

Fragments

BY CATHY STONEHOUSE

I: Glint of a Blade

We leave the church in unobtrusive groups. The eyes of a badger caught in headlights then the shatter of house keys against a brass door handle signal to our souls that work is done. Stained clothes removed, our bodies re-surface without ceremony, lay themselves back down on beds as if sadness had weight. Knives are sheathed; floorboards in the hallway creak beneath imaginary footsteps while memory itself collapses inwards, folds facts up neatly, finite as circus tents. Yet fragments linger: the green and gold brocade of the Legion banner, the wooden bird of the church nave candelabra still twisting on its knotted, dust-furred chain. *What happened to us in the church, what happened?* Yet we cannot reply to the nerve-ends that ask us such questions, not even when, in full sun, the following day, we reach out through space to pin the tail on a cardboard donkey and find ourselves grasping the face of a girl child, still partly human, before the knife she was killed with slips fully from memory's grasp.

II: Blood Fuse

In the Noddy room Grandma kneels down beside my bed. *This is the flame*, she says, and wipes blood on my tummy, makes a cross in it then wipes some onto my forehead to make a cross there. She has made a cut down the side of her hand. Blood runs from it, runs into my blood from the small cut she has made in my flat chest. Daddy is there too. He licks the blood up, licks it

from off Grandma's fingers. He'd tell me not to cry but there's no need: I know about night-time. We all whisper. *Shush don't wake your Mam.* In single file we go down the steep dark staircase. The smell of coconut and firefighters, the cold of bare brass runners underneath my feet do not wake me because they cannot. I am not even sleeping. In the living room Grandma's voice changes. She tells me that I must lie down on the carpet and be good. *Flesh is wax, blood is fire. Flesh melts, blood is power* recites Grandma as she lays out her stiff beeswax candles, lights a single match. And then they hold my hand over the candle flame, press my fingers close until skin burns. Then Grandma pulls my arms into a crucifix, as Daddy turns his back, starts to undress.

III: Paper Magic Memory Game

What will the game be tonight, she wonders—*Kim's Game, Jack Straws, Solitaire, Pontoon, Pass the Parcel, Musical Bumps or Simon Says?* Some nights there is a tray of toys to remember—penknives, playing cards, naked Barbies—or a challenge to lift up a single match without disturbing any of the others then a silent game of Snap or Crazy Eights. The living room is dark, Davy is sleeping; her mother is away out of the house. The wall-clock ticks. A quarter to three.

*

Dear Helen, How are you?
Asleep in her bunk bed the young girl hears a tap and sits up straight. *Time to get up.* She puts on her dressing-gown, goes downstairs.

Kim's Game Jack Straws Solitaire Pontoon Pass The Parcel Musical Bumps Simon Says Remember This. Downstairs, Dad's fingers poke through the cuffs of his frayed-out black robe while the tell-tale scar beside his thumb its numb lips stitched together articulates everything as he holds out to his daughter a deck of cards. She must choose the right one or else something bad will happen. He must be able to hear her heart *thump-thump*. But then it's morning, 7:30am the kitchen clock says, and there is no need for her to be afraid. Dad's wearing an old dark-green jumper at the breakfast table, and the cards he offers are letters smudged by rain.

IV: A Quiet Girl Too

He tells her she enjoys it and she knows it's true. She has learned that there are no exceptions—facts are facts, and the only way out is through. *Yes, please. More, please. I love you,*

He tells her
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She has learned
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Daddy: the only sounds that she can make are in-breaths, the only words that she can speak are these. As Daddy opens the car door he pulls her off him, and the night rushes in with its warm flesh, its animal fear. *Kiss me* she pleads but the stranger is already upon her, carries her away to his strange house with his hand on her

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V: Charades

Penknife, butter knife, potato peeler, meat cleaver. Would you like another slice of lamb?

Mum places the Sunday dinner on the table: roast lamb, roast potatoes, peas, carrots, mint sauce and gravy. This afternoon is Julie Statham's birthday. At three o'clock I will be there with my card and gift: a box of Black Magic chocolates. At dinner Davy crushes his peas into soup, mixes in thick red ketchup then says he's full already. I take the meat in my fingers and pull off the fat. Mum says we have terrible manners while Dad shovels spuds mixed with marge into his

open mouth.

Flesh melts, blood is power

In the mirror my reflection shifts and elongates. I step backwards. What will people wear to Julie's party? What will her parents act like, for instance, what will they say? I am wearing clothes which are too big for me: a cream pleated skirt and a striped, hooded sweatshirt. *Come on Helen jildy jildy you'll be late*. My hands curl around the mirror's frame as if to touch it, caress my own outline. In my mind's eye a vermilion lipstick is uncapped while my mother waits.

Wake up wake up

I won a prize at Julie's party for the best dancer. I could choose between a blue eyeshadow and a book for little kids. I chose the book. Everybody laughed. After that I played Charades and our team won.

Yes, please. More, please

After I get home I feel sad. I sit on my bed and it is quiet and I wonder if I'll ever get a boyfriend. Davy is in his bedroom with the door closed playing Def Leppard and Yessongs on his cassette player. I think of my Dad and want him to kiss me but don't really know how to ask.

Lessons from the Periodic Table

Earnshaw's bell rings and a cold wintry breath stripes through the fog. I peek out from behind my anorak hood to see who it is: Mrs Prentice, Davy's third-year-juniors' primary school teacher. I don't want her to see me so I turn away, hide behind the display of plastic hair slides, unzip my coat quietly as the steamed-up glass door to the chemist's opens and closes, opens and closes. *Hair grips, nail varnish, throat pastilles, Syrup of Figs*. Mum's getting our prescriptions. *Antibiotics, sleeping pills, ear drops, painkillers*; I am not really ill all the time I am just sensitive. Mum says most of us are sensitive in my family, we are Artistic, for example Mum does painting by numbers Davy makes Airfix models, while I read books. At the mo-

ment I am reading *Bobby Brewster*. It is by Enid Blyton. *Maybelline eyeshadow, Brut aftershave, Arrid roll-on, Brylcreem, Disprin, Avon soap-on-a-rope*. Jed Bates the man who fixed our house after it was struck by lightning comes in for a bit. Then old Mrs Martin who sometimes babysits. Then the barmaid from the White Lion, Joanne Staithes. A tall fir tree with its bulbs burned out stands on guard outside the Off-Licence a man with a carrier bag full of booze unlocks his red car door.

There are many different kinds of people. Here in the chemist's shop there are three for instance: Scary, Embarrassing, and Nice. The chemist man is Nice because he is shiny and wears round glasses and doesn't make me feel worried. Mrs Prentice is Embarrassing because she is from school. The lady in the blue coat whom I don't know but who looks very familiar is Scary because she rubs her face when she looks at me as though she *knows*: she *knows* that I *know*. And I know that I don't really want to be known. I want to say if you want to know something go and find out at the library cleverclogs, go into the library bus, it comes on Wednesday mornings and has books, the books even have labels on them Children's Young Adult Fiction Mystery Romance.

Words are unpredictable just like chemicals when they get them and they make them into pills. People can be unpredictable too. Sometimes I put people I don't like into bottles, label them like they are medicine and put them up on shelves inside my head. Some of the labels I like to use are Posh, Cheap, Common, Ordinary, Terribly-you-know, and Rich. For example I am Ordinary but with a Terribly-you-know label on me sometimes too (like when Mum takes me once a year to the ballet); people who live in big houses are Terribly-you-know; snobs are Posh; prostitutes are Cheap; Mrs Prentice is Ordinary. The Queen is Rich. Some people have several faces and several labels.

When I went into the doctor's office today I noticed he had a big chart behind his desk with the names of the elements Sodium, Potassium, Magnesium, Cobalt, etc., written up on it like they were vitamins printed on the side of a Rice Crispies box. When the doctor pushed his fingers up my *ay-nus*—"Open wide," he said, "Hop up on the couch. Place your feet in the stirrups"—to check if I was really really constipated I imagined that I was even bottling him Posh Rich Posh Rich Nasty Nasty Nasty high up on the shelf I thought I even recognized our medicine cabinet—Aspirin for headaches, Bradolol for sore throats, Milk of Magnesia for tummy upsets, Lemsip for colds—and then I felt a bit embarrassed about that part of me which I have now forgotten the name for—not *bosom*, not *buster*, not *bottom*, not *willy*—and wondered if being Sensitive makes your legs wobble Silver Carbon Copper Gold then I got dressed Sunset Vampire Peach Black Cherry zipped up my anorak as Jed Bates nods at us from Earnshaw's doorway I turn back to the lipstick wands. I am a sickly person. I have had a tummy upset five days in a row now. I also have eczema hay fever dizzy spells fainting and croup. Mum says my prescription is now ready. It is dark out. I am scared and I don't want to leave.

Commerce

You could get germs from that! My brother cries as I lick my newly wealthy fingers. Money is dirty, I know that; even my short stack of brand new 10p pieces sucks up filth like a special kind of vacuum cleaner; I drop them hastily into my vinyl clown-face purse, run my hands quickly under the cold tap as if I've been burnt with acid, heat or frost.

Every day I peek at this, my private, inch-high silver fortune, listen to its persuasive icy chatter, smell its secret blood-like scent. *Fifty brand new English metric pence.*

Where exactly does money come from? There's a science in remembering not to ask. Davy told me money's born in *coffers*, enormous handbags deep inside the bank. Perhaps that's the creaking sound I hear when I stand beside my Mum at the Midland and she cashes her Family Allowance cheque. Or perhaps that's Mr Shuflebotham wheezing. Mr Shuflebotham is the Bank Manager. He has a round red greasy face.

Money moves around a lot: it's like gypsies that way. Small change passes from hand to hand in village shops, gets scooped up by cash registers' retractable gun metal fists. Nobody wants to hold onto it for long. It's like the rain that goes back to the sky and then falls down again, otherwise known as The Water Cycle. Once my Dad had a five-pound note with a rip in it and two weeks later it was back again, folded up inside the milkman's change.

I don't know if we are rich or poor. Mostly we are rich I think, compared to the Starving Children of Africa, or Gavin Banks, who doesn't have any furniture. Usually we have lots of presents for Christmas etc. but sometimes we have to Tighten Our Belts and go on an Economy Drive, which I think is a bit like a Whist Drive, because both of them are about raising money in Times of Need (once at school we had a Whist Drive and Hot-Pot Supper to raise money for the Blue Peter Fund for Bangladesh). An Economy Drive means you have to turn off all the lights and make sure there's no water dripping from the tap; it also means eating Slimcea, not to lose weight but because it's light and therefore it is cheap. It's always important to eat everything. Mum says if we don't clean our plates we should put it in an envelope and post it to Bangladesh.

But at least we get pocket money. I get 15p a week, which is a lot really. I have bought a lot of things with it, including several Curly-Wurlys and Sherbert Dips, as well as jewellery. I have a ring and five elastic bracelets, one of which you can eat. We also

donate money to Dr Barnardo's, and every other Sunday Mum gives money to the church. She won't tell me how much she gives. She puts it in the special brown church envelope and slides it onto the collection plate in the middle of *Guide Me Oh Thou Great Jehovah* or some other hymn, when I usually guess how much is in it depending on how heavy or thick it is, like guessing Christmas presents, except you have to do it very fast; 50p's versus 10p's is the easiest. Some people leave five-pound notes or even ten-pound notes sitting right on top of the plate! They don't even bother to use an envelope. I think this means they are very proud and want everybody else to know how rich they are. Pride is one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Sometimes I collect money door-to-door with my Mum. We collect money for the NSPCC: the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. We rattle our big orange fluorescent tins and knock on doors and say to people *Spare a penny for the Underprivileged*; the Underprivileged are the Children Less Fortunate Than Ourselves, those who are Orphans and live in Homes for example, or who are Autistic or Spastic or Deaf-and-Dumb, or Confined to Wheelchairs like my friend Helen at school; she has Water-on-the-Brain and likes to kick people with her big metal boots. The Underprivileged

I turn back to the
lipstick wands.
I am a sickly person.
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I also have eczema
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are not the same as Those Who Cannot Speak For Themselves: they are usually animals, retired donkeys for instance, or maltreated cats and dogs; *Our Dumb Friends* as the NSPCA lady calls them: that's the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

I've donated money to the Busy Bees (the children's auxiliary of the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals), and milk bottle tops to Guide Dogs for the Blind. I've also stolen a book of recorder music from the school library, a small plastic pig from Boots, the Dispensing Chemist's, and some aniseed balls from Michael Senior's pump bag. Rich people usually don't steal. If I was rich I'd get a Sindy Hairdresser.

Dad told me he wants to buy Kruger Rands. Kruger Rands are actual bits of gold. He studies them in *Numismatics Society* catalogues, at antique fairs and coin collectors' shops. Once at school we pretended we were in a mine on our knees and we were child labourers and we were being exploited. We had to make pick-axes out of papier mache and do creative writing depicting the life of a Victorian mineworker. I sometimes wonder what it must be like to have to work.

Every day I wake up feeling tired. Sometimes I wonder if I accidentally got up and went somewhere in the middle of the night. One day I found some big fat envelopes of real money sitting inside my Victorian-lady nightdress case. I gave them both to my Dad and he carefully counted them. He told me it was the collection plate money and he hid it there to test if I was a thief. Or maybe I dreamt that. Anyway then I got worried: what if I got driven to some rich old man's house in the middle of the night and what if he made me get undressed right down to the nuddy and touched me on my botty, would I actually realise? Or would I just find fat green envelopes of money stuffed up inside my special hand-made Victorian-lady nightdress case? *You could get germs from that.*

Domestic Science: 1979

At grammar school we learn to cook with scientific eyes: a class of 36 in regulation cotton aprons, we measure out grams of SR flour into solid brown identical bowls. At the back of the classroom a door, half-open, reveals the world we're steadily marching to: it's the *family room*, four orange-backed chairs placed around a wipe-clean dining table, an empty sofa, place settings for three. We serve up Swiss rolls, sponge cakes, Quiche Lorraine, and trifle made with eggs, study cuts of beef and lamb on laminated food charts: *top-side, silverside, sirloin, brisket, scrag end*. While our brothers solder metal into useless sculptures, nail plywood together to make boats, we copy down notes about the food pyramid, about proteins and enzymes and 14 vibrant ways to serve up cheese! (sponsored by the Milk Marketing Board), draw up family menu plans and budgets, discover the principle of balance in all things.

At home, life is a fairytale gone wrong: my brother the unexpected beanstalk, his body light and fine as unwound thread, myself the evil black-haired snow queen, cold, plump and sticky as freezer ice. At the age of six I eat adult Christmas dinners, dutifully swallow spinach and prunes, hold inside me everything unpleasant only to sit on the toilet every morning and exclaim petulantly *nothing will come out!* My brother Davy toys with meat and vegetables, cuts them up into cubes yet will not eat, consumes a six-bowls-of-Shreddies breakfast then delights in the splash-marks of vomit erupted out of him: Mum! Dad! You can still see the lines! One afternoon he turns over his plate of dinner until hot mince darkens the tablecloth, stains brown a Pompeii of hidden knees. Our parents' hands, their horrified stares, trapped inside its grease-filled lava forever, like the ash-embalmed bodies of brittle Neopolitan dogs.

After this meal nothing stays the

same. As a woman's body threatens to engulf mine, my brother turns himself into the girl he is while I waste steadily away. His after-school snacks of chocolate digestive biscuits spin dangerously against themselves like Charlie Cairoli's stacks of circus plates, while I count out salad leaves, each evening measure my shrinking waist, trace the new bones pressed like greedy noses against the pale shop window of my skin, and ignore the moans of children trapped inside of me, their night dreams full of chocolate and treacle tart. Then the balance swings. *But there's no way back!* our bodies cry, as they pull and twist like hot strands of salt toffee. *Girls study needlework and cookery, boys study metalwork and wood!* After puberty, my brother's body hardens, while I break down and gorge myself on Kit-kats, prepare to soften my knife-sharp ribs for good.

Domestic Science: 1969

My father takes the green-grey wad of bills, licks his thumb and forefinger then counts: *Five ten fifteen twenty don't get clever and stick any down your trousers, if you hold onto money your skin will peel right off.* The old man's fingers print blue bruises indelible as coin stamps onto my thighs. Each leg represents a bill fold, and his marks are rows of well-coifed royal heads, the gooseflesh of my frightened skin a fine watermark of authenticity. Sometimes at Christmas I get a net bag of pennies

I always unpeel mine and eat them up really quickly like hot child bodies melting down the cracks of greedy hands.

Cathy Stonehouse lives and writes in Vancouver. "Fragments" is excerpted from a book-length manuscript entitled "The Quiet Girl," which is currently seeking a publisher.