

Leoni Descartes: A Croydon Tale

" I think it's best if I go away for a while"

Listening to my mother utter these words felt so surreal. I would cry myself to sleep wondering if this horrid anguish was how she felt, if her wretched tears were as cold as mine. I was tired. Tired of begging her to live, tired of being tired.

Was this my life, a token, a statistic? She was never home as it was, was a while forever?

"Mum please don't say that, the world is better with you in it, we are better. We need you."

I was fourteen going on fifteen. I had quite frankly had enough of this shit. I wanted to be sensitive to her plight as a human being, but I was out of stock on empathy. Days would pass and she wouldn't come home, and when she did she would sleep for days and be gone again.

I would search her bags for anything telling, but all I would find were those pink and yellow McDonald's straws crunched up. My sister and I used to pinch more than a few when we didn't know better. Back when no one gave a fuck about the planet. But these were different. They were dirty and cut to strange lengths.

Every day red letters would seep through the letterbox. With their bloody coloured paper, I knew they were tickets and overdue essentials. A little bit of stealing petrol here, a few unpaid house bills there. Debts that would never be repaid. I would pry some open with the steam of the kettle to read the contents and seal them back. I was an expert at this. My whole life had been spent living under the shadow of my mother's sadness and addictive tendencies.

And so life was amazing and then it was cruel. Then it was amazing again. It was always like that, our normal, fluttering between the glee of togetherness and the horror that was this.

Each day I would prepare cereal for my little sister, and we would eat it together in the hollow husk that was once our family home. I could hear the three of us laughing in the distance as we painted the dining room, our Mum was doing her best He-man and Shera impression. It was a beautiful day, I could see panels of light shining illuminating the dust we had all kicked up. We were so excited to be home, our bare feet pattering around on the warm wooden floorboards. I stare at her in awe, not because she sounded ridiculous, but because I couldn't understand how she could rip out a curtain rail screwed into these solid old walls with her bare hands. She always told us she didn't need a man and only herself. It was a line that echoed loudly in the absence of a dad and in the rough grooves of her hands. The alarm sounds. I rush to get my sister to school and lug myself there. Each day we would await my mothers return and continue the routine. Every day I would pretend. Every day I would try to cobble dinner together from our depleted stores. It was kind of foreboding that one day, she simply wouldn't come back. That maybe the door would one day be the police, not the postman.

I look at my sister as I tell my mum how much I love her, that I wasn't angry through the microphone. I realised I was lying. My sweet sister watched me closely, eyes glittering with watery inquisition, her tear ducts swollen, her cheeks rosy from the heat blast that was my aunties flat. Everything about this moment felt critical. A moment that would reverberate through the decades.

The moment she destroyed my life.

My auntie was sick of the burden that was us and her sister. She rushed me off the phone and shoed us out. It was a long walk home but we couldn't afford the bus, as my Saturday job money was barely seeing us through on the food front each week. I was relieved to be back home, at least it was warm and familiar albeit incredibly lonely with just the two of us. The absence of my mum was the absence of being told to put a GAP jumper on instead of the heating. I hated the emptiness but anything was better than my aunts, or enduring foster care again.

A few weeks after that fateful call, I did another day of pretend in a sea of many. I always slept with my curtains open as I liked seeing the sunrise from my bed. It was beautiful outside but I had overslept and was late for school. I barely got a glimpse of my mum in the morning, she asked for my bank pin while I was half asleep. There was an overwhelming lethargy and heaviness to this day. The nights had been long, I was exhausted. I could barely move. I left my mobile in a rush that morning. This felt so critical a mistake and I was eager to know why when I got home.

I had this strange impulse that we must clean the house. Soiled dishes had stacked in unstable formations. Everything was a mess and it was as though I only noticed it at this moment. When did it get like that?

I turned on my Motorola and there was a missed call.

My heart was pounding so hard I was going to be sick. I gasped for air and gripped the empty pit that was my stomach. I tried to catch my breathe and ground myself. It was her.

I turned over and was startled to see my little sister staring at me.

"Someone's at the door, I think it's the police".