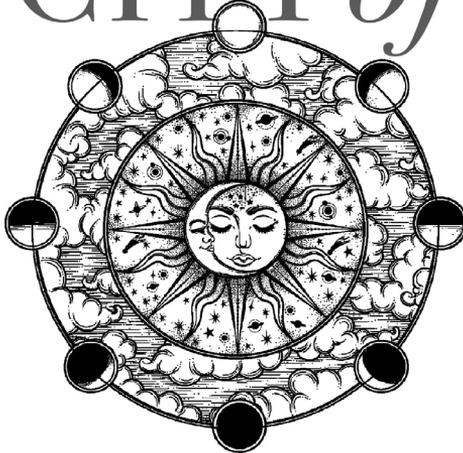


JESS RICHARDS

CITY *of*



CIRCLES



SCEPTRE

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Sceptre  
An imprint of Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 9781473656680  
Trade Paperback ISBN 9781473656697  
eBook ISBN 9781473656703

Typeset in Sabon MT by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

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## ONE FOR SORROW

Dying faces are the colour of soiled linen. It's the eyes which shine, as if the world around the person who is dying has brightened itself, so it's fully seen and felt and known. Colours, light, emotion, air, wind, sound – all of these things have no edges. They flood into the eyes, filling them, filling them, filling them, before the eyelids eventually close.

Inside a caravan, there are two beds. There are two primrose-patterned pillows. One pillow frames the face of Danu's sick mother. The other pillow is slumped under the weight of her dead father's head. Clem and Adelaide lie on these beds, one dead, one alive, under matching blue blankets.

Danu is standing barefoot next to her mother, listening. She's spent the past two weeks trying to keep her parents calm and alive through thickened fevers. She's fed and starved them, forced water into them, added and removed blankets, cold-sponged their bodies whenever the smells were too ripe. She's snatched hours of sleep on floor cushions, and attempted to scare away the magpies which keep landing on the caravan roof. The sound of their claws cause her mother to try to sit up, when she might have a greater chance of recovery if she remained still.

The wine-coloured curtains are closed. Inside, the caravan is soaked in reds. Outside, the sun will be too bright for today.

Perhaps it will be too bright for a long time. Danu's stomach clenches. The smell of tea leaves is pungent and the spilt boiled rice needs to be wiped away. It doesn't matter that rice is left uneaten. It's not expensive. But to approach the sink to clean the mess would mean passing her father's empty body.

His corpse is in Danu's bed. She had to separate her parents when they became ill. Sharing their own bed, a blanket and fevers sent their bodies into heightened and lowered temperatures. That was when her father could still move around.

But now he's a brittle shell. Some hollowed-out thing wearing a relaxed mask of the face she loves. She can't look over her shoulder at it. At him? No, it's not him. She swallows, tastes bile. Swallows again.

Danu hasn't breathed much since Clem died. His body strained against death. She doesn't know how much he felt, as his eyes opened wide and his body slumped. She's now frozen at her mother's bedside, waiting. Will death steal whatever soul or warmth or heartbeat it wants to remove from her mother's body more peacefully?

Why has she never heard anyone speak about watching death?

All Danu can do is wait. There's a crowd of sounds in her mother's lungs: gales, whistles, scratches. As there were in her father's. Did he die a whole hour ago? She's not sure what to do. Should she know? But on any other morning she might have tangles brushed out of her hair or be asked to prepare eggs or bread or stew. Sit on the caravan steps mulling over last night's show. Flirt with another clown. Talk about everything that's wrong with flirting, but only with the horses. But none of these usual things are happening.

They're quarantined and contagious. Others in the camp are sick as well, but Danu was only ill for a short time. So some people *can* recover.

She's waiting. Hoping. Numb.

Danu hasn't told anyone her father is dead. Her parents belong to each other. Till death parts them. Yes. One is dead. But they're still wearing matching wedding rings.

Is there a word like widow or widower, for a daughter? Orphan is the word for a child. Danu is fifteen. She can't lose both parents. Not to the same illness. Not on the same day. When her mother's better, she'll know what to do.

But Danu watches her mother suffer the same worsening symptoms her father did, at the end. Between coughing fits, Danu's eyes are drawn to the ochre stains on the bib of Adelaide's nightgown. She's seeking symbols in sputum and spillages, as if these stains could give accurate predictions about whether her mother will survive or not. Small clues, or uneven blots meaning nothing? Little more than smudges – there's the shape of an egg, a feather next to a small frayed hole. The real sign is obvious – Adelaide's lips are blue-tinged. Her eyes widen, trying desperately to communicate something. As she tries to speak, her wheezes turn words into whistles.

Danu perches on the edge of the mattress and stops breathing for a few seconds to give her mother some extra breaths to use.

Adelaide moans. 'Take this.' She pats her palm against her large battered locket and lets her hand lie where it falls.

Danu says, 'Your wrist's thinner today.'

The soft thud of palm against breastbone. 'Take the locket.'

'No, it's yours. You've worn it . . . how long?'

'Always, since I . . . Clem? Clem!'

'He's not here.' Danu's eyes spring tears. She shuffles on the bed so she blocks the sight of her father from her mother. She grips Adelaide's hand. 'Don't die. I've got heartbreak already . . .' She glances over her shoulder at her father's corpse, and

quickly looks back at Adelaide. ‘I can’t lose you. Not both of you at the same time. I’ll break.’

Her mother’s eyes blur, filling with light.

This is exactly what her father’s eyes looked like, moments before he died.

Danu releases her mother’s hand.

Adelaide tries to grasp her locket again. She tries to smile, but her muscles are so weak it looks more like a grimace. She sighs. Exhales in a rattle. Inhales with a hiss.

Her fingers are the texture of wax.

Adelaide whispers, ‘No, time’s run . . .’

As Danu leans in to listen, there aren’t any more words. She sounds like a little girl as she says, ‘Don’t die, fight. I’ll get the brush, do your teeth—’

Above, there’s a thud, and another. The scratch of claws against the wooden caravan roof.

Frowning, Adelaide strains to sit up and fails. Her breathing resumes and continues, turning to whistles, turning to silence.

Danu opens the top half of the caravan door, shielding her eyes from the noon sun. She yells to the outside world, ‘More magpies, get them gone!’ and rushes back to Adelaide.

Her eyes are shut. When did they close, did they stare, is she gone? No. She’s still breathing. Intakes of air, a breath, a gulp.

From outside: circus people shoo away the magpies – hands clapping, sharp yells.

The top half of the door bumps, still open. Salted air blows in.

Adelaide’s lungs slowly exhale, a whistle caught in the wind. Almost tuneful. Almost the ending of a song.

The song ends.

Outside: scraping of claws like thorns against wood, louder shouts.

Inside: Danu’s heartbeat is too strong, too sore, too loud.

Everything scratches, her clothing is bark to her skin, even air scrapes her face.

Adelaide isn't breathing.

Danu pushes on her mother's chest, trying to force her lungs to inhale, trying not to break her brittle ribs. 'Don't die!' she cries. 'Don't. I've no one else who's for me. I'll wash your nightgown, get the germs soaked away. Sit up. Come on, take it off . . .' She wraps her arms around her mother's shoulders to pull her up. She yanks and rips a seam.

Danu retrieves a crumpled cloth from the floor. At the sink, she rinses it, wrings it out. She passes her father without looking at him. She sits next to her mother to wipe the stains from her nightgown. Her hands aren't solid enough. She tries to press harder yet the stains are still there. Why is this taking so long?

'Come on,' she says to her mother. 'Come on.'

There's no reply.

Someone is saying *no*, over and over again. It sounds like a storm, building. It sounds like Danu's own voice. But it can't be; she's not speaking.

They both need to be cleaned of the illness which took them away. Wipe it gone. They can't be buried in the soil with dirt on them. Why does no one ever wash the soil before putting clean bodies inside clean coffins into the ground?

Coffins. She'll need to get two. Where do they come from?

Someone else must know about coffins. She needs to wash their bodies. Would bleach stain their skin too pale? They're already pale. Or salt? She's hunting in cupboards. Flour? What is this in her hands, a bag of brown sugar? Should she cook something to share with others? Tell someone her parents are dead and give them seedcake, or flatbreads? Is that what she should be doing? This paper bag has *Sugar* written in big black

letters across it but anything could be in there. She rips it open to check what's inside . . .

The bolt on the bottom half of the door clacks. The hinge creaks.

Footfall.

As sugar spills onto her bare feet, hands grip her shoulders and a surgical mask is stretched over her face. She's pulled outside into sunshine, blind. More hands grip and arms restrain her. Vivid colours of clothing flash, her body thrashes, fighting against brightness. There are too many words and sympathy and sighs and sobs. Her fists thump against clothed flesh.

The three magpies are silhouettes on the caravan roof. Everything else is too light. She screams gales of 'No!' at them.

A male voice speaks quietly in her ear, 'Danu, look away.'

She closes her eyes and the world is black. Her body stills itself but the sympathetic hands and surrounding arms scratch her tissues and muscles, the inside of her veins. Touch gets in too deep.

She has no other blood relatives in the circus; her body is alone among these bodies.

And they're hurting her without meaning to. Touch never hurt before now. Her parents hugged her all the time. Warmth. Arms filled with blood the same as hers. They always talked about blood. About sharing it. Only child.

Now she's only orphan. She's only no one.

She shouts, 'Don't touch me!' and means it. She shouts, 'This is my fault!'

The arms which enclose her tighten their grip and sting her. She blanks her body of sensation and lets them hold on.

Throughout her childhood, Danu Mock has lived within the circus, sleeping in tents, wagons and caravans. She understands

the whispers which take horses from panic to stillness and how to thaw frozen soil. She has learned to keep warm while snow is packed all around her and how to swim off the dizziness from bright sunshine. She knows how not to care when people take what they want and leave. She's travelled a long way while she's learned all these things.

Always, her parents were the backbone, the spine of this ever-shifting world. She didn't realise this while they were still alive. Without them, she is boneless. Loss has broken her body more than her heart. Her skin is raw – she's a scab, open to infection. Hollow inside? She is more crust than bone. More membrane than blood. A layer of skin over air.

Her heart, she can't yet think about.

It's there, it beats.

But every heart in the world beats whether it wants to or not.

The day her parents died, the doctor returned to the camp and pronounced them dead. Three others had also died, while Danu had been nursing her parents. The doctor examined Danu and confirmed she wasn't still contagious. She was told the virus attacked the weakest area of the body. Her mother's asthmatic lungs and her father's fused kidneys couldn't cope with the onslaught. Danu was told she was lucky she was young and healthy. Danu stared at the doctor blankly, knowing her parents caught the virus from her. They'd nursed her, and as she became well and immune, they became sick.

Her parents' bodies were removed from the caravan by someone else's hands. She wasn't allowed to wash them. She was told that unburied bodies carry a death curse. Railing against this superstition, she begged to be allowed to sit alone with their corpses. The oldest people in the circus were the ones who prevented her from doing so.

After the doctor had gone, she was taken for walks across

fields, and wrapped in blankets inside other people's caravans. She was handed sweetened milk in tin mugs, and given valerian from a bottle which warned of *a harsh and bitter flavour*. It tasted of piss. That night, she was put to bed in the caravan of two ageing contortionists.

Mag and Sandy Dougan were her parents' closest friends. Danu waited till they were asleep and tried to creep back to her own caravan. But Mag wasn't asleep. She clasped Danu's hand, forced her to sit, and hugged her too hard. Danu might have been crying. She might have been silent. It wasn't long ago. All the same, she doesn't remember all of it.

Now her parents' bodies have been removed to the nearest morgue, she stays in their caravan alone. It's been three nights now, this is the third. It's far too quiet to sleep. She hallucinates her parents' faces everywhere. They appear on each flat surface – the wooden walls, cupboard doors and bowed ceiling, the curtains and drapes, the rag rugs on the floor. Their faces appear as pencil drawings. Always side by side, disappearing and appearing again. There's no movement in their lips, no wise words mouthed. She stares, unblinking, willing them to speak.

Danu sells the caravan and horse to pay for their funeral. The sale's been agreed with a local man who wears a suit and a purple tie. He passed by after work and got talking to Hattie, the bearded lady, while she was out of costume and being demure. He wants Danu's caravan for a *feature* in his garden, and the horse for his six-year-old son.

He gives Danu a fat roll of notes when they meet beside the horses' enclosure. She's moved her caravan and hitched up the horse. All he needs to do is to check it's in good order and lead the horse away, pulling her home behind him. The horse

stamps, ready to go. Sirius, her father had jokingly named him, as he'd always wanted a dog. She can't look at him.

The man says, 'I'll let you count the money.'

She nods.

He climbs the steps to the caravan and opens the door, disappearing inside.

Even as Danu sits herself on a tree stump to count the notes, focus, count them again, she knows it's the agreed amount. The man has an honest face. He's been told Danu's *lost* her parents, and didn't mention them. What is there to say? She hasn't lost them. They're dead, and she's lost. Heartbreak is homeless. Every footprint she's left in mud is a hollow thing.

The man's heavy boots echo on the caravan floorboards. She's emptied the caravan of her parents' things, divided them into bundles and given them away. Her own possessions are stored in two leather bags at Mag and Sandy's caravan. A few circus people busy themselves nearby, keeping an eye on the caravan's open door and the notes in Danu's hands. Feeling herself being watched, she stops breathing, then remembers to breathe, loses count and has to begin all over again. When she has finished counting, the caravan and Sirius have already gone.

They're not lost either. They're just somewhere else.

The walnut coffins are expensive, but not as expensive as the graveyard plots. The nearest town is a wealthy one, called Caderton. Its inhabitants grow rhododendron bushes in their vast gardens. These plants are weeds when they grow in woods and forests – Danu's seen them burning in much of the countryside they've passed through over the years.

She'll remember Caderton if the circus ever passes through it again. She'll remember it and pick wild flowers on the way there. Roses or bluebells. Ivy. Ash leaves or bunches of laburnum seeds. Catkins or dogwood stems. Whatever the season is, she'll pick

something alive from it. And drop the live thing to die on Adelaide and Clem's grave-beds.

Danu will always remember Caderton, though the time the circus spends here passes in numb clouds. No shows are being performed, because everyone's in shock about the deaths, and constantly checking themselves for signs of the virus. Some people have simply taken to bed and won't get up till they *feel well again*. She doesn't believe they're even sick. The real symptoms were obvious. Raging fever and vomit followed by more raging fever and chest pains. The heartbeat weakening. Breathing problems. Not being able to eat or drink anything without evicting it again. The whole body under attack, inside and out. Her mother wheezed often, before getting the virus. Her father had a constant pain in his back, around the kidneys. He'd always said he felt *dented*.

Her parents will be buried beneath twin headstones, under a church spire which points at clouds. At Caderton, where houses are black timber and white painted blocks. At Caderton, where the riverbank's grass is mown between weeping willows by a council gardener. At Caderton where along every street, vast gardens are hidden behind privet hedges.

The day of the funeral. Her parents' coffins are side by side at the front of the church, under a gold cross. Three other coffins stand next to them. The building smells of polish and lilies. Shadows of the leaded windows criss-cross over pews and flagstones. All of the dead are spoken of in one ceremony. The minister talks first of the three others who died. He praises their longevity, says that they enjoyed full lives, and left behind many grandchildren. 'Through whom their spirits live on for evermore.'

At the back of the church a baby wails and is carried outside to be quietened.

Glancing at Danu, the minister moves on to speak of Adelaide and Clem Mock.

He tries to sound like he knew her parents, but he still gets their ages the wrong way around. He talks about Danu's parents' love story. It's what she agreed he could do. Talking to him about them the day before the funeral had made her want to stop talking. He'd softly said, *All this means is you're not ready to share your memories of them.* She'd replied, *You might be right.* He asked her how they first met each other, and she told him. So he suggested he tell their tale as – *the lady abandons every finery and runs away with the gypsy.* She agreed this was the easiest, most romantic story to tell. But all the same, as he speaks it now, she can't hear it. She's staring at the loose strands of his grey hair which catch the light from the windows. His hair is made from dust.

Their coffins have fleur brass fittings on shining wood. Inside, red velvet cushions their white-wrapped bodies. If she squints, she can see her own ghost coffin beside them. It's made of cardboard. The day she'd got sick, they'd all gone into town together. She'd stood outside a large bookshop waiting for them, knowing they were getting a book for her, and they'd hide it till her birthday. Outside the shop, a man stopped and leaned against the window, a hacking cough wracking his body. Danu asked if he was all right. He wasn't all right. He told her he was going to see the doctor. She stares at her ghost coffin, and crosses her arms over her chest.

The minister moves on to explain the deaths. 'A pernicious virus – not delivered by the hand of a forgiving god, but by the sickening fingers of the devil.' That's how he puts it. He's already told Danu he was visited by an evangelical man and is experimenting with how the devil can be blamed in a variety of linguistic styles in order to reinforce god's goodness. He wanted

to check she wasn't afraid of the devil, in case he felt the urge to mention him. She told him, *No more than I am of your god.*

The locals are dressed finer than anyone in the circus. Big hats and black lapels. On the way outside into the graveyard, they mingle. They say *ya ya* when they mean *yes* or *I'm sorry*. They speak to many of the circus people, without commenting on the bright colours of their clothing, or looking too closely at their dirty boots. There's been a donation. Too late to pay for this funeral or headstones or coffins and no doubt, not enough. It's given to Gianto Shabb, the smoke-haired elder of the circus, in a sealed white envelope. He puts it in the pocket of his long leather coat. Danu won't see any of its contents.

After all the coffins have been lowered into the ground, prayers said, and earth dropped, Mag steps forward to stand at the graves. Her white hair is covered by a black shawl. She sings in a low minor key: her voice is a drone, her mouth is a circle, the tune is a tunnel . . .

Death for the dead,  
life for the live,  
heart for the love,  
ticks for the clock,  
ticking till spent  
till spent, till spent  
ticking till spent . . .

Other voices join in. The song is low, sung in a round, goes on for an age, but doesn't last long enough. Danu keeps whispering the words after the song has ended. She turns away from the open graves and walks to the graveyard gate. She leans her back against the stone archway. Whispering, still whispering. *Life for the live, heart for the love* . . . She stops. Now she can't speak or move.

Mag approaches her. ‘We’ll be your family. Not the same, I know. You three were a safe little group . . .’

Danu looks up at the watermarks on the stones of the archway. She wants the damp shadows to drip on her face.

When she looks around, Mag’s talking to some local man with a white-flowered buttonhole who’s speaking earnestly about sympathy.

A woman with pink roses machine-embroidered on her black coat approaches Danu. ‘Come to the Church Hall. We’ve laid on a memorial wake.’

Danu steps away from the wall, breaking her silence. She asks, ‘Why, when you don’t know us?’

‘Out of respect for the dead. All of them. Nineteen locals died from the same virus. A bequest left by an historic landowner was to be used purely for local natural disasters.’

Danu glances at the recently swept paving stones, and an exuberant passion-flower vine which trails from the archway. She asks, ‘What kind of natural disasters do you usually . . .’

The woman’s short curls bounce as she shakes her head. ‘I know, I know. He once lived in a tsunami zone. Left a small pot for this purpose, when quite, quite senile. Puddles and the odd thunderstorm don’t require financial aid.’

‘My parents’ deaths aren’t a natural—’

‘Five strangers passing away on his land as well as so many of our own counts as some kind of disaster. Money should be *used*, not merely sit there. Come on.’ She pats Danu’s shoulder. ‘Don’t worry, it’s informal.’

As Danu walks beside her, following the others towards a red-brick building, she says, ‘We always have our gatherings outside. Under the sky.’

‘Well you’re all far hardier than we are, then. It may of course rain, or there could be a breeze. It was predicted, I think.’

The woman squints at white clouds. ‘Not marquee weather yet, unfortunately.’

At the wake, sandwiches are arranged in small mountains alongside homemade cakes and a tea urn. Most of the other circus people cluster near the door, eyeing the hats of the townspeople with curiosity and suspicion. Few of them take the proffered throwaway plates, as they don’t want to make a mess. The occupants of every town, rich or poor, friendly or aggressive, expect travellers to create litter.

The minister has a calmness about him. Beside him, Danu is numb. She wants to feel calmness too, but her body is too raw.

The minister eats nothing, and talks briefly to everyone in the room. In between conversations, he constantly returns to the trestle tables to have his cup of tea refilled by a lady who blushes. Danu is following him around, but he hasn’t told her not to. He seems to simply accept she needs to be near him.

She edges still closer to him. He’s wearing brass cuff-links and she doesn’t know how they work. She wants to tug at his sleeve to see if she can undo them, but he’s trying to balance his teacup, a saucer and a spoon.

The minister drops in a sugar cube and tinkles his cup. Dropping the spoon into a plastic box of dirty cutlery, he turns to her and says, ‘May god be with you, child.’

Danu replies, ‘He won’t be. But neither will your devil.’

He nods at her. ‘I understand. You’ve no belief. But he’ll be with you anyway. You’re young to lose both parents. Too young. A mere lamb.’

‘I don’t feel like a lamb.’

‘Well that’s good.’ His eyes sparkle. ‘I can imagine lambs are always a little chilly. All their gangly skinniness. They need a jumper knitting for them, don’t they? Or a nice bright shawl.’

He nods at Danu's lopsided blanket which she's wrapped around herself. It was the one thing her father made when her mother attempted to teach him to knit.

She wants to ask the minister something. She says, 'There are church people, aren't there, who . . .'

'Yes, child?' He puts his tea down on the trestle table and turns to fully face her.

'Who live behind gates. They never marry.'

'You mean monks and nuns?'

'The ones who live in big houses with only their own sex. Do they have their own rooms?'

He speaks slowly. 'Why do you ask?'

'I want to be locked up like that.'

He smiles at her gently. 'God eases the pain of loss. It will fade. I promise.'

'It won't. I'm not even feeling it.'

'Well you think that now, but you are. These thoughts are part of your pain.'

'But how can the only people you love . . . stop being there?'

'What about the others who know you well?' He nods at the circus crowd by the doors.

'They care about me, but I'm behind glass.'

'That's often said of grief. But do you understand why?'

'They're the wrong people.'

'No, they're probably the right people. But they're not the ones you're missing.'

Danu's eyes spring tears. 'No. They're not.' She glances back at the circus people. 'I can't even see them.'

'You'll be able to see them properly again soon. It's the devil who keeps them in shadows. Forces you to feel this alone.'

'I am alone.'

'Don't let him pull you.'

Danu doesn't believe in the minister's devil any more than she believes in the minister's god. But all the same, his eyes wrinkle as he smiles. He is a gentle man who believes in goodness and its triumph over evil: he has a faith which is god-high and devil-deep, and somewhere in the middle, an even greater faith in humans. He has a straight central parting in his hair.

Danu likes him. Doesn't believe a word he says. And she's let him bury them.

She thanks him for his kindness, and leaves the wake.

The circus hold their own wake through the night after the locals have retired to their black and white houses. Danu clasps a bottle of rum to her chest. She burns her throat with it and can only drink in sips. Beside the campfire, other people's heads and shoulders blur into the black sky. She tries to sing and cries instead, tries to talk and slumps her face against her arms. It is a drunken, tearful, bleary night. Stories and songs and silences. Blanks between all of these where the drink fills her head.

She must have finally slept. She wakes at dawn with her body cocooned in blankets. The campfire is now an earth-basin of ash. She doesn't know who wrapped her up, but she's thankful. The grass is soaked.

Morrie, the tightrope walker, is watching her from the steps of his caravan. He's holding a steaming mug. Perhaps he's been there all night, watching her sleep. Her head bangs in throbs. As she looks at him, he stands and goes inside, leaving his door wide open.

Already, horses are being fed and watered, tents and poles are packed away, possessions are being stored in bellyboxes and trunks. The circus prepares to move on, leaving the dead behind them.

But as Danu looks beyond the rapid activity all around her,

at the flat horizon punctuated by organised trees and lush hedges, she knows her parents aren't really here at Caderton, being left behind in church soil. They aren't in the clipped graveyard where the locals will trim the grass when it tries to grow tall. They won't hear the ivy being ripped from their headstones, or see its pale lightning marks on dark stone.

No, they're not really here under this blue sky with piles of neat clouds to the west.

They're not lost, or buried in soil. They're dead, which means gone.

What's left of them, the real things – the things they touched most, are now touching Danu's skin. Adelaide's silver locket is around Danu's neck and Clem's leather bootlaces are tied around her ankles. These things are hidden under her scarf, thick socks and boots.

The locket's metal is cold against her throat. The chain is linked tighter than her mother wore it, it's now a choker. The bootlaces are tied so firmly they make her ankles sting. She can't remember tying these things to her body. But she must have done.

This bruising trinket and these stinging knots. Such small, painful things.

For nearly a year, Danu's shared Mag and Sandy's caravan. Since her parents died, she won't sleep if she can't hear other people. At sixteen, she should be alive for herself, but it's this pair who've kept her heart beating.

Mag and Sandy's nocturnal breathing sounds like twinned waves. Danu lies in bed every night trying to distinguish between his breath and hers, but their rhythm is matched. The sound is like bellows being used to ignite stubborn fires.

They're kind, intelligent people. They've a stack of charity

shop books in a box under their table, and often draw one of these out to refer to while talking. They talk about everything and nothing, always honestly. Their interests are as flexible as their limbs – Mag is learning about archaeology and Sandy is reading a book on cloud formations – no knowledge is out of reach when there’s a book to hand on the subject. Danu’s mother used to take her to libraries in every town they passed through.

Since her parents died, Danu’s concentration for reading has been bad. Mag’s been putting a book on her pillow every so often, to tempt her with. Today she comes back from the shops and hands her a large carrier bag.

Danu’s at the table, picking at a plate of fried potatoes. She clasps the bag. ‘What’s this?’

Mag says, ‘If nothing goes into your head, try seeing what comes out of it instead. So your mother’s lessons weren’t all a waste.’

Danu looks inside the bag. There are seven large hardback notebooks.

Mag nods, as Danu takes one out and strokes a thick blank page. ‘They’re to write and draw in.’

Danu hugs her. ‘Thank you.’

‘So that’s that, then. I’ll not ever look in them, but I want them filled, over time.’

‘I’ll write stories.’

‘Whatever you like.’ Mag puts a hand on the kettle to test its warmth. ‘Tea?’

‘No thanks. But can I ask you something?’

Mag swills tea leaves into the bin. ‘Course you can.’

‘Why does no one in the circus like it when girls leave the camp alone? I always went out with my parents. But sometimes when I go off for a walk, people glare at me.’

‘Young women get in trouble.’

‘What kind of trouble?’

She pats her belly. ‘Girl trouble. We keep to our own.’

‘What kind of trouble do boys get glared at for?’

Mag snorts with laughter as she spoons tea leaves into the pot. ‘You’ll find it all out when you’re ready. Don’t worry about glares, they’re just being protective.’

When she sees Danu’s confused expression, she adds, ‘Take Sandy his cuppa and ask him too.’ She grins to herself as she rinses out mugs.

Outside, Danu searches the camp for Sandy, and eventually finds him in a corner of the field behind Tomas’s caravan. He’s chopping logs for the campfire. She puts his tea on a fence post beside him.

She says, ‘Sandy, why do girls need protection . . . ?’

He brings the axe down and it sticks halfway through a log. Frowning at her, he says, ‘You’re not knocked up, are you?’

Flushing, Danu shakes her head.

He manoeuvres the blade out of the log. ‘Good. If you want to talk about protection, speak to Mag. She’s always been good at it.’ He smiles as he brings the axe down again, and splits the log.

There’s no curtain around Mag and Sandy’s bed, and they sleep with their arms and legs wrapped around each other. They’re in their late seventies, and are far more tactile with each other than her parents were.

Around her own single bed, there’s a yellow curtain which hangs from ceiling to floor. She keeps her possessions in leather bags under the bedframe. Each time she sits on her mattress and closes the curtain, she’s as alone as she can be.

During the days, she keeps her heart so numb she’s not sure it’s beating any more. But at night, once she’s stripped off and pulled on her nightgown, her chest fills with ragged pain.

Tonight she stares at the curtain, longing for the outlines of her parents' faces to appear. But they're not here. They weren't here last night or the night before. If she goes without sleep for long enough, she might see them again. But she's exhausted. She closes her eyes.

Like last night, and the night before, sleep grabs, pulls her in.

She runs through a nightmare in which she searches for her parents. As a hunter, she's trying to steal them back from whatever has trapped them. She hunts in lonely places:

a dump filled with rusted thick chains and broken padlocks,  
a swamp made of sinking mud and icy mists,  
the deserted house of god which has walls made of solid fog,  
the derelict house of the devil which is made of smoked glass.

The next night, she puts a knife under her pillow and clasps its handle as she falls asleep. She will take it into her nightmares in case she finds them and can cut them free.

She hunts them night after night after night. They're nowhere.

The circus has recently moved on and pitched up camp on the edge of an old mining town called Bellclan. They're performing three shows a day – early afternoon through to night. They have to recoup their losses as the small audiences in the last few towns have left them skint.

Six locals watch the performing tent being erected. They're perched with folded arms on the drystone wall along the edge of the field. They look bored. Some flatties really must lead flat lives, especially now their mine's gone so they can't even burrow underground. Everyone outside of the circus is called a flattie, because without the highs and lows of performance and applause, what else can their lives be, but flat?

Inside the performing tent, the seating area is already roped off. People are up ladders, securing platforms to poles and tightening

the tightrope wire. Danu rakes the sand, which has been laid in a wide circle. Danu stares at the patterns the rake makes in the sand. When she looks up again, she's alone, and has no idea how long she's been raking.

She goes outside. As she passes between a row of caravans she hears Mag calling her name. Following the sound of her voice, she finds her lugging a hessian sack of potatoes off a wheelbarrow.

On seeing her, Mag says, 'About time. Can you get the veg chopped, for the aftershow?'

Danu chops carrots, potatoes and garlic, and throws them all in the blackened cooking pot which hangs over the campfire. Mag brings out a plate of pale meat. Once the pot's simmering, Danu goes back to the caravan.

Her clown costume is in a crumpled heap at the foot of her bed. The costume is stained with sand from her tumbles and falls. Clem used to wash it for her. Adelaide ironed it till the parachute silk shone. Danu shakes out the dress and hangs it on a coat hanger. Wetting a sponge at the sink, she wipes smudges off the white skirt. After pinching the black pom-poms back into shape, she hooks the costume on the curtain rail next to her bed.

Danu is part of a troupe of nine teenage clowns. Everyone in the circus is part of some act, and she's been a clown since she was six. She can cartwheel, juggle, walk on stilts. She can swing from the trapeze, she can tumble, flip, bump, kick, run away. She can wave her hands and mime a joke. Her parents' acts were written off the daybills immediately after they died, and she still hates seeing the calligraphy-written list without her parents' names.

Audiences like names on the daybills. They must want to know the relationships between circus performers, whether married, or child and parent. Sibling rivalry and heartbreak is

alive and howling in song and dance routines. So many members of the audience dream about running away with the circus and if they can see the performers' lives as more than an act, the more real this dream appears.

Her mother was well educated by the wealthy parents she'd abandoned to follow Clem and the circus. Adelaide was a solo singer with an extraordinary range. Clem swallowed burning swords, accompanied by the sound of drumbeats.

No one else in the circus has these skills. They won't ever be replaced.

Inside Mag and Sandy's caravan, Danu leans on the table beside a small open window. Mag has taken over at the cooking pot outside, and has donned an old shirt to protect her skin-tight glittering costume. Sandy's showing her arm gestures which look like he's doing the impression of a snake. She's leaning over the stew, smelling deeply, nose-pondering what it needs. She shoos his conversation away with a hand.

Mag used to give Adelaide a cake every year for her birthday, for as long as Danu can remember. Her and Sandy once gave Clem a bottle of whisky, but he never touched drink. He traded it in part-payment for a new saddle for their horse.

Sirius was beautiful. Strong, gentle and reliable. Is he still alive? Will he have been happy with the child he went to live with?

Danu gets three blocks of face paint, a jar of water, a sponge and a paintbrush. Squeezing into the wood-clad toilet cubicle, she stands before the mirror. The white base covers her face, semi-circles coat her eyebrows black.

She paints eyelashes on her eyelids but doesn't look into the eyes.

A red smile over her mouth is painted on, wiped off, painted on, wiped off, painted on till it's time for the show.

\* \* \*

To applause from the audience, the clowns cartwheel into the main performing tent. They run around the sand circle, pushing and shoving each other. The brass instruments play as they form a human triangle. The boy clown at the top pretends to slip. He jumps forward, arms outstretched, and grabs a hanging trapeze. One of the girl clowns below him grabs his ankles and steps off the shoulders of the clowns beneath her. The boy and girl swing till there's momentum. The other clowns collapse, lie in the sand circle and watch the pair above them, kicking their feet.

The girl clown flips over and the boy clown grabs the ankles of her lace-up boots. They swap places as the music surges. The boy pretends to fall, the girl catches him by the wrists and pulls him back to her. They stand on the bar facing each other. Swinging, swinging, swinging.

The clowns on the ground roll over and under each other. They stand in two separate groups, swaying in unison as they point at the clowns on the moving swing. On the trapeze, the pair stick their rumps out, lean their upper bodies towards one another, kiss, raise their arms into the air miming an explosion, and fall backwards off the trapeze. The audience gasps. The two groups of clowns on the ground catch them. They put their feet safely on the ground, and brush them down. The pair kiss again, and this kiss makes them fall over. They wave at each other from the ground, miming flirtation. When they stand again, the other clowns cartwheel away. The boy and girl clowns circle one another as the brass music ends. Drumbeats begin and a lively tune is played on a trombone.

The girl clown sticks her tongue out, the boy slaps her face. She feigns a scream. He sticks his tongue out. She slaps his backside. They embrace and fall on top of one another. Head to toe, gripping hands to ankles, they tumble across the sand and away.

By the main entrance, they rise, take a bow, and point up at the ceiling of the tent.

High above the sand, a suspended crush of blue velvet falls away to reveal the next act descending. Hattie, the bearded woman, is sitting on another trapeze. She appears lit by starlight which shines on the spangles of her frilly indigo knickers and long scarlet wings.

She's beaming with red glittered lips as she strums a ukulele. She sings as she extends a long leg and points her toes.

You never make me happy  
you always tell me lies  
you never kiss me hard enough  
and always like the wrong girl  
when you know that I'm the right girl.  
And I'm looking like some angel  
but I want your loving arms  
so I'm gonna kiss some devil  
just so you might notice me.  
The devil's got a forked tongue  
but I know that a forked tongue  
has a range of fiery charms . . .  
You'd best watch out or I'll go to him  
Oh, yes, I would go with him  
Mm hmm, I would go to him . . .

Beside the main entrance, the girl clown follows the smells of stew and flatbreads as she walks towards the campfire.

The boy clown grabs her hand, pulls her back, and kisses her. She pushes him away.

He says, 'What's up, Danu?'

She wipes his kiss from her mouth and smudges makeup across her face. 'Just don't.'

'All right.' He looks crestfallen, even with the fake grin his gob's painted with.

'I don't mean to hurt you, boy clown.'

He swells to his full height, which still isn't as tall as hers. 'Well don't then, girl clown.' They're called boy clown and girl clown on the daybills – and they've called one another these nicknames for the past few years. He pushes his fist against her shoulder. 'Don't like you anyway. I trust you not to drop me, though.'

She gives him a small smile. 'Don't like you either. So is it Nadie or Posuma you'll be kissing next?'

'Oh, Nadie of course. Bigger eyes. Nice tits.'

'Good choice.'

'Or Loretta. She hates you more than ever.'

'I've not done anything to her.'

'Aye, not since you chopped her hair off.' He grins at the memory.

'We were only nine! Anyway. It was a retaliation. Not an attack.' After this, Adelaide had told Danu their feud had gone on too long. Loretta's aunt was furious, and they were made to stay away from each other. Danu can't even remember what sparked them off fighting in the first place.

She says to boy clown, 'What's she hating me for, then?'

'Because she likes me.'

'Oh. Well, she might be your girl if you ask her . . .'

He nudges her. 'So you're off limits?'

Danu nods.

'I wasn't going to ask you, or anything.'

'Good.'

Boy clown winks at her. ‘But let me know if you ever have the urge for sex.’

A flattie staggers past, looking like he’s trying to find somewhere private to piss.

Danu scrunches her nose. ‘I don’t have an urge for sex.’

Boy clown shakes his head, feigning wisdom. ‘You will. Comes to us all. Or that’s what Dad says. He said to tell you – have a chat with him, any time you’re missing your folks. He misses his mum. This time last year, they all died, wasn’t it.’ He bites his lip.

‘Missing them is constant. Too sore to chat about. But thank him anyway.’

The circus people encircle Danu, nudge her on and try to keep her spirits up around the first anniversary of her parents’ death. Many speak to her about their memories of Adelaide and Clem. She’s trying to listen to what they say. *Happy couple, remarkable lives, such a romance.* These phrases are sore echoes, as all she can think is that it’s her fault they’re dead.

She longs to remember them as happy, though whenever she does, there’s a pain in her throat which feels like a lie. It’s the tight chain of the locket. She imagines it’s filled with strands of her parents’ entwined hair. She can’t bear the idea of touching something so personal to them, and so dead.

Every time she touches the locket, her heart flares, pulsing hard.

She can’t look inside. It is an unexploded bullet.

When Danu is seventeen, with no parents to rebel against, her heart rebels against feeling alone in a crowd. Boy clown was right in what he said – she feels the urge for something. She’s not yet sure if it’s love, or affection, or sex. She often catches

Mag watching her as if she's trying to work out what she's thinking. Whenever Danu's alone behind her yellow curtain, she gets out a notebook. She writes confused stories about romances between animals, fish or birds.

Night after night she lies in her bed listening to the breathing of the contortionists. She doesn't want to move or make any sound in case she disturbs them. Over time, she realises they're not asleep. They're having sex extremely slowly. So slowly, they barely move. Would they call this *sex*, or like most married couples, would they call this *making love* as if love needs to be created and re-created?

They make love in slow tides of breath.

Her body is alert to their sounds and she hates it. Sometimes she clasps her pillow over her ears. On other nights a strange ache passes over her skin, and her lips swell as she imagines herself being kissed.

There is no recognisable face attached to these imagined lips.

But she dreams that a kiss could be something remarkable.

And when she allows herself to dream of remarkable kisses, remarkable faces appear. They are covered in dark feathers, or coarse fur, or shimmering scales.

They disappear when daylight comes, leaving her alone.

Boy clown notices Danu watching as he's kissing Nadie, and glowers at her. Averting her gaze doesn't work for long because her eyes keep getting drawn back again. On another night, she sees him kissing Loretta, who glances at her in disgust. One night, Danu changes out of her clown outfit quickly as the audience trails away. She sneaks out of the circus ground and follows the flatties to wherever they're going for further entertainment.

At a balloon-strung hen party in a village tavern, Danu lingers outside and watches strangers through the window. It's a crowded

party which has been going for some time. There's a band playing love songs and dance tunes. There are many local men there, and there was an empty bus outside in the car park which presumably brought the bride and her female friends from further afield. People seem to pair to one another so easily. All it takes is a few glasses of alcohol, eyes which look away and back, a few words, and at the right moment: a slight movement of a hand or a leg. She watches how women are aware of men watching them as they dance under flickering lights. Men look like hunters. They buy a drink for a woman, and separate her from the others. This is how kisses begin.

A week later, Danu is in the front room of a terraced house only a few streets away from the circus ground. There's a birthday party she followed a group of teenagers to, and the room is crammed. No one's asked her if she was invited yet. She stands near the door as couples slow-dance under revolving pink lights. She senses someone watching her.

Glancing around, she catches the gaze of a thick-spectacled boy beside the window. He comes over. She doesn't know what to say to him, and she's not sure he wants to talk to her. So she decides not to say too much, but act a part. She reaches for his hand and places it on her waist. Shyly, he glances at the floor, and back at her eyes. The music is loud. Heavy bass thuds through floorboards as he kisses her. His beery tongue enters her mouth. Their teeth bump. His inexperience makes her more confident. She whispers, 'Slow down.'

He leans away from her. 'What?' He cups his hand to his ear.

She laughs, shaking her head as the music is too loud for words to be heard.

Looking crestfallen, he shrugs and leaves the room.

Danu goes back to the circus and remembers the kiss. She enjoys it more, imagining it, than she did at the time.

She goes out again a few nights later. In a pub, she kisses a boy who's a little older. He keeps glancing at other tables, checking who's looking.

She asks, 'Is something wrong?'

'No. You're really pretty, hey.'

He bites her lip during the next kiss, and she doesn't like his face any more.

The next time he goes to the bar to order a drink, Danu grabs her coat and slips away.

Mag's sitting at the table beside two crumb-scattered plates, tugging a hairbrush through her long hair as Danu gets out of bed.

She glances at Danu. 'Do you need to talk about anything personal, now you're grown?' Brushing a strand of hair away from her forehead she ties it all back with a bobble.

Danu says, 'Not this early in the morning.'

'It's long past morning. I can smell the booze on you. Unmarried girls aren't meant to—'

'Is it late?'

'Look, do you want to ask me anything, or what?'

Danu bites her lip to stop herself laughing. 'I'd like to know about your sex life.'

Mag doesn't even blush. 'I thought we were quiet. You'll have to ask Sandy about how he does what he does to me. There's nothing you need a kind of . . . mother figure for?'

'No. And you're not really a mother figure. You do get most of my wages.'

Mag nods. 'I know, pet. But I've never been maternal.'

'I've never asked you to be.'

'But is it drink?'

'Is what drink?'

‘That you’re sneaking off for.’

Danu’s cheeks flush. ‘None of your business.’

‘Is it sex?’

Danu shakes her head.

Mag doesn’t look convinced. ‘When folks die, close folks . . . Well, I’ll just say it. When my mam died I wanted sex all the time. It’s what the body does, to keep itself wanting to, well . . . keep on. But why not get yourself a circus lad? There’s plenty of them like you. But they won’t for long, if you carry on like this.’

‘Like what?’

‘Going anywhere with flatties after dark. Coming back smelling of booze.’

Danu doesn’t know what to say, so says nothing.

Mag says, ‘Well that’s that done. There’s been talk, so I was told to take you in hand. You’re in hand now? Can you at least *say* you are, so I can say I’ve done it?’

‘I’m in hand.’

‘Good.’ She goes to the counter and picks up the breadknife. ‘Do you want breakfast?’

‘Not yet. Just tea.’

‘Pot’s stewed, but you’ll not mind.’ She hands Danu a mug, nods at the yellow misshapen teapot, and goes outside.

Danu pours lukewarm tea into the mug. Talk is only about what people are capable of guessing.

Her curiosity is her own secret.

If secrets are kept for long enough, they become possessions.

The only things in the world which are hers.

Danu’s in the kitchen at a flattie’s house party. The flatties are drunk already, and no one’s asked her if she’s friends with anyone who lives here. She’s drank too much cider and one of

the flattie men comes over to her. He has brown eyes and a soft pair of hands. He glances at the leather bootlaces tied around her ankles.

She takes another swig of cider.

‘Come with me.’ He takes the glass from her and puts it on the counter.

Her body is like a rag doll as he leads her along a corridor and pulls her into a bathroom. He bolts the door and leans against it. ‘Come here.’ He opens his arms.

Laughing, she slumps against him. ‘You’re a bit spinning . . . I’ve had too much to drink . . .’

‘Well, I’ve not. Here, lie down.’

She glances at the tiled floor. ‘It’ll be cold. Dirty.’

He puts his arms around her. Is she meant to stroke his hair? It’s greasy. He pulls her to the ground and she lands awkwardly.

He kisses her neck.

She doesn’t want to be on the floor. She says, ‘I’m going now.’

As she tries to rise he grabs her hand and pulls her down on top of him.

She laughs; because his arms are so strong, she imagines he’s a bear. She kisses him. This time, her lips tingle. She kisses him again.

Something hard presses against her thigh. It’s sharp. She’s not sure what the shape of a man’s body is like under his clothes. She eases herself off him and stands up.

He’s on his feet as well, and as she tries to unbolt the door, he grips her wrist and stops her.

Seeing her wince, he says, ‘Sorry,’ and lets go.

He pushes her clumsily against the wall.

She says, ‘I don’t want to kiss you.’

‘Then you’re a tease.’ He’s too tall. Too wide. Too strong.

‘I’m not teasing. I’ve changed my mind, is all.’

He grabs her breast.

‘Don’t.’ She pushes at him but he pushes back harder.

He’s trying to get her skirt up.

She grips his wrist, but he shakes off her hand like it’s nothing.

She says, ‘You can’t just do what you want.’

‘I can.’ Hand up her skirt, he moves her knickers out of the way. ‘Your bound ankles turn me on, you slut.’

He smells of sweat. His body feels as hard as thick rubber. There’s nothing but density inside it. No organs, no brain, no lungs, no heart. Her body feels too small to fight him, so she uses her mind. Her voice shakes as she says, ‘Is your mother still alive?’

Anger makes his face look like a monster. It’s dark, focused, unmoving, and the mouth has too many teeth.

She says, ‘What would you think if someone touched her like this?’

He says, ‘Shut the fuck up.’

There’s a tap on the door. A voice from outside. ‘Is the bathroom free?’

His face changes back into the face of a man. He lets her go.

Danu rushes to the door and unbolts it.

As she passes the figure on the other side of the door, the man calls after her, ‘Well piss off then. You’re not the only pretty girl here.’

She passes pretty girls in bright dresses as she goes back through the kitchen and outside.

As she runs back to the circus, her elbow’s stinging, and there’s a bruise coming up on her shoulder. Too much booze, but she doesn’t feel drunk. She feels stupid and weak. She wants to swim. Float or drown. If only there was a stream here, if there was a river, a pool, a lake. If there was only an ocean.

But this town is dry.

Danu slows to a walk as she reaches the railings alongside the circus camp. Their shadows make the caravans look like they're inside a cage. She goes in through the gates and crosses shorn grass.

She opens the caravan door and clicks the catch closed behind her.

Exhaling, she leans back against the door. Two wine glasses are on the table beside an empty bottle. A stack of clean laundry is piled on a chair.

Everything is still.

Mag and Sandy are asleep under a thin sheet. She tiptoes across the rug and stands over them for a moment. Their hair is tangled together across blue pillows. The wrinkles which deepen their expressions during the daylight hours are gone while they're asleep. Mag's lips move, and are still. Sandy's eyebrows frown, and relax. Face to face, dream to dream, they could be any age at all.

Danu closes the curtain alongside her own bed and her world shrinks into a private one. She examines her body. One bruise to the elbow, one to the shoulder, a scrape to the knee. She lies down and tears run into her hair. Trails of salt burn her face.

She's been bruised often throughout her life. As a child, she scraped her elbows and knees learning acrobatics, fell on her arm while training for the trapeze, ground blisters into her palms practising handstands on sand, and few of those bruises brought tears with them.

So Innocence, and its twin, Ignorance, are to blame. How might she take revenge on them? She sees them as blank-faced dolls in pale dresses, seated on the lid of a rattling pressure cooker, sucking on salted caramel sweets. They have kept her naïve. The world is filled with big fish which eat small fish and

big people who eat smaller people. How to change what happened, or how it feels? Take her anger at her own ignorance and make it experience. Avoid anyone who might consume her.

And that could be anyone at all. She'd half-liked that man, before he changed into something she couldn't recognise. Something monstrous. Something cruel.

Innocence and Ignorance can sit on their pressure cooker, bubbling whatever they want in the pan beneath their skirts. She hopes the metal burns their backsides. She won't let them hurt her again.

'Stop,' she whispers to her body. 'You know how to be cold. So, freeze.'

Each night Danu cartwheels, a painted clown face hiding her true expressions. After each show, she spends time at the periphery of the campfire, watching others singing and chattering together. Since the night she was trapped in that bathroom, she's more tongue-bound than ever. She doesn't want to talk to anyone, and has stopped mixing with the flatties.

Most people are more interested in themselves than her, and she's glad of it. There are individuals and their clusters: Gianto and his bedraggled authority, the clutch of young women her own age – Nadie, Posuma, Loretta. Boy clown's been kissing all of them and lying about it. They spend most nights bickering. Hattie's beard is curlier than ever, and she's taken to dyeing it black. The crystal reader never smiles at Danu. Her dad died at the same time as Danu's parents. The farrier and the tightrope walker always have a ready grin. Night after night, Danu waits for Mag and Sandy to go off to bed, gives them an hour or so alone, and goes quietly to her own.

During the daytimes, she stays in the caravan as much as possible. Many days are spent sitting on her single bed with the

yellow curtain closed and her body wrapped in her purple coverlet. Mag and Sandy have noticed the quietness in her – she’s overheard Mag murmur, *Best leave her to it.*

One morning Danu’s sitting on her bed, hugging a cushion. Her body relives every unwanted touch it received from the flattie man like bad echoes. She can’t remember the last time she asked Mag or Sandy for a hug. She opens her curtain and the caravan is filled with steam. There are shapes in warm fog, slow splashes and waves. She watches them move and thicken.

Mag and Sandy come in from outside. They’re talking about landslides.

Mag yells, ‘For flipsake, lass!’ She rushes to turn off the kettle.

Sandy flaps the door to clear the air. He shakes his head at Danu. ‘Coffee?’

She nods.

Mag gets a jar of sugar out of the cupboard and clunks it on the counter.

Danu carries her cushion over to the table, and sits hugging it to her chest.

Mag opens a window and rinses three mugs. She glances at Danu. ‘Still gloomy, then.’

Danu asks, ‘How did you two decide to be in love?’

Sandy steps past Mag to wash mud off his hands. ‘It’s not a deciding thing. Well, you decide when to say something, I suppose. It was me who first fell on top of Mag, not the other way round. Contortions take a while to get right.’

Mag puts the coffee jug and mugs on the table. ‘I wish you’d keep a better eye on things, girl.’ She gets a carton of milk from the fridge and sits down. ‘It wasn’t who fell on top of who. We neither of us had to try.’ She pats her heart. ‘There were others all around us, acting this, saying that, preening or sobbing heart-break all over each other. We were just easy.’

Sandy nudges Mag. 'I've loved you since when you had your ankles—'

Mag pats his arm. 'Not now.' She turns to Danu. 'Have you fallen for someone? Tell me he's not a flattie.'

Danu says, 'I've not. And I won't.'

Sandy interrupts, 'Mag, it *was* when your ankles—'

Mag shushes him again.

Sandy laughs and says to Danu, 'You should hear about our first bash at escapology: there was this wardrobe and the back fell off, and—'

Mag puts both hands on the table. 'Sandy. Shut up. She's upset!'

Danu says, 'Don't worry about me—'

Mag shakes her head. 'You've been moping for a while.'

'Not moping, thinking.'

Sandy says, 'Well. Don't think for too long. It'll make you maudlin. Now, eggs.' He leans under the table and retrieves a small hardback book. He opens it on a page full of pictures of speckled eggs. 'Fascinating. There are so many colours and types—'

Mag says to Danu, 'It's only ever been me and himself. I love him. He loves me. It's simple.'

Sandy puts the book down, feigning shock. 'You've not said you love me for years!'

She slaps his wrist. 'You bugger. I tell you all the time.'

Danu says, 'I'm sorry if I worried you by leaving the camp alone at night.'

Mag says, 'You're not knocked up, are you?'

'Why does everyone always think quiet girls have nothing better to do than get knocked up? No! I'm just changing.'

Sandy slides the book across the table towards Danu. 'Well, that's as bad as thinking. Now, look at these.' He points at a

page of blue eggs. ‘They’re the ones to look out for in the woods round here . . .’ He launches into an explanation about exactly what height the nests containing these particular eggs will be in the trees, till Mag interrupts to tell him it’s the wrong time of year to be looking for eggs at all.

Once Sandy’s gone outside again, and Mag’s dismantled a stack of washing-up, Danu asks, ‘Were you scared of him, at first?’

‘Who?’

‘Sandy.’

She laughs. ‘Course not.’ She puts on her coat and rummages through the pockets. Spying her purse on the table, she picks it up and shoves it into her bag. ‘Right, I’m off to the shops. Need to get some supplies in. Sandy’s gotten through the cheddar. Bloody mouse.’

Turning a page in her notebook, Danu examines a pencil drawing of a rose she did a few days ago. It’s intricate and detailed, and the leaves have smooth curves. She’s written *who are you* over and over again to form a frame around the drawing. The thorns appear sharp but the petals are thickly shaded. Getting a rubber, she tries to lighten their edges to make them more delicate.

Mag comes back into the caravan, carrying a box of groceries.

Danu says, ‘Mag, did my parents ever speak with you about someone called Rosa?’

‘No, why?’

Danu closes her notebook and gets up to help Mag unpack the box. ‘They occasionally mentioned her name. But they never told me who she was.’

‘Well, what did they say about her?’ Mag gets two cans of beans out of the box and hands them to Danu to put away.

‘I think they’d have told me about her, eventually. She was

someone important. Just saying her name made them sad.’ Danu watches Mag putting a pack of soaps under the sink. ‘Are there any chores needing done?’

‘You could bleach the tea towels. There’s two in the washbasket, the others are in the drawer.’

Once the groceries are put away, Mag puts her hand on Danu’s shoulder. ‘Look, I know we’re fuddies. But I hope there’s someone you can talk to about all the things in your head.’

‘I don’t need to talk—’

She pats her shoulder. ‘You do, pet.’

When Danu’s alone in the caravan, she lies on her bed for hours staring at a frantic spider who’s covering the ceiling with its web. The web’s so fine it catches only the tiniest flies. She never sees the spider consume them.

If she stares without blinking for long enough, pictures of her parents’ faces appear. These images are always of the moment of dying. The virus has turned into a black thing, like ink. She can’t look away as blackness spreads and obliterates their faces. An ink-black illness and ink-black death.

Sometimes her mind replays the moments of them dying over and over again, and she forces herself to watch them. She imagines asking each of them questions. She tries to ask her mother if all men have a monster inside them, and she tries to ask her father if women have monsters too and is it all right to prefer to talk to animals rather than people. Sometimes she asks them who Rosa is. Sometimes she simply asks them to tell her all the things they were going to tell her when she was old enough to hear them.

But the images of death never change, no matter what she asks. They look as they did then, and say what they did then. There’s the smell of tea. The texture of a surgical mask stretched

over her face. It feels so strange to be able to change, to think, to be taller and wiser or more stupid than she was then, while her parents remain exactly as they were in such vivid detail. The marks on her mother's nightgown. Her father's eyes.

In her notebook she draws a picture of a girl made from oceans. Her hair is tangled seaweed and her heart is sealed inside a lobster pot. Danu can't talk to anyone about how she feels because she doesn't want to upset them. Everyone else seems fine. She needs them to remain fine. But all the same, her heart aches with silent hurt.

She waits till her heart is ready to speak to her.

In a quiet moment, it tells her: I need to learn something new, to patch up my holes.

If Danu doesn't listen to this, she'll be unlikely to survive. After all, if a heart is already broken by death, it is likely to be broken still more by life, and then surely it is only a matter of time till it stops.

She decides to obey her heart, and learn something new. Surrounded by people with a myriad of skills, she will choose someone to teach her, and become consumed in learning.

Danu wears a long purple tutu for Sandy and Mag's anniversary celebrations. For once, her dark hair is brushed, and it ripples over her shawl. By the campfire, she's playing minor chords on the squeezebox. She's sitting on a bale of hay, singing a song to a spider, from a fly:

If you are to tangle my body,  
and twine me in threads which glisten,  
I'll wait for your moistening silks  
and ache as I watch your legs flicker;  
a slight stroke of loose strands,

tense and slacken, teasing out lines.  
Sting and bind, pinch and wind.  
Your thickening toughening silks  
stretch out this tightening yearning.  
Your deadening softening silks  
draw me to you, shivering, burning.

As Danu sings the chorus, the key changes from minor to major, and as she repeats it, other people learn the simple tune and words. Their voices join hers:

If you're bound and tied, don't ever  
go dumb.  
When you're caught in a web, your  
song's just a hum.  
Flies hunger for spiders but spiders  
eat flies,  
so break the tight silks, and let your  
wings rise.

Familiarity and singing are a heady mix, when there's a tune to carry it all along. These people all around her, *know* her. She won't have disappeared from their view in the same way she's not been able to see them. They'll have watched her movements. Talked about her. Singing the chorus a few extra times, she soaks in this feeling of companionship.

On the other side of the fire, flamelight dances across Mag's face as she strokes Sandy's arm. Beside them Gianto is packing his tarot cards away. Boy clown warms his hands at the fire. He's not really a boy any more, and won't be a clown for much longer. He's learning stilt walking.

Danu can finally see them clearly again.