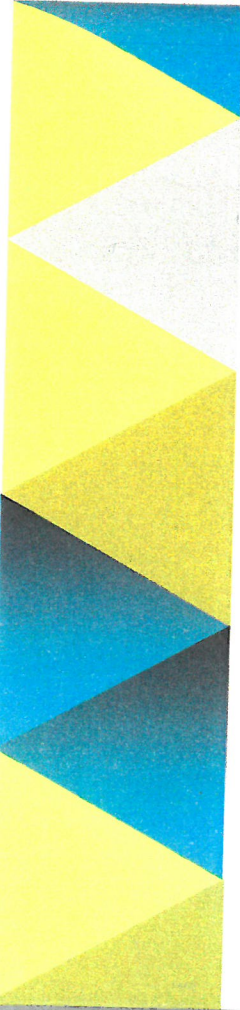
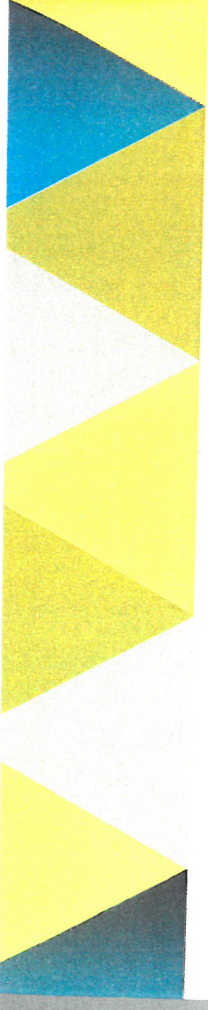


LUCY



LUCY CALDWELL

CALDWELL

MULTITUDES

'A writer of rare elegance and beauty, Caldwell doesn't just get inside her characters' minds. She perches in the precarious chambers of their hearts, telling their stories truthfully and tenderly.' **INDEPENDENT**



MULTITUDES

eleven stories

ff

FABER & FABER

ISBN 978-0-571-31350-1



9 780571 313501

First published in 2016
by Faber & Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House
74-77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA

Typeset by Reality Premedia Services Pvt. Ltd.

Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY

All rights reserved
© Lucy Caldwell, 2016

The right of Lucy Caldwell to be identified as author of this work has been
asserted in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988

'Escape Routes' was shortlisted for the 2012 BBC International Short Story Award
and was published in the award anthology (Comma Press, 2012); 'Inextinguishable'
was commissioned and broadcast by BBC Radio 3 (February 2013); 'Through the
Wardrobe' was commissioned and broadcast by BBC Radio 4 (November 2013);
'Poison' was published in *Belfast Noir*, ed. Adrian McKinty and Stuart Neville
(Akashic Books, 2014); 'Killing Time' won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize
(Canada and Europe) and was published in *All Over Ireland: New Irish Short Stories*,
ed. Deirdre Madden (Faber & Faber, 2015); 'Multitudes' was published in *The Long
Gaze Back: An Anthology of Irish Women Writers*, ed. Sinéad Gleeson (New Island,
2015).

*This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be
lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form
of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.*

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-571-31350-1



Ain't nothing but a stranger in this world
I'm nothing but a stranger in this world
I got a home on high
In another land
So far away
So far away

Van Morrison, 'Astral Weeks'

to tell you it's not what happens in reality, but your mum says not to listen to her.

You grip your mum's hand even tighter. Go on, your mum says. Go on, and she prises your fingers from hers. It is only a few weeks till Christmas, Santa's elves will be watching. You take a step in, and then another. There are tables and tables of toys, plush and soft and shiny and gleaming, but it's the costumes you're staring at: the princess dresses. They hang, shimmering, from racks just above your head. There is Tinkerbell, with gauzy wings, and there's Snow White, and there is Aurora, from *Sleeping Beauty*. There is Belle, from *Beauty and the Beast*. You've never played at being Belle before. But the Belle dress is the most beautiful thing you've seen. It has frothy pink straps and a velvet rose in the centre of the chest; its tight bodice billows into a full skirt, gathered at the front with six pink bows. The Belle dress is a bright shimmery yellow and in the soft light it looks like gold. You know how it would feel to dance in that dress: it would feel like being wrapped in a sunbeam. It would be impossible to be sad in that dress.

You are sad. You're only six years old, but you feel sad a lot of the time, a tightness in your chest that you don't have words for. Your mum says you're a sensitive child. Your dad says you've too many older sisters. Your dad says your mum babies you. Your mum says shh, she'll stay there till you fall asleep, you're safe and nothing can hurt you. But it's not outside you're scared of. It's something inside, and you can't explain it, but you know, just know, that in the dress you'd be safe from it.

Through the Wardrobe

IT STARTS WITH THE BELLE DRESS.

Your mum takes you all to the store in Donegall Place the week it opens, braving the lashing rain in the queue outside, all of you jumping and shivering with cold and excitement. Inside is the most magical place you've ever seen. Your sisters go hopping and squealing to the cuddly toys at the back, heaped right to the ceiling, but you just stand, clutching your mum's hand, unable to move or even to breathe. It is like being in Heaven, or outer space – somewhere far away from the grey November street and dirty puddles outside.

The shop is dim, lit by hundreds of pinpricks of light, like stars. Music is playing: 'Part of Your World', from *The Little Mermaid*. This is the part where Ariel and Flounder twirl and somersault and swim to the very top of the cavern, while Sebastian freaks out at his own reflection and gets trapped in a tankard.

You've seen that film so many times you know each word of it by heart, and this is your best scene, better even than when Ariel rescues the Prince. Your oldest sister likes

5 All of a sudden, your sisters are clustering round, a hundred arms plucking and tugging, yanking the dresses off hangers to hold them up and laugh and strike poses, squabbling over who saw what first, who bagsies which. Look at this, your mum says, crouching beside you, and she shows you an Aladdin costume, complete with a plastic scimitar; then Peter Pan's green tunic and cap with a feather. Your eldest sister seizes the cap and squashes it onto your head – Look at the wee dote! – and everyone looks at you, even the shop assistants, with their lilac and mint-green polo-shirts and jaunty visors and wide matching grins, and you feel your cheeks surge red.

10 Your earliest memory: wanting to push your willy between your legs as you sat on the toilet, and your father getting frustrated and setting you on your feet, showing you how to aim at the back of the bowl, and your mum saying, Don't be cross with him, Alan.

20 You long for the Belle dress so much it makes you feel sick. You tidy your toys and make your bed and eat every last scrap on your plate, even when it is broccoli. What's the difference between broccoli and bogeys? your dad says. Kids don't eat broccoli. Your sisters say, That's gross, and, Eeew. Your dad elbows you in the ribs, pretends to punch your shoulder. You wriggle away. Your mum says, Alan.

25 You make desperate deals with Santa in your head: you'll never ask for anything again, ever, if you can have that dress. It can count for next Christmas too, and the one after that.

You don't care: you have to have it, please can you have it, please.

On Christmas Day, your oldest sister gets Snow White, and the middle one Aurora, and the youngest Tinkerbell. You open yours, and you see the green felt, and you feel your body turn to stone, to ice, as if you're one of the statues that Polly and Digory from *The Magician's Nephew* find in the cursed hall of the enchanted palace. Your mum has been reading you and your next-oldest sister that book at bedtime, and it gives you nightmares, the thought of all the people trapped inside bodies that are theirs and not-theirs, bodies they can't control or even move, victims of some wicked spell.

And as your dad pulls your pyjama top over your head and manoeuvres your arms into the tunic and buckles the belt and says, Say cheese for the camera!, the feeling intensifies: your body is wrong, and you feel wrong in it.

★

Other things: crying when you have to have your hair cut. Feeling hot and strange and ashamed and confused when everyone laughs at May McFettridge in the Grand Opera House Christmas pantomime. Scribbling your name in febrile secret bursts and adding 'y' and 'ie' and 'ina', trying to find a way of making it sound right. Ripping the pages into tiny scraps afterwards and flushing them down the loo so nobody sees them.

He's just sensitive, your mum says. He's too bloody sensitive, says your dad. And no wonder, this house is like living in a witches' coven.

Your dad gets tickets for a football match, to see Northern Ireland play in the World Cup qualifiers at Windsor Park, but it's your next-oldest sister who begs and begs to go along with him, and in the end he sighs and agrees. At school, like the other boys, you say you hate girls. Girls whisper and they giggle and they're always linking arms and having silly secrets. But at home you sit on your sisters' floors while they paint their nails and practise liquid eyeliner on each other and try on shoes with different outfits and read problem pages out loud in silly voices, and you press yourself as small as you can against the ruffles of their Laura Ashley bedspreads because most of the time when they notice you're there, especially when they're reading the problem pages, they kick you out and you have to sit alone in your room instead.

They used to dress you up too, sometimes, squirt White Musk or Dewberry on you and tell you to pout your lips as they slicked on strawberry-flavoured lipgloss, but as you get older they do that less and less, and after you leave primary school they don't do it at all.

You have dreams where you ache, in places deeper than you can reach. You realise one morning in the shower you have five curling hairs in your groin – you count them, with horror – that seem to have sprouted from nowhere, overnight. You scramble up onto the rim of the bathtub

and, balancing there, in front of the mirror, you stare at your body. There are hairs in your armpits, too; three in one, two in another. With clumsy, stabbing fingers, you yank them out using your oldest sister's tweezers, your eyes watering with the pain, but in the following days and weeks they come back faster than you can pluck them out. Your balls itch at night and feel heavy in the mornings when you stand up. You're still small for your age, but your growth spurt will come – your mum tells you, thinking she's being reassuring – and you dread it. You have a hot, sickening feeling that time is running out.

Your house is rarely empty, but one Wednesday evening, it suddenly is. Two of your sisters are in the school play and are still at dress rehearsals; the other is at a friend's house. Your dad is out with clients from work, your mum's going to the Ulster to take flowers to a neighbour who had a bad fall. She asks if you want to come with her, and you say no, and you feel your heart pounding as you realise what this means. You're sure your mum will notice something, realise, insist you come. But she just says, All right, and, Will you be okay on your own? and, Your sisters will be back soon anyway. You watch her car pull out of the driveway, and your heart's in your throat, you can feel it beating there, as if it's lurched up from your chest and lodged there right where the windpipe is.

Then you're turning, pelting up the stairs two or three at a time and standing in the doorway to your sisters' room, the one the eldest two share because there's only a year

between them. Their room smells of coconut body balm and Elnett hairspray and ylang-ylang incense sticks. It smells of the jasmine oil that they dab on their wrists and throat and of Clinique Happy, which they mist in the air and step through. It smells of hair singed by GHDs and faintly musty underwear rolled inside out in corners.

You've never been in here alone before. You stand on the threshold, breathing it in. For a moment you even close your eyes. Then the thought that they might be back any moment spurs you on, and you step into the room, picking your way through glittery pools of halter-neck tops and discarded *More!* magazines, frothy concoctions of bras with ribbons for straps and empty Haribo packets. The wardrobe they acrimoniously share is open, bulging: it, like the room, is almost pulsing, bursting with sheer essence of girl.

You know what you're looking for. You root through the wardrobe, heaving overburdened hangers aside, dresses hung higgledy-piggledy, two and three thick. You're looking for the dress your oldest sister wore to the Christmas pre-formal last year. It's made from a stretchy gold material, which you remember is called lamé. Gold lamé: the words are like a spell. The dress is simply cut, straight across the top with tiny straps that are called spaghetti straps. You know this from your sisters' and your mum's discussions and deliberations. It goes right to the floor, and she needed special seamless flesh-coloured underwear with it because the fabric's so thin, or else (your sisters were in fits of giggles) she'd have to go commando. You haven't been able

to stop thinking about that dress since you first saw it. It stirred something in you.

You find it, eventually, not even in a special bag, just folded over a hanger under a pair of black trousers. Your palms are sweaty now so you wipe them on your jeans before you touch it, then tug it gently from the hanger, shake it out. It's creased, and there's a cigarette burn in it, and a dark spattered stain at the bottom where something has spilt on it, but to you it looks perfect. You open the wardrobe door fully, hold the dress up against yourself and gaze at the mirror inside. Then before you know what you're doing, you're stripping off, shucking off your jeans and pulling off your hoodie and T-shirt, taking each sock off with the heel of the other foot. You stand in your Y-fronts for a moment before yanking them off too.

Your body is pale and hunched, turned in on itself. You're the ugliest sight you've ever seen. But the dress is cool and slippery against your skin. It goes right over your head and falls like a waterfall to your feet, puddling on the floor around you. It gapes at the front, showing your nipples, and one of the straps keeps falling off your shoulder. You need to clutch up a handful of fabric at the side and hold onto the strap with the other hand just to keep it on. But there you are: like a princess.

You lift your chin, pull your shoulders back. If you squint, your hair could be purposefully cropped. There's a word for it, you can't remember the word, but girls have started to do it on purpose. Two of your middle sister's friends did, after Victoria Beckham's wedding last year. You

stand on your tiptoes and twist around to see your back, the way the dress ripples when you move.

5 A sudden flash comes to you of the Belle dress, from all those years ago, and you realise it's the memory you've been reaching for, the thing that hovers at the edge of your dreams, and everything, all at once, makes a terrifying, intoxicating sort of sense.

10 Look at yourself in that mirror, in that dress. Don't worry about your sisters coming back, or your mum: they won't be home for almost an hour. There's time. Stay where you are, and twist this way and that on your tiptoes, and let your shoulders relax and the knot in your stomach loosen. Look at yourself: how right you look, how beautiful, and remember how it feels, to feel this right, to know you're beautiful.

15 You don't know it now, but it's a blessing that the mirror can't – like the mirrors in fairy tales – show you what lies ahead. The three long miserable years before you pluck up the courage to say anything. The tubes and tubes of Immac, bought secretly with your pocket money and hidden in amongst your sisters'; that sickening chemical peachy smell, burning your face where you use it too often and leave it on too long. The shame of your voice scratching and hoarsening, the despair of your feet growing too large for your sisters' shoes. The bullying, and the endless beatings-up, no matter how careful you are not to give anything away, because other boys can tell you're different. The nights you cry yourself to sleep. The GP, who will insist there is no service anywhere in Northern Ireland that can help you.

You'll find a website, one day, which will tell you different, which will direct you to forums, statistics, FAQs you can print out. 'How to Tell Your Parents'; 'How to Ask for Help from Your Doctor'. But even after the eventual Tavistock referral will come the endless assessments, the psychologists, the endocrinologists, the journeys to and from Heathrow on the rattling Tube.

And, cruelly, worst of all will be the day you get the go-ahead: your mum trying to speak and for the first time finding nothing to say; your father trying to hug you, to tell you he loves you whatever happens, whatever you decide, his eyes slipping sideways, his voice thick and blurred; your sisters wide-eyed and whispery, flicking each other looks out of the corners of their eyes.

15 But hold this image of yourself in the gold dress, in front of the wardrobe, in your mind's eye: because you'll need it; and because it will become a sort of talisman; and because no matter what it takes and no matter how long it takes, you will come through.