



# THREE DAYS LATER

by Jessica Kluthe

MAGGIE stared, waiting for a response, a blink, anything. But Shaun's mouth was tight, his jaw slammed shut. For a second she thought of the soft skin behind his ear. And then she felt the grimy spaces between their one-inch floorboards separate. Her breath drop out of her mouth.

“Can't we? *Please*. Can't we?” For months, she'd held the words tight between her back molars—resisted talking, resisted trying. And immediately she hated her own voice. She hated her bones in her body. She imagined them slipping between the spaces and falling the story down.  
“*Please.*”

Shaun twisted his chin over to one shoulder and then across to his other one. She was too aware of the grocery bag in his hand—she wanted to reach for it, put the food in the fridge. Make dinner.

“Okay... Then *what?*” she said and pushed her tongue against the top of her mouth until the pressure in her head forced her to stop. He put the bag on the counter then turned and walked down the stairs to the basement. Maggie imagined that when he rounded the corner he’d see her there—splayed, flat.



The fish heads and bones looked like fine art or a horror scene. Maggie shook them into the holes and shovelled in some dirt before placing the tomato plants—which she’d grown from seed—on top.

A stray spine curved into the groove at the bottom of the bucket. She positioned her phone over top. She posted the picture and a caption that she knew he would read when he inevitably checked his phone during the start-and-stop traffic on the drive home from work: *To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.*

Her phone buzzed in her hand before she had a chance to refresh. Nearly a decade together, almost half that living under the same roof, and, despite everything, she still felt her body rise up—shoulders by millimeters, back uncurl—as excitement flitted through her when his name flashed across the screen.

SHAUN: What are the bones about?

MAGS: Fish heads too. Good fertilizer! Got it all for free from the seafood guy downtown

SHAUN: I won't be eating those

MAGS: Why...

SHAUN: I don't eat animals. Why would I want vegetables grown in fish heads? Hope you plan to eat those yourself when they're ready all at once

SHAUN: What a waste

SHAUN: that's

SHAUN: \*that's seriously so disgusting

Maggie imagined her cation flop and jiggle like the loose, scaly skin when it had hit the ground. As she walked to the side of the house to turn off the hose, she pulled her phone back out of her pocket and pressed the screen with a muddy finger. It all felt worse under the arch of a beautiful day: the sky stretched across the yard, and inside sunlight threw itself across the wood floors and up the buttercup yellow walls.

MAGS: Dirt has manure in it. Is that fine to you?

SHAUN: What do you mean “to you”

SHAUN: Anyway I’m going to be home late. Going to the driving range with Todd

MAGS: K

She stood on the back landing and tried to fill the hollow, carved out by anger and sadness, with full breaths. She rocked her bare heel on the loose tile right by the step and listened for the groan of chipped grout. She was suddenly starving and flicked open her messages as she stepped into the kitchen. She blasted out “heeeeyys” to the last people she’d messaged

with one hand, and with the other she reached into the freezer and dropped a frozen steak down on the counter.

As replies lit up her screen, her stomach turned and she slid the phone across the counter—it twirled when it hit the wall. She pressed her palms down against the countertops and weighed out how tired she was against how hungry she felt. Last summer, at that place just outside the city, it was this particular swirl of minerals that had pulled her in. It was her favourite part of the granite slab they'd picked out together.

She looked around the kitchen and darted her eyes over the tiles of the backsplash. She traced the edges of the tiny glass squares—stopping where she started and then sliding over to the next one. Would she have to move? Or him?

Maggie blinked away tears as she peeled back the taut, icy plastic and then tossed the meat into the microwave on 'defrost.'



The laptop gaped on the coffee table. Its white light formed a spotlight on Maggie's slouched, sleeping body. Shaun thought of touching his lips

against her bare shoulder, telling her to come up to bed, but then what? One concession could undo months of glacial separation—and wasn't that what they were trying to do?

Todd had said, *When you know, you'll know* and his cousin had said, at least a dozen times, *Shit or get off the pot.*

He bent his knees and leaned forward to steal a glance at what she'd been looking at. The title was stamped across the screen in bold letters: "Cruelty-free Cosmetics: A Complete Guide." Shaun scanned the text and felt her hypocrisy squeeze out the space between the words on her screen: *animalrightsfairenvironmental*. Panic pulsed behind his eyes. It was too late. Too late for small changes. He looked up at the dark ceiling and across into the black hallway.

He stepped back and instantly felt the melting icecaps flood his veins, spill over as a too-warm anger—silvery heads, shrivelled bodies. That image of the starving polar bear balancing on that piece of ice.

He left Maggie sucked into the couch cushions. As the wooden stairs creaked and popped on his way up to bed, he imagined fish spines snapping into tiny bones, into dust, into a shimmery face powder.

He felt his way into bed, shuffling his feet over the carpet until his shins bumped the side of the mattress. Shaun had fought for their relationship, once, when it would have been easier to separate—they hadn't yet shared finances, didn't have a mortgage or a car. And two moves later, into this house, they had a shed full of things they'd never known existed: camping chairs with built-in iPod speakers, electric bikes, a garden cart on big rubber wheels. He lay back and traced the streetlights long across the ceiling. When his eyes hit the wall, he started over.

Outside, the wind picked up. Shadows from the trees on the avenue shook across the room. Rain pelted the roof. He heard Maggie rustling downstairs.

"It's hailing!" she called up to him. "Help me cover the tomatoes!"

His heart jumped forward as he slid his head under the pillow. He could pretend he'd been asleep for hours. Or that he didn't hear her. Or wasn't home.

The door swung open against the house. Stucco crumbled to the porch. He imagined her out there, hair whipping up against her face, scared in the dark. Before he had time to measure out the meaning of his actions, he was outside, shaking off his housecoat and covering the tomatoes when



he saw how big the chunks of ice were. The hail pelted his naked body, and she flung her arm around him as they ran back under the covered porch.

“Global warming,” he yelled into the storm.

“Yeah. A point of no return!”

Three days later, on a Sunday morning, a blackbird would drop from the sky. She would take it as a sign they should try again. By dinnertime, when he arrived home with a bag of groceries, Maggie would work up the courage to ask him. Shaun would take the blackbird as a sign they should sell the house, separate, and by the time he arrived home from the grocery store, he would be ready to tell her.

When the bird fell, he would be inside in the washroom—a place he retreated to when he didn’t want to help with something. It would die with a pretzel snap when it hit the ground; she would hear it from where she was working the tomato cages into the ground to support the growing plants.

She would say, “It didn’t even hit the window or anything,” as she trailed him back outside.

“It just fell?” he would ask as he worked his heels into his tied-up tennis shoes, shoulders back, ready to take action.

Before he would pick it up with a shovel, he would stand on a stump, creating a bird's-eye-view of the scene, and then he would post a photo of the black body, wing askew with the caption *IMPACT*.

But tonight, as she wiggled her bra out from under her t-shirt, he started humming her favourite song. As she shook off her shorts, she imagined the words wrap around their bedroom, up the peaks of the ceiling, and against the recently painted eggshell white walls: *blackbird singing in the dead of night*. Shivering and soaking, they slipped under the covers. *Take these broken wings and learn to fly*. He pulled her to the middle of the bed and as they let themselves love each other one last time, he wondered if her face was still wet from the rain.

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica Kluthe teaches creative writing at MacEwan University. She holds an MFA in Writing from the University of Victoria and is the author of the book *Rosina, The*

*Midwife*. In her spare time, she volunteers for a local animal rescue. Twitter:  
[@jessicakluthe](#)

---

LF #089

© 2016 Jessica Kluthe

Published by [LITTLE FICTION](#) | [BIG TRUTHS](#), February 2016. Edited by Beth Gilstrap. Cover design by Troy Palmer. Bird image created by Agne Alesiute, from [thenounproject.com](#)

Read more stories at [littlefiction.com](#)