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## THE FEELING IN THE FLESH

THE GNAWING FEELING IN HER ABDOMEN starts a few weeks after May finds out that she's pregnant. On the advice of her midwife, May takes a two-hour bus ride to see an obstetrician at Auckland Hospital. He tells her that the feeling is probably caused by her morning sickness, and May admits that she is retching and spitting thick, acidic gobs of green bile into the kitchen sink every morning after she gets up, before Simon can see. The doctor prescribes Diclectin, and May takes the pills as directed, but the feeling doesn't leave or even diminish; in fact, it becomes more insistent and the vomiting more frequent—at night before bed, in the bathroom at work. Surely it must be the other way around—it must be the gnawing that causes the sickness—but May doesn't bother arguing with her obstetrician at her next appointment. He's too busy to talk, and there are no pills for something like that anyway.

Nothing strange shows up on the eight-week ultrasound or the one at twenty weeks, where May can see for the first time the baby's fingers, toes, and oval-eyed, alien face. It is only then, once they are home, that May mentions the gnawing feeling to Simon. She hadn't wanted to worry him. "It's a sort of rasping," she explains. She looks away from him and stares at the shadowy ultrasound image stuck to the fridge.

"I can't believe you would say such a thing," he nearly spits. "You make it sound like the baby's some kind of parasite." He pushes himself up from the small kitchen table with a jerk. In their cramped kitchen, he is suddenly huge.

May follows him into the living room. "I don't mean the baby! No! It's something else," May protests. She points to the spot right above the slight rise of her swelling belly. "It feels like it's chewing me, here, in the tissue—the fascia." She had looked up the word to make sure.

Simon flops onto the thick, fake-leather sofa, immediately deflated. "It's just nerves, May. It was so hard for us to get pregnant again." He pulls her

down beside him and puts his hand on her, over the baby. "I think you're just worried that something bad will happen." Worried that we might lose it again, he's not saying, like the pregnancy before this one, which was also conceived with a sperm wash in a sterile room at the clinic.

"That's not it," she says. "It's there. There's something..."

"It'll be ok," he croons as he settles into the dip in the sofa where the springs have failed and flicks on their small TV with the remote. "It'll be ok," he repeats as he pats her belly lightly with his wide hand, without looking, like she's the baby, not the mother.

May tries to distract herself from the feeling with preparations for the arrival of the baby. She paints the nursery in stimulating colours and buys wooden toys and cloth diapers online at work when she should be emailing clients. Her decisions are painstaking, and she spends hours searching the Internet and reading reviews and testimonials. She is worried that someone in the IT department will notice her non-work-related computer activity, but she still can't stop surfing and these decisions keep her up at night. Are plain or coloured blocks better for intellectual stimulation? What kind of diaper covers should she order from Australia? How many organic onesies will she need? She also takes up knitting, crocheting, and sewing and makes tiny clothes in the evenings and on weekends. Her mother did the same for her, though May cannot do any of these things nearly so well. As the due date approaches, she also practices deep breathing and meditation for her natural birth.

And the birth is perfect. On the half-bed in the birthing room, she groans and pants, just the way she is supposed to; she focuses on the baby-animal frieze, which runs around the ceiling, and ignores the cloying lilac walls. Simon tries to help by counting her breaths, but she doesn't need him and waves in his face to push him away. When the baby's head finally crowns, he stands helplessly and watches, crunching the spicy Doritos he brought in case the labour was long and he got hungry.

May is delirious with the endorphins that flood her system after nearly a day of contractions. She can't stop laughing and marvels at the magnificent glow of the fluorescent lights. Everyone told her that the delivery was the hardest part, but it was so much easier than she thought it would be. She can't believe her luck.

"Hi Donna," May says when the baby is cleaned and placed on her chest.

“Here you are.”

May and Simon name the baby after May’s mother, who died when May was very young, not quite five. “Here you are,” she says again. “I missed you.”

“Missed her?” Simon asks.

“Oh, you know what I mean,” May coos to the baby.

Donna scans the shadowy contours of May’s face with calm, grey eyes and doesn’t cry. May realizes right then that for the first time in eight months the gnawing feeling is gone.

On the ward, the nurse helps May feed Donna. The nurse is rough with the baby, pushing her head firmly against May’s breast. “Won’t you damage her neck?” May asks, but the nurse just sucks her teeth and ignores the question. It works well enough, as Donna’s throat contracts rhythmically and she half closes her eyes. It hurts May’s nipple, but she doesn’t want to say in case the nurse suggests a bottle. “I *have* to breastfeed,” she tells Simon, who admits that he finds the whole thing discomforting. “If you use a bottle you can break the attachment. I mean, *anyone* could feed her—it wouldn’t have to be the mother. *My* mother breastfed me even when no one else was doing it.”

After the feeding, the nurse shows May how to clean and swaddle Donna, and May is careful to touch Donna as lightly as possible. Her skin is thin and creamy soft; she doesn’t have a single blemish.

“Look, you won’t break her, darl,” the nurse says impatiently. But she could. Donna is delicate—not like the solid chunk in the bed across from them, who wailed his lungs out for two solid hours before finally falling asleep. May will have to be careful.

May finishes wrapping Donna and slides her onto the thin mattress in the Perspex hospital bassinette. She watches the light fluttering of Donna’s eyelashes, the miniscule dip in her nostrils, and the rise and fall of her gently sloping chest as she takes each breath. She is perfect.

For the next few days May is happy—no, blissful—and on the fourth day they take Donna to the doctor for a check-up. May puts Donna in a sling that wraps around her suddenly leaky and sagging body. The sling is so deep that Donna curls up and disappears into it, and May carries her like a wonderful secret.

They squeeze their way onto the bus and into the aisle crowded with

uniformed teenagers late for school. The teenagers seem enormous. How do children get that big? A tall, animated girl with a pierced eyebrow and a too-short kilt bumps May hard by accident and doesn't apologize. May nudges Simon and says, "I can't believe Donna will ever be like that. She *couldn't* be." She peeks inside the folded-over sling to get another look at Donna's dainty face and downy eyebrows, which crinkle in her sleep as though she's thinking hard. "I wonder what she's dreaming about," May sighs.

At the pediatrician's office, the nurse undresses and weighs Donna, and then May and Simon wait for nearly two hours in the waiting room. May sits rigidly upright the whole time in case they are called.

"Relax," Simon says. "Do you think I should hold her for a while now? You can read a magazine or something."

He reaches tentatively to take the sling, but May shakes her head. "I don't want to disturb her."

Finally, the receptionist ushers them into the examination room, where the doctor consults a chart, frowns, and says, "She's a little underweight."

"She's a delicate baby!" May says, even though she knows that's not what he means—that "underweight" is not good, no matter what. She bounces the baby in her arms and steps side-to-side in a slow dance.

"Someone will come to your home and help you with breastfeeding," the doctor says. He doesn't even look at May, but only at the chart on his clipboard, where he scribbles something about Donna's subpar weight.

"When?" May asks, but he's already left the room.

"I thought I was doing it right," May whispers. "She's happy isn't she? She's ok?" Simon shrugs. It's a new shrug that started only a few days ago—right after Donna was born. It means, "I've never had a baby before. Why ask me?" May hates that shrug already, and in an instant she wonders if she hates Simon and if she has all along.

Their house is a fifteen-minute walk from the bus stop, and May is sweaty and tired from the summer heat. Soon the humidity congeals in the air and heavy, warm drops start to fall from the gathering clouds.

"Rain?" May says and looks up. "We have to find some shelter." Her voice is tight and high. "She's going to get wet."

"It's ok," Simon says, striding ahead, not quite listening.

"No!" May stops in the middle of the sidewalk. "Don't you get it?"

Simon stops and stares at her with his new look. "She's going to get a bit wet. It's ok. It's not cold."

“We have to find some shelter.” May can barely catch her breath and pants while she speaks. She scans the wide, empty street around them, far into the distance, and lifts her nose into the air as if she senses danger or some kind of predator. Then she points to the nearest carport, “There!”

“I’m not going to go and sit on someone else’s property!” Simon calls after her. “It’ll be over any minute anyway.”

May ignores him and scuttles under the awning of a carport that is littered with boxes, paint cans, and tools. An oily stain—the colour of dried blood—blemishes the centre of the concrete, and May cowers in the far corner, as far as possible beneath the overhang, so that nothing can reach in and grab the baby. She starts to shake hard, and her teeth chatter and clack. Outside, drops fall, meet in puddles, and evaporate to steam almost immediately.

A few minutes later the sun is blazing again and May comes out, half-crouched, still protecting herself from exposure. Donna’s cries trickle from the opening in the sling.

“What did you do that for?” says Simon, who is barely wet.

“It might have rained hard,” May says as brushes past him. “You never know.”

She marches home with Simon trailing a few feet behind, and as soon as she is inside she throws herself on the sofa, undresses, and arranges the baby on a pillow for breastfeeding. It is a complicated process, which is made even more difficult because her hands and head are still shaking like something has her in its jaws. May eventually remembers her breathing and draws air deeply and slowly through her nostrils until her milk begins to flow.

Later that night, after May and Simon bridge the gap between them with monosyllabic attempts at forgiveness over a tinned-soup dinner, Simon asks, “What did you think would happen if she got wet?”

Grim-faced, she only says, “The gnawing thing is back,” and Simon helplessly shrugs.

For over a year Donna screams so often and sleeps so little that the days seem to pass by in a painful blur, like white noise turned up loud. There is an endless row of cloth diapers to be scrubbed, soaked, and hung on the line to dry in the bright, bleaching sun. And there is baby food to make from organic kumara, green peas, and heirloom pumpkin. When Simon suggests

disposable diapers and food in jars, May bristles. "It was good enough for my mother," she insists. "What good am I, if I can't even make her food?" In her exhaustion, May barely registers the grating between her ribs and feels it only now and then as a dull discomfort. But on the day Donna wobbles her first few steps across the living room, the white noise snaps off and May feels the thing bite down, forcing her to vomit in the kitchen sink. She wonders if it has been making a hole inside her all this time and if she should have been paying better attention.

That night May keeps a tight hold of Donna and waits at the top of the porch stairs for Simon to come home from work. She can't remember the last time she sat outside. It's too hot in the summer now, and she worries that Donna will get a sunburn or overheat. She hands Donna her sippy cup and says, "Here, drink this," but Donna shakes her head. May ignores the gesture, plugs the mouthpiece into Donna's mouth, and tips it back, but the water just dribbles down her chin. Then May checks the closure on Donna's hat and yanks it down further. Donna tugs at it, even though she knows she mustn't, and May pulls her hands away, closes them in her own fist to keep them there, and says, "Not safe!"

Half-an-hour later than usual, Simon appears at the end of the street, dragging his feet slowly.

"Hi," he says dully when he gets to the bottom of the stairs. "What is it now?"

"The thing," May says, lifting a hand to her abdomen. "Remember?"

"I thought that had stopped," Simon sighs. He sits on the step below them and buries his head in his hands. "Why don't you go to the doctor if you're so worried about it?"

"When?" May spits. "When do I have time to do anything? I don't get to go off to work every day—to do whatever I like." Then, "Do *you* think I'm sick?"

"Does it matter what I think?" Simon shrugs, picks up Donna, and goes into the house. The screen door bangs behind them.

"It might be a parasite?" May says to the doctor.

The doctor is young—younger than May at least, and surely too young to be a mother. She raises a perfect eyebrow. "Have you been travelling somewhere tropical? Fiji? Thailand?"

"With a baby?" May says. She can't fathom it and nearly laughs. "It's

very...multicultural here in South Auckland. People come from all over—China, Samoa. Maybe...”

The doctor examines May’s face closely and waits. “I don’t think—”

“Look—there’s something there!” May interrupts, pointing to a spot over her solar plexus. “It’s chewing. Sort of. Right now. I can feel it.” May gets up, ready to lie down on the examination table. “Shouldn’t you...palpate?”

“Do you sleep?” the doctor says without rising from her chair. “How are you getting on with the baby?” She glances at the stroller where Donna takes her single, daily 45-minute nap. “She’s how old?” She looks at the computer screen on her desk. “About eighteen months, right? So, she’s sleeping well?”

“Of course,” Donna lies. She sits back in her chair heavily. “She’s a toddler. And, anyway, she’s always been a good sleeper.”

The doctor nods as she taps at the computer keyboard. “How are things with your husband? Are you worried about something?” the doctor asks. “Do you think the feeling you’re having could be anxiety?”

“You sound like my husband,” May sniggers as though they’re at a bar sharing a joke about the hopelessness of husbands, but inside she is burning with rage. “It’s not in my head. There’s *something there*. It makes me puke every day! You need to do tests.”

“But would it hurt to talk to someone? How about—”

“No!” May nearly yells. “You have to check first. What if it’s cancer and I die?”

The doctor sighs and writes requisitions for x-ray and blood tests.

Over the next year-and-a-half there are more tests and specialist appointments: tropical medicine, neurology, oncology. Though he has to arrange for time off work, Simon goes with May and holds her hand the first time she gets her test results. It’s so long since they touched each other that his hand feels strange to her—thick-skinned, muscular, and hairy on the back, like a monster’s hand engulfing her own. After the third specialist and the second MRI, however, Simon doesn’t even bother asking May about her test results because they are always the same: there’s nothing there.

When they are not bussing to doctor’s appointments, May and Donna stay at home and play in the living room or the back yard. They make crafts and read stories and build structures in the sandbox. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, they go to community playschool, where May keeps a close

watch on Donna and makes sure she doesn't climb the ladder to the slide or play with the child-size tools. Other mothers watch her sideways and don't talk to her except to ask how old Donna is and what activities she does. May tells anyone who asks that they just do activities at home, and after that she keeps to herself. May knows that the other mothers are whispering and judging—she's not stupid—and sometimes one of the mothers will try to draw Donna away and encourage her to do something dangerous, like using the big shovels in the sandbox, before May can put a stop to it. But the mothers at the playgroup all have easy, well-fed children and big, extended families. They have no idea what it's like to be on your own.

May goes to bed early most nights. She lays awake while Donna sleeps on the other side of the double bed, beside her, and feels between her ribs for the rasping thing, but it's slippery under her fingers and always gets away. Sometimes, though, in the half light, when she sleeps with the blinds open and the moon spills into the room, she can see its shape beneath her pale skin—long and smooth, a kind of oval, pointed at the end. Then she calls out for Simon. "Here it is!" she yells. "Quick! Look!"

"Again?" he says from the spare bedroom, where he now sleeps alone. "Christ! There's nothing there May! It's in your head. You need to get out more."

"*Your* mother was crazy, remember, not me. Don't act like it's me."

Sometimes he slams the door, even though it scares Donna and both she and May end up crying for hours.

About a month before Donna's fifth birthday, Simon decides that they should drive to the coast now that they have a car. "You've got to let her out of the house occasionally," he appeals to May. "Let's at least pretend we're a happy family for once."

"Fine. Let's make a day of it," May says, her smile brittle.

Donna will be starting school soon, and May has the terrible feeling that she's running out of time. How did they get here so quickly?

"I know!" she exclaims brightly, like a children's TV host. "I'll make a picnic with sandwiches and a cake! Would you like that?"

Donna shrugs as she continues to blow unsuccessfully into a brand new inflatable ring with a tiger's head. Simon takes it off her, and she claps as he blows it up with only ten good puffs.

May searches the fridge for sandwich fillings, but they only have pea-

nut butter. She spreads it thickly on not-quite-fresh bread and contemplates making a cake, but the idea overwhelms her. In its place, she stuffs two apples and a half-eaten bag of Tim Tams into the cooler.

“We used to go on picnics when—” May starts, but Simon is tickling Donna and neither of them can hear her.

On regular Sunday picnics, May’s mother used to fold the tartan blanket and carefully wrap their china in linen napkins. She woke early, before anyone else was up, and her singing poured from the kitchen as she made salad rolls and cold ham, lamingtons from scratch, and homemade ginger beer. Then they ate all day and lay on the beach in the long sun or paddled on the edge of the sea. May recalled that life as though it were something out of a storybook. She had felt her mother’s constant love in all the details that she took care of in their domestic lives. Then she didn’t. No more picnics. No more mother.

May digs frantically in the closet for a blanket and can only find an old sheet. She balls it up and puts it in the cooler with the food and some plastic plates.

She has to sit and catch her breath. She rubs the place where the hole is.

“What’s wrong?” Donna asks.

“It hurts,” May says.

“Don’t!” Simon snaps, taking Donna’s hand. “I’ll get her ready.”

They take the long drive northwest, and Donna sings the whole way, joining in with an hour and a half of Rolf Harris on cassette. May sits beside her in the back in case Donna gets sick or feels afraid.

“Afraid of what?” Simon asks when May refuses to sit in the front beside him.

“Don’t you understand anything?” May counters.

“What is there to be afraid of?” Simon presses, but she can’t answer. There isn’t a name for it.

They ascend a slow mountain, and from the top they can see the beach below them. The sea is bigger than May remembers and lead grey, not blue. Seagulls flutter and fall above the water, as if dragged around on invisible strings. The wind has come up, clouds have begun to draw together on the horizon, and there are distant flashes of lightning.

"The sea!" Donna squeals. "I'm going to be a mermaid."

"Well," May says, "I don't think we're going to swim. It looks a bit dangerous today."

"She can paddle," Simon says. "Let her paddle May!" Then, under his breath, "For God's sake, let her get her bloody feet wet."

After they have parked the car, Simon says, "Can you take some of this stuff and go down with Donna? I'm going to change."

"You're swimming?"

"We're at the beach. What did you think?"

By the time May and Donna make it over the dunes, the wind is scattering loose sand in the air and it is much colder. Donna yanks her hand from May's and runs towards the water with her pink towel out behind her like a cape. When did she get so fast? Her legs are long. She has angles Donna has never seen before.

May drops her armful of toys and towels in a heap and runs after Donna, stumbling on the ridges and hollows left by the heavy tide. "Don't go in!" she yells hopelessly.

But Donna stops at the edge of the water anyway and watches the dark waves thicken as they surge and swamp each other. She points to two surfers kneeling on their boards in the water, close to the shore, and shrieks, "What is it?"

May thinks she can see something too—a flat shape, pointed on the end, half-submerged—but she isn't sure until the fin appears. It pushes its way forward to meet the two boys, who are now only a few metres out. They paddle hard toward the shore with naked hands, and water sprays out behind them, but they seem to move through the viscous sea in slow motion compared to the shark, which rapidly gains on them.

"Faster!" squeaks Donna. She yanks her arm from May's grip and steps forward.

"We have to go," May says, but she can't make herself heard over the roar of the beach. "Come!" May reaches out for Donna's arm again, but Donna steps sideways. May's feet sink further into the sand, ankle deep. "The weather's not good today. We've got to go home!"

The thing gnaws greedily, and May doubles over, wrapping her arms around her stomach.

As the shark gets closer, Donna calls out to the boys, "Hurry! Hurry!" She makes a makeshift megaphone with her hands around her mouth, and

her towel, let go, is stolen by the wind.

May tries to speak again, but she feels a crushing sensation between her ribs and thinks she will vomit.

Then a surge in the water lifts the surfboards and thrusts the boys to the shore. They drag themselves across the sand before collapsing at Donna's feet, and she claps her hands joyfully and jumps up and down, triumphant at their escape.

The shark, cresting a few inches now just behind the wave, is slower and doesn't follow the surfers in. It circles in the shallows once or twice before swimming back out.

"May!" Simon has run down to the beach from the top of the dunes. He shakes her shoulder. "What's happening? What happened?"

May doesn't answer and just stares at the boys, who lie on their backs on the sand, still at Donna's feet, panting and laughing. Donna is laughing too.

Cold drops begin to fall and lightning flashes again on the horizon. "Let's go, May! Jesus. We can't stay outside in this. Can you bring her? Get her out of this weather for God's sake! Wake up!"

"Her towel..." May gestures vaguely to the tangle that continues its desperate tumble across the sand. It's far away now, and obviously lost forever. The sight of it makes May's throat catch.

"Forget the towel. It's freezing." He lifts Donna onto his hip before turning and half-jogging back up the beach. He expects her to follow, she knows, but May, unmoving, looks back out to sea. She puts one hand over her eyes, scans the turgid water, and sees the circling fin. It's still there, isn't it? It won't leave.

Then, with effort, she draws her bare feet out of the sand and steps forward until thick foam swirls around her ankles. At knee depth, the current tugs her forward and she nearly falls before righting herself. When she is waist deep, the shark turns and swims towards her as the tow pulls her under. At last she meets the feeling in the flesh and is relieved to know that it is real and that she wasn't imagining it.