

Tilda and Alex

They sit opposite each other cross-legged on the rug in front of the fire as it licks and spits. Mother and son on a dark Sunday afternoon in early February, the worst kind. A fug of dark grey hangs in the sky outside the small bay window. Tilda will pull the curtains in a minute to shut it out. They both stare at the dancing orange flames in the grate. It was top of their list of Things we both like - the fire, in winter. Not winter itself, not for Tilda at least. Over the last few years winter has brought with it a slow sinking behind her ribs. Her right knee is too hot from the fire, she re-crosses her legs and kicks the Junior Scrabble game Alex has just won. Letters skitter across the board demolishing lines of words. He won with 'hover', placing each square carefully in reverse order, a grin breaking over his face like a slow wave as he dropped the 'h' on a Triple Letter Score. But the victory has passed and his eleven-year-old body concertinas down into itself and he stares over her shoulder at a point, she suspects, in the week just past, or perhaps the week to come. The fire gives off a loud hiss.

'I don't want tomorrow,' Alex says in his soft precise voice. The words tug at the base of her left breast, quicken her breath. She scratches around for words of comfort but finds none, and Sally's not here to answer it for her.

Until just before Christmas the tiny triangle of a loft room was inhabited by Tilda's younger sister Sally. She painted it lime green when she moved in five years ago, and filled it with her books, her shoes, her self-assurance, smells of incense and cigarettes. The window sits just above the tips of the hornbeam, naked now of leaves in the corner of the small patio with the empty rabbit hutch. Sally used to put a chair for Alex to stand on and they

would look out of the window, their heads almost touching, at the birds sitting right there.

Magpies, starlings, pigeons, the odd robin.

‘They’ve got the best view,’ Sally would say, ‘bird’s eye.’

For five years they had been a tiny triangle of a family.

The rabbit was Sally’s idea, for Alex’s seventh birthday.

‘The good thing about pets,’ Sally said, ‘is that they can always provide a diversion.’

‘From what?’ Tilda asked.

‘Anything. Awkward visitors, annoying children, excuse to leave: I’ve got to go and feed the rabbit/dog/baboon.’

‘Do you know someone with a *baboon*?’ Alex said, wide-eyed. Anything was possible with Sally.

‘Mainly you just love them,’ Sally said, then added wistfully, ‘it’s the easiest love in the world.’

Both Alex and Tilda had nodded agreement, but only one of them knew what she was talking about.

Alex discovered the easy love for Mister Puff.

Two years later, when he was nine, Mr Puff was snatched by a fox. On the day it happened Alex was so stricken and his breath so gaspy he thought for a moment that he himself might die. He knows it is possible to die of shock. The family of three mourned together, mealtimes silent, card games halted. After a week or so Sally broke the dinner silence.

'I saw a fox on the way home today Al, and do you know what I did?' Alex looked up from his bolognaise with wounded eyes and a pouted lip.

'I did *this*,' and she thrust two fingers up at the imaginary fox beating a speedy retreat out of the kitchen. 'And I shouted "Raaaah!" a throaty sound, baring her teeth. 'And whenever I see a fox now, this will be my fox face.' She bared her teeth at Alex across the table. Tilda, sitting on the end, swivelled her head from one to the other, watched her son thud his fork on the table in his fist, and snarled back at Sally, then turned it on the kitchen door, giving the V's with his free hand.

'Raaaaaah!'

'Alex, I don't-' Tilda's voice was lost in the shouting which went on for some minutes before turning to laughter.

On her infrequent visits Alex's granny described him as 'No bother at all'. The sisters knew what she meant but they didn't like it. On the one day a week Sally picked him up from school he didn't push other kids in the playground or demand sweets in a whiney voice. But he didn't seem to have friends. This bothered Tilda and it bothered Sally too. She was his friend. They played 3D Connect Four, Sally taught him chess from her hazy memory - jumping horses, sliding bishops. Alex beat her. The three of them played scrabble, and all the card games Sally and Tilda had played with their father for hours at his hospital bedside. He had said to them in his gruff whisper as they shuffled, dealt, paused to sit him up: "At least I don't need to worry about you girls getting fleeced at poker." The sisters had shared a look across the shrinking white-sheeted body of their father, a look that contained a whole childhood. No, he didn't need to worry about that. And it wouldn't happen to Alex either,

who won the rounds of prediction whist in front of the fire. No, they didn't need to worry about that.

Autumn, Sally is offered a promotion to the New York office. By December she is gone.

Tilda is sinking under her ribs. Her mother sends her a present, a pair of light box glasses: large clear goggles with a blue light intended to lift the weight in her ribs.

'Barry paid for them darling, they cost a hundred pounds!'

'Why would he-'

'Don't you worry Tilly, you just wear them.'

'I'm not-'

'It was my idea. They're very successful. Plenty of research. Now you just get yourself some winter sun!'

Tilda reads the instructions and wears the goggles twenty minutes morning and evening. They make her own glasses dig in, so she wears the goggles on their own. She looks ridiculous, feels ridiculous, bug-eyed and glowing blue. When she wears them she is almost blind.

'Worse than our science ones,' Alex says, smiling. Although it is blurred, his smile is worth the hundred pounds. Tilda tries to picture him in a lab with goggles on, in a line of similar children with similar goggles, hunched over a Bunsen burner, craning his neck to expose the sliver of pale flesh under his collar. He started his new school in September. All the changes in her life are giving Tilda motion sickness.

At home there is too much time and not enough Sally. They climb the stairs together up to the little attic room and look out at the dark. The hornbeam beckons a gnarly finger. Alex sits down on Sally's bare mattress.

'It smells up here,' he says, 'Sally smoked sometimes.' He says this like it's a challenge. Tilda is weary to her bones. She wants- what does she want? To fly out of the window and away; to have everything she needs to say lined up and ready; to feel brave.

'Mat, you need to chill more,' Sally says to her on Facetime. Tilda's heard it a thousand times. Her sister is the only person in the world who calls her Mat. Tilda wishes she didn't, but she knows that while change is possible, some things are fixed.

'You miss the good stuff, you're too focused on PE kits and sandwiches. Take the pressure off. There's loads of good stuff, Mat, but you can't see it from inside a Tupperware.'

'He's being bullied at school Sal.'

'What?'

'Just a few things he's said. Boys laughing at him. I don't know-'

'Fucking. Little. Shits.'

'I know, I know. I could kill them.'

'I would rip their bags from their puny shoulders. Empty the contents into the canal,' Sally's talking through gritted teeth, 'then I'd knock them to the ground, pin them down with my knees. Get a – a- pen, no, a fork! Jab it into their arm, into their *neck*. Till it breaks the skin. Little shits. I'd get a thick black magic marker and draw a cock and balls on their face. Mat?'

'Yeah. Yeah, me too.'

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The bus rattles downhill towards the centre. Towards school. Second week back. Alex is on the top deck his arms hugging the bag on his lap. The bus slows to a stop at the traffic lights in front of the giant rabbit mural. If you whizz past, it looks cute and funny, with rolls of fur and bulging cheeks. But if the bus is slow it looks fat with popping eyes. Genetically modified. He has to look away.

Two girls a few seats back giggle loudly and the prickling starts up in his ears and throat. He used to love that rabbit mural. Things change. Things change fast. You can say that again.

'Keep moving Al, keep going,' Sally says to him. He sort of but not completely knows what she means. Same with Mum's advice: 'People can't hurt your feelings unless you let them.' She says it in her serious-calm voice which used to make things better whatever it was saying. They can though, hurt you, especially if they knee you in the back in the school concert when you're standing for ages in tiers like in a football stadium. And that's not the only way.

They showed the video of the concert to the whole year in assembly on the first day back after Christmas. Alex thought they all looked like tiny feathers in the wings of a giant bird, fanned up and out on both sides of the music teacher who flapped and waved in the middle. It was really cool, the bird shape and the ripple, as one, when they did the actions. Really, really cool to watch. Just total crap when you were actually doing it. Things change fast. It all depends where you're looking from.

If only Sally was still here. They have Skyped. She stares out at him from the screen with a big grin, which isn't the way Sally smiles. She asks him questions and he knows his answers

are too short because she carries on nodding and smiling and raising her eyebrows when he's finished. She's right there, in real time, but it feels unreal. And he can't talk normally.

The bus is nearly at the centre. He presses his forehead against the cold grit of the window to see the coffee stand on the corner by the hospital with the red-haired lady with big teeth, always laughing. From up here her teeth fill her face. He wonders if he could sell coffee at a stall. He doesn't want to be a journalist like Sally, because sometimes you have to write through the night, and he would probably fall asleep. And he doesn't want to be a nurse like his mum because its mostly girls, which is just a fact and not sexist. But it looks fun on the coffee stall. Though he's not sure what he would say to people. First he'll start drinking coffee.

The laughing girls are in front of him down the steps as they get off, still giggling. At a pug dog standing on a seat smearing its nose along the window. Nothing at all to do with him. A warm rush fans out inside his chest. One of the girls has pink braces on her teeth and looks like she's eating a wad of candyfloss. If he can get braces he'll get lime green.

He stamps up the hill with the other dark blazers as icy gusts blow-torch his ears nose and fingers. This would be nothing to James Bond. At the crest of the hill, where the school roof spikes into view, he can't not think about the boys. Especially (mainly) Leon, with his squeaky voice and mean slits of eyes. He steers his mind to all the children in Africa and India who can't go to school even though they want to. Mum's always reminding him, not Sally though. Mum did it this morning, and for a second he hated her. They line up now behind his eyes in rows. He would give them his place if he could.

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'Arse over tit on the in the ice, suit legs cartwheeling! A posh suit, too, Armani or Gucci or something. I couldn't help thinking about the suit. My fingers sank into his pudgy face holding his glasses on as we sat him up.' Sally is on the screen, telling Alex about a man who had slipped over on the ice in Central Park on her way to work.

'It's really different here Al, people look you in the eye. They don't just keep their heads down.'

'Who just keeps their head down?'

'Americans are just more open, you know. They say "Hi! How you doin?"'

Alex laughs, tries out his accent. 'Hi! How *you* doin?'

'Yeah dude! That's what I'm talking about - Gimme five!' In New York, Sally holds up her hand. Alex leans towards the screen with a flat palm, then quickly sits back and shoves it in his lap.

'Anyway, when he gets himself together, the guy, he starts shouting and having a go. In his posh blue suit.'

'I thought you said they were friendly?' Alex says.

'They are. But there's a lot of crazies,' she twirls her fingers either side of her head. Alex does some crazy rocking of his own.

'He starts pointing at me "I'm taking the bull by the horns, lady!"' she's doing the accent again, waving her arms, she's gone a bit cowboy. Alex shouts in his best American.

'Bull by the horns, Lady!' He jumps up and starts firing his fingers in the air.

'I've had me enough of this bullshit!' Sally yells, shooting her fingers at the screen. Alex throws his head back and shouts at the ceiling 'Bullshit, Lady!' firing his gun fingers up, sideways, and back at the screen. He leans forward and bares his teeth to Sally.

'Raaaah!'

'Raaaah!'

The sting stays in his throat after she disappears from the screen.

On the worst kind of Sunday afternoon in February, the fire puffs and sparks its last as mother and son sit in grey silence not wanting tomorrow. Tilda remembers she hasn't done her twenty minutes.

'I need to do my light.'

'Your what?' Alex asks.

'Light.'

'Oh, your goggles,' he smirks.

'No, my *light box glasses*.'

'They make you look like a weird alien.'

'I know,' she sighs as she gets up, then adds with a half-smile, 'it's the look I'm going for.' Alex gets up too and he's quicker to sprint up the stairs.

When she comes back in he's back on the rug, a blur to her with the white-blue glare.

'It's like you've literally just stepped off a spaceship.'

She lowers herself down in jerky alien spasms and sits close so she can see him. He pulls out something from behind him.

'What's that?'

He dangles something black and wiry, she leans in. A pair of her old sunglasses, without lenses, two black cylinders like giant eyebrow stuck on the top with large amounts of Sellotape.

'Where did you get...?'

He balances the glasses on his nose then puts his hands up in front of his face. When he takes them away the left half of his face flashes gold, and the right half flashes red. Tilda's mouth drops open.

The eyebrows are bike lights.

'Hang on, I'll put it on constant.' Now his cheeks are spotlit, one gold one red, like a flag, with his nose the dark stripe in between. She claps her hands and stares, transfixed. A strand of his dark hair stuck to the tape points vertically at the ceiling. He is like an exotic sea creature, a circus curiosity, a boy actor – a wonderful rare breed, unique, illuminated. A fleeting glimpse of the many people he might be. Tilda rocks forward with her hands over her mouth and snorts out a laugh-sob as her heart clutches at her throat.

Alex chuckles and the glasses fall off, he catches them and settles them back on his stripy face. Then the room is still. Tilda's heart settles back to a steady beat. The fire puffs. They turn to it then back to each other, two glowing aliens face to face on the rug. Outside the darkness looks in.

'We'll just sit here for a bit, shall we?' she says, 'take in some winter sunshine.'

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