through the vertical blinds, projecting a grid-like shadow across the sheet and the floor.

'She used to take us places on the weekends – museums, galleries, parks. Once, when we were young, she took us to the zoo, and Cam refused to go any further than the seal enclosure. He said he could tell from the way they were moving they were communicating with each other. We had to leave him there and come back.'

'Maybe they were.'

'He also said their movements formed a perfect mathematical formula.'

'Mmm, maybe not.'

I love this stage of a relationship, all shiny and new, when you hunger to know every single thing about the person you're with, when you can trot out your old stories like freshly baked treats.

Tony gives my shoulder an idle kiss.

'If I slept in past nine o'clock, Lulu'd come in, pull the blinds up and tell me I was wasting the day.'

'She sounds terrifying.'

I think about this for a moment. 'She wasn't. She was strong and super-smart – we used to call her the Brain's Trust - and she cared about us. Really cared. I mean, God, can you imagine having to take on two kids when you're middle-aged?'

We lie for a while in contemplative silence until he says, 'Tell me more.'

'About Lulu? Well, she wasn't much of a cook. She didn't knit or garden. She liked to read, to turn wood. She made the dining room table and stools and platters and stuff. She liked fixing things, loved fixing things - radios, taps, shoes etc. She used to hate the way modern appliances were made, all glued together so you've no choice but to trash them. In fact, there was hardly anything she couldn't fix. Except . . .'

'Except what?'

'Except, now that I think about it, her daughter.'

'Your mum?'

I nod. 'I remember when I was quite young Lulu telling someone that Tara – that's Mum's name - had *fallen in with the wrong crowd* and I had visions of Mum falling, literally, against a stack of other people, like the losing side of a tug of war. Isn't that funny.'

'You did live with her, at first, didn't you?'

'Yeah, but only until I was six.'

My phone alarm goes off. When I begin to get up, Tony grabs my wrist. 'Stay. Call in sick.'

I consider it momentarily. 'Can't,' I say.

If there was one thing Lulu taught us, it was to work hard.

Tony watches me get dressed without getting up himself and I suspect it's because he's embarrassed. I have yet to see him naked and I understand. We all have things we are afraid to reveal.

‘Don’t feel you have to rush off,’ I tell him. ‘Just make sure you leave the key under the cactus.’

On my way to work I strain to remember what life was like before we went to live with Lulu. All I have is a series of blurred images and garbled conversations, the smell of smoke and incense. More sensations than anything, like swimming underwater with one’s eyes open. Strangely, what I remember most clearly is a white cat called Pussy whose distended belly grazed the ground. Cam, who was ten, had pre-Lulu memories but he guarded them as closely as the Easter eggs he kept in his cupboard so long they’d turn a motley grey.

‘What was she like? I recall pestering him one endlessly rainy weekend ‘Mum.’

‘You know what she’s like.’

‘I mean back then, when we lived with her?’

‘I’ve told you, she had long blond hair.’

‘Like mine?’

He examined me reluctantly. He didn’t like looking at people. ‘No, hers was darker. Hers was shiny. Yours is dry and knotty.’

‘But what was she like inside?’

‘How would I know?’ Already he’d lost interest in the subject. Or acted like he had. Already he was walking out of the room. ‘She used to sing a lot,’ he said, over his shoulder. ‘There was always music on.’

There’s music on in the café when I go in the back door. Rap music. I stretch a hair net over my scalp, sling on an apron. Ricardo, the chef, inclines his head towards me. ‘Hey, Angie. Get the tomatoes?’

‘Oh shit. Did you ask me to?’

‘Yesterday, remember? On your way out.’

Ricardo’s no Gordon Ramsay. Nothing much seems to bother him. Sleeping’s his favourite pastime, and when he’s not sleeping or cooking, he plays Minecraft.

‘Don’t worry,’ he says. ‘We can get some later.’

But I do worry. That’s how Lulu’s brain tumour started, with her forgetting things.

When I’m on my break, I call Tony, tell him I’m forgetting things, tell him I’m scared.

That night I go to Tony’s flat for dinner for the first time and don’t know what I should take. He doesn’t seem to drink alcohol and I don’t feel I can give him chocolates. In the end I take a Peace lily, although I’ve no idea if he’s into plants.

‘It’s perfect,’ he says. ‘Come on in.’

The flat smells of vanilla air freshener, hot garlic and damp. It’s under-furnished, as if he’s only just moved in or is in the process of moving out.

He tells me to make myself at home, that he needs to stir something, that we’re having a simple meal and he hopes I don’t mind. Of course I don’t. I’ve never had a man cook for me before. I wander around the lounge room where there are so few ornaments that I’m immediately drawn to the photo on the bookshelf, where books slump against each other like drunken comrades. There, a boy version of Tony stands in front of a big curly-haired woman and an equally large man.

‘My folks,’ he says, startling me. ‘What chance did I have?’ he says, slapping his stomach.

‘They look nice.’

‘They were nice. Still are.’

His childhood, he tells me over beef ragout and salad, was happy. An only child born after four failed pregnancies, Tony was adored by his parents and grandparents. Adored and indulged.

‘We were known as the Ham family. The Hams, actually. Short for Hammerford, I know, but we all knew it was because of our size.’

Tony eats sparingly and I wonder whether he loaded up on food before I came, wonder whether, if I looked through the drawers in his house, I’d find hidden caches of chocolate bars or potato chip packets in the bin.

‘What about you, Angie? Were you happy?’

‘I was,’ I tell him, ‘at least at primary school. I wasn’t smart like Lulu or Cam. I was a pleaser. I was the kid who sat up the front and put my hand up all the time, the one who offered to dry the dishes when I went to friends’ houses.’

‘Why was that?’

Tony’s questions often take me by surprise. ‘Because . . . I guess I was trying to make up for my mum, for Lulu’s sake. I wanted to stop her hurting. Lulu’d had such high hopes for Mum.’

Tony offers me more salad.

‘It was harder for Cam. Cam radiated unhappiness. Lunchtimes he sat by himself, reading, and I was glad we didn’t look alike, because it meant I could pretend he wasn’t my brother. If people challenged me about it, I’d say, *Maxwell’s a common name, you know*. I used to lie about Mum too. I’d tell people she was a fashion designer overseas on a fashion shoot and that’s why Lulu was looking after us.’

‘But you saw your mum, right?’

‘Every so often.’

Her visits were like lightning strikes – random, thrilling, unsettling. Generally, she turned up without warning, arms laden with stuff for us: bags of chocolates, toys in big boxes we were a little too old for, clothes that weren’t quite new. Once she gave me a short denim skirt and shiny black leather boots and she put on some music for me to dance to. ‘Hey, sexy girl,’ she said, when I tottered around in front of her. But then Lulu came in and turned the music off, saying, ‘Enough, Tara. For God’s sake, the girl’s only eight years old.’

But I don’t tell Tony that.

Later, in the dead of night, I wake, realising there must have been times I was unhappy - or maybe it was just that I had nightmares? - because I recall calling out Lulululululululu in the dark. There was immense energy, a sense of release, in that ululation, and then the satisfaction of having Lulu come running in to comfort me.

It's sticky, overcast. Heat rises from the footpath. There aren't many trees in this part of Hastings, where single-storey brick ex-housing commission houses predominate, blinds down, yards littered with car parts and kids' toys.

'Where are you taking me?' asks Tony, a little out of breath.

'You said you wanted to know everything about me.'

'Yeah.'

'So,' I stop in front of the house on the corner, unremarkable in every way except for the number of vehicles parked in its driveway and across the front lawn (six) and the overturned shopping trolley around which grass grows, 'this is where Mum used to live.'

Tony seems reluctant to look too openly, despite the drawn curtains.

'And you used to come here to visit?'

'Only once,' I tell him.

It was Cam who talked me into going. He used to skip school to spend time with her, come home all glazed-eyed and secretive, knew I wouldn't tell Lulu, wouldn't want to upset her. *What do you do there?* I'd ask. He'd shrug. *Just chill. Chat.* Cam was definitely not one for small talk. *Come,* he said. *See for yourself.* And I went, if only because Cam had never invited me anywhere before.

What I remember most was the sense of ennui, of sitting around on stained couches inside, then on upturned milk crates just outside the backdoor in the winter's sun, an old greyhound stretched out at our feet. There seemed to be a procession of people coming and going, smoking and drinking tea, without any sense of urgency. *This is my baby girl,* Mum told everyone. *Isn't she beautiful?* It rankled me, her saying that, she, who had never once sent me a birthday card, who probably didn't have a clue how old I was.

'Once was enough,' I tell him.

He takes my hand, despite the heat, and we walk on.

'And that was the last time you saw her?'

'Yes,' I lie.

I'd have taken Tony to see where we lived with Lulu, only we'd put it on the market after she died, and it was bought by a developer. A set of three units stands in its place. The last three weeks of her life, when she could do nothing but lie in bed, she used to look out the window where I'd set up a bird feeder and birdbath, and watch the small birds flit about - superb fairy wrens, firetail finches and silvereyes. Instead, we walk along the jetty, gulls swirling overhead.

'It's a shame when that happens,' says Tony, about the house.

'If I'd had the money, I would have bought out Cam's share. Kept it.'

'What was it like,' he asks, 'those last few weeks with Lulu?'

'Hellish,' I say. 'Humbling.'

Sometimes I stay at his house, but more-often-than-not he comes to mine. Tonight is one of those nights. When I open the door, he's clutching a bottle of bubbly.

'How did you know?' I ask.

'Know what?'

'About the scan.'

'What scan?'

I laugh. 'I had a CT scan. I didn't tell you. I got the results today. I don't have a tumour.'

He kisses me. 'Of course, you don't.'

'I might have had. Who's to know? You know what Cam said when Lulu was diagnosed? He said he wasn't surprised. He said she'd over-used her brain and that it had imploded.'

He shakes his head. 'Man, he had some weird theories.'

'Yeah, well, he fried his brains, didn't he? Ultimately. Anyway,' I hurry on, not wanting to spoil the sense of celebration, 'what's the bubbly in aid of?'

'Our anniversary. Two months,' he declares.

I rarely drink. I have a fear of getting addicted, but tonight I make an exception. The alcohol makes me woozy. I know I should eat something but when Tony manoeuvres me into the bedroom, I

don't protest. Our lovemaking's a little freer than usual, sweatier. Afterwards we lie together, my head against his fleshy forearm.

Again, my thoughts turn to Lulu; how she never had a man in her life since her first husband left her, and I wonder whether that's because she had her hands full, what with her daughter's issues and then with us. Another thing I never asked her about.

'Tell me something,' says Tony, 'something you've never told anyone before.'

My heart quickens, beats so hard it hurts. I take a breath.

'Lulu never stopped loving Mum,' I tell him. 'Never stopped believing Mum could turn her life around. When she knew she was dying, she was sure Mum would come to see her even though none of us, not even Cam, had seen her for years.'

'And?'

'She came. Don't ask me how she knew, but she turned up. Lulu'd had a shocking night. I'd just got her settled. I told Mum to come back later, and Lulu died the next day. I never told her, Tony. I never told Lulu that Mum had come to see her. I don't know why, exactly. I'd done so much for her, tried so hard.' My words are all squeezed up, like I've been sucking on helium.

Silence.

Tony extracts his arm from under my head and gets out of bed. He's still wearing his t-shirt, I can just discern his outline in the dark, and I want to howl - for Lulu, for the loss of him.

The overhead light, when he turns it on, is shockingly bright, and instinctively I close my eyes. When I open them, I find him standing in the doorway, t-shirt cast aside, every bit of him laid bare.