



Silence.

The bluish light to the day gives away the early hour, and I hug my knees to my chest as if I should be cold.

Sitting on the grass verge of a narrow country lane I become aware, with the gradual creeping light of dawn, that I must have been here for some time. It comes to me slowly, in the same way that I search for recent dreams when I first wake.

I can't remember . . .

The shrill call of a wild bird and the urgent flapping of its wings shatters the still air, nudging me to question why I'm here and not at home where I should be, in my pyjamas and tucked under my duvet. All around there's nothing but sparse winter countryside, no house, no shop, no building.

I'd been shopping in town.

A low mist spreads over the fields, disappearing into the grass around me, like in a horror film when dry ice creeps across the set, just before something scary happens. A light glittering of winter frost is sprinkled over everything, but I don't feel cold.

Why don't I feel cold?

My purple Converse shoe is on its side, half in and half out of a puddle, and the remains of the night still linger in the darkness of the water around it. I stare at the shoe, and the

laces trailing in the dirt, still caught in the grip of overnight ice, and I wonder if it's washable or ruined.

The purple will go well with the T-shirt I just bought, if they're not completely wrecked.

I'd begged my mother for these shoes, until she'd finally given in and bought them for me. Now the Converse star stares back at me, its single eye unblinking.

It was Saturday. I was with Beth. I bought a T-shirt.

We'd both agreed that Nathan Peterson, my boyfriend of seven weeks, would think that I'd look extra cute in it. Or is it seven weeks and *one* day now? Is it Sunday morning? It was almost dark when I was walking home.

Beth. Shopping. Walking home.

I grab at the fragments of my memory as they float past.

I'd spent most of my bus fare on a fabulous pair of earrings . . . I texted Mum to tell her I was on the bus home – a small lie . . . I had to get off the bus early because I didn't have enough money for the whole journey. I took a shortcut down King's Lane and it was evening, almost dark . . . and now it's not.

So, why am I still here?

I reach around for my phone, but it's not beside me. The bag with my new top in is about five feet away, half buried in the long grass, and my handbag is next to it, shining with wet and frost. I look again at my shoe in the puddle, and then at my feet . . .

I'm wearing both shoes.

The sound of a car engine pushes through the quietness of the morning, and I drag my gaze away from my feet, towards it, wondering what the driver is going to think about

a fifteen-year-old girl sitting out here, in the middle of nowhere, alone.

Yellow headlights flicker intermittently between the winter-bare roadside hedges, then blur as they hit patches of mist. The engine chugs slowly, and it hits me that I should be nervous about what sort of person is driving *that* slowly . . . but I'm not.

'Thank God!' I mutter under my breath, standing up, as the white, blue, and yellow of a police car comes into view and two policemen get out. They look briefly at my purple Converse in the puddle, then make their way over to me. 'OK, so, I have *no* idea why I'm here . . .' I tell them, laughing a little, to cover my embarrassment.

The dark-haired one reaches his hand towards me.

'I think we've found her,' he says, rather rudely reaching past me and brushing weeds and grass aside.

I turn to see what they've found.

And there I am.

My legs are bent upwards with a bone sticking out where my right ankle should be, making my foot hang from its tendons, facing backwards in its stripy sock. My chest is pressed into watery brown mud at the bottom of a ditch, but my head is turned, facing towards us at the strangest angle. My long, dark hair is spread out in the mud, and I can't take my gaze off the bluey whiteness of my skin, and how I'm staring blankly up towards all three of us, a milky bloom spreading across the green of my eyes.

I am statue still, unable to move, staring back at myself with total disbelief. A thin scream, high-pitched and desperate, fills

my ears and I realise that it's coming out of my mouth without my consent. The police don't react to the noise I'm making, as if there's an invisible soundproof wall between us.

'Noooo, this isn't happening!' I shout at them, grabbing desperately at the arm of the nearest one, but my hands disappear into the black of his jacket.

I can't feel any of the trembling that comes with fear, or the rush of breath that comes with panic. No tears are running down my face. I just feel kind of . . . disconnected, as if I'm watching this happening in a film. 'OK . . . so it's a *dream*,' I say out loud, another small laugh escaping from me, like I've just laughed at a joke that only I'm pretending to understand. I circle both men. 'It's a DREAM!' I shout in their ears, willing them to fade away and let me wake up. I scream again, and pinch myself, really, really hard, only I can't feel my fingers because I'm in a dream.

I'm not in a dream.

I hear the dark-haired one radio back to the station for reinforcements and an ambulance, while the ginger one runs over to the car and comes hurrying back with a small machine in his hands.

'I'm not sure you're going to need that, mate,' the dark-haired man says sarcastically, as his 'mate' kneels down beside my body in the ditch, and starts to get the machine ready. 'I *said*, I'm not sure you're going to need the defibrillator, Gary,' he repeats, alternating his gaze between me and Gary.

'Why?' Gary pants, squinting up, the red of his face competing with his hair.

'Because her fucking head is on backwards,' he says.

This is really happening.

I am dead, and I've absolutely no idea how it happened.

'Shit,' I hiss to myself. Hardly articulate, but it's all I've got to go with right now.

And the pinching and the crying and the trembling, it would seem, are for the physical body, and as I watch and listen to everything unfolding in front of me, I realise, with a kind of detached and awful shock, that I no longer have one of those. My body is in that ditch, and, to quote that police guy, my 'fucking head is on backwards'. My body and me have somehow got separated, and now I'm trapped in a soundproof bubble, and no one knows I'm here.

I watch the hustle and bustle of my roadside death: the ambulance with its wailing siren, the various police officers, investigators with their grim faces, tape stretched across the road, measurements taken, information recorded, pictures carefully snapped, and phone calls made. My phone is checked but the battery is flat, my bag is examined and so is my body. A large man with russet-brown skin stands close by holding a photograph of me, his lips squeezed into a downward turn.

This whole thing is all about *me*, but for once it's nothing I want to hear.

Apparently the trauma to my body is consistent with a road traffic collision, a 'hit-and-run', meaning that I have basically just become an . . . incident.

I, or rather, my body, has got rigor mortis, which has reached its maximum at around twelve hours after death, and has probably started the next stage. This basically means that I'm stiff, and am now going to head towards that floppy traditional

dead look. Right now, I'm like a dolly chucked on the ground and broken. My rigor mortis, and the fact that evidently the angle of my head is not compatible with life, means the paramedics can determine, categorically and without doubt, 'life extinct!'

I shout at them all again. 'Hey! . . . I'm not a *dinosaur!*' What does that mean exactly? My body is still on the planet, and I'm still here, seeing and hearing. I am not extinct! Although I am quite obviously not alive.

I watch the empty ambulance drive away, leaving my body behind, venturing on with its mission to save lives, as it has been unable to do with mine, its siren now hushed, all hope of saving me gone. I wouldn't say I've 'lost' my life exactly, and I haven't exactly 'lost' my body but I have, for sure, somehow lost the connection between the two.

My rigor mortis also means the procedure for scraping me out of the mud, and shoving me into a body bag, is totally degrading and less than graceful, and I watch with an expression of contorted disgust as they force my unwilling limbs inside and pull up the zipper.

Finally, long after the mists have dissipated, and the crystals of frost have been evaporated by the winter sun, and the sounds of the road and nearby town have filled the air, I climb into a black van, next to my own bagged-up self, and together we set off for wherever dead people are taken.



I can only describe it as *unusual* . . . looking at yourself from this angle.

My body is now lying down in the hospital mortuary covered by a sheet. My stiff limbs have been forced, and manipulated, into a more appropriate position, so I look a little less grotesque at least, and my closed eyes thankfully mean that I'm not staring back at . . . *myself*.

I've never studied my face from above like this, let alone porcelain smooth and still . . . eyes shut. I have always seen 'me', looking out from a mirror, a photograph or a screen, looking at my face full on, eyes wide and shining, and alive.

Always looking good, so I thought.

Bizarrely I can't help admiring how well I'd put my make-up on. Still perfectly applied in the places where it wasn't smudged and spoiled. Black mascaraed lashes fan my cheeks; they look quite long – thank God for waterproof! Forest shimmer green and pearly cream shadow, painstakingly applied with little brushes, now looks odd against my skin where all the natural colours of my life have slipped away, like paint down a plughole. The empty grey of my face looks creepy against the still blackness of my once beautifully straightened hair,

and the twinkle of gold and fake diamonds, peeping from my ears, look wrong as if they're clashing with death.

I hear my mother before I see her. There's an agonised noise coming from the depths of her body, like the groaning of an animal in pain, and I can hardly bear to listen. The sound heaves over and over, and it's getting louder, travelling down the hospital corridor, escorted by the echoes of three pairs of shoes tapping against polished vinyl. A fat man with thin white hair poking fluffily upwards over his ridiculously large forehead opens the door with a gentle click and a respectful expression. With his hand still on the door, he hesitates. 'Are you sure? We have already . . . identified her.' I'd already seen how the police had matched my ID and my strangely angled face, with a photograph held by Brian, the man with the russet-brown skin, and embarrassingly they had made a note of my birthmark, a kind of coffee stain of Australia on my right buttock. But I guess my parents couldn't believe without seeing, because they enter the room anyway.

'Mum . . . ? Dad?' I run to them, reaching out and watching my hands disappear mistily into their live bodies, like grabbing at steam. Although I already know it's pointless, I try wildly flinging my arms about in front of their faces, yelling at them to notice me, until, frustrated, I give up.

They hear and see nothing.

Mum and Dad hold on to each other, as if by letting go they'll somehow fall, down into the black abyss that is horror, fear and death itself. My mother's normally shoulder-length brown hair is scraped back into a fat hair comb, but a large chunk has escaped and hangs in mousey-brown tendrils down the

side of her stricken face. Dad's black- and grey-peppered hair looks short and smart as always, but merely serves to frame his haggard face. From memory it looks as if they're wearing what they were wearing when I left the house yesterday morning, only now their clothes look crumpled and almost too big for their bodies.

The impenetrable metal of the entire room cups their raw emotions, like a bowl holds water. If I can be glad about anything right now, it's that they didn't have to see me as I had seen me earlier.

A thin, strangled sound now chokes in Mum's throat as she looks down at the dead me, and a trickle of saliva glimmers on her fingers as they try desperately to hold in her grief. Tears course down her cheeks and her nose starts to run, joining the saliva on her fingers. She shakes her head and says 'noooo' in one long and ugly drawn-out sound, almost identical to the way I had when I first saw me.

The man with the ridiculously large forehead reaches for a plain box of tissues and pulls one out. As he hands her a tissue, she reaches for it but her eyes never leave my face. Dad has clamped his teeth and lips together and I notice how the muscles in his jaw flex over and over. He says nothing but gives a nod of affirmation to the man with the forehead. The faces of my parents have become distorted by tension below the surface of their skin, as if they're merely rough sketches of themselves.

Grief, I have learnt today, is the colour grey. All around us is grey. The walls, the equipment, the skin of the dead, and the skin of the living. The reddish brown of Mum's jacket and the

green of Dad's chunky-knit jumper look barely sepia against this room of grey.

Having confirmed with that nod that the lifeless mass of slowly putrefying cells lying in front of them had recently been me, the living, breathing, body of Lily Richardson, fifteen years old, daughter of James and Amelia Richardson, twin sister to Ben Richardson, they are allowed to leave. Or rather, they are encouraged, gently, to abandon their child, so that the accurate cause of my death can be determined, and recorded.

Dad turns stiffly, still holding Mum's hand, as he leads her out of this shiny room where death remains in the reflections of the stainless steel. Mum pulls against him, her free hand reaching for my hair, and her eyes caressing my face. 'What happened, Lily? Who did this to you?'


'I don't know, Mum,' I answer sadly. 'I wish I knew.'

She lets out another low horrible mourning sound, which drags itself out of her mouth again, while Dad puts a protective arm round her shoulders, turning his face away from both of us, his movement causing the tears balanced on his lashes to spill.

'I love you,' she whispers, walking through my invisible outstretched hands as they leave.

'I love you too,' I call out, as I follow them, but my words don't reach their ears, only the echoes of their footsteps on the vinyl fills the corridor, until Dad's voice bounces off the walls around me. 'I'll find the bastard that did this to you, Lily . . . and I'll make him pay. So help me GOD!'



Brian is waiting for them. He's obviously been assigned the task of supporting my family, and I'm thankful that he looks . . . *reliable*, like a big rugby player with kind eyes. Just . . . maybe,



fingers crossed, he'll be strong enough to keep us all together right now.

As they walk to the car, I realise their last possible shred of hope, that the body in that room might not belong to me, has evaporated. It shows on their faces, robbing them of several years while the colour of Brian's skin only serves to highlight the lack of colour in theirs.

Leaning with his back against the passenger door, Ben catches sight of Mum and Dad, their expressions confirming everything there is to know. His eyes peep out from beneath his black hair, which flops over his face, then they snap tight shut as if this will protect him from something he isn't prepared to understand. But he does understand. With one hand on the wheel arch of the police car for support, he vomits repeatedly, until his understanding splashes against the wheel and his shoes, and gets caught in the folds of his jeans. By the time our parents reach him, my twin brother is left with nothing but the silent retch that is pain trying to get out.





Nathan's mum was making Sunday dinner, while the frequent sound of canned laughter came through the door from the lounge, where Nathan was watching television.

She chose a bottle of red wine from the wine rack, and added a small glug of it to the juices surrounding the meat as it bubbled in a pan on their kitchen range. Then she got two large wine glasses and filled both. Taking a mouthful, she reached for a small terracotta pot and crumbled a little sea salt into the dish. 'Are you going out today?' she called to Nathan, glancing at the clock.

Nathan paused the programme he was watching, leisurely stretched out his long legs along the huge feather-stuffed cream sofa and yawned. 'No, tomorrow night. A few of us are going out but we don't know where yet. Why?'

'Because I'm making your favourite, sticky toffee pudding, but it won't be ready for a while. I just wanted to make sure you'd still be here to eat it.'

'Sweet,' he called back. 'Thanks, Mum.' Then he flicked the TV back to life, knowing that his empty stomach was going to appreciate his mother's cooking more than his ears were appreciating her intermittent singing from the kitchen.

She took another sip of wine, before grinding a pepper mill

liberally over the top and stirring all the ingredients with a wooden spoon before tasting it. Nodding to herself, she took another sip of wine and hummed the tune to an advert on the television, loudly singing the last few words of it, ‘... washing bright tabs dot com,’ just as Nathan’s dad walked in from helping a neighbour.

He hung up his jacket in the coat cupboard, but the smell of the cold evening air still clung to his clothes. He lifted the lid of the pot to see what delight she had rustled up for his dinner, then gave her a kiss, causing a lock of her long auburn hair to come loose from its black velvet ribbon.

‘Nathan? Dad’s back. Set the table for dinner, love,’ she called, then she lifted the wine bottle towards his dad and smiled, saying, ‘Beef in red wine,’ and with her other hand she passed him a round-bowled glass. He cupped the glass gratefully, the very good wine slipping down his throat easily, leaving hints of blackcurrant on his tongue.

Nathan appeared in the doorway, taking up most of the frame, his quiff of light-brown hair, creating the illusion that he was slightly taller than his dad. ‘Smells good,’ he said, smiling and giving her a look of approval, then he poured himself a pint of milk from the fridge and downed half of it, before making his way to the dining room to set the table.



As the day progresses, I watch my family's reactions shift and change in ugly turns.

They have stayed in the kitchen surrounded by cold cups of tea and Ben's half-eaten sandwich from the night before. Bacon, turned white from cold fat, pokes out of slices of white bread, now stiff and stale, reminding them of the exact moment that Ben knew, without a doubt, that something was very wrong.

We've always had a thing between us, me and Ben. A 'twin thing', like we've always known without words what was going on with each other. Ben was capable of eating the entire contents of the fridge in one sitting, yet that sandwich had stuck in his throat last night, when he just *knew*.

Next to the sandwich is an empty silver-edged frame. A pair of scissors lies alongside a large photo taken of us all at Christmas. Everyone was smiling at the camera and the light had caught our eyes along with the strands of red tinsel that I had draped over Dad's neck. Mum was wearing a reindeer headband, her antlers waving at us, and Ben had my fingers above his head like rabbit ears. We had just finished dinner, totally full to a point where we thought we might split, when Granddad Peter had taken the shot. I remember him, slightly drunk, his purple Christmas cracker hat lopsided on his head,

and how his false teeth had shot out of his mouth onto the table when he laughed at something. Ben and I had gagged at the sight of them, landing dangerously near to the honeyed parsnips. We were a normal family, nothing amazing about us, apart from our normality.

The photograph has a hole in it where I used to be, and all that is left of me are my rabbit fingers above Ben's head. I'm now in Brian's file somewhere, used for the purpose of identifying me. No doubt my family had hoped, at the time, that I'd just got distracted by friends, or a party, or *anything* other than what had actually happened. Now they all stare out from the glossy paper on the table, and, as in real life, I am no longer with them.

I'm totally helpless and I can't think of anything I can do to get anyone's attention. I can't be heard and I can't move objects, or pick up a pen to write a ghostly note. I've tried . . . I've really tried, but I'm literally trapped in some kind of virtual world, watching my family getting steadily more demented about my untimely death.

Uncle Roger, Dad's brother, rushes into the house trailing the shapeless and very useless Auntie Ruth. Auntie Ruth has always been what Mum politely calls socially incompetent, but Dad says if she was any more stupid, Roger would have to water her. And now, here she is, in a voluminous orange blouse, saying nothing except, 'Cup of tea, Meil? Cup of tea, Jay?' in her grating voice, shortening their names in her ever-irritating way. She chews the nails of one hand and dabs at her insipid grey eyes with the other, whispering 'Poor Lily-Pad' over and over, until Roger snaps at her.



'You're not helping, Ruth.' Auntie Ruth has a nickname for everyone and everyone hates it.

Uncle Roger dives into help mode by getting all practical. He phones my granddads and I can hear their cries of disbelief, strangely metallic down the receiver, and I feel bad for them when he finishes the call, leaving them alone with nothing but their news.

I am on the outside looking in. I can see the shaking fingers and hunched shoulders of my family, the whites of their eyes growing a network of red veins and shining with salty tears, yet I'm not reacting in the same way. I suppose all of that belongs only to the living machine that drives the adrenalin and pumps the blood and beats the heart?

I can't feel how the pinkness of their skin is made warm by their flowing blood, and I know that I will never again feel the weight of their arms round me, or the softness of their kisses on my cheeks. I know every feeling by memory, but I can't react with saline and chemicals like they are, and it seems wrong, and so unfair, that in a single breath it was all over.

'Another sarnie, Benji?' Auntie Ruth asks Ben. She scrapes the remains of yesterday's bacon sandwich in the bin and looks at him with agonised eyes, as if the extreme sympathy in her expression should support him with any grief that he may feel.

'No,' Ben answers, bristling, as always, from her name for him. She tries again. 'Biscuit, Benji?'

'He doesn't want any bloody food, Ruth,' Uncle Roger hisses at her, which causes her to flinch like she's been stung, and resume the nail-chewing and eye-dabbing. He lights a cigarette, placing his packet back down on the table but Mum

unexpectedly reaches for one, and barely raising an eyebrow Roger leans over and sparks his lighter into life at the end of the cigarette, which is now balanced shakily in her lips.

‘Ew, Mum, no?’ I gasp at how strangely unfamiliar she looks with the curl of grey smoke coming out of her mouth, and how, for sure, she would have gone mad at me or Ben for doing it.

Dad, who would always, without fail, waft the air whenever Roger trailed his smoky aura into our house, looks at them both. ‘*Really?*’ he says with a heavy note of sarcasm, and walks over to the back door, opens it and points outside, as if ordering a dog out. They dutifully prop themselves against the open door frame to the kitchen, and I notice how Mum sucks on her cigarette as if it is the only way she can now draw breath. Auntie Ruth shivers and reaches for a thick and bobbly beige cardigan, while Ben is eyeing Mum and the open packet on the table. He either hates the idea . . . or wants one.

‘Don’t do it, *Benji*,’ I whisper into his ear. ‘I’m *still* here.’ Then we all jump as Ben suddenly hits the table with his fist, and with his teeth clenched, in a burst of vented anger, he swears. ‘Bloody *hit-and-run?*’

Brian had informed them of the initial judgement, but exactly what happened last night is a horrible, unanswered question on everyone’s lips, including mine. I’m pretty sure though, that if we *had* to choose the cause of my death, we would all choose hit-and-run, rather than rape, murder and a roadside dumping. Not that it’s much consolation. Dad joins in and repeats his threat from this morning. ‘I’m going to kill the bastard who did it, then tear his limbs off and shove them all down his throat.’

Ben simply sits, rigid, hand still clenched, staring at those cigarettes.

It isn't fair. Someone out there will carry on with their life, while mine has stopped because of them. I want justice. I want the police to find them and ruin their life and the lives of their family as payback for mine, preferably before my dad gets arrested for dismembering someone.

But most of all, I want my life back.

Although I can move around with my family, I can't seem to actually leave them, so I've no idea how Beth is coping with all this. I want to wind the clock back and be back in town, shopping with her, having a laugh . . . being alive. I don't even know if Nathan knows yet. It's as if I am caught in the family zone and can't move away. I know Ben will tell his friend, Matthew, but he might not think to tell Nathan straight away. I want him to wrap me in his arms right this minute, to kiss the top of my head and tell me that this nightmare will all somehow be OK. I want him to tell me that he loves me, dead or alive.

Stunned disbelief, like a person whose face has just been slapped, has filled the room all day, and when finally Uncle Roger goes home with Auntie Ruth, who despite his chastising, has left huge piles of sandwiches covered in cling film in the kitchen, my family detach themselves and head robotically to various parts of the house, to lick the wounds that they probably believe will never heal.

Dad plants himself on the sofa with a bottle of whisky, and Mum crawls into bed with sleeping tablets and gin, as if they are merely clinging to the debris that is the remains of our family.

I follow Ben into his room. Does he still know me, without words and beyond walls? 'Can you tell I'm still here, Ben?' I ask him. No one really understands how close we are, except us, and as I study Ben in his state of jagged devastation, I wonder if he believes that I'm now severed from him, or whether somewhere deep inside, he can feel me with him still.

He puts a can of beer, swiped from the fridge, on his bedside table and with fingers shaking he holds up one of Uncle Roger's cigarettes, and lights it.

'Don't,' I plead with him, but he carries on, drawing on it, ignoring his obsession with fitness and sport. He takes a drag, then another, and carries on until the whole cigarette is nothing but a squashed and yellowing stub in the lid of a deodorant can. It makes him choke, and his choking turns into a sob, yet he wipes his face angrily, turns on some music and ramps up the volume, as if loud noise will replace the thoughts in his head.

He reaches for his phone and texts Matthew to tell him, without softening the blow, that his sister is dead, then waits for the screen to light up and ring with Matthew's personal *Mission Impossible* tone, signalling his reply, which, as it happens, is instant. Personally I don't think that 'Shit man, that's intense' is adequate at this point to support Ben through his grief, but within moments a second text comes through. 'I'm coming over.' After texting back a single word, 'No,' Ben switches his phone to silent and flops back on the bed, cocooned by the music yet clutching at the can of beer as if it is the only thing that will keep him afloat.

My brother, such a huge part of who I am – was? – or whatever, has become a kind of agony where my heart should

be, and I can't bear that the very essence of who we, as twins, were, might have been ripped and ruined. I am trapped in an awful cavity between life and death and all I can hope for is that my twin brother will find me.




Nathan's mum's beautifully restored vintage car, the shiny blue curves of its old-fashioned bodywork topped with a cream convertible roof, was parked in the garage for the second night running.

She planned to get her car washed early before work on Monday, because Nathan's dad, Alex, would have left the house by then, and Nathan was on half-term so would still be asleep. She really didn't want to tell Alex that she had hit a deer, or whatever it was, coming home from the late lunch with her friends on Saturday. She didn't want to explain the mud on her precious and normally pristine car, because she would then have to explain why she had cut across the countryside to avoid the main roads and the chance of more cars.


She didn't normally drink more than two glasses if she had to drive, but Morag had bought another bottle, and she had eventually given in to her friend's pressure to '*Go on, have another*'. In the end, although she had been quite careful and felt totally fine, she had probably been over the limit by the time she drove home, but as someone else had been pouring the wine she wasn't exactly sure *how* much she had consumed.

She'd been looking for some mints on the way home, while avoiding the potholes at the same time, when she heard the



think. There was nothing to indicate what she had hit as she looked into her rear-view mirror and her side mirrors, seeing only the inky black puddles and the darkening outlines of the trees and the nearby hedge. She had stopped, briefly, but couldn't see anything from her seat, and when she had tried to get out to look she realised very quickly that her high heels, the increasing dark and bad weather would make it a futile task to hunt for an animal, and even then what could she do? She could hardly shove an entire deer into her car and take it home. *No, better to let nature take its course*, she thought, then drove home, desperately hoping her car was OK.

They didn't have secrets from each other in her family, but she was terribly embarrassed that she had lost track of her safe driving limit. She decided to keep quiet about the animal, and the mud, and wash her car on Monday.





When the shreds of what had once been his family had dispersed, Lily's dad, James, sat on the sofa clutching a bottle of whisky, and listened to the sounds in his own head. It was the noise of jarring disbelief playing over and over, stabbing at his soul.

The two tiny babies that his wife had presented him with over fifteen years ago had completed his whole world. So vulnerable and perfect, he had held one in each arm, just looking from Ben to Lily, and being totally amazed and thrilled that they belonged to him. Amelia had smiled tiredly at him, flushed with exertion and pride, and he had loved her. In that moment he knew he was going to be a good dad and his heart had been a seesaw of joy and fear at the prospect ahead.

Amelia would joke with him over the years that he was almost caveman in his need to be the hunter-gatherer of the family. His key function in life was to provide and protect. They were so happy with twins, one of each, they had decided to stop there. From little pink wriggling things to strong, healthy teenagers, he had revelled in every stage. He had watched them over the years, how they fought with each other, defended


each other and loved each other. Many times when they were little he had found them in the same bed, curled up, warm little hands clasped as if they needed each other even when they were asleep. He had admired his children for everything that they had become, their achievements, their talents, their personalities forming as they grew, and yet he hadn't been able to keep Lily alive.

He took a large burning gulp of whisky and dialled a number on the phone. The steady rhythm of the dialling tone filled his ear and he swigged at his whisky again. The drink stayed in his mouth as a tired voice on the other end simply said his name. 'James?'

James was unable to swallow past the huge lump in his throat, and the liquid trickled out of his lips and down his jumper as he spoke. 'Dad?' he mumbled into the receiver, and waited while his father gathered himself.

'I'm here, son.'

They sat like that for some time, receivers to their ears and only silence coming down the line until James quietly said, 'I've failed, Dad.' He took another gulp of whisky, then another, then more, hoping with every second that it would numb the pain, even just a little. 'I didn't keep her safe,' he confessed into the receiver, the faceless bulk of his daughter's killer lurking in the corner of his mind. 'I can hardly bear . . .' The rest of his words wouldn't come out, but he thought about his wife and all the similarities there were between her and Lily and how she would now always be a stark reminder of the beautiful woman his daughter should have become. And Ben, so similar, the black hair and the shape of his face,



but now with an empty space forever beside him. He put his face in his hands while his father's words floated up from the carpet, where he'd dropped the phone.

'It will get better, James. It may not seem like it now, but it will. Trust me. Hold on to that thought.'

But James continued to hide behind his hands. He had failed. Life had proved too fragile and he'd broken it.



I stay with Ben all night.

I don't know *how* to go anywhere else anyway. It's a scary prospect, being trapped like this, by some kind of virtual glue, in this universal chasm. I no longer need to sleep. I can't get into my own bed, or turn on the television, or eat, or hold a conversation, or go and see Beth or Nathan. I can't do anything and it's terrifying. 'I'm right here, Ben,' I tell him. 'I'm right, sodding, bloody HERE. *Find me!*'

But there's nothing . . . not a turn of the head or a twitch of the lips. I resort to poking my finger into his eye, then his other eye, then flicking the end of his nose, like I loved doing before, when he was asleep, but still nothing – my fingers simply pass undetected through his nostrils.

The gradually lightening sky brings Monday, and the first day of half-term, but for Ben time and agenda won't matter right now. A group of us were supposed to be going out tonight. Me and Nathan, Ben, Matthew, Beth and several others, but that idea sure is ruined now. Ben falls asleep eventually, fully clothed and on top of the duvet, early daylight filling the room and his phone flashing silent messages beside him.

I miss Ben already. A lifetime of knuckle burns on top of my head, or the stinging flick of a tea towel on the back of my

thigh, or violently chucking me out of my comfy seat in front of the television, so that he could prove his size over me and sit wherever he wanted. I'd made it my personal mission to retaliate by sabotaging whatever he had been into over the years: toys, cars and more recently fraping his social media sites. I'd become an expert at firing elastic bands with amazing accuracy, or stealing his stash of sweets or money. The list was endless between us, and the merciless fighting was constant but we loved it. The tellings-off that we got from Mum and Dad were both frequent and ignored.

'I'm obviously the superior twin,' I told him often over the years, since I had made it down the birth canal first. Nearly sixteen years ago on 3rd June, I was born a full hour and a half before Ben finally decided to turn up. I could imagine myself pushing and shoving my way past him, in my eagerness to be first, and then we'd spent the next fifteen and three-quarter years behaving in exactly the same way, competing for the best of everything, from the first go down the slide at the park to grabbing at the biggest slice of cake. Yet in truth our love for each other was our strength. We fought each other's cause, when needed, with the determination of gladiators and we protected each other from the rest of the world like private bodyguards.

We were always in tune with each other. We *were* each other.

I look out of the window and down at the street below. A woman is pushing an empty buggy in the early-morning light, and holding the woolly-mittened hand of a small child. The walk is painfully slow, as the child stops to investigate everything. A leaf on the ground, something in the gutter, an

aeroplane overhead. Her whole life is in front of her, exciting and inviting, and I'm totally envious of her. They disappear from my view, and if I still had a beating heart, I believe it would be heavy with missed chances. 'When did we stop noticing everything?' I ask Ben's sleeping body. 'When did the wonder of it all fade away?'

Ben stirs. He breathes in and groans, deep and croakily. Then he sits up suddenly, as if he has just been punched in the stomach, by the memory of what happened yesterday. A tear makes a single, watery track down his cheek and I watch it travel slowly at first, then race down his skin to plop off his jaw. He scratches his cheek where the tear tickled his skin, but he doesn't attempt to wipe the wetness away. Another tear makes a track down his cheek, then another, and another, until he presses his head back onto the pillow where they change their watery tracks to his temples and into the blackness of his hair.

'So you *did* give a shit all these years,' I joke. But, even so, I turn away. I can't bear to see him this way, because even without a physical body of my own I *get* his pain. It's just that thing we do and never question, an illness, a sadness or something funny. I still *get* his pain . . . but can he still get mine?

Ben punches the bed beside him with his fist and shouts a single angry 'FUCK' to the air . . . or to himself . . . or to me.



Nathan's mum took her car early to the place round the corner to get it washed, then nipped home to finish getting ready for work until it was done. She heard Nathan coming down the stairs, and despite the fact that she was perhaps a bit late to leave for work it didn't pass her by that he was up ridiculously early for a school holiday.

'Who are you? And what have you done with my son?' she joked with him, throwing him a quizzical smile. 'You *do* realise it's half-term, Nate? You don't have to get up until at least bedtime.' Engrossed in the flashing screen of his phone, he leant against the door frame to the kitchen with an unfamiliar expression on his face.

She gave up waiting for a reply and turned to the ornate hall mirror, putting her favourite red lipstick on, before slipping into her shoes, which perfectly matched her jacket. Then she pulled on her coat, which nipped in smartly at the waist, picked up her half-empty coffee mug from the mahogany hall table and smiled her famously beautiful smile at her gorgeous son.

'Mind, love, I'm running late,' she told him, as she pinched his cheek gently so she could get past and into the kitchen.

'She's dead,' he replied.

'Who's dead?' Her mind was flitting in all directions. *Have I got my phone? Where did I put the car keys? Someone's dead . . .*

‘Lily,’ he replied, as if hardly bearing to hear himself say it out loud. His voice cracked . . . ‘My Lily.’ He clutched his phone, which beeped in his hands yet again. It was full of messages shared throughout the night by shocked and saddened friends, the second after Ben had texted Matthew. Nathan imagined that at this moment *everyone* was saying the same thing. ‘Shit! Lily Richardson is dead!’

‘Oh my *God!*’ She gasped. ‘*Your* Lily? How awful. How did it happen?’ She turned to him and placed a tender hand on the back of his head while standing on tiptoe to kiss his forehead.

‘I’ll ring work and tell them I’m going to be late this morning,’ she told him over her shoulder as she headed across the kitchen to put her mug in the sink. *Family always first*, she thought.

‘They think she got run over down King’s Lane on Saturday . . . that’s where they found her,’ he said.

Nathan’s mum dropped the mug before she got to the sink and it smashed on the tiled floor.