

RERE UKPONU

*Love is a Four-Letter Word
that Begins with You*

September

Son,

Do you remember your youth?

I do.

You were a little boy. You smelt cotton candy fresh. Spun sugar. Rock salt. You shouted with abandon using your reedy trill. Sticks and stones broke your bones. You turned those sticks to swords. Stones to soldiers.

Your hands have the power to be gentle. To caress, with nail beds like seashells. To embrace, to adore. To stroke the petals of flowers and pluck them gently—colourful offerings. Yet you always choose wrong. When you were a child you ran to me, wrapped those slim limbs around my legs. Tourniquet. Staunching primal impulses.

Blood is the water you drink now. It doesn't quench. It doesn't fulfil. It doesn't whet your thirst. It gives no life. It runs through the streets oil slick.

Remember the rainbow gasoline puddles we used to see? The smell used to make me nauseous, I would try and lead you away but you breathed in deep. Filling your lungs with the potential to burn.

Who told you that the only way to be heard was through barking? Through snarls, wet screams. Rabid dog.

Who told you that the only smile to show the world was grimace. Where did you find your iron teeth? Your claw nails have shown,

your sharp tongue drawn from its sheath. Your teeth have a point to them, I have discovered. Canines hooked and dangerous. Rip into flesh.

The people where you go call you beast, monster, demon, black toothed wolf.

I call you son; the word is harder to come out of my mouth now—like treacle, sticky sweet. The type of sweet that's painful.

When you were a child you used to run through sweet grass. The stalks waving their arms around your head. Lamblike in your innocence. What have you sacrificed? You ran, the rhythmic pounding, heartbeat sounding, drumming song.

You tripped. You've fallen. Cheese grater, skinned ribbon knees. Blood trickles, less waterfall, more brook.

War is the friend you've never had. War is the loudest song. The bullets fly around you like little angels.

I think of the other sides. The other mothers, the other sons. They too rested in their mother's hands. Anointed by her tears. Crowning into purpose golden-ridden light. *In utero*, they were blessed by the wishes of their parents. They were filled with hopes and dreams. Then like snakes in grass the whispers of glory shrouded them. They put brass knuckles on and shone their boots.

And I hate them. And I hate their mothers. I hate them for hurting you. Yet. Yet? Aren't you hurting them too? These two lines of soldiers—mirror images on a battlefield.

You punch, and they deflect. Punch back. War is the greatest dance, the oldest, the most vicious. It is a violent lover.

And nobody is winning. The corpses pile up on either side of the trench. So high nobody can see over them anymore. So high they blot out the sky.

You'll be OK, you'll find yourself again. Bless your hands that have killed, bless the tongue that has slain. Bless the teeth that have bitten and bless your dark heart. I'll keep praying for you. Past my breath stopping.

After all, what's a mother for?

All my love, all my heart,

Mom

November

Mom,

They don't tell you how you change.

They don't tell you how your skin stretches across your arms and becomes a war drum. They don't tell you that when you close your eyes you don't sleep—you just see the black blue of bruises and the hot red flash of blood.

They don't tell you about the bone-deep weariness, that settles in your heart and kisses you like a lover. They don't tell you how the walls cave in, and darkness makes faces at you until you wake in a pool of your own making. And drown. And drown. They don't tell you how it's *you* holding your head down in the sweat water until your lungs fill.

They don't tell you that, even when you're awake, even as you do drills, even as you swallow your food that falls into the pit in your stomach.

You are drowning, you are *always* drowning.

They don't tell you how you make an enemy of yourself.

It's hot here. It's hotter than that heatwave we had in summer. Last summer? A few years ago? The days melt into each other here, like ice cream left outside. It's sticky.

I want to come home. I do. I miss the way the springs in my mattress pierced me in my back when I lay the wrong way. I miss the corner shop, where everyone knew my name. I miss the smell of cut grass. Lord knows, there's nothing better than the smell of freshly cut grass.

But I prefer running through trenches and spitting out teeth to seeing you look at me. To seeing the thinly veiled fear in your eyes. I don't want to watch you rove my body, look at the muscles bursting out of their sausage casing flesh. I don't want you to see the baby-soft skin at the nape of my neck and the hedgehog hair that remains there.

I don't want to see a monster in your eyes. I get enough of that in the mirror.

I didn't choose this to shame you. I need you to know that. I didn't choose this to hurt anyone. I've only ever wanted to save. Maybe it started in the house on the nights Dad would come back roaring 20s drunk. And he'd kiss me with his lips, as he kissed you

with his fists.

Maybe it started when you would come in my room when he left and cry into cupped palms, tears dripping like offerings to a silent god.

Maybe it started when the bombings started. And I saw the children my age being ripped from their families, their arms held behind their heads as they watched the massacre of their parents.

I don't know where, it started—all I know is that it did. And I don't see it ever ending.

I never did it for glory. There is nothing glorious about the fear I feel as I stare into the narrowed eyes of my enemy.

There is nothing glorious about bullet holes, and brain matter and dirty fingernails. Nothing glorious about choking sobs and flags draped over coffins. There is nothing glorious about feeling the urine seep through your trousers as you startle from sleep.

But holding the freckled hand of a terrified little girl, and placing it into her mother's? Maybe, that is the glory you speak of.

April

Son,

It's been a few months since you've written, I wanted to pick up the pen and breach this distance between us, but I've never been so scared. Every time I turn on the news my heart drops. When I hear the phone ring I anticipate bad news. Then I pray for good news. I want you home.

I'm constantly caught in between this state of fear and hope. It's the same feeling you get when you're riding in the passenger seat in a car that is speeding. The window is down and your mouth is open and there is so much air in your mouth that you lose the ability to breathe. Equal parts terror and joy.

On the television the other day there was this mini-documentary about the war efforts. In the middle of this 40-minute show there was a mother. Her face burned into my retinas, she was crying for her baby.

"Please," she wailed. The red of her mouth stretched like a cavern and her teeth were train tracks.

"Please," she begged. But I didn't know who she was pleading

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with. I just sat there on the couch, my forgotten tea in my hands and thought of you. My heart crying out, 'Please'.

And that is how I realised, that I'm your mother *always*. And I realised that agreement doesn't always mean acceptance. And I realised maybe fighting for peace isn't always an oxymoron. And I realised that love is a verb.

And I realised that when I look at you, I'll only ever see *my son*.

My boy who was born in July and writes like I do. Who grew out of his jeans in two months. Who ate the crusts on his bread, then took the crusts on mine.

Who brought me weeds and made me see flowers.

Love, Mom

May

Mom,

The sky is blue. I'm tired, writing is hard. My leg is gone, I've lost a lot of blood, burns are wrapped like ivy fronds around my arms, but my stubborn heart is still kicking. Doctors just want to monitor me for a few more weeks, then they're discharging me.

I miss you. I forgive you. I'm happy. I'm coming home.

Love is a four-letter word that begins and ends with you.

See you in June.

June

Son,

I hope you're sleeping now, I hope you see me writing this up there. I hope when it rains, it's because you are crying. But only joyful tears, you deserve only happy tears. I hope the water washes me clean. *Peace* is a five-letter word that begins and ends with *you*.

I like remembering the way you gripped my fingers, my delicate boy. My summer child.

I miss you, in the way I walk, in the way I smile, in the way June tastes.

I'm sitting here, at your gravestone, my legs sprawled in front of me and I'm breathing in deep.

You were right.

There is nothing better than the smell of freshly cut grass.