

I

I was born too soon. Mine was not an easy birth. Nature failed to take its course. From my mother's womb I was untimely ripped, torn out of the darkness and thrust into the light. I was six weeks premature but I had no need for an incubator. I was gigantic, clocking in at a heaving twenty-one pounds six ounces. I was triple the size of your average bubba, a great flubbing lump of an infant, who lay screeching upon her mother's stomach, fists slamming down into her flesh, tiny nails clawing across her skin.

I was torn from the womb complete with fingernails, toenails, a healthy head of hair and a good set of gnashers. My canine teeth were abnormally large and hung down over my lower lip. My eyes were not blue like the eyes of other babies: the left one was pitch black, as if it had been sliced from night itself and the other was plain white; a burning sun. My hair was not red, nor black, nor brown, but devoid of colour, as if being born had given me such a fright that it had bleached each and every strand of pigment. I was the scariest baby this world had ever seen. My mother took one look at me and decided that this first hello would also be a last goodbye.

I was the baby left abandoned in the basket. Unlike Moses, I had no river, nor were there bullrushes for me to nestle amongst. My mother did not bother to remove me from my hospital blanket; she was too scared to unwrap me. She wanted me out of her sight. I say basket; it was a box. Brown cardboard it was, with *Barbados Bananas* printed on the side in yellow ink. Exotic. There was nothing else in there with me: no note, no rattle, no dummy for me to suck. I had been left to my fate; a fate which would prove to be both terrible and great. It was not my lot to be

mediocre.

This is the story of how I came to be, as it was told to me by Lettie, when she wanted to remind me that I did not belong to her; when she wanted to disown me. She would start with my humble beginnings and move on to the ruckus I had managed to create in her household.

‘Had I not had such a good heart,’ she would say, ‘you really would have been lost. Barry wanted nothing to do with you. If it hadn’t been for me...’

My arrival had turned Lettie’s ordered life upside down. I had so terrified the family cat that it fled into the night the minute it laid eyes on me and was never seen again. The dog, Mutt, an enormous and savage Alsatian, made a run for the far corner of his kennel, where he sat whimpering for the next seven weeks, venturing out only twice a day for a brief scoff at the food bowl and a quick slurp of water before dashing for cover again.

I was a difficult feeder. There was no question of the breast, and I was too bad for the bottle, chewing angrily through several rubber teats, and, in one instance, gnawing away on the bottle itself, milk spilling everywhere, plastic falling out of my mouth in gnarled fragments. Lettie soon resorted to a length of rubber hose, one end of which she would hold in my mouth, while she poured milk down the other. And I—I did not choke as a normal baby would, but took down as much as I could and saved up this sustenance for later, timely, regurgitation.

I was not a sleeper. I howled all through the night—great, long, otherworldly screeches which ricocheted around the house ensuring that neither parent was granted a single wink of sleep. Everybody had always said that my adoptive mother was a woman who had a good head on her shoulders, but even she was driven out of her mind by this thing, this Freak with a capital F. She had no idea what to do with me. She was unravelling, at a loose end. Barry didn’t want to know. He was pretending that I was not there at all. I stretched the limit of Lettie’s endurance far beyond breaking point. She took seven long weeks of me and then she shoved me away, out of sight from the world.

The basement was her solution. To the old girl’s credit, she did her best. It was not a case of merely shoving me down there amongst the bricks and the cockroaches; before she shut me away, she indulged in a wee spot of home decorating. She painted the walls in bright primary colours; great splashes of blue, yellow and red washing across the cellar in an attempt

at cheeriness. She hung mobiles from the ceiling and placed soft toys and cushions upon the floor. There was a sheepskin rug and baby powder. There were two small windows and a dusty sort of light. Please, don't think my adoptive mama cruel. She was at the end of her tether; she felt that she had no alternative.

I had no visitors to my basement home; the only soul I ever saw was Lettie, who felt it her duty to continue to pay her twice daily visits. The same routine every time; Lettie, appearing tentatively at the top of the stairs with a torch, peering down into the dusky gloom in an attempt to discern my mood before venturing into the cellar with her hose and her jar of warm milk. When she thought I was calm enough, and providing that she was feeling game, she would come down and feed me as quickly as possible before sprinting back up the stairs and into the safety of the house. She was especially terrified of my fangs, those gigantic canine teeth, which had grown at an alarming rate and hung down over the edge of my lower lip like the tusks of a walrus. She knew I could bite; she had seen what I had done to those baby bottles and she did not care to meet the same fate as that shredded plastic. She never came near; she stood at a distance and poked the feeding tube into my open gob and tipped sustenance into the other end of the pipe. And Barry's words would drift down from above. *What the hell are we gonna do with her?*

After three weeks in the cellar, my feeding difficulties escalated. I would take down none of the milk and nothing of anything else either. To me, it was all vile. Lettie tried using artificial flavouring: banana, vanilla, chocolate, strawberry. I was not interested. She attempted other liquids: orange juice, Coca Cola, lemon barley water, ginger ale, coffee, beer. I grew pale and wan, sallow, my cheeks became cold hollows, my big limbs began to wither. Eventually she struck gold, or, rather, orange. She poured Fanta down the hose and I guzzled like a baby calf at the teat. Fanta was the answer. And it remained the only thing I would drink for the next month and a half. Lettie figured that it was better the orange fizz than nothing, although she was unable to fathom how I managed to extract sufficient nourishment not only to survive, but to enlarge, for at three months, I weighed a hefty thirty-three kilos. Lettie did not believe that I could live on Fanta for ever; all that sugar and food colouring could not be good for a young 'un. At the beginning of my fourth month she grew understandably concerned. I was glowing an unusual shade of orange. She had heard me fizzing in the night. If I would not take milk, then I

should learn to take solids or else my death would surely be imminent, and she did not care to have such a weight on her shoulders.

So it was that Lettie came down the cellar stairs with a hose in one hand and a bowl of some very sloppy looking pumpkin mash in the other. What was she thinking? I would allow that orange slop nowhere near me, nor the mashed spud or mushy peas or rice she tried to feed me, night after night, as she grew increasingly more desperate. This was familiar territory; this was the milk revisited. Perhaps, she thought, she's taking exception to the hose, and she risked spoon-feeding me, only to have me chomp through the metal like it was butter, spit out the remnants of the spoon and then take to her wrist for good measure, leaving puncture wounds like a vampire's kiss. She was tearing her hair out; she had large bald patches and she was going grey besides.

I, however, had a secret. Lettie had been right; a young babe cannot live by Fanta alone. Unbeknownst to my adoptive Ma, I had been snacking on the sly. And unbeknownst to me, she got down upon her knees one evening when it was still light and pushed her eye up to the keyhole set into the cellar door and bore witness to her over-sized daughter crawling across the basement floor, snatching up bugs and insects from the dirt and stuffing them into her gob. Oh shameful truth! I had been feasting on these beasties for a good six weeks, ever since first sampling a rather slow-moving spider, and my palate and digestive system had come to crave these fine insect friends. They knew I was their master. The bees did not sting me. The spiders knew they were beat and did not scuttle away at my approach, but gladly gave their lives that I might live. On the other side of the cellar door, Lettie was gripped by a savage repulsion. Sensing her presence, my face flung towards the door and her horror was intensified. House flies fell struggling from my lips. A spider's leg hung from one corner of my mouth. The insectivore was outed. My substantial size was due not only to freak genes, but also to the many thoracic snacks I had been enjoying on the side.

She knew what I needed. Her newfound maternal guilt overcame natural revulsion. She could not allow me to continue to fend solely for myself. She had to believe that she was caring for me; she wanted me to exhibit signs of a normal infant's dependence upon its mother, despite my obscene behaviour, despite what I was.

She was a good old Mum, in her own way. She took to catching bugs in jars and bringing them to me, holding them out in extended arms.

*For you.* The bounty was always varied, a mixed diet, as well-balanced as could be expected under the circumstances. At the local fishing shop she found what came to make up the bulk of my intake; worms and maggots, squirming annelids, writhing larvae. I took to these with a passion, shovelling great fistfuls into my gob, frenzied, while Lettie turned away in nausea and fear and Barry sank yet deeper into denial.

They often longed to be rid of me. Barry talked of me as if I were some cheap chattel they'd purchased by accident.

'Maybe we could do an exchange. Take her down the orphanage and play swapsies. Bring us home a little angel to take the place of this devil.'

And, in his harsher moments, he'd comment, 'Her mother should've thrown her in a sack with a few rocks and drowned her, like a kitten.'

It was Barry who remembered that they had forgotten to name me. The two of them had been doing their best not to speak of me at all, but when they found themselves forced to address the issue of yours truly, they spoke in hushed whispers and called me 'her' or 'she' or 'it'.

'I guess it might be easier if we gave it a name,' said Barry to his wife one evening, as the two of them sat watching *Wheel of Fortune* on the telly.

'Shit,' said Lettie. 'That had clean slipped my mind. But what name would suit her?'

They racked their brains. Barry suggested Myrtle or Murgatroid or Muriel. Lettie came up with Daisy or Petal or Rose, hoping that the name might alter me, praying that I might come to resemble my moniker. Barry thought Doreen or Noreen or Maureen. Lettie thought Crystal or Moonbeam or Heaven. Barry thought Hell.

Eventually, after long debate, they settled upon Celia. Neither pretty nor ugly, neither spectacular nor plain, it was an in-between kind of name that they hoped I would live up to. It was middle of the road.

Only later did they match my first name to my last and realise that they had made a terrible mistake in the naming of Celia Doom.

Their lives were very much affected by me. Lettie thought she must have committed some terrible sin in a past life to be now so burdened, and Barry became a sort of meat-hacking, speechless automaton, staggering silently through his days, lost somewhere inside himself. He would rise,

dress, eat, head to his butcher's shop, hack meat, eat, hack more meat and then return home to eat and watch the telly. At midnight, he would slink quietly off to bed. He'd once been popular with the ladies, but now gone were his saucy comments and his sly ways; this was a new and much subdued Barry, worn down by his new daughter to the point where his only defence was to try to pretend that I did not exist. Lettie made more of an effort.

'Nature versus nurture,' she would say to her husband. 'She's not to blame for whatever horrendous genes she inherited. It's up to us to provide her with love and support. We must try to make the best of this worst of situations.'

I was the black cloud that had entered their formerly sunny sky, the guest who casts a dark spell upon the wedding party, the evil fairy who arrives, uninvited, to the christening. I was the devil's walking parody of all two footed things.

All in all, I was not exactly a gift from God.