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For My Mother, A.E.D.

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1992

THE SOUTH SIDE

One

The day was flat. That morning his mind had abandoned him and left his body wandering down below. The empty body went listlessly through its routine, pale and vacant-eyed under the fluorescent strip lights, as his soul floated above the aisles and thought only of tomorrow. Tomorrow was something to look forward to.

Shuggie was methodical in setting up for his shift. All the pots of oily dips and spreads were decanted into clean trays. The edges were wiped free of any splashes that would go brown quickly and ruin the illusion of freshness. The sliced hams were artfully arranged with fake parsley sprigs, and the olives were turned so that the viscous juice slid like mucus over their green skins.

Ann McGee had the brass neck to call in sick again that morning, leaving him with the thankless task of running his deli counter and her rotisserie stand all alone. No day ever started well with six dozen raw chickens, and today of all days, it was stealing the sweetness out of his daydreams.

He pushed industrial skewers through each cold, dead bird and lined them up neatly in a row. They sat there, with their stubby wings crossed over their fat little chests like so many headless babies. There was a time he would have taken pride in this orderliness. In reality, pushing the metal through the bumpy pink flesh was the easy part; the difficult part was resisting the urge to do the same to the customers. They would pore over the hot glass and study each of the carcasses in detail. They would choose only the best bird, ignorant to the fact that battery farming meant they were all identical. Shuggie would stand there, his back teeth pinching the inside of his cheek, and indulge their indecisiveness with a forced smile. Then the pantomime would really begin. *“Gies three breasts, five thighs, and just wan wing the day, son.”*

He prayed for strength. Why did no one want a whole chicken any more? He would lift the carcass using long prongs, careful not to touch the birds with his gloved hands, and then he would dissect the parts neatly (skin intact) using catering scissors. He felt like a fool standing there

against the broiler lights. His scalp was sweating under the hairnet and his hands were not quite strong enough to artfully snap the back of the chicken with the dull blades. He hunched slightly, the better to throw his back muscles behind the pressure in his wrists, and all the time he kept smiling.

If he was very unlucky, the tongs would slip and the chicken would thud and slide its way across the gritty floor. He'd have to make an apologetic pretence of starting again, but he never wasted that dirty bird. When the women turned away he would put it back with its sisters under the hot yellow lights. He believed in hygiene well enough, but these little private victories stopped him from starting a riot. Most of the judgy, man-faced housewives who shopped here deserved it. The way they looked down on him flushed the back of his neck scarlet. On particularly low days he folded all types of his bodily discharge into the taramasalata. He sold an uncanny amount of that bourgeois shite.

He had worked for Kilfeathers for over a year. It was never meant to be that long. It was just that he had to feed himself and pay his own dig money each week, and the supermarket was the only business that would take him. Mr Kilfeather was a parsimonious bastard; he liked to staff the shop with anyone he didn't have to pay a full adult wage, and Shuggie found himself able to take short shifts that fit around his patchy schooling. In his dreams he always intended to move on. He had always loved to brush and play with hair; it was the only thing that made time truly fly. When he had turned sixteen he had promised himself he would go to the hairdressing college that sat south of the River Clyde. He had gathered up all of his inspiration, the sketches he had copied from the Littlewoods catalogue and pages ripped from the Sunday magazines. Then he had gone to Cardonald to see about the evening classes. At the bus stop outside the college he alighted with half a dozen eighteen-year-olds. They wore the newest, most-fashionable gear and talked with a buzzing confidence that masked their own nerves. Shuggie walked half as fast as they did. He watched them go in the front door, then he recrossed the street to catch the bus going the other way. He started at Kilfeathers the following week.

Shuggie killed most of his morning break poring over the damaged tins in the discount bins. He found three small cans of Scottish salmon that were barely damaged, the labels were scuffed and marked, but the tins

themselves were intact. With the last of his wages he paid for his small basket and placed the tins of fish inside his old school bag, which he locked again inside his locker. He sloped up the stairs to the staff canteen and tried to look nonchalant as he passed the table of university students who worked the easy summer shifts and spent their breaks looking self-important, surrounded with thick folders of revision notes. He fixed his gaze to the middle distance and sat down in the corner, not with, but near enough to the girls from the tills.

In truth, the girls were three middle-aged Glasgow women. Ena, the ringleader, was a rake-thin, poker-faced woman with greasy hair. She had no eyebrows to speak of, but she did have a faint moustache, which seemed unfair to Shuggie. Ena was rough even for this end of Glasgow, but she was also kind and generous in the way hard-done-to people often are. Nora, the youngest of the three, wore her hair scraped tightly back and held in place with an elastic band. Her eyes, like Ena's, were small and sharp, and at thirty-three she was a mother of five already. The last of the group was Jackie. She was different to these other two in that she very much resembled a woman. Jackie was a riotous gossip, a big, bosomy sofa of a woman. It was her that Shuggie liked best.

He sat down near them and caught the ending to the saga of Jackie's latest man. It was guaranteed that the women were always full of good-hearted patter. Twice now they had taken him along on their bingo nights, and as the women drank and howled with laughter, he sat amongst them like a teenager who couldn't be trusted to stay home alone. He had liked the way they sat easily together. How their bulk surrounded him and the softness of their flesh pressed into his side. He liked how they fussed with him, and although he protested, how they pushed his hair from his eyes and licked their thumbs to wipe the corners of his mouth. For the women, Shuggie offered some form of male attention, and it did not matter that he was only sixteen and three months. Under the La Scala bingo tables they had each tried at least once to brush against his cock. The strokes were too long, too searching, to be truly accidental. For Ena-with-no-eyebrows it could become almost a crusade. The deeper she went into drink, the more brazen she became. With every passing graze of her ringed knuckles, she clamped her fat tongue between her teeth, and kept her eyes burning into

the side of his face. When Shuggie had finally flared with embarrassment, she had tutted, and Jackie had pushed two pound notes across the table to a beaming, victorious Nora. It was a disappointment, sure, but as they drank deeper they decided it had not been a rejection exactly. Something about the boy was no right, and this was at least something they could pity.

Shuggie sat in the dark listening to the unsteady snores through the tenement walls. He was trying, and failing, to ignore the lonely men who had no people of their own. The morning chill had turned his naked thighs a tartan blue, so he wrapped a thin towel around himself for warmth and chewed nervously at the corner, soothed by the way it squeaked between his teeth. He arranged the last of his supermarket wages along the table's edge. He ordered the coins, first by worth, then by their mint and shine.

The pink-faced man in the room next door creaked to life. In his narrow bed he scratched noisily at himself and sighed a prayer for the will to stand. His feet hit the floor with a thud, like bags of heavy butcher's meat, and it sounded like an effort for him to shuffle across the small room to the doorway. He fumbled with the familiar locks and came out into the always-dark hall, blindly feeling his way, his hand sliding across the wall and falling against the outside of Shuggie's door. The boy held his breath as the fingers ran across the beadwork. Only when he heard the *plink-plink* of the bathroom light cord did Shuggie move again. The old man began to cough and hauch his lungs to life. Shuggie tried not to listen as he pissed and spat gobs of phlegm into the toilet at the same time.

The morning light was the colour of too-milky tea. It snuck into the bedsit like a sly ghost, crossing the carpet and inching slowly up his bare legs. Shuggie closed his eyes and tried to feel it creeping there, but there was no heat in its touch. He waited until he thought it might have covered him entirely, and then he opened his eyes again.

They were staring back at him, a hundred pairs of painted eyes, all broken-hearted or lonely, just as they always were. The porcelain ballerinas with the little puppies, the Spanish girl with the dancing sailors, and the rosy-faced farm boy pulling his lazy shire horse. Shuggie had arranged the ornaments neatly along the bay window's ledge. He had spent hours with their made-up stories. The thick-armed blacksmith amongst the

angel-faced choirboys, or his favourite, the seven or so giant baby kittens smiling and menacing the lazy shepherd.

At least they cheered the place up a little. The bedsit was taller than it was long, and his single bed stuck out into the middle like a divider. An old-fashioned two-seater settee, the wooden kind, whose thin cushions meant you always felt the slats in your back, was on one side. A small fridge and a double-ringed Baby Belling cooker was on the other. Except for the rumpled bedding, nothing was out of place: no stour, no yesterday's clothes, no signs of life. Shuggie tried to calm himself as he smoothed his hand over the mismatched sheets. He thought how his mother would have hated these bedclothes, the odd colours and patterns, layered one upon the other as if he didn't care what people would think. This mess would have hurt her pride. Someday he would save some money and buy new sheets of his own, soft and warm and all the same colour.

He had been fortunate to get this room in Mrs Bakhsh's boarding house. He was lucky the old man before him had liked his drink too much and had been jailed for it. The large bay window jutted out proudly on to Albert Drive, and Shuggie supposed at one time the room must have been the living room of a fairly grand three-bedroom flat. He had seen into some of the other rooms in the house. The kitchenette Mrs Bakhsh had turned into a bedroom still had its original checkered linoleum floor, and the three other boxier rooms still kept their original threadbare carpets. The pink-faced man lived in what must have been at one time a nursery, still with its yellow-flowered wallpaper and a happy border of laughing rabbits around the cornicing. The man's bed, his settee, and his kitchen stove were all lined up on one wall and all touching. Shuggie had seen it once, through the crack of a half-opened door, and he was glad of his grand bay window.

He had been lucky to find the Pakistanis. None of the other landlords had wanted to rent to a fifteen-year-old boy who was pretending to be one day past his sixteenth birthday. The others didn't say it outright, but they had too many questions. They had looked up and down at his best school shirt and polished shoes suspiciously. *It's no right*, their eyes had said. In the corners of their mouths he could see they thought it was a disgrace for a boy of his age to have no mammy, no people of his own.

Mrs Bakhsh hadn't cared. She looked at his school backpack and at the month's rent he had in advance and went back to worrying about feeding her own weans. With a blue biro he had decorated that first rent envelope specially for her. Shuggie had wanted to show her he cared about being good, that he was reliable enough to put in this extra effort. So he took a piece of paper from his geography notebook and drew swirling paisley patterns on it, intertwined it around her name, and coloured in between the lines so that the peacock shapes stood out in cobalt glory.

The landlady lived across the close, in an identical tenement flat, richly furnished and flushed hot with central heating. In the other, cold flat she kept five men in five bedsits for eighteen pounds and fifty pence each a week, week to week, cash only. The two men who were not being paid for by the social services had to slip the first of their wages under her door on a Friday night before they took to drinking the rest. On their knees, on her doormat, they would linger a moment over the contentment radiating from inside: bubbling pots of perfumed chicken meat, happy noises of children fighting over television channels, and the laughing sounds of fat women talking foreign words around kitchen tables.

The landlady never bothered Shuggie. She never set foot in his bedsit unless the rent was late. Then she came with other thick-armed Pakistani women and knocked heavily on the doors of the men. Mostly, she visited only to Hoover the windowless hallway or to wipe around the bath. Once a month she poured bleach around the toilet bowl, and from time to time, she laid a new scrap of carpet remnant around its base to soak up the piss.

Shuggie leaned his face against his door and listened for the pink-faced man to finish his ablutions. In the quiet he heard him undo the snib on the bathroom door and step out into the hallway again. The boy slipped his feet into his old school shoes. Over his underpants he pulled on his parka, a noisy nylon-skinned thing that was trimmed with a matted fur hood. He zipped it closed all the way to the top, and into the large army pockets he stuffed a Kilfeathers shopping bag and two thin tea towels.

There was a school jumper stuffed into the gap at the bottom of his door. As he removed it, he could smell the other men carried in on the cold draught. One of them had been smoking through the night again; another had taken fish for his supper. Shuggie opened his door and slid out into the

darkness.

Mrs Bakhsh had taken the single light bulb from the overhead fixture, saying the men had wasted good money by leaving it burning at all hours. Now the smell of the men lingered across the hallway like a trail of ghosts, with no breeze or light to disturb it. Years spent smoking where they slept, eating fried suppers in front of Calor gas fires, and passing summer days with windows closed. The stale smells of sweat and cum mixed with the static heat of black-and-white televisions and the sting of amber aftershave.

Shuggie had begun to be able to tell the men apart. In the darkness he could follow the pink-faced man as he rose to shave his face and comb Brylcreem through his hair, and he could smell the musty overcoat of the yellow-toothed man who ate only what smelled like buttered popcorn or creamed fish. Later, when the pubs had reached closing time, Shuggie could tell as each man returned safely home again.

The shared bathroom had a mottled-glass door. He snibbed the lock and stood a moment pulling on the handle, checking it had caught. Unzipping the heavy anorak, he placed it in the corner. He turned on the hot tap to feel the water, it ran a leftover lukewarm and then sputtered twice and ran colder than the River Clyde. The icy shock of it made him put his fingers in his mouth. He took up a fifty-pence piece, turning it mournfully, and pushed it into the immersion heater and watched as the little gas flame burst to life.

When he turned the tap on again the water ran ice cold, and then, with a cough, jets of boiling water streamed out. He soaked the wet dishcloth, running it over his cold chest and white neck, glad for the steaming heat of it. He sank his face and head into the rare warmth, held himself there and dreamt about filling a bath to the very top. He thought about lying under the hot water far away from the smells of the other lodgers. It had been a long time since he felt thawed all the way through, all of him warm at the exact same time.

Lifting his arm he ran the rag from his wrist up and over his shoulder. He tensed his arm muscle and circled his fingers around the bicep. If he really tried, he could almost wrap his whole hand around it, and if he

squeezed hard, he could feel the contours of his bone. His armpit was dusted in a fine lint, like baby duck feathers. He brought his nose to it; it smelled sweet and clean and of nothing at all. He pinched the skin and squeezed, milking the soft flesh till it flushed red with frustration; he sniffed his fingers again, nothing. Scrubbing at himself harder now, he repeated under his breath, "*The Scottish Premier League Results. Gers won 22, drew 14, lost 8, 58 points total. Aberdeen won 17, drew 21, lost 6, 55 points total. Motherwell won 14, drew 12, lost 10.*"

In the mirror his wet hair was black as coal. As he brushed it down over his face he was surprised to find it nearly to his chin. He stared and tried to find something masculine to admire in himself: the black curls, the milky skin, the high bones in his cheeks. He caught the reflection of his own eyes in the mirror. It wasn't right. It wasn't how real boys were built to be. He scrubbed at himself again. "*Gers won 22, drew 14, lost 8, 58 points total. Aberdeen won 17, drew ...*"

There were footsteps in the hallway then, the familiar squeak of heavy leather shoes, and then nothing. The thin door moved insistently against the hasp. Shuggie reached for the army parka and slipped his damp body inside.

When he had first moved into Mrs Bakhsh's bedsit, only one of the other tenants had paid any real notice. The pink-faced man and the yellow-toothed man had been too blind or too ruined with drink to care. But that first night, as Shuggie sat on the bed eating the buttered end of a white loaf, there had been a knock at his door. The boy stayed silent a long time before he decided to open it. The man on the other side was tall and thickly built and smelled of pine soap. In his hand he held a plastic bag with twelve tins of lager that clanged together like dulled chapel bells. With a hard paw the man introduced himself as Joseph Darling and held the bag out to the boy with a smile. Shuggie had tried to say, *No, thank you*, in the polite way he had been taught, but something in the man had intimidated him, and so instead Shuggie let him in.

They had sat quietly together, Shuggie and his visitor, perched on the edge of the neat single bed and looking out on to the tenemented street. Protestant families were eating their dinners in front of televisions, and the charwoman who lived opposite was eating alone at her drop-leaf table. The

pair drank in silence and watched the others go about their normal routines. Mr Darling kept his thick tweed coat on. The weight of him on the bed rolled Shuggie into his broad side. From the corner of his eye Shuggie watched the yellow tips of his thick fingers stab nervously at themselves. Shuggie had only taken a mouthful of the lager to be gracious, and as the man spoke to him, he could think only about the taste of the tinned ale, how sour and sad it tasted. It reminded him of things he would rather forget.

Mr Darling had a considered, half-closed way to himself. Shuggie tried his best to be polite and listen as the man told him how he had been a janitor at a Protestant school that they had shut and merged with the Catholic one to save the council money. To hear him tell it, Mr Darling sounded more astounded that the Proddy weans should be running with the Catholic ones in peace than he was to find himself out of a job.

“Ah jist cannae believe it!” he had said, mostly to himself. “In ma day a person’s religion said something about them. Ye came up through the school having to fight yer way there through bus-fulls of cabbage-eating Catholic bastards. It was something to be proud of. Now any good lassie will sleep with any dirty Mick as soon as she’d lie with a dog.”

Shuggie pretended to take a light tug on the beer, but mostly he let it swirl around his teeth and trickle back into the can. Mr Darling’s eyes were searching the walls for a sign. Then he stole a sideways glance at the boy and asked, suddenly unsure of his audience, “So, what school did ye used to go to?”

Shuggie knew what he was after. “I’m not really one or the other, and I’m still at the school.” It was true, he didn’t belong to either the Catholics or the Protestants, and he still did go to school, when he could afford to not be at the supermarket.

“Aye? What’s your best subject then?”

The boy shrugged. It wasn’t modesty, he generally wasn’t good at anything. His attendance had been patchy at best, and so the thread of learning was difficult to follow. Mostly he went and sat quietly at the back so that the education board wouldn’t come after him for truancy. If the school knew how he lived, they would have been forced to do something

about it.

The man finished his second can and quickly set about his third. Shuggie felt the burn of Mr Darling's finger against the side of his leg. The man had set his hand on the mattress, and the little finger, with its gold sovereign ring, was barely touching him. It didn't move, or wriggle. It just sat there, and that had made it burn all the more.

Now Shuggie stood in the damp bathroom holding his parka closed. Mr Darling pulled at the edge of his tweed bunnet in an old-fashioned greeting. "Ah jist chapped to see if ye were around the day?"

"Today? I don't know. I have some messages to run."

A cloud of disappointment crossed Mr Darling's face. "Miserable day for it."

"I know. But I said I would meet a friend."

Mr Darling sucked at his large white teeth. The man was so tall he was still straightening to his full height. Shuggie could imagine generations of Protestant weans lined up in single file and terrified in his long shadow. He could see now that the man's face was flush, a line of drinkers sweat already on the edge of his brow. The man had been bent at the keyhole, Shuggie was sure of that now.

"That's a pity. Ah'm jist away to cash ma dole, might stop in at the Brewers Arms, then put a wee line on. But afterwards ah was hoping we could share a few cans. Mibbe watch the fitba results on the wee telly? Ah could teach ye about the English leagues?" The man looked down on the boy, he dug his tongue into his back molars.

If he played it right, the man was always good for a few pounds. But it would take too long to wait on Mr Darling to cash his unemployment; to stoat from the post office to the betting shop to the off-licence and then home, that was if he found his way home at all. Shuggie couldn't wait that long.

The boy let go of the parka then, and Mr Darling pretended not to stare as the coat gaped slightly. But the man seemed unable to help himself, and Shuggie watched as the grey light in his green eyes dipped. Shuggie could feel it burn into his pale chest as the man's gaze slid down over his loose underwear to his bare legs, the unremarkable, white hairless things, that

hung like uncut thread from the bottom of his black coat.

Only then did Mr Darling smile.