

Paradise Block

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Eggs

It is very early on, still the beginning. I am still the daughter. *She* is still the mother. I can run through the flat while *She* sobs over pink laundry. *One red sock*. I don't care; I am running to my bedroom with headphones in my ears, hiding for one, two, three hours, listening to the music. There are four different cassettes: all albums by my favourite artist. It is Robbie Williams. Some smells and screaming come under the door, but I have been forgotten about and I can hide with the cassettes, listen with the headphones: *Robbie Williams*.

When the cassette ends I turn it over quickly, press play, but during the brief silence I hear screaming, and I accidentally glance at Little Vincent. His skin is red and mottled; he has a rash and his face opens up, like a wound: I can see his wet tongue thrashing around inside. He screams and I turn, swivel my eyes around the room; the doorway, where the grey smoke is pouring in.

I can talk to other girls about Robbie Williams; I can think about him when I get home from school. There is one song I like, one song in particular; it is about a girl with the same name as me, but she is a completely different girl.

Little Vincent says, 'Can't breathe.'

And I don't hear him, but I accidentally read his lips, see him coughing. I try to concentrate on the music, the peace-making angels giving themselves away, Robbie Williams; but Little Vincent has swung his fat legs over the side of his bunk and is kicking his boots against the wood. He wants me to do something. There is a fire in her room, and *She* is screaming especially loud. I can hear her, even when the fire alarm starts, even though Robbie Williams is shouting, 'I'M LOVING ANGELS INSTEAD.'

Without thinking about what it will mean, I pick up Little Vincent, and run down the stairs.

Min is worried that her flat next door will be burnt, but the firefighters come quickly and use their twisting hoses on the spluttering flames that want to reach up and touch the big yellow letters that say PARADISE BLOCK. They look awkwardly at where my mother's dress has been burnt. *She* is leaning against the building, her ears covered against the fire alarm, the tattered white material billowing around her naked legs and feet.

Min tries to clean my brother's face with a bit of tissue.

'What's this red?' she says. 'Is that a rash?'

Min never listens to anyone; she asks these questions, but she doesn't want to hear the answers. Whatever Min is doing, she is always in motion, always about to move on to

her next task. Min is rubbing at my brother's rash, her eyes are very worried; but moments later she is dusting down the wall where some dirt has touched the cream paint.

'Well,' she says, and she reaches down to snatch at some weeds whose heads have grown up between the bricks, to shoo some of the white cats that are gathering quickly.

I put my headphones back on.

She is crying, covered with a silver blanket. Three women stand around her nervously. One of the women reaches out and timidly strokes her hair. Min has finished with the weeds and the cats, and she leans over me to take off my headphones.

'You should help your mother,' she says.

I can see that her hands want to fuss me, to adjust my dress, push me towards my mother, but for a moment she is still. We are watching Little Vincent, who is pissing up against the front of Paradise Block, just underneath our downstairs window, where the fire has been raging. The fire alarm stops very suddenly, but he continues. Little Vincent is pissing into the smoke, coughing and laughing, as if this is a game. The smoke pours out from our downstairs window like a black tongue.

The headphones have lost their power. I can listen to Robbie Williams, the outside sounds are not part of it, but now darkness invades the *inside* of the music.

There is a cup of water in my room; it is old and grey. The water vibrates, and I know that something is happening downstairs, within the guts of the flat. I take off one headphone, just to see, and I can hear her. *She* is changing, scratching on my door. Little Vincent is crying.

‘I won’t open it,’ I say, but I know that outside there is the black hallway and my mother, crawling on the floor.

The flat is very burnt, and women keep coming and bringing little gifts. These gifts stand out brightly against the charcoal, and this makes the women feel bad, as though the gifts were designed to make the flat look worse, as though that’s their fault. *She* cries every time they bring something new. They don’t know whether *She* is crying happy tears or sad ones, because *She* always looks the same: head back, mouth open. *She* howls.

Min has brought me a present of my own. It is a shiny pink apron. On the apron there are words, curling white and maggoty letters: ‘Little Lady’. Min holds the apron in front of my face until I am forced to look at it. She slips the string over my head and ties the back securely with a double knot.

I take Little Vincent to school the next day. He skips and sings a song happily: ‘Jack and Jill went up the hill, To fetch a pail of water, Jack fell down and broke his crown, And Jill came tumbling after.’ His voice is very sweet and his hand is tiny. We are on time for school and the teacher gives my brother a gold star to wear on his jumper.

My brother says, ‘I won!’

Everything is okay, but I wake up at midnight because my brother is screaming. I get into bed with him and he clings to me. I cannot sleep and during the night *She* slips into the room and sees us.

She gets into the bed next to me. ‘Hush, hush, my babies. Mother is here.’

And then *She* starts crying, but *She* does it with Little Vincent’s toy bird stuffed in her mouth, so I can just hear the heaving. *She* falls asleep on top of my arm and shoulder, and I watch the plastic stars that my brother has stuck to the blackened ceiling. The stars are supposed to be glow-in-the-dark, but they aren’t glowing at all. Maybe the curtains are not thick enough to make the room properly dark.

Now, Min comes around and shows me how to make eggs. She delivers the instructions as though to herself.

‘It doesn’t do for the water to be simmering,’ Min says. ‘Make the water lively; make it really boil.’

I think that Min might have forgotten that I am in the room, and that this is how she always makes eggs, muttering to herself, staring into the bubbling water, measuring the spot to hit the knife against the orange shell.

I watch Min carefully, and I learn how to take the eggs out of the water, where they are smashing their bodies against the edge of the pan. Min waits for the moment when the eggs are no longer hot, places them carefully in their pale blue eggcups. She cuts the eggs’ heads off, pushing the knife towards her thumb until the blunt metal hits her thumb skin. She stares at the eggs for a few seconds and then walks away and out of our flat.

Min never eats the eggs herself.

I make eggs every day that week, and Little Vincent is less irritable. His rash disappears, and now his face is

round and softly white. Even *She* takes one of the eggs and dips a piece of hard bread into its eye.

‘I love eggs,’ *She* says.

‘Me too,’ my brother agrees.

There is less screaming now, just damp sounds as Little Vincent sucks and chews. *She* is happy, trying to paint the burnt walls with tubes of watercolour paint. *She* has wrapped her head in a silk scarf, and *She* keeps retying it to trap her giant yellow hair inside. Beneath her big head, *She* looks smaller and *She* moves around more, sometimes almost leaping. *She* chatters about writing letters and replying to important people, but when *She* is working, I see that *She* is just practising her signature, turning the loops and smiling. It is peaceful; there is less screaming, and I can hum Robbie Williams to myself while I make the eggs.

But that evening, I find something strange. It is just a cluster of lines behind my knee. At first, I think that Little Vincent has used a felt tip to draw on me while I was sleeping, but the lines are very fine and faint, and they won’t disappear when I rub them with spit. They are light green, like the threads in my wrist, and when it has been a few days, I realise that this is something from inside, something coming to the surface. I tell the lines to go away, go back inside, but soon they get darker, and then they come undone; they begin to spool around to the front of my calf. Now the threads appear like a ball of wool, a huge cloud underneath my knee. The cloud is a dark purple scribble with floating green threads, swirling up and into my thigh. The threads are not painful, but

they are ugly and strange. Before I help Little Vincent into his pyjamas, I steal a pair of the long beige stockings that are always drying on Min's washing line.

At school, we are making cards for Mother's Day. I shade mine carefully, working on covering one tiny corner with flowers. I am hunched over, keeping my eyes close to the paper. I want every inch of the card to be covered; there will be no empty white space. I am concentrating very hard when I realise that the teacher is standing by my desk.

'Lovely,' he says, but he seems nervous and tries to talk to me about the fire and how much of our stuff was burnt, whether the rest of the block set alight.

I tell him, 'Little Vincent is still alive, if that's what you want to know,' and he laughs, as if I have told a joke.

'Well,' the teacher says, sliding his watch up and down his thin wrist, 'if you ever want to talk about it.'

When the bell rings for break my card is only one-quarter finished, and I cover the rest of the paper quickly, with light green threads and a threatening angry cloud in a purple colour that nearly matches my leg spool.

Min is there, looking over on to our balcony.

She nods twice and pats the concrete approvingly when she sees that I am putting out the washing.

'You *should* be helping your mother,' she says.

'I am,' I reply.

My brother's small underpants and my mother's billowy white dresses. The dresses shriek around like ghosts on the washing line and inside I can hear screaming again.

When I am finished, I slump down amongst the plant pots. There is a crack in the wall, so I watch Min scolding her little dog, Missy. I wonder whether Missy knows that she is being scolded because she rolls on to her back and shows her yellow tummy. Min is drying many pairs of stockings on her washing line, as well as some of her husband's long black trousers, and she walks up and down, weaving in and out of the hanging legs.

I am nearly going back inside, but then I notice something strange on Min's leg. Min is wearing a pair of the stockings, so I can't be sure, but I think that I can see it, the spool, the purple storm on Min's skin, brewing and blistering, much larger than mine. Min turns around to crush a spider that is hanging from one of her pots, and I see that there is a scribble on her other leg too, creeping out from underneath the hem of her skirt.

She is looking through her papers for something when I get back from school, her little hands scattering the sheets.

'Where is it, where is it?' *She* yelps.

She is crying.

'What are you looking for?' I say, and I touch her.

She leaps backwards.

'Who the hell are you?' *She* says, and we stare at each other.

She has threaded bits of ribbon through the light-coloured plaits that are on either side of her head, and *She* wears a glass necklace that I had been hiding inside my pillowcase.

'What?' I say.

I drop my school bag on the floor and it makes a thudding sound.

‘Oh.’ *She* is brushing the golden hair from her forehead, dabbing her bright eyes with her sleeve.

‘It’s so dark in here,’ *She* whimpers. ‘Why is it so dark?’ *She* begins to cry again.

My brother is doing very well at school and he comes home with a second gold star. He sits at the table, greedily eating eggs. *She* is working feverishly over her papers and says *She* hasn’t got time when I ask her if *She* wants an egg for herself. I don’t know what *She* is doing, and I try to look by walking past her several times, back and forth. The fire has burnt many of the papers, and *She* is taping pieces together carefully, like a surgeon, her tongue sticking out.

Later, a siren starts up somewhere down the road, and I think that the screaming has begun again, or that there is another fire, but when I look, *She* is still working on the papers, scribbling notes with her sparkly pen and putting numbers into her calculator.

She smiles with her small mouth when *She* sees me, and says, ‘Mother will take care of everything.’

She is so pleased that *She* keeps laughing quietly, giggling and then shushing herself, as though *She* is very clever to have a secret plan.

I go to my room and wait.

I am wearing my headphones, but now I can barely hear my music above the screaming. *She* is there, in the middle of the burnt kitchen. *She* is wearing my favourite party

dress, which barely fits me any more but isn't even tight on her small body, and I can see that *She* has been trying to make a Special Meal: eggs sliced into strange shapes and placed across slices of black bread.

There is blood all over her hands.

'She shouldn't be doing it,' Min says.

She has taken my headphones away, but she is not talking directly to me: she talks to a woman. They are all standing inside our burnt flat.

'It is too much for her,' Min says.

Min has given my mother a pill to eat and *She* holds it in her damaged hand for a moment before *She* swallows it.

'Everything will be okay, dear,' Min says kindly; she pats her arm like it is an animal. *She* nods her head limply and lets out a giant sigh, hugging herself while the women crowd around her. *She* looks tiny, like a child. I try to follow the shadows around the edge of the flat, to get to where the stairs are, but I am too big now – Min sees me and she grabs hold of my shoulders. Her eyes are swirling and blue. Min goes to get my apron. It is hanging on a hook, a shining pink pig.

'Don't be selfish,' she yelps, forcing the plastic material into my hands, waiting until I put the apron on.

'You're the little lady now,' Min tells me, and she gives me a little push, towards the blackened kitchen. 'You're the mother,' she says.

The blood has been washed and the knife put away, but there are still a few pinkish pieces of egg left on the chopping board. The papers remain, strewn across the

table, and I look at the printed letters, which talk about money and demands, but are disordered and change into nonsense along the seams, where they have been taped. I see my mother's purple notes. Her writings look like flowers or small animals but not like the actual words that are needed.

On the hob there are three pans, chattering and bouncing as they boil over and spill their contents. I stare at my hands very hard, willing myself away, but without my headphones I can hear the pans banging, like intruders running up and down the stairs. I can hear the screaming of my brother, the heaving. I can see my brother's scars, his rash has returned; his hair is hopping with head lice. *She* holds her damaged hand to her chest, whimpering and sighing. One of the pans begins to screech and I go to the hob and turn the fire off. Against the blackness of the burnt rooms my family is very vibrant and I cannot look away.

Little Vincent has grown three inches, and he can reach the showerhead to wash himself now, although he does not.

'What would your friends say if they knew your sister helps you in the bath?' I ask him, but he just stares at me and brings his flat hand down in the water, making a splash that goes all over me. Suddenly, we can hear my breath coming up from my chest, it is rattling when it comes out of my mouth. I wheeze like an old person and fold over the side of the bath. My brother looks at me, out of his little face.

'Stop doing that now,' he demands, but I can't, and I grab at my throat.

'Stop it,' he says again.

It is nearly Christmas, and now my brother comes home with a different kind of star, one that he has made for the top of the tree. I go on to the balcony to find a tall branch. There are only small twigs and they are wet and useless, but there is a sapling cowering in a corner, surrounded by weeds and bits of broken china.

Little Vincent stands in the doorway, holding his star with both hands, while I dig in a circle, almost to the edges of the pot. This is as far as I can imagine the little tree's veins stretching, and then I dig further down. I picture the tree being released in a great brown ball of tangled seething. But then, there is a thick vein, and it seems like it keeps moving around, thrashing from side to side to avoid my spade, or maybe there are many thick roots. I have to be very quick and dig very fast, and while I am doing so, I feel something popping inside of my spine, and a white spool of pain unties inside, and I am lying on the wet ground.

I am doing very badly at school and the teacher has sent a Note of Concern home, but the next few weeks are spent in bed with tablets that make the mind quiet, whispering to me only occasionally about eggs and stars. In the Plum Regis hospital, I have a stick to help me move around.

The doctor is surprised when she removes my stolen stockings and sees my legs; and she touches them all over with her little plastic gloves. She gives me an injection and then I hear her talking about my spools to another man doctor in the corridor. This doctor has an accent and a voice like a tape slowing when the batteries have run

down: ‘Un-u-sual in some-onnne so yooou-ng,’ he says. ‘Vari-coo-se veeei-ns and miiiild arth-i-ri-tis?’ he asks, as though this is a question, and then I find that I have been asleep because my eyes are opening and the corridor is empty.

It is Christmassy in the hospital, and a man wearing a red jacket and trousers and a fake white beard comes into my room. He asks me to confirm my name and wants to know how old I am before he starts dancing around at the end of my bed. I am baffled by all of this and I ask the man what he wants from me. After he has given me a tiny sewing kit: needles and three different colours of thread; even a tiny thimble that is too small for my first finger, he leaves the room looking angry.

My brother has stolen the teacher’s sticker book and he has gold stars all over the front of his jumper and some on his face and hands. He has time off school now, and he sits and watches me. Someone has brought me grapes, and he eats them all and leaves the tiny pips across the edge of my blanket. It is like a trail of snot.

Min comes.

‘Your mother is very upset,’ she tells me, picking grape pips from the blanket. She holds the pips in her hand.

‘What were you doing, trying to dig that tree up?’ Min asks.

When I am home again, some women bring a Christmas pudding. I try to see if these women have marks on their legs, but they are wearing trousers or long skirts and

stockings. *She* says that *She* will set fire to the pudding, and the women all look sideways at each other. I am still walking with the stick; I feel too nervous to support my weight, and I like the sound that the stick makes as I tap around the flat. It is like someone is walking around with me, helping me with my household tasks.

Little Vincent has balled up many sheets of paper and arranged them all to make a kind of tree formation. He has put the star on top and is pouring a tin of green paint over the paper. The screaming starts when *She* sees what he is doing and realises that the papers he has used are her special papers, the ones that *She* has been poring over. While they scream, I find a bottle of my mother's dental fluid and empty it over the pudding. There is a huge flame, nearly to the black ceiling. The pudding burns for a long time and when it goes out, the cake that is left is chewy, tasting minty and rich.

Two men come and they keep buzzing through the morning while *She* tries to sleep. It is hard for me to get into her room since this is where the fire started and the door has crumbled into many jagged pieces, barring my entry. *She* is smaller now and *She* can slide in and out whenever *She* wants to.

She is curled up, nearly covered by the green papers; streaks of green paint are on her arms and legs. I can see that *She* is wearing her eye mask, the one with hearts and shells patterned on the silk, and that *She* has her hands over her ears. There are candles all over the floor, white and milky, like bones. *She* is beautiful and very still, like a painting, not a real mother or woman, and soft orange

light is coming in through her window, resting on her body like a blanket.

The buzzing continues, and I can hear Min at the front of the building, in the car park; she is asking the people what they want, but when they try to tell her, she just starts screaming. I hear scuffling and feel my brother's clammy hand on my arm. He is peering through, into the room, where *She* lies. Little Vincent starts to scream and, quite suddenly, my mother stands up, straight as a pin, and I can see a thin black line around her neck, reaching up under her hair.

I realise that *She* is wearing headphones.

There are two men there; one is wearing a plastic card attached to his trousers by a long stretchy string, which he pulls out to show us before it pings back to his waistband. My brother stops screaming and laughs, he tries to reach for the plastic card again, but the man steps backwards into the puddle of swamp water that has gathered in the middle of the step. The man looks annoyed and the second man is behind him, peering at our flat, which is stained black, a blemish on the face of Paradise Block.

'We are looking for the home owner,' this second man says, 'which one of you is the home owner?'

He reads the address, 'Flat 4, Paradise Block, Box Close, Clutter', even though he is standing on the doorstep, right in front of us.

She is picking at a streak of green paint on her knee, and her white gown is billowing around her small body.

The man in the puddle starts talking: 'We have been trying to reach you,' he says. 'You have not been replying

to our letters. If you do not meet our demands, we will be forced to seize your property.'

I look at my mother to see if *She* will respond, but *She* is still looking at the paint, tracing the line from her sock to the place under her nightgown, fascinated, and when I look back at the man, I see that he is actually looking at me, not my mother, and that now he is very angry.

'Do you have anything to say for yourself?' he asks me, and I have no way of replying, so I just lean on my stick and say, 'I am very sorry, sir.'

She has my headphones on when I get home from school. I want to know what *She* is listening to, but *She* can't hear me, and my voice starts to tremble and crack when I shout. I go to the kitchen and make eggs for Little Vincent and for her, and when I have finished clearing away, they shout, 'MORE EGGS,' and I look and see that they have finished them already.

I try to talk to the other girls about Robbie Williams, although, without my headphones, I can hardly remember his voice or what he liked to sing about. A girl is wearing a Robbie Williams T-shirt under her school blouse; I can see his eyes through the thin material.

'Why do you have a stick like an old person?' the girl asks me.

One morning, I wake up and feel very tired still, although I have slept for a long time. I can't hear any screaming, and I look at the top bunk to see if my brother is still asleep. Perhaps we all have a great tiredness.

Little Vincent is not in his bed, but I can hear some noises outside and when I look out of the window, I can see my mother and my brother from far away, almost at the bus stop. I have not seen her taking Little Vincent to school for a long time and so I am surprised. As I watch, I see them step into the road in front of a giant lorry. They jump backwards, back on to the pavement. I think that they are laughing. Before they cross the road, I see that *She* is wearing my school uniform.

When they get home from school, I shout to my mother, ‘What the hell do you think you are doing?’ but *She* just looks at me vaguely and points to a gold star on the front of her cardigan.

‘Aren’t you pleased?’ *She* asks me.

The two of them skulk through the flat, leaving crayons and book bags against the black walls and floor. My mother is singing Robbie Williams and dancing a little bit.

I begin to scream, but *She* does not hear me and Little Vincent looks at me for a few seconds with a distant interest, before he points his small finger to the centre of my pink apron and says, ‘Eggs,’ and then he begins to scream also.