

**1987**

“Will you come?” she asks again, her voice fraying, falling apart at the seams.

At first, her mother says nothing, swiping the crumbs off the kitchen bench with the edge of a floury forearm. She catches them in an open hand and flicks them into the sink with the art of long practise. The silence after stretches. Only the tick of a cheap plastic clock marks the moments as they pass. Neither woman can bear what would or wouldn't be said next. The mother, Daisy to those she could tolerate and Linda to everyone else, scrunches her lips together in discomfort. It is Wendy, her second eldest daughter, who slouches in the doorway, desperate for her answer. Daisy almost hopes her husband will return from where he hides out in the back shed, bringing with him the thunder cloud he always carries, full of mis-educated vitriol and barely constrained fear. But he has already stamped out of the kitchen in disgust when Wendy invited them. He is consoling himself by watching the races on the tiny black and white and pretending his daughter hadn't chosen to go against God.

Though the house was always darker with him in it, at least he always knew what to say, knew what to do. He decided everything, the last forty years, letting Daisy fade into the background. She has found it strangely comforting to rest her voice and let others speak, standing to the side as everyone else surges forward. There is no one to rest on now. No one else's voice is raised with opinion. She is lost.

Instead, Daisy potters around, tidying this and that, hiking up her faded apron when it starts to slip over her third-best housedress. A part of her is hoping Wendy will tire of waiting and leave without an answer, but her daughter has a stubborn set to her chin, lips tight and eyes fierce. She isn't giving in this time.

Finally, Daisy sits heavily on one of the radioactive coloured plastic chairs at the cracked Formica table and drags the ashtray toward her. She extracts a single cigarette from her plastic case and lights it, staring at the flame only a moment before she puts it to her lips. She takes a drag, still hoping the standoff will end on its own. That Wendy will give up. That Wendy will walk out. That Wendy will change her mind. That Wendy was different.

The smoke coils upward past the curlers which crown her head, to further stain the already brown tinged ceiling above the dining table. She sits where she always sits; the chair grooved from her generous rump. It was where she had served thousands of roast dinners with two veg and boats of gravy for her nine children.

Although she doesn't glance in her direction, she feels the hefty gaze of her daughter, just as she had felt the weight of all her other children's eyes. She felt it, the time her eldest daughter had told her she was pregnant at fifteen. When her second oldest son asked for

bail money, the first time he went to prison, and then for her to take care of his son the second time he went to prison. It was where she had sat when she told them all about the cancer, slowly eating away at her lungs, stealing her life from her.

Daisy swallows, preparing to speak, certain her voice would emerge as a rasp, a gravelly note that used to be so precise and clear.

“Where is it?” she asks, her voice low, almost discussing the weather.

“It’s at the Uniting Church on Northstead street.” A hint of relief, almost. Quickly smothered.

Another drag on the cigarette, her lungs sore, protesting.

“I might come. If I’m not too busy.” She flicks the ash off the end of the cigarette and turns her face toward the window. The view of the super six fence is suddenly so fascinating, more so than her daughter’s drawn face.

Daisy catches Wendy’s expression from the corner of her eye, fleeting, a kaleidoscope of anger, sadness and then resolve.

Wendy smooths her face clean with a shaky hand and looks around the fading, sagging kitchen where her mother had spent her whole life. She sees the forty-year-old furniture and plastic knickknacks with new eyes. She wonders if she had ever really lived in this house. It was alien now, different. But maybe she was the alien, maybe she was the one who was different.

Wendy just nods, knowing she wouldn’t get anything else from the dying woman. But she had gotten enough.

For another moment, Wendy watches her mother breathe in the poison that was killing her, drawing in every detail, before she turns to leave her parent’s house behind.

Daisy waits for the sound of the front door latch clicking shut before she stubs out her cigarette and gets back on her feet to bustle about the kitchen once more. It was four o’clock, and her husband would be wanting his dinner. She couldn’t sit about all day watching the day pass outside the window.

Later that night, Daisy woke suddenly, struggling to gather the air in her faulty lungs, coughing so forcefully that her husband’s snores caught and held as he turned over and complained in his sleep. She slips from beneath the covers, shuffling on her slippers and turning into her housecoat before pulling the bedroom door shut behind her. The kitchen is shadowed and ominous in the dark, and without switching on a light, she fumbles out a cigarette and lights it, pressing an open hand to her head to make sure her rollers sat

straight. She takes a great drag of her cigarette, and a great cough racks her diminishing frame, every nerve jangling, rocking within her. She collapses into her usual seat; the plastic creasing underneath her, loud in the quiet. As she fights to catch her breath, she watches the night intrude into the kitchen, moonbeams making the cigarette smoke sparkle and shine. Her heart aches along with the rest of her chest and before she can stop herself, a string of words erupts from her lips.

“She is your flesh and blood.”

Daisy sits and smokes until morning breaks over the old grey fence and she hustles to make her husband’s breakfast.

A week later, two women clasp hands in the church. They are wearing plain black suits rather than long white dresses, and only a handful of guests are sparsely arrayed in the pews to watch. Daisy is among them, alone but for the rosary clutched in hand, but wearing her best dress, green with patterned white roses, her hair set in steel grey waves.

She doesn’t stay long after the ceremony, barely pausing before shuffling off down to the bus stop at the far end of the road. But it was long enough for her to snap a single photo with her daughter and her new wife, smiling.