

*The Artificial
Anatomy
of Parks*

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Kat Gordon was born in London in 1984. She attended Camden School for Girls, read English at Somerville College, Oxford, and received a distinction in her creative writing masters from Royal Holloway.

In between, Kat has been a gymnastics coach, a theatre usher, a piano accompanist, a nanny, a researcher and worked at *Time Out*. She has spent a lot of time travelling, primarily in Africa.

Kat lives in London with her boyfriend and their terrifying cat, Maggie.

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*This book is dedicated to
Janet and Alex Gordon,
and to Tom Feltham, with thanks.*

PART ONE

Heart

One

It's nine o'clock in the morning when the phone call comes through.

"Miss Park?"

"Yes?"

"This is Marylebone Heart Hospital. I'm afraid your father has had a heart attack."

For a moment I don't understand. I'm still in bed, under the covers, head and one arm out in the open.

"He was brought in here at six this morning. We'll be moving him to coronary care shortly, where you'll be able to visit him. He's still under, though."

"Right." I feel I should say more. "Please let me know if there's any change in his condition."

"Of course."

I hang up.

I lie back in my bed. My brain feels like it's out of sync with the rest of me. I try to think about the last time I spoke to my father; it was five years ago. I can see him before me, white-faced, the nurse's arm around his chest as she propelled him out of the room. I wonder whether this heart attack was already lurking offstage, biding its time. I know that heart problems can build up over a long period, treacherous plaque mushrooming on the inner walls of the coronary artery. When

I was a baby, my father gave me a plastic simulacrum of a heart to play with. It was meant for medical students, but I used it to chew on when my teeth were coming through.

Years later, when I was alone in the house on rainy afternoons, I would read his medical journals. I became obsessed with the heart, its unpredictability. I can still recite the facts: ... *damage to the heart restricts the flow of oxygenated blood usually pumped out of the left ventricle. This causes left ventricular failure and fluid accumulation in the lungs; it's at this point that the sufferer will feel a shortness of breath. Patients may also feel weak, light-headed, nauseous; experience sweating and palpitations.* Approximately half of all heart-attack patients have experienced warning symptoms such as chest pain at some point prior to the actual attack.

My ears are ringing now. I plug them with my fingers, trying to push the sound back into my brain. I can't imagine how it must feel, the realisation that your heart is failing you, when for so many years you forgot that it was even there, ticking away like a little death-clock. All my muscles start to curl up just thinking about it. I couldn't have stopped it, I tell myself, but there's a heavy feeling in the room, like when you're a kid and you've done something bad and you're waiting to be found out.

I drag myself out of bed to throw up in the sink that stands in the corner of the bedroom. My hands shake when I run the taps to clear away the mess. I cross the room to the window. *We don't swim in your toilet, so don't piss in our pool* – my cousin, Starr, taped that sign to the glass.

I force the window open and stick my head out into the fresh air. Below me a cyclist screeches to a stop, drops his bike and runs into the building two doors down, his hair slick with sweat. The traffic is heavy and the air is already thick and sultry. Shop workers stand in their doorways, fanning themselves. Behind them, JXL curls out of the radio – the remix of Elvis Presley's 'A Little Less Conversation'. It's been number one in the charts for a month this summer. It's

2002, the year of the King's big comeback.

I feel sick again; I haven't been in a hospital for five years either.

My flat is in a converted Victorian house on Essex Road, N1. It's supposed to be a prestigious postcode, but the ground floor of our building and the one next door is taken up with a funeral parlour, hence the cheap rent. They do transporting, embalming, flower arrangements, the works. When I first moved in I was freaked by all the coffins I saw being carried in and out, but now I'm used to it. Below me is another flat, I share a toilet on the half-landing with him. Mine is the attic – two medium-sized rooms, a bedroom with sink, a kitchen with shower. It's not much – it's peeling and yellow and recently there's been a strange damp smell that sometimes means I wake up wheezing. I took it because it was close to work, and I have a weakness for badly-fitting wooden floorboards and windowpanes that let in cold air. I blame my grandmother.

Now, though, for the first time since I moved in five months ago, I wish the place felt more like home.

I pad into the kitchen and fill the kettle, checking my reflection in my cracked, bear-shaped hand mirror while it boils. My hair is dirty and there's yesterday's makeup smeared around my face; I don't necessarily want to go to the hospital, but I can imagine what my grandmother would say if I turned up like this – 'The poor man's got a weak heart, do you want him to die of fright?'

I shower, scrubbing myself hard. I drink a coffee while it's steaming and sort through the post, drumming my fingers on the kitchen table, impatient for the caffeine to kick in.

My uniform is draped across the back of a chair, waiting to be put on. It's a tight turquoise-and-purple mini dress like waitresses used to wear in American diners in the fifties. My name is stitched into it over the left breast, so male customers can gawp at my chest and get away with it.

Maybe I should let my boss know about my situation, but

the more time that passes, the more I feel I don't have to go and sit by my father's bedside – there's a reason we haven't kept in touch.

I get dressed in the kitchen, trying to iron out the creases with my hands. I can hear the golf coming in waves through the paper-thin wall separating me from my neighbour. I wonder what my mother would say to try to convince me to go, although if she were here we probably wouldn't be in this mess in the first place. She was always able to talk me out of being angry when I was younger. She'd say something like, 'This is the only point in your life you can go to the post office in a Batgirl outfit. Don't waste it on getting upset.'

She was the one who bought me the Batgirl outfit too, a reward for being brave after I fell out of a tree in our garden when I was five. I don't remember the fall; I remember my father picking me up off the lawn and carrying me inside. He laid me down on the sofa and started prodding me gently. I was completely still, but I winced when he took my head in his hands and examined my eyebrow. I could feel something warm start to meander down my face, and when I blinked my eyelashes felt sticky.

"You're bleeding a bit," he told me. "Do you know how bleeding happens?"

"How?"

"It means you've severed tiny blood vessels near the surface of the skin. When you do that, the blood comes out of the body, and we call that loss 'bleeding'."

"Okay," I said.

"Good girl," he said, and helped me up.

"Is it serious?" my mother asked.

"She'll need stitches, but she'll be fine."

We sat in the hospital waiting room for an hour; the bright lights and squeaky plastic floor and coughing patients made me shrink back into my chair. My mother held my hand the whole time. On the way home she rode in the back with me, showing me all her scars.

“This one is from my first cat,” she said, showing me a white line running down the inside of her right arm. “And this one is from chickenpox.” She pointed to a circle next to her left eye.

“You obviously ignored your doctor and scratched it,” my father said, from the front seat.

“If only I’d known you back then, Edward,” my mother said.

She was smiling. I looked at my father’s eyes in the rear-view mirror and saw the skin crease around them, like he was smiling too.

“What’s that one?” I asked, putting my finger on the little cross on her chin.

“That was from when your mother was saving the world,” my father said.

“I fell over at a CND demonstration,” she said, “and cut myself. It was when you were a tiny baby, and I was going to take you along in a sling, like in those photos I showed you, but thank God I didn’t, or I might have squashed you.”

“Where was I?” I asked.

“At home with Daddy,” she said. “It was the first time I was away from you.”

“Yes,” my father said. “I seem to remember you cried all night.”

* * *

I’m feeling the caffeine buzz now – my heart is pumping a little too fast and my ears are choked-up with its clamouring. *Lub-dub, lub-dub*. I wonder if I’m going to throw up again.

My mobile rings, it’s Starr. “Thank God you picked up, have you heard?”

“Yeah, the hospital just called.”

“Are you there?”

I light a cigarette. “Not yet.”

“Are you on your way?”

“Not yet.”

“Hon, what are you waiting for?”

I make my hand into a fist, and consider it. Roughly speaking, it is the size of my heart; my father taught me that. “I have to call work.”

“So call them.”

“I will.”

“When?”

“Now.”

“This is a really big fucking deal. You’re the only one he has left, apart from Mum and Aunt G... You *have* to go.”

I pretend not to hear her. “Where *are* you? It’s a really bad line.”

“I’m in Spain, remember, with Riccardo. I wish I could fly back but we’re in the middle of fucking nowhere – flights once every ten days or something, and we’ve just missed one. Give Uncle Edward my love.”

“Alright.”

“You are *going*, aren’t you?”

“Get off my back, Starr. I don’t know yet. It’s not like we’re that close, is it?”

I hang up. I’m not ready to face my past quite yet, no matter how bad Starr makes me feel.

I sit on the edge of the bed, working up the will to put on my socks and shoes – black flats that won’t pinch after an eight-hour shift. My feet have always been big with knobbly toes, like monkeys’. When I was a kid I used them to pick things up and carry them around – pens, rubber bands, coins. I wonder if my father remembers it.

If he dies now...

I pick up the phone again and call my boss to tell him I won’t be in today. “It’s a family emergency,” I say.

“You can’t expect me to believe that,” he says. “That’s the oldest trick in the book.”

“Well this time it’s true.”

He makes a disgusted noise down the receiver. “I see right through you, missy,” he says. “You’ve got a hangover again.”

I start to say something, but he cuts me off. “I don’t really care. If you’re not in usual time on Wednesday, you can forget about coming in for good.”

I bang the telephone down. If I had the guts or the money I’d quit in a flash.

“And do what?” Starr asked me once. I pretended I hadn’t thought about it.

So work isn’t an obstacle anymore. I don’t want to see my father, but I can’t pretend I don’t know about it. If I hadn’t picked up the phone this morning, I could get on with my daily routine. But I did pick up the phone. ‘You were raised to know the right thing to do,’ my grandmother would say. ‘If you don’t go now, it’ll be because of your own pig-headedness.’

“You win,” I tell her. “But I’m only going for you.”

I throw on some non-work clothes and grab my cigarettes, keys, and phone and leave the flat, locking the door behind me. I walk to Islington Green, running the last few yards to catch the number 30 pulling in at the stop. It’s only when I’m on it that I realise my aunts might be at the hospital too. The doors are still open, and I almost get off again, but something inside me puts its foot down – no more wavering. My grandmother’s influence again, probably. I sit by the window and watch as the bus sails past sunbathers on the green, then Pizza Express and William Hill and the new Thai restaurant, with potted bamboo and stone buddhas outside. Pedestrians amble alongside us in the heat, flip-flops slapping against the pavement, and Brazilian flags still hang from second and third-floor flat windows, mementoes of their fifth World Cup win back in June.

I don’t want to see any of them – my place among the family was always a little uncertain – but especially not Aunt Vivienne. She’s my father’s younger sister, Starr’s mum, and I remember her being tall and glamorous and fierce. When I knew her, she had short, dark hair that licked each ear. “To look like Cyd Charisse,” she said. In 1974 and 1975, a

twenty-two-year-old Vivienne had appeared, scantily clad, in several films with titles like: *Vampira*, *The Arabian Nights* and *Supervixens*.

She might not show up though – she has a bad track record of attending funerals at least. And as far as I could tell, when I was a kid, Aunt Vivienne didn't seem to notice my father much; maybe they haven't seen each other recently either. Starr said, once, that after I left my father basically turned into a recluse, but Starr exaggerates.

* * *

When we were children I thought Starr was the coolest person I knew. She wore glitter eye-shadow that suited her name, and could balance whole stacks of books on her head while walking round the living-room. Sometimes we'd visit them in their Primrose Hill flat and she would show us. She said that Aunt Vivienne made her practise every night so she'd have the right posture for modelling or acting.

"You know, I went a whole year without buying myself a single drink," Aunt Vivienne said once, smoking a cigarette and crossing her legs. "*Everyone* took me out to dinner. I went along with it of course, but I knew they just wanted to see if I'd get my tits out."

Me and Starr, playing quietly under the kitchen table, giggled to ourselves at the t-word.

"You should have come with me sometimes, Evie," Aunt Vivienne said to my mother. "You're very cute, you know. Not exactly right for the roles I got, but you could definitely have played a young country *ingénue*. That would have been right up your street, wouldn't it?"

Under the table I saw my mother's hands tighten in her lap.

"Right," Aunt Vivienne said, her face appearing suddenly. "Get out you two. Don't think I don't know you're snooping around down there."

We crawled out and I went to stand next to my mother.

Aunt Vivienne watched me. I watched her back. Aunt Vivienne never dressed the same as other women on the street – she looked more like the people from black and white films – and now she was wearing white trousers that flared at the bottom, and a white silk shirt. I could see through her top to her purple bra, and I wondered if she still needed to show people her tits.

My mother was wearing her red tea dress and her blonde hair big and wavy. When she'd come down for breakfast that morning my father had pretended to think she was Farrah Fawcett, although I thought she was much prettier. She put her arm around me and buried her face in my hair, speaking into it. "What are you up to?"

"Playing with dolls."

"That sounds nice," she said, and nuzzled my ear.

Starr was standing near the door. Aunt Vivienne crushed her cigarette out in the saucer in front of her and turned in her seat. "Starr, go to your room. And take your cousin with you. Can't I ever have an adult conversation around here?"

"Come on," Starr said when we were in the hallway. "Let's go to Mum's bedroom and try on makeup."

"Okay," I said. I thought Starr was very brave after the way Aunt Vivienne had just looked at her.

Aunt Vivienne had a whole row of lipsticks and pots of cream and brushes.

"The blusher's in here," Starr said, pulling open the top drawer of the dresser. She was wearing shiny silver leggings with gold spots on them, and a pink t-shirt with two elephants kissing. I stuck my hands in the pockets of my denim shorts and wished I looked as exciting as her.

"Oh, it's the left one." Starr struggled to close the open drawer. "Help me."

We tried pushing it together.

"You have to jiggle it," Starr said. "Quietly, or she'll hear us." She mimed drawing a line across her throat. I giggled.

"There's something stuck at the back," Starr said, reaching

into the drawer and pulling out sheets of writing paper, bills and photos. "Take these. We have to shove everything down."

I looked at the photo on the top of the stack Starr had given me. It looked like a birthday shot; there was cake on a table in the front and, standing slightly behind it, Aunt Vivienne and my mother, wearing party hats. My mother had an arm around Vivienne's waist. There was another face in the frame as well, all blurry. It looked like a man with dark hair, no one I'd ever seen before. Both my mother and Aunt Vivienne were looking at him, and Aunt Vivienne was reaching out a hand like she was trying to catch hold of his arm.

"Who's that?"

"Where?"

"Here."

We heard someone go into the bathroom next door and water running.

"Give them to me," Starr said, grabbing the stack and piling it back in the drawer. We scuttled out of Aunt Vivienne's bedroom and into Starr's. My mother put her head around the door as soon as we'd sat down. Her eyes looked red around the rims, like she had a cold.

"It's time to go, Tallie," she said.

Starr gave me a look and put her finger on her lips. We giggled again.

* * *

I get off at Harley Street and make my way through Marylebone, past women with expensive hair drinking coffee, down wide, sunlit streets with 'doctor' written in front of the parking spaces, and quiet pockets of residential mews and small, peaceful parks. After the grey and brown of my road, it feels like the whole area has been splashed in colour – red brick, green trees and silver Mercedes. I wonder if I'll run into Toby; he used to live nearby, although I think he was closer to Edgware Road.

A young mother comes into view with a toddler in tow.

She's carrying too many bags and feeding bottles and a ball under one arm. The toddler is red-faced, and one tug away from a screaming fit. The woman looks tearful. I look away.

My mother – Evelyn – was wonderful with children, everyone said so. She used to stop and coo at babies whenever we went for walks together and they always smiled at her. She used to bake proper cakes for my birthdays, elaborate ones in the shapes of cartoon characters, with butter-cream icing, and she would stay up all night sewing costumes for me when I was invited to fancy-dress parties. She could do lots of different voices when she was reading stories aloud at bed-time. She smelled like vanilla, and sang low and sweetly.

I have all these memories at least. She's there in my head. It's in the real world that I've lost her – I haven't smelt her perfume since I was ten, or seen the strands of hair that used to build up in her hairbrush. I can't remember how it felt to touch her when she was still warm and soft from a bath. And what was she like when she wasn't with me? What was she like as a person? I think about my mother all the time.

Two

My father isn't in Coronary Care. When I ask at Reception I'm told he's been moved to Floor One. My father's worked here at the heart hospital all my life and I know what's on Floor One: Intensive Care.

"I'm afraid the heart attack, and the heart rhythm he went into, were very severe," a pretty nurse is telling me. "He had to be anaesthetised to let it recover."

Nurse Slattery, her badge says. She's very gentle with me, but she doesn't smile. I used to want to be a nurse. I wonder how I'd break the news if it was me in her place, if I could be as calm.

"Thanks."

"He's still under. You can sit with him if you want."

I make it to the doorway of his ward before I feel my chest begin to tighten. I pull up short and flex and unflex my fingers; they feel cold, like all the blood has rushed elsewhere. I tuck them into my armpits. It's okay, I tell myself. No one even knows you're here. You can go home without explaining yourself to anyone. My feet start to move instinctively, I'm halfway down the corridor in the other direction when I hear someone calling my name. I lift my face up to see Gillian, my father's older sister, coming out of the lift.

I stop. She hurries up to me and puts her bags on the

floor – she’s been to Harvey Nichols – and kisses me on both cheeks. She smells of lavender, she’s wearing navy linen trousers and a stripy top and her hair in a tight, blonde bun, just as I remember it.

Her eyes are shiny, like she’s holding back tears. “How are you, darling?”

“I’m fine.”

“I went to call you earlier,” she says. “But then I realised I don’t have a number for you. I didn’t even know if you were in the country – I was so worried no one would be able to reach you. How long has it been? Five years?”

She’s skirting the issue, letting me know my disappearance has been noticed, but not asking for a reason.

“The hospital called me,” I say.

Now that I think about it, I realise Starr must have given them my number. My father certainly doesn’t have it.

She hasn’t taken her eyes off my face yet. “Have you seen him?”

“No.”

“Come on then.”

We walk to my father’s room and Aunt Gillian goes straight in. I hover, half-in, half-out.

“Edward,” I hear her say. She sounds choked.

My father looks terrible. His whole face is grey. I didn’t know people could be this colour and still be alive. I look away, at the floor; there are scuff marks by the bed, as if it’s been moved rapidly at some point.

“He’s unconscious,” I say.

Aunt Gillian is stroking his hair.

“They had to anaesthetise him to let his heart recover,” I say. “They’ll probably keep him under for a while.”

“Yes,” she says. “They said on the phone they’d done a PCI.” She looks at me, then back down to my father. “We sound like pretty cold fish, don’t we?”

“We sound like him,” I say. My father is a heart surgeon, and when I was a little girl this terminology was as familiar

to me as my nursery rhymes. Perhaps even more so – I can't remember anything beyond the second line of 'Oranges and Lemons'.

It's when Aunt Gillian turns to face me that I realise I'm humming the tune. "Sorry," I say. I come and stand beside my aunt.

"Don't be," she says. "You're under a lot of stress." She guides me into a bedside chair. It's almost too close to my father to bear. I can smell his aftershave, dark and woody, mingling with antiseptic and rubber. He must have already finished his morning routine when he had the heart attack; he always got up early. I find myself looking at his ear, checking for the tell-tale crease, Frank's sign, named after Dr Sanders T. Frank. Frank's sign is a diagonal earlobe crease, extending from the hard pointy bit at the front, covering the ear-hole, across the lobe to the rear edge of the visible part of the ear. Growing up, I was fascinated by the idea that this little rumple of skin could anticipate heart disease. You find it especially on elderly people. My father doesn't have it.

"He's still so young," Aunt Gillian says, like she's reading my mind.

She's kind of right. He's fifty-four, but he looks much older than I remember – maybe it's the illness. He's the same, but he's changed. His hair seems finer, and I can see a dusting of grey in the blond, like the time my mother's camera had metal shavings on the lens and everything came out speckled with silver. There are a few hairs that have started to creep out of his ears and nose. His moustache and eyebrows are bushier, too, and there's a deeper 'V' at the cleft between neck and collarbone, where he must have lost weight. His hands are lying palm-down on either side of his body, but even at rest they're wrinkled. He's not wearing an oxygen mask – part of me wishes his face was covered up more.

I'm here now, Dad. I didn't want to see you again, but I came anyway. So now what?

Someone taps at the door and comes in. It's the pretty

nurse from before. I watch as she takes my father's pulse and examines his respiratory pattern. She opens his eyelids one after the other, and looks at his pupils. Then she turns his head from side to side, keeping the eyelids open.

"What does that show?" I ask.

"We call it the doll's eye test," she says, laying his head gently back down on the pillow. "If the eyes move in the opposite direction to the rotation of the head, it means his brainstem is intact."

"Like a doll," Aunt Gillian says, vaguely. I can tell the presence of someone official is making her feel better; she's stopped fidgeting and she's watching the nurse like she's going to perform some kind of miracle.

"Exactly," the nurse says, smiling encouragingly. "He's doing really well. He should be out of here in no time at all."

By which point I'll be long gone.

"The doctor's already seen him today, but he's around if you have any questions?"

"We're fine," I say. There's nothing quite like a man in a position of care and responsibility to set my teeth on edge, actually, Nurse.

She straightens his pillow, writes a few sentences on her clipboard and leaves, her shoes squeaking on the floor.

"They're very good here," Aunt Gillian says.

"Yeah," I say.

* * *

When I was six I was in a ballet performance, dancing the part of a flower girl in something our ballet teacher had written herself. My mother had stitched pink and gold flowers onto my wraparound skirt, but I was in a bad mood because I wanted to wear a tutu, like the older girls, or carry a basket, like Jennifer Allen. I was already jealous of Jennifer Allen because this was 1987, and my favourite TV character, even more than Batgirl, was Penny, Inspector Gadget's niece, who also had blonde hair that her mother tied up in pigtails.

“Look at that pout,” my mother said, helping me into my tights.

“You have what is called a ‘readable face’, Tallie,” my father said. He tapped my nose and I tried to hide a smile. “Shall we go?”

My mother straightened up. “Let me just get my camera.”

The phone rang while we were waiting for her; I could hear my father put on his doctor’s voice, and got a heavy feeling in my tummy.

My mother came downstairs. “Where’s Daddy?”

He came back into the kitchen with his doctor’s bag. He always said that he could run a hospital from his bag, and usually I loved it, loved the instruments he took out to show me. “I’m afraid I’ve got to go see a patient around the corner, Tallulah, so I might not be back in time for the show. I’m sorry – I did want to see you.”

“Mummies *and* Daddies are supposed to come,” I told him, sticking my lower lip out.

My father shook his head. “I have to go. It’s very sad, she’s the same age as you but she’s been extremely ill. Maybe I can bring you a treat home instead.”

I could feel my face get hot, like it did whenever my father talked to me about other little children who needed him.

“Never mind,” my mother said. “You can come to the next show.”

“There isn’t going to *be* another show,” I said. “Belinda said so.”

“Who’s Belinda?”

“The ballet teacher,” my mother said. “Come on, we’re going to be late if we don’t hurry.”

My father was asleep in front of the TV when we got home. We tiptoed past the open door and into the kitchen. My mother made me baked beans and potato smiley faces, and I ate in my ballet costume. I never wanted to take it off.

“You’ll have to get undressed to have a bath,” my mother said, picking bits of fluff out of my hair.

“I don’t want a bath.”

“Ever again?”

“Never ever.”

“What if you start to smell?”

I chewed a smiley face. “I won’t.”

“Well in that case, there’s nothing to worry about,” my mother said. She pointed to my plate. “I’m hungry.”

“So?”

“Will you let me eat something of yours?”

“Like what?” I asked, giggling; I knew what was coming.

“Like... *this* finger.” She opened her mouth and grabbed my hand, lifting it up towards her face.

“No,” I squealed. “You can’t eat that.”

“No? What about your elbow?” She cupped her hand underneath my elbow and put her teeth very lightly on it, pretending to chew. It tickled and I laughed, trying to wriggle away.

“Hello girls.” My father appeared in the doorway. “How was it?”

“She was a star,” my mother said. “How was your patient?”

“Absolutely fine.”

“Good.”

He yawned. He must have forgotten my treat, I thought, and I looked at the table rather than at him. He’d forgotten to get me a treat when he missed my birthday party at the swimming pool as well, when I’d had chickenpox, when I’d been singing at the school summer fair, and when I’d been left at school for two hours because my mother was at the dentist and he was meant to be picking me up. The teacher in charge of the afterschool playgroup was very nice and let me eat toast and jam with her in the office, while all the other children took turns on the scooters outside. But even she was worried when it was five-thirty and he still wasn’t there. She’d locked up and stood outside with me, checking her watch, and I couldn’t stop the hot tears from spilling out.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” my mother asked.

“Yes, that would be nice.”

My mother closed the door of the living-room after taking my father his cup, so we wouldn't disturb him, and we read together in the kitchen.

“Are all Daddies always tired?”

“Only if they work too hard,” she said

“Does Daddy work too hard?”

My mother stroked my hair. “He works very hard,” she said. “But he's very important. And he's trying to look after me and you.”

“I can look after you,” I told her, because she looked sad. “When Daddy's working.”

“I think it's meant to be the other way around,” she said, and kissed my forehead.

* * *

“Goodness,” Aunt Gillian sighs, bringing me back to the present.

This tightness of chest, this hotness behind my eyes, is exactly the way I remember it from another hospital vigil. I can't tell if the aching feeling inside is for now, or for that memory. “Do you think we can open a window?” I ask Aunt Gillian.

It's a perfect day outside. Late summer, brilliant blue sky. We're far enough away from Marylebone High Street that the traffic is muffled, but we know that life is going on out there. There's a jug of water – presumably for relatives – on a table at the end of the bed, and ripples sparkle in it whenever we stir. I feel like this moment is made of glass.

“Perhaps we should wait and ask someone,” Aunt Gillian says. She pulls another chair up alongside the bed and starts stroking my father's hair again.

We sit in silence.

Silence never bothered me. There are people in the café who have to talk all the time, but I was an only child with a busy parent. My mother and I developed our own sign-

language for those mornings when he was trying to rest. The days got longer, and I spent more time outside: climbing, building, jumping. My mother would open the door that led to the garden and sit down in the kitchen, I would wrap my legs around the tree branch, one finger drawing a circle in the air – “I’m going to roll over and hang upside down.”

I could bear being upside down for two minutes. I liked the feel of the rough bark digging into my legs as I gripped the branch, liked stretching my fingers out towards the ground, liked feeling the strain of my stomach muscles as I pulled myself back upright. My mother would press her hand to her cheek and open her mouth in a perfect “O” – “I’m impressed,” – then press her hand to her heart – “I love you”.

Aunt Gillian is talking – she seems to be trying a different tack. “You must come round to the new house,” she’s saying. “We’re still in Knightsbridge, but a smaller place now. We moved after Georgia got married. Of course, you didn’t come to the wedding...” She fixes me with another wet-eyed stare. “She would have loved it if you were there – we all would have.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, feeling like someone’s punched me in the gut. I didn’t know cousin Georgia had got married, she’s only twenty-two as well. Starr can’t possibly have forgotten to tell me. Maybe she thought I’d be jealous since I couldn’t even manage a secondary-school crush on Toby without screwing it up. I try to push all thoughts of him away.

Apparently the groom is much older than Georgia, but very rich and very nice. I nod fuzzily. The dizziness has returned and I’m starting to get hungry.

“Are you alright, love?” Gillian puts her hand on my arm. “You look faint.”

“I haven’t eaten today,” I say.

She beams. “I was just about to meet Paul at the steakhouse.” Paul is her third husband. “Why don’t you come and join us? It’ll take your mind off things.” She glances away from my father, who’s so still he could be made of wax. Aunt

Gillian is a great believer in minds being elsewhere.

Lunch with Gillian and Paul will probably be a disaster, I think, but I really want a steak now. I allow myself to be hustled to the restaurant, where Paul greets me without mentioning that we've never met. He might not be able to tell one cousin from another – Paul is Gillian's oldest husband yet. He looks and smells like leather. "I see the stock market's taken another nose-dive," he says.

We don't mention my father. We talk about Paul's indigestion and their upcoming holiday in Majorca. Paul shows me a wad of Euros, fanning them out so I can admire them properly. I remember the fuss everyone made last year about introducing a single European currency; the notes don't seem particularly complicated to me. "You wouldn't believe the difference it's made," Paul says. "Bloody pesetas, and francs and lira – that was the bloody worst."

"Paul travels a lot," Aunt Gillian says.

I eat my steak quickly. Gillian is drinking red wine and she's a little flushed by the time we finish. Paul makes his excuses after the main course, although I think I see him eyeing the cheese selection wistfully. Aunt Gillian always puts her husbands on a strict no-dairy regime.

"No rest for the wicked, eh?" he says.

"You must be very busy then," I say. He guffaws, but Gillian gives me a look.

After Paul leaves she brings up Georgia's wedding again. "She looked so beautiful you know," she says. "We bought this *beautiful* ivory-coloured gown. And a cream, diamond-studded crown."

"Sounds nice."

Gillian fishes in her handbag. "I have some photos. You must see them, since you couldn't be there. Now where are they?" She rummages some more, then makes a little triumphant sound and pulls out a pocket-sized, leather-bound photo album. I lean in, and feel my eyes pop. Cousin Georgia has changed since I last saw her. She used to be chubby and

placid. Aunt Gillian said it was the result of quitting her swimming training, but we all knew it was because Georgia ate hunks of butter by themselves.

The Georgia in the photos before me is slim and fresh, with large brown eyes and a vibrantly scarlet shade of lipstick. I think she looks beautiful. Beautiful and lost.

“You two look so alike now, dear,” Aunt Gillian is saying. “One would think you were sisters.” She’s always had active hands when she talks, and now she flutters them in my direction. She’s slightly drunk though, and her glass of wine gets knocked over and starts to bleed onto the album. “Oh,” she says. “Oh, how *silly* of me.” She fusses with napkins, mopping the wine from the photo of Georgia (alone with her bouquet in a garden setting), and makes faces of distress. She is berating herself, under her breath and very fast. Instinctively I put my hand on her arm. She stops muttering and mopping and looks up; we’re both surprised. I take my hand away.

“Well,” she says. “Well, I think I’m going to have dessert. Perhaps the sticky toffee pudding. How about you, Tallulah?”

Three

In the beginning, you are two separate entities – spermatozoon, and ovum. When the two cells come together, the ovum is fertilised. You (fertilised-egg-you) leave the fallopian tube, pass through the utero-tubal junction and embed yourself into the endometrium – the lining of the uterus. You need nourishment, sustenance, and foetus-you does not take in oxygen or nutrients the same way you will outside the womb; your lungs remain unused for the gestation period. Instead you get everything you need from the placenta and the umbilical cord. During pregnancy, your mother’s heart rate will increase by as much as twenty percent to produce thirty to fifty percent more blood flow for you. This blood is carried from the placenta by the umbilical vein, which connects with veins within you. Oxygenated blood is collected in the left atrium of your heart; from here it flows into the left ventricle, is pumped through the aorta and travels around your body. Some of this blood will return to the placenta, where waste products such as carbon dioxide will leave you and enter your mother’s circulation. This is part of what is called the ‘communication’ between foetus and mother.

Even before I was born, therefore, my mother’s heart and mine were working for the same purpose.

* * *

Like me, my mother had been an only child, and sometimes she worried I would get lonely.

“Were *you* lonely?” I asked her.

“Not always.” She was mending my dungarees as I stood in them, kneeling in front of me, holding up buttons to see which was the right one. I was wearing a short-sleeved check shirt underneath the dungarees, my favourite shirt from the age of seven to ten. She had a flowery dress on, and she was wearing her tortoiseshell reading glasses for the first time, which must have made it 1989. “It would still have been nice to have a little sister, or a brother to run around with.”

“What about your mum and dad? Did you play with them?”

She held up a big pearly button with brown rings around the holes. “What about this one? Do you like it?”

“Yes.”

“They were quite old when they had me,” she said, biting off the thread. “They used to call me their little surprise.”

“And you didn’t have *any* other family?”

“No. And my parents died when I was sixteen, so then I was an orphan.”

She’d made a mistake, I thought – orphans were children, like Annie, or Sophie in *The BFG*.

“Hold still,” she said. “You’ll get stabbed if you keep on wriggling.”

“Are you lonely now?”

“Not now,” she said. “I have you and Daddy now, don’t I?”

“When did you meet Daddy?”

“When I was twenty-one.”

“How did you meet?”

“At an ice-rink.” She patted my bottom. “There – all sewn on.”

“I want to hear about you and Daddy.”

My mother started packing her sewing kit away. “I was

there with a friend,” she said. “And she fell over. She couldn’t get up, and then your father suddenly appeared and said he was a doctor. It was all very romantic.”

I went and stood on her feet and she walked us across the room, wrapping her arms around me to keep me upright.

“What was wrong with your friend?” I asked.

“He said her ankle was twisted, so we sat in the bar for the rest of the night with him and his friend.” She kissed the top of my head. “He had a moustache back then, and a big hat, and I thought he looked like a blond Omar Sharif.”

“Who’s that?”

“An actor I used to have a crush on.”

“What happened to your friend?”

“She ended up going out with the other boy,” my mother said. “And then she moved back to Wales and we lost touch.”

“And you and Daddy got married?”

“Not straight away.”

“But you stayed together forever?”

She smiled, but she lifted me off her feet and started tidying up, shuffling my drawings together. “That’s nice,” she said, turning the top one to me. “Is it Snow White and the seven dwarves?”

“It’s me and my cousins,” I said. “I wrote it at the bottom.”

“I see it now.”

“Anyway, *I’m* not lonely,” I said. “I’ve got Starr and Georgia.”

“And Michael and James.”

Because my mother was so worried about me being lonely we saw a lot of my cousins. We all lived in London, but usually, when the weather got hot, we would visit our grandmother out in Shropshire.

Our grandmother was terrifying – she towered over us, all bones and dark eyes. Her fingertips were yellow after years of smoking and she smelled like lavender with an undercurrent of mushrooms. She walked four miles every day; she didn’t believe in being ill. She never spoke to us, unless it was to tell

us off, and she cleared her throat all the time, making a sound like ‘hruh’. If she wasn’t there, James said, going to hers would be great. I agreed, the house seemed like a castle to me, with a gardener and a cook, a lake, and stables – although, sadly for us grandchildren, no horses. My grandfather had been the rider and within a week of his death, she’d sold them all off to the farmer two fields away.

Most of the house, my mother told me, had been built in the Victorian period, but little extensions had been added over the years so that from the outside it looked like a puzzle with the pieces jammed together in any order. There was a long, tree-lined drive leading up to it that twisted and turned and suddenly opened out onto a clearing and the house and a silver glint of the lake in the garden beyond. The windows on the ground floor were the biggest, at least three times as tall as me; the first floor windows led on to a little balcony that ran along the front of the house and the second floor windows were small, where the ceilings were lower. The outside of the house was a pale yellow colour, like it was made of sand, and the roof was covered with grey tiles.

There was an older wing, made of small, grey stones, to the left of the house. It slanted upwards like a church, and it was the only part of the original Tudor house left after a fire destroyed the building in the nineteenth century. My grandmother had a painting of the house in flames that she hung in the entrance hall. When I was older, I asked her why she kept it; she said it was a reminder that our family had been through disaster and come out the other side.

The Tudor wing was where I slept, in a yellow room that faced the walled garden at the side of the house. I was separated from the others by a short, uneven corridor, and a thick, wooden-beamed doorway. My parents’ room was just beyond the doorway; it was rear-facing with a view of the lake, but I liked my sloping ceiling, and the latticed window high up in the wall. I had to climb onto a chair to see out of it, which was forbidden because the chairs at my grandmother’s

were all at least a hundred years old, or so she said.

One visit we were having milk and malt-loaf in the kitchen when a rabbit limped up and collapsed against the open French door. Its eyes were glassy and it had red all over its fur, like something had taken great bites out of it. Aunt Gillian shrieked when she saw it.

Michael stooped to pick it up. "It's hurt," he said.

"Michael, *don't touch it*," Aunt Gillian said. "Get the gardener," but my grandmother snorted and strode over.

"Let me see that," she said, and Michael held it out to her. She looked it over quickly then put her hands on it and twisted the neck until we all heard the snap.

"Foxes," she said. "Or dogs. Nothing else we could do." She took the body and went out into the garden. Next to me, I heard Georgia whimper softly, and Michael turned away from us, white-faced.

That night I had a nightmare about a ghost being in the room with me, and stumbled down the corridor to my mother. My father steered me back to my own bed and tucked me in again. "There are no such things as ghosts," he said, but he sat at the end of my bed until I fell asleep again.

We spent most of our time by the lake, seeing who could skim stones furthest across the water, launching paper sailing boats that Michael taught us to make, or eating cold chicken or cheese and pickle sandwiches that we had to sneak from the kitchen. The grown-ups stayed indoors, playing cards and arguing, especially Aunt Gillian and Aunt Vivienne. My father usually sat apart from the others, reading a newspaper. Sometimes he'd save the cartoons for me, especially ones about Alex, the businessman in a pinstripe suit and his friend Clive and wife, Penny. I wasn't always sure I understood what was going on, but I liked how hopeless Clive was.

Our grandmother sat apart too, watching everyone from her special armchair. There was another, matching armchair that Starr told us had been our grandfather's while he was alive, but no one ever sat in it. The grown-ups never talked

about our grandfather either. Michael, who was eleven at that point, said our family was a matriarchal society, like elephants, and men weren't important, although one time when me and Georgia were on a food raid we heard Aunt Vivienne and our grandmother in the hallway fighting about one. They didn't mention his name, and Aunt Vivienne seemed pretty angry by the end.

"You just want me to be a fucking doormat, say please and thank you and kiss their feet."

"No one forces you to come down and see everyone, Vivienne."

"And look what happens when I'm not here."

There was a pause.

"I know you're strong, my girl, but sometimes circumstances are stronger."

"Don't be ridiculous, Mother. Just because *you* failed to stop it doesn't mean it was inevitable."

There was another pause, then, "You're a cold person and no mistake," my grandmother said, and her voice was even more terrifying than normal.

We heard footsteps start in our direction. Georgia, her hand deep in the biscuit tin, looked at me with widened eyes. We slipped out of the kitchen and back to the others. Without agreeing on it, neither of us said anything about the conversation.

* * *

At four a.m. I give up trying to sleep and drag my duvet into the kitchen to watch TV. I'm addicted to it in the way my mother was to afternoon plays. She used to talk about the characters as if they were real. I used to come home from school and find her in the kitchen with the radio on, eyes wide and hands paused mid-action: chopping a tomato, scrubbing the table, feeding the cat. I guess she liked the company. My mother didn't work. She'd been a waitress, like me, when she met my father at the ice-rink.

Later that morning my eyeballs feel like someone's pushing them back into their sockets. Aunt Gillian calls me as I'm sweeping up china shards from a bowl I smashed in the kitchen.

"Paul's gone to Glyndebourne," she says. "To see *The Magic Flute*. I don't like Mozart all that much, although I know you're not meant to say that. *Madame Butterfly* is really more my cup of tea."

"Aunt Gillian..."

"Anyway," she continues. "I just thought it might be nice if you could come and keep me company for the day. Maybe we could go to the hospital together. That's if you don't have any plans? You're not working, are you?"

"No," I say, before I can stop myself.

"Oh good, maybe Georgia will join us. I doubt Vivienne will." She sniffs.

I meet Aunt Gillian at the bus stop by Hyde Park Corner; she's brought two teas and more photo albums.

We sit at the front of the top deck.

"Let's see which one this is," Aunt Gillian says, bringing out another slim black volume, with 'Memories' written in gold calligraphy on the bottom left corner. I cradle my cup in my hands, blowing on the liquid to cool it down. She licks her thumb and opens to the first page – I'm surprised to see a black and white photograph of Aunt Vivienne as a young girl. She's wearing a knitted jumper dress, long socks pulled up to her knees and t-bar sandals. Her hair is in two bunches on either side of her head, which is tilted away from the camera, though her eyes are definitely on it. She's laughing at something.

"She loved that dress," Aunt Gillian says. "The sixties died for Vivienne the day it unravelled past repair."

"I didn't think you two were close," I say.

Aunt Gillian's leaning over me, looking down at the photo and shaking her head. "She always was a hoity-toity little madam. Just like you when you were younger." She smiles

at me. I'm not sure how to respond, so I take a sip of my tea.
"Do you remember my second husband, George?"

I remember George, a wheezy red-head who used to squeeze all the girl cousins inappropriately, until Starr complained. Aunt Gillian and Aunt Vivienne didn't speak to each other for a year after that. The last I heard of him, he was going to prison, although I'm not completely sure what for.

"He used to say you were going to grow up to be a real handful," Aunt Gillian tells me. "You certainly used to drive us all to distraction with that mangy old cat you carried around."

She's talking about Mr Tickle.

A week after my sixth Christmas, I found a cat in our garden. It had half an ear and one eye and clumps of fur missing; I wanted to adopt it straight away.

My mother was washing up when I ran in and tugged at her skirt. "There's a cat in the garden," I said breathlessly. "But I think he's hurt."

"Tallie," my mother sighed. "Are you sure he's hurt? Is he just lying down?"

The week before I had dragged her over to see a squirrel who walked funny, who was walking fine by the time she got there. And I was always scared that pigeons would get run over – they didn't seem to have ears to hear the cars coming. If I saw a pigeon in the road I would chase it off, flapping my arms at it.

"No, really hurt," I said. "Can we help him, please?"

My mother was resistant at first to bringing an animal indoors, but she gave in when I showed her the frost on his coat.

"Can I name him?" I asked as my father wiped his wounds and sprayed them with antiseptic.

"What would you name him?" my father asked.

"Mr Tickle."

"That's a good choice." My father shone his penlight in Mr Tickle's ears and down his throat. "He seems pretty

healthy, all things considered. Although we should probably take him to a vet.”

“Don’t get her hopes up, Edward,” my mother said. She put her hands on my shoulders. “Tallie, this is someone else’s kitty. See, he has a collar. We’ll have to advertise in case anyone wants him back.”

“But he ran away.”

“Cats run away a lot,” my mother said. “Don’t get too attached to him. I don’t want you to be upset about it if someone gets in touch.”

We advertised in the local paper. I spent a month in fear every time the telephone rang, but no one came forward to claim him. It wasn’t that surprising – the cat ate like a horse and smelt like an onion. From that moment on, wherever I went, Mr Tickle came too.

* * *

Aunt Gillian is looking out of the window at the road ahead of us. I think I see water welling up in her eyes.

“We never really know what we have until it’s gone, Tallulah,” she says.

My father is no longer under anaesthetic, but the rhythm of his heart hasn’t stabilised yet, and they want to keep him in Intensive Care.

He’s asleep when we enter, his face still the colour of papier-mâché. Aunt Gillian and I pull chairs up next to the bed. She starts talking to him in a low voice. After a few minutes I realise she’s singing. Some song I don’t know – from their childhood, probably. I feel ridiculous, like I’m an imposter.

I think about what she said on the bus. I wonder who she was talking about. John, her first husband? George, my grandparents? Not my father, anyway, he’s not gone yet. I catch myself trying to imagine my life without him; it’s hard to see how it would be different, when we haven’t spoken in so long. I can’t see it being like when my mother died – if my

father stopped breathing now, I don't think I would even cry.

"What was that?" I ask Gillian when she's finished.

"It's something our French nanny used to sing to get him to sleep," Aunt Gillian says, waving her hands. "It was from the region of France she grew up in."

"It was from France, period," a voice from the doorway says. "So it's probably all about adultery and fine wines."

Aunt Vivienne enters the room. She's wearing a black suit; the jacket is fitted and the skirt is pencil-style. Her hair is shoulder length and chestnut coloured – a dye job, but a good one. I tried to describe her to Toby once, but now I think I might have underplayed her old-Hollywood magnetism.

"Vivienne," Aunt Gillian says icily.

"Gillian," Aunt Vivienne drawls, eyebrow raised. "And *Tallulah*. The prodigal daughter returns." Maybe it's a good thing he never got to know my family, I think.

I can feel Aunt Gillian fuming next to me. "Why the hell are you dressed for a funeral?" she snaps.

I slip out while they're arguing and find a nearby nurse. She's not best pleased; she rushes in and I can hear her scolding from outside the room, "This is an *intensive care* unit. If you two want to continue whatever this fight is, then you're going to have to go outside to do it."

One of the aunts murmurs something.

"If you're finished, then you can stay. But one more word from you, and I'll have you out so fast, don't think I'm afraid of you" – that must be to Aunt Vivienne – "I have a duty to my patients you know."

I lean against the wall in the corridor. I've hardly smoked all day and my body is screaming for some nicotine. I close my eyes and concentrate on the buzz. While I still did ballet all the spinning made me feel dizzy and sick. I learnt to turn my focus inwards, and then I could shrink the dizziness to a tiny, manageable lump inside me. I try to do that now, but it's been a while. When I open my eyes I have to blink twice. I can see someone far off down the hall being very still – they

look familiar. It takes me a few moments to realise it's my reflection. "You're cracking up," I say out loud, and a passing nurse gives me an odd look.

I walk to the lift and push the button, but it takes too long, so I find the stairs and jump down them two at a time.

Outside, I light my cigarette, disconcerted to see my hands shaking. I tell myself to get a grip, smoke two cigarettes in quick succession and go back inside.

It doesn't seem real, being here for any reason other than waiting for my father to finish his shift. My mother used to bring me after tea-time on a Thursday. She had a friend who ran an old book-binding shop and we'd go there for biscuits and orange squash first, then walk the ten minutes to the hospital, sometimes with my mother's friend, too. Her name was Vicky; she had dark, curly hair and lots of rings on her fingers. She was the only person who ever babysat me, and only once – my parents can't have gone out much. I guess most families have the grandparents around to help out with things like that, but my grandmother lived too far away, and her husband had died of a heart attack when my father was thirty-one. Not – as Starr once informed me – because my granny poisoned him, but because he drank like a fish right up until the day he keeled over.

I was jealous of other kids at primary school, who had all their grandparents left. My best friend Kathy lived next door to hers; she used to go across the front lawn every afternoon to have tea while her granny plaited her hair. When I was young, I thought my grandmother was so different to Kathy's granny, and to all grannies in books and TV shows, that she almost didn't count. It was my mother who first let me see my grandmother as a real person – not a figure of authority – on a fruit-picking trip.

My mother used to make all our jams and marmalades herself. She said her own mother had started doing it during the war years when there was rationing, and then she'd taught her daughter. Now she was going to continue the tradition by

teaching me. I had a special stool to stand on, so I could reach the counter where all the fruits and glass jars were lined up neatly, freshly washed. I wasn't allowed to use the knife, so I stirred the pulpy messes in their pans. Every so often I would lick my finger then stick it in the bag of sugar.

In 1990 – the year I turned nine – we had an unusually late autumn that was still sunny in October, so my mother and I went blackberry picking. “They’ll be extra big and juicy,” she told me. “It’ll be nice to choose the best ones for ourselves, won’t it?”

I waited impatiently in the hallway while my mother searched for the pails.

“You have to wrap up nice and warm for me,” she said, when she finally appeared. “I don’t want you to catch a cold.”

“I don’t want to wear my scarf,” I grumbled. “It’s scratchy.”

“Hmmm,” my mother considered me for a moment, turned around and walked towards her bedroom. She came back holding her pink cashmere jumper, my favourite of hers. “What if you put this on underneath the scarf and coat?” she asked. “Then if the scarf feels scratchy you can just concentrate on how the jumper feels instead.”

I stroked the cashmere. It was unbearably soft and feminine. “Okay,” I said. She slipped it on over my outstretched arms and pulled it down; it felt like cream being poured over me. I rubbed my face with the sleeve. My mother handed me my coat and scarf and watched as I buttoned up. I was still wearing my red duffel coat with the hood from when I was seven. Back then I used to like to think I was Little Red Riding Hood. My mother would pretend to be the wolf and jump out of bed at me. Now that I was upstairs at school with the oldest kids, we didn’t play that game anymore.

“Where are we going?” I wanted to know.

“Richmond Park woods.”

We walked hand in hand. The air was cold enough to turn my nose and feet numb.

“How come I can see differently out of each eye?” I asked.

We were swinging our linked arms for warmth. My mother carried the pails in her other hand.

“What’s the difference?” she asked.

“Things look more colourful out of my right eye than my left.”

“Really?”

“Yes. And when I look at something then shut my left eye and look at it out of my right, then it looks the same, but when I shut my right eye and look at it out of my left then it moves a little bit, like I’ve moved my head, but I haven’t.”

“Well,” my mother said. “That means your right eye is stronger than your left.”

I thought about that for a while. “Does everyone have a stronger eye?”

“No,” my mother said. “Not everyone.”

“Is it good to have a stronger eye?”

My mother squeezed my hand. “There’s nothing wrong with it,” she said. “Your aunt Vivienne is short-sighted in one eye, even though she won’t wear glasses. And your grandmother is blind in one eye.”

“How come?”

“Something happened to her.”

“What?”

My mother paused. “Someone hit her,” she said eventually. “On the left side of her face. Her cornea was damaged and she never saw out of that eye again.”

“What’s a cornea?”

“It’s the part of your eye that you can see.”

“Who hit her?”

My mother stopped walking and put our pails down. She took her hand back from mine and rubbed it against her cheek, not looking at me. I waited for a minute, then asked her again.

“Your grandfather,” she said, still not looking at me.

I tried to grasp this idea. “Why did he hit her?”

“They fought a lot. And your grandfather grew up in a

time when it was accepted that a man might hit his wife. He could be very respectable on the street, but what happened behind closed doors was his business.”

“Oh.”

She picked up the pails and we tramped on. The woods smelt like earth and cold air. The leaves underfoot weren’t crunchy anymore, but stuck to the ground.

“Why did Grandma stay with him?”

My mother smiled at me. We stopped by a blackberry shrub and she picked some blackberries. She put one in her mouth. “Open up.”

I opened my mouth obediently. She gently placed a berry on my tongue. I brought my teeth down and the juice was sweet, just right. Not like some blackberries, where it was so sharp it made my mouth sting.

My mother was picking more blackberries and tossing them into her pail. “I don’t know,” she said. “I imagine it’s because there was nowhere for her to go. Things were harder for women back in the 1950s. And she loved him.” She turned away then.

“How can you love someone who hits you?”

“Sometimes people are drawn to each other because they’re both damaged by something that has happened to them,” she said. “And sometimes, if you’re damaged, then you can’t see past it, and then you hurt the other person, or you expect the other person to hurt you.”

“I don’t understand what you just said,” I said.

She sighed. “Sweetheart. It’s absolutely wrong to hit someone, and most people know that. But sometimes you can love someone so much that even when you know they’re wrong, even when they hurt you, you still go on loving them.” She placed a pail in front of me.

“That’s stupid,” I said. “If someone hit me, I would stop loving them.” I kicked my pail. It tipped over and rolled away.

My mother cupped my face in her hands. “It’s not always simple,” she said. “But you’re clever and brave, and I’m so

thankful for that. Every day.” She kissed me on the forehead. “Now go pick up your pail.”

* * *

I buy a coffee from the café by the entrance and find a place to sit in one of the chairs that line the hallway.

Maybe I took in what she was saying more than I realised. Maybe I’ve even used it as an excuse.

If I had to describe myself, ‘damaged’ would probably make top of the list, and look at me now – best friend gone, a family of strangers and a dead-end job.

I rip off the top of the sugar packet with my teeth; my mother used to make a tear in the middle, my father opened them like a bag of crisps, but I use my teeth.

I tip the sugar into the liquid. I’ve forgotten to pick up a wooden stirrer, so I wait for it to cool then use my finger. No one gives me a second glance here – hospitals are like train stations, or hotels without the complimentary toiletries, an endless round of people turning up, staying, moving on. Everyone blends into the background unless they do something drastic. Or maybe I’m particularly good at being inconspicuous.

Maybe I never really tried to make my life any better because I assumed this was my lot. I wouldn’t be the first Park to do that.

* * *

I didn’t see my grandmother until the following Easter. It was 1991 and I’d just had my tenth birthday. My parents decided to celebrate with the whole family in Shropshire; it was dark by the time we set out and I had a blanket to cover my legs. Mr Tickles was purring in his cage next to me. I watched the houses become fewer and farther between, until the only light came from lampposts along the central reservation, and occasional cars overtaking us. My mother peeled an orange and handed back the segments for me to eat. I fell asleep in

the backseat, a Roald Dahl tape playing on the car stereo.

The next morning I woke up in my bed at my grandmother's. I didn't remember arriving the previous night. I shuffled along the corridor and down the stairs. My cousins were all in the kitchen, eating cereal.

"Tallie," Georgia said, when she saw me standing in the doorway. "We're having an Easter egg hunt." She patted the chair next to her. "Can we be on a team together?"

My mother and the gardener were responsible for the hunt, with paper clues scattered around the house and garden and a prize at the end of the trail. The prize was a pillowcase full of miniature chocolate eggs that we were supposed to divide equally between us, but later that afternoon James was sick, which made me think he'd managed to sneak more than everyone else.

I hadn't run into my grandmother much by that point, but on Easter Sunday I was made to take her a plate of hot cross buns that the cook had baked. She was asleep in the living-room, or at least I thought she was. It was a warm day so she'd rolled up the sleeves of her jumper, and her hands were clasped across her stomach; I noticed how the skin on her arms was still smooth like a younger woman's, and see-through, but her face was wrinkled like an old apple, especially around the mouth. She had a mole on her cheek, and I strained to see if there were hairs growing out of it, but I couldn't find any.

I lingered for a moment after balancing the plate on her knee, watching her breathing in and out. Her teeth made a sucking sound. I wondered if they were false, although my mother hadn't mentioned that on our fruit-picking trip. I tried to remember what her eye looked like, but I'd never been brave enough to look her directly in the face.

At the door to the living-room I turned around and caught her sitting bolt upright, her eyes wide open and looking at me. I fled.

The grown-ups were arguing less than usual that weekend

and, apart from my grandmother, we all ate together in the garden every night. Uncle George and my father carried the kitchen table outside and my mother strung lanterns up on the roof of the porch. The cook made potato salads, meat pies, and meringues, and put dishes of butter out with ice cubes nestled among the yellow pats to stop them from melting. A cake with candles was brought out for me and everyone sang happy birthday. Afterwards, Aunt Vivienne said how Aunt Gillian had always been the loudest singer, even if she was the most tone-deaf. Uncle George bellowed with laughter. Aunt Gillian's face flushed, but she just said, "I suppose you're right, Viv."

My mother put us to bed that night. Georgia and Starr brought their mattresses into my room and she read us a bedtime story. After she'd gone, Starr and I talked while Georgia snored gently in between us.

"You know I'm going to a new school soon, right?" she said.

"Yeah – I heard your mum say."

"She's enrolled me in a boarding school – all the Parks went to it, she says."

"Where is it?"

"Not that far from here."

"Are you going to come and see Grandma by yourself?"

Starr shuddered. "No way. She probably eats children when no one's watching."

I giggled.

"Where are you going to secondary?"

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't even finished Year Five. But I just want to go wherever my friends go."

"Oh," Starr said. "Well, you should think about boarding school. You get to be away from your parents – it's really grown up."

"I don't want to be away from my parents," I said.

Starr rolled over. "Yeah, I guess not," she said. "Anyway, I'm tired. Night night, Tallie."

“Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

Starr snorted softly. “You can’t say that when you go to secondary,” she said.

* * *

The next day after breakfast my grandmother suggested we go for a picnic. None of us grandchildren said anything.

“That’ll be nice, won’t it?” my mother said, smiling at me over the rim of her mug.

“We’ll go to the field at the back of the garden,” my grandmother said. “They’ve got horses – we can take them apples.”

I looked at Michael, who raised and dropped his shoulders slightly.

“If we can pat the horses,” I said.

Starr came and stood in front of me when I was putting my wellies on.

“I’m not coming,” she said; she looked fed up. “Picnics are boring anyway.”

“They’re not,” I said. I knew Starr didn’t think they were either, and I was going to ask if she was okay, but then my mother called for me to help her pack the picnic basket.

Outside, my grandmother led the way and carried the blanket. She wore old people’s clothes – a long tweed skirt and an old, cream woollen jumper whose arms she kept rolling up – but she walked very quickly and upright. Michael tramped behind her, a cricket bat under one arm. After him was Georgia, limping because of blue jelly shoes that were too small for her. She was wearing split-coloured cycling shorts – one leg lime green, the other hot pink – that I’d seen once in C&A. My father had refused to buy them; he said I’d thank him when I was older.

Behind Georgia and Michael, James carried the apples and sugar for the horses. My mother and I were at the back, holding the basket between us. I let it bang against my legs, not caring if it hurt because my mother seemed so happy. She had her hair

up in a ponytail and it rose from side to side like a swing-boat when she turned her face to smile at me. She looked young and beautiful, I thought, and was I proud of her.

“What a lovely day,” she said.

“What’s Starr doing?”

“I think your aunt wanted some alone time with her,” my mother said.

“Why?”

“Well... ”

“Dad said she just didn’t want Starr spending time with Grandma,” James said, keeping his voice low so our grandmother couldn’t hear.

“I’m sure that’s not true, James,” my mother murmured, but she didn’t finish answering me.

We reached the wooden fence at the bottom of the garden. My grandmother swung her legs over the top and landed on the grass on the other side, then took the cricket things Michael was handing over. He jumped up to sit on the fence and held his arms out to Georgia, who let herself be picked up and dropped lightly into the field. Michael stood up, balancing on the top rung.

“Michael,” my mother said. “Are you sure it’s safe to do that?”

“I’m on the gymnastics team,” he said, and walked to the nearest post and back without wobbling. He looked so confident and grown up that I stared at him; he was actually quite handsome, I thought, and then I was embarrassed to be noticing my cousin that way.

James looked annoyed. “I can do that too,” he said. “You don’t have to be on the gymnastics team to be able to walk.”

“Bet you can’t do *this*,” Michael said, and somersaulted backwards off the fence. He landed off balance and had to take a step forward to stop himself from falling. “I learnt that last week.”

“I’m sure it comes in handy,” my grandmother said, raising an eyebrow.

“You’re so *clever*, Mike,” Georgia said, and Michael grinned. For a moment, I was jealous of how close she was to him, then James started climbing onto the top of the fence and my mother dropped the picnic basket and put her hand out to stop him.

“James, please,” she said. “I wouldn’t be able to face your mum if you got hurt.”

“Michael did it,” James said.

“Yeah, but I know what I’m doing,” Michael said. “You’ll probably break your neck.”

“No I won’t.”

“Gymnastics is certainly less important than saving your neck,” my grandmother said. “James, Tallulah and Evelyn, if you wouldn’t mind climbing over the usual way.”

James looked furious, but he climbed down carefully, and my mother and I joined everyone else, handing the basket to Georgia while we were trying to get over.

“I *can* do a somersault,” James muttered, on the other side. “I’ve done one before.”

My grandmother pinned him down with what I assumed was her good eye, and he turned a funny colour. When she started leading the way again, he hung back, looking sullen. Georgia tried to take his hand, but he shoved her away.

“Get lost, podgy,” he said.

“That’s not very nice, James,” my mother said.

“It’s Dad’s nickname for me,” Georgia said; her eyes were full of tears, and I prayed she wouldn’t blink. Everyone knew once you blinked you were definitely going to cry.

“Do you want me to help you with the basket?” I asked her. “We can carry it like me and Mummy did.”

“Yes, thank you,” Georgia said. She smiled again and I felt ashamed of being jealous of her before.

“Thank you, darling,” my mother said.

“Is anyone actually coming?” my grandmother called to us.

The field was mostly muddy; eventually my grandmother stopped and beckoned me and Georgia over to a dry patch.

“Unpack that here,” she said.

We took the basket to the blanket, which she’d already laid out, and opened it. There were salmon-paste sandwiches, salad, jacket potatoes in their skins, Petits Filous, slices of cold chicken, Ribena and leftover cake from my birthday dinner.

We all tucked in. My mother shifted to make room for James on the blanket when he reached us, but he took a sandwich and went and sat facing away from everyone.

My grandmother asked Michael, loudly, what he was doing at the moment. He was going into fourth year, and he reeled off a list of subjects he’d be studying, mostly languages. “You must have got that ability from your father’s side,” she said, and he went quiet.

My mother broke the silence, saying school seemed like a long time ago to her; she’d stopped going when her parents passed away, which she said was a shame, as it was something else she lost. She sipped her wine and smiled at Michael, who was still being quiet.

My grandmother turned to Georgia who was still in primary, like me. “And what would you like to do?”

Georgia thought about it for a moment. “I’d like to be Mary in the Nativity play,” she said. “Last time I was only a shepherd.”

I thought my mother and grandmother were trying to hide smiles. I was hoping they wouldn’t get around to asking me, but my grandmother swivelled her head in my direction.

“And you, Tallulah?”

“I’m the same year as Georgia.”

“And would you like to be Mary?”

“No,” I said. “I’d rather be a Wise Man and wear a beard.”

“I see,” my grandmother said.

My mother pulled me onto her lap and hugged me.

After we’d finished all the food, Michael tried to teach me and Georgia how to play cricket. Georgia was supposed to catch the ball when I hit it with the cricket bat, and throw it

back to Michael, but she wasn't very good and spent most of her time trying to find it, instead. Michael said he wanted to practise his bowling, and threw the ball too fast for me to see it, until I threatened to throw it back at his head.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm not used to playing with little kids."

"Oh, you're so *grown up*," I said.

"Do you want me to teach you properly, or do you want to play a sissy game?"

"Forget it," I said, dropping the bat. "Cricket's boring anyway."

I made my way back to the picnic blanket and flopped down onto my belly. My mother and grandmother were sitting at the other end. I watched them over the hill of my forearms, screwing my eyes up so it looked like they were closed and I wasn't spying.

My grandmother looked very serious. "Nothing to forgive..." she said.

My mother put her glass down. I caught the last bit of her sentence, "... hard on you."

"I can't blame her," my grandmother said. "We saw him through different eyes."

My mother turned away as she was speaking, and the next thing I heard was my grandmother saying, "Whatever you do, Evelyn, don't blame yourself."

I felt something cold land on my neck and jumped up, yelling and brushing it off. James was laughing evilly, and when I looked at my fingers they were covered in slime. A fat, grey slug was curled up on the blanket where I'd just been.

"Your face," James said. "You were so scared."

"Was not."

"Were too."

"Was not."

"That's enough, children," my grandmother said.

"Were too," James said under his breath, and looked smug.

Later, we walked over to the corner of the field where the horses were grazing. My mother placed apple segments

and sugar lumps on our palms, and taught us to feed them, keeping our hands flat and still. The horses' mouths tickled when they took the food and I squirmed inside, but didn't move, because my grandmother was watching me closely.

“Good girl,” she said.