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Sis

1

Maisie wrote you a note on your first birthday. Neither of us would remember this, of course. But when I clear the box of greeting cards in Mom's cupboard – all filed by date and occasion – I find a small blue sheet of paper that's folded in quarters. It starts with your old name, addressed to the child you used to be. Maisie's handwriting says,

So you're 1. I hope you'll have a better life than I have.

That's all. First, I wonder why Mom kept it. Then I imagine her at the end of your party: scooping up wrapping paper and napkins, stacking your presents in a pile and the cards in a little tower, heating a bottle for your afternoon nap and rubbing green icing-crumbs off my face — calling out to Maisie in the garden, asking her to wash some veggies for dinner. I see her tipping a jug of water over your scalp, gently-gently, shielding your eyes from bergamot bubbles. I hear her reading and re-reading the rude bits in the giant story to me and yelling for Maisie to turn down her guitar amp. Finally, Mom collapses on the sofa with a mug of rooibos. She must have ordered our cards by size at the end of each long birthday, without pausing to reflect on all the years before.

Of course she didn't know. She never had the time to see what was right in front of her.

Here's the thing: your parts are not my story to tell. I don't know if I ever felt like a girl – not the way you did – but I've been there with you and you are a part of me. On subtropical nights, as we fell asleep with our backs against each other, we even felt like one. Your hair coiled through my ragged braids under the covers and I swear we were so close. Almost the same colour. So forgive me for writing all that it was not. Let me try to start with what it was.

It was late November and every day hummed up to a crescendo of lightning. You woke each morning with the same question: 'Is this the day that Caddy dies?'. I'd pull off my pyjamas, throw a bright dress over my head and peer out the window at the chicken coop.

'No way, not today,' I'd say. You'd stay in your hamster shirt for as long as Mom would let you. We'd eat rice cereal straight from the box and she'd make us drink low fat milk. We were always running out the door five minutes late, comparing watch faces as Mom huffed in the front of the beaten Ford. The cracked leather seat seared and stuck to our thighs.

Our mother was not a religious person, but she believed in free daycare provided by the local Summer Youth Project. I didn't need converting. Like the other kids I wanted to study Sasha, the darkest white girl in our grade. Sasha wore a thin gold crucifix and drew Jesus fishes on her notepads. She went all day without eating and always came first in athletics. I could never run like her, but Youth Group meant I could try to be her friend.

You were less thrilled about our holiday arrangement. Every now and then you kicked Mom as she checked that you'd strapped yourself in. She didn't yell back. Instead we zigzagged through traffic and I hummed, lower than the revving,

This little light of mine...

Mom pulled up by the church's driveway, not even braking properly, and out we tumbled. If you hadn't kicked her that morning, she'd wave. The hall was full of fidgeting girls and older boys. Our Youth Leader was so lifeless to me that I can't remember his name — but I have met other men since then whose haircuts spike in the same way, who wear chino shorts and pink golf shirts, and they all seem to be called Jamie or Jarryd or Jason. Let's say he was J.

J started the mornings with something tame, like throwing around a big ball or talking about our dreams. On our first day I made the mistake of describing the tornado nightmare, not realising that what he wanted were impossible things that were terrifying to say, like I Want To Help Sick Kids or I'd Like

To Be a Mom One Day. We welcomed any newcomers and jumped around singing a half-rhyming song. Next, we moved onto some form of drawing. Once J caught you rolling your eyes at me. He looked annoyed until you told him you were trying to pray with your eyes open.

At lunch you perched next to me and played with a triangle of Laughing Cow cheese. I didn't mind the plastic smell because I knew soon we'd move onto afternoon activities. If the weather was fine, which was most days, we got to run around outside. J would start to relax; sometimes he pretended not to notice if the younger kids were hitting each other. He seemed less alien when I realised even he was watching Sasha's group.

Sasha was nice enough to me to seem polite. I hated it. When she was with her friends, she let out a raw cackle, laughing wide so you could see her fillings. If I tried to make a joke, she'd hide her nose behind her hands and looked sideways at the others. Once a boy asked if you and I were really related and she told him to shut up. Next time we saw them, though, he started the chant that followed you around the rest of that summer. Your face was waxy and you didn't say anything and yet somehow a molten feeling was in my throat. My limbs moved before I knew what sounds would come spilling out. I chased him around the field and dug my nails in his pasty arm, shouting that it was your birth name, a special name, and you were my family. He tried to back away but I drew close to his face and scratched harder. J grabbed me by the waist and told me to cool it.

Her friends didn't stop teasing you, but after that, Sasha nodded whenever we walked past. I imagined there was a part of her that saw into me.

After free time, or if it was raining, J unlocked the basement to bring out the theatre props. I loved how little sense the costumes made. Why had a fake beard been sewn onto a mustard robe? How would the nativity scene work if the Jesus doll was as big as the toy donkey? Its weird scale should have put me off religion, but really, it made me want to believe every story that had ever been written. The best days were when J went to the upstairs office and we were left to play with the costumes, unsupervised, for a few minutes. Deep in a pile of velour and muslin, it felt to me that everyone else was in on it too. We were all just playing parts in something — a script that I could memorise if I moved and spoke like Sasha. I could be anything with the right words.

As it turned to late afternoon, J became his morning self again. The costumes were locked back in the basement. If we were outside, he'd separate us to pray in two circles: girls holding hands, boys tilting their throats to the sky. I peeked through my lashes at you, your palms locked across your chest. It always seemed like you were shaking.

'I don't want to be in the stupid play,' you said at dinner.

'Don't start,' said Mom. 'We have to show face.'

'But they want me to be a Wise Man. I don't want—'

'Tough takkie.'

Can you forgive me for taking her side? I wanted to look like the other families. I thought all our lives would be easier — not just mine, but yours, too. If we learnt the lines, if we prayed with our eyes tight and our palms pressed, then maybe even Maisie would be happy. In bed I thumbed through my pocket Bible and read the Old Testament. I tried to find beauty in the dust and the blood, the spite. When I lit a candle and said a prayer, nothing happened, but I kept reading and mouthing the words. God's voice would come to me if I knew the language. Some nights I dreamt of a line of men, many men with nameless wives. Sometimes I was one of them.

In the morning you'd shake me awake and ask, again, if it was the day that Caddy would die. I'd grab a fresh dress and stare at the chicken coop outside. 'No way, not today,' I'd say, knowing it was just a matter of time.

3

A highly sensitive person. That term has always interested me. What determines sensitivity? Is it how a person is born — Caesarean, water birth? Is it something their mother ate, the milk they drank or a chemical in the air? It's a real skinned-knee thing. It's a hell of a quandary.

What surprised me most about my attack on the boy was that I had never been called sensitive. You were the one who threw tantrums if we had to stop playing Nintendo. You cried at not only the cartoon deer but also the elephant, the tribesmen, the shaggy-haired beast. None of that touched me.

When our cousin came over to play, we'd act out all the plots we'd watched. She and I were lionesses; you had to use Mom's scarf as a mane. We were princesses and you were the urchin, the genie, the villain and the monkey. If we were two mermaids, then you were a pirate. You'd try to get us all to be the same creatures but it never worked. Zoë and I would run to the bottom of the garden, yelling

My Mother Your Mother

until one of our moms would tell us to stop. And once, Auntie Dee offered to cut your hair in the kitchen, and you cried until Maisie came out her room and picked you up, even though she'd said we were too big to be babied.

No, I wasn't sensitive. Not like you. I only got bothered when Maisie was in one of her cruel moods. On the evenings when Mom left her to look after us, she would peer over her glass and chuckle in a careful way. I knew by then that that look was no good. You still wanted to crawl on her lap and laugh along with her. She'd start with a slow question. Once she asked if we knew where the universe ends. We said no, so she explained how nobody really has a clue, the galaxies are just expanding constantly, and at the same time we're all the smallest shrinking specks that will eventually die, even Mom, especially Mom — until I was tugging my hair and had to climb in bed with you to fall asleep. During a lightning storm she made us guess what happens if you get sucked into a tornado. The next morning, Mom had to prove to me that there hadn't been one in our province since before you were born. But Maisie's favourite thing to say in that innocent tone was, 'Where do you think your birth mothers are right now?'

After the first couple of times I tried to fight back. Maisie didn't care for my guesses about them going back to school, or even having their own families. 'I bet they're dead,' she said, eyes glowing wild. 'Do you know what happens when people die? It's worse than with chickens.' Of course you asked why, so then she described all the body processes, the long-growing fingernails and stages of decay. Mom found me sobbing under the sheet when she came back that night. She asked if it was a bad dream again and I didn't say.

I used to wonder why Maisie's questions never shook you. It seemed to me that you shared something — a flick-switch I'd never felt in me. Both of you had moods when you only wanted to make Mom cry, when one of your voices would start to spike in the next room. I'd sneak out to the coop and crouch down by Caddy, splitting seed shells between my nails.

'skay,' I'd repeat. 'You won't die today.'

But there were also times when the pair of you were giddy. Maisie would ask us to help her bake, she'd pretend that only we could knead the dough just right. You'd grin and yelp us you chewed on raisins. Then, as the yeasty smells grew sweet, she'd set up the paddle pool and spray our backs with a hosepipe. Sometimes you even offered to play the Barbie game that Mom's special friend, Gilbert, bought for my birthday — the one you normally called silly.

It made me wonder, the way you two went about with all that volatility. And I saw Mom had a quick-switch in her too, though maybe not so strong. The women in the Bible had borne joy and pain right from the Fall. I saw the Ruths and Abigails as a brood of model sisters. The way I should be. But I didn't know how to come back to myself after waves of conflict. You all could go from coolness to anger to dizzy laughter in the course of an evening. There was something sharklike in your smiles. I started to flatten my voice, even in the light moments, so I wouldn't grow to be like any of you. This just led to more questions, though: why was Gilbert the only one who saw how to act normally? Why wouldn't he visit us at Christmas? And if girls were meant to be reactive, then why did you cry more than me? Not that any of this was conscious. It was a shifty instinct I had no vocabulary for, back then. But when I was sitting with Caddy I sensed more in her numb face than any girl's I'd seen.

4

J told our mother what I'd done. He didn't mention the chant — just that I had gotten woes with one of the boys. As punishment she made me miss a day of Youth, not realising that this would make things worse for you. Maisie was upset too. She had to call in sick to the pharmacy to look after me. As soon as Mom had driven away, she started blasting music from her room and told me to amuse myself.

‘Idle hands, devils’ playthings,’ she sneered. I didn’t know what a plaything was, the word sounded a bit rude, but I knew better than to ask what she meant. Out in the yard it was a sticky grey day. The clouds felt too close. When I tiptoed back inside, I could hear Maisie talking on the landline in the lounge. Her bedroom door had been left ajar. I walked in and froze in front of her stereo. My neck felt strange, like someone was watching me.

Well I’m taking taking taking taking taking off

She’s taking taking taking taking taking off

No, not watching — talking to me. It felt like the words were being whispered in my ear, a soft, slow sound that made sense and needed to be loud. I spun the volume knob.

And he’s taking taking taking taking taking off

She or he? Or both? Or me — I saw myself as a grown woman. I saw myself looking back at this moment. I grabbed the album case and stared into a vision I’d never dared to dream. The cover was an abstract photograph, something like a flag of purple and yellow cloth stitched together with three red arrows, pointing downwards. There was no artist name. No title.

And we’re taking taking taking taking taking off

Then Maisie was coming down the hallway. I fell back into my body.

‘Who’s this?’

She scowled and took the album from me. ‘Not for children.’

‘Mom lets me watch PG-13.’

‘And I’m not your Mom.’ I blinked. She pushed me back a little. ‘Off you go.’

That voice sounded like it had been playing in my head for a while, for years before I first heard it. The low snarls, the yelping, the skittish little sighs. Whoever she was, she didn't hide her voice's dips and cracks. She made a show and then smoothed it all out. Not even Sasha had made me feel so seen.

5

Maisie told us on one of her dark nights that left-handers were twins who consumed the weaker foetus in the womb. I supposed it was true — I did have that energy to me. The next Monday, when J was giving another sermon about holy spirits, I imagined your soul came from the embryo that had vanished. I pictured a sibling-ghost floating from my birth mother, circling the earth a few times until it found its way to another host, to you, the night your cells began to generate and merge—

'I think someone wants to make a confession.' J's preacher voice had turned mean. I refocused my eyes and realised he was staring at me. My face started to warm and there was the hefty feeling again, the rip in my throat from the other day. 'The Lord is telling me that somebody has something on their mind.' I lowered my eyes and hoped he'd not say my name. The whole hall went still for a few seconds.

'Me,' the person to my right spoke. 'I want to confess.'

I stopped staring at the parquet patterns. The stranger hadn't seemed much at first: no bigger than me, untidy eyebrows, ginger-brown hair. As he confessed to J, though, I thought I saw a glance flashing towards me. He had a tilted incisor that his top lip clung to. It fixed his face in a half-smile.

After the sermon, I was slow to unbend my knees. The stranger paused and stretched — he was taller than I'd thought — and then reached out to help me to my feet. He told me his name was Will.

'Don't stress. I can see guys like J from a mile away.'

'How d'you mean?'

He grinned and I wondered how his nose stayed Roman, carved as a good myth, when the rest of him cracked open like that. He was all beauty, suddenly. Will told me he'd been to more churches than he could count. There were plenty sissies who tried to act tough, he said. Will boarded at Catholic school but his family lived next door to Sasha. She was like a best friend and a sister, he added proudly.

This was news, even though Sasha had a slew of boys she called family. One of them was the kid who'd picked on you. I relished in hearing her say they were like siblings, seeing that boy's forehead go thick with confusion. In this way I could never be like Sasha. I couldn't imagine calling another kid my brother. In fact, I hardly thought about anyone of the opposite sex. There was Gilbert and then there was you and so masculinity, to me, implied either great distance or some surrogate form of mothering. Of course there were the boys in school but they were either sporty, which meant smelly, or thin-necked and dull. I hadn't been prepared for a person like Will — not that I wanted a brother's love from him.

But none of Sasha's boy friends were really like family, either. She'd get them to rub her neck and sink back in their arms, cooing how they were so, so good. If any of the girls ever said she was a slet, she spat the perfect excuse: 'How could you! He's my brother.' This way she stayed both pretty and pure. It was one of the things that annoyed me about Sasha even as I kept trying to be like her. The truth was that no boy, smelly or otherwise, had ever expressed interest in doing that to me. My hair was all krullerig, my chest strangely wide. I already had stretch-marks on my thighs. Until that day, I'd thought I was okay with that, but I found myself tugging my dress lower as Will was speaking. He waved a hand in the air. He ran it through his hair. I stared. His fingers weren't boyish at all.

'Anyway, come hang out with us some time, 'kay?'

'Where?'

He laughed at my quick question. 'Dunno. Milky Lane?'

I gave a small smile. Milky Lane was where Sasha went with all her boy friends, where the older girls went on real dates. What did this mean? Before I could code a way to ask, he started jogging to the lunch room. He turned back and waved twice. Good glory, I thought, those hands. I wanted to feel them on my back.

6

With less than two weeks to the nativity, J started to grow urgent. He made us queue straight after lunch and repeat our lines until they sounded just right. I was a star — not the Star of Bethlehem, just the one that stood to her side — and so I had no words. Still, I had to wrap myself in a grey bedsheet and wiggle

my fingers as if to shine. J made you cover your head in a tea towel and lower your voice. Only I could see you wanted to cry. If the boys got mean with you then I wound my sheet tight and flicked it at them, afterwards, in the basement. They only tried that twice.

Mom asked Granny and Gramps to come and watch the play. She said they could stay over, if they liked. Maybe we could even spend real Christmas together. I listened to her pleading on the landline and imagined Granny's reed-like speech on the other end, inventing an excuse.

'— 've not seen you since last Easter —'

Mom's voice kept stopping and starting, like the Ford when it packed up that one afternoon. Remember? Gilbert drove us to school the next morning. The more I thought of Gilbert, the more sure I felt that Granny and Gramps would not be coming to see the play. In fact, it felt quite possible that we'd never see them again. But just as I started to decide that I hated them, Mom's sentences softened.

'Oh. Well — ja, fine, okay. That would be quite nice.'

The next night she told us that Granny and Gramps couldn't come to the nativity play, but they'd be in town the day before, so we'd have Christmas Dinner with them then.

'That's not even Christmas Eve,' Maisie said. Mom shot her a glance so she only added, 'Unlike everyone else at this table, I remember when they used to care.'

I started drawing a chequer pattern in my mash. You asked if you could go and play computer games. This time it was my turn to roll my eyes. You had to try and make a name for yourself. I told you it was simple: find something you're good at, and people will focus on that, instead of the way you look or how you act. For me it had been netball. Thing is, you only cared about chess. The black kids didn't like how you spoke and the white boys didn't see why you wouldn't play rugby.

Will told me he couldn't believe we were related. I wanted to tell him we weren't, not really, but I'd scratched Sasha's friend for daring to suggest otherwise.

'I mean, like, you look alike,' Will said, his eyes scanning the clear lines from where sun touched my socks, my uniform sleeves. 'But you're so much louder.'

No one had ever called me that before. But then nobody had made me laugh during class or assembly. Every sermon Will created a new word or raised his eyebrows in a way that made me have to

clench my core and press my lips together until we'd spill out into the street at the end of the service and gasp and clutch at each other's arms. I'd not known such lightness could feel possible.

The night before I went to Milky Lane, when Maisie was working late at the pharmacy, I sneaked into her room and put on the album I'd overheard. I sat in front of her poster of Marlene Dietrich and picked up the tweezers on the dressing table. I plucked and plucked until there was something of the film star to my temple. Just the brows and nose, maybe the cheekbones –

Sometimes I think that I'm bigger than the sound –

I mouthed the words to the mirror. Marlene kept her eyes fixed on the ceiling. Turning off the lamp on the vanity, I tilted my chin like her and leant into the glass. Pretty, I saw then, was where bone lifted skin. This was the only way that being a woman could make sense to me.

7

I got to Milky Lane earlier than the others. The menu was a dream of glossy photos: fudge-brown sundaes topped with clouds of cream, waffles oozing in syrup and jelly. A line of pastel thickshakes. I read through all the names twice, slowly: Aero Delite, Bar One-der Bomb, Cookies and Caramilk.

Just as I was about to hop off the neon barstool, Sasha came through the doors. 'You look different,' she said. 'Did you do something to your hair?' She ran her fingers over my scalp. My expression must have shifted because she drew back and smiled quickly, sweetly. 'Sorry. I just wanted to feel. You look better is what I mean.' She draped one arm across my shoulder and held her other hand next to my forearm. 'Look, so tan. We could be sisters, hey?'

It was the first time she'd ever touched me. In fact, it was the first time she'd spoken to me without anyone else around. Her eyes were darting like they did when she laughed properly, when she spoke with her brother-friends. Her smile sparkled wider than it had ever seemed. So I told her about the tweezers and the CD — though she interrupted me before I got to Marlene Dietrich.

‘Will can’t make it.’ She scanned my T-shirt and the pink handbag I’d taken from Maisie’s wardrobe. ‘But we could do a bit of girly shopping. Unless you just wanted to see him?’

‘No no,’ I said. Too quick — Sasha giggled and shook her head. I’d wanted to try a milkshake, but it became clear that this was just a place to meet. Instead she led me to an accessory shop. Silver studs and belly rings gleamed in rotating cases. A pimply boy at the till pretended not to look while she looped two studded belts around her waist. The smaller one had a pattern of crucifixes branded into its leather.

‘So do you like him then?’

‘Um. He’s nice.’

She grabbed my wrist so I was forced to meet her gaze in the mirror. ‘Course he’s nice, he’s my best friend. But do you like-like him?’

‘I...’ Sasha’s nails cut. Her smile was a spotlight. ‘Ja, I do.’

She turned, just then, to admire the belts from behind. I waited to see if she was surprised but she unclasped them both and handed the thinner one to the boy. ‘Just this.’

‘You go to that church, don’t you?’ His voice was deeper than I’d imagined, or it could have been the accent. From Bloemfontein, maybe.

‘Depends who’s asking,’ Sasha grinned.

‘I sometimes see you when I pick up my brother. He said you’re Mary.’

‘Oh, well.’ She pocketed the receipt, tore the tag from the belt, and wrapped it back around her waist. ‘God bless him, and have a Jesus-filled day.’ When we were a few shops down from the accessory store, she burst out laughing. ‘That guy! *Mary*. Tragic. Did you see how he was looking at me? With that acne. Sies.’

‘I think he was just talking about the nativity,’ I said. Sasha drew a deep breath as she notched the belt tighter. She let out a sigh and rolled her eyes.

‘Anyway, you and Will are so cute. I don’t know if he likes you. But you should tell him how you feel. It’d be good.’

‘He hasn’t said anything?’

‘No, we don’t talk about *that*.’ I wondered what *that* meant. ‘I can tell him if you like.’

‘Don’t –’ I rushed, ‘but – I don’t know if I want to tell him either. I’ve never told anyone I like them before.’

‘Me neither. I don’t need to.’ Sasha wrinkled her nose. ‘I mean — you know what I mean.’ She stopped in front of the storefront we were passing with stringy bikinis and skater shoes in the window. ‘Why don’t we see what you want to get, hey?’

For the rest of the afternoon, she tried to get me to buy something from every shop we walked into but the tops and shoes all looked ugly, so beige and pointed. When I found a necklace I liked, she asked how old I was, so I put it away. It felt like we were speaking different languages — we only laughed when she made a face behind someone’s back or I raised my eyebrows and wiggled them as if we were in service. Still, after she offered to buy me a three-pack of bracelets, I asked her to come over on the weekend. She said yes. I couldn’t wait to show her my trick with the light at Maisie’s dresser. If I could show her how I posed all silent in black and white, if I could learn to be sisterly, I thought, then maybe she and Will would see more to me.

It was only when I got home and opened the chicken coop that I realised I’d told Sasha to come over on the day of Granny and Gramps’s visit. I ran through the possible outcomes in my mind, my hands cold from either the oversized beads that clunked on my new jewellery or something else entirely. Caddy was sitting on the patch where she used to lay eggs, a few feathers dislodged from her back. I told her what I wanted to say to Will. Then I imagined Sasha’s visit: Mom wouldn’t be tired and Maisie would sound bubbly. Granny and Gramps would smile and nod and say they’ve heard I do netball now, and look how thick my hair’s gotten — something like that, awkward but well-meaning.

‘They’ll act fine, won’t they?’

Caddy’s pupils were prehistoric. Her irises seemed fossilised.

8

I am eightch-ay-pee-pee-why, I am eightch-ay-pee-pee-why...

Mom piped red letters on the Christmas cake and dotted it with meticulous fondant snowmen.

Somewhere there was a bowl of soft chocolates that I knew you would be offered first. I was desperate to believe the words that Sasha and I were singing.

I am ell-ob-vee-eee-dee, I am ell-ob-vee-eee-dee...

Loved. Even though our family looked a little strange, even though Granny and Gramps wanted to exchange presents a week earlier than Christmas Day, we all were still loved — weren't we? I was wondering this as Granny came into the kitchen. The room felt cooler suddenly and I crossed my legs like she did, knee over knee, back ramrod but still singing.

“Happy Christmas”? Goodness. Whatever happened to Merry? Are we all sinners in this house?’ Granny’s cornflower eyes spun from Mom to you and back again.

By Jay-eee-ess-you-ess, by—

‘That’s enough now,’ Mom ordered as she closed the cake stand. Sasha gave me a look. I would have to tell her later that Mom wasn’t really upset about our singing — it was Gilbert, again. I knew Granny would go all day without even saying his name.

‘Who’s this?’ Granny asked, pointing to the table where the three of us were sitting.

‘My friend, Sasha,’ I said. ‘From Youth.’

‘Hello Sasha.’ Granny reached out as if to pat her head, but then pulled back her hand. She glanced at Mom and forced a laugh. ‘Vir ’n oomblik het ek gedink...’

‘Wat?’ Mom’s teeth were as sharp as the breadknife as she turned around. ‘Nog ’n kind?’

‘Well she does look—’

‘Ma. Stop it.’ Mom gave us a tight smile and said, ‘Why don’t you kids show Sasha the garden?’

You stayed at the table, fiddling with the icing bag — the whites of your eyes were still veiny from earlier, when Mom had explained that Caddy had to die, she was getting old, and to eat her would

mean her life had been well lived. I got up and beckoned for Sasha to follow. As I led her down the hallway she asked, ‘What did your Granny mean just now? She said she’d thought something?’

‘Oh don’t worry, she gets confused,’ I lied. ‘Come check out my sister’s room.’

Maisie was in the back garden. I didn’t want Sasha to see her washing the axe of its blood. So I led her to the dresser and showed her how I leaned right up close, breath against another version of me, a shadow who knew how to rock and sing like a lady, or at least, a woman. Sasha squeezed next to me on the stool and pouted against the glass. I laughed. We both pressed against the mirror harder, competing. In the second before the frame tipped, I felt certain we were at the start of a fun story.

Then the chipboard snapped and the glass slipped straight out. The sheet seemed to shatter before it had even touched the carpet.

‘Eina!’ Sasha shrieked. I pulled her up and asked where it hurt but she didn’t seem to be cut anywhere. My skin was also clean.

‘Wat gaan nou aan?’ Granny called from the kitchen. But it was Maisie who got to us first. Maisie, with her forehead sweating, her fingers dripping with water. She wiped her hands on her apron and shook her head. I hoped Sasha wouldn’t notice the spatters.

‘Typical. *Typical*. Fuckin’ children. You know what this means, right?’ I had never seen Sasha look scared before. ‘Seven years bad luck. For both of you.’ Maisie pushed past me and started picking up the glass. ‘Well? You gonna stand there all day or get a dustpan? *Jassis*.’

We shuffled back to the kitchen, Sasha hovering behind me. Granny clicked her tongue; Gramps was sitting at the table with you, now, and didn’t look up as we came in. Mom handed me the dustpan and told us to say sorry to Maisie. Then she asked you to help us clear the glass. A dirt-pink lump sat on the chopping board in front of her.

We worked around Maisie in silence. Once she’d picked up the larger shards, she told us to put the glass in the brown bin, in the garden, and stay outside until it was time to eat. You sat cross-legged on a rock while Sasha picked at the basil and bunny’s ears. I stared and wondered what we were. Two halves — but no, we were three. Sasha, you, and me. I felt fixed by the images that Maisie and Granny

and every other woman had made of me. Just then, Granny shouted something from the kitchen. I saw her watching through the window, hating us.

Everyone was sitting for mealtime when we came in. I don't know when you started crying, again, because Mom had put on a carol CD. But when Maisie told you to eat up, you let the flesh fall to the plate and made this long lowing sound that the neighbours must have heard. Spitty potato clumped on your lips as you sobbed, through a string of little breaths, 'Ca – duh – duh – dee'. Granny patted her mouth with a napkin; Gramps took off his paper hat.

I'm not sure what made me say it. The first word was that buzzing feeling in my throat, maybe. Or it could have been because that was how Maisie had spoken to us, the way I'd been taught for years that grown humans speak. Most of all I wanted Sasha to smile, to roll her eyes, to do anything other than sit there with her shoulders squared away from us. It felt then that you were the real problem with our family, the weirdest of all. And I was angry at you for always standing in my way by feeling, by being weak. By doing nothing for yourself. I knew when I felt it that I'd get in trouble, but somehow the words still clawed their way out:

'Fuckin' sissie.'

9

Why have I told you all this? You know it already: Mom made me go to my room and drove Sasha home alone, early. She forced you to act in the nativity play the next evening and made me stay at home, telling J I'd got an upset tummy.

What you don't know is I spent that night thrashing around our room, kicking the pillows down my duvet as I imagined everyone in their sparkling costumes, the orange light. At some point I thought I heard Maisie knock. She'd put some leftovers outside the bedroom door and I tried not to eat them, but the starched gravy smell made me dizzy, and when you got home I could hear Mom laughing that the plate was clean. That was the first time I truly felt weak.

And I never told you, but Sasha must have said something to Will. After Christmas and New Year's, when Mom let me go back to Youth – 'Two more weeks, then school,' she declared from the

driver's seat – they stood in a huddle when J went to fetch music sheets from the church office. I waved but they turned, quickly, and nipped down the stairs to the basement.

I never told you, but I followed. Instead of responding to my hello, Sasha asked pointedly if I believed in ghosts.

'Uh, I dunno.'

'Well I do. I'm a good Christian.' I wasn't sure where this was going.

'Oh, ja, me too.'

'Really?' She mouthed *sies*. Then she shook her head at Will and bounded back up the stairs. He looked like he also wanted to leave. We spoke for a little while about the play and how his Christmas had been. He said he'd be going back to boarding school soon. Then, I knew, was my chance. My legs and arms felt like they were buzzing. I started saying the words that had felt easier to compose a couple weeks ago, when I'd just said them to Caddy. Caddy. I tried not to think of her plucked flesh but his face was coloured the same way, in that dank room, and suddenly I knew it was wrong, all wrong, and how on earth did I ever think I'd get what I wanted and I don't even remember what he first said to reject me. All I know is that raw feeling was back in the neck. But this time I knew better than to swear. Instead, I pressed him.

'But why?'

'Sorry,' he said. 'We wouldn't work. It's just — someone like you, and someone like me.' He shrugged and pursed his lips.

'What does that mean?'

'Has Sasha not told you?'

'What?'

Will sighed. 'Don't say anything to anyone. But I don't feel... *that way*.'

I didn't understand what he meant. How could I? I barely knew any men. I didn't know that *that* was code for something, back then. I thought it was all about me. Maybe I was a source of temptation. I'd started wearing gloss and my lips were too large; my eyebrows were clean arcs; I was too much. Or it could have been my skin. I remembered how he'd stared at my bared ankles, my upper arms.

‘D’you think I’m a sinner?’

‘It’s not...’

I didn’t wait for his reply. You caught me at the top of the stairs, blinking in the stained light. You weren’t speaking to me then – you didn’t really speak to me ever again, even when we were forced to talk – so that was all you saw. I haven’t seen you since you became who you always were, my sister, my surprise. You never told me your name.

And which stories of yours did I miss? Hell, I can see them. The others in your class whispering. That chant that must have lasted longer than I care to remember. Sasha pulling aside any kid who spoke to you, telling them you had a foul-mouthed sister who scratched like an animal. A family of animals, but not even related, just snapping and bickering like strays, like pigs in a sty. I saw her saying we weren’t, we were never, friends. But then that story isn’t really yours again, is it? It’s mine.