

A Manual for Cleaning Women

by Chris Baker

Her strong fingers worked flour, sugar and rough cubes of butter together, slowly creating coarse crumbs of crumble. It had been made so many times at our table, that it had become a ritual: an offering. Her jaw was clenched and her eyes fixed on the bare wall opposite. She was thoughtful, she would tell me. She could not keep it to herself, she never could. The only sound as she worked away was that of the mixing bowl on the table.

I turned and looked across the fields remembering a conspiratorial friendship, long since faded. She was older than me, by about fifteen years. I have never smoked. She did and developed with my encouragement quite a taste for my parents' cigarettes. Produced by Morland & Co they were made with Egyptian and Turkish tobacco. Then they were chic, perhaps even a rather raffish offering. I used to provide her with cigarettes and she me with biscuits and cake.

Intrigued I would watch the thick grey rope of smoke coil up her nose and disappear, seemingly forever before she exhaled slowly; almost regretfully. Sometimes the tobacco caught the back of her throat, drawing what sounded like an involuntary sob. My cigarette runs ceased when I moved away. By the time I came back her taste in tobacco was less exotic and my parents spent less at Morlands.

As I turned to get up, I noticed her red eyes and runnels of tears on her cheeks, which she had tried to wipe away with the floury back of her hand, leaving white smudges beneath her eyes. Slightly ghoulish. I heard the sound that she first made when inhaling the smuggled cigarettes.

It took a while to get it out of her. It came to this: She knew that her friend had been let go on account of 'the Austerity' and when she'd seen that old *Manual for Cleaning Women* on my desk she'd thought that I was looking for someone to replace her.