

# Clay

**Lucy Hatton**

Youth Short Story

Obedience. That was what I had been forced into; all that I understood. It was natural for me to keep my head down, looking only at the feet of the people who passed me by as if I was dust in the wind. Nothing I did was important enough to warrant attention, apart from whenever I did something wrong. In those instances, it was as if they had grown hawk eyes; vicious, trained only to seize the opportunity to strike. Yet, I idolized them as if they were the ideal models for my life.

I didn't realize the harm that they were causing me, even though it was obvious. It was a whisper-quiet sort of harm, like a bomb set to go off that grew hotter to the touch with every ticking second. Perfectly engineered to be ignored, to be deniable. They smiled at me, but only when everyone was watching. It felt suffocating, not being able to speak around them. A brittle trust, halfway to breaking apart.

I would try and smother my presence. If nobody noticed where I was or what I was doing, then surely, I wouldn't get in trouble? That was what I thought, and naivety was seeping through. I looked at the world through rose-coloured glasses, if only to protect myself from the criticism. I wanted the two figures to at least open their arms to me, but they remained shut tightly. Locked away under shells of scalding words.

And when I finally reached out to them, everything froze in time until the trouble melted away. Then it wasn't anyone's issue but mine. They drifted apart from me, yet the words they had told me rang so loudly in my ears, carefully crafted to work away at and erode my future. It was painful, but I could never muster the courage and form the sentences enough to tell them how I felt.

As if I'd have wanted to.

Though they had never done anything but twist away themselves, there was always an adverse reaction when I did the same: a sigh, an eye-rolling, a glance of 'how could you do this to me?'. It was hypocritical, but who was I to say anything? They were, are and will always be my superiors. I watch, with bated breath, for the ticking clock to usher in my next phase of life. Maybe they won't seem to care so much?

I'm always looking to the future, but maybe I won't have one. The voices continue to rattle around in my skull, a relentless barrage of phrases from all ages. Slowly, I have felt that their positivities and praises are fading from my memories. They aren't demons, but they've surely done the work of the devil in allowing my mentality to become like this.

I don't know why. Aren't they supposed to love me? Have I not tried hard enough? They're pushing the others to higher heights and leaving me to drown. Seaweed tangles around my legs, now, and I'm only trying my best to breathe. Can't they see that, at least? My skin reddens in their gaze for a million reasons, and that is only one. Maybe they expect me to be fine, like the others in the sky.

I can't really explain their thought processes. But I wouldn't advise asking, lest they push anyone else away as they have done to me countless times. I don't want anyone to be hurt, which is why I might seem a lot more concerned for the health of others rather than myself these days.

It wasn't always the same as the present. Unfortunately, I can't personally remember when they were, but photos gleam in albums, telling of a better time. I look down at them sometimes – despite not wanting photos, detesting how I look, for veiled comments had been made on that front many times – and wonder when everything really changed. When they felt challenged by me enough to react like this.

It was then, when I could form sentences to the extent where I could speak out against them.

But I think I've changed because of that voice. I'm not the golden child that I was; I refuse to sit around and have them shape me to their idealisms like potters' hands to clay. The clock has ticked over, the bomb defused, the seaweed rotting away. That wasn't who I really am; the world has grown and changed around me, and I needed to adapt whether or not they wanted me to. I need to be my own person.

After all, the fact remains.

Wounded animals will rear when cornered, and strength will finally find its place in their bones.