

FLUTTERING

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The birds always returned at night. Joan knew they'd come, fluttering against her chest, tap tapping their tiny beaks against the windowpane. She knew they'd return that night because earlier in the day, she had pulled her hand from her watermelon cashmere glove and pressed one short, plump finger to the buttons on the ATM machine. She'd punched out the secret code to her account and discovered that the Yves Saint Laurent 'Joséphine' stretch satin torsolette bodysuit with reinforced faux-whalebone ribbing and Serenade soft-cup bra had cleaned her out. Joan had checked her purse, found enough gold coins to hand across the counter at Harvey & Walstone's Department Store in exchange for a thin metal box of Valrhona Carré de Jivara Grand cru de chocolat, individually wrapped in gold foil and little paper jackets. Now the torsolette bodysuit lay wrapped up in tissue paper and hidden in the corner, away from the gaze of Saint John the Baptist, whose face on the bedside table sparkled and shone in the holograph picture-postcard Joan's mother sent her from the Vatican several years earlier. Joan pulled the blankets up to her chin. From another corner of the Federation weatherboard house, Joan's father gulped at the night air, his snores rumbling across the floorboards.

When the birds came, Joan saw her mother's face again, heard her mother's voice, calling out her name. Joan liked to think of herself as erased, there in the presence of Saint John the Baptist with his 3D face under a shower of gold glitter.

Maybe, in the morning, Joan would unfold the tissue paper, lifting each layer of feathery white from the satin torsolette which lay sleeping inside. Perhaps she'd slide the smooth satin faux-whalebone ribbing over her waist, glancing sideways at St. John. Perhaps Joan would press the satin soft-cup bra to her breasts and keep the secret there all day, hidden beneath her Perri Cutten 'edge-edge' Lava wool suit, pulled in tightly at the waist and secured with a single gold button. Or perhaps not. It might stay there, tucked away in the shadows of Carla Zampatti and Jill Sander gray wool tweeds, folded and draped over Joan's Van de Velde

mahogany armchair, silk upholstered in the Prikher Art Nouveau style.

The birds would return that night, like every night and Joan's dad lay snoring in bed, where he stayed most of the time, curled up under the sheets with the velvet curtains closed and sagging from the wooden rod. There was a crack in the darkness that he was always trying to get through. Joan knew that he was searching for Her, tracing Her absence with his glassy blue eye, that he was trying to squeeze through the gap without leaving the bed.

In the morning, Joan made soft-boiled eggs and dippies, just like her mother used to make. She took the tray into her father, placed it on the table beside his bed. She reached out across the darkness to where her father's shoulder lay pressed against the pillow, calling out to him gently. *Dad, Dad*, she said. She called out again, slightly louder this time. Once. Short and sharp now. *Dad! It's your breakfast.* He turned from the window. His body was stiff and ragged, bones jutting at the sheets. He raised his eyes, looked into Joan as if she would turn translucent, a flowing veil. He smiled because he recognized something, but it was alright because he called her Saint Joan. *Saint Joan*, he said, *there's a fluttering in me heart.*

Later that day, the cleaner would arrive to dust and vacuum away the dirt and grime from the corners. Joan had applied for home-help through the council, for meals-on-wheels, but her father wasn't eligible, on account of Joan's wage. In her room, Joan slid her stockinged feet into Italian leather pumps, thought about the René Lalique frosted glass lamp with blue enamel tracery she would buy with her next pay check. The buckles on her shoes sparkled, winking gold. She'd shone the brass late the night before just so that everything would be in its place, suit pressed and smooth. No creases on Joan, that's for sure. She was wrinkle-free.

Joan's father called out from across the hallway, his thin voice trailing through the air like vapor. *Joan? Where are you, Saint Joan?* She called back, *I'm here, Dad.* She hovered over the tissue-wrapped package, fingering the ribbon, twisting it back and forth between her thumb and forefinger. *I have to get to work, Dad. We've got a staff meeting. There's the reports, sales figures. I have to set our target goals.* But he was insistent, an urgency creeping into the hollow. *Saint Joan. I saw her in the night. She came with a plate of Snowballs and Barmbrack Teacakes all laid out on a china plate with Irish Clover painted around the rim.* Joan stood in the

doorway to her father's room. She scratched at the painted timber molding of the doorframe. *Ah, Dad. What are you talking about?* But he went on. *Leave the cane in the corner for when she comes back, will you, Joan? And can you find the time to make some Barm Brack Teacakes, Joan? Can you make some Snowballs? For your mother. For when she comes back in the night.* Joan scratched at the doorframe, flecks of paint wedging under her fingernails. *Sure, Dad.* She flicked at the paint. *I'll find the time.*

Joan took the ivory-handled cane from the corner by the fireplace. She remembered its tap tapping along the hallway late at night while darkness hovered around her and the birds threatened with their feathery brush, the warm beating of their wings. Joan's mother would tap tap, slowly along the hallway as she hobbled across the floorboards to the kitchen for a glass of water and a chalky white Naprosyn tablet. Joan slapped the cane up against the wall, making a sharp cracking sound. Her father flinched and turned his head to face her. *Oh Dad, I'm sorry. I'm a little clumsy today. Must be the meeting.* She stood up straight, wrapped tight in her Yves Saint Laurent pure wool dressing gown. Joan thought about the René Lalique frosted glass lamp with blue enamel tracery. Her father smiled, thin lips drawn back over crooked teeth. *That's alright, Joan. You're such a good girl. Just leave out me lunch. I can fix it meself.* Joan turned away. She promised to make the Teacakes later that night. Snowballs too.

Joan pulled out the lingerie box from beneath the Perri Cutten 'edge-edge' coat slung over the chair. Her fingers tore at the tissue paper, dragged the ribbon to the side of the package. She released the 'Joséphine' torselette bodysuit from its container and slid the satin over her waist. She liked its hardness, the way it felt against her body, pulling her in, pushing her breasts up like little hilltops. She snapped the hooks into place, stood for a moment with her hands gripping the back of the armchair, then pulled a Ralph Lauren silk blouse over the top. Joan teased a ruffle or two. She smiled, glanced briefly at St. John, then thought to herself, *Yes.* The tissue paper was scattered around the room, torn into shreds. Joan gathered the pieces in a few swipes and deposited the evidence in the bin. She took the mobile phone from the hallway table and checked on her father one last time. He was still staring into the strip of light. Joan said, *I'm off now, Dad. Call me if anyone bothers you, alright?* Joan kept her fingers wrapped around the mobile phone just in case there was a call from above, from the glazed tower where the GM called

her into his office every week and she saw her paperwork and expenditure requests disappearing under a sea of manila folders. Down below in the basement bookstore where sparrows swooped in through the alcove doorway every now and then to flutter around the vaulted ceilings, Joan gathered her staff, her helpers, around in a semi-circle and told them stories from her days as a salesgirl at Harvey & Walstone's. She told them about her manager, how she had a face set in stone. Joan trembled whenever she gripped the doorhandle to her office, whenever she had to make a request for leave. Joan said she would never be like that. *The door to my office is always open.* Joan held up a bound report with a handwritten note across the front page and a large red 'A' punctuating the corner. *This is a marketing report I completed many years ago.* Inside the report was an analysis of display and merchandising techniques for point-of-sale purchases and impulse buying. Joan said there were techniques in there which everyone could use to full advantage. She said the report would be in her office all week for anyone who wanted to flip through its pages, examine the multi-colored diagrams and the bullet-point headings. They all held their breath for a moment, then murmured a rippling line of thank you's, tumbling one over the other. Later that day, Joan walked over to Harvey & Walstone's department store to buy Christmas gifts for everyone, for Susan and Phillipa and Eric and Rosalind, for Sally and for Darius, who always came to her with a cup of freshly brewed Twining's Earl Grey tea and a few words of comfort after a sparrow had swooped in close to her head and threatened her with its beating wings. Joan went to the Crabtree and Evelyn counter. She chose the Relaxing Lime & Lemongrass-scented Botanical Bath Stick. Joan stood up straight and tall next to the counter, waiting for the young woman with the tied-back blonde hair to stop chatting to her friend. Joan said, *Excuse me. I'd like some help, please.* She asked for twelve of the sticks, but they were at a reduced price and the girl couldn't work out how to ring up the sale. Joan took a deep breath and jammed her lips together. The young woman was fiddling around with the register, so Joan offered some advice. She told the young woman that she must enter a minus code first and then the quantity of the items, which was twelve. The young woman's friend turned to Joan and said, *Thank you. We can manage on our own.* Joan huffed, *Clearly not.* Then she snatched at her bag of Crabtree and Evelyn Relaxing Lime & Lemongrass-scented Botanical Bath Sticks and marched out of the department store, castigating the sales girls as she left, telling

them they must be sure never to apply for a position in her store because she didn't hire insouciant like them.

When Joan handed out the gifts, all neatly wrapped in blue cellophane with gauze ribbons and a thank you Christmas card, she was greeted with raised eyebrows and shy smiles. Joan handed them out, one by one, slipping them into receiving hands with a quiet whisper. *This is for you, for Christmas, Susan, or Phillipa* or any of the others.

The gifts and the stories and smiles and thank you's didn't stop them from going out at night. Didn't stop them from gathering in that grungy little cafe around the corner, drinking beer and chinotto, ordering huge plates piled high with Turkish Pide bread, olives, roasted garlic, charred eggplant, hoummus and tzatziki dip. Joan knew they said thank you and smiled, but at night they huddled together and whispered to each other. It's why she changed the rosters, made them all finish at different times, swapped the meetings to the morning instead of last thing at night. Joan had seen them in their late night furtive meetings as she slipped past the window on her way to the carpark, clutching at her mobile phone just in case He called from the glass tower to say, *You've done a wonderful job, Joan. I've got your forms in front of me now. Why don't you come up for a chat.* Yes, she'd seen them alright, leaning back in their tubular steel chairs with the vinyl torn and peeling. She'd seen them rocking back and forth with laughter, her name, Joan, that Joan, escaping the shape of their mouths, lips rounded, jaw dropping slightly at the end. But she never stopped, never lingered in the shadows to spy on their secrets. She walked straight past, glancing from the side, quick and sharp. She marched past the window, like any other corporate executive. She kept her own secret that day, her 'Joséphine' satin bodysuit, tucked away in the space between her clothing and her skin.

On the way home, Joan stopped in at the delicatessen. She smiled at the old man across the counter, said, *Hello Charlie. How's young Steven?* Charlie wiped his hands on his long, white apron, told Joan that his grandson was having the operation in two days, but they expected no complications. *He's a strong young fellow, our little Steven.* Joan wished him luck, said she'd remember them in her prayers. She held out her shiny new American Express Gold Card and asked for a box of Cavendish & Harvey Sour Lemon Drops and two packets of Callard & Bowser Chocolate Toffee Drops. At home, she would brew fresh coffee in the

drip-filter coffee maker, lay out a clean Wedgwood floral-painted china cup and sit back on the old green club lounge, with her feet, shoeless and free, perched up high on the coffee table. She'd drink her coffee in the soft blue twilight, plucking Chocolate Toffee Drops from the silver tin and popping them in her mouth one by one. She might sit up with her father and watch a little television, rocking gently back and forth in the turned oak Shaker fireside chair that used to be her mother's.

She might.

When Joan slipped her key into the lock and pushed open the front door, her father was hobbling along the hallway with his walking frame, clutching a china plate. Joan stood back, said, *Dad, what are you doing?* He told her not to worry. He just was getting out the plate that was painted around the rim with Irish Clover. *I've got it ready for you Joan. All laid out on the kitchen bench.* Joan helped her father into his bedroom, where he turned back to the strip of light but wouldn't let her open the curtains. *Ah Joan, me lunch was lovely. I've stacked the dishes for you. Perhaps we can take a trip down to the docks after dinner, after we've laid out the Teacakes and the Snowballs.* Joan pivoted on her heel, the gold buckle flashing, a beacon. She slapped her files down on the kitchen table, appraisal forms, budgets, monthly targets that she was meeting but failing to exceed. They all spilled out across the solid oak surface. Joan took a chopping knife from the kitchen drawer, the weight of its handle sitting deep in her palm, steel blade glinting, reflecting her eye in its rich curve. She held the knife to the light. Three carrots, twelve small onions, some mushrooms. That blade was so sharp, you had to be careful. Joan's father liked Brown Ragoo of Lamb on Thursdays. Today was Thursday. Brown Ragoo of Lamb.

Joan sliced a carrot in half.

There's Susan and Phillipa, there's Eric, reeling back with laughter. Joan, Joan. They call her Dragonheart when she's not around. She knows because Christine sidled up to her one day, late in the afternoon when the shoppers had climbed the stairs and headed back to their office towers and waiting cars. Christine leaned in close and peered at her through her glasses, thick and round, magnifying her eyes into large gray pools. She sparkled. *They stand around and chatter, chatter, and when I come close they grab a book or two, pretend to find an empty space on the shelves. I hear them say it, 'Joan, Joan'.* Christine offered herself. She said, *I'll be your transmitter of information. I'll be your superconductor.* Joan asked

her to stand at the front, to wander across the floor, to weave in and out, around, sliding, checking, seeing, correcting whatever was not in order.

The knife scraped against the chopping block. Joan sent the carrots tumbling into the pan where the onions were already sizzling in a pool of golden butter.

Last week, she put up notices over the corkboard in the tearoom. There were scrappy pages advertising someone's theatre performance, a gallery opening, an invitation to a book launch. There was no space for Joan's notices. She pushed the notices to the side, placed her glaring white pages slap in the middle. Large and bold. Joan had written, *We must all focus on our work. We must not chatter to each during work times. Remember to circulate and smile. We must stick together if we are to make it through this difficult period.*

Last week, Joan had printed a double-page sheet to spread across the refrigerator door. She made the words bold and black. Joan said, *The fridge is here for lunches. Staff are requested to abstain from visiting the tearoom outside allocated breaktimes.*

There's Susan and Phillipa and Eric, even Darius, gathered around a late night coffee table, beer glasses pressed to their lips. They have their Botanical Bath Sticks carefully tucked away in coat pockets, carry bags, backpacks. They're screaming laughter. And during the day, sneaking into corners to make private phone calls, to chatter to each other, to chatter, chatter, then pretend they're discussing work when she walks around the corner.

Joan punched her fist into the dough. She rolled out the balls and dusted them in icing sugar so they were powdery white, then she stacked them high on the green china plate her father pulled out earlier in the day. Joan laid out the Snowballs and the Barm Brack Teacakes on the sideboard in the lounge room. She knew her father would want them there, for her mother, who always returned in the night.

After dinner, Joan helped her father into his gray woolen suit. She offered him her arm as they walked outside to the car. They locked the wheelchair into the back of Joan's green Daihatsu so that they could make it all the way along the pier, so they could walk over to the place where Joan's father linked arms with the picket line, defending the Maritime Workers' Union. Together, they drove past the cranes that rose up against the evening sky, towering over a shimmering harbor. The wharves were deserted, gray-flecked planks receding into darkness. Joan parked

the car, unfolded the wheelchair and pushed her father across the asphalt to where splintered timber jutted into the black tar of the street. Joan strained and pushed. She heaved her whole body into the weight of the chair that refused to move onto the pier. There were gaps in between, black water splashing against the pylons below, hard slaps. From the edge, Joan looked down. She could see the rocks, jagged and sharp, see-sawing the ocean which swirled and eddied around their fragmented forms. *You could really hurt yourself, if you fell down there. You could smash your head right open.* Joan heaved her father one last time as she looked out over the edge. The wheels bumped to the right and her father lurched forward in his seat, clutching at the armrests. Joan jumped forward to steady him. *Dad! Be careful. You don't want to fall over the edge now.* But he sat back and sighed. He'd hold up his arm in a moment, just as they reached the place where the cranes stood silhouetted against a silvery blue sky. Joan's father held his hand out in the air, flat against the twilight. He'd say, *This is it Joan, stop here.* Then they'd reminisce as Joan's father re-imagined the gathering of the crowd, brought to life again, right there on the docks before them. Joan's father held up his arm. *This is it, Joan. Stop here.*

Joan's father had been retired when Patrick Stevedores sacked their union labor and brought in industrial mercenaries to take their place, but he went down anyway, for the old days and the principle of it all. He'd taken Joan with him to lock arms in the human chain, to chant slogans and to hold up placards which said, 'What Conspiracy? H.R & Co.' and 'MUA First Wave? Whose Next?'. He'd gripped the force of the chain, the strength of the bodies all linked one into the other, and then he was back at the front of an angry crowd, twenty years before. Then he was storming through the hot, black streets in a river of workers, surging towards Parliament House in demand of shorter hours and better pay. Joan's father gripped the armrests on his wheelchair. *Ah Joan, remember the days of solidarity? Remember, Joan?* Joan remembered alright. There was her father coming home late on weekend evenings with giant lollipops after he'd spent the day at the track, standing on an upturned crate, marking up chalk boards with odds for the favorite. He'd come home with All-Day Suckers, six of them, one for each kid. He'd hand them out while Joan's mother stood to the side, wiping her hands on her apron and saying, *Oh no, Darragh. It's too much!* They'd spend all Sun-

day sliding their tongues up and down the sticky, sugary sweet, twirling the toffees around and around, sticking their tongues out at each other, all blue, or orange or red. There was Joan, lying in bed on weeknights as the clock ticked on into the early morning hours, long after her mother had turned off the radio and put away the ironing for the night. Joan would listen for the creak of the front door as her father crept into the darkened hallway and slipped out of his cleaner's overalls. There was Joan, scrambling out from under the blankets at the first light of morning, just to catch a glimpse of her father leaving for the early shift on the wharves, his hat pulled down over his ears, tattered carry bag in one hand, silver thermos in the other.

There he was now, leaning back into the wheelchair, asking Joan to take him home, to lay out some tea for her mother who might return in the night.

They drove home through the darkened streets. Joan's father shook his head, slowly. *There's no solidarity these days, Joan. This government, you know, undermining our rights . . . Ah Joan, how can they do it? It makes no sense, treatin people that way.* Joan agreed. *I know, Dad. It's outrageous. How about that old woman who died. . .* Joan's father cut in, *Yes, on the hospital trolley.* Joan's father shook his head in frustration. *It can't go on. People have to realize that we have to look after each other.* Joan thought of her staff in the bookstore. *You're right, Dad. It's what I keep saying. We have to work together. Be a team.* The green Daihatsu sped past old worker's cottages, some run-down with paint peeling off the weatherboards, others refurbished with ornamental trees in the front garden. Joan's father laughed, softly. *You're a tough one, Joan, that's for sure. You keep us all in line. Just like your mother, you are. What a Saint she was.*

Yes, Joan's mother was a Saint. Saint Mary. They'd all run up to her, calling out, *Ma! Can you tell us another story.* She'd wipe her hands on her apron, leaving white floury streaks behind. She'd pull out a chair and they'd all sit around the big oak kitchen table while Mary told them a story about a Saint, Saint John, Saint Margaret, Saint Christopher. But it was the story of Saint Bernadette that kept young Joan enthralled. She would ask her mother, over and over, to tell her the story of Saint Bernadette. *Tell me, tell me,* she'd cry out as they were rolling butterballs together. *Tell me the story of Saint Bernadette, who said, "Use me as your broomstick."*

Late at night, after Joan's father had turned to face the strip of

light, milky blue now, sliding in from the street, Joan sat at the kitchen table with her budgets, her expenditure requests, and her personality profiles which she'd asked Susan and Philippa and Eric and Darius and all the others to fill in. She'd asked them to think about a Vision for their employment so she, and they, could see if it accorded with hers. She handed them out. She held her face very still. She said, *We have to work as a team. It's the only way that we'll ever get through.*

Joan turned off her mobile phone. He wouldn't call, not now, not when the silver disc-moon was already peering out over the factory roofs which stood painted in black against the star-flecked sky. Down the hallway, Joan's father snorted, sent a rumble reverberating along the walls. There was her mother's voice now, consoling Joan from the darkened kitchen. There She was, telling her the story of Saint Bernadette. *She was the most stupid girl in the village, but she was good and pious, and she lived in the barn with the farmyard animals. She slept with the sheep and the cows and was happy to do God's work, whatever form it took. You see, Joannie, Bernadette had no aspirations for greatness. She turned her eyes to the Heavens and she pleaded for Him to use her as a broomstick, to sweep away the dirt and the suffering so that our world would be a better place. She died accepting the will of others. She lived so that others would prosper.*

Tomorrow Joan would ask for a reduction in her salary. She'd call them all together and tell them that she'd reduced her salary in order to save their jobs. She'd tell them about the memo that arrived in a yellow paper folder with a corporate letterhead inside. The memo was addressed to Joan. *Joan*, it said, *You are aware that company policy sets wage costings at ten percent of the annual budget figure. As your wage figures exceed this amount by 5.8 percent, you must rationalize your staffing levels.* Joan would avoid their eyes. She'd tell them that she'd tried hard to keep everyone together, that she'd been working till two in the morning, staying back in the office till four sometimes, rearranging the shelves, tidying, putting books away, loose items. Then they'd sit back and nod. They'd say to themselves, silently, *We have to work together. We can all help out like that.* They'd join her, arms outstretched, Susan and Eric and Philippa, Rosalind and Darius.

At two in the morning, Joan gathered her papers together. She slid them into a manila folder, flicked off the light switch. Outside, a tawny owl fluttered to roost in the pear tree by the kitchen window. Joan stood by the glass, transfixed by its gaze. The owl stared at her with its round,

phosphorous eyes. Joan thought of St. John, showered in gold glitter, always watching her from the side of the bed. She was still wearing the torsolette bodysuit. She'd take it off where St. John couldn't see. That night, she'd change in the bathroom, cover the mirror with a towel so that the lights could stay on. Joan undressed in the bright fluorescent glare of bathroom tiles and chrome. She closed the window, just in case the owl was still out there, trying to see inside with its shining eyes, burning yellow. She climbed under the blankets, pulling her flannelette nightdress down around her knees, wrapping the soft cotton print tight across her legs, encasing her body in a sheath of pink and white floral. Joan thought of all the men she never had. She thought of her brothers who walked down the aisle with their fiancées all dressed in fluffy lace and soft white satin, shining pearls strung across their bodices, looped through their ears. She thought of Garret, whose deep green eyes she fell into when he smiled and brushed against her shoulder at the Frankfurt Book Fair. They sat at the canteen coffee table drinking thick black coffee from small china cups. He said he'd be in Australia later that month, that they could strike a deal between his company and Joan's. He'd like her to meet his wife, he said. They had two beautiful children, back in Ireland, with thick black hair, like his, and bright blue eyes, like their mother's.

Outside, the owl hooted. The night closed in on its tunneling cry.

Thursday morning. Breakfast meeting. Joan had her papers laid out on the mahogany desk, ready for the Teamwork Talk. She'd chosen, just for the meeting, a Perri Cutten velvet suit in a sedate shade of pale blue. They were gathering around her now, a little early, Susan and Eric and Philippa. They held out envelopes, addressed to her in tight, hard script. *We want to talk with you. We've got something important to say.* Joan stood tall, straight, held herself in. She refused to see them collectively. She'd make appointments, individually, later in the day.

They came to see her, one by one, as requested. They closed the door to the office behind them. They stood with their hands clasped together as Joan sat at her laminate desk, the one-way mirror at her side. Susan and Eric and Philippa came to her, later in the day, all with the same words. *I've been made another offer that I can't refuse.* Joan held her lips together, stared straight at the wall. *Can I ask where?* And they told her where they were going, another bookshop, a cinema, a festival office. Joan turned and smiled, wished them luck, said they'd be missed.

But as the afternoon wore on, the wind changed direction. An icy southerly whipped the gray streets outside, burst in through the entrance doorway, along with the heavy rumbling of trams and the chatter, chatter of office workers heading back to their glazed towers after a long lunch, weaving their way through suburban housewives and heroin dealers pushing for another fix. Joan was standing at the counter, composing messages for the staff tearoom, little sayings to take to the heart and to remember. *1. Now is the time to start afresh. 2. This is the beginning of a new era. 3. Let's clear away the rubble and start building our ship anew.* A blast of Antarctic swell, a sparrow and then another swooped in over the threshold. Joan gripped the counter, ducked as one sparrow flew past, darting across the vaulted ceiling, all of them, fluttering and chirping in a dusty, gray haze. Darius came prancing across the floor, his arms waving in the air. He called out to her, to Joan. He called out her name. *Joan, he said, Go out the back, we'll get the birds outside.*

Joan walked towards the office, trying to maintain her composure. She stood up straight, pulled her jacket in around her waist. A sparrow swooped past her. She jumped to the side. She kept on walking. Joan slammed the office door behind her, turned out the lights and lay back against the darkness. She did this, sometimes, when migraines clouded her head, pressed up against her eyes. She stretched out on the Berber loop carpet tiles and waited for Darius to come with a cup of tea, freshly brewed in a floral china teapot. The ceiling tiles seemed to close in on her then, the shiny white metal frame criss-crossing the fiber tiles, a cage laid flat over the sound-proofed sky. Joan remembered, *a broom to sweep with.* Joan remembered the broom. Her mother's voice. Yes. The broom. The phone rang out, sharp and piercing. Joan gathered herself from the floor, picked up the receiver, held the cool plastic to her ear. It was her dad. *Dad, she said, are you alright? What's happened.* But he went on. *Ah Joan, everything's fine. You've always got the place in order. It's just your ma, Joan. We've run out of her favorite tea. Can you pick up some Earl Grey before you come home? Maybe a new teapot, too. Something special.*

A new teapot too. There was her father, hobbling along the hallway with his walking frame, climbing back into bed to face the strip of light. There he was, waiting for his teapot, for Her to come, always for Her to come. Joan would have to go out later to Harvey & Walstone's Department Store. She'd buy a box of Earl Grey tea in one of those balsa wood boxes with the Twining's label imprinted on the front and a small brass

latch to hold the lid closed. She'd buy the new teapot, something special, perhaps Rosenthal Art Deco Series in cream glaze, and then she'd go to the antique shop in Victoria Arcade with its wrought iron entrance, and she'd buy the René Lalique frosted glass lamp with blue enamel tracery, the one she'd been looking at for the last three weeks. Later, in the evening, she'd compose some advertisements for new staff who'd be eager and fresh, who'd look at her with their young, smiling faces as she explained the steps to success, developed from her own personal experience as a sales girl and then a manager at Harvey & Walstone's and then at Andrew Gregory's Fine Bookstores. Yes. That's what she'd do.

A knock at the door, a soft tap with the tips of the fingers. The door opened slightly and Darius peered in. He held out a cup of tea, placed it with a slight tinkle on the desk in front of Joan. Darius was tall and lean. He dressed in dark colors, slim-fitting pants with no particular label. Joan thought of him sometimes, hovering up against the ceiling tiles with his arms outstretched. But he was lingering by her desk, clearing his throat, clasping his hands together, waiting. *Is there something else, Darius?* Darius was her friend, her confidant. He'd put his arm around her shoulder after Eric had refused to work any more overtime, after she had thrown her manila folder across the tearoom to where Eric had been standing with his palms spread out before him, saying, *But Joan, we can talk about this.* She'd been too furious. She'd stormed out, ran into Darius, who had held his arm around her shoulder and comforted her. Now he was hovering there beside her, with these words about to escape his lips. Darius said, *I want to thank you for the years I have worked here. But now I think it's time to move on.*

Joan replayed the scene over and over as she stood by the kitchen bench that night, chopping onions and celery and carrots for the Jugged Hare casserole. There was still the washing to do and the ironing, and then there were the messages she had to print, for Darius and Eric and Susan. She'd find a space on the tearoom wall for more messages, cover the lockers if she had to. She'd stick the messages back up after the air conditioning vent had torn the corners loose with its screaming currents. She'd take Christine aside and ask her if she'd heard anything new. Joan reached across the kitchen bench, made a note on the yellow square of the Post-It pad. She made a note to remind herself. She wrote 'The Broom' in fat black text. She had to remember the broom. Her

father called out from the lounge room where she'd helped him to the couch with promises of Earl Grey tea brewed in the new teapot. Joan didn't have enough cash, or enough credit, for the René Lalique frosted glass lamp. Her father called out. She was a Saint, an Angel of the Night.

Joan's mother was there, stitching time into a Serenity Quilt. She was stitching words together, with Joan there chopping and slicing, the knife heavy in her hands, each word folded tightly into the seam, italics, capitals, bold, underlined, packed so tight the light couldn't get through with its fluttering.

Joan's mother said, those birds won't flutter against my cheek. Joan knew she could lie back at night to dream of angels following Her through the dark night, whispering words of love to the saints, reaching out to feathered fingers and climbing, always dissolving into the orange pools of the harbor streetlamps. There, a rumble now. Joan found herself caught up in the heavy shudder of steel wheels turning through the night. The factories and dark streets and the gray, flecked wharves were covered in a layer of frosted, sparkling white that would dissolve in the first light of dawn. Joan sliced an onion in two, took the head from a stick of celery. There was an Yves Saint Laurent 'Joséphine' stretch satin bodysuit hidden away in the cupboard, but Joan knew and She knew, it was lying there with secrets embedded in the stitching, in the broderie anglaise trim. There it was, sequestered beneath tissue paper, inviting, always inviting, that lingering touch, that soft breath. In her mind, Darius was unfolding. Joan gathered the others into a semi-circle for her to stand centered, a point in the middle. Darius was unfolding, his fingertips reaching to the light and the criss-cross pressed against a gunmetal sky. Those messages, they were procreating, self-generating, creeping over the walls.

Darius was unfolding against a steel sky, shining, reflecting the others, reflecting Christine, who stayed behind to slink back into an upholstered armchair, legs crossed and hands resting on her thighs. Christine's eyes, magnified three times. Joan counted the numbers. Darius was taking flight. Judas.

He carried a package wrapped up in Barbie Doll pink and sunflower yellow with a spray of taffeta ribbons bursting from the center. Joan was saying the words to the hard steel, slicing through celery, slapping hard against the chopping block. *Goodbye and all the best, we wish you luck, farewell, you've been wonderful, come back to visit, won't you?* There

was Darius, taking flight, unfolding a silhouette. There were more messages, sheets white and clean, reminders with words in italics, capitals, bold, underlined. Super font in simple styles. There was one word, screaming. Joan held the knife to the chopping board, scraping the blade across its surface, vegetables tumbling, scattering.

You only saw those nice things, a satin bodysuit, fine china and frosted glass lamps, Valrhona Carré de Jivara, Perri Cutten and Carla Zampatti, Wedgwood, Rosenthal, René Lalique, Cavendish and Harvey, Crabtree and Evelyn, Jill Sander and Yves Saint Laurent. You saw budgets and expenditure requests and clean lined notebooks disappearing under a furious script in black felt pen, running forward to forever. You remember the broom, she offered herself as a broom with which to clean away the suffering.

Listen.

There's a moth fluttering in Joan's throat - a word prized loose from its moorings and struggling to be free.

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