

No Small Thing

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For Forest Millie

‘And how shall the living sing of that
impossibility?
She will’

June Jordan, ‘A Poem for Joy’

Meriem

There were things I needed to learn.

*That rage can be discharged at the smallest inducement;
a misplaced word dropped from your mouth before you have chance
to swallow it down; a thoughtless shrug; a sigh.*

That often it was best to be dumb and small. Still.

*In order to detect the shift. At best pre-empt the contraction in the
air that always came before.*

There was skill in this.

*It takes practice to shrink to the tiniest of places, to hide your light,
keep it dim, just a flicker.*

These things I learned.

Ways of being that shape the soul the way water shapes the earth.

Small erosions, barely noticeable until you are changed, fixed.

And everything that comes after follows that design.

And suddenly it is too late.

You have run out of time. To alter the course.

I thought I had more time.

To go back.

Do it differently.

The world can be a sorrowful place.

After

For one year, the three of them had lived in the flat below his on the Blossom View Estate.

Three females.

Black women, brown-skinned. Skin tones from deepest cinnamon to buttermilk.

One September until the next. Time enough for the majestic maple tree standing sentry over the squat three-storey blocks of flats and maisonettes to flush gold and back again. The foxes to mate and multiply, slipping like shadows in and out of the helter-skelter undergrowth bordering the edges. For the pine trees to remain unchanged, stretching upwards, stoic and aloof, and the rowan trees to bud, then drip with bright-red berries by mid-May. His balcony thickened with leaf and fruit; his mint and strawberry, his bergamot and night flox. Exulting in all the sun and rain that year, then easing back on themselves as the earth began its slow cooling.

Three women.

Until the day one of them climbed up the metal staircase of the water tower, the highest point on the estate. Up and up until she'd reached the flat roof of the block opposite and taken flight, launching herself off and out into the gauzy autumn sky, arms outstretched and then flailing, pumping the air as if she was racing

against the downward swoop of it all, racing herself to the ground below, the tarmac car park, the unforgiving cushion of concrete.

And then there were two.

Lots of people claimed to have witnessed it. Others just heard about it and convinced themselves they'd seen it. Discussed it endlessly, for a while anyway. Earl hadn't seen it, and he was glad. Better to remember a person with the life still in her, the kind of life that just sings off a person; from her eyes and her bones and her skin and her hair. Better that than the shattered and broken remains, the blood seeping out all around her like a cape, bright and fresh as those rowan tree berries.

Earl wasn't an authority on much, but he did know that a seed can take root and flourish, and like all earthly things must wither and fade. And though only one of them would be lost, her light extinguished forever, and though he tried to understand what needed to be done that year, to save her, to save them all, he knows he failed.

But he'd like to return to that year. Set it down. Place each month side by side, an act of remembrance.

One Year Earlier

Livia

The first thing I learned to do when I walked out of my life was to run. Not fast and not far. But I run, every day, the same route. Pavement and park, concrete and grass. I run in rain and mist, moon and sun. I used to be soft, I had folds and dips. Fifteen years of running have left me hard and angular. My body is unyielding. It does not give. Today I make it to the lake, the tang of it lingers in my throat as I head for home. I take the back way, crossing the green, passing the big tree, her leaves yet to fall. I cut diagonally across the car park, glancing up at my balcony, noticing the bareness of it compared to the guy's above, that jungle thing he has going on. I climb the stairs, make my way along the grey walkway to my door, and there she is, lounging against the railings. Overdressed for the weather in a black puffa, yellow frizzy hair springing from underneath a rust woollen hat. Skinny still, inside her big coat, same grey eyes, hard as pebbles, same twitchy mouth.

Fight or flight. I choose neither, but I am ready. I am tense and alert, I can hear a bird keen, the faint clearing of a throat somewhere above or along. How long has it been? I think I will say this, I'm preparing myself to say this, but instead I say, 'How did you find me?', automatically reaching inside my sports bra for my keys, which will look like I'm clutching my heart, but I'm not, I'm really not.

‘That’s nice,’ she says with a smirk.

Behind her is a child. Maybe ten years old. There are two suitcases on wheels, a large leopard-print one, bulging and barely shut, and a smaller one, emblazoned with Elsa from *Frozen*, her trademark plait slung over one shoulder, one cartoon eyebrow raised and a wry, knowing smile splayed across her cartoon lips.

‘Aren’t you going to invite us in, Mum?’ the woman asks, pulling off her hat so that all that fiery yellow hair is released.

Mickey

She remembers being eleven years old and marvelling at her mother's breasts. The curve of them under T-shirts, the domed swell of them in sun tops, resplendent in the bath, floating like the palest of tiger lilies, the dark blush of each nipple circling out like a rosebud. Livia was decent-looking, she will give her that. Caramel-brown skin, jet-black hair oiled with enough Luster's Pink Original to keep the frizz at bay, so that even in damp weather it fell in coiled glossy spirals. The woman standing in front of her is shorter, thinner. Gaunt even. Grey strands frizz at her temples, streaking through the lank hair collected in a bun at the nape of her neck. Hair that is neither curly nor straight. Hair that looks thirsty. Those breasts have shrunk to nothing, flattened by a tired pink sports bra beneath a faded grey sports vest.

They stand in the kitchen. A countertop separates this from the living area. Beyond, a small table and one chair. A two-seater sofa sits flush against the wall, it faces a TV stand with a small TV on top. Light from the balcony window bounces in, striking all the empty spaces, the dust. Livia stares intently at the draining board, at a solitary mug. Line and shadow score her eyes and mouth. Mickey was expecting more than this, this sad sack of a woman who hasn't the decency to open her mouth.

'We're not here out of choice. As soon as I've sorted myself out, we'll be gone,' she says, her voice loud in the bare flat. It booms.

She sounds kick-ass. Livia takes a quick breath and blinks rapidly.

Summer is looking at Mickey, waiting for a signal. Mickey smiles at her. Winks. She feels triumphant, giddy with it, breathless. As if she's won something. Because if this is war, and it is, then the first battle is hers.

Summer

Blood rushes to her head and thuds against her brain. If she stands on tiptoe she can bend over further until her plaits hang down. She is leaning over the balcony swinging her arms. When she straightens, the blood gugs back out like water swirling down a drain hole. She does this a lot because she likes the tingling and flashing stars, but also because there is not much else to do here on this balcony, which is narrow with grey iron railings. She should be starting school. She doesn't even have a new pencil case or gel pens. Mickey said there was no point. She wonders when they will pack up and leave again. They've been here two weeks, two weeks of nothing to do but lean over the balcony and feel blood.

Somehow a small, round, bright-green table and two metal chairs have been wedged in. In the corner is a mop and a pair of trainers, muddled and damp. Next to these is a small wooden box with a bag of compost, a trowel and some empty plant pots. The mop is sad and lonely because it's on its own. The table has the chairs, but there are two of them and they will probably leave the table out. On the table are two pots of flowers – red and pink. They look bedraggled and thirsty. The woman who lives here says they are geraniums. Her voice is hoarse, as if she isn't used to talking. She says they are impossible to kill. Summer doubts this, but at least they have each other.

Summer prefers even to odd numbers. Odd numbers can make her stomach ache. For a long time, they were three – Summer, Mickey and Grandpa Jim. But mostly they were two because Mickey was always somewhere else. When Grandpa Jim died they were two, which was fine except Mickey was often in bed, so Summer was like the mop. When they moved into Liam's she had to sleep on an airbed on the floor in Liam's living room, while Liam and Mickey sat in the kitchen smoking and drinking, and Mickey would always forget to come and kiss her goodnight, and Summer was like the table. Liam was either laughing and joking or shouting and slamming things.

She had her ninth birthday when they lived with Liam. He took them to Nando's, and he was laughing and joking, which was good, and Summer tried to concentrate on this and the fact that it was her birthday, but it was hard because it took all her effort not to stare at Mickey's right eye, which was purple and swollen and stayed half-shut like it was simply too tired and had given up trying to open properly.

They left Liam's when Mickey saw his fingertip prints on the top of Summer's arm. She looked at Summer like she wanted to slap her, and Summer felt herself flinching back, readying herself, but Mickey just muttered for fucks sake, holding Summer's arm like it wasn't attached to her, holding it like it was a piece of rubbish in need of a bin. They packed up and left when Liam was at work, which was better because they were two again and they got to stay in a hotel. She'd never stayed in a hotel before. They'd hauled their cases up three flights of stairs and spent whole days watching films on Mickey's tablet, eating chicken and chips and giant packets of Doritos, and making up dances to Chris Brown and Drake – 'This is like a holiday babe,' Mickey had said, licking orange crisp powder off her fingers, her eyes all shiny and bright. And the best thing about it – apart from the shouts and the stomping at night; hearing big men coughing up their entire insides in the bathroom they were meant to share; people banging on the door, screaming to be let in all the time, so that Mickey would have to yell, 'Your room is number 4 you fucking

pieceofshit crackhead, bang on my door again and I'll break your fucking face!' – was that she didn't have to go to school.

'Too far,' Mickey had said. 'Two buses and a train. I can't be arsed with that twice a day – and it's practically the summer holidays, there won't be much learning going on, trust me. I'm your mama, right?'

That was June, just before she turned ten. She had her birthday in the hotel. Mickey bought indoor sparklers and painted Summer's toenails turquoise. And she got to sleep with Mickey because there was only one bed, and they lay together all snug like a pair of trainers in a box.

Now they are here, in this pale, echoey flat, with this strange, silent woman with the closed-in face. Mickey says they won't be here for long. She says this is a necessary stopgap until she gets her head straight. The woman is at work and Mickey is sleeping again. Perhaps sleeping during the day is the only way she can get her head straight, which implies her head has somehow become wonky or is suddenly pointing in the wrong direction, which Summer can see perfectly well is not the case; her head is fine.

Mickey and the woman are never on the balcony at the same time, as if there is a rule in place that no one has told Summer about. Mickey smokes on it, in between sleeping, dressed in shorts and vest tops. She perches on the edge of the metal chair, goosebumps working their way across her skinny arms and thighs. She crosses her legs, and the crossed one makes tiny bouncing movements. The woman comes out to the balcony at night. She stands for ages, staring into nothing. She stands very still, like a statue. She is Mickey's mother, which makes her Summer's grandmother. Summer has never had a grandmother before. Mickey says she is not allowed to call her grandmother, Mickey says she is an evil bitch who deserves to die. Given the choice, she's not sure she would choose an evil bitch to be her grandmother, even one she is not allowed to name. There are three of them again, but they are not the table and chairs, they are each the sad and lonely mop.

The boy on the yellow BMX is making circuits of the car park, standing and sometimes sitting, braking and swerving to a perfect

stop, pulling the handlebars up into effortless wheelies. Today he is wearing a striped top and grey jogging bottoms. She puts her fingers in her mouth and lets out a whistle. The boy looks up and scans the rows of balconies trying to locate the sound. He spots her and stares, shielding his eyes against the sun.

‘Let me have a go,’ Summer shouts down.

He continues to stare at her for a moment and then resumes riding. Summer leaves the front door on the catch and skips down the concrete stairs. He is nowhere to be seen.

She crosses the grass to where the trimmed, neat lawn falls away to the messy undergrowth where the foxes hide. It’s thick with brambles and thorns and stinging nettles. She hears the skid of tyres. The boy is back. They eye one another across the grass and the concrete. The car park has bays, which are numbered. He has come to a standstill in bay forty-five. She walks over.

‘Give me a go.’ She stands in front of him, her feet planted either side of the front wheel, her hand on the handlebar.

‘I’m not allowed.’

‘Who says?’

The boy hesitates. His dark eyes flicker up to the windows of the flats looking down at them. He is shorter than her, but he could be older, eleven or even twelve. His skin is shiny and brown as a burnished conker, freshly lotioned. His hair is razored around the sides, creeping up into a neat afro on top. He smells of coconut.

‘Do you live here?’ The boy says.

‘Just to them garages over there. Promise.’ She gestures vaguely at some point behind him. She has a sudden desire to smack him hard in the face.

‘Summer! What the fuck are you doing?’ Mickey’s voice bellows down from above them.

Summer turns and looks up to see Mickey standing on the balcony. A tiny towel is wrapped round her torso, and another round her hair in an elaborate twist.

‘Why are you shouting out my name like that?’ Summer yells back.

Mickey goes back inside, slamming the balcony door. There is movement on the balcony above, the one overflowing with plants. The man who lives there looks down at them. His long dreadlocks are wound up on top of his head like thick black snakes.

Summer turns back to the boy and the bike, but he's gone – disappearing round the corner and off the estate, pedalling furiously. Summer picks up a stone and hurls it in his direction. It hits a low branch of the big tree, and an explosion of birds scatters into the sky like scraps of black paper. The dreadlocked man is watering his jungle of plants. He watches her as he waters, and the water is dripping like rain from his balcony on to theirs, dripping fast and hard, bouncing off the railings and hitting the left-out table and the secretive chairs. Summer can hear it. It is raining on their balcony and everywhere else is sunny.

Livia

My dead mother bears no resemblance to the mother I remember when she was alive. Alive she could be found at windows, parting the closed curtains just an inch. Fingers fluttering, veins dancing near her eye, the constant quiver of her lips, wordless pleas or remonstrations. Sometimes she would shake so hard her whole body vibrated and trembled. 'My nerves,' she used to say possessively, as if her nerves were much-loved family members. Her name was Meriem.

Now she enters into the silences, the quiet times. She finds me in the lulls between serving customers in the café. In the empty properties I clean for Mr Begum, those hollowed-out spaces which echo with only me. She comes to me when I can run no further, when my body is done and my heart fit to burst and I'm crouched over, gathering breath. She waits for me to be still. Some nights she's there in my dreams, chattering ten to the dozen in ways she never did before. Dancing, sometimes naked, curves like snow drifts, skin like alabaster, all healthy and vital and rattling off opinions way more than she did when alive.

Often I have no wish for these disturbances, these intrusions. Other times, when I long for her to appear, she refuses me, ignores me. As maddeningly unavailable as she was alive. Right now, I'm in no mood, yet here she is.

*

What now? she is saying
I stay very still
Like a trapped animal?
If you like
She's a firebrand
You don't know her
Not out of choice
She's angry
You surprised?
She always was
You need to stop running
Don't tell me what I need

Earl

He would see her jogging across the grass in all weathers, always in trainers and leggings. He called her Running Woman. They would pass often, coming and going in and out of the estate. But he was not one for pleasantries with neighbours, and neither it seemed was she. If she'd noticed him, recognised him as the guy who lived above her, she made no sign. She walked with purpose, gaze straight ahead. Like most Black women she was difficult to age. Lean and sinewy, forehead smooth and high as a sandstone wall. Jet-black hair seamed with silver threads, always tied back, pulled into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. He'd never seen it loose. He liked to imagine it, springing out, a black and silver halo. Her face gave nothing away. Like an abstract painting – to know her, to understand her, would require study. He'd have to say *hold still lady*, take her by the jaw and tilt her face to the light.

This is what he knew for sure: she kept regular hours, ran daily, sometimes twice daily, and lived alone. Until she didn't. That September, like most, was for cutting back and preparing. Planting spring bulbs. Mrs Hemmings favoured bluebells and hyacinth, Mrs Forester daffodils and crocus. He remembers waiting on a delivery of koi for the Harringtons and their Japanese-inspired pond he'd been digging out. The pond wasn't ready. It needed seasoning, but who was he to offer common sense to those who

didn't wish to heed? Their money, their garden, their pond full of dead koi, probably.

So that September, in the early evening, all thoughts of spring bulbs and ponds consigned to the back of his mind, a pleasant ache in his bones, rolling off him from all that shifting of soil still lining the seams of his skin and the ridges of his fingernails, he began hearing voices down there on the balcony below, wisps – not of conversations as such, but the odd indistinguishable word or statement, a question. Female tones, melodic notes rising and catching on the stems of his plants, the feathery leaves of his witch hazel. Cigarette smoke rising too, mingling with his Green. Music, tinny, from a phone he calculated, Afro-beat and R&B shit.

There were two of them: a woman and a child. He met the woman first. She was fair-skinned with a cloud of frizzy yellow hair, and skinny as a whip – mawga, Bibi would have said. She came to his door breathing hard, like she'd sprinted up the flight of stairs between landings. Hands on her hips and something glinting in her belly button just above the band of her jeans and below the edge of her T-shirt.

'There's water.' She said angrily. 'From your balcony. It's pouring.'

And she shifted to the left, trying to look past him as if she wanted to glimpse the offending balcony and this pouring water herself. He crossed his arms, mirroring her. She seemed snap-pable, that neck, those arms. Cocky.

'Yeah,' he said.

She was right. When he watered his plants, water probably did seep through some. Old balconies. No doubt needing attention. Pouring was pushing it a bit.

'Yeah? Is that all you've got to say?' she snapped back, a flash of metal on her tongue.

If she thought he was going to say sorry, it won't happen again, she was sorely mistaken. Running Woman had never complained. She looked ready to fight him then, standing at his door. It amused him, this scrappy young thing with fierce eyes. That's when he named her Firecracker.

And then The Child, big-boned and fleshy. He saw her kicking about on the grass. If it weren't for her long black plaits, she could've been a boy. Sometimes she was with a boy on a bike, they'd take it in turns riding it around the car park, in and out of the marked bays, across the grass and round the maple. She would ride straight at him and then swerve off. The boy would try to grab the handlebars as she passed, but he wasn't quick enough. He would stare in the direction she'd gone, as if staring hard enough would make her magically reappear. He'd wait. Look around, as if for potential witnesses. Before long she'd be back, cruising round the corner. She'd laugh and throw the bike at his feet. He'd pick it up slow, attempting cool, casual, unhurried. He had no choice. She was taking the royal piss out of him. But he always returned the next day and the whole sequence would be repeated. It was a game. He loved it.

Black Boy Joy is what they called it. A sparkle in his eyes, a looseness in his limbs and smile. Earl would see it in the tussle of Black boys in school uniforms at the bus stop, outside the Tesco Metro. Exuberance springing off them like sparks. But he didn't need to put a name to it. Naming it made it a thing. A thing can be seen, taken, smashed. White people see that and they can't wait to stamp it out before the sparks fly, catch and fire up. There is nothing so fearful to white people as Black Boy Joy.

They beat his out early. Those white men who took Bibi, leaving him and his family homeless, motherless, scattered, because who could take all six of them? And no one wanted Earl with that tight fist of anger inside him, slowly growing into something hard and permanent, marking him out. His Black Boy Joy was stolen when they stole Bibi.

He called her The Child, this girl tearing up the green full of joy and swagger. And if Running Woman's world was altered by these mouthy, cocky, potential ball-breakers, Firecracker and The Child, it didn't show. She still ran, day in and out, with her unreadable, unknowable face.

Livia

It was the easiest, cleanest first-baby birth the midwife had seen in a long time –

‘The next one’ll punish you, mark my words,’ she’d said with a rueful laugh, as if being punished by your own child was the way of things, the order of things and that, somehow, this easy birth was a glitch. We’d decided on a name months before; Meriem after my mother, or Michael after Jimmy’s father. Somehow, during the chaos of those first early days, she became Michaela, my mother’s name forgotten. I didn’t have the desire or the energy to fight this overlooked agreement. Perhaps it was no bad thing, not to name her Meriem, to risk bestowing on her all of my mother’s sadness. So Michaela she remained, and eventually just Mickey.

Jimmy and I were expecting her to be fair, but the grey eyes and the yellowy down covering her head were a surprise, she didn’t seem to have much of me in her at all. Only a miniature dusting of brown on her tiny knuckles and the blue shadow on her lower back made it obvious she was mine too. Jimmy was a natural. His hands, used to handling camshafts and cylinder heads, were now deftly snapping intricate poppers and skilfully manoeuvring tiny baby thighs and arms into unthinkable small rompers and vests. In comparison I felt heavy and awkward, a lumbering she-bear. One false move and I might irrevocably damage this tiny being with my giant paw-like hands. I was shocked and revolted at how

fat I still was, how my stomach continued to balloon out despite the absence of baby.

Breastfeeding was hell. Days of trying and failing to get my cracked and bloodied nipple, with its desultory trickle of milk, into Mickey's mouth as she writhed and screeched, livid-red with fury. That last time, wanting to throw her across the room, and Jimmy, standing there with his hands on his head, his face pale with panic at the carnage of it all, saying, 'I'm calling my mum.' Me shrieking, 'No fucking way!', knowing that if I couldn't have my own mum, then I sure as hell didn't want his gawping at me, judging me. I'd thrust her at him then, our baby, needing to be somewhere, anywhere else. I stayed out in the small garden for hours, eyed by the moon, bashed by her beauty. Hating myself for so badly wanting my own mother, for still blindly, stupidly needing her.

I turned back to face the newly quiet house. Through the kitchen window I saw a large plastic steriliser on the worktop, with four baby-milk bottles edged with red and yellow teddy bears bobbing around in the bubbly waters like drowning men. I went back inside. Jimmy and his mum were on the sofa, and Mickey, in the crook of Jimmy's arm, was hungrily sucking on a bottle, cheeks dimpling in and out, matching the soft rise and fall of the top of her head, regular as her heartbeat. She paused, came up for air from all the sucking, turned her small head and fixed me with those deep-grey eyes. Measuring me, weighing up this first proof of inadequacy, before her gaze, milk-drunk and glazed, returned to Jimmy. The milk flowed then, from my aching, battered nipples. Streams of it spreading and darkening the fibres of my top like a joke.

Mickey

She hates the place. Five miles out of Deptford and it may as well be the fucking countryside. Trees and grass everywhere. Big, black bird things that stare her down. Hungry-looking foxes that don't give a shit, prowling the grass and the car park below like they own the place. And that crazy Yardie fuck upstairs throwing down great lumps of meat for them to drag into the bushes like something out of the fucking Serengeti. For all this space, she feels hemmed in. For all this green and sky, she feels choked. She would rather not be here with this woman who fucked off fifteen years ago. But then the universe has been fucking her up and fucking her over for as long as she can remember. No two ways about it, she was born to the wrong mother, and the universe takes great pleasure in reminding her of this daily. What chance did she have with parents like Livia and Jimmy?

It definitely was not cool to find herself pregnant at seventeen, and yes, she should've gotten rid quick-time. But maybe that was why she kept Summer, to prove she could be a better mother. And she was, wasn't she? At least she was trying. At least she was *here*. At least she hadn't abandoned her. Even after Jimmy died and she'd found out he hadn't been paying the mortgage so the only home she'd ever known was repossessed and she and Summer were virtually kicked on to the streets, she'd tried, she really had. Even with Liam, fat cunt Liam, who, as soon as he realised he was

punching way above his weight with her, took to punching her into next week. Then the sofas they outstayed their welcomes on, the attendance people going on at her about Summer missing school. What the fuck was she supposed to *do*? She wanted to yell at them. So it was a hostel in the short term, then temporary accommodation in places unreal to her. Places so far off the map they didn't really exist, just a collection of letters rolling around her mouth. Dagenham, Beckton, Uxbridge.

'Your only option,' the housing officer at the Homeless Unit had said as she sat back in her chair, patting her head at the cheap, badly sewn-in weave, looking for all the world like she'd won the lottery.

'How long's temporary?' Mickey had enquired, itching to smack the smirk off her face.

'Could be six weeks, could be two years. We can move you at any time, so best not to get too settled.' She was trying, always trying, and she was tired of trying.

They are headed out of there for the day, on the 122. Her and Summer, escaping to Catford.

'But why?' Summer whines, 'I hate catching buses. It's long, man.'

'Because it's better than a kick in the teeth that's why,' she throws back.

Summer rolls her eyes at that, suggesting Mickey is a dumbass.

They're going to see Tiffany and Sienna. It's Saturday and Livia isn't at work, which means the atmosphere in the flat will be unbearable. Mickey knows Livia judges her; can feel her eyes clocking the empty bottles of wine she finds stashed in the recycling box, the cigarette stubs arranged in neat piles on the table on the balcony. And she knows for a fact Livia judges her parenting skills – which is so fucking hypocritical, so fucking cheeky, it makes Mickey want to scream.

She'd texted Tiffany:

I'm going crazy Tiff seriously

Come visit we have new shower fitted I'm in love! lol

They are hurtling down Westow Hill towards Sydenham, on the top deck at the front, sitting on either side of the aisle. Summer has stopped moaning, thank Christ. She is deep in Candy Crush on Mickey's phone. Mickey sips from a small bottle of Pinot Grigio – she has two more in her bag for the very likely scenario that Tiffany won't have any in. 'Me and Stu don't really drink much any more.' Mickey can't believe that Tiffany has become that person.

They've known each other almost eleven years. Two swollen-bellied kids in neighbouring beds in Lewisham Hospital's maternity ward. They gave birth within hours of each other and were back on the ward, each with a swaddled baby girl. Tiffany said the father was a boy she slept with on a geology residential trip.

'Geology? What the fuck?' Mickey said.

'I like rocks,' Tiffany declared. 'I collect them, from the beach by my nana's caravan. Rocks are cool.'

She planted a kiss on her baby's head, which resembled a misshapen potato.

Mickey didn't exactly know who her babyfather was. Could have been any one of three boys. Not great, but not a disaster. None of them capable of stepping up, that was for sure. All this baby needed was her. She was going to be the best fucking mother ever. She looked down at her, the perfect heart-shaped face and milky-coffee complexion. Brown babies were way better-looking than white ones. Fact. It warmed her, this knowledge. It made up for the constant stream of visitors flowing around Tiffany's bed. It made up for Jimmy, turning up in his overalls, rubbing his chin with a look of bafflement running across his face.

She'd shuffled across to the desk one night, still sore from the stitches, to a shiny-haired nurse bathed in the light of an Anglepoise lamp.

'There's someone who might try and visit me. But I don't want to see her. OK?' The nurse had looked at Mickey as if she was talking some ancient language, then said, 'We can't police every visitor that comes in you know.'

‘Well can you try please.’

And she’d shuffled back, thinking the nurse was fucking lucky she could hardly walk because she was *this* close to fly-kicking the bitch in the mouth.

Tiffany said he was going to marry her, her geology boy, once he’d done his GCSEs. He didn’t. Though now there is Stuart. Tiffany met him redoing her maths. They just clicked – what does that even mean? Like being strapped in by a tight seat belt?

They live in a Victorian conversion in the back end of Catford. Stuart *adores* Tiff, treats Sienna as his own. He works in recruitment, *long hours, good money*. Tiffany has just completed her social work degree, *she wants to put something back*. She talks like this now, now she has a flat, a Stuart.

The bus noses its way into the mess that is central Catford, lorded over by the huge black and white cat balanced over Catford Broadway. Mickey tips back the last of the wine. It goes down so nice. Alcohol on an empty stomach is a kind of bliss. Like being pinched and stroked at the same time. The promise of expectation snapping at her insides like an elastic band, causing her heart to perform little missteps. Yet it slows everything down too, creating space between thinking and doing, oceans of it. There are occasional blackouts, lost time, but they are a kind of mercy – shit can happen and it doesn’t need to touch her.

She can do this, she can. She opens the second bottle as they walk up Brown Hill Road. Late September, and the sun is still giving out. It could be shorts weather – definitely T-shirt, although Summer has insisted on wearing a thick hoodie. She walks in front, hood up in silent protest at Mickey who is singing ‘Bitch Better Have My Money’.

‘Does she, though?’ Summer asks. They are waiting for Tiffany to press the buzzer upstairs and unlock the main front door.

‘Does she what?’

‘Owe you money.’

‘Who? Rihanna?’ She laughs at the absurdity.

‘Tiff.’ Summer sighs, not appreciating.

‘No babe. I probably owe her money, to be fair.’ Mickey slips

an extra-strong mint under her tongue. The door unlocks with a whirr and a click. They troop up the stairs to Tiffany and Stuart's first-floor flat. Tiffany is there, waiting to usher them in.

'Hey hey hey – my two favourite people in the whole world!' They air-kiss.

'Have you grown again Miss Summer Kettering?' *She's grown!* This mouthed at Mickey behind Summer's back. Tiffany is as soft and curved as Mickey is hard and angular. She has a round moon face and saucer blue eyes. She is the only person in Mickey's life who puts up with the dramas, the drunken late-night texts, the inconsistencies, the hot and cold air that Mickey constantly pumps out of herself, despite her best intentions. Despite vowing to treat Tiffany better, because Tiffany is good and kind and forgiving – everything that Mickey isn't. It was Tiffany who said Mickey should seek out Livia. 'She's your mum, at the end of the day Mick. Whatever's gone on. What mother would want to see her own daughter on the street? Give her a chance.' Or some such shit.

They sit in Tiffany's spotless kitchen, with its IKEA units and cream metro tiles. They drink coffee and eat the Victoria sponge Tiffany has made – not bought. She talks of the degree she has almost finished, of the baby she plans to have before she is thirty, her and Stuart's saving goals. Same old. Mickey is constantly aware of the wine in her bag, the knowledge of it gently prodding her like a long, elegant finger. The girls, once they've reappraised each other, circling each other warily like two mountain cats, are watching YouTube clips in Sienna's bedroom, their two heads bent together: Summer's black braids in contrast to Sienna's wisps of white-blonde. They have very little in common, these two. They just about tolerate each other for the sake of their mothers.

'What's she like? Is she like you remember?' Tiffany asks.

'I dunno. She's just ordinary. I don't really remember what she looked like before, to be honest. I think I've blanked it out.'

Mickey laughs, pressing her fingertip into cake crumbs and licking them. She wants Tiffany to laugh too. Isn't it all so fucking

hilarious? But Tiffany is slowly nodding her head, then says, 'Have you talked?'

'Talked? What's there to talk about?'

'The past, the . . . it's been years. I mean, what's she been . . . doing all this time?'

'I don't want to know. She ruined my life, that's all I know.'

Tiffany blinks at Mickey, her cheeks balloon out as if she's holding her breath, before she exhales and says,

'I just think, you know – we shouldn't have to be defined by our past, by choices we made before we kind of got to know ourselves – do you know what I mean?' She says this carefully, as if it's rehearsed, as if she'd read it on some uplifting Instagram post. Mickey *doesn't* know what she means. Who is she referring to? Livia? Mickey? Herself? It seems to be aimed at her in a way she can't quite define, a comment on her many shortcomings. Silence springs up like a wall. She needs a piss.

She sits on Tiffany's toilet and pees in sweet relief, glugging down the third, precious, perfectly handbag-sized bottle of wine.

Time to go.

'Summer!' she hollers, pushing her arms into her leather and opening the front door at the same time.

'You know where I am.' Tiffany says, looking perplexed by the sudden exit.

'Actually,' Mickey pauses at the door. 'Can you lend me a tenner Tiff, I'm a bit short. My money's all messed up with the moving.'

Tiffany's round pippin-apple cheeks colour up. 'Of course. Of course.' She disappears and comes back holding a twenty-pound note. 'It's fine,' she says. There is a beat before Mickey balls it up into her fist and yells for Summer again. She pulls Tiffany towards her and kisses her hard. Outside the sun is still shining. Buses and lorries thunder past.

'We going back – to the flat?' Summer asks.

'Shall we go pub for a bit?'

'Can I have chips then? I'm starvinlikemarvin.'

'Of course you can my sweet baby-doll, of course you can.'

She loves this kid of hers. It rushes through her, the love, like

sudden rain. She pulls Summer to her, says, ‘Mama loves you, you know that right?’ Summer squirms, tries to duck out of the embrace, but Mickey can see she is smiling, despite herself, and she allows Mickey’s arm to stay there, draped over her shoulder. Eventually she snakes an arm round Mickey’s waist and they walk like that, arm in arm through the fug of frantic traffic.

Livia

She's sleeping on the mattress in my spare room, on her stomach, arms folded under her head, face hidden beneath a halo of frizz the colour of rain-sodden wheat. Sun is seeping through the slats in the blinds. The room is square and featureless like all the rooms in this small, functional flat. Mr Begum discourages decorating, which suits me. I have no desire to make my mark, to announce my personality through pictures or ornaments. Her smell is everywhere – perfume, cigarettes, alcohol, an unidentifiable female muskiness. I fight down an urge to open the window. She rolls on to her side and is suddenly awake.

'Fuck.' She looks up at me, startled, off-guard, vulnerable for a moment, before the hardness returns around her eyes and mouth.

'I made tea,' I say, stating the obvious.

I place the mug on the floor next to the mattress, stepping back in one swift movement, despite myself, as if she is a wild animal liable to spring up and attack. She props herself up, reaches for the mug.

'Right.'

The top of the duvet is tucked under her arms, just covering her breasts. In womanhood she has become angles and corners – elbows, knee joints, a crooked nose, cutting planes for cheekbones. Her Blackness, handed down from my father, whoever he was (my mother was vague on the specifics of his heritage