# THE DAUGHTER

Liz Webb

*For Andy and Archie*

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying,
Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:
But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,
thou shalt not eat of it:
for in the day that thou eatest thereof
thou shalt surely die.

**Genesis 2:16–17**

# CHAPTER ONE

Normal people don't eat raw quince. But I sink my teeth into the smooth skin of a fat yellow specimen, and the astringency of the hard pulp floods my mouth, making me grimace. I plucked this one from the tree in Dad's front garden at around 2 a.m. last night, as I followed his stretcher to the ambulance. It's been touch and go, but Dad's stable this morning, dozing in his high, precisely made hospital bed. The view's spectacular up here on the ninth floor of University College Hospital, but Dad's oblivious. I lean my forehead on the big wrap-around corner window and fog it with a wet circle of quince spittle.

'Where's Feynman?' Dad says suddenly.

I plaster on a smile and turn to face him.

'He's at your house,' I say.

'Have you walked him?'

'Yes, I walked him round the block this morning.'

Dad nods.

I lift a scratched plastic cup from Dad's untouched lunch tray and position the bendy straw by his mouth.

'Where's Feynman?' Dad repeats.

'He's dead,' I mumble.

'When did he die?'

'Twenty-three years ago.'

Dad nods again.

As I replace the cup on the easy-wipe table over the bed, I glance across at the motionless old man in the bed opposite and the perspiring woman sitting beside him, sheathed in thick woolly tights, despite it being mild for September.

'Where's Feynman?' Dad repeats, yet again.

'Who's Feynman?' I snap.

'Our dog!'

'I've never heard of him.'

With this last exchange, I see panic in Dad's watery eyes. Christ. So what if we've had this same conversation ten times this morning. My brittle, bruised Dad still engages for the fifteen seconds that these conversations take place. Swiping my arm across my face leaves a watery snail's trail of my tears.

Feynman was a gorgeous golden Labrador that my brother Reece and I had when we were growing up. He was named after Dad's hero, the jovial quantum physicist Richard Feynman. Both Feynmans are long dead. Both coincidentally succumbing to kidney failure. Feynman the physicist died in 1988, his final words being that dying was boring. Watching Dad's disintegration over the last six months since I moved in with him, I can only agree wholeheartedly. For me anyway. Given Dad's goldfish mind, he's either completely unaware of his impending

death or it comes as a horrible shock daily. I really hope it's the former. Reece, always my opposite, would hope for the latter.

Feynman the dog died in 1996, as a result of canine kidney failure. This was precipitated, according to our bastard of a vet, by 'poor oral hygiene', despite my religious commitment to brushing his drool-coated teeth. After Feynman was peacefully put to sleep by the vet, we held a family funeral in the garden. I wore one of the many black knee-length T-shirts I sported at fourteen as I threw Feynman's favourite (and clearly redundant) teeth-cleaning chew toy into the grave. Reece, dashing in the new designer suit that Mum had recently got him for his eighteenth, threw in a Snoop Dogg album. Dad, his hands plunged into his maroon cardigan's pockets, wept at the wrenching loss of his beloved companion. And my beautiful mum, stunning in a tight black dress, leant on Dad's shoulder for balance, as her vertiginous, red-soled stilettos sank into the grass. It all felt so traumatic at the time – but then I had no idea of the jamboree of hatred and accusations that would, just three weeks later, constitute Mum's funeral.

'How he doing?' calls Woolly Tights woman from the other side of the pristine ward, indicating Dad.

'M-mm,' I grunt, with a shake of my head, hoping that if I don't make eye contact, she'll leave me alone. Just my luck that Dad's bed is opposite the only other bed, on this fully occupied eight-bed ward, to have a visitor.

'Your dad?' she enquires.

'Mmm.'

'Dementia?'

'Mmm.'

'Just like my dad,' she says, gesturing to hers. She speaks in a heavy accent I can't place. Her dad is unresponsive, lying under a non-regulation bedspread of yellow, green and red stripes, which looks garishly out of place alongside the other seven blue-blanketed beds.

How has my vibrant, athletic dad joined this male cloister of reverie?

'Is terrible thing, dementia,' she continues, 'cuts people off.'

'Mmm.'

How many 'mmm's will it take to cut her off?

She'd be horrified if I blurted out that dementia is not in fact all bad. But it does have one dark upside for Dad: he doesn't remember much of the last twenty-three years. He's often time-travelling back to when Mum was still alive; when I collected interesting pebbles, not nervous tics, and when Reece only called Dad deranged for saying Spurs could win the league.

Anyway, Dad's got bigger problems. When the paramedics arrived at his house last night, he was spreadeagled at the bottom of the stairs, barely breathing, his left arm bent under him at an unnatural angle. This morning, I was told that he's snapped his collarbone, but he's so old they'll just let it fuse wonky; also that it's too soon to tell if his present confusion is concussion or just his regular dementia; and worst of all, though nothing to do with the fall, his doctor was surprised that, as his carer, I was unaware of Dad's advanced prostate cancer. It's beyond hope of treatment, but they've put him on morphine as they think he's in considerable pain.

'Nice pear?' enquires Woolly Tights, gesturing at the

quince I'm munching. She's got the same pointy nose as her unresponsive dad. They're like Mr Pointy Nose and Miss Pointy Nose in a set of Happy Families cards. I'm not part of a recognisable family set. I've inherited Dad's once-brown hair, but not his original fine features or his tight cyclist's body. I've never looked like either of my parents – not my handsome, wiry dad, nor my beautiful, willowy mum – although the pressure of hiding my shameful secrets this year has jettisoned more than half my body weight, and I'm occasionally disconcerted to catch Mum in my silhouette in a shiny shop window.

'The pear?' Woolly Tights repeats, her little white boots squeaking on the lino as she swivels towards me. 'Is juicy? I get all my fruit at market. To feel before I buy.'

'Mmm,' I respond.

'Got any more?' she asks, still upbeat despite my wall of 'mmm's.

'M-umm,' I say, shaking my head.

I've got four more in my bag, but why make her day even worse. These aren't sweet, juicy pears; these are hard, nasty quinces. Quince is usually only eaten cooked. In gooey pink jam, which no one in their right mind would choose if strawberry, raspberry or any-bloody-berry was available as an alternative. Raw quince is even more disgusting. And this is especially unpalatable as it's early season. But I've been impatiently watching these growing in Dad's front garden over the last six months, desperate for them to ripen as they remind me so much of Mum. She was a terrible cook, but every autumn she would announce 'the crops are in!', theatrically wrap a scarf around her head and make a big pantomime of 'harvesting' our quince with a wicker

basket. Then she'd stack them carefully for a few weeks to mellow, constantly checking, like they were fragile treasure, and finally, wearing a ridiculous frilly apron and singing along to the radio, she'd spend hours boiling them with mountains of sugar to make vats of jam.

I've no desire to produce that slimy concoction but to connect with my vibrant, larger-than-life mum I relish eating this quince raw. It makes me feel – here – in this moment: the taut skin splitting under my front teeth; the granular flesh crumbling as it rolls around my mouth like cement in a mixer; the bitter juice stinging my cracked lips and searing my dry throat. I should market this experience as a shortcut to that mindfulness crap.

'Hen,' Dad mumbles as he flails his right hand out, banging the table, spilling the water and sending shrivelled peas in all directions.

'Careful, Dad. No hens here, just me,' I say as I roll the table further down the bed so he doesn't hurt himself.

'Een,' he continues, staring at me intently.

'I don't understand, Dad. What are you saying?' I lean in, inhaling soap and gravy.

'Jen.'

Oh. This is new. I guess my weight loss has confused his poor vision.

'No, Dad, I'm not Mum. I'm Hannah. Han-nah.'

'Sorry,' he rasps.

'It's OK, you don't need to—'

'I'm so sorry, Jen,' he says, reaching for me. I jerk away, unnerved that he's touching me as if I'm Mum. But as a loosened tendril of my hair flicks across my face, I realise it's the longest it's ever been. Mum's length. I had a short

brown bob as a child, razored it army-short after Mum's death and then rattled through shaved, permed, green, blue and spiky tiger stripes as I tried to get a grip on my spiralling life with drastic rebranding. But since embracing the course of least resistance, I've got a brown version of Mum's long blonde hair. Combined with my pronounced weight loss, it's clearly working like a Mento sweet dropping into the Diet Coke of Dad's mind, foaming out a splurge of locked-in memories.

'Sorry for what?' I murmur. Flattered that Dad could possibly mistake nervous, twitchy me for my confident, charismatic mum, I momentarily indulge the outlandish idea and my usually hunched stance softens into her loose-limbed ease. Moving like her, whilst simultaneously inhaling the exotic scent of quince coming from my bag, sparks an intense visceral memory of Mum feeding Dad some of her quince jam with one of her little ornate crested spoons. He'd laughed and inadvertently spat some out, making her throw back her head, her long blonde hair flying out and her high-pitched laugh exploding out of her, sounding like a yelping fox. Reece and I had rolled our eyes at her antics, but she'd kept on spooning the jam into our spluttering dad like she was a busty, disapproving matron doling out medicine. Soon all of us were crying with laughter, clutching ourselves and begging her to stop.

I miss her antics. Miss the way she ignited a room. Miss who I used to be around her. Time hasn't healed me. It's just hardened me.

'Aaagh,' cries Dad. His thin lips part, his tiny pupils expand into black counters, and the trace of colour in his cheeks washes away to grey clamminess.

I gently pat his good shoulder, feeling his birdlike frame under his worn striped pyjamas.

'It's OK, Dad, everything's OK.'

He breaks into a broad smile.

Except it isn't a smile.

It's a grimace. His thin skin stretches taut around his open mouth; his yellow teeth bare; his tongue sticks out, pointy and reptilian.

Thoughts of Mum have induced a heart attack.

'Help, please help us,' I shout.

But as I step away, his right arm shoots out and he grabs my upper arm with uncanny force. His ragged fingernails scratch me as he lurches up, spittle dripping down his chin, and as he rises, I'm simultaneously yanked towards him and our foreheads clash. The searing pain makes me lose my footing, and I collapse onto the bed, jarring my elbows. I try to right myself, but Dad's pushing down on me, his nails ripping into my arm.

'Jen,' he pleads.

'Stop it, Dad,' I beg, struggling to stand and twisting to try to loosen his grasp.

'Are you OK?' calls Woolly Tights, rising from her seat in alarm.

'Get help,' I call and she rushes down the ward.

As I stand, I lift Dad with me, forcing my fingers under his, trying not to hurt him, but he scrabbles them back on.

'I'm so sorry, Jen,' he whispers, his lips brushing my ear, his sour breath on my neck. 'I didn't mean to.' He twists his head so I'm eyeball to eyeball with his wide, staring eyes.

'Didn't mean to what?' I cry, still scrabbling to loosen his rigid grip.

'To—'

But before he can say another word, I finally succeed in unlatching all his fingers simultaneously and he collapses onto the bed. I stagger back, struggling for breath and clutching my throbbing arm, blood oozing between my fingers.

'I'm Hannah, Dad,' I sob, 'I'm your daughter. Mum's . . . not here.'

Woolly Tights is shouting in the distance.

Dad's lying motionless across the bed, staring up at the ceiling, as if the last minute never happened.

But it did.

He thought he was talking to Mum and he begged for her forgiveness. That could be forgiveness for anything – for not putting the bins out, an argument, even an affair – but the rigid dam in my mind is cracking and memories are cascading through the crumbling barricades: looking at Dad's scrawny legs, I remember when they were muscular and fast; staring at his mottled gnarled hands, I remember them broad and powerful; and raising my tear-hazed sight to the purple vein snaking across his right temple, I remember it livid and pulsing, at moments of exertion – or anger.

I lean in and whisper the question I have never let myself utter in twenty-three years.

'Dad, did you murder Mum?'