

Closed Doors and Sour Soap

Short Story: 4287 words

By Kelsey Bricknell

I was four when I stayed there, with Zan and all her kids. Mum had gone to hospital—knee surgery, she told me later, tore the ligaments playing Squash. At the time I thought she'd gone off on an adventure, reclaimed the open road without me.

'It'll just be for two days,' she'd said as we both hobbled to the car—her on crutches; me under the weight of my pillow and a tiny brown backpack shaped like a koala. 'One night. Until the doctors fix me up.'

But one night turned into a week before the hospital spat mum back out—before our stretch of the Bruce Highway led her back to me. When I finally left Zan's house, it was in unwashed clothes and hastily combed hair, the opposite to how I'd arrived. Mum had been told that Zan was alright.

'I send my own kids there,' a co-worker had said, 'when Bryan flies back out to the mines for work. Lovely lady. Good with babies and all that.'

Mum had been unsure, but her pending surgery forced her to rush the decision.

'You'll have fun,' was the last thing she'd said. But I never went back there again. And Mum never asked her co-workers for advice after that week.

Zan's house smelled of soap. A sour, forgotten scent that met us at the door, worked its way into our skin.

'Imperial Leather,' Mum whispered as we approached the front door, more to herself than to me—that way that adults do, as if they won't hear their thoughts any other way. Her nose scrunched up like my grandmother's did when anyone accidentally threw out the extra napkins she'd gathered at McDonalds, *just in case there's a toilet paper shortage*. It was a look that made me think "imperial" must be a bad thing—that Mum was talking about the armchair that sat, ripped and sagged, by Zan's front door. While she knocked, I taught myself how to scrunch my face up the same way and planned to do it whenever I saw a similar chair. It would be years before I would put the words together with the red and black labels littering Zan's bathroom floor; the chunks of soap caked into the grouting and the smell that curdled with whatever boiled concoction was being prepared in the kitchen. I haven't used that brand of soap since.

Zan was a large woman with legs as thick as my mother's torso. A sheen of sticky sweat accompanied her skin whenever she moved about the house; it leached out of the folds in her neck and dripped from her hairline. Clumps of baby powder gathered in the creases of her elbows and dropped to the ground when she reached to grab something from a shelf, or carried one of the babies down the hall. The rooms in Zan's house were filled with babies—kids she used to replace her own, when they got too old for her to handle.

'I like the little ones best,' she said to Mum as we walked inside. I couldn't help conjuring images of giants—of *Jack and the Beanstalk*—in my head. 'Easier to manage than all the rest. My own kids included!'

Trained as a Primary teacher, Zan found older kids confusing.

'They don't really communicate, you know? Mine come home from school: "How was your day?" I ask 'em and you know what they do? They just grunt! The little ones are definitely better.'

If Mum had seen any signs of trouble then, she didn't show it. Maybe she was in too much pain from her leg. But usually she was a wake up to anyone who seemed to choose the easy options over confronting life and work head on. As Zan kept talking my mother just smiled, nodded even though her eyes showed me she really didn't agree with what the larger woman was saying.

‘How could someone favour a stranger’s child over their own,’ the creases around her eyes seemed to say, but at the same time her face had relaxed slightly for a moment—like a part of her was beginning to believe that she was leaving me in safe hands.

I learnt quickly that first day that I fit into a kind of nowhere category at Zan’s. I wasn’t one of the babies, but I didn’t really fit in with the older kids either. Zan didn’t think I was difficult like her own children, but she still didn’t have much time for me, nor the energy to notice that my actions didn’t really match how I was feeling. On the outside I was a quiet, content kid—I’d learnt to be like that so Mum could rest after her long shifts, or the endless nights she sat up studying so that, as she said, one day we could have a better life. I never really knew what she meant because it seemed alright just how it was—but Mum made it sound important.

Zan could tell straight away that I wasn’t the type of kid who’d cry if she left me to play alone in the sandpit; that, with me, she could return to the babies and the programs that played non-stop on the large, square TV. But her wide smile and encapsulating damp hugs didn’t make up for her turned back—didn’t show her that, after being there only a few hours, my stomach had knotted up so much that I could no longer stand up straight; that I’d started avoiding small spaces and dark hallways—anywhere her daughter, Skye, could reach me undetected. For the most part, I didn’t succeed. Zan’s daughter, my surrogate sitter for the after-school hours, seemed trained to seek me out.

Skye was a plump girl, about fourteen and already the image of her mother. She’d come home from school early that first day, told Zan she had a stomach ache. But when it became apparent that she did not—that she’d really just wanted to skip double maths and eat chocolate and chips in front of *The Bold*, Zan had set her to task.

‘Well you’re just getting a bit lazy, Love,’ Zan said to her daughter’s protests—her voice was more rushed than usual, like she really meant it. ‘And you might like looking after some of the kids. Maybe it could be a good career path for you.’

While her daughter banged cupboards and slammed various kitchen implements around in protest, Zan led me through the dimly lit house to a bedroom with two single beds.

‘You get to choose first,’ she said. ‘Aleesha, who you’ll share rooms with, is still at school. I’ll send Skye in to show you round once you’ve made your pick.’

I smiled at her rounded back as she left, still too shy to speak, but wanting her to know that I felt safe. To know that I would make an effort to be happy here, even though

the darkened rooms were starting to bring me down. My heart pounded in time to her weighted footsteps disappearing back up the hall. It felt just as heavy.

I'd barely placed my koala bag on a bed—the one next to the wall because the windows freaked me out; made me think that someone was watching me—when I was greeted by a far from achy Skye. She was grinning in high spirits and ready for attack the moment her mother looked away.

'So what d' they call ya?' she said, slurring all the words together as if it was too much effort to speak. 'Ya name, ya little brat.'

I was still grappling with my new surroundings—still observing the wooden louvers over the windows, which had looked nice from the outside but were fixed together with masking tape from in here. All the furniture was, I noticed, layered in tape or caked in lumps of super glue, and for a time I forgot to answer Skye.

'Cat got ya tongue? Or ya just think ya too good to talk to me, huh?' the round girl stood smiling at me in the doorway. Her little piggy eyes almost disappeared into her face and there was no joy in her expression. Malice and intent—like she could smell my fear.

'Possum,' I said softly, my hand automatically picking my pack back up. I hugged it tight in front of me and tried to tense my shaking legs to a stop. 'Or Pos, if you like.'

Skye scoffed, her mouth opening to say more, but quickly snapping shut. The front door had clattered open and rushed footsteps sounded toward us.

'Is she here yet? The new one, is she here?'—a girl's voice echoed around the now stuffy room and the walls, which seemed to have been closing in on me, started to exhale back out. 'Oh Skye, you look like you're feeling better then? Is the new girl here?'

Aleesha rushed into my room and her smile seemed to illuminate the space. She had a slight sheen of sweat in her hairline, but otherwise looked like she'd come straight of a TV set—out of one of the video clips I sometimes watched with Mum on Saturday mornings. She was half Philippino, tanned and slim—in no way similar to the demeaning girl hovering, suddenly less imposingly, next to her.

'Ooh,' she squealed, jumping slightly towards me. 'I'm Leesh,' she said 'and you have got to be the cutest addition we've had yet! Look at your big brown eyes. They're great!'

I couldn't help smiling, but at the same time, it seemed like I was caught in some kind of elaborate joke. My bottom lip quivered as it parted slowly to make way for my teeth and my eyes started to sting.

‘Ugh,’ Skye rolled her eyes. ‘Her name’s Possum.’—she turned sharply and began to retreat back toward the front of the house, muttering loudly about my name being stupid as she went; how I should hope it was a nickname if I knew what was good for me. Her footsteps thudded away in time with the relief-beat of my heart.

‘Don’t listen to her,’ Aleesha’s eyes were sparkling in a way that Skye’s would never be able to master. ‘She’s just jealous that she doesn’t have a cool name that suits her so well. Except for maybe pi...’ She cut herself off. Giggled nervously. ‘C’mon, let’s get a Milo. I’ve been craving one all day at school.’

Aleesha took my hand and bounded toward the kitchen. She filled two of the biggest glasses I’d ever seen with milk—five heaped spoonfuls of deliciousness in each. ‘Wana play on the swings?’

In the yard Aleesha told me she only stayed at Zan’s over the weekend, when her dad had to work extra shifts.

‘It’s not so bad,’ she said. ‘And Skye is okay. Sometimes. You’ll get used to her.’

Skye was watching us from the lounge room. Her body was angled so that it faced both us and the television. As I swung, staring back at her, I noticed she’d gone and got changed soon after Aleesha had shed her school uniform. They now wore identical outfits, like a lot of girls their age seemed to do, although Aleesha’s skin didn’t bulge out of the gaps in her’s. In floral bike-pants and a button up shirt, cut off at the sleeves and tied in a knot above the bellybutton, Skye looked ridiculous.

‘And she’ll warm to you eventually,’ Aleesha said noticing my gaze. But she was wrong.

My biggest threat in that strange, baby-filled house was Skye—that, and my fear of turning into Popeye after being fed so much spinach. It was Zan’s favourite thing to cook, I would come to know. Around every corner Skye lurked, arms crossed, scowl in place; ready to accuse me for something I hadn’t done.

‘Lily just smashed a plate,’ she said to me on my second morning.

The sun had only just managed to peek through the thick curtains that shrouded most of the rooms in the house. I was restless, had got up for a drink and met Skye in the kitchen, already there, waiting for me, while a small girl with matted curls drank milk out of a bottle.

‘If ya don’t get me a red cordial with a straw,’ she snarled, ‘I’ll tell Mum it was your fault.’—every threat was finished with a random movement intended to make me

flinch. It always worked and always made her laugh. ‘And if it’s not delicious, I’m telling Mum anyway.’

My eyes stung slightly from being buried against my pillow in sleep. I rubbed them and stretched for the handle of the enormous pantry cupboard.

‘Wash ya hands first, ya grot,’ Skye hissed. ‘No wonder ya mother left ya. She’s probably not coming back, ya know.’

I felt the darkness of the house close in around me again and my legs start to shake. Skye knew how to say everything I was already thinking. To pick the statements that would really hit a nerve. I didn’t want to cry in front of her though. To let her know she’d won. I bit my lip and abandoned my attempt at the cordial. Walked away from her, through the dark hallway off which Aleesha, Zan and her husband Robbie were still sleeping, their doors closed to the knowledge of the rest of us kids.

Aleesha woke later to find me with my back against the far corner of our room, Koala pack hugged tight to my chest.

‘You okay, Pos? Want some breakfast? I can smell toast.’

I liked how Leesh didn’t make me answer awkward questions—that she knew the answers anyway and instead was just there.

‘I’m okay,’ I told her. ‘I ate earlier. With Skye.’

Leesh saw through my lie but didn’t ask anymore. Instead she said she had something to show me. Something that would make the house seem a bit different.

‘Lighter,’ she said. ‘It’s always so dark in this place.’

She took my hand and led me down the hall, to a room I hadn’t noticed. The door was slightly open and bright light was streaming out—when I’d arrived, it’d been closed and I thought it was just another blank section of wall. The room was empty of people, but I could tell Zan had been in there recently; her mixed scent of steamed vegetables and powdery sweat lingered in the air—clung to the laced curtains and doyleys inside.

‘Why is this one so different,’ I asked softly as we entered, squinting to adjust to the light. ‘Why is everywhere else so dark?’

Aleesha said it was because the house was filled with ghosts. That Zan had told her once that Robbie kept the place shut up so the spirits wouldn’t escape. I stopped dead in my tracks.

‘Not the scary ghosts Pos,’ Aleesha said. ‘Not to us anyway. Just memories, I guess she meant. Things from their past that they don’t always like to think about. Like this wedding dress.’

Aleesha stroked a petite dress that hung in a see-through plastic suit bag on a ledge above the window. It was so elegant, with its sparkly embroidery and slim cut—it didn't even look like it would fit Skye, let alone Zan.

'Who's is that?' I asked Leesh. 'Does Zan make them?'

Aleesha smiled softly, as if she was a little bit sad.

'No,' she said. 'It was hers.' Nodding toward a photo frame on a small table by the bed, Leesh fumbled with the dress, stroking it so that it sat smoothly in its casing.

I walked to the table, to the small collection of happy people in the frame. I realised then that I hadn't seen any photos around the house—no wedding, none of Skye as a baby—nothing. In all the houses I'd visited, and the ones I'd lived in already, there were photos on the bookshelves, frames hanging from the walls. But in Zan's house, the only images of family you could witness were in the way they all talked to each other, the few times that they did—the way they bonded in unhappiness.

It wasn't that Zan and Robbie had fought a lot the night before, but more that they were silent—that they only seemed to speak to each other through us kids.

'Skye, take this to your mother,' Robbie had said holding out an envelope he'd brought in from the mail box. 'Tell her it's from the bank.'—Zan had been standing by the fridge, no more than two meters away from him.

But that photo frame, and that well lit room told me of a family who spoke out loud. A family very different to the one I was staying with. I shivered as goose bumps prickled down the back of my neck—whether I completely understood then or not, I had just seen one of that family's ghosts. The daylight and happiness that they had forgotten about.

'You know,' Aleesha said, now next to me, 'you and I might not have *proper* parents, little Pos, but aren't you glad that we aren't like that? Part of a family that only exists in a photograph? Must be hard to live knowing you're like that.'

She didn't want me to answer. Just to think about it I guess.

'C'mon, let's go get that toast.'

I couldn't stop thinking about that photo at the dinner table that night.

'What ya starin at ya freak?' Skye hissed at me as we lay out the knives and forks ready for dinner. 'Ya jealous of me Mum and Dad, huh?'

My eyes had been flicking between Zan and Robbie for the last half hour, searching for traces of those people I'd seen.

‘Never seen two parents before have ya?’

Aleesha glared at Skye from where she stood helping stir the pots—Zan had left her in charge while she went to turn the fans on; cooking increased her sweat.

‘Skye sometimes you can be such a bitch,’ she said, flicking a hot piece of spinach in the fat girl’s direction. ‘Leave Possum alone, alright?’

Skye backed down, but dropped a fork on my foot when she thought no one was looking.

‘Why don’t you have any photos?’ I said suddenly, curiosity getting the better of me, when Zan returned. ‘Why are they only in that room?’

If it was possible, the house went quieter—as if Robbie had put the television on mute. Skye looked from me, to both her parents, mouth open and a scowl etched into place.

‘We have photos in our house,’ I said again, but then quickly looked to the ground—no one seemed to want to answer me and I realised I had said something wrong.

‘Just haven’t got them framed yet, Love,’ Zan said eventually. ‘Been bit busy. Now, how bout you kids go wash your hands before I serve up.’

I said ok, and we did as we were told. But as we left I could feel a weird, tension growing with the increased silence, forging a barrier between the open plan living-dining area where Robbie and Zan both stood.

‘You nose little brat,’ Skye said to me, pushing me forward into the dark. I heard Aleesha hit out at her back but Skye just brushed it off. ‘And you can stop defending her too, you’re just as bad. Don’t think I didn’t notice the two of yas snooping around in that room down there.’

‘We weren’t snooping; you know we’re allowed...’ Aleesha’s voice was drowned out under the words rising from where we’d just come. The three of us stopped in our tracks.

The words were hard to make out at first—hushed hisses and rebuttals, but they grew, breaking through the muted barrier.

‘I get home, everyday by six,’ Robbie’s voice rose—a deep, scratchy voice, as if he had the flu, but probably just because he wasn’t used to talking in the house, ‘And you’re still preoccupied with these friggin kids. Lettin’ them into our lives and takin’ up the time when you’re meant to be cooking *your own family* food.’

I wrapped my fingers in Aleesha’s hand as Zan’s voice responded—even Skye had hugged in tight to the two of us.

‘I am cooking you food Rob. It’s almost ready, like I said.’

‘That’s fuckin’ slop!’ Robbie’s scratch had disappeared—his voice had started to boom. ‘It’s lucky I already ate. I’m so sick of eating this shit.’

‘It’s healthy,’ Zan said. ‘Like you said. You wanted us to be healthy again.’

There was silence—all three of us kids knew we should leave. Should go wash our hands so we couldn’t hear anymore, but our feet had glued to the spot. The smell of spinach and boiled meat wafted down towards us. It curdled with the regret in my stomach—my fear that I’d started all of this with my questions.

‘I fucking meant you!’ Robbie yelled and we heard Zan stumbled, the pot on the stove clatter to the ground. We ran in to help.

Hot water and chunks of vegetables swam on the ground. Washed the stained floors, that looked like they hadn’t seen a broom or mop in at least six months. The large woman hopped up and down, whimpering at her burning feet. Robbie stood still. Didn’t break his gaze. ‘You kids, get the hell out! Go to bloody bed.’

We moved to do as we were told, obeying the aggravated authority in his voice, except for Aleesha.

‘Zan, can I help?’ she said quietly, a dishcloth in her hand.

‘It’s okay, Leesh. We’re okay. Thank you,’ Zan’s small eyes were looking everywhere but at us. ‘Robbie’s just had a tough day, I think. It’s okay.’

‘A tough life,’ we heard her husband mutter as we scurried off.

Skye came with us to our shared spare room. We listened to Leesha’s rap music on a cassette tape as our stomachs growled in time. Tears welled up in my eyes.

‘Don’t worry,’ Skye said softly—a tone I’d never thought she’d take. ‘I don’t really think it was all ya fault. Kinda been a long time coming.’

The tension in Zan’s house didn’t diffuse by morning. Instead, it grew—silent, but ever present, over the next three days. Dinner times were short and we fell asleep to slamming cupboards coming from the main bedroom. Robbie started getting home later, acting strange and smelling funny. On my last day he didn’t even get up for work. After Skye had left for school and the other babies were all settled in front of the TV, secured in cots and the play pen, Zan told me to go outside.

‘Get some fresh air, while Rob wakes up. It’s a nice day. I’ll bring you in for lunch.’

As she spoke Robbie emerged from the dark hall, glaring at all us day care kids and smelling strong of smoke and sweat.

‘Quickly now,’ Zan said. ‘Have a nice play.’

I realise now that Zan was only trying to protect me, so stop me from hearing another fight, or witnessing a man in a state that I might not otherwise be exposed to—she was trying to be good at her job. But when Mum had found me out the front, alone—where I'd wandered in search of more fun, she had not viewed it quite like that.

'Possum, how did you hear me?' she choked on the words slightly as I flung myself into her arms—she was barely out of the car and I think I bumped her, still fragile leg. 'They sent me home early. I was going to surprise you!'

'Robbie's home,' I told her, thinking that would explain it all—that I'd been sent out the front while he cursed at his wife and vomited his drinking over the bathroom floor. 'And Skye and Aleesha have school.'

My mother looked at me, her eyebrows narrowing in on her nose. 'Is Zan home too?'

'Yes. In there looking after Robbie.'

Realisation still hadn't dawned on my mother but she walked, as quickly as her leg would let her, up to the front door.

'You can't go in,' I ran after her. 'We have to wait.'

'Possum, does this happen a lot? You get sent outside, out the front by yourself.'

I told her that yesterday another kid, Billy, had been there. That really I didn't mind, because I could make up games out here and not get in trouble for making too much noise. For disturbing Robbie's head.

'You might not really mind,' my mother said. 'But I do. It's not safe. Not what I'm paying all this money for.'

Mum looked angry and I started to cry.

'I'm sorry Mummy,' I told her. 'I just wanted to do what Zan said. Because their fight was mostly my fault.'

My mother knelt down, wiped my tears from my cheeks and used them to flatten the fly-away strands of my hair. Her eyes were narrowed, but her anger was gone.

'No Possum, you've done alright. But I shouldn't have left you here. Shouldn't have let you be around all of this.'

Mum took my hand and we walked back to the car. Our black stretch of road opened up in front of us as the engine shuddered to a start. We drove home listening to a Top Cat recording in the tape deck. Mum talked along in all of the voices until I started to laugh and forgot that I'd been crying in the first place.