

## **I will not apologise!**

MAIRE FISHER

It's getting dark outside. My bike's still leaning against the garage wall where I left it this morning, ready to head off with the boys. My homework books are jumbled on the floor next to my desk. Mom's in the kitchen, liquidising something for Gran's supper, Dad's voice murmurs through the closed door of my bedroom. I put my ear to the door, but can only make out a few words. 'Lou the Plumber? ... urgent ... tomorrow morning? ... nothing sooner?' I walk to the window, and it throws my reflection back at me. Pale face, dark eyes and a mess of red hair.

Tom and Sean will be back by now. We'd been planning it all week. Get up early. Meet at Tom's. Ride to Kalk Bay and spend the day there. But instead, I had to stay at home with Gran. Mom and Dad were really sorry. In typical Dad fashion, he'd made the arrangement ages ago and forgot to tell us. They couldn't cancel their plans, so I had to cancel mine. I had to stay inside for the whole day. With her.

Gran moved in nine months ago. Mom explained that her pension was small and that before he died, Granddad's medical bills had used up most of their savings. 'It's not easy for her either,' she said, 'so let's all try to make this

work.' And I did try. I do try. Most of the time I can tune out her endless 'youth of today' spiel, ignore the way she criticises everything I do. But when she gets on Mom's case, I can't keep quiet and I answer her back. Then Dad and Mom talk to me, and I promise to try harder. Again.

Gran doesn't like Mom, and she doesn't try to hide it either. She never thanks her for anything. She just moved into our house and became the queen bee. With her came a whole set of rules. No friends over the weekend – we make too much noise. Complete silence when she's taking a nap. No loud music – ever. She took my room because it was closest to the bathroom. Even our food changed. Mom used to cook brilliantly, but Gran's dentures and her digestion are major culinary stumbling blocks. The menu is now officially substandard.

A day in the house with Gran. That's what I had to look forward to as I watched Mom and Dad drive off. I made tea, weak and milky, the way she likes it, with two digestives to dunk. I tried doing my homework, but I couldn't concentrate. Maybe if the wind had been howling like it always does in Fish Hoek, I wouldn't have minded so much. But no, today was a perfect day.

My topic for my English oral on World War I was Siegfried Sassoon. I'd done all the research; all I needed was to choose quotations from his poems. I sat on the floor and opened the book I'd taken out the library.

'... the Dragon sings

And beats upon the dark with furious wings ...'

Sunday morning sounds drifted into my room. Cars coming back from church, the drone of Mr van Heerden's lawnmower, the kids next door shouting in the garden....

I wondered whether Tom and Sean had caught anything. I'm not really into fishing. I like chilling – dangling my legs over the harbour wall, watching the sea and the mountains changing colour, listening to Tom and Sean messing around, joking about home and parents, school and teachers.

'... all grew black as pitch,  
While we began to struggle along the ditch;  
And someone flung his burden in the muck,  
Mumbling: "O Christ Almighty, now I'm stuck!"'

It was no use. I closed the book and went into the kitchen to heat Gran's soup. In Kalk Bay, Tom and Sean would be talking to the fishermen, counting their money to buy *slap* chips and Coke. And here I was, stuck indoors – leaping into action whenever Gran wanted something.

She shouted for me after lunch. 'Bo-neeta! Come here.' I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling, my fists clenched. She has this way of saying my name as if it's part of some weird language she doesn't want to learn. She's always going on about how things should be plain and sensible. My name definitely doesn't fit into that category. When Mom told her it means 'pretty' in Spanish, she just hmffed and told her to pass the mashed potatoes. 'Pretty is as pretty does,' she said. 'All a fancy name does is put fancy ideas into a child's head. Spare the rod, spoil the broth, I always say.' Gran adds a totally new dimension to calling a spade a shovel.

'Bo-neeta! Can you hear me?'

I tried Mom's remedy. 'Take a few deep breaths, Bon. Take your time before you say anything.'

Dad says that when people get old, you have to give them some leeway. 'You've got to allow for her eccentricities,

Bonita. She can't help the way she behaves.' He's always saying that sort of thing to smooth things over. He doesn't like it when people don't get on. But I think Gran is perfectly capable of behaving properly. She just doesn't want to. I think as people get older they just become more of who they have always been. And my grandmother has always been horrible.

I breathed deeply all the way down the passage. She was watching TV. Full blast. Zapping through the channels. The remote control's a lethal weapon in her hands. The sitting room was stuffy, gloomy; windows closed tight, curtains drawn against the sun. She clicked Dr Phil off in mid-sentence when I walked in.

'About time,' she said. She flapped an imperious hand towards the corner. 'Get me my knitting.'

'Please,' I muttered. Gran never asks. She commands.

'What's that?'

'Nothing.'

I fetched her ratty old knitting bag and brought it to her.

I prayed she wasn't planning on unpicking another baggy jersey; otherwise I'd be trapped there for hours, holding my hands in the air so she could wind the ancient wool around them. And then she'd knit another one, just as gross and baggy as the last.

Gran hauled out her needles and peered at the stitches. 'Sit down,' she said.

I flopped into the armchair opposite her. She'd colonised the couch like she always does, spreading her tissues and her Vicks and her Rennies and her hand cream and her Woman's Value and her reading glasses and her pen for doing the crossword.

'There are things I've been wanting to say to you, Boneta.'

I dug my toes into the pile of the hooked rug at my feet and concentrated on saying nothing.

'Certain matters simply can't be swept into the closet,' Gran said. 'Heaven knows, you can't rely on your mother for this sort of thing.'

Her fingers flew, and for a while the only sound in the room was the click-click-click of metal needles between her white soft hands. Soft wrinkles on soft skin. Holding her hand is like holding a frog – only frogs are nicer creatures. I try not to touch her, but sometimes, when she has a faint spell, I have to help her to the bathroom. She only has faint spells when Dad is around.

'I'll get straight to the point,' she said. 'None of this skirting around the bush. It's those boys. Sean and whatsis-name.' I stared at the blankness of the cream wall behind her. If I gazed at it long enough, a magic door would melt into it and open wide. She started knitting again, her busy hands flickering, the shiny spines of her silver needles flashing.

'You're getting too old to be running wild with them.' Her smell filled my nostrils: old lady, old clothes, musty shoes and the sharp pepperiness of her skin.

'I've noticed your body changing.' Gran paused. I'd like to say delicately, but that word isn't in her vocabulary. 'And I see that your mother is letting you use those tampons. I don't know what's wrong with a good sanitary towel, but no doubt she knows best.'

I stared at the wall even harder. If I looked at her, I'd see her cold-as-iron eyes, her pincer-lipped mouth, see poison words, steaming poison gas, rising mustard-yellow from her mouth. 'I'm sure your mother has told you what it means to be a young woman.'

No way was I going to tell her about how my mom had

hugged me – how we'd talked about boys and dating and the love between her and Dad.

Gran stopped knitting and spoke sharply. 'Look at me and pay attention!'

I dragged my eyes to her face.

'Boys are going to want to do certain things. It's the way they are.'

Gran's dentures were a strange stained yellowy colour. She'd resisted having anything done about them, but had finally agreed to let my mom take her to the dentist. She was being fitted for new ones next week. Instead of looking into her eyes, I watched the snippy movements of her mouth, listened to the wet sucking noises she made as she spoke. She rummaged in her bag and pulled out a pair of nail scissors. Snick-snick-snick went the small silver blades and lengths of dirty green wool dotted her lap.

'As for you, Bo-neeta.' Gran's hands slowed and she glanced up at me – a sharp, quick, almost gleeful look – 'Well, let's just say I've always thought there's a lot of your mother in you. A bad apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Girls develop so fast these days,' she said. 'I suppose we should be grateful you've taken longer than most.' I hunched forward, pulling my neck into my shoulders.

'Yes, boys can't control ... certain urges. Even your father, poor man.'

'What do you mean?'

It always happened like that. I knew, I *knew* I should keep my mouth shut. She prodded and poked and needled and jabbed until she pushed the right button, forced me to fight back.

'You don't know?' Gran breathed in, and the air whistled around her dentures. 'Your mother obviously hasn't told you the circumstances...?'

Her words slipped like razors into my mind, cutting my life into pieces.

'Well, I'm not surprised. What she did wasn't something any young girl would be proud of.'

'Stop,' I said. I stood up and backed away from her. 'I'm going, before you say anything else.'

'I'm sorry, Bo-neeta, but it has to be said. You're getting to be a woman now and it's your responsibility,' Gran said. 'To know how to behave with boys.' She spoke fast, her words pouring out in a spray of saliva. 'You can't play around with them, tease them, lure them on. Because if you do, you'll land up like your mother and some poor boy will be tied to you for the rest of his life. Dirty laundry always comes home to roost, you know.'

'I said stop!' I yelled. 'Shut up you hideous, horrible woman! You're just jealous, because Dad loves Mom, and he loves me, and you can't have him all to yourself.'

Everything paused and became all blurry, like slow motion in a movie. Into the dead silence came a loud thumping sound. I looked around to see where it was coming from. And then I realised it was my heart, pounding. Gran's mouth gaped open, shut, and then opened again.

'Well I never!' she spat the words at me, and with them ... she spat her dentures. They landed at my feet with a muffled thud and sat there smirking up at me. Purpled plastic gums and large square yellow teeth. I grabbed them.

'Bow-nee-hya,' Gran gargled. 'Gi mee dhoze bah.' The teeth sat slimy and wet in my hand. A rank smell rose from them. Eau de Grandmother – fully distilled.

There was no magic door in the wall, no way to escape from her. Nothing would ever make her change. All the digs at my Mom made sense now. And from now on,

whenever she made them, she'd be sliding glances at me from the corner of her eye, knowing that I understood.

'Bow-neeehya!' Gran's lips had thinned to a wrinkled pink line, rimming the furious black hole of her mouth. She was struggling to stand and her cheeks flared red from the effort. 'Geh mee my stchick.'

I walked from the room. 'Bow-neeehya! Cerm bah!' she slurred after me.

I went into the kitchen.

'Bow-neeehya!'

I placed the dentures on the counter next to the sink and washed my hands with a green dollop of Sunlight dishwashing liquid.

'Bow-neeehya!'

I opened the drawer and took the meat tenderiser Dad used to smash steak into red pulp. I took a deep breath and raised it above my head. I pounded down – once, twice. On the third blow the dentures snapped with a brittle crack. Two teeth sheared off and ricocheted against the breadbin.

'Bow-neeehya!'

I tore four squares of paper towel from the roll hanging over the kettle.

I picked up the bits with a pair of tongs and wrapped them in the paper towel.

'Bow-neeehya!'

Her voice faded as I walked down the passage to the bathroom. Her support stockings billowed pink and fleshy from the shower rail. The water in the bowl soaked into the white wadding and her broken jaw leered through in a gap-toothed grin. I poked at it with the toilet brush and piled toilet paper on top of it with each flush. I flushed the toilet four times.

At the end of a day like this in Kalk Bay, blue fades from the sky and the mountains become inky shadows. Fishermen call *naand* to each other as they climb into their rattling cars. In our house, Dad is on the phone trying to get hold of an all-hours plumber. Gran has had four faint spells since they got home. Mom is going to try and change the dentist appointment.

And I have to stay here in my room, until I'm ready to apologise.