

Affirm_{press}



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Anchor point

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1984

KATH STAYED IN THE studio through dinner. Laura forked up meat and potatoes for the rest of them, a bag of frozen peas pressed to her eye. When Kath eventually slunk in, tiptoeing, red-eyed, smelling of smoke, Laura thought how loud a person sounds when they are trying to be quiet. She shared a glance with her father across the couch.

‘Mutti?’ little Vik called from the bedroom where she was meant to be asleep.

Laura grit her teeth against the yearning in her sister’s voice, a pinch deep in her chest. But she was beyond expecting Kath to respond. She could hear her mother filling up the kettle, opening the fridge and rifling through. Vik started to cry. She was only just five.

‘I’ll go,’ Laura said quietly, heaving up. She went down the hall to the bedroom.

When she appeared in the doorway, Vik howled harder. ‘I want Mutti!’

Calmly, Laura gathered the blankets in her arms. It was all she could do to lift them, she felt that tired. In the gloom, rubbing her sister’s back, she tried to block out their parents’ voices. But they came anyway, detonating down the hall.

‘I’m busting a bloody gut out there!’ she heard Bruce shout. ‘You come in, messed up. Thinking what?’

Kath’s response was shrill, garbled. Bruce came in over the

top, forcing Kath's voice higher still. The words made Laura feel strangled; she couldn't breathe. Bruce went on about the dinner Kath hadn't made, the dishes she hadn't washed. Laura tried to barricade herself in the bed, pressing into the mattress, eyes squeezed tightly shut, face buried in Vik's hair. The bruise over her eye throbbed against the pillow. Laura waited for Bruce to say something about how Kath had hurt her, but he went on.

Laura whispered, 'It's alright, Viko. Don't worry, okay?' The little girl pushed herself deeper into Laura's arms. Squeezing her sister's familiar shape, Laura felt grateful, despite the raging fight, that there was someone for her to hold.

'Back off,' Kath was hissing. 'The sacrifices I've made. You have no idea – your tiny mind.'

They were growing louder, scuffling together. Laura winced, hearing the thud of feet on lino as Kath pursued Bruce along the hall, berating. Laura ran the pad of her thumb over her calluses, hands rough from stacking wood the weekend before while Bruce logged gums. Bruce said there were lots of ways to be clever; she was lucky to be good with her hands. But not good enough: she hadn't been able to hold Kath's fresh-fired urn, dropped and smashed to smithereens on the studio floor, sparking this latest fight.

'Forget it,' Bruce yelled, sounding close enough to touch. 'Talking to a brick wall.'

'Oh, that's right,' Kath screamed. 'Walk away, you bastard.'

They were in their bedroom now, fiercely opening and closing cupboard doors. Then, as though suddenly recalling their sleeping children, their voices dropped menacingly. Laura slid down off the bed. Vik mewed, but didn't cry out.

Outside her parents' bedroom, Laura stood in the pale light spilling into the hall. She didn't know what she needed to see.

'All I ask is that you tidy up now and then,' Bruce was saying, speaking in a low voice now, slumped against the wall. Coveralls unrolled to the waist, he looked in the process of shedding skin. He stared at his hands on his thighs. 'A bit of housework, love. That's all I ask.' He let out a breath.

Watching from the door, Laura saw the straightening of her mother's spine. The way Kath loomed. 'I work.' She clenched and unclenched her angry fists. 'You understand nothing of me. In ten years!'

She turned from Bruce. Laura registered the pain in her expression.

'Did you ever love me?' Bruce whispered.

Kath's eyes, full as the dam in winter, found Laura's face. The bedroom door hit its frame so hard that Laura felt it in her teeth.

Kath came to her an hour later. Fresh from the shower, her face looked different without makeup; she seemed younger somehow, naked. The long blonde hair was damp, turned dark with water. It hung in tendrils as she leaned over Laura's bed, sharply floral. Laura loved her mother best like this: scrubbed clean, a raw version of herself. She took the edge of Kath's silk kimono gingerly, rolling onto her back. Though the room was dark, a wedge of light made a halo of Kath's head.

'Are you asleep?' Kath said unnecessarily. Laura shook her head. Her mother sighed, touching Laura's face, stroking her hair. 'I'm sorry,' she said softly. 'I love you very much. I shouldn't have, you know, hit you.'

They sat in silence for a moment.

‘My dear, big girl,’ Kath went on in German, making Laura quiver. ‘My good helper. No one in the whole world loves you more than I do.’ Her hand kept time on Laura’s forehead; the soft skin of her palm, like suede.

Though Laura didn’t want to sleep, to miss a moment, her lids drooped together, lulled by touch.

‘You don’t mind helping, do you?’ Kath was saying, voice soothing.

Laura felt herself heavy, sinking down into the bed.

‘Shh,’ Kath continued, stroking. ‘Quiet.’

Kath was up early next morning when Laura scuttled down the hall to the toilet in her gown. The sky was greying towards dawn. Across the dark stretch of grass behind the house, the studio windows were lit. In the big bedroom, Bruce was already pulling on the clothes he wore to kill pigs. Laura could hear the rustle of cloth against skin as he dressed. She paused in the hallway, shivering. Dread like cold had seeped into her skin. Had Kath lit the stove? Bruce would expect breakfast before work.

Once, sitting at the kitchen table, face lit by candles they never used again, Kath had taken Bruce’s hand. One rough and weathered, the other cheaply bejewelled. Laura had watched the way her parents’ fingers clasped with hesitant tenderness across the scarred tabletop. The way a cow will nuzzle her grown heifer calf – taken at birth – when it rejoins the milking herd.

Kath had started talking about her work. She spoke quietly, and the family were quiet listening. There were moments when her work couldn’t be abandoned, she said,