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When God Was A Rabbit

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When God Was A Rabbit is her first novel. She lives in London, but spends as much time as possible in Cornwall, a place that both fascinates and inspires her.

When God Was A Rabbit

My brother was five years older than I was, and had blond curly hair that was as unfamiliar to our family as the brand-new car my father would one day buy. He was different from other boys his age; an exotic creature who secretly wore our mother's lipstick at night and patterned my face with kisses that mimicked impetigo. It was his outlet against a conservative world. The quiet rebellion of a rank outsider.

I blossomed into an inquisitive and capable child; one who could read and spell by the age of four and have conversations usually reserved for eight year olds. It wasn't precocity or genius that had become my bedfellow, simply the influence of this older brother, who was by then hooked on the verse of Noël Coward and the songs of Kander and Ebb. He presented a colourful alternative to our mapped-out lives. And every day as I awaited his return from school, my longing became taut, became physical. I never felt complete without him. In truth, I never would.

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'Does God love everyone?' I asked my mother as I reached across a bowl of celery to take the last teacake. My father looked up from his papers. He always looked up when someone mentioned God. It was a reflex, as if he were about to be hit.

'Of course he does,' my mother replied, pausing in her ironing.

'Does God love murderers?' I continued.

'Yes,' she said. My father looked at her and tutted loudly.

'Robbers?' I asked.

'Yes.'

'Poo?' I asked.

'Poo's not a living thing, darling,' she said seriously.

'But if it was, would God love it?'

'Yes, I expect he would.'

This was not helping. God loved everything, it seemed, except me. I peeled off the last curve of chocolate, exposing the white marshmallow mound and the heart of jam.

'Are you all right?' asked my mother.

'I'm not going back to Sunday school,' I said.

'Hallelujah!' said my father. 'I'm glad about that.'

'But I thought you liked it?' said my mother.

'Not any more,' I said. 'I only really liked the singing bit.'

'You can sing here,' said my father, looking back down at his papers. 'Everyone can sing here.'

'Any reason?' my mother asked, sensing my withholding.

'Nope,' I said.

'Do you want to talk about anything?' she asked quietly, reaching for my hand. (She had started to read a book on child psychology from America. It encouraged us to talk about our feelings. It made us want to clam up.)

'Nope,' I said again through a small mouth.

It had been a simple misunderstanding. All I had suggested was that Jesus Christ had been a mistake, that was all; an unplanned pregnancy.

'Unplanned indeed!' screamed the vicar. 'And where did you get such blasphemous filth, you ungodly child?'

'I don't know,' I said, 'just an idea.'

'Just an *idea*?' he repeated. 'Do you honestly think God loves those who question his Divine Plan? Well, I'll tell you, missy, he does not,' and his arm shot out and pointed towards my banishment. 'Corner,' he said, and I wandered over to the chair facing the damp, crumbling green wall.

I sat there thinking about the night my parents had crept into my room and said, 'We want to talk to you about something. Something your brother keeps saying to you. About you being a mistake.'

'Oh, that,' I said.

'Well, you weren't a mistake,' said my mother, 'just unplanned. We weren't really expecting you. To turn up, that is.'

'Like Mr Harris?' I said (a man who always seemed to know when we were about to sit down and eat).

'Sort of,' said my father.

'Like Jesus?'

'Exactly,' said my mother carelessly. 'Exactly like Jesus. It was like a miracle when you arrived; the best miracle ever.'

My father put his papers back into his battered briefcase and sat next to me.

'You don't have to go to Sunday school or church for God to love you,' he said. 'Or for *anyone* to love you. You know that, don't you?'

'Yes,' I said, not believing him.

'You'll understand that more as you get older,' he added.

But I couldn't wait that long. I'd already resolved that if this God couldn't love me, then it was clear I'd need to find another one that could.

*

'What we need is another war,' said Mr Abraham Golan, my new next-door neighbour. 'Men need wars.'

'Men need brains,' said his sister, Esther, winking at me as she hoovered around his feet and sucked up a loose shoelace, which broke the fan belt and made the room smell of burnt rubber. I liked the smell of burnt rubber. And I liked Mr Golan. I liked the fact that he lived with a sister in his old age and not a wife, and hoped my brother might make the same choice when that far-off time came.

Mr Golan and his sister had come to our street in September and by December had illuminated every window with candles, announcing their faith in a display of light. My brother and I leant against our wall and watched the blue Pickford van turn up one mild weekend. We watched crates and furniture carried carelessly from the truck by men with cigarettes in their mouths and newspapers in their back pockets.

'Looks like something died in that chair,' said my brother as it went past.

'How do you know?' I asked.

'Just know,' he said, tapping his nose, making out he had a sixth sense, even though the other five had proven many times to be shaky and unreliable.

A black Zephyr pulled up and parked badly on the pavement in front, and an old man got out, a man older than any man I'd ever seen before. He had goose-white hair and wore a cream corduroy jacket that hung off his frame like loose skin. He looked up and down the road before heading towards his front door. He stopped as he passed us and said, 'Good morning.' He had a strange accent – Hungarian, we later learnt.

'You're old,' I said. (I'd meant to say 'Hello'.)

'I'm as old as time,' he said, and laughed. 'What's your name?'

I told him and he held out his hand and I shook it very firmly. I was four

years, nine months and four days old. He was eighty. And yet the age gap between us dissolved as seamlessly as aspirin in water.

I quickly shunned the norm of our street, swapping it instead for Mr Golan's illicit world of candles and prayers. Everything was a secret and I guarded each one like a brittle egg. He told me that nothing could be used on Saturdays except television, and when he returned from *shul* we ate exotic foods – foods I'd never tasted before – foods like matzo bread and chopped liver and herring and gefilte fish balls, foods that 'evoked memories of the old country', he said.

'Ah, Cricklewood,' he'd say, wiping a tear from his blue, rheumy eyes, and it was only later at night that my father would sit on my bed and inform me that Cricklewood bordered neither Syria nor Jordan, and it certainly didn't have an army of its own.

'I am a Jew,' Mr Golan said to me one day, 'but a man above all else,' and I nodded as if I knew what that meant. As the weeks went by I listened to his prayers, to the *Shema Yisrael*, and believed that no God could fail to answer such beautiful sounds, and often he would pick up his violin and let the notes transport the words to the heart of the Divine.

'You hear how it weeps?' he said to me as the bow glided across the strings.

'I do, I do,' I said.

I would sit there for hours listening to the saddest music ears could bear, and would often return home unable to eat, unable even to talk, with a heavy pallor descending across my young cheeks. My mother would sit next to me on my bed and place her cool hand on my forehead and say, 'What is it? Do you feel ill?' But what could a child say who has started to understand the pain of another?

'Maybe she shouldn't spend so much time with Old Abraham,' I heard my father say outside my door. 'She needs friends her own age.' But I had no friends my own age. And I simply couldn't keep away.

'The first thing we need to find,' said Mr Golan, 'is a reason to live,' and he looked at the little coloured pills rolling around in his palm and quickly swallowed them. He began to laugh.

'OK,' I said, and laughed too, although the ache in my stomach would years later be identified by a psychologist as nerves.

He then opened the book he always carried and said, 'Without a reason, why bother? Existence needs purpose: to be able to endure the pain of life with dignity; to give us a reason to continue. The meaning must enter our hearts, not our heads. We must understand the meaning of our suffering.'

I looked at his old hands, as dry as the pages he turned. He wasn't looking at me but at the ceiling, as if his ideals were already heaven-bound. I had nothing to say and felt compelled to remain quiet, trapped by thoughts so hard to understand. My leg, however, soon started to itch; a small band of psoriasis, which had taken refuge under my sock, was becoming heated and raised, and I urgently needed to scratch it – slowly to start with – but then with a voracious vigour that dispelled the magic in the room.

Mr Golan looked at me, a little confused.

'Where was I?' he said.

I hesitated for a moment.

'Suffering,' I said quietly.

'Don't you see?' I said later that evening, as my parents' guests huddled silently around the fondue burner. The room fell silent, just the gentle gurgling of the Gruyère and Emmental mix and its fetid smell.

'He who has a *why* to live for, can bear almost any *how*,' I said solemnly. 'That's *Nietzsche*,' I continued with emphasis.

'You should be in bed, not wondering about death,' said Mr Harris, who lived in number thirty-seven. He'd been in a bad mood since his wife left him the previous year, after her brief affair with (whispered) 'another woman'.

'I'd like to be Jewish,' I pronounced, as Mr Harris dipped a large hunk of bread into the bubbling cheese.

'We'll talk about it in the morning,' said my father, topping up the wine glasses.

My mother lay down with me on my bed, her perfume tumbling over my face like breath, her words smelling of Dubonnet and lemonade.

'You said I could be anything I wanted when I was older,' I said.

She smiled and said, 'And you can be. But it's not very easy to become Jewish.'

'I know,' I said forlornly. 'I need a number.'

And she suddenly stopped smiling.

It had been a fine spring day, the day I actually asked him. I'd noticed it before, of course, because children would. We were in the garden and he rolled up his shirtsleeves and there it was.

'What's that?' I said, pointing to the number on the thin translucent skin of his underarm.

'That was once my identity,' he said. 'During the war. In a camp.'

'What kind of camp?' I asked.

'Like a prison,' he said.

'Did you do something wrong?' I said.

'No, no,' he said.

'Why were you there, then?' I asked.

'Ahh,' he said, raising his index finger in front of himself. 'The big question. Why were we there? Why were we there indeed?'

I looked at him, waiting for the answer; but he gave none. And then I looked back at the number: six digits, standing out harsh and dark as if they had been written yesterday.

'There's only one story that comes out of a place like that,' Mr Golan said quietly. 'Horror and suffering. Not for your young ears.'

'I'd like to know, though,' I said. 'I'd like to know about horror. And suffering.'

And Mr Golan closed his eyes and rested his hand on the numbers on his arm, as if they were the numbers to a safe and one he rarely opened.

'Then I will tell you,' he said. 'Come closer. Sit here.'

My parents were in the garden fixing a birdhouse to the sturdy lower branch of the apple tree. I listened to their laughter, to their shrieks of command, to the 'Higher' 'No, lower' of clashing perspectives. Normally I would have been outside with them. It was a task that would have thrilled me once, the day being so fine. But I'd become quieter those last couple of weeks, gripped by an introversion that steered me towards books. I was on the sofa reading when my brother opened the door and leant awkwardly in the doorframe. He looked troubled; I could always tell because his silence was flimsy and craved the dislocation of noise.

'What?' I said, lowering my book.

'Nothing,' he said.

I picked up my book again and as soon as I did he said, 'They're going to cut

my knob off, you know. Or part of it. It's called a circumcision. That's why I went to the hospital yesterday.'

'What part?' I asked.

'Top bit,' he said.

'Will it hurt?'

'Yeah, probably.'

'Why are they going to do that, then?'

'The skin's too tight.'

'Oh,' I said, and must have looked confused.

'Look,' he said, a little more helpfully. 'You know that blue roll-neck jumper you've got? The one that's too small?'

'Yes.'

'Well, you know when you tried to put your head through and you couldn't and it got stuck?'

'Yes.'

'Well, your head's like my knob. They've got to cut off the skin – the roll-neck part – so the head can be free.'

'And make a round neck?' I said, sounding much clearer.

'Sort of,' he said.

He hobbled around for days, swearing and fiddling with the front of his trousers like the madman who lived in the park; the man we were told never to go near, but always did. He recoiled at my questions and my request for a viewing, but then one evening about ten days later, when the swelling had subsided and we were playing in my bedroom, I asked him what it was like.

'Happy with it?' I said, finishing the last of my Jaffa cake.

'I think so,' he said, trying to suppress a smile. 'I look like Howard now. I have a Jewish penis.'

'Just like Mr Golan's penis,' I said, lying back onto my pillow, unaware of the silence that had immediately filled the room.

'How do you know about Mr Golan's penis?'

A pale sheen now formed across his face. I heard him swallow. I sat up. Silence. The faint sound of a dog barking outside.

Silence.

'How do you know?' he asked again. 'Tell me.'

My head pounded. I started to shake.

'You mustn't tell anyone,' I said.

He stumbled out of my room and took with him a burden that, in reality, he was far too young to carry. But he took it nevertheless and told no one, as he had promised. And I would never know what actually happened when he left my room that night, not even later; he wouldn't tell me. I just never saw Mr Golan again. Well, not alive, anyhow.

He found me under the covers, breathing in my nervous, cloying stench. I was fallen, confused, and I whispered, 'He was my friend,' but I couldn't be sure if it was my voice any more, not now that I was different.

'I'll get you a proper friend,' was all he said as he held me in the darkness, as defiant as granite. And lying there coiled, we pretended that life was the same as before. When we were both still children, and when trust, like time, was constant. And, of course, always there.

*

My parents were in the kitchen, basting the turkey. The meaty roast smells permeated the house and made both my brother and I nauseous, as we attempted to finish off the last two chocolates from a box of Cadbury's Milk Tray. We were standing in front of the Christmas tree, the lights dangerously flickering and buzzing due to a faulty connection somewhere near the star (something my mother had already warned me not to touch with wet hands). We were frustrated, looking at the piles of unopened presents scattered about underneath, presents we weren't allowed to touch until after lunch.

'Only another hour to go,' said my father as he skipped into the living room dressed as an elf. His youthful features stood out from under his hat, and it struck me that he looked more like Peter Pan than an elf: eternal boy rather than spiteful sprite.

My father was into dressing up. He took it seriously. As seriously as his job as a lawyer. And every year he liked to surprise us with a new festive character, and one that would remain with us throughout the Christmas period. It was like having an unwanted guest forcibly placed amidst our lives.

'Did you hear me?' my father said. 'Only another hour till lunch.'

'We're going outside,' said my brother sullenly.

We were bored. Everyone else on our street had already opened their gifts and were parading the Useful and the Useless in front of our envious eyes. We sat dejectedly on the damp front wall. Mr Harris ran past, showing off his new tracksuit, a tracksuit that unfortunately showed off too many parts of him.

'It's from my sister Wendy,' he said before unnecessarily sprinting down the road, arms splayed out wide towards an imaginary finishing post.

My brother looked at me. 'He hates his sister Wendy.'

I thought she couldn't much like him, as I watched the purple, orange and green flash disappear round the corner, narrowly missing Olive Binsbury and her crutch.

'Lunch!' shouted my father at three minutes to two.

'Come on then,' said my brother. 'Once more unto the breach.'

'Once more where?' I said, as he led me towards the dining room and the scent of my parents' selfless and enthusiastic offerings.

It was the box I saw first; an old cardboard television box that obscured my brother's head and made his feet tap out their way like white sticks.

'Am I nearly there yet?' he said, heading towards the table.

'Nearly,' I said.

He placed the box down on the table. I could smell the fecund dampness of straw. The box moved jerkily, but I wasn't scared. My brother opened the flaps and pulled out the biggest rabbit I'd ever seen.

'I said I'd get you a proper friend.'

'It's a rabbit!' I said with piercing delight.

'A Belgian hare, actually,' he said, rather brotherly.

'A Belgian hare,' I repeated quietly, as if I'd just said words that were the equivalent to *love*.

'What do you want to call it?' he asked.

'Eleanor Maud,' I said.

'You can't name it after you,' my brother laughed.

'Why not?' I said, a little deflated.

'Because it's a boy,' he said.

'Oh,' I said, and I looked at its chestnut-brown fur and its white tail and the two little droppings that had fallen from his arse, and thought that he did indeed look like a boy.

'What do you think I should call him then?' I asked.

'*God*,' said my brother grandly.

'Smile!' said my father, pointing his new Polaroid camera in front of my face. FLASH! The rabbit struggled in my arms as temporarily I went blind.

'You OK?' asked my father as he excitedly placed the film under his arm.

'Think so,' I said, walking into the table.

'Come on, everyone! Come and watch this,' he shouted, and we huddled around the developing image, saying, 'Ooh' and 'Ahh' and 'Here she comes', as I watched my blurred face sharpen into focus. I thought the new, short haircut that I'd pleaded for looked odd.

'You look beautiful,' said my mother.

'Doesn't she?' said my father.

But all I could see was a boy, where once I would have been.

*

January 1975 was snowless and mild. A drab, uninspiring month that left sledges unused and resolutions unsaid. I tried most things to delay my imminent return to school, but eventually I passed through those heavy, grey doors with the sullen weight of Christmas Past pressed firmly on my chest. This would be a *dull* term, I concluded, as I dodged airless pools of malignant torpor. Colourless and *dull*. Until I turned the corner, that is, and there she was; standing outside my classroom.

It was her hair I noticed first, wild and dark and woolly, and breaking free from the ineffectual Alice band that had slipped down onto her shiny forehead. Her cardigan was too long – handmade and handwashed – stretched at the last wringing out, and it hung down by her knees and was only a little shorter than the grey school skirt we were all forced to wear. She didn't notice me as I walked past her, even when I coughed. She was staring at her finger. I looked back; she'd drawn an eye on the skin at the tip. Practising hypnosis, she would later say.

I held up the final picture of my rabbit to the bewildered faces of my classmates.

'And so at Christmas, god finally came to live with me,' I ended triumphantly.

I paused, big smile, waiting for my applause. None came and the room fell silent, unexpectedly went dark; the overhead lights useless and straining and yellow against the storm clouds gathering outside. All of a sudden, the new girl, Jenny Penny, started to clap and cheer.

'Shut up!' shouted my teacher, Miss Grogney, her lips disappearing into a line of non-secular hatred. Unknown to me, she was the product of missionaries who had spent a lifetime preaching the Lord's work in an inhospitable part of Africa, only to have found that the Muslims had got there first.

I started to move towards my desk.

'Stay there,' said Miss Grogney firmly, and I did, and felt a warm pressure build in my bladder.

'Do you think it's right to call a hare—' Miss Grogney started.

'It's a rabbit, actually,' interrupted Jenny Penny. 'It's just called a Belgian—'

'Do you think it's right to call a rabbit *god*?' Miss Grogney went on with emphasis.

I felt this was a trick question.

'Do you think it's right to say, "I took *god* out on a lead to the *shops*"?'

'But I did,' I said.

'Do you know what the word "blasphemy" means?' she asked.

I looked puzzled. It was that word again. Jenny Penny's hand shot up.

'Yes?' said Miss Grogney.

'Blasphemy means stupid,' said Jenny Penny.

'Blasphemy does not mean *stupid*.'

'What about rude, then?' she said.

'It *means*,' said Miss Grogney loudly, 'insulting God or something *sacred*. Did you hear that, Eleanor Maud? Something *sacred*. You could have been stoned if you'd said that in another country.'

And I shivered, knowing full well who'd have been there to cast the first one.

Jenny Penny was waiting at the school gates, hopping from one foot to another, playing in her own spectacular world. It was a strange world, one that had already provoked the cruelty of whispers by morning's end, and yet it was a world that intrigued me and crushed my sense of normality with the decisiveness of a fatal blow. I watched her wrap a see-through plastic rain bonnet around the mass of frizzy curls that framed her face. I thought she was waiting for the rain

to stop, but actually she was waiting for me.

'I've been waiting for you,' she said.

I blushed.

'Thanks for clapping,' I said.

'It was really good,' she said, hardly able to open her mouth due to the tightness of her bow. 'Better than everyone else's.'

I unfolded my pink umbrella.

'That's nice,' she said. 'My mum's boyfriend's going to buy me one of them. Or a ladybird one. If I'm good, that is.'

But I wasn't that interested in umbrellas any more, not now that she'd mentioned a different word.

'Why's your mum got a boyfriend?' I said.

'Because I don't have a dad. He ran away before I was born.'

'Gosh,' I said.

'I call him "my uncle", though. I call all my mum's boyfriends my uncles.'

'Why?'

'Easier. Mum says people judge her. Call her names.'

'Like what?'

'Slag.'

'What's a slag?'

'A woman who has a lot of boyfriends,' she said, taking off her rain bonnet and inching under my umbrella. I shuffled over and made room for her. She smelt of chips.

'Fancy a Bazooka? I asked, holding the gum out in my palm.

'No,' she said. 'I almost choked last time I had one. Almost died, my mum said.'

'Oh,' I said, and put the gum back in my pocket, wishing I'd bought something less violent instead.

'I'd really like to see your rabbit, though,' Jenny Penny said. 'Take it out for a walk. Or a hop,' she added, doubling over with laughter.

'All right,' I said, watching her. 'Where do you live?'

'In your street. We moved there two days ago.'

I quickly remembered the yellow car everyone was talking about, the one that arrived in the middle of the night pulling a dented trailer.

'My brother will be here in a minute,' I said. 'You can walk home with us, if you like.'

'All right,' she said, a slight smile forming on her lips. 'Better than walking home by myself. What's your brother like?'

'Different,' I said, unable to find a more precise word.

'Good,' she said, and started once again to hop from one foot to the glorious other.

'What are you doing?' I said.

'Pretending I'm walking on glass.'

'Is it fun?'

'Try it if you like.'

'OK,' I said, and I did. And it strangely was.

*

We were watching *The Generation Game*, shouting, 'Cuddly toy, cuddly toy,' when the doorbell rang. My mother got up and was gone for quite a while. She missed most of the conveyor belt bit, the good bit, and when she came in she ignored us and went over to my father and whispered in his ear. He stood up quickly and said, 'Joe, look after your sister. We're going next door. We won't be long.'

'OK,' my brother said, and we waited for the front door to slam before he looked at me and said, 'Come on.'

The night was cold and urging frost, and much too harsh for slippered feet. And we crept nimbly in the shadow of the hedge until we reached Mr Golan's front door, thankfully still on the latch. I paused in the doorway – three months since I'd last crossed it; since I began to avoid my parents' questions and his pleading, rheumy eyes – my brother offered his hand, and together we passed through the hallway, with its smell of old coats and stale meals, and headed towards the kitchen where the sound of subdued voices lured us like flickering bait.

My brother squeezed my hand. 'All right?' he whispered.

The door was ajar. Esther was seated on a chair and my mother was talking on the telephone. My father had his back to us. No one noticed our entrance.

'We think he took his own life,' we heard our mother say. 'Yes. There are tablets everywhere. I'm a neighbour. No, you were talking to his sister before. Yes, we'll be here. Of course.'

I looked at my brother. He turned away. My father moved towards the

window, and it was then that I saw Mr Golan again. But this time he was lying on the floor; legs together, one arm out straight, the other bent across his chest as if he'd died practising the tango. My brother tried to hold me back, but I escaped his hand and crept closer.

'Where's his number?' I said loudly.

They all turned to look at me. My mother put down the receiver.

'Come away, Elly,' my father said, reaching towards me.

'No!' I said, pulling away. 'Where's his number? The one on his arm? Where is it?'

Esther looked at my mother. My mother turned away. Esther opened her arms, 'Come here, Elly.'

I went to her. Stood in front of her. She smelt of sweets. Turkish delight, I think.

'He never had a number,' she said softly.

'He did. I saw it.'

'He never had a number,' she repeated quietly. 'He used to draw the numbers on himself, whenever he felt sad.'

And it was then that I learnt that the numbers, which looked as if they had been drawn on yesterday, probably had been.

'I don't understand,' I said.

'Nor should you,' said my father angrily.

'But what about the horror camps?' I asked.

Esther placed her hands on my shoulders. 'Oh, those camps were real and the horror was real, and we must never forget.'

She pulled me towards her; her voice faltered a little. 'But Abraham was never there,' she said, shaking her head. 'Never there. He was mentally disturbed,' she added, as casually as if she'd been talking about a new hair colour. 'He came to this country in 1927 and he had a happy life. Some may say a selfish life. He travelled a lot with his music and had great success. If he kept taking his tablets, then he was my old Abe. But if he stopped – well, he became a problem; to himself, to others...'

'Then why did he tell me all those things?' I said, tears streaming down my cheeks. 'Why did he *lie* to me?'

She was about to say something when she suddenly stopped and stared at me. And I believe now that what she saw in my eyes, what I saw in hers – the *fear* – was the realisation that she knew what had happened to me. And so I

offered my hand, to her the lifeline.

She turned away.

'Why did he lie to you?' she said hastily. 'Guilt, that's all. Sometimes life gives you too much good. You feel unworthy.'

Esther Golan let me drown.

*

My mother blamed it on shock, a delayed reaction to the sudden loss of her parents. That was how her lump had started, she said, as she placed the Bakewell tart onto the kitchen table and handed us the plates. The trigger of unnatural energy, she said, that whirls and gathers momentum until one day, when you are drying after a bath, you feel it sitting there within your breast and you know it shouldn't be there but you ignore it until months go by and the fear adds to its size and then you sit in front of a doctor and say, 'I've found a lump,' as you start to unbutton your cardigan.

My father believed it was a cancerous lump, not because my mother was genetically prone to such a thing, but because he was looking out for the saboteur of his wonderful life. He'd started to believe that goodness was finite and even a glass that was once half full, could suddenly become half empty. It was strange to watch his idealism turn so rapidly to slush.

My mother wouldn't be away for long, a few days at most, for the biopsy and the assessment, and she packed with a calm assurance as if she was going away on holiday. Only her best clothes went with her, perfume too, even a novel – one she would describe as a good read. Shirts were folded with a small sachet of lavender pressed between the cotton and the tissue paper, and doctors would soon exclaim, 'You smell lovely. It's lavender, isn't it?' And she would nod to the medical students crowded around her bed, as one by one they offered their diagnosis of the growth that had taken illicit refuge.

She placed a pair of new pyjamas into her tartan overnight bag. I ran my hand over the fabric.

'It's silk,' my mother said. 'A present from Nancy.'

'Nancy buys you nice presents, doesn't she?' I said.

'She's coming to stay, you know.'

'I know,' I said.

'To help Daddy look after you.'

'I know.'

'That's good, isn't it?' she said.

(It was that book again; the chapter called: 'Hard Things to Tell Small Children'.)

'Yes,' I said quietly.

It was strange, her going away. Her presence in our young lives had been unequivocal, unfailing. Always there. We were her career, and long ago had she given up that other world, choosing instead to watch over us night and day in constant vigilance – her shield, she would one day tell us, against a policeman at the door, a stranger on the telephone, a sombre voice announcing that life had once again been torn apart: that unmendable rip that starts at the heart.

I sat on the bed, noting her qualities in a way most people would have reserved for an epitaph. My fear was as silent as her multiplying cells. My mother was beautiful. She had lovely hands that lifted the conversation when she spoke, and had she been deaf, her signing would have been as elegant as a poet speaking verse. I looked at her eyes: blue, blue, blue; same as mine. I sang the colour in my head until it swamped my essence like sea water.

My mother stopped and stretched and gently placed her hand on her breast; maybe she was saying goodbye to the lump, or imagining the cut. Maybe she was imagining the hand reaching in. Maybe I was.

I shuddered and said, 'I've got a lump too.'

'Where?' she asked.

And I pointed to my throat, and she pulled me to her and held me, and I smelt the lavender that had escaped her shirts.

'Are you going to die?' I asked, and she laughed as if I'd told her a joke, and that laughter meant more to me than any *No*.

Aunt Nancy didn't have any children. She liked children, or at least she said she liked us, and I often heard my mother say there was really no room in Nancy's life for children, which I found quite odd, especially since she lived alone in quite a large flat in London. Nancy was a film star; not a massive one, by today's standards, but a film star none the less. She was also a lesbian, and was defined as much by that as she was by her talent.

Nancy was my father's younger sister, and she always said that he got the brains *and* the looks and she got whatever was left over, but we all knew that was a lie. When she flashed her film-star smile I could see why people were in

love with her, because we all were actually, just a bit.

She was mercurial; her visits often fleeting. She'd simply turn up – sometimes out of nowhere – a fairy godmother whose sole purpose was to make things right. She used to share my bedroom when she stayed over and I thought life was brighter with her around. She made up for the blackouts the country was suffering from. She was generous, kind, and always smelt divine. I never knew the scent; it was just her. People said I looked like her and although I never said it, I loved the fact that I did. One day my father said that Nancy had grown up too quickly. 'How can you grow up too quickly?' I'd asked. He told me to forget it but I never did.

At the age of seventeen Nancy joined a radical theatre group and travelled around the country in an old van, performing improvised plays in pubs and clubs. Theatre was her first love, she used to say on chat shows, and we would huddle round the television and burst into laughter and shout, 'Liar!' because we all knew that it was Katherine Hepburn who was really her first love. Not *the* Katharine Hepburn, but a world-weary heavy-set stage manager who declared unencumbered love to her after a performance of their unpromising two-act play, *To Hell and Back and That's OK*.

They were in a small village just outside Nantwich and their first encounter took place down the back alley of the Hen and Squirrel; it was a place usually reserved for urination but on that night, Nancy said, there was only the smell of romance in the air. They were walking side by side, carrying props back to the van when Katherine Hepburn suddenly pushed Nancy into the pebble-dashed wall and kissed her, tongues and all, and Nancy dropped her box of machetes and gasped at the speed of this feminine assault. Describing it afterwards, she said, 'It felt so natural and sexy. Just like kissing myself' – the ultimate accolade for an award-winning actress.

My father had never met a lesbian before, and it was unfortunate that K. H. should be his first, because his liberal cloak was pulled away to reveal an armoury of caricatured prejudice. He could never understand what Nancy saw in her, and all she ever said was that K. H. had amazing inner beauty, which my father said must be extremely hidden, since an archaeological dig working round the clock would probably have found it hard to discover. And he was right. She *was* hidden; hidden behind a birth certificate that said Carole Benchley. She was a self-confessed cinephile whose knowledge of films was surpassed only by

her knowledge of mental health care within the NHS; a woman who frequently tiptoed across the celluloid line that kept Dorothy on the Yellow Brick Road and the rest of us tucked up safely in bed.

'Sorry I'm late!' shouted Nancy one day, as she rushed into a café to meet her.

'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn,' said K. H.

'That's all right then,' said Nancy, sitting down.

Then looking round, and with raised voice, K. H. said, 'Of all the gin joints in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine.'

Nancy noticed the people in the café staring at them.

'Fancy a sandwich?' she said quietly.

'If I have to lie, steal, cheat or kill, as God is my witness, I'll never be hungry again.'

'I'll take that as a yes then,' said Nancy, picking up a menu.

Most people would have instantly recognised the joyous pact that had been made with lunacy, but not Nancy. She was young and ever the adventurer, and went with the excitement of her first stirrings of lesbian love.

'She was a great lover, though,' my aunt used to say, at which point either my mother or father would stand up and say, 'Anyway…' and my brother and I would wait for the rest, but there never was any more, not until we were older, *anyway*…

I'd never known my father to cry before, and the night after my mother left would be his first. I sat at the bottom of the stairs eavesdropping on the conversation, and I heard his tears stutter between his words.

'But what if she dies?' he said.

My brother crept down the stairs and sat next to me, wrapping us both in a blanket still warm from his bed.

'She's not going to die,' Nancy said commandingly.

My brother and I looked at each other. I felt his heart beat faster, but he said nothing; held me tighter.

'Look at me, Alfie. She's not going to die. Some things I know. You have to trust. This is not her time.'

'Oh God, I'll do anything,' my father said, '*anything*. I'll be anything, *do* anything, if only she'll be all right.'

And it was then that I witnessed my father's first bargain with a God he

never believed in. The second would come nearly thirty years later.