# Slights

## Kaaron Warren

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an excerpt from
SLIGHTS
Kaaron Warren

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## *at eighteen*

What should have happened was this:

We got a taxi home.

This is what did happen:

We went out for lunch to spend Mum's lottery win – she won just enough for a slap up meal. Food rich and creamy, chicken breast with camembert, salad with blue cheese dressing, a bottle of sweet wine, champagne, port.

We laughed and joked; talked loudly. Mum was in a good mood, not a nagging one. The waiter pretended we were sisters, and that made her giggle.

We just babbled on. We had no idea this was our last meal together.

"What do you think of my haircut?" I asked her.

"I wouldn't go back to that hairdresser, if I were you, Stephanie," Mum said. She had a fleck of parsley on her lip and when she talked it wobbled.

"I know. Stupid bitch. I said I wanted a change and she does this to me."

I had splurged and asked the hairdresser to give me a new style. She wanted to cut inches off, saying, "Once you pass eighteen, you have to be more careful."

I said, "Fine." How old did she think I was?

She snip snipped. Dark, wet entrails of my hair fell onto her thighs, criss-crossed the diamonds of her fishnet stockings. I couldn't take my eyes off her. The hairdresser said, "You know, you've got the sort of face which would suit a good red colour. You need a bit of a lift at the moment. Everything looks a bit flat. And maybe we should have a go at your eyebrows."

She was a very slim girl. Her hair was black, cut like a metal helmet. She wore a tight silver T-shirt, a thick corduroy skirt, the fishnet stockings. She sat in a rolling chair, travelling around my body like I was an island, *snip snip*. She spoke incessantly, complained of slight after slight.

She sighed. "Anyway, I'm sure you're not interested." I looked up from her thigh and she wasn't happy with me. She dried my hair without speaking, then held the mirror up for me to see.

I said nothing.

"Are you happy with that?" she said.

"You are kidding me," I said.

It shocked her. I suppose you're meant to lie. I paid her even though she made me look like a



fucking bimbo. All this from a woman who told me, confidentially, that she thought reading novels wasn't smart because it's all just made up.

"What *do* you read?" I asked her.

"Oh, I love my magazines," she said. "I can read them over and over, there's always something different."

Mum laughed and called me a fibber.

"Oh, Stephanie. You're just trying to take attention away from your hair," she said.

"This is how the girl talks. I swear." I took a sip of wine and grimaced. Mum always chose sweet stuff. "We might as well drink lemonade," I said.

"Well, your hair is fine, really. You're just not used to looking pretty."

"Thanks a lot. I'll book you in, if you like."

That's what we talked about.

I joshed Mum about, paying her attention, making jokes about the waiter, who had terrible acne, and telling stories about other diners in the restaurant.

She said, "You sound just like your Dad. He used to whisper into my ear, telling the most outrageous tales. Should have heard what he told me about my father."

"What?" I didn't like to talk about my maternal grandfather, Joshua. He died when I was five, and I have a feeling he used to touch me; sometimes I get a glimpse of his face in my memory. It's shiny, a sucked lollipop, and very close to me. He was a

grouch most of the time, generous and soft when you were alone with him.

"Come on, Mum, what did Dad say?" I passed her the plate of chocolates the waiter had laid on our table. They were dark, rich, and we planned to eat every one.

"He said that your granddad Joshua had affairs with everyone willing in town. Everyone." She covered her mouth. We didn't often talk about things like that.

"What, the men too?" I said, and she coughed in horror.

"You're a storyteller, just like your Dad was," she said. I knew that was true; Dad was a detective long before he joined the police force. I wondered if Dad's stories were ridiculous, or if they were true.

I dropped the keys on the way to the car. I've never been good with alcohol; a couple of glasses, still under the limit, and I'm screaming. Mum was giggling and muttering away, feeling no pain.

Feeling no pain.

I suddenly grew tired of it; being with her, pretending to be friends, enjoying her company. I drove quickly, wanting to drop her at home and go somewhere alone, somewhere I didn't feel like a fake. I should have called her a taxi and sent her home; that way, she would have been resentful, but alive.

"The car smells nice," she said.



"New leather in a can," I said. One of the best smells. I drove quickly. I thought I saw a child in the road and I swerved, my wheels span and I lost it. I remember very clearly, though I said I didn't. I said I had no recollection; my head ached trying to remember.

But I remember my mother's arm coming across to protect me, hold me in my seat as if I were a child. My arms went over my face and head but I still cracked my skull.

I remember looking at her; she looked at me. She was terrified of death; more terrified of my death.

"Careful," she said, then we hit the wall.

This wall was only there to keep the sound of the highway from reaching the wealthy residents in the suburbs behind it. If the wall wasn't there, my mother may not have died. The papers loved it. "Wall of Death – the quiet life versus the long life," all that.

I told people, especially Peter, that she died straight away, without a word. I told no one about where I'd been, that I'd smashed my skull and found myself in a cold, dark room full of people, faces familiar but beyond my tongue; I couldn't voice their names. The board I lay on was ridged with razors, sharp lines of pain down my back.

The faces came into focus. Some I knew; people I knew were there. Their eyes watered. They weren't blinking; that was it. They stared like

zombies. I could smell them. They were so close now I could see the blood *bang bang* in their veins.

I touched my wrist to feel my pulse. *Bang bang. Bang bang.*

"Peter?" I said.

He was there. He stepped forward when I saw him. His hands rested by his side; he carried a potato peeler. I laughed. They all shrunk back. These were weak creatures, scared of the light and the sound of my voice.

"Where's Mum?" I said, to keep them away. They shuffled forward and I recognised some of them. The lady from the lolly shop at the end of the road, her fat arms spilling out of her tight, flowery sleeves.

"I'll have a red traffic light," I said. She grabbed my tongue but I slipped it out. Her fingers tasted of piss and dirt.

A middle-aged man with spiky blond hair, his eyes bulging and red, began to pile books onto my chest. One, another, then another. A handsome boy with dark brown eyes and one tiny scar on his chin held me down by the shoulders. Another book and another, I couldn't breathe, the weight crushed my chest.

A little girl with greasy hair breathed into my mouth.

"You need to get off the anchovies," I said. She bared her teeth at me.



And all these strangers surrounded me; people with car keys, shopping bags, bus tickets. All surrounding, leaning in to sniff me.

Kids I remembered from school clung to Peter like he was their father. I knew their names, could remember their weaknesses: Darren, Cry Bobby, Belinda Green, Neil. I tried to say milk fight but milk was in my mouth, sour milk, and I couldn't turn to spit it out. I dribbled some out of the corner of my mouth but the rest sat there, waiting for my epiglottis to give in and allow the swallow to continue.

I felt a nibble at my ear; now I could turn my head. My neighbour, Gary, a gross sleazebag who thought he ran the street, thought he could manipulate me. I spat milk into his face; he grinned, let it drip to the floor.

I sat up, causing a ripple through the room. There was the waiter from the restaurant Mum and I had eaten in, his face full of acne. The food he had served me was still in my belly.

"Acker Face," I said. Miaow. He wrinkled his nose, lifted his arms, pushed the sharpened tines of a fork into the meat of my thigh. I could feel the idea of pain but not pain itself. A thin clear liquid ran from the holes, like the cooked blood of a well done chicken.

Behind him were more strangers; from the restaurant? Had they been there, seen my mother's last meal?

I wanted to ask them about her face. Was she happy? Was this the best time of her life? Could things only get worse?

It was lucky then that she died.

Someone tied knots in my hair, tugged at it. The skinny hairdresser. "I paid you," I said. She pulled harder, ripping out clumps of my hair out by the roots and tossing them to the floor. She wasn't listening.

None of them listened.

Another kid from school, a shitty little bore, Ian, Ian Pope, was there and some young kid in cricket whites, "You're out," I said, and he swung his bat flat onto my nose.

I heard a crunch and felt blood cover my chin.

This was no sun-dappled heaven. These people did not love me. The driver of the other car – was he dead too? Did we all die? But there was no other car. A wall. A box which looked like a child. Another car. Opposite direction. Stopped to help. Caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. I shouldn't be here. I should be at home.

I shouldn't be here. This is not where I belong, stinking weakness waiting for something, pain. I moved my limbs, opened my mouth to scream, leave me, leave me. They seemed to exist for me.

Somebody saved my life. Rescued me from the dark room.

I missed my mother's funeral. Peter and I were now orphans. He took charge of everything, "I made the arrangements," he said. The image in my mind was of Mum's body, people moving her rag-doll limbs until she sat as they wished her to sit.



In hospital, the smell of jasmine saved me. The nurses brought it in when they realised it made me smile. I lay with jasmine under my nose, I sucked it in, because my nostrils were full of shit and mothballs and the woman in the next bed began to choke and moan. I sat up to comfort her, but I could not sit up. I could not move. Then I felt myself lift, my body turned over, and I looked at the two of us. She was writhing, dying, and there was nothing I could do. I realised then that I had died too, and I closed my eyes and waited to be taken to the cold room. It's time to go back, I thought. They're waiting.

This second death, so soon after the first, surprised the nurses, I think. They did not expect me to go into arrest once I was in the safety of the hospital. Once they had brought me back from the dead at the scene of the crime. Scene of the accident.

It surprised them in the dark room, too. But I was not there for long this time.

Someone came along and saved me.

"Stephanie? Stephanie? Are you with us?" The stink of shit and mothballs was gone. It was the hospital, antiseptic, starch, medicine and blood. I returned from the room and there were people surrounding me, but they were medicos doing their

job, watching tensely for me not to die so they wouldn't be blamed.

"Mum?" I said. I knew the answer. One of them sat by my bed and took my hand. There was kindness in the touch, and pity, but no respect.

"Your mother died instantly. She didn't suffer," the nurse said. I knew that wasn't true. I remembered her screaming. I didn't want to say that. The scream was on me and I didn't want anyone to know about it.

Peter said, "God, you gave us a fright."

"He's been shuddering like the Nazis were goose-stepping on his grave," my nurse said. I quite took to her. She could shock a room full of patients without blinking.

"I've been somewhere terrible," I whispered to Peter.

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