

Thief

As a daughter of Tere Whittacker, you had no choice but to turn out a hardarse. All the neighbours knew it, the teachers at school knew it, even your grandparents knew it and avoided their hoha daughter, and her hoha kids, who she'd had with that useless monkey of a man. A joke is what he is. That's what they told Tere when she met him, and when she got with him, and when she had her first, second and third babies with him. And they rubbed it in good when he left her with all those bloody kids and not a brass razor.

You, being the second daughter, could slip out of sight most of the time. You weren't Trina breaking the rules and smoking and shit. And you weren't the Sooky-bubba either that needed nappies at night cos she was a piss-pants. You were like wallpaper and stealth and invisibility all put together. Even the neighbours would forget to notice you, and you would hear them talking out their fat mouths about your mother and your family. It's disgraceful, they'd say, shocking, can you believe it, hooha hooha, and they'd gather at their gates to nose down the road and chip away at you like kept hens. Troublemakers those kids, pretty sure the father's in jail, they'd say wiping their hands on their aprons and rubbing their pukus full of scones. We can hardly bear it, and they'd grasp their thick chests, we've just got to keep on praying to Jesus for them.

They were liars though. You weren't even dirty and useless like they said. Your garden was always tidy cos your mother kept it like that. She scrubbed and cleaned her house, and her kids, and cut the blades of grass out the front until her forearms were pink and raw. And Trina walked youse back from school every day so it's not like you were all running round loose. Well, she was supposed to walk you, but she was like ten people spaces in front of you cos she said you suck. You say to Sook that Trina's just a cow and a ho and not to worry bout it cos you're good to walk on your own self anyway and she can just fuck up. Sook doesn't say anything much cos her thumb's in her gob but at least she doesn't ever cry.

The front door to your house is slammed shut, first from Trina and then from youse as you come in. Your mother is out the back getting the washing in and you're all into the bread and butter before she realises you're home. Get out of it you bloody kids, she drops the washing basket when she comes in and has a go. Who the hell do you think you are? Do

you think money just grows on fucking trees. Trina makes a snooty face at her and she gets a clip for that. You and Sook just disappear outta there, fast as, and let Trina have it. She deserves it anyway.

You feel the urge to sneak into your mother's room but there's no way. It's at the front of the house which means if she's busy in the kitchen you might be able to swing it, but today she's already fuming at Trina and there's no chance. Sometimes you can put in her mind that you are doing something allowed in your own room, or out the back, or whatever. Still, if Trina takes up enough time with her lip you might get away with it.

When the knock at the door comes you get ready. If there is a visitor, your mother with her worker's hands, and her straight back, and her bad mood, won't look for you anywhere and won't be able to thrash you. No matter what she says she doesn't have any such eyes in the back of her head.

Your heart beats till you're almost sick as you listen to her at the door. It's a man in a suit asking if she's Mrs Whittacker, asking her if he can come in and she says, what's this about? What do you want? And then she steps outside onto the concrete porch with him and pulls up the door so you can't hear.

You sneak into her room with your ears on high and leave the door open wide so she doesn't suspect anything if she looks out the corner of her eye. The first time you went in there you just wanted some money. Five cents maybe to get some lollies at the dairy. Or a ciggy that you could trade at school. Sometimes if you timed it right you could slip your hand right into her handbag and get a coin out of her purse just by feel. You wouldn't even look down at your hand while it was doing it's work, just keep looking out the window or into a cupboard like you were totally doing something completely else.

On this day you sit at the end of her bed and look into the mirror to see what those dog neighbours saw. You're your father's daughter, your mother often says to you cos your hair is blonde like his. You don't accept that shit and tell yourself that you are Tere Whittacker's daughter instead, with her long black silk of hair, her staunch-as back, and her immovable face. When you grow up you are gonna dye your hair if it doesn't change colour by itself.

Your mother's wide mirror takes up the whole length of her duchess and here is where she keeps

her real self. On top of her duchess she has her nan's brush and mirror, all laid out like an olden day lady would do it. When you grow up you're getting your own room too and you're going to inherit the lady brush and mirror – it's an heirloom, your mother says, which means it's forever and you must keep it till you die. It has a picture on the back made of satin, with lilac flowers on it, but it's pretty old and faded and stuff. This is not the brush she uses everyday, that one's just cheap plastic. This set is laid out on three primo doilies – a big oval one for the centre and two smaller matching ones that go to either side. The special brush and mirror are in the centre and they are immaculate. Your mother never makes a mess. The duchess is dusted. The brush and mirror are laid perfectly.

She is still out on the step talking to the man. Her voice is angry and raised and so you know she'll be there for a while. So in your hand goes, into the top drawer, the long slim compartment like a breadboard tray in a fancy kitchen. You pull on the slim handle and slide it open. First time you thought it might have smokes in it but there was way more treasure, her stash of secrets.

You have an order which you touch things in. You begin with the tiny bottles of perfume that you twist the mini lids off and sniff. You would never put that shit on, your mother would know – she can smell Trina a mile off if she's wearing smellies. There's a heap of hair clips of different sizes. You try some on but you have to memorise where you took it from and how it was placed there so you can put it straight back and she will never know. In her jewellery box there are earrings and necklaces that are old. And some ugly-as-rings. It's the earrings you want, long drop jade pendants. And small gold crosses. She is beautiful when she wears them and you want to wear them too. Sometimes you want to slip one into your pocket and keep it. You would just deny. And then you could have it with you forever cos it's so tiny no one would know.

There are little bottles of pills in there too. You don't know what they are but they will be for her sickness. And there are notes she has kept that you read again and again. Especially the one from Dad that says, Tere I still love you. J.

Sometimes there are coins and they are the biggest temptation. You want to take just one. Just a 20 cent piece. At Wendy's dairy you can get ten lollies for 10 cents. But you don't take it.

There are nail clippers and nail polish and nail files; you drag one over your fingernail but it leaves a big white line on the emery board and you put it back, panicking that she will know you've been in there, that she will know it was your fingernail, your white line.

In a small box are a set of rosary beads that are threaded together – heavy little beads like precious gems in perfect roundness that finish in a silver cross with a Jesus dead on them. Her grandfather gave them to her. She misses him and you don't pull them out but you do run your finger over the figure of the tiny man on the cross with his head bent.

And sometimes you find a bill. A demand from those money-hungry baaarstards. You have seen them all just come and go. Like the bald man on the front porch now. You check that she is still out there talking to the suit. He's waving a paper at her and she's snatching it. Mrs Whittacker, you have one month. After that you will be forcibly removed. She's not bothered by him. He's got nothing on her.

In the back of the drawer is the thing. The thing she has no idea that you even know exists. It is a long, hard, box about the size of a ruler but deeper. It is white leather on the outside with tiny gold stitches round the rim. It looks like something you'd get at first holy communion. Like the things that the immaculate would come in. When you open it the top flips up on hinges to show a thin cushion of silk where rings are supposed to go. But there are no rings.

Instead, inside it are small, yellowing teeth. Baby teeth, all lined up. The first time you found it you were scared. Then angry. These were your teeth lined up here, and Sook's, and maybe Trina's. You wanted to take them back for yourself. You wanted to storm around and yell at her that she had no right to keep parts of you in her drawer. But you didn't.

You see the man out the window leaving. You see your mother, square shouldered, waiting to see him off your bloody land. You see the neighbours with their fat arses clucking over their fences. You can hear Sook calling out to you from the kitchen. You close the box on the small and crooked bits of bone, the little treasures, precious heirlooms dotted with silver fillings, and put them quietly, quietly back.