



BREATH

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ONE

“I don’t think I could ever kill someone,” said Barries. He sat with his legs stretched out in front of him, his back against the wall. His blue-black Gibson guitar lay across his lap. He was sucking the last life out of a slowboat, before dropping the butt into an empty Red Bull can. “So I’m going to give my dad just enough rat poison to make him writhe in agony for a few days.”

“You’re not serious!” Lizette’s dark hair swished as she spun her head around.

Barries had kicked his backpack off the bed to make room for her, Floris and Theo. His books, pencil case and lunch box had gone flying and were now lying amid a pile of dirty clothes scattered across the floor. He pointed at the weekend bag next to the bed. “See for yourself, packed and ready. His Christmas gift from me.”

Lizette grabbed his wrist. “Barries!”

“He never wanted me,” he said. “I still don’t know why not. But just watch, I’ll get it out of him.” He teased the high E-string of the guitar with a plectrum. “My dad doesn’t know what he’s in for.”

Floris had a habit of blinking his eyes rapidly when he had something important to say. As if his eyes had a stutter. “So you’ve decided to go to him after all?”

“To get my own back, yes.”

Floris blinked even more frantically. “If you give him an overdose, he’ll die.”

“No loss.”

“Is he really that bad?” Floris had skin problems. An eruption of acne on his cheeks and forehead.

“My dad’s a monster.” Barries strummed a riff of minor notes. “And monsters don’t change.” The blue lights on the amplifier hopped, skipped. “Rats will always be rats.”

The speakers in the corners buzzed so loudly that the thin walls of the flat seemed to vibrate.

“People aren’t rats,” said Lizette, “and you don’t look like you’re having a birthday today.”

“Yes.” Theo held out an imaginary mike to Barries. The more handsome of the two brothers, he was a year Floris’s senior, with a smooth, tanned complexion and impressive, steroid-induced muscles in his upper body. “Why don’t you give us a song? Ladies and gentlemen, the punk hunk of Houghton – Barries Barnard!”

He whistled through his teeth. Floris and Lizette did the same and burst into loud applause.

Barries smacked the strings with the flat of his hand and sang off-key: “Exams are almost o-o-ver, an awful year in the can. A ho-o-o-rrible year down the drain.”

“Barries,” said Lizette when he stopped. “You’re not the only one whose dad doesn’t live at home any more. I know lots of kids in the same boat. And they don’t feed their dads rat poison.”

“Really?” He tuned a string. “And did their dads also beat the shit out of them with his belt when they were five?”

“A drunk doesn’t always know what he’s doing,” she said.

“Maybe, but did their dads run away too? Do their dads forget their birthdays? Not a card. Not a message. Nothing. Like, every single year for the past eleven years?”

“But this year he remembered,” she reminded him. “He’s asked you to come visit. Doesn’t that tell you something? Maybe he’s sorry about everything.”

“Well, I’m not falling for this sudden turnaround. When I’ve finished with him, I’m taking my mom’s maiden name: Nel.”

“And what will we call you then?” Theo asked. “Still Barries, or will you be Nellie?”

“Ha-ha-ha. That’s so lame.”

Lizette pushed the guitar away and jumped into his lap, straddling him. “No, really, we’re sick of Barries-with-the-long-face.” She kissed him deeply. His hands were roving over her lean back under the T-shirt when the door flew open. Lizette’s face turned crimson and she scurried to the foot of the bed, pulling at her clothes without looking up.

“You never heard of knocking, Ma?” asked Barries, furiously fanning the air with a pillow.

“Good evening, Auntie Vera,” Floris and Theo said in unison.

“The entire flat reeks of smoke,” she complained. “And pick up your dirty clothes – you can’t even see the floor in here. Dammit, Barries.”

He opened the window. "Because this flat is the size of a dovecote."

She jerked her head back the way she always did when she was annoyed. "Yes, a dovecote with all the modern conveniences. Ungrateful brat."

"You look sexy, Auntie Vera ... as usual," Theo flattered her.

Auntie Vera's hand flew to her hair and she tugged at her neat black trouser suit. "I'm going out tonight. Here's money for pizza." She handed Barries a few blue notes.

"No, Ma! We're going to the club!"

"You're always going to the club."

"And we're taking the Mercedes."

Her face flushed. "Over my dead body."

"It's my birthday!"

"It's *my* car."

Theo held up his hand. "No worries. I'm legal and I've got my own wheels."

Auntie Vera's cellphone rang. She pulled it out of her handbag and answered as she walked away.

"Shut the door!" Barries shouted at her retreating back. When she ignored him, he kicked the door shut. "Probably my dad again. She's always doing that."

Theo gave a soft whistle through his teeth. "Your dad's a fool. If I were in his shoes, I'd be over here every night."

Floris blinked. "So your dad calls, but he never talks to you?"

"It's only the past month that he's been calling regularly. But *I'm* the one who doesn't want to talk to *him*. Why would I want to talk to him now, after all these years?"

“Time to get ready,” said Theo.

“Meet you on the corner in an hour.”

Lizette took out her phone. “Pick me up at home, but make it an hour and a half. I’ll message my mom to come fetch me here.” While she was typing, she said: “Your mom has a cool phone. Ask her where she got that cover with the roses.”

With the brothers out of the way, Barries locked the bedroom door and pushed her down on the bed. First he kissed her delicate nose, then her mouth until her thin lips parted. His hands crept steadily over her protruding ribs to the softer, fuller flesh above, while he nudged her legs apart with his knee.

“Barries, wait. Your m—”

He smothered her protests with kisses while trying to peel off her jeans.

She grabbed his hands and looked into his eyes. “Have you got something?” she asked, panting.

He saw the desire deep in her dark brown eyes and said: “I’ll be careful.”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“Are you crazy? Anyway, your mom’s still here.”

“Later tonight, then?”

She pushed him away firmly and rolled out from under him, tucking in her T-shirt, zipping up her jeans and buckling her belt. There were red blotches on her neck. “You’ve been different lately.”

“What do you mean, different?”

“I don’t know. Super wired, or something. As if you can’t wait for anything.”

“Theo can’t wait for *you*. He’s got the hots for you.”

“Is that why you’re acting like this?”

“No, but it grates me that Theo thinks all the girls will fall for him, even you – and my mom.”

“Shame on you. What do you think of me?” she asked, unlocking the door. “Anyway, he’s *your* friend.”

They walked out together and rode the lift ten floors down to the ground floor.

“So when are you going to your dad’s?” asked Lizette.

“I don’t know exactly. Maybe next week when exams are over. Maybe I won’t even go. We’ll see.”

“I’ll miss you.”

He pulled her closer and kissed her, his hands all over her again.

“Just leave the rat poison here,” she gasped between kisses.

He waited with her on the pavement in front of the block of flats until her mom’s red Volvo appeared from among the clamour of hooters and exhaust systems, silently sliding up to the pavement. The windows were tinted, so he couldn’t see inside but he waved anyway. The car swallowed Lizette and merged with the traffic again.

Back in the lift, he sent her a WhatsApp: *Luv u 4ever*.

He found his mom drying her hair at her dressing-table mirror. The room smelled of bath salts and body lotion.

He sat down on the bed behind her and watched her in the mirror.

Was she angry or sad? he wondered. Her eyes couldn’t hide what she was feeling, but he didn’t always understand what he saw in them. Sometimes she seemed about to cry

when she looked at him. Sometimes she seemed about to hit him. She rolled her curly hair around her hairbrush and turned the hairdryer on it.

“When are you going to stop smoking weed?” she asked when the hairdryer fell silent.

“You see any bottle necks? Are my fingers yellow?”

“There’s nothing wrong with my nose.”

“What you smelled was Theo’s rum-and-maple tobacco.”

“Rubbish, man.” She rolled another section of her hair around the brush and switched the dryer back on.

“Would you ever go for a much younger man?” he asked over the noise of the dryer. “Like Theo?”

She blushed. “I must admit he looks like Barbie’s Ken, but I stopped playing with dolls a long time ago.”

She watched him in the mirror, pointing the hairdryer at a thick lock of hair wrapped around the brush. “If you *must* go clubbing tonight, try not to smoke.”

“People do it to feel happy, Ma. Anyway, dope is legal now. Nothing wrong with it if you use it responsibly.”

“Nothing wrong with it? Barries, when was the last time you did a good long-distance?”

“Is it my fault I get asthma?”

“Asthma?” Her cheeks were on fire. “If *you* have asthma, then *I* have a bun in the oven.”

“And the cramps in my legs—”

“All symptoms of smoking weed,” she interrupted him. “I swear you can’t even climb the stairs any more, your lungs are so shot.”

“Ten floors!”

She tossed the hairdryer aside, the brush still caught in her dark curls. “And your cricket? Why were you dropped from the first team?” She opened her Indian jewellery box

but the shiny pieces fell out of her shaking hands. The long-haired man watching them from the photograph on the shelf beside the dressing table smiled as if he was enjoying the spectacle.

“And I shudder to think of your school report.”

“You’re always carrying on about nothing. It’s a real downer.”

She gave him a long look in the mirror before she replied: “Now you sound just like your dad. As if *I’m* the one with the problem.”

“Don’t compare me to him!” He swiped the framed photograph off the shelf and stormed out onto the balcony.

The lights of Houghton surged in front of him like a twinkling ocean. He leaned against the balcony wall and hung over the railing. Ten floors down, the bottom of a cliff beckoned.

Is there a God? he wondered. Will He let me fly if I jump? Will He come if I call Him?

He hung over the balcony for a few more minutes until a rustling sound startled him.

“Nelson!”

In his wire cage in a dark corner, his African Grey shook his feathers. “Flip it, Nelson, I forgot about you. I was going to take you inside this afternoon, I swear.”

“Barries?” His mom stood behind him on the balcony. Her black hair was styled in waves. He could smell her perfume. She wore a maroon evening gown with a scooped neckline, and a profusion of gold jewellery.

“Barries, you won’t change your mind, will you? You *will* go to him?”

He leaned back against the railing. "If I go, it'll only be for a few days. I hate him. If I could get my hands on that man tonight ... I swear I'd kick his ribs right into his lungs."

"You can't go with an attitude like that. Dammit, Barries."

"Fine. I'll stay."

"No."

"You talk about *my* attitude. What about his? The bastard beat me with his belt until he drew blood, even though you had an interdict against him. Or were you lying about the interdict?"

"No, of course I wasn't lying. I just ... sometimes I felt sorry for him, that's all. That's why I didn't ... I didn't lay a charge every time he raised his hand against you."

Barries lowered himself against the balcony wall and sat down on the cold cement. "Do you tell him about me? I mean, does he know I sometimes smoke dope? Have you told him about the trouble at school? And does he know I play lead guitar?"

"He knows most of it, yes."

"I used to make him greeting cards. You did mail them, didn't you?"

"Of course. Maybe he didn't get them. They could have been lost in the post."

"Come on, Ma." He got up off the floor and lifted Nelson's cage from its hook.

She touched his arm. "I'm worried about tonight. I don't like you going out with Theo and his brother. Those two are a bad influence."

"You'll have to make peace with the fact that they're

my best friends. Uncle Charles is a lawyer and their mom is a doctor. What could be so wrong with them?”

She held on to his arm. “Are you trying to be smart? Do you like punishing me?”

He freed his arm, took Nelson’s cage inside and stepped into the shower.

Drying himself in front of the mirror in his bedroom, he looked into his own eyes. They were greyish blue, like his mom’s. They had the same dark hair, though his was shaved close to his scalp. He had her thin face. Even her athletic build, only stronger and tougher. Not as ripped as Theo, but actually not bad at all.

On a shelf behind him was his chess trophy. On the wall hung a number of cricket Man of the Match awards and a handful of athletics medals, mostly for cross-country running and road races.

He sprayed on some 24/7, pulled on his Levi jeans, a muscle T-shirt and his Puma sneakers. He paused in front of Nelson’s cage and whispered: “I wish I had wings, like you, but I’m glad I’m not in a cage.”

“Dammit, Barries,” Nelson said. “Dammit, Barries.”

“You’ve been neglecting him,” his mom spoke behind him.

“You know I wanted a dog.”

“And you know we’re not allowed to keep a dog in the flat. Not even a small one.”

“I’m off. Enjoy your evening with whoever.”

“Barries!” She stepped in front of him. “I don’t know how long I can still carry on stressing about you.”

“What are you on about now?”

“I’m serious. Someone will have to help me to help you. Are you listening?”

“Don’t go on like that!”

“Try to come home sober tonight. We need to talk.”

“I’ll try. Bye.” He pushed past her and left without the hug and kiss he knew she was waiting for.

In the busy street he bought a bulging bag of dagga heads at a food stall. At the pharmacy he bought Stimorols, sweets and a packet of condoms. In the corner a Father Christmas sat watching him beside a plastic tree festooned with flickering lights. He held up the condoms. “Could you buy this stuff in your time?”

The man fixed him with a silent stare.

“Go home, old man. It’s not even December yet. Go play with your kids.”

He reached the pavement just as Theo’s lime-green Opel Kadett pulled up. He jumped into the back seat, straight into Lizette’s arms. She wore a short denim skirt, black tights and black knee-high boots.

“Move over,” Theo said over his shoulder. “We’re picking up our chicks as well.”

Floris sat in the passenger seat, his cheeks covered with a thick layer of base to hide the livid pimples.

Barries whispered in Lizette’s ear: “I bought Ultra Thins.” He tapped on his pocket. “Theo says we won’t even know I’m wearing it.” He kissed her neck and collarbone while the Kadett wove through the evening traffic. “Tonight we’re doing it, okay?” he whispered, his hand high up between her smooth thighs. He felt her sultry heat. “You can make me really happy tonight.”

“And what would make you happy?” She took the packet of condoms from his pocket. “This?”

He thought about her question. What would make him happy? Paul Barnard writhing and sweating in agony, pleading in the night like a whipped donkey, begging for forgiveness. Him, telling the man to his face: “Chill, dude! You’re nothing to me. Never have been.”

Then he could come back home and carry on with his life.