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Opening Extract from...

The Life I Left Behind

Written by Colette McBeth

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The Life I Left Behind

Colette McBeth

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Sit. Feast on your life.

'Love After Love', Derek Walcott

Prologue

October 1987

THE FIRST THING that strikes him is the cold. When he comes in from the garden he's always greeted by a hot blast at the door, like running into a band of warm cotton wool. Except today there's no cotton wool. This is his first disappointment. Outside. Inside. If there is a change in temperature between the two it's so minuscule it doesn't register. It's certainly not enough to thaw his fingers, which are the pink of raw meat. He inhales. Has he missed lunch? The kitchen clock tells him he has. It's gone three. What he fancies is some of his mum's chicken soup, with a hunk of the bread they baked together yesterday. He'd spread butter on it so thick he'd see teeth marks when he bites into it. Or a crispy pancake. He's fond of those too but he doesn't fancy his chances. 'If you eat that rubbish you won't grow tall like your dad,' she says, to which he always gives the same reply: 'Fine by me,' because really, he'd rather not be anything like his dad.

As it is, he can't smell anything. Not even cheese on toast bubbling under the grill. Don't tell me it's sandwiches, he thinks, clocking up his second disappointment. He's been out in the field all morning building a den with Christopher and Jamie from the house on the other side of the lane. They used a discarded wooden panel propped up against the ash tree, three old cushions

from the shed and a sheet of tarpaulin he found in the back garden. A sandwich hardly seems adequate reward.

The silence strikes him as odd too. Plain weird. It's never quiet. Not like this. Most of the time there are only two of them but they make a lot of noise. There's always a record playing on the turntable. His mum's a Doors fan, which is why he knows all the words to 'Riders on the Storm', but she's partial to a bit of Abba too, a good old shimmy to 'Waterloo' when the mood takes her. He likes that, the way she shakes her head down and lets her long blond hair fall about her face. Sometimes she'll relent, allow him to play 'Pump Up the Volume' or Rick Astley, but only if he promises to duet with her afterwards: Stevie Wonder's 'I Just Called to Say I Love You'. He pretends it's a chore, tut-tuts and hangs his head to one side like he's seen teenagers do, but secretly he loves it, the way they close their eyes, roll their heads about and pretend to call each other on imaginary phones. Afterwards she'll try to scoop him up, surprised that she can't, because he's ten now and he's been too big to lift for years. So instead she just gives him those tickly kisses on his neck. She smells of Parma violets, which have been his favourite sweets for as long as he can remember.

He wanders into the kitchen. It's a big space with a cooker, cupboards and an unnecessarily large table at one end and a living room with a green velvet sofa and matching armchair off it. This used to be his grandmother's cottage and she had umpteen kids, which is why everything is bigger than it needs to be for just him and his mum and his dad when he graces them with his presence. Now they only come here for holidays. Opposite the sofa is a massive fire. Not one of those gas ones with fake coals plonked in the grate either. This is a real one with proper logs that snap and spit when they come alive, and flames that cast dancing shadows across the room. Sometimes, for supper, he

toasts bread on it, stabbing a slice with the big barbecue fork and waving it as close to the flames as the heat allows. He keeps it there until he feels his own face toasting and then eats it with butter, washes it down with a glass of milk.

He'd love to warm his hands on the fire now but it is dead. Not even the faintest hiss or pop can be heard. One charred log sits in the grate, frosted with grey and white. 'Mum!' he shouts. 'I'm starving. What's for lunch?' His gaze comes to rest on the table, where he sees a glass of milk and a ham sandwich. What a letdown. Ham is only his fifth favourite sandwich but hunger doesn't allow him to be fussy. He sits at the table. He used to be able to swing his legs from the chair but they've grown too long now. 'Where did my baby go?' his mum asks sometimes, like it's a mystery she's never managed to solve. He wolfs the sandwich down without even washing his hands and is about to take the last bite when he notices her shoes across the room poking out from the gap between the sofa and armchair. She can't have gone far if her shoes are here. It's only when he looks again that he thinks it's a bit odd that each foot points to the ceiling, like the Wicked Witch of the East when Dorothy's house fell on top of her. Only her shoes were red and shiny and his mum's are scuffed brown leather.

He goes to investigate. When there are only a few steps separating them he sees the shoes are still attacked to legs. Jeans that have a rip at the knee. The jeans lead up to a stomach, clothed in a red and white stripy top. Around the neck is a chain. It's a gold chain with a little bird in a cage. This brings a smile to his face. She's never taken it off, not since he bought it for her birthday last year. 'As long as I wear it, you'll be next to me,' she told him. His eyes drift up to her face. His mum's face. Her eyes are closed, although not completely, which makes him think she might be playing a trick and is ready to jump up and say

'BOO!' She's like that, either joking or crying. Never a happy medium, his dad complains, but he couldn't care less what his dad says. He prefers it when it's just the two of them. Joking or crying.

He stands over her, deciding against shouting 'MUM!' because he thinks she's asleep and there's nothing worse than waking up with a start. Besides, she looks so peaceful, like when he creeps into her bed at night and sees her face warm and soft with dreams. He just wants to watch her for a while. When his legs begin to ache from standing, he crouches down next to her and takes her hand. She always has cold hands and feet but they're extra cold now, like ice pops from the freezer. He gives her a little shake but she doesn't open her eyes.

It's at this point it occurs to him she might be dead. He's ten years old after all, not stupid. And they have talked about this, about death. Just last night when they were saying their prayers together, blessing Granny Julia and Uncle Billy in heaven, she told him that they were watching down on them. *Just because we can't see them doesn't mean they're not next to us*. She ruffled his hair and kissed his cheek and held him really tight and said, 'Sometimes people get tired, they need to rest. That's when they die. So you shouldn't be afraid of it or be sad. Even if you miss a person, they will always be with you.'

He runs a muddy finger down her cheek. It looks and feels like the dough they made bread with yesterday. The red of her lips is faded, like a strawberry mivvi when he's sucked all the juice out of it.

He contemplates running to ask Mrs Docherty across the road to come over but she has five kids and is always hassled. 'What is it now?' she says with her angry face, which is actually the only face he's ever seen her wear.

So he stays put. He doesn't want to leave his mum. *Don't be*

scared. He repeats her words out loud until he believes them. *Don't be scared*. What is there to be scared of? It's just the two of them. He feels the delicate links of the chain around her neck. As long as she's wearing it she won't forget him, wherever she's gone. This gives him comfort. He likes the idea of straddling two worlds: the world of green velvet sofas and ham sandwiches and another one he can't see. It makes him feel like he has special powers.

Outside, the light shrinks. It's late October, the nights are rolling in. Darkness grows in the room, shrouding it in a veil of blue and grey. He goes to fetch his He-Man duvet from his bed. He's too old for He-Man now, which is why it's in the cottage and not at home. When he returns he lies down, pulls the duvet over both of them and wraps his arms around her. His eyes close and sleep holds him tight until he is woken by his father's screams the next day.