

Melissa O'Shea

## HOME

On days like this, my head hurting in drum beats, I look in the medicine chest and lament the empty shelves. *Codeine*, I cry. *Aspirin*, *Bufferin!* *Panadol*, *Panadeine!* Pharmacists become idols. Their daughters fill my dreams.

I don't do drugs. Never have, never will. People that do bug the crap out of me. Oh I got a headache, gotta take an aspirin. Oh I got a stomach ache, gotta take a pill. Can't sleep, can't wake, can't stay happy, don't wanna be sad. Pathetic is what I say.

You learn the brand names watching daytime TV. The drug companies ad agencies TV station gods think they've cornered the market on suffering, zapping us headache gutache lifeache sufferers with their fake testimonials, miracle cures. It's true we are home. Philosophers, housewives, loners, unemployed. Night shift workers, though mostly they're asleep.

If only I could visit the medicine chest of my childhood. Entombed in my mother's house, it would divulge a rich array of out-of-code painkillers, antibiotics, anti-depressants, sleeping pills. I imagine the Fenurgen from my baby days nestled half-empty between bottles of sticky children's cough mixture and crusty pink calamine.

That chest was mother's guru. After a long weekend away, she would consult its inner treasures with a dull-eyed intensity. "Promise you'll never do drugs," she'd say to me as she palmed a collection of pills. "It isn't bloody worth it." Her bruised eyes and arms held me until I repeated the words, "I promise." At last, pushing me in the direction of the lego castle I had constructed in her absence, she would stagger to the bedroom to sleep.

Year 8 Health taught me about a different sort of drug. It took only minutes to locate the flat, arrow-linked packets of thirty-eight in my mother's bedside drawer. Among other things. Among other things.

Mother worked nights. Mrs Maggie babysat. The routine was always the same. Canned slop for dinner, followed by brainless TV and a skin-peelingly hot bath. (Mrs M seemed constitutionally incapable of regulating water temperature.) After lights out I listened to the tub empty and refill. The aroma of scented bath beads steamed up the corridor and I wondered if Mrs Maggie was lying there as I had, scalded red and drowsy. Looking back, I think Mrs M. was homeless. It was not a bad deal. She got dinner and breakfast, a bath and a bed. Mom got

reliable childcare that was cheap if not free (the bath bead consumption in our house must have risen considerably). But on Mother's nights off who knows where Mrs Maggie went.

Mornings Mother slept heavy, arms flung out across the bed. Weekdays Mrs M would hurry me to school, finger pressed emphatically to lips as we sidled past the half-closed door. Weekends Mrs Maggie departed after breakfast, entrusting me to the doubtful care of children's television programming. As soon as the front door closed the investigation began. First mother, then her bag.

Summer she slept in her underwear, which was always chlorox white. Breasts were snowy triangles tilting with each sleep-filled breath; stomach a puffy bag streaked with silver-grey lines tearing toward her groin. I'd trace her caesarean scar with an insect light touch. I'd count her painted toe nails, examine her skin for bruises, chafing, mozzie bites, burns. I'd gaze along the surface of her legs, foot to hip, watch the fine film of hairs glisten in the curtained half-light.

The bag was next, a faux leopard receptacle of tricks and truth. The underthings inside were every colour but white. Sometimes they were balled up and crusty, sometimes neatly folded, hardly used. Their fabrics were soft, silky, decorated with sequins, feathers, lace. At the bottom of the bag nestled items which were a mystery to me long after I could read. C-O-N-D-O-M-S. K-Y-J-E-L-L-Y. E-D-I-B-L-E-U-N-D-E-R-P-A-N-T-S.

Until I left home at eighteen my own underpants were cotton and white. Chosen by a mother eager to keep her son innocent. Shortly after leaving I bought my first pair of colourful silk boxers. The loose folds of fabric near my crotch, the silk against my skin, taught me the meaning of the leopard skin bag.

I lie. My journey to understanding started years before.

Cathy was a mango in my grapefruit life. She adored the places my mother shrank to touch.

It began with a wink. Sunday afternoons the year I turned sixteen Cathy and Mother traded war stories over coffee and a family pack of Arnott's Assorted. I'd slouch against the kitchen sink until Mother told me to nick off. Cathy would smile and give me a long, slow wink. One day Cathy arrived at the usual time to find a note instead of Mother: *Sorry hon, private job, give ya a ring tonight.*

Cathy held the note out to me. "No one to tell you to nick off this time, my boy." Her laugh was low and hoarse, the chuckle of a night-club singer used to playing her audience like a tune.

I still remember Cathy's perfume. Cheap and acrid, the kind my mother never wore. I come across it sometimes, strolling through Woolworths or waiting for the train. A decade later it still turns my head.

My mother's chosen scent was pricier but no less intoxicating. Chanel No. 6 permeated her hair, skin, clothing so thoroughly that after dressing her body for burial there was no need to reapply.

Now I recognise perfume for what it is. I'm getting old, I need a spray. I'm not yet married, give me a dab. My husband's cheating on me, is that *parfum* or *eau de toilette*? The kids are in school, I am alone, I'll take a scented bath and soak the housework away.

And like drugs, it is false disguise. The smell only masks symptoms; the condition won't go away. The women are still poor or unmarried, working or not. No matter how many times they spray, soak, swallow, when the effect wears off they will be as they were until the next pick-me-up, the next false reality they choose to call their own.

Like I said I don't do drugs. My mother taught me that much. The rest I was taught by her friends.

I'm expecting one of them now. Sharleen is forty years old and a boozier. She'll take my headache away. Sex with her is like drinking tonic. That taint of freshness has gone, and when you dig deep under the layers of artifice—when you remove the blonde wig and the earrings, the artificial nails and the padded bra, when you blot the lipstick with your kisses, trace the varicose tributaries along the map of her legs—when you peel pry prod *struggle* to get under her skin, there's a core of solid selfness you can't perfume or drug away.

When I get to that I'm home.