

My father doesn't like it when Eva comes round. He says she drinks too much. My mother says Eva's the only friend she's got left. When my father goes to the betting office, they sit downstairs and talk, and both of them drink too much. Sometimes I can hear them laughing. But when Eva came up to my room I panicked, because there's really no more space for anyone else in this house.

This is my bedroom, and Luca's, and Fran's, and my mother's. The four of us sleep here, and at the back of the house live Celesta and Rose, my other two sisters who I don't really know. They have pinned a notice on the door which I can't read but which I know says, **KEEP OUT. THIS MEANS YOU!** I think it means me. I imagine they're serious.

We are Celesta, Rosaria, Francesca, Luca, Dolores. I'm the last, and like Rose and Fran I am shortened in my name: I am Dol. This is so my mother can get us all down for breakfast in one breath. There is one more of us, Marina, who comes after Celesta, but she's not here any more, which is just as well, because how would she fit in?

My father has the last bedroom. It's called the Box Room, but it has no boxes in it, at least none that I can see. It's always open, as if he's saying he doesn't really live there, or is pinched by the size of it, or wants us to know he's still alive at night by letting us hear him snore. I never go in there by choice, but sometimes I stand at the door.

My bedroom is full of beds. It's practically a ward. There's also an old fold-up, which has lost the ability to do what it suggests. It lounges on its side against the far wall, as if it's waiting for another child to fill it. I share the big bed with my mother and my sister Luca. We lie on either side of her in our winceyette pyjamas, like two brackets stuck with fluff. I never consider that this might be my father's place.

Fran sleeps on a slim divan in the corner. It's not because she doesn't want to sleep with us, but because she always wets

the bed. I do too, sometimes, and so does Luca. It's easy to tell who's to blame; the mattress is patterned with flowers, and stains. My mother doesn't understand why we do it, children of three, six, eight, and we can't explain.

Our Father, who art in Heaven . . . I've done two as far as I know, which is only up to Daily Bread, so I stop and watch. I think I see his shadow on the hill, but as the shape trots down I laugh because it's just a dog.

There's only space for one more thing in here, and that's the chest, which is also a bed of sorts. My mother keeps her old handbag in it, busting with photographs of lots of people I don't know. They're always getting married and standing on a step, so the two are linked forever in my head. There are others, too, of me and all the rest, black and white, cracked and creased, sliding on each other inside the dim nylon pouch, inside the handbag, inside the chest.

I slept in the chest, when I was newborn. My mother told me how she wrapped me in a shawl at night and hid me from my father.

He would've smothered you, she said, without malice but with a strange sense of pride, as if I were a Rescue kitten she had taken in.

I think about the little baby in the chest, and my father, creeping into the bedroom like a pantomime giant. He's lifting his legs very high, placing one shiny hobnail boot slowly in front of the other. He has a pillow concertinaed in his hands; he's sniffing the air for signs.

But wouldn't he have heard me? I say, and my mother smiles.

Not when I shut the lid. You didn't make a peep.

My mother's laugh below and the chink of a bottle reminds me I am on lookout. He's loping down the street, almost home, and I run to whisper in my mother's ear. Eva drags her coat off the chair, pockets the bottle of rum, and moves to

the back door. She lifts the latch and lets herself out. The air is frosty. My mother breaks off some blackened parsley from a pot next to the step, and folds it into her mouth.

Go upstairs now, Dol, and do your puzzle, she says. I must keep out of my father's way.

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That was a time before I was four. The house is still here, and now I am here, standing at the window of the bedroom we shared. A veil of grime is drawn across the sill. My mother would never have allowed it.

The Jacksons have long gone, moved to a new estate called Pentwyn Farn. It says so on the front of the bus which takes you there. Their house is empty now: one top window is boarded up, the other gapes; a smash of black glass juts from the frame like a broken bone. A stone's throw. The other houses in the row are nailed with identical sheets of gunmetal grey, decorated with ribbons of graffiti red. There are a few people left on the street, but I don't know any of them. There are no cars at the kerb.

I'm standing at my window, and I'm the last. All the rest have gone. All the sisters have gone. I'm waiting for them to stage their comeback.

one

Six-to-four the field, six-to-one bar!

Shouting the odds, the TV and my father, low down on the living room floor.

C'mon, baby! he yells, beating his flank with his fist. With the betting slip in his teeth, he gallops down the last furlong of the rug, to the home straight of the lino. Words bolt from the side of his mouth: Yankee Piggott Photo-finish. I don't understand any of it. I think my father's English leaves a lot to be desired.

He curses: Jesus Christ.

At the end of the race, his face is very flushed, an inch from the set. He's watching the lines and dots as if Barney's Boy will suddenly leap through the screen. Ripping pink shreds of paper from his mouth, my father tears up his slip and spits the remains on the rug. Then he starts in on the *Sporting Life*, holding it out in front of him, rending it between his fists until he's tearing air. I know at these moments that he would tear me too, for the slightest thing, and I crawl ever so slowly behind the couch, until he's put on his donkey jacket and slammed the back door.

He isn't just like this about horses. My father will gamble on anything that moves. He won't do Bingo or fruit machines or snow on Christmas Day, but horses and pontoon and poker

Stars of blackened cheese skid away from his touch. Salvatore holds his tongue until my father has ended his monologue of woe: then he straightens, launching into the silence.

Okay, so you lose on a horse. Then what you do? You go home? No. Too sensible for you, eh Frank. Frankie, he don't want to go home! Frankie want to win, yeah?

Salvatore talks and scrubs, plunging his hand into the bowl of filmy water, chiselling fiercely with the edge of his blade. Rainbow bubbles cling to the black hairs on his wrist. He stops, points the knife at the ceiling above his head,

Joe Medora don't want to see you - I don't want to see you,

then waves it in front of my father's eyes.

Take your face somewhere else.

For my father has come to beg. He will beg Salvatore for a loan, and he will beg Joe Medora for extra time with the rent. He stays silent, waits for the storm in Salvatore to pass, and listens to the rain belting off the pavement outside. The going was too heavy, thinks Frankie, watching a replay of the race in his mind. It's not monochrome in his head: the racecourse is green, the horses always chestnut brown, the bobbing jockeys brilliant in Silks. He puts the race away before he catches sight of Court Jester loping home in fifth.

Frankie puts his hand in his trouser pocket, pulls out the chit from Len the Bookie and slaps it on the counter. He turns the lining inside-out, catching the debris in the palm of his hand and depositing it neatly in a gritty mound beside the crumpled docket. A half-crown rolls away from the flecks of tobacco and dust.

Go home, my friend, says Salvatore, hearing the lonely clatter of the coin. He gives the money back to my father and wipes the fluff off the counter with the corner of his apron.

It was a sure thing, Sal, says Frankie, pocketing the half-crown.

Sure thing. Sure. Ciao, Frankie.

Frankie looks steadily at Salvatore, turns and walks slowly away from the bar.

Frankie - il cappello! shouts Salvatore, gesturing to the hat on the counter. Frankie isn't listening. He winds between the booths, heading not for the exit but for the narrow door marked Private which will lead him up the stairs to his old home, to his old life - to Joe Medora's new office. He'll find out for himself if Joe doesn't want to see him. Salvatore smooths the felt brim of the hat with his fingers: his eyes track Frankie's footsteps across the ceiling.

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Our yard door is locked, so to get round the back of the house, you have to climb over the side wall and drop down on to the flags. Those in the know, when they're out slipping the lead off someone else's guttering, use the outhouse roof as a sliding brake. A foot on the lintel, one hand gripping the frame, then the other hand, and down with a silent jump. Fran has another way of sneaking in: she pushes aside the fencing at the rear of Number 4, sweeps the slat back into place, and throws her leg over the low chicken-wire that separates our backyard from the Rileys'. Fran sees the smoke leaking out from under our kitchen door, and stands amazed.

There is a rush of action, shouting in the street. Alerted by their mother, the Jackson boys come bouncing off our outhouse roof like a pair of experts. They knock Fran sideways on the concrete path. Martineau surfs down after them, slices his palms on the broken slate, and lands with a crack on his knees. He moves the boys away and puts his shoulder to the hot wood of the kitchen door.

My mother, on the wrong side of the wall, hears her baby burning on the inside.

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Our kitchen thick as tar. A sudden suck of air that punctures heat, and the fire becomes fury. Flames spill in a river across

the floor; scalding oilcloth, blistering wood, boiling the blankets on my bed. The boys shield their foreheads with their arms and flail about like drunkards, tipping over chairs and shouting. They are devils out of Hell. It is burning burning burning - and then Martineau lifts me with his great scored hand and hauls me out to daylight.

By the time the fire engine arrives, we are all in the alley, the yard door is battered open, and the Jackson boys are the heroes of the hour. They pat each other's shoulders and brush bits of cinder from their clothing. They are all arms now, describing the heat to their friends, pointing to the flames gulping at the window. Martineau bends and grips his mossy knees, breathing in shallow bursts. From under his fringe, he watches my mother. She stands in the pouring rain, her head raised to heaven: she won't look at me. She carries me loosely, this charred little thing, as if I have fallen from the sky. She is sure I am dead. When the ambulanceman holds out his red blanket, she drops me into it like a swathe of kindling.

Later, undressing Fran in the back bedroom of Carlotta's house, my mother finds two dingy cigarette butts and the box of spent matches. Her heart turns mad with blackness.

tinder

My right hand is fine. There's little damage, and the fingers are quite beautiful, in the ordinary sense of them actually being there, bending, flexing, pointing things out to strangers who stop in their cars and wind down their windows to ask directions.

But the left hand. People who don't know me stare when they see it. They look away, then sidelong at my face in search of further evidence. There are scars there too: if they get close enough they could find them. But not many get that close: an outstretched hand, my left one - it's enough to ward them off.

I lost the fingers. At one month old, a baby's hand is the tiniest, most perfect thing. It makes a fist, it spreads wide, and when it burns, that soft skin is petrol, those bones are tinder, so small, so easily eaten in a flame.

But I think of it as a work of art: a closed white tulip standing in the rain; a cut of creamy marble in the shape of a Saint; a church candle with its tears flowing down the bulb of wrist.

I go back, and try to piece together how it was. I think there must be a design. I can picture Len the Bookie and his bet with the Syndicate (how soon my fist would echo his); the sight of my mother hopeless in the rain; Martineau behind

out from the passenger side. Standing in his living room chewing on his breakfast, Mr Jackson hears noises on the street. He raises the grey net of curtain at his window, and poking his head round it, looks at the car, admires it and the blonde woman standing beside it, and gazes up to our front bedroom. He sees my mother's hands pressed flat on the pane, her mouth moving silently. He sees my father suddenly appear from our house, gripping Marina's shoulder, helping her onto the back seat, stroking her head as she slides across the leather upholstery. Marina bends forward and waves to our downstairs window, where the faces of my sisters crowd the steamed-up glass like pale balloons. Fran and Celesta wave back; Rose is crying. The blonde woman takes the suitcase, lifts it onto the seat next to Marina, shuts the car door. Joe Medora revs the engine.

My father doesn't look once at Joe Medora, and Joe doesn't turn his face from the view through the windscreen. The road in front of him leads to the high wall with the dead end, which means he will have to turn the car round on the street and drive past the house again. It's not his house any more; but he has Marina, sitting solemnly in the back seat of his car, her little gloved hands folded now over the belt of her raincoat.

My father cuts straight through the house - in through the front door and out through the back - stumbling on to the morning where he stands until the sound of Joe's engine dies to nothing. He takes off his jacket: it's been raining overnight and the smell is sharp, there's a bird singing somewhere which infuriates Frankie, thinking of the songs that Marina will hear, far away in Malta, that he cannot share. He looks at the yard, the washing line empty except for the pegs, and the spiders' webs between them laced with dew. He looks at the old back door lying flat on the ground, like an entrance into Hell.

Then he sets to work; to break the door to pieces, to knock and hammer and make the most terrible screeching

noise; he wants to scream, he wants to let out his lungs and howl: anything, to drown out the emptiness that oozes from the house.

He lifts the door from its grave of flattened grass: the hidden side of it is slimy and crawling with woodlice. The saw gibbers through the wood as Frankie devastates the silence. He sings a song without a tune, in a voice that comes from his bones, all day, like breathing.

He hammers until darkness, but not able to leave it alone, he goes out again with the red weals of flesh growing tight on the skin of his palms. Hammers into the black. Something will be Built, he thinks.

It takes him a month to erect the cage. He will fill it with animals. He will buy chickens, perhaps, or rabbits. It is a thing for his daughters.

My mother would tell me this story, every time differently, but would always end with the same line:

What he really wanted was to saw *me* to bits, Dol. Like a magician. He couldn't stand it, you see? Jealousy! That's what jealousy does for you, girl.

It didn't occur to her then, or if it did she never let on, that he was doing something about us; about losing everything that winter. He was determined to change his luck.

Rabbits

We loved the rabbits. But then they vanished too. My father killed every single one, for food, for sport, for no reason at all. Like a poacher, he used them as a stake; he would take them out of his donkey jacket and throw their soft bodies on the counter of the betting shop. They were currency, and he spent them all: apart from the ones I managed to destroy.

It's an instinctive thing. That's what my mother told me when I showed her, took her down to the bottom of the garden, and *showed* her - those small scraps of flesh, streaks of disgorged skin - all that was left of the babies. I couldn't think

what I had done to hurt them; I was *proud* of them. They looked like the sugar mice you buy in sweet shops. My mother said the doe had eaten her young. And that I had done something terribly wrong by touching her babies.

You had to interfere, she said.

I was five; it was the first time I'd heard the word. The way she said it made it sound like murder.

SIX

Say it then!

Gowchee, I say, spreading my lips over the last syllable. It's not a new word, but I'm humouring my mother.

Now spell it, she says, breaking off a thread of cotton with her teeth. She tacks the needle into the front of her blouse where it twinkles when she moves, folds the mended shirt and places it on the pile of ironing to be done.

G-A-U-C-I, I say slowly.

Well done, Dol. Now do the lot.

I take a deep breath:

Dolores Sebastienne Gauci. Aged Five. Living at Number 2 Hodge's Row, Tiger Bay, Car—

She stops me by flapping her hand in front of my face.

Alright, Dol, you're not going to the bloody moon. Now, you know what to say?

We're sitting round the table, which is heaped with washing, the *South Wales Echo*, my crayoning book, and *True Crime Monthly*, and I have to pass this memory test before my mother will let me go to the corner shop for her. I can feel she's nervous; she never lets me out. I can't play in The Square with my sisters, and I can't go to school. I started there last month, but you wouldn't know it—I've only been twice. Rose says it's because I'm bad luck and I mustn't be seen. She

with his tongue stuck in his head, or he passes round a plate of food, moving his way slowly among the pastel scents and cigar smoke. Pippo Seguna is wedged in the corner, his head cocked at an angle as he tries to read the label on a gramophone record. Frankie leans against the booth, talking: his hands make circles and close, emphatic chops in the space in front of him. He is having a conversation with someone Salvatore doesn't recognize. Salvatore is struck by the other man; the way he listens to Frankie, nodding, a slight smile now and then. His face is full of concentration, but his look is sidelong, fixed on the door marked Private. He wears a suit with stripes in it which glint every time he moves. This man cannot stay still; he repeatedly touches his hair, a nervous, agitated swipe across his head. Pippo, standing just behind the man, mirrors this gesture. Salvatore realizes that they are brothers.

Salvatore! cries Frankie, noticing him, Come meet Paolo. Salvatore shakes the man's hand. It is damp. He doesn't like him at all.

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Fran uncovers her left arm first. From the crease of her elbow to an inch above her wrist runs a long thick scar, a blue-white strike against the sallow brown of her skin. Intersecting the wound is a shorter slash, trailing down at one side: the two lines form a pale blue crucifix. The wound is puckered like a burn from repeated scraping. Fran lets Luca run her finger along it before she hooks up the other sleeve. This time the tattoo is inky; bits of blue leak out from the lettering. FRAN, it says.

Bernard did that for me, with India-Ink.

He your boyfriend? asks Rose, her eyes fixed on the letters.

Yeah, says Fran, But don't tell Mamma.

Why not? I say.

Fran pulls her sleeves down and folds her arms,
She wouldn't like it, she says, He's a Half-Caste.

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Frankie drags the girl through the crowd, gripping her hand tight as she bumps and trips behind him, right up to the counter and Salvatore.

Sal, he shouts, Say hello to Rita!
Salvatore looks at her. She is plump and dark with a fine down of hair covering her bare arms. A gold locket at her throat.

Gina, she says, hurt, I'm Gina.

Give her a drink, says Frankie, ignoring her.
Salvatore smiles kindly as she holds out her glass to him. They are always Rita, or Sophia, or Gina. The girls change but the names don't.

I'd like some champagne, she says.

Salvatore bends down behind the bar and fetches up another bottle, so he doesn't see Paolo moving quickly across the room. Salvatore unwraps the foil, twists off the wire, eases out the cork, and pours. The foam shoots up the glass. He loves the effect this has on the girls, the tiny shiver of panic on their faces as the bubbles flash to the rim, the way they close their eyes for that first sip. Salvatore is watching this. He isn't watching the door marked Private as it opens and shuts.

It takes a minute for Paolo to find the key to the safe. Another minute, his pockets full of money and his mouth full of biscotti, and he is back at Frankie's side. Frankie is laughing now, his eyes on Salvatore as all four raise their glasses in a toast. He doesn't need to look at Paolo to know: now, he can do business with Joe.

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I lie awake waiting for my mother to come up. I can't sleep until I've asked her about half-caste. Because that's what we

are: that's what they call us at school. I can't see why my mother wouldn't like Fran's boyfriend if he's just the same as us. I try to concentrate on Half and Whole, but through the bedroom wall I can hear Rose talking to Celesta. She must be telling her about Fran's tattoos and her boyfriend, because every now and then Celesta goes, Oh my God! and, Wait 'til Mam finds out! Then it's quiet, just Luca grunting in her sleep and a strange mumbling sound from Fran. I know this noise — it's like Carlotta, telling her rosary. It makes me very tired to hear it.

amulet

The kitchen doesn't get the light in the evenings. I'd forgotten. My way downstairs seems shorter too, a few quick steps, a right turn, the final three steps with the last one wider than the rest. You could sit here, on the bottom step. I try it now. It feels awkward, cold; there's a draught blowing down from upstairs. I haven't checked the other bedrooms properly. Perhaps there's a window open, or a pane smashed. It feels wrong to sit on this step, my back exposed to the chill. Nothing to lean against. The door shutting off the upstairs has been removed. That's what the difference is: you used to be able to rest your back on the closed door. The hinges have gone, leaving two shallow depressions top and bottom of the frame. I put my hand on the one nearest me. It's been painted over. Beneath my fingers, the solid drips of gloss feel like a message in Braille. I wonder if my mother painted it. The idea of shutting off the stairs, hiding up from down, it appeals to me now.

I want to run away. I want my warm flat, my warm yellow kitchen again. This room looks so empty. In my head, it's full of people, steamy with smoke and cooking smells and talk. Perhaps my mother had a home help; or maybe the social services have been here and cleared up. I should go through the drawers before the others arrive, sort things out: if there's something to be found, I want to find it.

Home-made, yeah? he said, taking my left wrist and holding it fast. The double meaning made us laugh. He didn't let go. I didn't let him go.

Will you come to the funeral, Louis? I asked.

He looked blank. So this, too, was something Celesta wasn't sharing.

Our mamma's — your gran's — funeral. It's tomorrow.

Aw no, he said, Aw no.

He turned his head sideways, like a pigeon eyeing a crumb. He was deciding.

I'm going, he said, We'll all go.

And he linked his arm through mine.

Nearly there, *Auntie*, he said, grinning again, Wasn't so terrible, was it?

I made him leave me at the top of the street. He was reluctant, kept turning round as I waved him away, shrugging his shoulders in hopeful challenge.

You sure? he shouted, You sure now? I'm useful, me! Good in a crisis!

Celesta wouldn't want him in the house. And I didn't know how Rose would react.

She is kneeling in the centre of the room, surrounded by bins and baby clothes, shoes and coat-hangers in two sloping mounds. It looks like a jumble sale. From under the bed, only the grey paws of her dog are visible; he lies as bored as a corpse. Rose looks up at me — her eyes are guilty, embarrassed, as if I've caught her in some terrible act. She smells of sweat and there's a black crease running down her forehead. She has the face of a child.

I've been sorting all afternoon, she says, inspecting her hands. She holds both palms out to show me; her fingertips are sleek with newsprint.

It's mostly rubbish. I'll put it out for the binmen.

I've been to see Eva, I say, And I've met Celesta and her boys.

She's mad, her, Rose mutters.

I don't know who she means.

Did you know Dad was wanted for murder? I ask. I'm level with her now. She won't escape this time.

Oh aye, she says, sliding a knot of clothes back into the bag. And rape an' pillage and daylight robbery. Have I missed anything? Do let me know — leaning close to me, her voice high in mimicry — And I'll put it on my list.

I'm not joking, Rose.

No. You're gullible. Believe anything, you would.

She sits back on her haunches. The sunlight has sunk away; her face is blue in the gloom.

People get blamed for all sorts — Laddered your tights? — *that's* the Gaucis' fault — Break a fingernail? — *blame* the Gaucis! He did a lot of bad things, Dol, she says, raking up the mass of belts and hangers from the floor. He beat the living daylight out of us, he left us without a penny and he just fucked off. That's the worst crime there is, if you ask me.

She stuffs the clothes into the bags, grabbing handfuls, pressing her weight on them.

You don't need to go looking for what he did, Dol. It's right here, she says.

She gathers the plastic bag and ties a knot in the top.

Or haven't you discovered that yet — Sherlock?

And then she tells me about finding his belt. This is all she is prepared to share. I can't remember it, but something turns in my stomach as she talks. Slippery, wet.

Anyway, I thought you might want these. Or shall I bin the lot?

A pile of photographs is heaped across the lino. I bend over to study them: pictures of Celesta as a child, countless men in

suits, the smiling faces of women; and a portrait of four small children sitting upright on a couch. Our names have been written in biro above our heads: Rose, Luca, Fran, Dol, with corresponding arrows.

So she wouldn't forget, probably, says Rose.

It's Fran I want to see; leaning into me with her arm round my shoulder and her eyes lit up, the slight blur of a blink. One thin wisp of hair is stuck at the corner of her mouth, which is open, about to say something. I can't remember what it was. A joke perhaps, to make me smile for the camera.

My mother's handbag lies open on the floor next to Rose. Out of its mouth spill other stories: a faded newspaper picture of two men; a child's rosary tarnished with age; a worn wooden dice. Nothing is revealed to me. Old recipe cards of meals I've never tasted, Christmas cards from people I never knew. Nothing more of Fran.

Here, Rose says, bending over the pile, There's a good one of you.

The cream paper backing shows through where the surface is cracked; the edges are round with the wear of constant holding. Two small children. The older one wears a button-up plastic raincoat with a white trim, the collar skewed at the neck, as if she's dressed herself or been forced into it in a hurry. Even though the photograph is black and white, you can tell her hair is red — it flies up off her head like a firestorm. She carries a patent-leather bag slung diagonally across her chest, she grips the strap, stares venomously at the lens. She looks like a bus conductor. *Give me the correct fare, or else.*

The baby next to her is crying. It holds both fists in the air like a prizefighter. It takes me a moment to realize that the baby is me. I study the photograph closely. I put it so near to my eyes that the tiny left hand becomes a blur of off-white, no more than grains on a surface. On the back of the photograph, my mother's nervy script says,

Luca, age 2, with ~~Dolores~~, Dolores, 3 wks.

I am crossed out and re-spelt, as if she hadn't got used to this latest child.

It's me, I say to Rose.

Aye, she grins, *All of you.*

The ghost pain flexes. I've never seen my hand before.

Photo of Luca

Luca is the first to bolt; no sooner is the final Amen sounded than she's careering away on her stiletto heels, raking the mud, fleeing as if the Devil himself were giving chase. But it's only Rose, her coat blown open like a bell, who puffs behind her.

Lu, let up a minute! Wait for me! When she catches Luca, they link arms. Their laughter falls out over the sloping graves and wilting weeds. I feel a jealous exclusion. For a short time, Rose was mine, and there was a moment at the graveside when Luca put out her hand and I felt I could claim her too. Now they've got each other again. Celesta fusses ahead of me, trying to placate the priest; she'd like to distance herself from all of us, even her boy Louis. He stays at my side. He has a look of mischief about him.

Who's that then? he says.

Luca.

Oh aye, he says, I've heard of her.

We're standing at the lip of the hill, watching the traffic below. The cars look like toys, all lined up and revving at the lights. The greyiness of the day is flat, peaceful. Louis surveys the scene.

It's a shock like, seeing everyone again? he asks.

I can't hide my disappointment.

This isn't everyone, I say, There are lots of people I won't be seeing.

Like your dad, he says quietly.

No. Like Fran.

We can try, he says, We can still go and have a look-see.

He makes our excuses.

We're just gonna pop to The Moonli—the restaurant, Mam. Pick up some gin.

Celesta cases herself into the back seat next to Rose and Luca, pinching her coat round her in an unconcealed show of distaste.

We're off home, Dol, shouts Rose through the window, Bring some snacks, okay?

We watch them leave. Mrs Riley smiles and waves at us from the front seat of Jumbo's car. They could be a family on an outing. We wave back.

Now Aunt Dol, says Louis, Are you ready?

~ ~ ~

He is appalled that I don't know where I am. For Louis, the change in the city has been a gradual process, years of roadworks and cordoned-off streets, digging machines and noise and dust, the stink of tarmac smoking the air. To me, it's all new, and all the same; identical rows of red-brick terraced houses, their doors open to let out pushchairs, children's bikes, cooking smells. Tin Street, Zinc Street, Silver Row. I'm thinking about precious metals as we turn into Platinum Place. Louis pauses here.

Look, he says, pointing me in the direction of a cutting overgrown with brambles and weeds, We can get across yer. If you're not superstitious, like.

A leap of black iron spanning the railway. This is Devil's Bridge. To the left a tangle of tired backstreets; to the right, the docks spread out, the threads of the tracks cutting and crossing like the lines on a hand. Directly beneath us, curving away like a serpent, is The Arlies. I have never been on top of the arches, only underneath. A noise of banging, metal on metal, comes from one of the lock-ups in the distance, bouncing out of focus across the air.

We used to play here, I say, When we were little.

Louis grins at me,

We did too! he says, They're lived in now. Squatters and that.

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He leads me further in, cutting his path to the heart of the Docks. We're passing a dingy row of shopfronts when he

gestures to the other side of the road – there's a grocer's shop, a tailor's with a dirt-encrusted grille, an amusement arcade with its shiny purple paint and fake prizes in the window. Louis looks at me expectantly.

What? I say, What?

I follow his gaze. I have to remind him that my memory belongs to five-year-old. It's a child's bubble of street names and people's names. Not the real thing. He's pointing at a hand-painted sign above a doorway: Tino's Fruit and Veg. It still means nothing: but now there's something about this place that presses down on me. The lack of proper daylight, that smell of closed-in darkness. Something I can barely feel.

I'll show you, he says, crossing the road. He pushes the door wide, but I hold back, pretending to examine a crate of oranges on the pavement. Mould closes round them like frost. An old man sits in the entry, surrounded by boxes of vegetables in various stages of decay. Louis talks quietly to this shadow while I shiver on the pavement; the wind is carrying rain. Behind the grille of the tailor's shop, the top half of a mannequin leans sideways in the window. The face is empty and the eyes are blank. The head rests awkwardly in the corner of the frame, a smirch of fingerprints grazing its cheek. A fizzing starts up in my chest.

Come on, I shout to Louis, Let's go back.

He leans out of the doorway, gives me a wry look.

I thought you wanted to meet some people, he says, not unkindly. He grips the shoulder of the man sitting on his upturned crate.

Do you remember Dolores Gauci, Mr Tino?

The old man puts out his hand. There is grime beneath the fingernails and the knuckles are grained with dirt, but the hand is strong still, as massive and open as the day it lifted the baby from the fire. He lets out a tiny, breaking sigh of recognition.

Of course, says Martineau, beckoning me close, Let me see you.

The 'grocery store' is not what it seems. There's a narrow set of stairs at the far end of the hall, with a soft light shining down from above, as if the roof has been peeled off. Martineau fetches a key from a hook and lets us in to a long room. The only light in here is from a plate-glass window facing out on to the street. Windolene has been rubbed across the lower half in pale pink swirls. Someone has written a message with their fingertip. It takes a moment to decipher.

The MoonLight OPEN for BUS nes

So this is what Eva meant – Martineau is her 'someone'.

My eyes are slow to adjust; Louis and Martineau move like shadows in front of me, easing themselves past the round tables dotted at random in the aisle. At the far end is a counter nailed with rough formica. A single bottle twinkles darkly on the top. Martineau lines up three tumblers.

Sit, he says, Sit, please.

Louis drags a stool to the bar, and I climb up into the soft blue half-light.

It's a sad day for you, Dolores, says Martineau. He pours a measure of liquid into each glass. A scent of aniseed. His fingers drum the formica; he is looking for something.

Ah! he says, ducking. He fetches a lemon from beneath the counter. This he quarters, squeezing the juice into the drinks.

I keep the good fruit in here, he smiles, pleased at his joke. We raise our glasses. The drink looks cloudy and cool; it has a sharp, numbing taste.

Dolores is interested in the old times, says Louis. There is a shine on his face as he studies Martineau. It is a vision of romance, and it frightens me. I can see in Louis the cut of my father, swinging down the street with his hat in his hand,

OUT. THIS MEANS YOU! and the times when they did things, played games in the street, and went to school together, and I was never allowed to share it. They have never let me in.

Go upstairs now, Dol, and do your puzzle.

To keep me out of my father's way. It races through my blood, feeling again the soft dusk falling in The Moonlight and Martineau speaking low: *they were afraid*. They still are.

Celesta begins to fuss with the glasses, moving Rose aside and rinsing them one by one. She places them on the drainer.

Where's that Louis? she says in an embarrassed voice, He's a bugger, he is!

Jumbo reaches into his pocket and pulls out his fob-watch, as if looking at it will make his brother come faster. His round eyes blink slowly at the time.

Nearly half-past four, he says, sounding surprised. Celesta takes this as her cue,

We'll have one drink and then we'll be off, she warns, Louis or no Louis.

No one argues. Rose reaches over behind Jumbo and pulls the tea-towel free. She twists it inside the glass until it squeals with pain, and, mocking Celesta, holds it up to the light.

Clean enough for you?

We raise our glasses. Celesta's lips are already pursed at the rim when I offer a toast. A last try.

To us, I say, To *all* of us — wherever we are.

It doesn't matter who they think I mean: Fran, or Marina, our father, Salvatore, even Joe Medora. I'm including them all. I'm including me. I'm looking at my sisters, caught in the kitchen with their glasses raised and ready to drink. They're all so still, they could be a snapshot from a family album. I could fetch that pen from the Toby Jug and write the names in the space above their heads. I'm unlocking a door which

would let us all pass through. They will surely let me do this. But Celesta won't: she closes it again.

To *Mam*, she says firmly.

Aye, laughs Rose with relief, At least we know where *she* is. Thank God.

~ ~ ~

Drinking in the afternoon has never suited me. Perhaps it's that. Or maybe it's the thought of Salvatore, sinking in the thick mud of the bay. It's defiling, being dragged into the light. The twisting action of Rose's hand as it turned inside the glass, the tea-towel squeaking round and round and the kitchen bulb shining through it, the closed-in streets, the gulls rising and falling in the distance; something being unearthed.

I stand in the yard. Sharp points of light, like silverfish, swim before my eyes.

Come on in, Dol, says Luca, It's wet.

She inches down the steps and leans against the door of the outhouse. I'm catching raindrops on my face. Inside me, something claws to get out.

It'll be the drink, she says as I heave again, On an empty stomach.

She puts an arm round my shoulder.

Not pregnant, are you? she whispers.

The cage at the end of the garden. Split skin, fur on the tongue.

Not likely, is all I can manage.

Then I can give you something. It's herbal. It'll help.

Luca is getting soaked. The raindrops on her scarf are pretty as pearls. She looks towards the end of the garden and the cage, crouching in the long grass. She doesn't like it out here.

Do you remember the rabbits? I ask, keeping her.

A short, thick-sounding No. Luca used to be a good liar.

You must! There were dozens. He'd buy them as presents—

I don't remember, she says, turning away, Understand me, Dolores, I don't remember One Single Thing.

The rain and the cage and Luca standing in the garden, denying everything. The heaving in me comes out as a shout.

Well I do! You and Rose, locking me in there. Shame on you, Luca!

She faces me. In the twilight, her own sickness shines like a jewel. Luca closes her eyes; she's tired of not remembering.

Dol, we were letting you out, she says.

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Louis leans over the parapet of Devil's Bridge, his arms spread out on either side for support. From behind, it looks like a scene from the crucifixion. The lock-ups under The Arlies have been there for as long as Louis can remember, but he's confused now; he can't locate the spot. Curtains hang from a few of the arches, and where there are still doors, new padlocks have been fitted. Louis knows Anto and Denise by name, and most of the others by sight, but he can't be sure. Seeing Anto's lock-up, Louis drops down on to the oily mud below the bridge. He counts the rows of arches until something catches his eye. That's it -- a strip of Christmas lights looped across an entry. The bulbs are different colours, green and red and smashed and blue and missing and yellow. The cable ends abruptly. It is plugged in to nothing. Louis knows he will be late back, but he doesn't care. There's something important to do. He passes beneath the string of bulbs, lifting a low hoop hanging from a nail. It reminds him of the restaurant and the gaudy rash of fairy lights. It's a mistake to call it The Moonlight, he sees that now; there is no glamour in such a thing. He'll tell Jumbo when he sees him. Louis peers inside. He is looking for a supermarket trolley filled with bags. He hopes he's got it right.

All is rusted here. The cage has a corrugated sheet for a roof, rivulets of water shiver in the folds. I catch a droplet from the edge and it sits in my palm like a wept star. There are weeds growing over the square door, ivy embedded in the joints and cracks. When I drag it away, a frenzy of woodlice scatter in all directions. The grille with its crumbling skin of rust. I half expect to see a rabbit, or a litter of pink-white babies shut-eyed and squirming. All there is, is darkness.

Rain on the tin roof sounds like a shower of stones falling from the sky. You have to be on the inside to know this.

Forgetting time was when I stared at the kitchen window, watching her move across the lit square and willing her to come out and get me. I could see her at the sink. Sometimes she would be staring into nowhere, her hands pressed over her ears. Or she'd turn on the tap and I could hear the water curling down the drain. It would run forever, like a thirst.

Punishment time was whenever I was caught, sinking against the door that shut off the stairs, listening to them. One time my mother was shouting. Take me with you, I heard her say, Take me too. She flung the door open and dragged me down, over the last wide step, then the cold graze of the flagstones on my feet and the shivery plank sinking sideways in the mud. Don't tell your dad, she was saying in a whisper that stung my head, Don't tell him. So I knew the man she was begging was not my father.

There was one other time which had no name.

I'm here because I'm safe. A smell of murder in the house, strong as burning. I can see long grass to the left and right, the mud track and the plank leading back down to the yard. The kitchen door is open and a shadow blocks the light -- I won't catch its eye! Upstairs, Rose and Celesta's room is all

