

---

THREASA MEADS

## BAD FRUIT

*I am on my knees on a footpath. A teenage girl stands nearby, smoking beside a telephone booth. We're at the edge of a wasteland and a highway. In the distance is a Fruit Barn.*

*The girl's dark eyes are blood-shot. She steps into the telephone booth and reaches for the receiver; I am pulled to the booth, pressed against the glass of the door. My knees sting from grazing the cement.*

*The girl says into the phone, "Reverse-charge call from January." She takes a drag on her cigarette. The smoke wafts out of her mouth.*

*Her face contorts as she says, "Hi Mum. It's me."*

*Her hands shake. "Mum? I'm in trouble. Can you help me?"*

*She coughs and butts out her cigarette on the tattered Yellow Pages. "I've just been to the doctors."*

*She listens, nods, and starts crying. "Yes I am, Mummy. I'm sorry."*

*She looks out of the glass and right through me and continues, "I'm in the phone booth near Reggie's Fruit Barn."*

*She hears something through the phone and sucks in a breath. "Okay, I'll wait here. I love you, Mummy?"*

*She listens. Her face looks hopeful until she hears a click.*

*She hangs up the phone, opens the door, and steps out through me.*

. . . . .

January lights another ciggie and feels a soothing smoke screen envelope her. She is filled with the comfort of nothingness. There are little red patches on the cement. Looks like blood; for a moment, she feels like it means something. The thought dissipates. Inside she is quiet. It's like she is somehow hovering around outside of herself, like she's watching a movie and in it there's a girl who looks like her. If this were a movie, what song would be playing? Definitely

*In the Air Tonight* by Phil Collins; she'd been hearing it a lot lately.

At least she knows now why she's been so tired. She thought it was a hangover, until it didn't pass. She couldn't drag herself up from her mattress on the floor to stand. She barely crawled to the bathroom to wee and throw up. She hasn't been to work for weeks.

Her flatmate, Jane, has been on her case: yelling every day, saying they have to earn money, and telling her to get up. January sooked at first, saying she wasn't well. As the yelling wore on, she told her to piss off.

She'd still be in bed if she weren't weeing razorblades. When the doctor got her to wee in a container with a yellow lid, she thought he was testing for an infection. When he told her the results she said, "I only came in here to see what was wrong with my wee. What made you test for that?"

It was routine, apparently.

How can this be happening? Eric said he was experienced. He said he knew what he was doing. January didn't know how to check.

She wishes there was somewhere she could sit. The sun is burning her scalp. She could walk down to Reggie's Fruit Barn and get a drink? Mum would rock up the minute she left and get the shits, for sure.

She wonders if Jane'll be home tonight. She can't remember the last time they just hung out. This is big news to share. Maybe they could go to the Leagues Club for a drink, to make it special.

January's mum pulls up at the curb. She looks angry. She reaches across and pushes the passenger door open and says, "Get in."

They drive in silence. January's glad to be in air conditioning.

As they pull into a car park, January's mum says, "Don't say a thing. I will do all the talking." She stops the car and rips up the handbrake and adds, "I've got it all sorted."

January's mum struggles to get her bulk out of the car. A whiff of stinky sweaty crotch makes January want to throw up. Her mum continues as they walk across the car park, "I'm just starting my life, now that you're gone. There's no way in hell I'll let you ruin what little happiness I have left." As she pushes open the doors to a doctors' surgery and walks in she mutters, "Remember to keep your mouth shut."

The doctor's office is old and brown and musty. Surely this isn't her Mum's usual doctor. Her

mum says something to the doctor and he nods. He directs her to sit down in front of his big desk and January sits next to her.

The doctor folds his arms and looks only at her mum and says, "Do you know how far along she is?"

"Nine weeks."

He frowns, "I'd like to examine her."

January's mum nods.

"Tell your daughter to climb up on the examination bed, over there, and take her knickers off."

January does as instructed.

The doctor closes the curtain, lifts her skirt, and slides his fingers up into her vagina until she feels like he is puncturing her guts. He pulls them out, wipes his fingers on a towel, walks back over to his desk, and sits down.

January puts her undies back on and stands near the examination bed.

Her mum says, "We wouldn't be in this predicament if she could just keep her legs shut."

The doctor lifts the telephone handset from its cradle and says to January's mum, "I'll make an appointment for next week." He dials a number and talks to someone.

January tries to make eye contact with her mum; her mum just keeps looking straight ahead.

The doctor hangs up the phone and says to January's mum, "It is done." He writes down the details. He passes them to her and says, "You'll need to get her there an hour earlier, to fill in the paperwork. It is a general anaesthetic, so no food after 10pm the night before or breakfast in the morning."

Her mum thanks him and stands. She grabs January's arm tight and guides her out of the office.

On the drive to January's place, January is so far away from her body that her skin is numb. She's in the car. She knows that the hot wind is blowing through the open window onto her face as she cries. She just doesn't feel it.

As January climbs out of the car, her mum says, "I'll be here to pick you up next Wednesday at seven, on the dot. You hear me?"

January nods.

Her mum screeches off.

In the flat she shares with Jane, everything is gone, except for the couch. January's room has been left untouched, too.

January stumbles into the bathroom and takes off her clothes. She turns on the taps and sits in the bottom of the shower, cupping water, trying to force it up her vagina. She wishes the water were strong enough to wash everything out. She pushes her head back and feels the water pelt her face. Water fills her mouth.

. . . . .

January smells hospital disinfectant and blinks her groggy eyes at the fluorescent lights above. She hears the swish of curtains and the soft shuffle of shoes on linoleum. She hears wheels rolling, bars rattling, and an elevator dings. Her eyeballs feel heavy and she can't focus. She can't distinguish people from lights. There is so much light. January feels like she is descending. Another elevator dings and the doors slide open with a whoosh. Air moves past her skin. A hand feels her wrist and adjusts something on January's face. She is breathing in gas and is aware of pain between her legs. The bed shakes. Her hair tickles her cheek, as it lifts in the breeze.

She has stopped and is being reversed. She stops. A curtain is drawn around and someone leans down and locks the wheels in place underneath her.

A woman says, "That will be all thanks."

The curtain is opened and closed again. January hears a clipboard being dropped over a bar at the end of her bed.

The woman says, "I'll be back in a little while to check on your progress—rest now."

Soft, brisk footsteps retreat. The curtain swishes open and closed, trapping the strong smell of hospital around January. She wishes she were still asleep; she hates the hospital smells. Hospitals are where sick people go to be surrounded by even sicker ones. People die in hospitals.

January cranes her head forward and strains to see her legs through the blur. They are lying flat. She tries to move them: the pain in her thighs is intense and she groans. Her mouth feels like it is stuffed with pillow-foam. She drops her head back and looks up. There's a line above her along the ceiling like the line she watched as her bed was pushed to theatre, before the anaesthetic kicked in. She must be parked in a corridor.

A nurse comes in and says, "You're awake." She walks to the end of the bed, lifts the clipboard, unclips the pen, and writes on the form. She flicks to the next page and reads. She frowns and puts the clipboard down and says, "I'm just going to check your dressing and see how you are going down there okay?"

The nurse lifts the sheet and January smells copper and Betadine. She can't work out exactly what the nurse is touching. It all feels numb. She hears crinkling and feels tape being gently ripped off her thighs. Cool air chills her exposed crotch and then it's covered up.

The nurse says, "Everything looks fine. I'll change this dressing and get you a regular pad to wear home." She pulls the sheet down and leaves.

The nurse said January can go home—with a fresh pad? She must be bleeding. She didn't think about that. January stares at the curtain, waiting for the nurse to return. She can see people moving past there on the other side. It's weird being in a corridor.

The nurse is finishing when a doctor comes in. It's not the same doctor as the one January saw with her mum. He takes the clipboard from the nurse and frowns. He pulls a pen from his pocket, looks at his watch, and writes something.

He gives it back to the nurse. He steps close to January and says, "We are going to release you now. The nurse will help you with your clothes." He nods to the nurse and she smiles. The doctor sticks his hands in his pockets and continues, "Go home and go to bed. Get plenty of rest." He shakes his head and his voice becomes grave, "I hope I won't be seeing you for this again."

January looks away. The doctor clears his throat and says something to the nurse and then leaves.

The nurse helps January get dressed. She considers asking the nurse about the pain in her thighs and decides not to—in case it's something they did on purpose to punish her. She doesn't want to feel worse than she already does.

January waddles out to the waiting room, her heart aching for a cuddle from her Mum. Her mum was there for her, when she really needed her. Maybe they can be friends now. Maybe she'll be her best friend. Her stomach growls and she looks at the clock; it's been twenty-four hours since she ate something. Maybe they can drop by McDonalds on the way home. She also needs to remember to ask her mum about the nurse's instructions. How big is a big blood clot? How will she know if she is bleeding too heavy? What if she can't work it out and she bleeds to death? She's confused, dizzy, and her thighs are killing.

The waiting room is empty. Maybe her mum didn't know what time January was getting out. She heads for the public phones while lighting a smoke. The first drag nearly floors her and

she stops in the middle of a head-spin. By the time the phone's ringing her mum's work, she's had a few more drags—her head feels like it's a balloon, ten times bigger than her skull. The phone goes to an answering machine and January hangs up. She tries her mum at home and after a few rings she answers.

January says, "Hi Mum it's me. I'm ready to be picked up."

Her mum's voice turns cold and she says, "I'm not picking you up. I've got better things to do with my time, thank you."

Through gritted teeth January says, "Fine."

Her mother hangs up.

The bus stop is right outside the hospital. January sits down. Every time she sees a pink car come around the corner, she feels a flutter of hope that it's her mum. Right up until the bus comes, January hangs onto the idea that maybe her mum will change her mind and come and get her.

. . . . .

*I watch January climb up the steps of the bus slowly, much to the annoyance of the bus driver who looks like he's had way too much coffee and is chewing the inside of his mouth. From the bus stop, I can see that she's barely got her bum on the seat before the bus lurches off away down the street.*

( . . . )