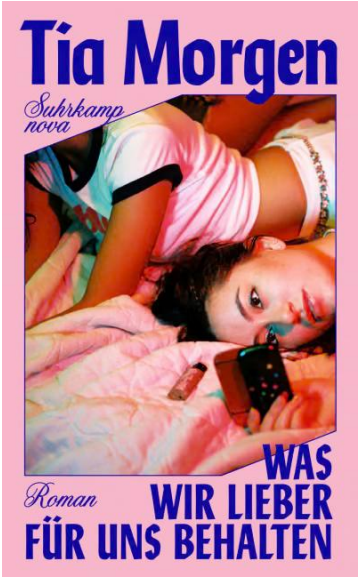

Tia Morgen

The Things We Keep to Ourselves

A Novel

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Sample translation by Joel Scott

Never imagine that any of us speak easily
of the things we tell you.
Dorothy Allison in: *My Dangerous Desires*

We do not have to earn our humanity by being
any kind of perfect.
Melissa Febos, *Body Work*

Don’t be ashamed, I’m your friend
Destiny’s Child, *Girl*

Three days later

The Vaseline melts and leaves a glistening film on my skin. I cautiously run my finger along the top of my foot, feel the heat, the irregular line. At the spot where the blood has congealed, a scab is forming, fissured and almost black, like cracked earth.

“Are you sure you’re ready to go back to work?”

Behind me, Kaya is twisting her curls into buns above her ears, fastening them with clips, before pulling two thin strands from the front of her part. Neon green at the roots and black at the tips. She looks at me attentively in the mirror and I nod, turn to face her and close my eyes. Her fingertips are cold against my temples, I flinch away. Delicately, she follows the curve until she reaches my cheekbone, I feel a stabbing pain, which gradually fades away at her touch.

“What do you use to cover purple again? Is it yellow or pink?” Kaya gently lifts my chin toward the ceiling, her breath gives me goosebumps.

“Yellow,” says Sam, who’s sitting next to us on the edge of the bathtub. The air smells of menthol and rosemary and Sam’s wet swimming trunks that are slung over the heater. She reaches for the phone that is charging on the little shelf above the basin. “Yellow for purple, green for red, orange for brown.”

Kaya clicks her tongue in recognition and Sam opens TikTok. Other people’s voices trickle out of the phone and into my auditory canals and form hazy images behind my eyelids. A baby singing in the snow, someone has made it a duet, now it sounds like a trap song and is

going viral. Someone explains the planetary parade, someone stitches a pickup artist, a city lies in ruins, smouldering. Sam keeps scrolling, scrolling, scrolling, and I'm grateful for the blare, which soothes me like white noise. When the speaker starts playing her own voice, Sam closes the app and puts the phone back on the shelf.

"Perfect," says Kaya and tosses the concealer in her bag. "You can't see anything now."

I carefully slip into a hoodie, which is Sam's and so too big for me. In the mirror, I see the contours of a person on the verge of being swallowed up. As if someone had thrown a tent made of cotton and polyester over them. I stare at the fingernails protruding from the much-too-long sleeves. Bright gems shimmer in the glow of the neon lights, and for a brief moment, I catch a glimpse of a woman I once knew.

Kaya hands me the highlighter and we hover over the basin, the glass fogging up in front of our mouths. We brush our brows, blend the rouge on our cheeks and overline our lips. We do our eyeliner, fan it dry, and paint freckles on our noses. We turn around. We take a step back.

"Done."

Sam looks at us and smiles. Faint morning light flows in through the window above the tub, thin and mild like skim milk.

Our work is on the fourth floor of an unassuming 1950s building with paintings of stalks of wheat fading on the weathered façades. The door opens with a buzz and Kaya walks up the steps in front of me. I stare at her blood-red moon boots above the terrazzo floor panels, hear the clacking of my heels beneath the rustling of the nylon. Out of the corner of my eye, doormats float past, strollers, scooters, and walking frames tethered to the cast iron bars of the balustrades with bike locks. On the third floor, I sense the familiar smell of bleach and disinfectant in my nose. Long before my time, back when people could afford much more than they can now, this floor was also part of our shop, the older girls like to talk about that.

Now, a nursing company has moved in here, and we have half as many rooms. I start to feel dizzy, I force myself to focus on Kaya's steps, on my breathing. Kaya stops and looks at me, a line between her eyebrows.

"What?" I ask, and because I don't want her to worry, I force a smile.

"Nothing." She holds her hand out to me. She has paired her chunky boots with a puffer jacket in fluorescent lilac, a pink basketball jersey underneath over light yellow, shimmering leggings. With Kaya, you never know where to look first.

When we get up there, Edith is already standing in the doorway, decked out in white as always, as if she were on the wrong floor and actually works downstairs. As we walk past, she squeezes Kaya's shoulder and places her hand on my back. You're late, she would normally say, but she doesn't say it today. "Well would you look at that," she says instead, "my two beauties back together again." Her voice, which is usually hoarse and thunders through the rooms a little too loudly, sounds gentle. She doesn't even make a comment about the baggy clothes I'm wearing.

Edith ushers me through the long hallway, in which a thick, carmine-red rug muffles our footsteps. In the kitchen, she places a cup under the coffee machine and collapses onto the chair next to me. The wicker creaks beneath Edith's body, I can smell her: powdery and slightly sour, with a trace of cold smoke. With a sigh, she undoes the belt on her white bum bag. I've never seen her without it.

"I always assumed," says Edith, offering me a plate of butter cookies, "you didn't have those kinds of problems with women." She looks at me searchingly, shakes her head. "Shows what I know, I guess."

I want to say something back, but my throat closes off, I try to fight it by swallowing, I swallow and swallow, my hands strangling the plate of cookies, and I swallow down the words. Edith pulls out a packet of tissues from her bum bag and slides it toward me. Blinking, I look up at the ceiling, then at the window, at the faux-marble floor tiles, and while the room

around me turns to liquid, I see myself here five years ago, when Edith showed me all this for the first time.

I remember how she showed me around the rooms, tugging the pillows in every room into shape and smoothing the bedspreads, every manoeuvre carried out with routine precision. How every bit of her bobbed up and down as she did it, how she alternated between calling me sweetheart, darling, pet, and love, and didn't bother making the effort to remember all our made-up names. How Nokia the dog lay by the door of the changing room, her black coat glistening like oil, just two patches of different sizes above her eyes, white and shapeless like snowflakes. How with a sweeping arm motion, Edith presented an impressive collection of platform boots and heels left behind by women who had failed to reappear from one day to the next. "It comes with the business," she said, and raised her hands, before pushing me on toward the lockers, where she handed me my key. "Sometimes the girls come back, sometimes they don't." Edith opened her bum bag, touched up her lipstick in front of the mirror and combed her bleached fringe. "You never know what's going on at home, whether the old man has suddenly got wind of it, or if their kid's just sick. Or if they've finally managed to patch the hole in their finances. We could all do with that, right girls?" She laughed her smoker's laugh and stuck her comb back in her bag.

"But you don't have any yet, right?"

I shook my head.

"But you've got a man…" Edith gave me a wink.

"Nope, no man, no kids."

"You're better off." Her whole body shuddered with her throaty laugh, while the angel statue next to the entrance warned: *From this point on, keep quiet and carry on smiling*. I followed her down the corridor, on into the break room, where three pairs of eyes turned towards me. The fourth woman lay sprawled over the mint green and pink print of the corner

sofa, one arm over her face as if she were sleeping, but I suspected that she just didn't feel like making small talk. They were wearing tracksuits and bathrobes, one was painting her toenails, one was labelling regions of the brain on a worksheet, another was talking on FaceTime. "This is your new coworker," said Edith. The women nodded at me and I nodded back. On a screen on the wall, the front door, the stairwell, and the corridor to leading to the rooms flashed up in succession. For a moment, two flickering bodies entered the frame, before disappearing again. Craig David was emanating from the speakers, the same playlist to this day. I made an effort to seem streetwise, hoped they could tell that I wasn't some newbie. I'm one of you, I wanted to say, I know what's in store for me. I felt like I did on the first day of the eighth grade, when I changed schools. Anxious because I didn't know the rules of the place but so desperately wanted to fit in.

In the tiny kitchen, Edith pressed the plastic button on the coffee machine, which, like the rest of the fittings, seemed not to have changed since the nineties. Wall cupboards with imitation wood panelling, sponge-painted walls in warm apricot, four wicker seats around a circular glass table in the corner. Nokia plonked herself down underneath it, having accompanied us on our tour.

"Take a seat," said Edith, and I read the slogans on the tin signs above the fridge: *Men are like children: loud and filthy. Sex keeps you thin. Nudist zone: no clothes allowed.*

Edith slumped beside me, arranged some biscuits on her plate and told me about her time as a nurse at a hospice in Berlin, before love had taken her to Frankfurt, and then here. She told me about her years on the palliative care ward, her herniated disc, her divorce. Her three adult children and now five grandkids. Said I reminded her of her daughter-in-law and stretched her wrists with a rolling motion. "She's a pretty little thing too."

I ask if her kids know where she works and stuck a biscuit in my mouth. It disintegrated on my tongue like damp sand.

Edith nodded. Said they sometimes visited her here and brought cake. "My eldest is a

pastry chef."

I still remember thinking the whole time: this can't all feel so normal. And then the bell rang at some point and Edith looked at me inquisitively. Asked if I wanted to dive right in at the deep end. "You could do it with one hand tied behind your back. You're a pro, right?"

I slipped out of my dress, got into the heels I'd brought with me, pulled the straps of my thong up. Another quick look in the mirror, fixed up my bikini top. I liked what I saw.

Back then, I still knew who I was.

"Oh man," Edith says, "the coffee." She stands up, hands me a cup and drops back into the armchair with a wheeze. She pulls the sugar bowel over, places a stick of rock candy inside her cheek and a second in her cup. "That's how it goes, sometimes," she says, and stirs her coffee. "But broken hearts heal." The rhythmic banging of the spoon against the porcelain, the crunching between her gold teeth.

I think of everything that might have been and feel the pain in my whole body. The scrunched-up tissue in my hands is smeared with concealer, a camouflage of yellow and orange.

"Yeah," I say, "I'm sure it will."

The doorbell gives the signal, bright laughter and the clacking of heels rings out in the break room. Kaya stops in front of me. For the third time today, she looks at me with that questioning expression. She's now wearing a swimsuit made of metallic, shimmering Lurex, and rhinestone-dotted *Juicy* platform slippers on her feet. She looks serious. And impossibly beautiful. Everything about her glitters and glows.

"You coming?"

"In a sec," I say, "you go ahead," but instead of following her, I go into the break room next door, which is empty apart from Nokia. Adhesive window tinting protects us here from prying eyes, the white overhead light drains all meaning from the hours of the day and

seasons of the year. I sit down on the sofa and pull my knees up to my chest, reach under my sock and carefully fun my finger over the scab on the top of my foot. The wound is weeping, swollen and warm, the Vaseline has been completely absorbed into the fabric. From the hallway outside reception, gentle whispering and the muffled scuffing of Edith's slippers against the carpet filters over, the speakers are playing Dido. Nokia stretches in front of the sofa with a yawn, she squints, one ear pops up. Then she lifts her head, opens first her left eye, then her right, looks me up and down insistently. I can't hold her gaze, I look at my hands, the bare edges of the nail beds, and suddenly I'm confronted by those images, snapshots like pulsing strobe lights. I see her in front of me, above me, her eyes wide, her mouth gaping, the twitching in her jaw, a throbbing in her neck. I start to feel hot, I exhale, I breathe against the tightness, swallow, breathe, swallow, a piercing ringing in my ears. I close my eyes, I don't want to hear her voice anymore: cold and compressed and thin with hatred.

"And you, sweetheart?" I jolt with a start when Edith strokes my shoulder. "Maybe not today, huh?"

I hold my hands in front of my face, think: pull yourself together. I try to speak, to peel my tongue from my parched palate. "Can I stay here anyway?"

She nods. "Of course you can, pet."

As we walk down the stairs and onto the ground floor, Kaya pulls her lashes off and I redo my lipliner. It's already dark out. Kaya hooks her arm in mine and we brace ourselves against the icy wind. The roughened material of Sam's trackpants slaps loosely around my legs, is no match at all for the cold, which creeps up from the shaft of my boots all the way to my groin. I feel Kaya's right hipbone, her shoulder, hear the swishing of my hood over my ears and think of us back then, Kaya, Sam, and me, on the back seat of the bus, with Sam's hookah in the park, in the smokers' corner behind the gym. Always hungry for something but not yet knowing what, and always together, unless Kaya or I had hooked up with one of the older

boys. But apart from the summer when I fell in love with Yuri, we usually got bored of them quick enough, and when we saw each other the next day at school, it was Sam who would ask the right questions. She picked up the things we dropped and gave them back to us when we needed them most.

Arm in arm, we pass the bike shop, the dog salon, the posters in the front window of the travel agency, cross the grounds of the service station and walk up the stairs between the ivy-covered façades, the leaves white and hard, enveloped in frost. When the takeaway glows across at us as we turn the corner, Sam is already sitting on the little bench in the window. She's wearing a white top and a black jumper, and letting her silver necklace slide between her thumb and index finger. With her other hand, she's typing something on her phone. Kaya knocks on the fogged-up glass, and Sam looks up, the necklace slips out of her fingers, the corners of her mouth go up for a second.

There was a time when we met here every Monday. And because Kaya and I felt the need to reward ourselves for the good and bad shifts alike, we would order everything we felt like. Papaya salad, wonton soup for Sam, summer rolls and udon noodles for me, and always the peanut curry with beef and a coconut mango shake for Kaya. Sometimes also cheesecake and matcha ice cream, even though we were already bursting. I can't remember when we were last here together, but it feels like an eternity. Like a different life.

Now Kaya unlinks her arm and pushes the glass door open with her shoulder. A bell chimes above us, and I think: it's just like it always was. A narrow corridor with pigeon-blue walls and just enough space for three small tables. The hissing coming from the kitchen behind the counter, the steady clacking of a knife. Sam being the only one of us on time and hunched over her phone waiting for us. The aroma of star anis and pepper. It's just like always, just not Kaya's hair, which is now neon green instead of strawberry blonde, cherry mocha, faded denim.

Sam gives Kaya a kiss on the cheek and squeezes me tight, the smell of the swimming

pool clinging to her neck. We order at the counter, and as I sit down, I see us right here in this little niche, on a dark December evening two years ago. The day after I met Nico. And even though the three of us had always told each other everything in this little nook, I wanted to keep Nico for myself for a bit. I knew that Kaya wouldn't understand the significance of this encounter, and the more I would try to explain it to her, the more words I would place on the table between us, the smaller and more insignificant that first night with Nico would appear. I didn't want her view of it to cover mine.

"Tori, are you listening?"

I look up. Kaya is pulling off the last of her press ons, she never wears a design for more than a few days. Today ten pointy flames in silvery, shimmering chrome, carefully lined up on the tabletop. She spreads her fingers out and looks at me with an inquisitorial look. "Is she still in your apartment?" The shame hits me, the feeling of having failed, it's as if I'm being sucked deeper and deeper into the plastic chair I'm sitting on, a viscous, glowing mass with which my body slowly melds. I fight against it by pressing a fingernail deep into my bare nailbed. I look around, tell myself to breathe. A group of girls are huddled at the next table, their chairs shoved together. They must be ten years younger than us, they're showing each other videos on their phone, laughing.

"Stop it." Sam's finger between mine. She opens her mouth, but then leaves it. Unlike Kaya, she knows that not everything has to be said out loud. My heartbeat calms down, I shrug my shoulders, give the vaguest hint of a nod.

When the waiter comes and places three steaming dishes in front of us, Sam lets go of me, takes a photo, posts it to her story. I stare at the thick noodles, teeming worms swimming in oil. I start to feel nauseous under Kaya's nagging gaze.

"So what are you going to do now?" She puts a piece of grey meat in her mouth.

I don't like the way she asks that, I can hear the impatience in her voice, a faint sense of annoyance, as if it were all my fault, my responsibility, as if everything could be resolved so

easily. I feel the words on my tongue, the impulse to throw something back at her – you act as if you like being single, but you haven't let anyone near you since Sam because you're so fucking terrified of getting hurt! – but I hold the words back. I know that something like this would never have happened to her. Nor to Sam, who's been in a long-distance relationship for three years because she's convinced that the space does them good.

"Hey," says Sam carefully, running her hand over the stubble of her freshly shorn buzz cut. "Tori doesn't need to have that figured out yet." She tries to sound calm, but I hear the fine fractures in her voice, know what lies beneath them, even though she's trying to hide it from me.

We stay silent for a moment.

"Could I maybe stay with you for a few more days?"

Sam's hand lingers on the back of her head. "Of course you can," she says and smiles. "Always." Her phone vibrates, over and over, until Kaya grabs it and turns it on silent.

She wipes her greasy lips with her forearm and leans over the table. "Should I pay her a little visit?" She motions toward the door with her head, as if she were going to run off right now, drawing her thumb across her neck.

"Kaya," Sam says suddenly, and we all laugh, laughing the tension away, all the unsaid things, and I notice how my tears mix in with my laughter, because I know that it's her worry that's making her tough, my silence and her clumsiness.

We pay at the counter and grab the bag with the takeaway containers. Outside, on the footpath, we stand close together as Kaya lights a cigarette, Sam takes her vape out of her pocket. She tilts her head back and blows rings of steam into the black sky, the light of the streetlamps lies orange on her face. In the end, I did tell them right here about Nico.

"You gonna to see each other again?" Sam had asked, and I can still remember how casual I sounded, how close I kept the whole thing to my chest. How I revelled in having Nico to

myself for just a little longer.

“Dunno,” I replied, shrugging my shoulders.