

Financial control

Ana and Joe

8 January 1960 8.26am, Cook Islands

Ana shifted her gaze downwards as she watched the waves wash over her feet. She inhaled deeply as she flexed her toes under the soft white sand. Ana looked across the ocean and observed a fishing boat in the distance, and sighed out loud as she inspected her fishing net and bucket filled with trout. She was technically meant to be heading back home, but she was longing for a moment of solitude.

Ana ran her damp fingers through her hair and softly closed her eyes as she felt the warmth of the sun on her skin. She remembered those days when she was younger, and the sun used to awaken her and fill her bones with energy and desire. Everyday offered a fresh and different perspective. There was always something new to learn and as a child she enjoyed the feeling of being free-spirited. Whilst she was raised in a very close-knit community, she felt that when she looked out into the large expanse of the ocean there were endless possibilities awaiting her. Those had been Ana's dreams. However, all she felt these days was tired and disillusioned. Tired because of the various roles she played as a wife and a mother to two sons under the age of five, but disillusioned because of Joe, her husband.

She admired the way in which other wives spoke of their husbands, always poking fun at them slightly but in a good-humoured way. When it came to Joe, she somehow couldn't find it within

herself to speak about him in a loving way. She never shared how she truly felt about him to anyone else. As far as Joe was concerned, he was a great husband who provided for her and her family.

As Ana slowly opened her eyes, she gathered the net from beneath her and picked up the bucket of trout as she started to make her way back home. As she walked across the beach with the fishing net dragging behind her, she winced as she heard her knees slightly creak. The joys of aging, she thought to herself. It was a beautiful morning no doubt, and it was Ana's favourite time of the day because it meant uninterrupted silence. She craved those days where her mum would brush coconut oil into her hair as her legs dangled off the side of the front porch. She missed being taken care of. As much as she loved James and Noel, they took up much of her time. And then suddenly her thoughts went to Joe.

She regretted marrying him. She never wanted to in the first place. As Ana walked down the sandy path back to the village, she remembered the day her father told her that she needed to marry Joe. She was twenty-five years old.

"This needs to happen - you're getting married to Joe," Jonasi announced to Ana in Rarotongan as they sat on the floor eating yam soup.

"What? Joe Your friend's son?" Ana responded with her eyes wide, as she felt her heart sink. This wasn't how this was supposed to pan out. She was meant to announce her relationship with Taniela to her parents this week. This couldn't be happening.

"That's right, he's coming over tomorrow with his family so make sure you're back from helping your mother on the plantation by then," Jonasi said as he beckoned his wife, Lusi to pass the wilted spinach.

Ana looked like she was frozen in shock, and this did not escape Lusi's notice. Ana didn't say anything during the rest of the dinner. Everyone knew that once Jonasi made up his mind, that was that. The family knew what the rules were. He was the head of the family, and his words were practically law.

Lusi cornered Ana later that evening, whilst she was washing the pots and pans outdoors.

"What's going on? Is there something you want to tell me?" Lusi asked Ana as she handed her a pan for washing.

"I don't know what you mean ma..." Ana responded as her voice trailed off. She knew better than to lie to her mother, but how could she say what she needed to say without the fear of reprisal?

"I'm not stupid. I saw your face during dinner. You always knew this would happen, right? We spoke about you getting married to someone in the village since you were a teenager. Is it Joe? Don't you like him?" Lusi queried.

"It's not that ma, it's just that I thought that I might be able to choose my own partner," Ana responded quietly.

"Choose? I didn't have a choice and neither did your grandmother," Lusi snapped. *"You know that this is about building strategic alliances within the community. I don't need to explain all of this to you."*

"But ma I want to marry someone else," Ana blurted out.

There was a pin-drop silence. The only thing either of them could hear for ten seconds were the loud crickets chirping in the grass and the sound of croaking frogs. The unwashed dishes were now long forgotten. Ana realised she now had to reckon with her mother's anger.

"When you say someone else, what do you mean?" Lusi said slowly inching towards Ana's face, and as she did, Anna covered.

"Yes – Taniela," Ana whispered.

"Taniela as in the boy around the corner? Ana he is only eighteen! What were you thinking? Have you completely lost your mind?" Lusi whispered loudly, as she slapped Ana across the head.

Ana, who experienced an entire childhood of her mother's physical expressions of anger, shook her head to counter the dizziness and slowly moved away from Lusi without responding.

"And nobody knows about this?" Lusi asked Ana threateningly.

"No of course not," Ana quickly responded. *"I wanted to tell you and pa this week."*

"Well it had better stay a secret," Lusi shot back. *"There is no way you are ever ending up with that boy. He's been raised by a single mother and without a husband for years. That woman's reputation says it all. If there's something wrong with the bitch, then there's something wrong with the pup."*

Ana gulped as she felt tears well up in her eyes. Whilst Ana recognised that this would not be an easy feat, she didn't think that it would be this difficult. What did age and status have to do with anything, Ana thought to herself. She loved Taniela and that was all that mattered.

Lusi sat down quietly on the stool next to Ana, with her head in her hands. Ana knew what Lusi was thinking. She was thinking about how she was going to have to break this news to her husband, about how furious he'd be, and he'd somehow find a way to blame Lusi for not watching over Ana close enough to ensure that something like this wouldn't happen.

Ana already felt like a failure. She felt like she did her best to make her parents happy. People in the village had dreams and aspirations of leaving the village to a far-away land where there were large buildings and cities, and Ana often felt that her destiny would be someplace far from here. However, she was brought up to believe that her life was about ensuring that her younger brothers were warm and stayed fed, that their crops were planted so that there was food every season and that she managed the household with her mother. Of course, the expectation was that Ana would eventually get married.

Ana didn't say anything as she watched Lusi sit quietly by her side. She knew what her mother was about to say next, and she wasn't looking forward to it at all.

"You can't see him ever again," Lusi said suddenly. *"End it. Now."*

Ana wasn't surprised at this response, but she thought that she might have more leeway with her father.

"I'm going to speak to pa first," Ana responded.

Lusi turned to Ana glaring at her angrily, and said sarcastically *"Try your luck with him, see how that'll work out for you."*

Ana turned to the dishes and switched the hose back on and continued with her chores. Lusi stood up and left quietly, she felt like she had said what she needed to say, and she knew Ana's determination. This child won't let it go, she thought to herself as she shook her head walking back towards the house.

As Lusi entered the hut, she was greeted with Jonasi's tall figure standing by the doorway next to his favourite sisal rope chair by the kitchen.

"What was all the yelling about?" Jonasi asked Lusi.

Lusi paused before responding, *"Your child has something she'd like to share with you."*

Jonasi looked confused, but upon surveying his wife's expression he knew this was not good. He clenched his jaw as he made his way out onto the front porch to have a cigarette. These damn women, he thought to himself as he lit up.

The next day, as Ana was scattering corn to feed the hens in the garden, Jonasi approached her.

"You're fighting with your mother again?" Jonasi asked Ana as he approached her.

Ana paused before she responded. This was it; this was the moment of truth. But she knew she had to get it off her chest. This had been two years of her and Taniela keeping their relationship a secret and she wanted everyone to know she was serious about marrying him. With Taniela's mum it was easy, as she had known all along and had counselled Ana on the difficulties that she might have with her parents on the subject. Ana of course delayed this for as long as she could, but their relationship was becoming harder to keep a secret. The village

was small, and a couple of neighbours who had seen them together out on the plantations behind the village were already beginning to talk.

Ana took a deep breath in and told Jonasi about Taniela. About how long they'd been seeing each other and how she wanted to marry him.

Jonasi's face was blank, but his expression was steely. There was no way she was marrying Taniela, the son of a woman whose morals were questionable. She raised a young boy all alone without a husband and didn't have any status whatsoever, Jonasi thought to himself. He said nothing as Ana finished what she was saying, and then he waited. He took a step towards Ana as she flinched, and then he took her arm and dragged her inside the hut towards the kitchen where Lusi was preparing breakfast for the boys. Lusi who saw Jonasi approaching with his face looking like thunder, hurriedly told her young sons to go out to the front of the house. She was afraid of what Jonasi might say and do in front of them and she didn't want them to bear witness to it.

Jonasi pushed Ana inside the door as he loosened his grip. Ana rubbed her forearm as he released her arm.

"She is marrying Joe, am I making myself clear?!" Jonasi boomed.

"I spoke to her yesterday, I thought she understood," Lusi said quickly.

Jonasi interrupted and said *"She understands nothing! You have raised a foolish daughter, someone who wants to get married to a man who is a child! Doesn't she understand the implications of marrying into a family like that?!"*

Ana's eyes began to well up. She could almost feel like her heart was breaking. She couldn't believe that this was it, and that the decision was made. She couldn't be with the person who she wanted to be with.

"She's marrying Joe, that's my decision," Jonasi announced.

And so it was. Three months later, Ana and Joe were married. One year later, she gave birth to her first son and two years after that, she gave birth to her youngest son.

As Ana walked back to her home she shook away her memories and came back to reality, and she was suddenly filled with regret. She wished she fought harder for her relationship with Taniela, instead of giving up so quickly. Ana had in fact wanted to run away with him, she had fantasies of borrowing one of Mr Saki's boats and taking it out into the open ocean and sailing somewhere far away with her love. Whilst this was a great idea in principle, this wasn't her reality. Jonasi and Lusi kept a firm eye over Ana in the months leading up to her wedding, not letting her out of their sight. She felt suffocated, but she knew what they were doing. They wanted her to do what they needed her to do, removing Taniela from the equation.

She reflected on what her life could have been, more so because her current reality was pretty shit. Ana was in a loveless marriage with her husband. She didn't know when these feelings evolved and crept into their marriage, but it was getting progressively worse on a daily basis. There was never any passion between them. She always felt that their marriage was pure strategy, a means for close-knit families to pool resources.

As Ana looked up the dirt path in the direction of her home, she saw her family. James and Noel were playing in the front yard with bits of grass and firewood. Joe was standing in the doorway watching them and saw Ana walking up. Their eyes met, and Ana lifted the bucket indicating to Joe that she had their trout for dinner later. Joe nodded but had the same vacant

expression on his face that he always had. It was a look of suspicion, but also disillusionment. Ana had gotten used to this expression over the years.

Ana looked down as she walked around the house and entered the back garden. She had to gut and clean the fish first and soak it in lemon juice to prepare it in time for lunch. Ana turned to get the wooden chopping board and suddenly looked up to see Taniela walking by the house. Their eyes locked, and Ana felt the way she always did when they had these moments. It somehow felt like she was communicating a host of emotions to him in just that one fleeting moment. Taniela quickly looked away after three seconds, as did Ana.

They couldn't make it too obvious. They were after all, having an affair.

It had been going on for years since James' birth. That was also when the abuse started. Of course, Ana never understood it as such. She just saw it was Joe asserting his manly control over her which was what her father did to her mother for years. There was nothing about her experience that felt unfamiliar or wrong, except for the scale of the abuse.

After Ana got married her life changed in more than one way. Her attitude towards her friendships changed, she grew distant with her family and her life revolved around Joe and supporting his businesses in the village. She always thought it would be inevitable after marriage, but the difference between what her life used to be and what it was now, was stark. However, she accepted this was her new reality as a married mother of two.

The truth was that Joe was the breadwinner, and that was the norm. Joe used to be something of a loan shark, but a friendlier version. He made his money off charging interest to those who borrowed from him. Through that, Joe was able to form small village shops, importing tinned

goods and dried food from fisherman who ported in the neighbouring village. Ana took care of the house and worked in one of the shops during the day with Joe's mother.

The first time Joe got violent was during her cousin's wedding. Ana was involved in the rituals around the wedding and presenting gifts to the groom's family. Joe said he needed her to take care of matters in the shop as he wanted to meet with one of his friends. She explained that she would rush back to help his mother after assisting her cousin, and before Ana could even turn away, Joe grabbed her by the wrist and twisted it.

"Are you saying that you are more of a cousin than my wife? Didn't your mother teach you that you need to support your husband?" Joe said as he gripped Ana's wrist tightly.

Ana remembered that she froze. Sure, Joe had gotten mouthy with her in the past, but never physical. This was new, and she was afraid. And so, she did what made sense at the time, she apologised and complied. What else was she meant to do? Go up against him and find out what standing up to a six-foot two brute would look like? She'd seen her father's anger before, and she didn't want to experience anything remotely similar from Joe.

This was the start of many of Joe's temper tantrums. He'd often wait until the children were asleep and then take his anger out on Ana, usually after drinking his statutory post-dinner toddy. He'd press a kitchen towel to Ana's face so nobody could hear her screaming. He liked to hold her arm behind her and twist it until she squealed. Sometimes it was because the yams were too salty, others because his mother complained about how Ana was inefficient in the shop and was doubling her work. But most of Joe's anger came from the fact that he had an instinct about Ana's and Taniela's affair. He of course didn't have solid proof, and Ana was always as careful as she could be. Ana knew the island well. She knew of the secret twists and turns that she discovered during her younger years when she went foraging. That's how

her and Taniela first met. He was playing guitar by himself in one of the small caves hidden from plain sight, which was when Ana heard his voice for the first time.

They didn't care about age, they just wanted to be together. It was all very forbidden, but they somehow made it work. After Ana told Taniela she was getting married, he broke down. He felt like he couldn't breathe, how could this be happening to him? This was his first love, and she was getting married to someone else. Whilst Ana discussed why her parents objected to their relationship, he knew the underlying reason because his mother had explained it to him. They were different, which meant that the same rules didn't apply to them as they did to everybody else. And the age difference between Taniela and Ana certainly didn't help matters.

It was after the wedding incident that Ana asked to meet with Taniela. She knew where he was every Wednesday afternoon, in that very same spot playing guitar on his day off. She told him what happened, and how Joe was treating her.

"What if it gets worse?" Taniela asked Ana. "And why didn't you come to me about this before? You know you can talk to me about anything."

Ana felt the old feelings come back and it was like a rush of pure unadulterated oxygen. She missed the tenderness and the love. With Joe there was none. Even their lovemaking was rough and very mechanical. It was clear that all Joe wanted was children. Ana felt powerless over her own body, as Joe would climb on top of her and enter her without exchanging a single word with her. She knew she had wifely duties, but she never felt more unseen in her entire life.

Taniela and Ana never spoke about the future, and what they wanted out of their affair. All she knew was that it felt good. The affair distracted her from the abuse she was facing at home. On the days Joe chose not to exact his anger and frustrations upon her, Ana would feel

grateful. On those other unfortunate days, she would collect herbal leaves outside her home after he had finished, so that she could soak them overnight to press onto her bruises around her stomach the next day.

Ana's life had turned into somewhat of a routine, with no excitement. Except for Taniela of course.

Joe was building their forever home. He wanted it to be the biggest in the village. He was therefore in charge of the finances, and Ana did the running around when it came to feeding the villagers who were working on their home daily as per Joe's instructions. He didn't like her being on site whilst other men were there, so he carefully monitored her. The only time Joe was unable to do so was when Ana went further up into the plantations to gather yams. This was because he had a bad knee, and Ana was the only one who could scale those rocks. She used those opportunities to meet with Taniela, which frankly worked to her benefit.

"You're going to have to take out five hundred from the cash register tomorrow Ana," Joe directed her after dinner one evening.

"Is this for the house?" Ana asked.

Joe glared at her and responded sharply, *"Of course, what else would this be for?"*

Ana had gotten used to his sharp tone over the years, and she was glad that on this evening it appeared to be sharp tones rather than his sharp elbows being rammed into her.

"And don't forget to bring down cassava and those purple sweet potatoes from ma's plantation tomorrow. Do that after you bring the money to me," Joe added.

Ana nodded meekly. She didn't ask many questions in terms of what he was doing with the money and how he was handling things. She knew better than to question Joe. After all, she was just a housewife. At the very most she was a domesticated fisherwoman and a farmer. She didn't know squat about finances as her father took care of theirs for her mother, and now Joe was doing the same.

"I'm also going to use that money from your savings," Joe said to Ana as he sipped on his drink.

Ana frowned and responded, *"Do you mean that money that my father gave me as part of my dowry?"*

"Yes don't be so stupid," Joe responded. *"Of course, we need to use it. I'm putting a roof over your head too, am I not?"*

Ana knew better than to argue with him. She somehow knew that the money her father gave her would inevitably be absorbed as part of Joe's ventures, whether it was for the shop or their house project. She nodded absent-mindedly and turned her attention back to the kitchen sink.

Joe suddenly got up and moved towards her, grabbing her by the waist.

"Come it's time," Joe murmured to her back.

Ana knew what this meant. She had to perform her wifely duties and she was not looking forward to it at all. She nodded as she turned the kitchen tap off and followed Joe to their bedroom.

As Ana pulled the small yams from the ground into the coconut-weaved basket, she found herself asking herself whether she knew what love really was.

The elders in the village sang about it, like it was something they could all aspire toward, but it was never attainable. She only ever experienced love mercilessly intertwined with pain, which felt extremely cruel at times. She knew she didn't love her husband, that love was certainly never there to begin with in the first place.

Taniela watched Ana as she sat in the plantation uprooting yams. He could tell she was upset, judging by the way in which she was throwing them into the basket. She was here as planned, they planned to meet each other at this exact spot every few days. He was worried about her. He saw the slight purple bruises around her neck even from afar. He felt helpless. Joe was clearly hurting Ana and Taniela didn't know what else to do other than to be there for her.

Ana could hear Taniela's footsteps behind her, and suddenly felt reassured. She turned around to meet his gaze. He sat next to her and watched her face. Her face was blotchy, and it looked like she had been crying.

"What's happened?" Taniela asked as he gently rested his arm on her shoulder.

"The usual," Ana responded shortly.

Taniela paused before asking, *"Is there anything I can do?"*

Ana responded, *"Take me to the waterfall."*

Taniela nodded and took the yam out of Ana's hands and placed it into the basket. He took her by the hand and led her past the plantations.

Ana didn't say anything. She was holding back tears she wanted to cry. Tears of disappointment, pain, sadness and of feeling like she was locked into a life she didn't want for herself. She wanted to see what was past the ocean sea and discover a new life for herself. She knew there was hope beyond the horizon, but she had no clue as to how to get there. All she felt she had were empty dreams.

Taniela felt Ana's pain and anguish. There was a certain heaviness in the air around her and her frustration was palpable. He just wanted to make her happy, and he wanted to get her mind off of her suffering. Taniela looked back at her and searched Ana's face, but then was instantly drawn again to the dark bruises below her jawline near her upper neck. He felt a flash of anger come over him. He never grew up seeing men hurt women. All he remembered was a single mother doing everything she could to make ends meet, and he had nothing but respect for the women around him. It was clear that Joe didn't have the same respect.

Fifteen minutes later they reached the waterfall. The misty spray from the waterfall surrounded them, and it looked like magic. They were surrounded by lush green rainforest. As this was during the rainy season, the water from the top of the rocks fell fast and hard. Ana dipped her feet into the water, and it felt cool and calming.

Ana turned to Taniela and smiled as she said, *"You always know how to cheer me up."*

Taniela smiled back and put his arm around her and held her for a while. Ana allowed herself to feel everything she was holding back over the past few days and sobbed quietly. Taniela sighed as he stroked her head.

After a few minutes they looked at each other, and Ana nodded as she wiped her tears away and moved towards the water. Taniela followed her, as they both removed their clothes and placed them on top of a rock and swam out towards the deeper end of the waterfall together. It was like old times, where neither of them had a care in the world. As their bodies met in the water, their lovemaking was slow and sensuous.

After they finished, Ana made her way back to her home and Taniela returned to his.

“They’ve asked us for half of the deposit on the house Ana,” Joe said as he flicked through paper receipts as he sat down on the living room floor.

“Well we have that don’t we?” Ana turned as she responded to him from the kitchen.

“Yes of course we do,” Joe snapped. *“I just need you to take the rest from ma when you see her tomorrow at the shop.”*

Ana nodded meekly. Joe never left Ana in charge of finances. If she ever wanted money, she had to ask his mother for it. After Joe took Ana’s dowry money and most of her savings having claimed that it was for the purposes of building their business together, Ana had very little left for herself. Joe oversaw the finances and as a result she had nothing of her own to fall back on. Therefore, Ana developed a strategy. Every time she was asked to take money from Joe’s mother, she would skim a bit off the top. It was much harder to do a few years ago, but now with Joe’s mother’s early-onset senile dementia, it became a much easier task. Ana managed to put a significant sum away for herself.

Recently, she was becoming more and more worried. Joe seemingly looked like he had the finances under control, but she saw that he was worried about running out of money. They had put everything they made from their businesses into the house they were building. Ana had always thought they had a significant amount that was being generated from the business, but she could also see from the manual ledger stored in the shop that Joe was taking more than what they were making. She also noticed that he took money out from the cash register without letting either her or her mother-in-law know. Instinctively, Ana felt she had to protect herself and her children. She felt awful taking money without asking but she felt she had no choice. As she did this in small increments, neither did Joe nor his mother were able to clock on.

Ana took a walk from their home to the shop to do as Joe asked. As she turned a corner, she looked up and her eyes met with Taniela's. He was standing across the pathway, with a carrier filled with firewood. As they exchanged glances, they also exchanged their desires with one other. It was this ferocious intensity that existed between them that was indelible.

Ana never understood love to be this way. It was the self-sustaining type of love that she witnessed between her parents growing up. Lots of passive aggressive comments and gendered expectations without a lot of affection. Ana sometimes wondered whether the affection existed before her parents had her, but upon witnessing their behaviour for many years, she realised that women were meant to perform their duties as wives upon being married and that was all there was to it. There didn't seem to be a sense of her mother having an identity of her own, other than being a wife and mother. Ana always wanted more for herself. She often fantasised about meeting someone who would see her for the person she was and would embrace her quirks. Meeting Taniela was that and more.

Ana and Taniela quickly tore their gazes away from one another and looked away. They knew they couldn't risk someone observing them, but the problem was there always was. Joe who

was helping contractors store bricks under the house, had observed their interaction from the side of the house. All Joe could really do was to make Ana's life miserable, casting upon her all his insecurities and secret loathing that he had for her. He knew she didn't care for him the way in which other wives seemed to care for their husbands. She seemed to do what was required of her, but her heart wasn't in it. Joe figured that the only way he could get control back over an uncontrollable situation was to constantly remind her that she was the woman, and he was the man, and what better way to do it than to exert his own physical strength over her?

As Ana made her way into the house, she observed contractors storing items in the front of the building. She realised she had no visibility of finances, and how much of her own money was put into this venture. She was glad she had her little nest-egg of money that Joe was unaware of as she was getting the overwhelming feeling that she might need to use it. She was feeling extremely unsettled by Joe asking for more and more money, and their main business was already deeply in debt. Ana decided that she would need to review the ledger book that Joe kept in the closet to see how much was being put towards the house being built and whether they were healthy from a financial perspective.

Joe was due to go away to a neighbouring village to oversee an import that had just come in. Ana decided that she would use this opportunity to review their finances. As Ana watched as Joe was picked up by the village truck and driven down towards the port, she waited for the dust-cloud on the road to settle before she made her way to their bedroom. She softly closed the bedroom door and used the mini stool to reach the top of the closet where Joe kept records of their finances.

As Ana reached the top and brought down the shoe box which had the ledgers, receipts and other paperwork, she felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. This felt wrong, but at the same time she needed to know what the true state of their financial affairs were. Ana rifled through the shoebox and noticed a bunch of signed pieces of paper. She was confused, were these with builders and contractors or with other people?

She noticed names on the paper of her neighbour, family friends and her parents. This was odd, Ana thought to herself. She saw that there were amounts loaned to Joe for varying amounts. There was no reason for these loans, just straight cash loans with a payment schedule. Ana was in shock at some of the figures written on these invoices. They were for hundreds, with an indefinite period with interest being tacked on. She pulled out a writing pad from the bedside cabinet and started taking notes. She added the total repayment figures per month to assess their outgoings. According to her calculations, they should have been out of pocket every month if Joe complied with the payment schedule, but that simply didn't make sense. Joe never mentioned this, and she surely would have noticed him making these sorts of payments. Unless of course, they were in debt and Joe wasn't making these payments. Ana gulped as she processed this thought. How much debt were they in exactly, she thought to herself.

Ana added the totals of each invoice and gasped at the total. This was ridiculous, how could Joe have incurred this much debt? Ana placed the invoices to the side and reviewed the contents of the ledger. There were the totals of contractors and builders which made sense, although these numbers were quite intense. She took note of the total cost of construction-work which looked to be slightly under the total debt figure she noted. Instinctively, Ana flipped to the back of the ledger book.

Envelopes were slipped in between the pages with the names of women in Joe's handwriting. Mary. Another envelope was titled Genevieve. Teulia. She opened the first envelope and saw

letters from Mary, and as she read the scrawled manuscript her stomach dropped. The first letter read:

“Joe, this month Hanna needs money for school fees. Could you send across the amount on the invoice in this letter? We really do need the money – you missed last month’s payment and I’ve had to take up a second job.”

The letter dropped from Ana’s hand, and she started to shake. She knew what this was. These were different women, Joe had other families. She saw the address on the envelope, and these were all sent to her mother-in-law’s house. Ana’s head started to spin. So, her mother-in-law knew. She opened the other large envelopes, and the other letters were in manuscript scrawls around the same lines. The addresses of these women were in other villages. This all made sense as Joe made several trips to these villages on a regular basis as he claimed he needed to maintain trading relationships with suppliers. Ana wrote down the addresses of the women on the same notepad. It was almost as if she needed to prove to herself that there were other women in the picture.

She rifled through the rest of the ledger and saw schedules of payment, except each page wasn’t the name of a woman, just numbers 1, 2 and 3. That was it, three women and three different families. And Joe was financially maintaining each of them. Ana’s head was spinning but she knew that in this situation, she really couldn’t say anything. Her bargaining position had been eroded. There was no mention in any of the books of her dowry money, and so Ana safely assumed that Joe used these funds long ago.

Ana put the ledger book and other papers back into the shoebox and returned it to its original place on top of the wardrobe. She had to think. She wiped her sweaty hands over the front of her sarong and opened the bedroom door as she walked towards the back of the house and sat on the kitchen steps, looking towards the hills surrounding the village.

What was she going to do? It was clear that Joe had dug them so far into financial debt that there didn't seem to be a viable way out. There was nothing she could do. All her neighbours probably knew, and her family was involved in this financial mess as creditors from what she had seen. If Joe couldn't pay off these debts, they would be ruined. She needed to come up with a plan, but not right away. Ana blinked back tears, suddenly realising that the life she once thought was stable was about to blow up.

Ana didn't say anything to Joe that night when he returned from his trip. She cooked, cleaned, put the kids to bed and gave Joe head. She woke up the next morning realising that she needed to get out. She could take the kids and run. There were ships porting, and she could easily make that happen. Somehow start a life on another island and never return. And then she thought of Taniela and her heart sank. What about him? She would miss him. Their financial situation could ruin her and her family. She had her kids to think about. Nobody would ever help them out ever again if they found out that their family couldn't make their debts good. The reality was that there was no money available in the pot. She was aware of how much Joe's businesses made, but it was nowhere near enough what they needed to pay off the debts he had incurred,

She decided that she would speak to Taniela about it during one of their weekly meetups in the plantations. She told him everything, about what she had discovered and what she planned to do, escape.

"You're not thinking clearly," Taniela said exasperatedly. "You just upping and leaving isn't going to solve a thing. Ok yes, you'll be free of Joe but what about us? What about everything we share?"

Ana pressed her eyes closed and looked down. It wasn't like she was completely unaware of where her and Taniela stood at all. She knew that it would mean the end of hers and Taniela's relationship. But what she also knew was she was a mother and had her children to think about. She wanted to give them the best start at life, and she knew what the implications of Joe's behaviour would mean for them. They would be isolated as a family, with no opportunities, friends and connections.

"You're not a mother, Taniela and you will never understand the impact of this on my kids. This will ruin us," Ana finally responded. *"And what about you and I? We've long accepted that this could never be a thing. This has always been an affair because I'm a married woman. Now what I'm suggesting is that I take the kids and start afresh somewhere else – maybe on another island. You are more than welcome to join us."*

Taniela didn't respond. He was deep in thought, what about his life? His mother, cousins and business, he'd be giving all of that away for Ana and her kids. The reality of the situation dawned on him, and he felt stuck. He loved Ana, he did. But he didn't understand why he had to compromise. The reality was that both him and Ana had gotten comfortable in their five year-long affair, and he didn't expect there to be any seismic changes to their existing model.

Ana could see from his expression that he was deeply conflicted. She was asking for a lot from him, she realised. Not only was she uprooting her life, but she was expecting him to do the same.

The reality was that Ana had been in an abusive relationship for years, and that never triggered her to leave at any point. She just saw it as something that she just had to put up with. She felt that she was never good enough and deserved to be reprimanded on a continuous basis. It really did depend on Joe's mood and how merciful he happened to be feeling on that day, but the outcome was always the same.

She had gotten used to Joe's abusive behaviour and was willing to put up with it for the rest of her life, but Joe's financial misfeasance was what pushed her over the edge, perhaps it was because she thought that his actions would impact her kids and their respective futures. Little did she know that both of her children had witnessed their father hitting their mother and it would have a lasting impact on their lives, changing the way in which they made sense of their own human relationships. The funny part was that Ana was not able to identify Joe's behaviour as abusive, she just thought she would never be good enough, and that she deserved every bit of mistreatment that she received from him. Her self-esteem was absolutely shot.

Ana decided that she would put her plan into action. She remembered seeing that the first payment due date would be in a month, and she wanted to leave ahead of this taking place to avoid the commotion that would follow. She was also keeping a keen eye on the incoming funds into Joe's business, and the next set of profits barely covered the first payment due the following month according to the figures she saw in the ledger. Ana decided that she would leave by boat from one of the neighbouring villages which Joe didn't frequent. She phrased it to the boat owner as a trading visit that she was organising for her friend and two of her children, when in reality it would be her boarding that boat at 6pm that day and taking off to Niue. There was enough room for one extra person, they informed her. She immediately thought of Taniela, would he come with her? Would he? There was only one way of finding out.

Ana met Taniela that afternoon in their usual spot. His expression was blank when she told him her plan. He shook his head.

“Ana, you’re expecting me to uproot my life here and simply go away with you. What about my life and my responsibilities to my mother? How do you expect me to take that? Not everything revolves around you,” Taniela said sharply.

Ana knew better than to push this any further with him.

“Look I’m just telling you. This is what I’m going to do. There’s a space on the boat if you change your mind,” Ana said, as she gathered her weave basket and made her way back down the hill.

As Ana made her way home and surveyed the long winding dirt roads surrounded with cane fields, she realised that she would miss home. She’d miss her family, and the community. But she knew that what she had grown up knowing would soon change. The warmth of the people and their generosity would soon disappear. As she made her way down the path and entered her home, she watched Joe as he carried out a bunch of papers from the bedroom. She was now able to discern when he was lying to her. Joe generally had the look of a man who was unhappy with the way in which his life turned out and wanted everyone to know it. She also knew that there was a cruel side to him, which nobody else seemed to be aware of. But when Joe was hiding something from her, his eyes would widen and he’d have a paranoid look on his face. She now knew, but for years she didn’t. It was funny how men could lie so easily, she thought to herself as she watched Joe make his way out of the house.

Ana planned to pack her childrens’ clothes in advance and leave them in the abandoned goat shed in the back garden. Joe never went back there, so it was safe. She would do the same for herself. She wouldn’t take too much so that he would notice, just the necessities. Ana was surprisingly calm about this, but she knew what the protocol was. She had hers, the childrens’ and Joe’s travel papers which Joe naively trusted her with. She would take hers and leave his behind. She would write a letter to him telling him that she knew about his financial

misfeasance. Ana would then leave taking the last ship in the afternoon so that he wouldn't be able to track her on the day. She used different names to book hers and her childrens' places on the boat. It was all planned to a tee. All she had to do was execute her plan.

It was almost as if Joe knew that Ana was up to something. The abuse was getting exponentially worse. He was now grabbing her in clear sight of their children, sometimes twisting her arm so hard that it would leave bruises. She put up with it knowing that in the end she would come out winning. Leaving him would be the worst humiliation for Joe, and she couldn't wait for his comeuppance.

In the days leading up to D-day, there were several people who had come by to the house to have private discussions with Joe. Whenever this did happen, Joe excluded Ana from these conversations and he'd pull into a separate room where quiet voices were used. Thankfully Ana had a head-start and was aware of what was taking place. The sharks had already begun to circle.

The next day went exactly according to plan, but Ana felt like she needed to go and see Taniela one last time to check if he had changed his mind. As she walked up the dirt path, she noticed that Taniela's truck wasn't outside his home. As she peered into his backyard, she noticed that the usual stack of gardening tools, tractor and clay pots weren't outside his home.

"You looking for someone dear?" Mary, Taniela's neighbour, called out.

Ana swung around abruptly and responded, *"Oh nothing, I'm just looking for aunty."*

"You missed them, they left yesterday," Mary responded.

Ana's heart suddenly stopped. They left?

Ana gulped hard and then asked, *“Left to visit relatives in another village?”*

“No no, they’ve moved. To one of the neighbouring islands. Last I heard was that they were planning to move to Samoa and then eventually New Zealand where they have family,” Mary said as she studied Ana sheet-white face. *“They didn’t tell you?”*

Ana said, *“Oh I’m pretty sure they mentioned it but I didn’t realise it would happen so quickly.”*

Mary smiled curiously at Ana and nodded slowly. Ana quickly turned her face away and walked mindlessly towards the ocean. Left? How could he have left without telling her? She felt hot and cold all over, why would he just leave without telling her? Did she mean anything to him? Did she mean that little to him? All these thoughts were swimming through her mind. None of this made sense. As she made the walk back home, Ana’s face was dark with worry. She felt as if someone had wrenched her heart out. She thought he loved her, and that he would at least tell her what his plans were and say goodbye.

Ana made her way to the backyard and shut herself in the garden shed, leaned on the back of the door, shut her eyes as she took several deep breaths. She knew that a mountain of instability was headed her way with the decision she made to leave her husband by essentially running away from home with James and Noel. So why did this hurt so much? Was it because it was unexpected and there was no closure? Or was it because she felt like he rejected her versus her rejecting him? Ana inhaled sharply and exhaled slowly. Why did this hurt so much when she was essentially doing the same thing to him?

She stayed in the garden shed for ten more minutes until she heard Noel’s small fists knocking on the door, looking for her. It looks like the kids had already returned early from her mother’s.

Ana wanted to keep the kids close to her today. If she had her way, she would have run away from Joe weeks ago, but she needed to time this perfectly.

Her instincts when she found out about the hold that Joe dug himself in, was to up and leave him immediately. He mocked her, hurt her, made her unhappy, and the very least she could have relied on him for was financial stability so that they could give their children a good start at life. When he failed at that, Ana asked herself why she was even in this marriage in the first place. Confronting him would be what most wives would do, but Ana knew the game. Tipping him off wouldn't solve a thing, it would mean more control, more restrictions, more beating and less that she could do about her situation. No, she needed to pre-plan and outsmart him. Although she realised that every passing day she was chancing her life. If Joe ever found out that she was plotting to leave him and take James and Noel with her, she'd be dead meat. Literally.

She also needed to time it for when the right ship would take her to the right place, far away from Joe's reach. In an ideal world, it might have worked out well with Taniela leaving and them doing this together, but she realised that whilst it would have been her idea, it wasn't Taniela's intentions to be with her and the kids. As she ushered Noel back into the house and started preparing lunch for him and James, she realised that the affair was what it was. Just an affair. There was no longevity, no planning for them to be together in the end. She was alone in her marriage with Joe, and equally alone in her relationship with Taniela. Ana fought back tears that were forming at the back of her eyes as she placed yams on the stove to boil.

Ana heard the front door open and heard footsteps. Her heart stopped, why was Joe back home this early? She felt her body tingling with anxiety as she controlled her breathing.

"Have you heard?" Joe asked Ana as he stepped into the kitchen.

"Heard what?" Ana responded, as she avoided meeting his gaze.

"Taniela has left the village. Something about him leaving for Samoa with his mother," Joe said slowly examining Ana face.

Ana who was aware of this kept her face expressionless, looked towards the kitchen sink and responded, *"I heard that from somewhere yes."*

Joe didn't say anything and quietly left the kitchen after a few seconds. That was a close call, Ana thought to herself. He didn't throw this news back in her face like she thought he would. She continued to prepare the childrens' lunch and was quietly brainstorming. Shit, why was he home so early? He needed to be out of here before 6pm so she could grab their things and catch a van that she arranged in a neighbour's name about two kilometres away from their house. She was trying to do it as incognito as possible, but she realised that one missed step and Joe would kill her if he found out what she was trying to do.

Ana decided she needed to do some digging as to what his plans were for the afternoon. She could say she was heading up to the hills to farm later that afternoon and use that as her excuse out, but she had to do it in a way where it sounded legitimate and vanilla. Nothing out of the ordinary or unusual, she was just yanking yams out from the ground.

"We're running low on yams so I'll be going out this afternoon to the hills to collect them," Ana called out to Joe in the living room.

Joe absent-mindedly flapped his hands at her without responding. He wasn't suspicious. Good, Anna thought.

5pm came sooner than expected, and Ana took James by his hand and put Noel in a sling on her back as she headed to the shed. Joe headed out to the shop that afternoon, allegedly. At that point, Ana no longer cared whether he was taking out more loans or spending time with one of his other three families. She had reached the point where she just wanted out and to have nothing to do with him anymore. She felt betrayed, yes. And she had accepted that those feelings may never go away. But she felt like it was heartbreak upon heartbreak, because not only was she hurt by Joe's actions, she also felt abandoned by Taniela too. If it wasn't for James and Noel giving her a sense of purpose, she would have been a wreck.

As Ana grabbed a duffel bag containing their clothes and placed it inside the woven basket so that it looked like she was headed to the hills, she paused at the door of the shed before she made her way slowly past the gap in the fence and made her way to the dirt road, passing the tall cane plants and disappeared out of sight. Her heart was pounding, she couldn't believe she was doing this. She was escaping the life she had chosen, taking the two pieces of her heart with her, yet feeling extremely disillusioned and hurt from what she discovered over the past month. She had to be strong for her children, Ana realised.

"Ma, where are we going? This isn't the way to the plantation," James said to Ana and he gripped Ana's hand tightly.

Ana gulped hard before she responded, *"Don't you worry, we're going somewhere special today."*

"Where?" James asked with a puzzled expression on his face.

Ana smiled before responding, *"You'll see."*

The cool breeze blew through Ana's hair as she observed the endless horizon of water ahead of her, as she stood on board the ship's deck. The nervousness wasn't able to leave her body. Until they had left the port, Ana knew that she wouldn't completely be at ease. She kept having these mental images of Joe clocking onto her plan, following her on board the ship and dragging her and the boys back home. As she turned around, she watched as James and Noel held each other, with Noel resting across James' chest. Her heart softened. In the end, she knew she did it for them.

The ship's horn blasted as she felt movement slowly across the water. Ana felt an overwhelming sense of relief - she did it. There was a slight hiccup when she was trying to board the ship, as a member of the crew was suspicious as to why a woman was travelling alone with two children without her husband. Ana who had expected there to be hiccups, provided the name of a male and said he was waiting to receive them at the port they'd be disembarking at. Ana knew better than to leave a clean trail for Joe to find her, and so upon arriving to Niue she would take the next boat out to Victoria. She would take advantage of the fact that there were masses of migrants moving out to New Zealand at the time and would simply get lost in the shuffle. She didn't want to be found by anyone. Neither her family, nor Joe. She was more than happy disappearing, she lived her entire life as a hologram for everyone else around her, what difference would it make if she just dropped off the face of the earth?

As Ana sat next to James and Noel and drew them closer to her, she reflected on her feelings. She closed her eyes and took herself back to the solitary figure standing by the beach as she observed the large expanse of ocean, in brilliant blues and greens. That was the only time she was able to reflect on her innermost thoughts. Whilst she was surrounded by a lot of people, she was lonely. She loved her children, but her marriage to Joe was painful and had been since the day she married him.

Ana didn't understand what "abuse" meant in practical terms and the implications of that on her mental well-being. All she felt was that she was siphoned into a cookie-cutter life. The life of her grandmothers', her mother's, her aunt's and sister's. She always felt restless, but she never understood why. Every single day that she was asked to conform, she felt an inner resistance. Joe's ill-treatment of her simply made her reality more uncomfortable, but it wasn't to say that her reality wasn't uncomfortable already. Taniela proved to be a useful distraction, Ana thought as she closed her eyes softly.

Taniela. What about him? Last she heard, he was moving to New Zealand as well. Should she look him up? What should she do? She wasn't sure how she even felt about him. He left without telling her. Who would do something like that? It made her question the basis of her feelings for him, and a part of her regretted having felt anything for him in the first place. In the end, she was alone. The only love she had right now, was for her children. Her family, husband and society had disappointed and hurt her. In that moment, as Ana observed James and Noel, she realised she was doing the right thing. Victoria would be a fresh start for them.

Ana had a soft smile across her face as she allowed herself to drift off to an uninterrupted sleep for the first time in years.

II

Disrespect

Hoshanna and Daniel

14th February 2019 2.42pm, New York City

Hoshanna scabbled around her very messy desk, trying to locate her ringing phone amidst her tech pitches strewn across her desk. For a Friday, today felt exceptionally busy.

"Hello yes?" Hoshanna asked, upon finally locating the phone on her desk and answering the call.

"Is this Hoshanna?" a man asked over the phone.

"Uh huh yes, sorry who is speaking?" Hoshanna queried as she absent-mindedly scrawled the details of her last meeting on a pink post-it note.

"Is your husband Daniel?" the man asked.

"...yes...sorry who is this again?" Hoshanna asked again.

"I'm very sorry Hoshanna but I have some bad news for you," the man replied.

There was a short pause after he said this. Oh my God, Hoshanna thought to herself. Did something happen to Daniel? Had there been an accident? She felt her throat go dry, and she suddenly broke into a cold sweat.

“Your husband has been having an affair for the past 2 years with my wife. I found out last year in April and we’ve been separated since,” the man said.

If there was ever a moment where Hoshanna felt her heart physically stopped beating, this would be it. She felt like the carpet beneath her had swallowed her up entirely. She felt nauseous and anxious, and without even noticing, her fountainpen dropped onto the floor with a resounding thud.

“I’m sorry but who are you? What do you mean my husband is having an affair? And what’s the name of your wife?” Hoshanna asked as her voice quavered.

“Ex-wife,” the man corrected. *“Her name is Maya, and I am Benjamin. And I’m guessing that you don’t believe me, judging from the tone of your voice,”* Benjamin said.

“I’m struggling to understand why you are calling me at work, on a corporate line. I don’t know who you are or what you want but I’m not entirely convinced that you are telling me the truth. What is your motive? And if you left her last year, why are you only coming forward now?” Hoshanna pressed.

She was determined to not believe in what this man was saying, she pondered for a moment as to whether this whole thing was orchestrated by an extremely agitated corporate customer of the company she worked at. Although this felt a bit too cruel, even for an extremely vexed client, Hoshanna silently thought to herself.

“I thought you had the right to know,” Benjamin responded, “And I have proof that what I am telling you is the truth.”

Benjamin then proceeded to provide Hoshanna with details of her personal life. He knew about her parents, their professions and where they worked. He also told her that he was aware that her brother was in mining and that both he and his wife lived in New York. This was all very Googleable, Hoshanna thought to herself, and immediately pointed this out to Benjamin.

“How do you know all of this? And this information can very easily be accessed by a scammer with anyone who has enough motive,” Hoshanna said in a matter-of-factly manner. “Who set you up? Is someone paying you to do this?”

“My ex-wife told me all of this when she came clean last year, that’s how I know,” Benjamin responded simply.

“Ok well I don’t believe you. I find it really strange how you held back on this information for just under a year and you’re only telling me this now. What exactly is it that you want?” Hoshanna asked.

Benjamin paused for a moment, and then revealed something that completely turned the conversation around.

“Do you remember that one time when your husband accidentally called you on his mobile phone? There was Daniel, a woman’s voice in the background, I’m sure that you remember this don’t you?” Benjamin asked. “Didn’t you ever put the pieces together and wonder whose voice that really was?”

Hoshanna paused for a moment and responded, *“Yes...but he explained that. That was his cousin and his child. But in any event how do you know about that?”*

Daniel’s family was from Connecticut, and it didn’t surprise her at all that they could have nipped down to the City to visit Daniel, although she did think it was a bit strange at the time that they didn’t pay Hoshanna a visit. She also always found it strange that other than Daniel’s nuclear family, she never had any of Daniel’s other family member’s contact details. Not even any of Daniel’s friends.

Benjamin said simply, *“My ex-wife told me. He was with her that day. Your husband told her about the conversation you had in your home when you asked him about who he was with on the day, and he relayed the conversation you had with him, to her. And when I confronted her about the affair, she told me about this incident. About how you almost found out about his affair if you had listened to the conversation for longer.”*

This was the red herring. This set him aside from every con-artist and scammer out there. This man was telling the truth. Nobody else could have known about that conversation Hoshanna had with Daniel. She remembered that when she overheard his voice when Daniel misdialled her, that he sounded happy. Bubbly and excited. The sad part was that when he told Hoshanna that he was with his cousin, she believed him. Hoshanna felt like the world’s biggest idiot.

Benjamin then went on and on about other bits of information that he had about Hoshanna’s occupation and where she worked, but at that point her entire mind went completely blank. There was a part of her that didn’t want to believe him but deep inside, she knew that what he was saying was true. Daniel was having an affair.

“...and Maya and I have a child together...” he added.

“*Oh my God,*” Hoshanna said out loud. So essentially, Daniel broke up their family. Hoshanna felt sick.

“I didn’t want to be the one to tell you this, but she may be pregnant again. I can’t be certain, but when I saw her the other day at our family home, she looked like she may have been. I felt it was right to reach out and tell you about this, just in case it was his,” Benjamin said.

Hoshanna felt like someone had stuffed razor blades into her mouth and she was choking on her own blood. She felt disturbed, nauseated by this. He might have gotten her pregnant, she thought, and what added to this was that he hadn’t touched Hoshanna in years.

So that pressure he kept putting on her from the first year of marriage when she turned 23, it was all for this? Because Daniel wanted to be a dad? Hoshanna clutched her head in her left hand with her eyes closed. She was starting to see a kaleidoscope of colours. How had her life become like a film script?

Hoshanna was now remembering all the times Daniel avoided having sex with her, trying to schedule in sex like it was a chore because he was allegedly too tired over the course of the week. She didn’t think too much of it at the time but was a massive relationship red flag.

Benjamin kept talking about how he was made to feel in all of this, and talking about the betrayal and the scale of it but at this point all it felt like was that his words were collecting around her in puddles.

Hoshanna also felt ashamed. Ashamed that because she couldn’t give Daniel what he wanted, and he sought it elsewhere. Ashamed that she couldn’t keep her marriage together.

Ashamed that she discovered all of this from a third party, which added a further layer of humiliation.

She felt like she was falling down a well, with nothing but darkness ahead and moving farther away from the light and everything she thought she knew. She thought that perhaps only something like the Spanish Flu could make her feel this physically sick. She couldn't control how she was feeling. She closed her eyes tightly shut and listened to Benjamin try and convince her that what he was saying was the truth. This was their marriage he was talking about, and yet, he was a complete stranger telling her things and she was engaging with it to a certain degree. Why? Because a part of her deep down knew that he was telling the truth.

"Oh and I know where you live because Maya told me," Benjamin added, and then proceeded to recite Hoshanna's home address.

Hoshanna instantly knew that this was probably because Maya had been to their house and had sex with Daniel. In her bed, and in her Egyptian cotton sheets, Hoshanna thought to herself bitterly.

Hoshanna still felt the need to continue to press Benjamin on his motive for reaching out at this point and why he didn't do so much earlier. After asking him a further three times sounding pushier and more aggressive each time, Benjamin burst into tears.

"You don't know what I have been through, this has been a lot. This has not only impacted me but my entire family. I didn't feel the need to reach out immediately because my life was falling apart," Benjamin said as he sobbed loudly.

Hoshanna's heart broke when she heard this. The compassionate side of her felt for him. Intuitively she knew that these weren't crocodile tears - this was real pain. She could hear the

hurt and sorrow in his voice. She suddenly felt sick with guilt and remorse. But at the same time she knew I had to talk to someone about this immediately and the only person she could think of was her mother.

It almost felt humiliating to talk to her mother about this as she feared judgment, but what she needed was support. Even in her 40s, whilst Hoshanna tended to give her mother a wide berth and only saw her on Hannukah and Rosh Hashanah, Hoshanna couldn't process this news alone.

Hoshanna hesitantly thanked Benjamin for calling her to let her know, and slowly put the phone down.

"You can call me if you have any questions you know, I know this is a lot to take in but I thought that you really needed to know," Benjamin said.

Thankfully Hoshanna had an office so she could process this devastating news in her very own private air conditioning.

"Thanks," Hoshanna said shortly, as she ended the call.

Hoshanna exhaled. *"What now?"* she said to herself out loud.

And then she broke down in tears on the carpet in her office.

Hoshanna took her mobile phone into the conference room and called her mother Sara, who answered the phone immediately.

“Don’t think I don’t know that you didn’t keep your fast for the 15th of Shevat, Hoshanna,” Sara started after Hoshanna greeted her. “It’s like I’ve always said darling, it was all well and good keeping fast when your life wasn’t working out well, but now that all is going rosy for you this is the time you need to be grateful to our creator,” Sara said.

“Am,” Hoshanna abruptly cut in. “Is papa there? If he is, please leave the room as I need to talk to you about something really important.”

Sara suddenly went quiet and responded, *“Ok Hosh, give me a second.”*

Hoshanna waited until Sara told her it was safe to speak, and then she let it all out. She told Sara about the phone call and what Benjamin had just spoken to her about, not leaving out a single detail.

Hoshanna could hear Sara’s voice shake over the phone and her breath shorten. Her mother was clearly shocked and devastated by this news, which was understandable.

Sara too started with her line of questioning. Who? What? Where? When? How? Hoshanna wished that she knew all the answers to her questions. She too, like Hoshanna, was cynical about the phone call. When Hoshanna told her about the red herring, Sara seemed to dismiss it. A part of Hoshanna wanted to dismiss it too. Daniel was the definition of a perfect husband, how could someone like him be capable of such betrayal?

“Clearly someone is trying to break your marriage, are you sure your witch of an aunt isn’t behind all of this? She’s still peeved that you dumped her son in the 90s,” Sara bitterly commented.

“Am, how are you not taking this seriously?” Hoshanna said exasperatedly. “Do you not understand what is happening here? Daniel is having an affair. What do I do?”

“Yeled, we don’t know anything yet. This could just be gossip and rumours and there’s no need to get worked up by all of this. You and Daniel have been married for years now, just talk to him about it,” Sara said assuredly.

Hoshanna told her mother to tell her father after they finished speaking. Hoshanna couldn’t bear the thought of having to tell her father all of this herself.

Hoshanna knew that she needed to know the entire truth. She wanted to confront Daniel about this, but for some reason this all felt very insidious.

There was more to this, she felt. She always knew that deceit was a pattern of behaviour. In her job as chief financial officer she would fire employees if she found out they were in any way deceptive, even more so if she caught them lying. So why should a marriage be any different? Where there was one lie, there would be more.

As Hoshanna left the conference room and walked down the corridor to her office, she considered whether she was being too hasty. She rubbed her eyes wearily, as she entered her office and sat down. Hoshanna quietly packed her things and told her secretary that she would be working from home for the remainder of the afternoon.

It was Valentine’s Day, Hoshanna realised. Benjamin really did choose his timing well.

Perhaps a part of Benjamin expected Hoshanna to confront Daniel with this information on the day and ruin his Valentine's Day, but Hoshanna was smarter than that. She'd seen it many times, all you needed to do was give a man time and a pen, and God knows how many lies they'd manage to come up with. The best thing in this scenario was to discover the truth for herself, rather than expect answers from Daniel.

Yes she wanted to go in shouting and screaming at Daniel about what he had done to her, and to their relationship. Intuitively, Hoshanna knew that this would not result in a positive outcome for her. They lived together. They owned assets together. What were her options? Did he have a right to remain in a house that her family paid for? What about her furniture? Was it now their furniture? Hoshanna pressed her fingers to her temple and slowly closed her eyes as these thoughts ran through her mind as she sat in a cab during the drive home.

She decided en-route that she would not confront Daniel about things, at least not immediately. She needed to keep her cover, and for that to happen she needed to go with the flow, but she wouldn't blow things out of proportion. Red roses from a 7/11 would do for now. Hoshanna asked the driver to stop by a neighbourhood store and bought red roses for Daniel, as she did every year on February the 14th. Except that these weren't luxe roses, these were basic, just like Daniel, Hoshanna angrily thought to herself.

The truth was, Hoshanna was torn. Torn between knowing what she knew of Daniel, the same man she met in temple as part of a set-up, to this man that Benjamin described him – deceitful. Hoshanna was trying to reconcile all these thoughts in her mind, while also factoring in Sara's comments about the whole situation being a witch-hunt. She decided not to speak to Daniel about the telephone call, until she had more information and assessed how she truly felt about all of this.

As Hoshanna paid the cabdriver and walked up to the brownstone apartment, she turned the key into the lock and was met with the sight of Daniel watching TV with his feet up on the designer antique ottoman she bought before they were married. Great he was home, she thought as she breathed in deeply.

“Hey are we doing anything today and tomorrow? I have a lot on this weekend and may need to go into the office,” Daniel called out to Hoshanna from the living room.

Bastard, Hoshanna thought, upon hearing his voice. She felt hot and cold all over. She was keen not to blow her cover, but how could she keep a straight face whilst armed with the knowledge she possessed?

Daniel walked to the reception area, his slight frame standing at the door with his black rimmed glasses and mousy brown hair curling away from his face. Something happened in that moment, whatever rage she had melted away. This was her Daniel. HER Daniel. He would never do this to her.

Hoshanna didn't know this at the time, but this is very often what happens to most women. It all feels well and good to be objective about things upon being tipped off, but when you see them in the flesh, whatever love she had for him took over her.

For a few moments, Hoshanna found herself balancing these warm fuzzy thoughts with streaks of objectivity. Did Hoshanna ever really love him? Did Daniel ever really love her? What was love? Was it loyalty and monogamy? Or was it more of a matter of convenience so that they could pool resources to be able to afford the lifestyle they had as a couple? These thoughts were all swimming in her head as she put her coat away, kicked her Mary-Jane Manolo Blahniks off her feet and brushed past Daniel as he stood at the doorway.

"Hello, aren't you forgetting something?" Daniel asked, gesturing towards the bunch of red roses that Hoshanna left lying on the table in the reception room.

Hoshanna looked at the roses and said "*Oh, happy Valentine's Day darling.*"

"Thanks love, yours are in the kitchen," Daniel responded.

They weren't even roses, Hoshanna noticed as she peeked into the kitchen. They were Poinsettias. Her heart hardened and all feelings of love that she had in that moment quickly dissipated.

"*Son of a fucking bitch,*" Hoshanna muttered silently under her breath.

Hoshanna knew she needed to do her due diligence. Something wasn't right. It wasn't just the second-grade flowers and the knowledge she had, their life together was a hologram and involved a lot of box-ticking. It all felt very functional, and she never really had a chance to think about whether her and Daniel were ever truly happy. Where was the passion? Was there even any passion to begin with?

Hoshanna told Daniel that she needed to get an early night. She felt sickened. She needed to come up with a plan, but she needed to sleep on it first.

She took a couple of sleeping tablets and fell asleep in their marital bed, whilst Daniel fell asleep on the couch that night. Little did she know at the time, Benjamin's call was just the tip of the iceberg.

Money.

He'd need money to have an affair so there must be some sort of a paper trail, Hoshanna thought to herself.

Unlike Hoshanna, Daniel barely had a full-time job. He too was in tech but didn't make nearly as much as Hoshanna did. Although Daniel did make contributions to the house and the life they led together, it was ultimately Hoshanna who did most of the financial heavy lifting.

Hoshanna pondered the next Saturday morning, vaguely recollecting that Benjamin had talked about a hotel that Daniel and Maya used to frequent. Obviously, they would need money to be able to be able to maintain that lifestyle, and this perhaps would be reflected in his bank statements. Hoshanna heard the door to the bedroom open and close. He said he'd be out this weekend, Hoshanna remembered. This was the time to verify matters.

Hoshanna waited an hour and heard the front door click shut. She looked out of the window on the first floor, and saw Daniel walk down the stairs below her and out onto the street. She didn't care who he was fucking at this point, she needed to get to the bottom of this.

She waited three minutes until she saw him turn a corner, and then she got to work. She walked into the study towards Daniel's desk. She opened the drawers and started rummaging. She saw a set of bank statements with an elastic band wrapped around it. Fuck it, I'm opening these, Hoshanna thought to herself.

The bank statements looked fairly non-controversial. Although she noticed that there were a few bank accounts she never knew existed with small balances in them, a couple of thousand dollars here and there. There were a lot of cash withdrawals, she noticed. A 100 here, 200

there. 50 sometimes. Mostly from ATMs in the City. Cash, she thought. No trace of how the money was being spent. She remembered what Benjamin said, that Daniel paid for hotels in cash. There were no card transactions.

None of these were the smoking gun, Hoshanna thought to herself. And then she noticed a strange bank charge on one of the statements. A monthly direct debit to a dating website, for about 40 dollars. Hoshanna's heart sank, this bank statement was dated a few years ago. So this was going on for a long time. Her mind was now going wild, there most certainly had to be more evidence if there were more women.

She remembered that Daniel used to keep bags in the loft. He claimed these were old clothes that took up too much closet space, and he kept these in the back. Hoshanna never bothered herself with accessing the loft being the 5 foot 2 diva that she was. She scrabbled to climb up to the loft, putting all her weight on her forearms, avoiding using the step-ladder that Daniel used to access the loft that weighed a tonne. Perhaps whatever further context she needed was in those bags, who knew. All she knew was that there were secrets, and she needed to discover them.

Hoshanna managed to hoist herself into the trap door in the ceiling placing her feet on the lengths of the narrow corridor to inch her way up. It's amazing how pure adrenaline turned Hoshanna into an overnight gymnast.

Hoshanna coughed as she inhaled a dust cloud, and quickly brushed herself down. She crawled her way to the back of the loft where she could see where the bags were kept. Jesus, these were heavy, Hoshanna thought as she grabbed the first bag by the handle. She zipped them open and couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Stashed in the bag, were women's clothes. Correction, under-clothes. Lingerie, and lots of it. Polyester and flammable. Lots of lace. Lots of stains on them, these were used. Why would he keep them in bags? Hoshanna was horrified. She removed a few of the lycra dresses and unfolded them to inspect them and noticed that they were cheap and wouldn't cost most than ten dollars apiece. She noticed there were shoes at the bottom of the bag. US size 10, she noticed. She zipped up the first bag and opened the next.

There were similar items in the second bag, except for a dildo the size of her forearm.

"What in the actual fuck!" Hoshanna exclaimed. She lifted it up and saw that it felt greasy and immediately dropped it back into the bag. What did this mean? Did he make these women use it on him? Did he use it on them? Or did he use it on other men? And why was that sex-toy so large? It was practically the size of her forearm. Hoshanna's head started spinning but she knew she needed to keep going. She wasn't sure when Daniel would return and she knew there was more she needed to uncover.

As she rummaged around, she noticed colourful wigs, unused thongs still in packaging, makeup and costume jewellery. It was either Daniel was a cross-dresser, or that he was a deeply disturbed human being. Hoshanna veered towards the latter, as not only were the clothes (and shoes) not in his size, but that foundation really wasn't really his shade. These were trophies, she realised. Trophies of his nights out spent with trashy women who he met on equally trashy websites.

Hoshanna collapsed onto the floor of the attic, and as she did, dust billowed up from under her. She looked down at the open bags, and felt like she was having an out of body experience. It was as if a part of herself hovered above, observing herself, sitting amongst tombstones that represented her marriage. There was no going back from what she had just seen.

It was as if all the innocence in the world had left her. Suddenly she saw images of her playing in her grandmother's back-garden in their Hamptons holiday home. She saw her five-year old self playing with flowers and leaves, the childhood that her parents sought to preserve when she was young. It was like all the purity and belief in the good that existed in people had left her. She felt completely broken.

Hoshanna had seen enough, and she didn't want to see any more. She quickly zipped the bags back up and pushed it to the back of the attic to its original place. Hoshanna made her way out of the loft and practically jumped from the ceiling and landed on her knees and forearms. It was then that she noticed the deep marks on her hand, probably as a result from using her forearms to hoist herself up into the attic. She replaced the hatch-door, went to her bedroom and called Sara.

"I told you not to go looking Hosh, but now what are you going to do? You were planning to have a family with him soon via surrogacy, were you not?" asked a very worried Sara.

"Am this is it, I am going to end it with Daniel. I need your support now more than ever," Sara said decidedly.

After speaking to Sara, Hoshanna then called the same lawyer who drafted her will, requesting that he put her in touch with a good family lawyer in New York.

"I would also like to update my will, could you please send on a draft and I'll make the necessary amends?" Hoshanna asked Jon, her lawyer.

"Of course, and Hoshanna there's something I'd also like to say about the situation, may I?" Jon asked.

“Go for it,” responded Hoshanna wearily. The last thing she needed right now was outside counsel. She just wanted to get on with matters.

“He will get his karma,” Jon said.

“Thanks Jon,” she responded.

Hoshanna ended her call with Jon, and put her plan into motion.

Hoshanna was a modern woman living in New York City. Her entire life involved working hard to develop her career and balancing that alongside expectations that she would marry a good Jewish boy. She thought back to some of the things her mother said to her when she was little.

“Look at that poor Alma girl, she married a Christian and look how her life has turned out. Her poor mother can’t even show herself in temple after her split from that goi,” Sara said in the car when Hoshanna was about ten years old.

“You see with these non-Jews Hoshanna, you will find it very hard to practice your faith Yeled. Our belief is that we need to marry someone of the Book. Hosh, don’t make the same mistakes as my sisters. Look at aunty, her life is practically cursed,” Sara said to a young Hoshanna.

As Hoshanna spent the most of her Sunday striking out all references to Daniel’s name in the draft will that Jon sent over, she reflected on her past decisions. She was angry. Angry with herself for marrying him, angry with the disrespect she had been shown, angry with herself

for holding indoctrinated beliefs, and angry with how she found out about the affair. The image of womens' lingerie burned a hole through her brain. Was that what he liked? Trashy lingerie on equally trashy women? These weren't even La Perla, more like La Target.

Hoshanna always felt the pressure to marry someone who was Jewish. After she graduated university, she knew that it would only be a matter of time before she would start being asked to find someone a suitable partner, and by the time she met Daniel, she just wanted the pressure to stop. He seemed safe, quiet. Educated and moderate in his thinking. He seemed enlightened, and in her experience, there weren't many enlightened non-Mummies, Jewish boys around town. And so, she married him.

Intuitively she felt something was amiss. He seemed so nice, but somehow she always felt she had settled. Settled so that she could be with someone who wouldn't get in the way of the religion that she was born into. The same religion she often felt so disconnected to. But she followed the path of least resistance, because she wanted to preserve the relationship between herself and her very tight-knit nuclear Jewish family.

Upon reflection, Hoshanna didn't conduct enough due diligence. His family lived in another state, he had very little friends and didn't have a great relationship with his family. From Hoshanna's understanding, this was a very painful part of Daniel's past that he didn't want to discuss and Hoshanna as a result, didn't pry. But perhaps she should have, Hoshanna thought to herself as she redlined her will on her Macbook.

Upon sending the revised version of her will to her lawyer, Hoshanna made a list of all the things she wanted to speak to an attorney about on Monday. Finances, property, alimony... she needed a better idea of what her rights were.

"In the absence of a pre-nup, he gets 50% of everything," Jon said, during his advice to Hoshanna.

"Excuse me, what?!" Hoshanna exclaimed.

"You married him abroad like we discussed, did you not?" Jon queried.

"Are you telling me, that despite the fact that I picked up the bill on most things in our marriage, just because we got married in a stupid castle in another country, this son of a bitch gets half of everything I have?" asked a very stressed Hoshanna. She had twirled a strand of her hair so tightly around her index finger that it had started to turn blue.

"In a hutch yes," Jon said.

"So let me get this straight. The money he asked for, for me to fund his courses after we got married. The money I gave to him when he was struggling ...that all counts for nothing?" Hoshanna asked.

"Well you gave that of your own free will. Was there any duress involved?" Jon asked.

"What do you mean by duress?" Hoshanna asked.

"Well did he threaten you? Did he walk you down to the bank and force you to sign over money?" Jon asked.

"No obviously not, but I was asked multiple times for money and after months I gave in. It seemed like the only way out," Hoshanna responded.

“Then I’m sorry, but that money is gone. We can’t trace through and get whatever you gave him back. And in any event, he’s entitled to half the equity in your house, in cash as you acquired it during your marriage. So it’s either you sell the house and split the proceeds, or you pay him off in cash,” Jon said.

“This house is a three million dollar hit! Are you joking?!” Hoshanna exclaimed.

“I don’t joke to my clients, Hoshanna. I’m simply advising you from a legal standpoint and given you were married in another country, this is what you’re entitled to,” Jon said simply.

Hoshanna went quiet. She couldn’t believe any of this.

“Right,” Hoshanna said after fifteen seconds. *“I would like to file for divorce. What do I need to do?”*

Once Hoshanna received the draft divorce petition from Jon, and signing off on her revised will, she started thinking about D-day. What she needed, was her home back. She wanted him out, which was the Great American tradition after all upon discovering your spouse was cheating.

Hoshanna had never been so sure of anything in her entire life. During the period between verifying Daniel’s extra-marital affair and planning her soon-to-be divorce, she had the time to watch Daniel and process the state of her marriage. Daniel flitted in and out of the house of his own accord, Hoshanna never asked any questions and Daniel never felt the need to explain his exact whereabouts.

It wasn't just Daniel's manner, it was also the way he spoke to her.

"And you're surprised he made a pass at you Hoshanna, when you're wearing a blouse like that," Daniel said, upon Hoshanna telling him that one of her colleagues made an inappropriate comment towards her at work.

Hoshanna was able to conduct a review of their entire marriage and suddenly realised that he wasn't a kind person at all. There was a cruel side to him, a side he hid from the rest of the world that Hoshanna had come to witness only after marriage. Because good Jews don't live together before marriage, Sara reminded Hoshanna often enough.

A part of Hoshanna hated Daniel. She hated him for taking away the best years of her life, leaving her disillusioned and heartbroken. She hated the fact that he took advantage of her trust and kindness, and shit all over their marriage with his whores. She hated the way he made her feel, barren and childless. Like she failed as a woman to even want to try having a child with him. She hated him for how he broke her trust in people and in men.

She was struggling to hide how she felt about him.

"You know sometimes when you look at me Hoshanna, it looks like you really do hate me. Is there a problem?" Daniel asked Hoshanna during their drive to a work event.

"No nothing, there's nothing at all," Hoshanna responded. Hoshanna hated lying, but she needed to ensure that she got her timing right.

She didn't doubt that Daniel would destroy every shred of financial evidence upon him finding out that she wanted to leave him. The drill was that every time Daniel left the house to have another one of his affairs (Hoshanna presumed), she would go through his documents and

send photos to her lawyer just so he had all the facts. This was all apparently within the bounds of the law, it just felt little shady to have to do it behind your husband's back. She underestimated how exhausting this process was, as every time she saw what he was doing with money, she felt triggered.

"I ask my clients the same question every single time, but do you think he will get violent when you do eventually confront him?" Jon asked Hoshanna.

"I mean, Daniel has gotten handsy on a couple of occasions but I don't think he's a violent person," Hoshanna responded.

"When you say handsy, what do you mean?" Jon prompted.

Hoshanna then went on to describe Daniel's temper tantrums. When Daniel didn't get his way, he would often fling something small across the room, and every time Hoshanna tried physically leaving the situation, he would grab her by the arm.

"So he has the capacity to get violent," Jon said.

"I'm not sure I would classify that as violence per se..." Hoshanna responded with her voice trailing off. Although Jon had a point, she thought. If Daniel knew his gravy train was about to leave the station, surely that would leave him in a fit, wouldn't it?

"I would advise that you let the police know about this in advance," Jon advised. *"Just call them a day ahead, explain the situation, just so they are aware. It wouldn't hurt, Hoshanna."*

"Ok I'll do that," Hoshanna said, as she jotted down yet another note in her iPhone, adding yet another item in her checklist of things to do.

As the day drew closer and Jon was finalising her divorce petition, the reality of the situation dawned on her. She was creating objective lists of things to do, to get out of a marriage. Wasn't the normal thing to simply confront your spouse and ask that they leave? Why did she feel the need to carry out all this prep work? Hoshanna realised that this wasn't a normal situation, because Daniel wasn't a normal man.

He had a way of twisting things around, making her feel like she was the crazy one. If Hoshanna confronted Daniel closer to the time that she made her discovery, there was a chance she might just forgive him and stay in the relationship. As a woman, she knew what her weakness was – believing male bullshit. Hoshanna knew intuitively that he wouldn't make it easy, which is why so much planning was involved. But this much planning? It was because there was so much at stake.

Hoshanna spent so much of her time burying her mind in the detail of ringfencing her assets, while her emotions remained frozen in time. She hated him, she hated what he did to her and how he made her feel.

She couldn't find a way to deal with her emotions, or to even really process what had happened. She would deal with it later, Hoshanna thought to herself, once that toxic son of a bitch was out of her house.

Hoshanna received an email from Jon a couple of months later, confirming that the divorce petition was sitting on ice and a restraining order was drafted just in case he got violent. This was such a well-engineered divorce, Hoshanna thought to herself. She made the decision to confront him on Shabaat, the day of sabbath, the following week.

“Daniel I need to speak to you about something,” Hoshanna said the following Saturday morning.

D-day had come. Hoshanna sat on their dark blue velvet couch and nervously fiddled with a cushion as she spoke. She was dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans without any makeup on. She figured that if she needed to duck and weave in the event that Daniel lost his shit, she certainly wasn't going to do it with lipstick on, she thought to herself as she washed her face earlier that morning.

“Sure,” Daniel responded from the study, as he made his way into the living room. Hoshanna could see that he was still in his pyjamas, with his hair messy and unkempt. Vulnerable, she thought as she examined him. Good.

And then Hoshanna let it rip. She told him everything she knew about the affair. About the phone call. The clothes. The bank accounts. She didn't feel the need to mention his subscription to the dating website, but she told him enough to let him know that the relationship was done. The only difference was that Hoshanna backdated this information to the day before rather than three months ago when she received the call from Benjamin.

His face was expressionless, which amazed Hoshanna.

“Are you telling me that you are going to believe the words of a random person over the phone? Have I not been there for you in this relationship? Have I not been present for you whilst you've been living out your great American dream of making it to the top of the corporate ladder?” Daniel spat at Hoshanna.

“Daniel stop, I know you did this. I saw the clothes,” Hoshanna said, as her voice quavered.

“Those clothes were for my own pleasure,” Daniel calmly responded.

“Daniel those clothes were obviously used with stains on them, just stop lying to me!”
Hoshanna exclaimed.

“There is more than one type of betrayal Hoshanna,” Daniel said.

This was classic Daniel. His arguments were always circular, as if he wanted to pin it all on Hoshanna every single time. Out of exhaustion, Hoshanna would often give in, but this was her life and today she would stand up to him.

“Daniel I want you out and I’m filing for divorce,” Hoshanna said.

“You can’t make me leave. Look, while you think about things I’ll just stay here in the room. I’ll be quiet and won’t make a sound. You can’t just throw me out,” Daniel persisted.

Hoshanna couldn’t believe it. After all that she discovered, he still wanted to stay in the same house as her. Then she suddenly realised, Daniel didn’t have anywhere to go. No properties, no assets.

“Daniel, I need my space. After everything you’ve put me through, I need this time,” Hoshanna pleaded.

“Hosh you can’t make me leave,” Daniel said.

This conversation lasted for four hours. Hoshanna was tired and drained. Daniel kept looping in and out of the living room, coming up with a new plan of action every single time, to try and

find a way out of the situation. Hoshanna considered calling her parents, but she knew it would complicate matters.

“Daniel you can’t just sit here. I know about the affairs. I know about the other women,” Hoshanna blurted out.

At this point, Daniel had come so close to her. Hoshanna broke out into a sweat.

“I need my family right now Daniel, I need support,” Hoshanna said as she looked Daniel in the eye. Hoshanna then slightly turned away from him, feeling uncomfortable with how close he had gotten.

Daniel then reached out and grabbed Hoshanna by the shoulders, as if to try and stop her from getting away. Hoshanna wriggled free and moved quickly away from him.

It wasn’t like Daniel hadn’t gotten handsy with her before. But not like this. She remembered what Jon had told her, *“I’m really sorry if he does get violent, but if he does, it will work to your advantage. You can call the police and have him removed from your home.”*

Hoshanna slammed the ball of her left foot on Daniel’s foot, and as he recoiled in pain his grip loosened and she managed to release herself from his grasp.

As Hoshanna quickly moved towards the door, she said *“Daniel, you have chosen to exercise your right to remain in the marital home, and I’m going to exercise my rights.”*

As Daniel rubbed the top of his foot, he looked up and said *“What do you mean? What are you going to do?”*

"I don't have to tell you," Hoshanna said as she ran to the broom closet and locked herself in with her mobile phone and dialled 911.

"This isn't legal yet, right?" Hoshanna asked the young man staring at her with a rolled-up newspaper, on the corner of 49th and West.

"Well for medical purposes yes, recreational – no," the man responded.

"Right well here's 50 bucks, have a great day!" Hoshanna said as she took the newspaper as the man handed it to her. She really needed to get high. As Hoshanna turned a corner and made her way to 53rd street, she found herself deep in her own thoughts.

The past few weeks were a blur. Moving Daniel's things out were a task. She didn't realise how much he accumulated over the years, but whilst the process of packing his things into boxes and loading them into a truck ought to have felt quite therapeutic, the whole process was emotionally draining.

Hoshanna was coming to terms with the end of her marriage, and she found herself trying to numb her feelings in every way possible. She was drinking a lot, very often passing out on the floor of her kitchen floor with the TV and lights on. Waking up on a Saturday morning with an empty bottle of Prosecco, her head resting on a sticky floor, with sick in the kitchen sink and her cats staring at her inquisitively had become a normal occurrence. Her life felt like a whirlpool. Receiving hostile emails from Daniel's lawyer, coming home to an empty house after a long day at work and consuming one too many shots of gin before bed, trying not to think about whatever she was feeling.

She felt as if she had lost out on her youth by being married to Daniel from such a young age, so to compensate, she was behaving like a sixteen-year-old with a credit card. Hoshanna redecorated the house, threw way too many parties and brought home a variety of men. Most of them not Jewish and certainly not circumcised, and she very often thought that this knowledge would traumatise her mother.

Hoshanna turned left onto the street and walked toward her favourite jazz bar.

"Fuck," Hoshanna said out loud as she saw the queue to the club.

As she spoke to the host and hesitantly joined the queue, she mentally egged herself on to have some patience. Hoshanna reached for the gummies that she had just bought from the dealer that she stashed in her pocket. After she chewed three, she put the rest away. It had been a while since she did marijuana, and so she wanted to try and take it easy. As she stuck her AirPods into her ears, Hoshanna observed the affectionate couple in front of her holding one another tenderly.

When was the last time Daniel showed affection, Hoshanna asked herself. The whole concept was a distant one. It wasn't like she was ever like a cold fish to begin with, but she felt that in the relationship she had to be the one wearing the pants. It took away from the feeling of her coming to terms with the fact that she was a woman with needs. She lost herself in the process and instead focused on what the unit needed. They needed to sustain the lifestyles they had, and they certainly weren't going to be able to do it on Daniel's salary alone.

Hoshanna never thought that she was ever the type of woman who would resent her partner for making less, and she never did. But it was only after her separation from Daniel that she realised she was the one making the large purchases. As a couple, they agreed that this approach would be best as Hoshanna earned more. However, Daniel always made her feel

bad about her privilege. They needed her money to be able to live in New York, but she was allegedly 'unrelatable' and wasn't one who could 'empathise' with Daniel's own financial struggles given her wealthy background.

Hoshanna glimpsed at her watch as she realised that forty-five minutes had passed, and she wasn't high. She was also feeling hungry, so she decided to eat the rest of the gummies in the packet. Hoshanna didn't check how much she was dosing, however as the drug-guy told her it was low-dose, she figured that finishing the bag wouldn't be such a bad idea.

When Hoshanna finally made it into the jazz club, one and a half hours later, she ordered food and drinks as she watched the jazz band. She felt like for once in her life, she could enjoy things like this and not feel yuppy-guilt. Hoshanna slowly swayed to the music as she nibbled on her wasabi-infused octopus. She felt light, and all of a sudden she felt like her skin had become like playdough. What was happening, she thought to herself as she started touching her forearms and neck.

Oh fuck she thought to herself, she was high.

It felt like a slow decline, like somehow the alcohol and drugs were interacting in a strange way with one another. And all of a sudden, she felt sick. So she went to the bathroom and threw up whatever she ate and drank that night. Was this because she had this all on an empty stomach? She blamed the long queue and her stupidity for consuming an entire bag of gummies. Pretty dumb move, she thought to herself as she hurled one more time.

As Hoshanna went back to the bar feeling slightly better, she closed her eyes for a few moments. Why was she doing this? Consuming drugs and alcohol was a recipe for disaster, but she still did it. Had this become her coping mechanism? Going in so hard without thinking about consequences? She wanted to go to the bar opposite the street and meet guys, but she

certainly wouldn't be doing that in this state. She was swaying precariously and looking at everyone around her anxiously. She felt unsafe, and she needed to get out of there.

As Hoshanna turned to grab her purse from behind her seat, she saw that a man sitting across the bar was looking at her. She realised she recognised him. He was a mutual friend. She remotely remembered her friend trying to set her up with him when she was in her twenties but she turned him down on account of the fact that he slurped his soup. Hoshanna grinned outwardly as she remembered this, but poor David was already making his way over to her, interpreting her grin as a green light. Oh dear, Hoshanna thought to herself as she took a sip of water.

"Hi," David said to Hoshanna as he sat in the chair next to Hoshanna.

"Long time no see," Hoshanna responded.

"What brings you here?" David asked. "And can I get you another drink?"

"No, no noooooo," Hoshanna sung as she giggled. "I need to be sobering up actually."

David smiled and then said, "I think you're fine."

Hoshanna remembered David taking her hand and taking her to another club around the corner. She drank more tequila, and then the rest of the evening was a blur. There were two women dancing near their table, and Hoshanna remembered wedging herself in between them and grinding on them. She didn't know what came over her, other than the fact that she wanted to feel free. She remembered groping the woman in front of her, feeling how amazing her breasts and hair felt. And then she remembered grabbing her by the face and kissing her passionately. Hoshanna didn't remember much after that, other than the feeling of elation.

Like she had transcended her body and was in heaven. She was high as a kite and didn't care who was watching her.

Hoshanna couldn't remember where she lived, so David took her back to his. He put her in the shower and told her to shower it all off, which she did. Surprisingly she managed to take her earrings and bracelets off, with their enclosures intact and placed them in her Marc Jacobs bag. She scrubbed her face with the shower gel in the bathroom and wrapped herself in a towel.

"Is there a bathrobe?" Hoshanna called out to David.

"Unfortunately, not, I've just moved places and everything is still packed up," David responded.

Hoshanna was way too tired to process any more information than this, and so she walked out of the bathroom and put herself into David's bed. David realised that she probably didn't know where she was and got into bed with her after a while. Nothing happened between them, but when she woke up at 7.30am the same day, she was filled with regret. She also felt like shit. She wearily rubbed her eyes as David entered the room with two cups of coffee.

"Look, you don't need to say anything. I just needed to get you someplace safe as you were starting to black out," David said to Hoshanna as he handed a mug of coffee to her.

"I really gotta go David. Thanks so much for taking care of me, this has been great but I have stuff to do," Hoshanna said as she placed the coffee mug on the table next and moved towards the chair where her crumpled dress lay.

David nodded quietly. He secretly wanted things to kick off between them, but he knew too well about Hoshanna's divorce and that she was clearly going through something. He called her a cab and watched as it drove off.

Hoshanna leaned her forehead against the frosted window. How could she have blacked out this badly? It was like she wanted to numb every nerve ending in her body, so she didn't have to come to terms with the way in which she was feeling. Hoshanna was never one to cut loose in this sort of way, but the lack of responsibility and care for her own wellbeing and safety scared her.

As she entered her home and examined her smudged mascara and patchy face in the entrance mirror, she asked herself out loud "*Who are you?*". In that moment, she promised herself that she would get help. She needed to talk to someone about how she was feeling.

She felt like she was trying to break down the person she was because, clearly, proceeding the way she had been hadn't worked out so great for her. She wanted to discover who she could be, but she wanted to experience all the darkness first.

Hoshanna had always been a good girl, but she wanted to know what it felt like to go off the rails for a bit. She wanted the adrenaline, she wanted to experience things that were outside of her comfort zone. She wanted to break rules, and although doing a bit of Molly wasn't exactly hard drugs, she was afraid that it would be just a few more things out of the ordinary before she would have finally passed the point of darkness.

Hoshanna quickly reached out to her insurer that same morning and made an appointment for a referral. She needed a therapist and to nip this destructive behaviour in the bud.

It had been six months since her separation, and Hoshanna wondered when it would start getting easier. She was officially a single Jewish woman in her 40s and wondered how she had gotten to where she was. Daniel and her only spoke to each other via their attorneys. It came as no surprise that Daniel wanted alimony and everything she had in the bank.

Hoshanna was also grappling with another concept, which was that she was a victim of domestic abuse.

“No look, he’s gotten physical a few times and before that it was just yelling and berating me,” said Hoshanna to the police, and later to her therapist.

“Hoshanna you need to read the police’s guidance notes on this on what domestic violence really is. It doesn’t need to be physical all the time. From my understanding, he was trying to obtain control over your finances and insisted on access to them via a joint account. And in other instances he would ask you for money and wear you down just so that you could part with some of it to pay towards his courses,” Jennifer said, who was Hoshanna’s therapist.

“Yes but that’s Daniel being Daniel, he argues for hours on end and wears you down until he gets what he wants,” Hoshanna said.

“That’s abusive,” Jennifer said, after a few seconds.

Hoshanna took the time she needed to digest this. How could she not have known she was a victim of abuse for years? She studied criminology at university, and of all people she ought to have known this, how could she have not? She then realised, that she never knew what a good relationship looked like because prior to meeting Daniel she never dated. Her parents

forbade her as a young woman and told her to focus on her education. Like the straight-A student that she was, Hoshanna complied.

Daniel was her first, and she realised that he preyed on her naivete. He was twelve years older than her, and even though he wasn't holding onto a particularly steady job at the time, she went with the flow. She needed to find her *besheret*, as her grandmother once said. The person who was destined for her. Provided he was Jewish of course otherwise she would suffer for her sins, in short.

Hoshanna sunk deeper into the therapist's couch, how could she have allowed her blinkered-off approach affect her ability to reason? Had religion taken that much of a toll on her life that she couldn't see the wood from the trees? She realised that her need to please her family, and please God was what made her make these decisions. Without Judaism in her life, would she have even married Daniel?

Hoshanna closed her eyes and took three deep breaths, and then after half a minute, opened them.

She looked at Jennifer and said, *"Jennifer, thank you. But there's a lot of processing that I need to do right now by myself. I need to reflect on what we've discussed. Can we meet in a week?"*

"Sure thing, Saturday April the 25th? Actually sorry that's Sabbath for you. What about a weekday the following week?" Jennifer asked.

Hoshanna sat up from the couch and responded briefly, *"The Saturday works just fine Jennifer."*

Jennifer nodded and jotted the date down in her notebook.

As Hoshanna got up from the couch she looked outside the window next to her and added,
“In fact, let’s schedule it for every Saturday going forward, even if it is Shabaat.”

Hoshanna paused and then turned around to face Jennifer and added, *“God and I are good.”*

IV

Exploitation

Katrina and Tristan

25th May 2000 8.56am, Auckland, New Zealand

“Seriously Katrina, when are you ever going to listen?” Tristan shouted, as he threw a used saucepan into the kitchen sink.

Katrina stared into her empty cereal bowl, wondering when Tristan’s tirade would be over.

Arguments like this would kick off approximately once every four months. She liked to call it her ‘quarterly review’.

“You think that Dylan and Jess will ever really get it?” Tristan asked bitterly as he turned to Katrina. *“It’s all well and good that you want to advocate trans-rights, but did you have to do it at a wedding? We don’t need to know about your role on various committees. I mean hell, I hear about it often enough at home with you!”*

Katrina knew better than to answer back. She knew the drill. Say as less as possible, so that she could get out of the situation. This was a cycle that used to repeat itself repeatedly, taking place over the course of their three-year relationship. Although it never used to always be like this. Katrina closed her eyes and remembered the time they first met, three years ago.

They met at a house-warming party in the North Shore. It was during Pride week, at an after-party. She was going through her gender transition at the time and had just returned from a particularly brutal hair removal session, and despite the body makeup she liberally applied to her skin that day, she was feeling self-conscious.

Katrina wasn't particularly forthcoming to others about her journey. Yes, to everyone she was Katrina. The surgeries were confirming who she felt she always was. She was a woman and felt like a woman. On that day, despite how she felt about her slightly bruised and sensitive face, she felt empowered. She was in alignment, and everything she was doing was simply a confirmation of that.

"How do you know Liz and Joanna?" Tristan asked Katrina as he walked up to the drinks table, where Katrina was struggling to decide between tequila and gin.

"Liz is my cousin," Katrina responded looked at Tristan as she flicked her golden highlights out of her face. Attractive, she thought to herself as she surveyed his high cheekbones and dark eyes.

When Katrina and Tristan locked eyes in that moment, Tristan felt spellbound. Who was this fabulous creature? With her narrow-set eyes and impish looks, she looked like someone he wanted to get to know more.

Personally, Katrina had never experienced chemistry like this before. She didn't have a particularly blossoming love-life. With her struggles growing up in a conservative Christian household, she spent most of her life trying to make sense of Steve.

Steve was the name she was given at birth, and she hated it. She hated how all it did was put her in a category that she felt she could neither identify with nor relate to.

Her entire life was spent trying to make sense of why she couldn't just wear a dress. Why couldn't she look and express who she was? Why did she have to play football with her scruffy older brothers? Why couldn't she just be herself, without fearing ridicule and rejection?

She confided in one of her classmates in class during Algebra.

"What if I feel like a girl?" Katrina asked Jennifer.

"What do you mean?" Jennifer asked.

"I mean I feel like a girl, I am a girl...just like you," Katrina responded.

Twelve-year old Jennifer paused for a minute before responding.

"Well, if you feel like a girl, then you are a girl - that's all that's important. You should do what makes you feel good right?" Jennifer said quite simply.

Katrina visibly relaxed. How could she receive such acceptance from her Algebra-buddy, but yet get belted at home by her father for refusing to partake in the family rugby tournament?

Katrina was used to feeling like a victim. She was beaten, alongside having her views and feelings invalidated on a constant basis. Her parents always felt that she was different. She was meant to be a boy, according to them. By the time she reached fifteen, she told them that she was sleeping over at John's place whilst secretly painting her nails at Jennifer's house smoking a joint on her bedroom floor whilst listening to Britney Spears.

“This is purely psychosomatic,” Heather the psycho-sexual counselor said as she turned to face Katrina and Tristan.

“With dilation and tools we’ve given you, this really is a process. You must keep at it. That may be semantics for the purposes of your transition, but I can see how this is frustrating for both you and Tristan in terms of trying to achieve intimacy in your relationship,” Heather added.

“When you say psychosomatic, what do you mean exactly?” Katrina queried with a confused expression.

“Even prior to your transition, you mentioned having feelings of guilt and shame around sex, which is not uncommon in children who have lived in religious households,” Heather responded.

“What I’m trying to say is that this is a sensitive area. Prior to your relationship with Tristan, we were already working through these issues. We’re going to try and get you to comfortably relax so that we can progress intimacy and sex post-surgery, through dilation,” Heather added.

Katrina sat back on the couch in Heather’s glass office on Queens Street. All of a sudden that gelato outside Smith and Caughey’s was looking pretty good. She felt deflated. Let down by her past and yet, her future wasn’t catching up fast enough with her reality.

“Well what can we do to get some normalcy?” Tristan asked as he leaned forward.

“There are ways,” Heather said. “I’d suggest that rather than Katrina treat this like a transition-related exercise when she dilates on a regular basis, that you somehow get involved, Tristan.”

“Ok, what do I need to do?” Tristan queried as he sat up.

Katrina and Tristan left Heather’s office feeling exhausted. Tristan came off as the poster-boy for all things supportive. He seemed engaged and empathetic in Heather’s eyes. However Katrina noticed a different side to him when they were at home alone. When Katrina first met him, he was charismatic and a real charmer, and coupled with his boyish good looks, Katrina thought he was a complete catch.

These sessions were always a strain on Katrina and Tristan’s relationship. Katrina tried her best to educate Tristan on all the details linked to her transition, and he initially seemed to be pretty understanding.

“We’ll go through this together Kat, I know there’s a lot involved in terms of supporting you through this, but I completely understand,” Tristan once said, after a particularly stressful doctor’s appointment.

“Thank you for all your support – it means the world to me,” Katrina responded.

Katrina was always under the impression that they would do things as a team, but things changed when they moved in together. Tristan seemed to constantly resent Katrina for anything related to her transition. Katrina felt that she had come into her own after she announced her transition to her work colleagues, friends and her family.

At work, Katrina moved from strength to strength, and the promotions kept rolling in. She was now managing director at a consultancy firm in the City, and she felt like she had finally made it in spite of the odds.

She didn't understand why life had to feel so hard, and why she constantly felt misunderstood. She now realised that she was hiding her soul from the world, and more importantly herself. Dressing up at home, having her hairdresser come to the house just to give her a blow-out so that she could feel effeminate wasn't enough. She wanted to shout who she was from the rooftops, without fear of judgment.

"So are you saying that Steve is now a girl?" Katrina once overheard one of her work-colleagues say in the cafeteria.

"No no, he said that he was always a girl and he's a 'she' now," another colleague responded.

"So he's a 'shim'," another colleague giggled.

Katrina felt her ears and face burn up, as she quietly slunk away from the salad counter with her back hunched. Why did she feel ashamed? She wasn't ashamed of who she was, but the judgment was something she always feared. Katrina cried herself to sleep every night for two weeks after having overheard that conversation.

"Look I'm not surprised Kat," Tristan said upon Katrina relaying her account of this incident to him. *"What are you doing at work exactly? I haven't seen you walk out in skirts like you do when you're out with the gang, so if you're already calling more attention to your transition then that's on you."*

It felt like an additional layer of shame. What was Katrina doing wrong? She spoke to the counsellor, and to Human Resources, but she couldn't avoid the additional comments around all the things she wasn't getting right.

"You have to expect comments like this Kat. This is New Zealand, not California!" Tristan added upon sight of Katrina's fallen expression across the kitchen table.

Katrina couldn't say anything. She felt like crying, but she knew Tristan wouldn't comfort her. This was her decision, and she had to face the consequences, including those impacting her relationship.

She felt like this was all on her, and she only had herself to blame.

"It still hurts, it really hurts!" Katrina sobbed as she lay down, with Tristan at the foot of the bed.

Tristan looked at Katrina's face, contorted in pain.

"What do you mean it hurts? We've been at this for months, you aren't taking this seriously Kat," Tristan said shortly. *"You're still at the smallest sized dilator, and you keep crying and sobbing about this but quite honestly I don't quite get it."*

Katrina lay there, wiping away tears from her face.

"Tristan I can't help the way that I feel. I can feel my body closing up and nothing goes in, nothing at all," Katrina said quietly.

“Yeah but that dilator you’re using now is smaller than my finger! If a surgeon’s scalpel could get up there, you’re telling me that you can’t with that tiny thing?” Tristan shot back.

“I don’t know what else to do,” Katrina responded.

Tristan exhaled loudly and turned to look outside the window. The air was suddenly filled with tension.

“You’re not listening. This was fine post-operation right? You were able to dilate successfully, so then why is it when it comes to me there’s nothing? It’s almost like you want this fail,” Tristan said as he sat at the end of the bed.

Katrina’s body was shaking. She was tired of this. Tired of somehow linking her transition to her relationship because Tristan was keen for them to start being intimate as soon as she was able to. She just wanted to heal and take the time she needed without the pressure of Tristan wanting to get his rocks off.

It wasn’t just the fact that she was healing, but her feelings towards Tristan were changing as time progressed. She found herself trying to avoid being intimate with him, because it always resulted in her not feeling good about herself. It would always start fine, but after a while she would often find herself disengaging from the process.

It wasn’t like they didn’t try having sex. As soon as her doctor told her she had sufficiently healed, they were to make a gentle start on things. The sex was ok for the first three months, but then things started to change quickly after that. Katrina didn’t know it at the time, but that was when Tristan started showing his true character.

Tristan had turned from this very enlightened human being, who seemed to accept her for who she was and the journey she was about to begin, to this beast of a person who put her down whenever he could. Katrina couldn't put her finger on whether it was living together that changed things or whether this was what most serious relationships were like. She didn't know what good looked or felt like anymore.

As she watched Tristan from the corner of her eye, she realised that her feelings towards him had evolved. Sometimes she felt like his entire body was covered in scales, more so after he'd speak to her in a derogatory way. She was once happy, but now she no longer was.

But which another couple out there was happy? Katrina often asked herself this. Pickings were slim in the LGBT community, let alone the trans-community. In the early 2000s, discussions on trans were avoided. People confused the terminology and kept referring to Katrina as 'he' or 'Steve', even though she had already begun the transition process. Who else out there would accept her for exactly who she was?

Katrina's self-esteem was shot for many years in the lead-up to her transition. She felt like she was a shell of a person, existing just so the world could make sense of her. She lived for others and not herself.

She remembered the moment when she wanted to do it. She was Steve at the time and a teenager living in a remote part of the country, who wanted to live a life as a woman but the very thought of it petrified them. They felt overcome by fears of rejection, scorn, mockery and isolation. What would Steve's parents think? What would Steve's friends think?

And so Steve took the can of petrol from the garage and walked out to the open field away from livestock, on the farm Steve's parents owned and lived on in Palmerston North. Steve took a lighter bought from the local store and walked to the large Pohutukawa tree with its

flaming red flowers during the early hours of the morning and doused themselves in petrol. Steve untied their ponytail and let their locks fall past their shoulders. Steve wanted to feel as much like themselves as possible, but they couldn't do it in this body.

Steve clicked the lighter open and closed their eyes.

"Stop!! Stop!!" Charlie the farm-help exclaimed, as he ran towards Steve.

Steve's eyes shot open and they started trembling violently. The kerosene fumes infiltrated their nostrils, and the reality of what they were about to do hit them suddenly. Steve stood there in shock, feeling heavy and numb. Charlie approached Steve slowly, watching Steve's face carefully as he took the lighter from Steve and threw it to the side. Steve fell to the ground sobbing, and it was about an hour before they got up.

Since that incident, Steve's parents knew that they could no longer look the other way and ignore their cries for help. It required a fair amount of education on Steve's part, with a lot of understanding on their parents' part. They booked Steve in for counselling with a therapist and Steve was eventually referred to a counselor after that incident.

It took a while before anyone could figure out what was going on, with both parents meeting with various psychologists and psychiatrists. Gender dysphoria was not a common concept in the South Pacific at the time.

After Steve moved to Auckland for university, it became clear to them that they needed to focus on gender confirmation surgery and making the transition. Steve worked two jobs, with that goal at the back of their mind. Steve knew what needed to be done. But the reality was, Steve always identified as a woman. Surgery would only confirm that.

So why did Katrina's current life feel this way post-transition? She was meant to be living her best life, with the identity and the body she always wanted.

But in the end, she was never a good enough girlfriend to Tristan and constantly felt like she was taking something away from him. He reminded her of that often enough. As Katrina lay back on the pillow, she closed her eyes and reflected on some of the things Tristan said to her.

"With all the add-on therapies you're booking, do you not consider that perhaps we should be planning on how to have a family and earmarking some of that money?" Tristan often pressed. *"I don't earn as much as you do, and I don't have my dead aunt's fortune sitting in my own bank account, unlike you."*

"Tristan I need this to be able to make this transition with the funds that I have," Katrina would often respond.

"No you don't. I was there at the doctor's, and you don't need the additional laser sessions but you're doing them anyway! Everyday a bill arrives and you're having to foot it. Have you not thought about my needs? What would I like to do? I want to go into a completely different field and yet you are completely consumed in your own so-called 'journey'. What about my dreams? Do I need to keep working to keep you happy?" Tristan shouted at Katrina one Monday evening after having a bit too much to drink.

Tristan then threw the tea-towel to the ground, his face beet-red.

As Katrina moved towards the door, Tristan grabbed her by her arm. As she turned towards him, his fist made contact with her left jaw. That was the first time he hit her, eight months ago. Katrina remembered reeling in from the shock of it. She remembered the first time she saw

her father hit her mum when she was five years old, and she suddenly felt like she was reliving it all over again. The punch almost felt like an affirmation of the life she experienced, that she was experiencing and that she would experience. She was in a vicious cycle, and there was no way out.

She remembered Tristan looking visibly taken aback by his own actions, but he simply paused, turned to Katrina who lay there on the floor clutching her jaw, and said to her “*Look at what you’ve made me do.*”

They had earmarked every Sunday to work on dilation, and getting Katrina to the place she needed to, for her and Tristan to be fully intimate again.

Everything hurt down there. When they tried anal-sex, Katrina would often end up in floods of tears. It was the same sensation in both places. Tightness, stress and resistance. What Katrina didn’t appreciate at the time was that this was her body’s way of saying NO.

When she started the process of dilation right after her gender confirmation surgery, Tristan was away on secondment in Hong Kong. The dilation process worked perfectly. She was happy and relaxed. Somehow Tristan’s return to Auckland made everything regress. She moved from the intermediate level of dilator right down to the tiniest size. Her body closed up in a way she couldn’t understand.

When Katrina sought psychosexual counselling, Tristan insisted on being present during each session. Katrina never really understood why, but a part of her thought that this was perhaps because he wanted to keep an eye on what she shared with the therapist.

“Right well, Heather did say that I needed to be more involved in the process,” Tristan said to Katrina that Sunday, as he drew the blinds in their bedroom.

“Ok so the plan is one finger at a time, right?” Katrina asked nervously.

“Yes we’ll start with that,” Tristan responded. *“It may feel different in a good way, as you won’t be inserting a piece of plastic inside you.”*

That Sunday was sex-trial day. Katrina closed her eyes as she lay on the bed. She didn’t want to look at him as he did it. She felt tense.

“Breathe,” Tristan said. *“I can feel you tensing up again, and it’s only going to hurt the more you tense up.”*

Katrina took three deep breaths then waited.

It was worse this time, as Tristan swiveled his index finger inside of her. She started shaking immediately.

“What’s wrong? This again? You need to calm down, you’re not taking this seriously enough,” Tristan said.

Katrina closed her eyes and kept taking in deep gulps of air. Why did this feel so horrible? Why did this have to be so hard? She read the books and did her due diligence before embarking on this journey. She knew it would be hard but not this hard. Was there something wrong with her?

“Anything? Can you feel anything?” Tristan asked as he peered at her.

Katrina was still shaking, and suddenly tears started rolling down from her eyes.

Tristan couldn't see her expression and took her silence as Katrina not being cooperative.

"Right, well we're just going to have to make this happen," Tristan said. He then pulled his index finger out and pushed his other four fingers hard inside Katrina.

Katrina went into a state of shock. She felt the pressure and intensity of his fingers. It felt animalistic, without care or concern. Her body lifted off the bed, and she started violently trembling and opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Her jaws opened wide but all she that came out was a large whisper.

Somehow in the back of her mind, she knew that if she made a peep, Tristan would berate her. She started hitting her stomach as if to detract from the pain she was currently feeling and started writhing in pain.

Tristan looked at her and exclaimed, *"You selfish bitch. Don't you realise that you acting the way you are affects me? Do you not see what it's doing to me?!"*

Tristan pushed his fingers harder into her, and Katrina felt like she almost levitated off the bed and was violently shaking. Katrina truly felt that this was all her fault, that her pain was a consequence of what she represented to Tristan, which was that she would never be good enough.

After they finished, Katrina didn't want to talk about it. She didn't want to admit to herself, let alone to anyone else what had happened. Tristan berated her for it afterwards, to add insult

to injury. She didn't know what to do or what to say, but she just listened as he verbally tore into her in the living room later that day.

When Katrina spoke to Heather about this two weeks later during their therapy session, she told her about the extreme pain that she was facing during her next appointment, she spoke about the incident in a very detached manner.

It felt all very clinical, "*He put his fingers inside me and it hurt like hell*" Katrina said to Heather. There was no room for getting into any specifics, and in any event she couldn't, with Tristan sat right there.

"*We just need to keep trying,*" Tristan said in Heather's office, as he took Katrina's hand in his and held it.

"*You have each other to get through this, and nobody said it would be easy but we'll get you there,*" Heather said in response.

Katrina and Tristan parted ways as they both headed off to work after their session with Heather.

"*Crap!*" Katrina exclaimed as she turned a corner towards her place of work. She realised that she left her copy of the keys in the house and the only other copy they had was with Tristan. As she glanced at her watch, she figured that there would be enough time to go to Tristan's office to use his keys to get into the flat in an hour or so after her first meeting. Tristan worked later than she did so she thought it would only make sense that she pick up his set of keys to get home that evening. His office was only a fifteen-minute walk away from hers and given that she was unable to get a hold of Tristan on his mobile, she started to make her way to Tristan's office.

Katrina made her way to Tristan's floor and approached his assistant Glen's desk asking if she could speak to Tristan for just a moment.

"Of course you're welcome to wait in Tristan's office, his meeting finishes in ten minutes," Tristan's assistant Glen said to Katrina.

"Ok thanks Glen," Katrina responded as she made her way to Tristan's office.

As Katrina continued down the hallway she could hear Tristan's voice in muffled tones. Something told her to continue walking down the hallway past Tristan's office to try and locate him. And so she did. She heard Tristan's voice becoming clearer and noticed that his voice was emanating from a door that was left ajar, and so she peered through the gap. She inhaled sharply and couldn't believe what she saw.

She saw Tristan and his boss Victor, on a dark mahogany desk kissing vigorously. Tristan had his hand down Victor's trousers, and Victor was reciprocating. It was like watching a car crash in slow motion, you know you should stop watching as it may traumatise you even further, but you simply couldn't stop.

Katrina stood there for twenty seconds completely paralysed, watching as Tristan and Victor experienced one another. Upon seeing Tristan quite forcibly remove Victor's clothes off, she turned her face away and walked away from the door, her eyes filled with tears.

It felt like someone had stabbed her in the gut. Repeatedly. So this was what betrayal felt like, Katrina thought to herself as she turned away. This was what all those late nights were about - Victor.

Katrina sped past a very confused-looking Glen and took the stairs down to the lobby, avoiding eye contact with anyone and everyone. She could feel a lump in her throat the size of a tennis ball. She didn't want anyone to see her crying. She felt red hot with embarrassment, like everyone in the office thought she was the biggest idiot in town. Surely they all must know what Tristan was up to behind her back, and she was the fool.

This was Tristan, her first love. She thought that he accepted her for who she was, during an important turning point in her life. Katrina never knew what it felt like to be cheated on, to see something so deceitful take place in front of her. This man not only made her feel like she would be nothing and nobody, but she also made her feel like an option. Katrina felt disrespected, and after that one incident, the rose-tinted glasses came off.

Katrina pulled into a coffee shop just around the corner, ordered a bottle of sparkling water and sat in the corner farthest from everyone. She paid for everything. The rent, the groceries, the trips abroad... everything. There was so much disparity between her and Tristan financially, but she always thought that he gave more to the relationship than he, did he not? He was the one who had to put up with the snags in the road when it came to her transitioning, and therefore she always thought that he was the one pulling the weight in her relationship.

The comments came back to her like flashbacks, all of them.

"I'd rather be with a fat cow than a skinny bitch like you, because then at least the cow would know how to treat a man. Do you know how to treat a man, Kat? Or is always about you and your story?" Tristan would often say to her.

"You're shit, you will always be shit" was another one of his favourite quotes, which was quite common after a heavy night of drinking.

Katrina took several deep breaths and looked outside the window onto the street. She saw a mother playing with her child, and the look of complete joy on their faces. When would she ever get her child-like innocence back? Or was it gone forever? Lost in the memories of her lying in her bed while Tristan forced his fingers while she emitted silent screams with her body arched on the bed in sheer pain. Was this the world she lived in? Was this the person she chose to be with?

Katrina cried silent tears in the coffee shop.

“*All ok?*” the barista asked Katrina, as he took the used coffee cups from the next table.

“*Yes yes, I’m alright,*” Katrina responded as she quickly took some tissue paper from her bag and wiped her eyes.

The barista sympathetically nodded at her and quietly moved away.

Katrina briefly sent an email to her assistant, telling her that she was unwell and would not be coming in for the rest of the day and told her to cancel her meetings.

What a mess I’ve made of my life, Katrina thought to herself. What an utter mess. Suddenly, the image of her underneath the Pohutukawa tree, doused in kerosene entered her mind. Why did life have to be so hard? Why was she born into a body she hated? Why the struggle? Why why why why?

Katrina closed her eyes and took three deep breaths in through her nose and out through her mouth. Her first counsellor in Palmerston North taught her this method, if she ever went back to that dark place. In for five, out for six. In for five, out for six. Katrina silent counted as she deeply inhaled.

Katrina then realised she needed control back. She needed control over her life and home, and she wanted to focus on her journey. She was still in the process of transitioning, and she couldn't have Tristan around her. She didn't deserve the shouting, the yelling and the abuse. He hit her, she remembered. She had rights. Katrina then got up from her chair, wiped her eyes for the last time and walked across the street where the police station was conveniently located.

This was it. She needed to get him out of her house, and to do that, she needed to file a police report.

She told them everything, minus what happened within the confines of her bedroom. It was a grey area, Katrina thought. It sure didn't feel right, but maybe what happened to her was kosher as it was vetted by Heather. He was meant to stick his fingers inside me, Katrina thought, so what was the point in getting into all of that?

"Sorry your identification says your name is Steve," the police officer, Geoff said.

"Legally it is, yes," Katrina responded.

Geoff looked up at Katrina and glanced at her identification and paused.

"Right, well for all practical purposes, we'll take your legal name down," Geoff said.

"So anything I sign will need to have my legal name on it?" Katrina asked.

"Whatever your birth certificate says Steve," Geoff said, with a slight smirk on his face.

Katrina was used to this treatment. At the airport, at the DVLA and when dealing with human resources. But when Geoff said Katrina's legal name, it felt like a knife had cut right through her. She wasn't Steve. She was Katrina. Katrina took another deep breath and looked absent-mindedly at the awful abstract painting on the wall across the room.

"So he's hit you, how many times?" the police officer asked Katrina.

"Thrice in nine months," Katrina responded.

"Did anyone witness it?" the officer asked.

Katrina paused before responding, *"Well, no, but how does that make a difference?"*

"Well we could interview that person and get their account. Also if the prosecutor takes this further, they could charge him," the officer added.

Katrina had to think about this. She didn't want him to end up behind bars, that's for sure. She just wanted out and being able to do it safely. Katrina knew that if she ended up confronting Tristan, that he would refuse to acknowledge that any of his actions were even remotely abusive.

"Well this looks like assault to me," the police officer said.

"You mean domestic abuse don't you?" Katrina responded with a quizzical expression on her face.

“Well, I mean, you’re both men,” the police officer said.

Katrina’s back suddenly went ramrod-straight.

“I need to speak to someone more senior please,” Katrina said.

“Well we don’t need to get into that, I didn’t mean to offend you…” Geoff quickly responded.

“We are in a live-in relationship and he hit me, what don’t you get?” Katrina said with a slightly raised voice and a slight edged tone.

Geoff excused himself and got up to speak to another officer in the outside the room. Katrina waited five minutes, and he let himself in with another female officer.

“We’ve read the guidelines and we agree that what’s happened is domestic abuse,” the female officer said, whilst Geoff looked to the floor avoiding eye contact with Katrina.

“He hasn’t sexually abused you, has he?” the officer asked, immediately breaking into Katrina’s thoughts.

Katrina paused for a moment and responded, *“No, no he hasn’t.”*

“Ok, well how this works is that you can fill out this form applying for an order to keep Tristan away from you, basically. You can either hire a lawyer to help you, or you can fill it out yourself. Personally, we’ve seen higher levels of success if you toddle down to court to file this yourself, rather than appointing a lawyer. However, you could hire one of your own accord, and if you don’t have the means to do so, we have a list of lawyers that you can use on a pro-bono basis,” the officer said as he printed off Katrina’s crime report.

Katrina knew what she needed to do. She completed the form then and there in the police station and filed it in court personally. She felt a wave of relief the moment she submitted her copy to the court and receiving a stamped version of her application and statement.

Katrina knew the police would be coming to her home that evening to remove Tristan, so she let herself in and waited. She was told to send a text message to the police officer in charge, to tip them off as to Tristan's presence in her house.

Katrina hadn't even rehearsed for this moment. She didn't know how to phrase it, and she wasn't sure of what to make of any of it. All she knew was that she would ask Tristan for his set of keys back and ask him to leave peacefully, as their relationship was over.

She had to think quickly. Would he let go easily? Would he try gaining access to the building? On the back of that thought, Katrina immediately deactivated Tristan's building access by calling the building manager. After doing this, she sat down and made a list of all the things that he had in his name, whether it was bills or insurance, and realised that everything was in her name. He just lived in the same house as her but took either very little or no financial responsibility.

She had nobody in Auckland to tell. She had one best friend who now lived in Singapore and didn't want to bother her with matters especially as she had a baby on the way. She thought of the semantics and how Tristan would need to collect his things, and about how she would need police present for that. And so, Katrina made a list.

After a few more hours of planning and hiding knives and heavy objects in the flat, she sat in silence. She knew that what she was doing was completely off the beaten track, and she never

thought that she would ever need to do this. But tonight, she would be taking away Tristan's stability and security, and she really didn't know how he might react.

Katrina finally sat quietly in the living room when she heard the latch click, and she felt herself start to tremble. She took in two deep breaths as she heard Tristan's footsteps.

"Hey," Tristan said as he pushed the front-door open. *"By the way I think our building access key is bugging, I had to tailgate to get in. It might be worth letting our building manager know."*

Katrina had quickly texted *"He's here, be here in 10 minutes"* to the police officer's number, ensured that her phone was on silent before putting into her pocket, and then stood up from the couch and walked towards the front door.

Tristan looked normal. He didn't look like someone wrecked with guilt over what he had done just that afternoon. What a sociopath, Katrina thought. As she studied his face, she could see it. She could see his trauma for the first time. This was a man who was broken and who needed help. But he would no longer do it on her time. Katrina was finally done.

"I need to speak to you about something," Katrina said.

"Listen if it's about today, I really am not in the mood to do one of our sex-trials this evening. I've had a crazy day at work, and I just want to sleep..." Tristan snapped.

"That's not what it's about," Katrina quickly interjected. *"I know about you and Victor, and I want out."*

Tristan paused and looked at her, his expression blank. No remorse, no guilt. He looked as calm as a cucumber. What in the actual fuck, Katrina thought to herself.

"You're joking right?" Tristan responded after a few seconds.

"I'm sorry, what about this sounds like a joke to you?" Katrina said with a dumbfounded expression on her face. *"You've just been caught cheating, and I want out, please may I have your keys."*

"You're overreacting. Whoever told you is a liar," Tristan said flapping his hands around him in disbelief.

"I saw you with my own eyes Tristan! Just today, at your workplace!" Katrina exclaimed.

"You saw some heavy making out, that's all that it was! It was just one time and I've had a difficult time with all the things you've put me through Katrina. There is more than one form of betrayal," Tristan responded.

"You've gotta be kidding me," Katrina said looking aghast. *"You're equating your lousy behaviour with what exactly?"*

"Do you know what I've done for you? I've put my entire career on hold just so I could hold your hand throughout those surgeries and all those fucking hormones. Kat, I don't have time for this conversation," Tristan said as he turned his back toward her.

Katrina couldn't believe this. He was making her sounds like she was the one that was crazy, that she was the one who needed to be grateful for his presence in her life, despite the fact that he had just been caught cheating.

"It's over Tristan, the police are on their way, and you need to leave," Katrina said shakily.

“Police? For what? Cheating?” Tristan guffawed. *“You really are a crazy bitch, you can’t call the police just for cheating sweetie. It’s not a thing.”*

“No Tristan, for the physical abuse. I want you out,” Katrina responded. *“We are done. We could do this the easy way or the hard way, but I’d like my keys back.”*

“This is my house too! I contribute towards the mortgage as well, and I want all my money back,” Tristan said, his expression steely as he moved towards Katrina.

Katrina knew what was coming. She broke into a nervous sweat and started shaking violently. She hoped that the police were already on their way.

“How dare you? Who do you think you are?” Tristan said as he stepped forward, inching closer towards her.

Katrina took several steps back and realised that she was being backed into a wall. Tristan suddenly lunged towards her and Katrina quickly moved to her right, dodging him just in time and ran towards the door. As she flung the door open, she searched for police presence.

Katrina saw three police officers standing in the hallway, one of them being Geoff coincidentally.

By this time Katrina was violently shaking, her face was swollen and puffy with tears and she could barely get a word out.

“He’s inside,” Katrina croaked to the police officers.

The female officer stormed inside, followed by Geoff and another officer. Katrina sat down on the stairs with her head in her hands. Her entire shirt was soaked in sweat and her body felt hot. She started to shake violently.

The police sat Tristan down in a room and explained matters to him. A police report was filed, and they informed him that he could no longer remain in the house. They got him to pack some of his things, and if he was to return to obtain the rest of his belongings, a police officer would need to be present along with another independent third party.

Tristan left with the police, and Kat was taken into the kitchen just so they didn't walk past each other. She provided the police officers with a final report of what had happened when she confronted him, and how he made a lunge for her. She was advised to change the locks which she did upon the police officers leaving the house.

Once the locksmith left, Katrina locked the door and collapsed into a heap on the carpet in the living room.

"I'll be gone for a couple of months mum," Katrina said to her mother on the phone as she placed the last of her belongings into the car.

It had been eight months since the breakup, and Katrina decided that she needed a change of environment.

"Yes yes, I've completed my procedures and now I just need to ensure I go in for top-ups on a weekly basis and then ensure that I keep up the process. Mum I'll be fine, I just need a change of scene," Katrina added.

After telling her family about what had happened between Tristan and her, her family became increasingly concerned for Katrina. They wanted to make sure that she'd be ok. She noticed that the relationship that she had with her parents improved almost overnight. Releasing Tristan from her life turned out to have an extremely positive effect on the rest of her relationships.

Katrina finished her conversation with her mother and started the engine. One year after her split from Tristan, Katrina decided to do some travelling. The plan was to drive around South-West USA and finally take that road trip she'd always wanted to. She would start in Las Vegas, and then head to the Grand Canyon, after which she'd continue driving to Monument Valley. She would finally end up in Texas where she'd meet her best friend.

Tristan never liked to travel. He said it was a self-indulgent practice, and therefore if they ever travelled, it was always on her dime. As Katrina reflected on this, she muttered "*Fuck him*".

Katrina got her restraining order right after Tristan was taken by the police that day. Tristan was asking for every penny he put into her house. In the end, Katrina paid him off just to stop him from sending daily letters to her lawyer. She was happy to finally see the end of him.

As she drove down Route 66 in the United States in a Ford Mustang convertible, Katrina tried not to think about the course of the past few years. She wasted three years of her life on Tristan, when she could have been focusing on her journey and living her truth. She didn't want children, but he did. They were simply incompatible, but rather than walking away, he chose to make her feel bad about her values, stance, and her identity.

She was still healing in more than one way. She could never forget the abuse and how he made her feel. She felt guarded around strangers, keeping each person at an arm's length,

away from her mind and her heart. Katrina's therapist said this was normal, and she was working through these triggers through trauma-therapy.

Katrina occasionally felt a sharp pain in her chest, when thinking about the sexual abuse and what Tristan put her through. She closed her eyes and remembered the time when she was asked by the police whether Tristan had sexually abused her, and she quickly responded that he hadn't. She couldn't make sense of it at the time, as the physical abuse seemed to be the more obvious form of abuse that she could objectively identify as abuse applying a traditional definition. But the sexual abuse was harder for her to make sense of because it was carried out within the context of psychosexual therapy.

Yes, the act was meant to create intimacy to help her relax, which was Heather's intention. But what it was not meant to do was hurt Katrina in the process. Tristan used this vetted process to abuse Katrina in a way that appeared kosher from the outset.

After journaling about her experiences as a way of coping with what she went through, she would randomly start bleeding for an entire month. Neither could the doctors explain it, nor her therapist. She was on several hormones post-transition, which could have been a factor, but she soon realised that whenever she tried to process her emotions connected to the abuse, the bleeding would commence shortly after.

The counsellor said it was fine, didn't she? He was meant to insert his finger to create intimacy between them, right? How could that be wrong if it was done within the bounds of psychosexual counselling? After speaking to her own therapist after the split, she walked through the different ways in which Tristan hurt her. It was only through that experience, after describing step by step what he did to her, that she realised that he had sexually abused her.

Her stomach turned each time she remembered his fist inside her, aggressively pushing until he couldn't push anymore. The reality was that Katrina endured a wide range of abuse from Tristan, more than she was able to make sense of at the time.

She almost couldn't believe that the first person Katrina gave her heart to, could treat her this way. Finding a genuine connection was so rare, and she was also mindful that not every person could completely empathise with her gender transition. Tristan made her feel seen, heard. But that all went away very quickly, and by then she was already in love with him.

As Katrina drove down the very straight road towards Arizona, she wondered when it would go away. The reflection on the pain and her sadness. She suddenly realised she didn't have one suicidal thought for a couple of months now. Right after her split from Tristan, Katrina would very often find herself mentally venturing towards the same Pohutukawa tree on her parent's farm, wanting to set herself on fire. What Tristan did to her, made her feel hollow. Once Katrina was able to process her emotions she realised that she was a walking hologram, only ever being utilised as his punching bag.

It took months of trauma therapy to sift through the myriad of emotions. Katrina felt like she had to kill a version of her old self and grow to be the version of the person that she now was. She had become protective over herself, and vigilant about the types of people she let into her life.

However she now had a clearer idea of what she wanted, and realised now that where there was smoke, there was very often fire. Spotting the deal-breakers and the bad traits in people was something she was becoming better at deciphering. She was with someone who was quite possibly the worst person she ever knew in her life, and it made her all the wiser.

Tristan's absence from her life meant that she could focus on herself and her goals. She received a job promotion a few months afterwards, with the possibility of working from anywhere around the world. For once, Katrina felt extremely settled in her life. Everything was falling into place, even though she felt that she was still undergoing a process of healing.

It occurred to her that the image of her standing under the Pohutukawa tree with its flowers flame-red stayed firmly in her past. As she revved the engine, and pressed down on the pedal, she felt that she was speeding into her unknown future. With her pink Samsonite in the back seat of her Ford Mustang convertible, naturally.