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Excerpt from *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House*

Chapter 2

Mrs Whalen 26
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For the first five days after the murder, Mira Whalen is mute. She cannot speak when the maid says good morning, she cannot tell the swarming policemen to move their booted feet off the white carpet in her bedroom, she cannot say anything when the police insist on showing her photographs of all the robbers they know who were out of jail at the time of Peter Whalen's murder. She can only moan refusals (*don't come, don't arrange for the body to be taken back to England just yet, don't cry*) when her mother calls with offers of assistance.

But her voice is not the only thing that leaves her. On each of the five nights since the murder, Mira Whalen has also lost her teeth.

Painless though it is, it fills her with an unexplainable terror each time she dreams it, a terror that remains unabated on waking. It is often an ordinary dream, as dreams go (walking the dog, washing the dishes) save that, before she knows it, her two front teeth tumble from her mouth and into her hands. Every night.

In her dream, she is warned by a mental tearing-away devoid of physical sensation that nevertheless compels her hands upwards until they reach her lips. She parts them slowly and feels the proof plop into her palms. It is always baby teeth – bloodless and tiny – the kind you might leave for the tooth fairy. Her Morphean self stares at these miniatures, whiter and more multi-faceted than she remembers, and while she stares, the mental rending starts afresh, the central incisors in her palms are elevated and there is the slow parting of lips and the silent crash of more of the teeth she hasn't owned since she was a mere little girl.

What disturbs Mira Whalen most about these dreams is not the threatened loss of her ability to chew, but rather the fact that she often continues to stare at the teeth in her palm, even though she knows that more are to be lost. It does not matter to Mira that she is dreaming. Surely, she thinks on rising in the near-morning, surely her sleeping version should be smart enough to foresee what will happen next? To do something to prevent the loss of more teeth? While Mira Whalen ponders the stupidity of her somnolent self, her sensible side repeats the same actions each morning on waking. She walks the twenty steps from the makeshift bed on the carpet behind the closed bedroom door to the mirror above the bathroom sink. There she takes three deep breaths before forcing herself to face the glass, at which point she watches her reflection bite the back of her hand, hard enough to mark it, and then examine each curve in the smarting impression.

It is only after she has convinced herself that her real teeth are all grown up that she counts them, every morning after the murder. She counts aloud, as counting her teeth in her head gives her the sensation of still being asleep and the prospect of being a sleepwalker is the scariest thing of all, but today is the first day that her voice actually makes a sound. Her voice grates over her tongue and teeth, and emerges from her mouth a rasping thing that whispers even when she doesn't want it to. On each of the first five mornings after the murder, Mira Whalen considered it a blessing that she could not speak and wake the children even if she was so inclined. On this, the sixth morning, she chides herself for being so stupid as to still believe in blessings.

On the sixth morning after the murder of her husband, Mira Whalen looks at the lonely

pink electric toothbrush in the medicine cabinet while she swallows three Panadols and one Celexa with a gulp of water she catches in two cupped palms under a hot tap. She does not realise that she's opened the tap marked 'Hot' but she does not burn her fingers, because she never needs more water than she can catch in the ten seconds before it begins to steam. She swallows all four tablets in one gulp and lifts her head from the spigot just as it reaches a temperature that could singe her skin if she isn't fast enough, and then she is faced with the mirror again. For the first time since the murder, Mira allows herself a look, a long look, at a witch with wild hair, wandering eyes and a wet, crusting bruise on a cheek now shaded with purple and blue. Then she turns away, partly because, outside of the teeth, the person in the mirror isn't someone she recognises and partly because she has better things to do than try to fix that woman's face. Things like calling the Baxter's Beach police station, for example, to determine whether they have yet caught the man who killed her husband. Things like calling the mortuary at Baxter's General to find out whether the forensic pathologist has flown in from Sweden so he can tell them what they already know and she can take the children and get the fuck out of here. Things like trying to reach Peter's ex-wife and the mother of his two children to tell her what has happened, because the first Mrs Whalen is an artist and has gone off on retreat in a mountain in India somewhere where she doesn't even have access to a fucking phone. Things she hasn't been able to bring herself to do in the first five days since she lost her husband.

On the sixth morning since the murder, after counting her teeth and her medicine, Mira Whalen counts the children. She reverses the twenty steps from the mirror to the soft stack of bedding on which Beth and Sam are still softly snoring. She sits on the carpet and watches them first, counting the rise and fall of breast and back. After two sets of ten counts of breath, she counts two sets of ten fingers, two sets of ten toes. And then she counts two sets of ten breaths again. It is only after this second set of ten breaths that she can close the curtains more firmly against daylight, go back to bed and drift into the future. In this future, she is leaving for Peter's retirement party, getting dressed for Beth's wedding, sitting in the audience at Sam's graduation until, inexplicably, she decides to walk a big white dog she has never owned in real life and the moments start to slow down the way moments do when something is about to go terribly wrong.

On this sixth morning, Mira Whalen hears clicks and spits teeth and gasps awake to the sound of a young girl's screaming, Beth's terror a fuller, deeper version of her own.

The day before Peter died, they had been arguing: one of those pointless rants about nothing important that Mira will now never forget. He'd ask her to bring raisins on her way back from the beach, because he wanted to make her bread pudding, her favourite dessert in the whole wide world. Peter wasn't a good cook. As far as she was concerned, he didn't need to be, and he certainly didn't need to cook for her

– he could afford to eat anywhere he wanted every day for the rest of his life, and therefore, by extension, so could she. She hadn't understood why he'd insisted, this visit, on making her bread pudding, why he'd gotten so upset when she said she'd forgotten the raisins. He hadn't understood why she couldn't appreciate that the argument was about more than bread pudding and raisins.

In the end, when the argument had escalated past raisins and cooking, Peter had decided to spend the night in the spare room again, and this time he didn't bother to wait until the children were asleep before he took his things down the long, lit hallway to one of the other bedrooms. She'd watched Sam's face fall and had said, 'Daddy's making room for you to sleep with me,' because a seven-year-old accepts such explanations. For Sam that had been enough, but his sister had rolled her eyes and slunk off to play her stereo much louder than she should have been allowed. Mira had rolled her own eyes. If she and Peter were never able to make the baby they so desperately wanted, she'd long decided, if the gods decided to be that unkind, she'd still count herself lucky to be the stepmom to these two, even when life with Beth was beginning to get a hell of a lot more challenging. Sam remained as sweet as ever.

She'd admired Peter that evening as he'd passed her with his arms full of bedding. She'd

taken in the slightly sagging skin of his arms and chest, the laugh lines that never left his cheeks, the cotton-candy wisps of salty hair under his armpits. Inside, she'd acknowledged that he was a good man. The thing that had come to her mind then was 'But he is a good man', and she sometimes forgot now that if her thought had been a qualifier, then what must have come before it was that he was somehow *not*. That night she'd taken in the sight of him walking with a pillow with a blue-striped pillowcase under his arm, trying his best not to look at her. She'd thought him beautiful, but hadn't told him. A small, a stupid thing. A thing you do in full expectation of waking up the following morning on the other side of the argument, brushing his back on the way to breakfast, catching his eye when you both laugh at something one of the children says over pancakes. That night she'd gone to bed secure in her entitlement to another chance. At the time, three weeks into their summer vacation at their luxurious beachfront villa, the arguments had been new, and never about the thing they were *really* arguing about. She had hoped to finally be able to argue about the real thing this holiday. To get things out and off both their chests. She'd felt entitled, at least, to *that* argument.

But that argument had eluded her.

That night, she'd surrendered to sleep despite the bump and scrape of Peter's restlessness through the wall, drifting off fitfully. Later she'd been awakened by the barrel of a gun prodding her face. She'd got up groggy, and thought it was him, which still pained her – that the conclusion that it was *her husband* who'd broken into her bedroom to do her some evil was the first one she'd come to. Perhaps Peter would have been perfectly entitled to want to kill her for all the wrong she had done.

But it hadn't been him.

It had been a blue-black man with a grey-blue gun and a palm wide open, standing at the side of her bed demanding money. At the sound of her scream, Peter had come running. He'd opened his arms and offered his wallet to the robber and when the man was still not satisfied, he'd begged him to spare her. *Please*, he had said, *let my wife go*. And the robber had looked at him, focused in on the fact that he was pleading for a life other than his own, and laughed. A deep laugh he'd lost a moment later, when he brought the butt of the gun down on Peter's nose until it bled. The children had been sleeping, Sam having decided that he would stay in Beth's room for the night, and Mira Whalen had witnessed Peter's efforts to muffle his anguish when his nose broke, so that the children wouldn't hear him cry out, wouldn't wake and come running into the room with the robber and the gun.

'Don't look at me, pops! Don't. Look. At. Rass. Hole. Me!'

And then the buzzer had sounded, at two o'clock in the morning. Two o'clock in the fucking morning. She had almost wet herself with the shock of it, wondering what it could mean. In six years – *six years* – of holidays, the buzzer had never sounded at that hour. Visitors out for a drunken stroll after a night at the sleepy hotel disco, she'd thought, or local teenagers playing pranks on the tourists, or (*please God!*) the police responding to someone who had reported that they'd heard something. But she'd never got to find out who was buzzing.

The robber had paused. The buzzer had continued. She'd thought she'd seen a chance and she'd run and grabbed at the gun with one hand and with the other she'd clawed at the gauzy second skin the robber wore on his face. A small, a stupid thing. The robber had struck her hard on her cheek and Peter had run towards her and she'd wanted to kick him for being the fucking gallant one. Again. He was supposed to run outside, call the police, answer the door, tell the children to get out of the house. *Something*. Something other than run straight up to the robber and try to stop him from struggling with her.

Instead, Peter had run right for the gun, pushed her out of harm's way, and she'd shouted for the children to run although they had likely not even been awake, and the gun had gone off, and the robber had yelled something which probably meant 'Stop!' and grabbed his stocking mask

out of her hand and stuffed it in his pocket and then the gun had gone off again and out of the corner of her eye she'd seen Peter, falling, while the robber looked past him to fire at her. The gun had refused and finally the robber ran.

All it would've taken were small things: remembering to buy a box of raisins so they wouldn't have argued in the first place, for instance. Or walking the few steps into the spare room after he'd turned the light off, wearing a smile, and slipping into bed with him, so that the robber would have reached the master's bedroom and found no one there. Or, in the weeks before they'd landed on the island, all it would've taken was the buying of a big dog or an alarm system or a decision to go to America instead. Or, in the months before that, all it would have taken was her being good, so Peter would not have suggested a trip to Paradise to try to fix what she had broken. Any of these small things and Peter would still be here.

But instead he'd been shot, and had fallen and this is what bewitched her: that she hadn't even looked at him as he fell, that her eyes were still trained on the blue- black hand that held the gun. What bewitched her was that her acknowledgement, her apology, her regret had not been the last things her husband had seen of her before he died.

That they would never now have the chance to have the *real* argument. A small, a stupid thing.

Chapter 3

Lala

30 July 1984

Even now, with Baby sleeping open-mouthed between the both of you, when you are reassured of reality by the chirping of birds, the swish of the coconut leaves and the roar and retreat of the waves below, even now, you can look into the face of the man snoring on the other side of that small baby and wonder who he is. You can see those thin, spiteful lips, slackened into pleasantries by sleep, and forget how they feel when he kisses you. You can look into his wide, flat features, his closed, heavy-lidded eyes, and struggle to remember his name.

Baby stirs and stretches in slow motion and settles back into sleep.

You don't grudge him that, three days ago, you had to take a taxi all by yourself, from Baxter's General, to bring you and Baby home. You understand that he had to stay out of sight in case the police was looking for him so you don't grudge him that he come only once to visit you during the whole week the both of you confined in Baxter's General, watching the other mummies and babies get presents and flowers and visits from husbands and friends and church members. You don't complain that nobody else ain't come to see Baby, not even Wilma. You don't grudge him that the one time he come he stay only a few minutes, staring at Baby, stroking her little cheeks and cooing, before hearing a siren and saying he have to leave, that things still hot.

But you grudge him trying to stop you from braiding when he know it is the only thing that keep you sane. You born to braid like he born to breathe.

If you is woman enough to call your own taxi from the hospital and tell it where to go, you tell yourself now, if you can mince out of that taxi with your stitched-up parts still stinging and you can pay the taxi man and you can cross the sandy soil with two bags and five pounds of baby in a pink dress you buy her with money you make from the same braiding, if you can get up the same twenty-five steps you mince down that night you went to find him, with two bags and a new baby, ain't you woman enough to decide when you will take that baby and go back to doingheads?

How many of the women on the ward come home to nobody? is what you asked yourself when you open back Adan's front door with the blue PEPSI logo painted on it. He ain't miss you and the house miss you less – the dishes done stacked same as you left them that night you went looking for him, the bed still wear the same one of Wilma's rose-printed fitted sheets you wake up on, sweating like a suckling pig, the morning that Baby was born. The blood stay and dried on those sheets, it was there when you left the house and it still there when you got back home from the hospital. But *he* wasn't nowhere to be found for a whole three days. How he feel he can come and tell you what to do now?

This morning, only this morning, he knock and you answer and he crawl into the bed and fall into the same open-mouth sleep the Baby now sleeping. Is only this morning you can tell him you have to take Baby for a walk, the nurse say to walk Baby every morning. But you didn't tell him. He don't know you been walking with Baby two mornings already, because those two mornings he not there.

You is your own woman, you say when he lay down this morning, you can ease up the baby, quiet, and walk with her down the steps and you can fetch the pram from below the house and settle Baby in it and tuck your combs in the bottom, just in case. You can put one of Wilma's old hats on your head and set off down the beach, staying on the part of the sandy soil held together by the roots of the coconut trees, so that the wheels of the pram do not find themselves stuck. You can watch the early-morning swimmers take their tentative steps into water bathed in the lilac and orange hues of sunrise, and see their wonder at why the water feels so warm. You can watch the women, especially, lay back and float so that their silky strands of hair fan around their heads, and almost hear them sigh as their stresses dissolve in the caress of warm shallow water.

But you cannot stop him coming down the beach to find you when he get up and Baby is not there and neither are you.

A name, you think, is a pacifier. Like: if it is 6.30 in the morning and you are walking down Baxter's Beach pushing a pram and looking for a smooth rock on which you can rest a bag of bright beads and a plastic mayonnaise jar stuffed with combs of all sizes. If you are looking for a spot that will be shady enough to set down a small folding chair a customer can sit on, a spot that will provide enough room in the shade to protect a tiny new baby in an old-fashioned pram when the sun climbs the sky. If you are doing this and you pass Tall Pink Man walking his big, gruff white dog with pointed ears, and if the dog starts to growl at you, you might feel helpless, because now that you have a new baby you cannot run, not really. If the dog jumps and snarls and barks at you, and makes like it could eat you alive, were it not restrained by the warnings of its owner, you might not remember this thing about a name. But if you do remember, if you call its name, if you stop and say 'Betsy' the way Tall Pink Man does every morning when he throws a piece of sea-bleached stick metres down the sand for the big, gruff dog to go running, it will stop as if stunned. It will cock its head to one side and open its mouth in surprise and it will ask, 'I know you?' (Even a dog cannot be violent to someone it truly knows.) And if you laugh, if you say, 'Shut up, Betsy, of course you know me, you and me is friends,' it will sort of half sit behind the sweaty legs of Tall Pink Man and lower its head and make bewildered noises and Tall Pink Man will wonder what the hell is going on with his dog after he wonders how the fuck you know her name. The point is, the dog will no longer try to frighten you, simply because you can name it.

'This is my baby, Betsy,' you could say, and by this time Betsy would be so calm, so quiet, somebody might think you could introduce the two of them, Baby and Betsy. Somebody might think you could bring Baby closer to the dog and hold her out and show it how pretty she is, how warm

and soft and beautiful.

But you don't. Because same time Adan come down the beach at a trot and give the dog one look, just one, and the dog lose interest in doing you anything at all. *Cha*, say Adan, he tell you not to even *think* about working in the hot sun with his baby, yet here you are – not even two weeks good and you got the combs in your hand already.

He not too sure about this walking thing, say Adan when he trot up to you and hold your hand and take the combs and the handle of the pram, he don't want to draw too much attention, things still hot, he think maybe is best you and Baby stay inside. You could take the baby out on the top step for a few minutes if you need to. Come back and lay down and rest yourself, say Adan, he is a man and he will take care of you, is not like you have to go and braid the hair for the money. He ain't that sort of man.

His face is wearing that brand of smile that worries you. It is a small smile – the corners of his lips barely turn upwards – but it worries you because above the smile the eyes are dead serious. And because you have seen that smile before.

Just walk the baby and come back home, Adan repeat, plenty of time to braid hair when Baby grow a bit.

And although you notice that he is looking around, checking to make sure that nobody is following him, that the police are not at that very moment closing in on him on the beach with their guns drawn, you also notice the pride that puffs him up when he says 'Baby'. It warms you, that pride, it almost makes you forget that that smile is a signal, or that you make this baby with a killer.

'Adan,' you might say then, 'Adan, I does get my peace from braiding people hair, you know? And it can't hurt to do a head real quick, with Baby sleeping. All she do is nap anyway. And we need the money.'

But you don't say that; you open your mouth to call his name, to say you are a grown woman and you can braid hair with the baby if you want to, but nothing come out. And he take that to mean you okay with him taking the handle of the old pram from you and steering it to smoother ground in the direction of the little house you just come from.

'Come,' say this giant man with the scar on his forehead, 'come let we go and lie down with she. I tired. And you know I don't want nobody seeing me walking 'bout the beach just so.'

His face is beginning to cloud over, like rain, so you go with him because Baby just born and little for her age and you don't want him to frighten her with what he will do if you don't.

When you are back in the house and lying on the bed, watching them sleep, this giant and his baby, you might marvel that even after two years of knowing him and one year of being his wife, the name of this flat-faced man in the bed, the one who sleep with his thigh over your hips when you lie on your side to be rid of him, the one with his arm over your shoulders while you squint at the fist he make even in his sleep, the name of this man still escape you at times, like when you are on the floor in his shadow, at the precise moment when the right holler of his name might stop him cold.

So maybe it is now, after you already allow yourself to be led back to the house and back into the bed and after you are made to put Baby down between the two of you and to lay down yourself, fully dressed, and after you are reminded to keep your eyes open and on the door, just in case the police are coming, that you realise what you have brought her into. Maybe it is at this moment, with this man on the other side of Baby, that you understand that it is possible you make a very big mistake. Maybe it is time to accept that this man is not the laughing giant you meet riding a unicycle at a fair two summers ago. Maybe it is time you realise that this man don't make his living rolling this way and that under an arc of bright juggling balls, for coins people drop in a jar. Maybe there is a reason that this is a man whose name you sometimes can't remember, and it is not just that there were posters you shielded your eyes from on the way home, asking for information about a murder, with a description of a suspect you know. It is not just the newspaper you cannot stop to buy because it carries a front-page story of the robbery and the photo of a man who has died and you cannot be faced with the details of this death. It is all of these things and it is the little brown baby asleep beside you who should not be made to feel the fear you do.

Maybe when he stirs and talks in his sleep you forget that you are grown and you are just quiet.

'Lala?' he is singing. 'Lala?'

You can reach out and touch the loose curve of his fingers, you can splay them open to see his palm, you can trace the lines that tell his future to see whether you and Baby are still there. You can turn his hand over and see the scars on the knuckles of his fingers, the long scratches that travel up his arm. But you cannot call his name, because you cannot remember it. You cannot call him by name and say, *please, not now*.

'No,' you are saying, because you are still sore and it has not yet been six weeks. 'No.'

He tries your name on a different tune. 'No.'

But no does nothing.

You can bite your lower lip, and keep your eyes on the baby, you can say to yourself that what he is doing cannot be that terrible because it does not wake the baby, it does not make her cry even though she is being shaken hard in the sheets, not really. If it does not make a baby cry, but it makes you cry, then how much of a woman are you?

You can watch the door fly open and then shut, open and shut, open and shut. You can train your eyes on the Pepsi lettering in the brilliant blues of that brand and wonder where the door came from, which shop he robbed of its own front door. You can imagine that the door is slapping the side of the house in protest, that it does not fly open merely to make a wobbly window to the sea. You can imagine, with the appearance of a very big wave, that it will come in on you, that big blue sea. You can be afraid that, despite the logic of the intervening sand and a house on stilts, you could all be a few seconds away from drowning. But you cannot call his name, cannot make him stop because, like the wave that crests and falls and disappears somewhere beneath the wooden floorboards, he is out of reach. Somehow beyond you, woman or not.

