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Publication Date

2012

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Chingford Hall

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Tanya Frank

December 2012

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family on both sides of the pond for their constant understanding of my writing obsession. When most people are thinking about their pension plans and long-term health care, I took a huge leap of faith, an even bigger amount of risk, and a great measure of non-conventionality to strike out on a writing degree.

My steadfast and loving partner Nancy has been my cheerleader from the very moment I met her in 2001. I'm not sure that I could live with me, and my compulsive fussing over my work, but she has and she does, and for that I am grateful.

My boy-men, Dale and Zach have grown up with my stories, suffering all that goes along with having an eccentric artist for a mother. As musicians they understand my perfectionism, and the love-hate relationship that it procures.

A big thank you to my teacher Chiwan Choi of Writ Large Press, and to my dear friends, Deja Gworek, Sylvia Sukop, Bonnie Kaplan, and Kristen Brownell, who read and responded in all kinds of clever ways to my work.

I am indebted to my thesis committee, most of all to the chairperson, Mike Davis. Mike comprehended what it meant to face humble beginnings in life. He championed my writing, showed excitement about the socio-political tone of the piece, and encouraged me to just be myself, true to my voice and my experience--an all round cockney rebel.

Chingford Hall

1.

Mum was a natural - naturally plump, naturally loud, and a naturally good storyteller. When she spun a yarn she stared into the middle distance, her hands danced in the air, and I swear I could hear her brain click-clack into gear, recalling the past. Mum's tales were funny, sad and altogether captivating, and I never doubted a word she said. It didn't take much to get her going, but she stopped just as easily, sometimes mid-flow, to re-tie her apron, or make a cuppa.

“What happened next?” I cried out. “Go on.”

And she did. This way I learned things that other girls my age never knew. Mum said it made me precocious. I didn't care. I wanted to be all grown-up so we could be best friends. I thought she was the best thing east of the River Ching. I knew I would never leave her side. Ever.

When it was time for me to be born, Mum thought she needed to empty her bowels. She sat on the loo at Edgware General, in the labour ward, and pushed and groaned. The Irish midwife had given her an enema a good hour before. “Mrs. Frank,” she tried to explain, “that's baby trying to come out.” Mum wouldn't be told. She was a law unto herself. It wasn't until she reached between her legs and felt me crowning, that she moved away from the pan, and had me lying down, supine, like a good mother should.

Upon her transfer to the maternity ward, she was issued her first bottle of Guinness. Rich in iron and a so-called "Vitamin G", Edgeware General, like most medical establishments at the time, suggested a recommended allowance of three pints a day. The liquor was administered to nursing mothers, blood donors, stomach and intestinal post-operative patients and mothers recovering from childbirth.

Mum wasn't much of a boozer. She preferred a good old grub up, and wasn't scared to admit it. "Now if it was a potato latke," she said.

The orderly was insistent, one of those types who went by the book, "hospital orders, Mrs. Frank. Ten days of bed rest and Guinness."

Mum maintained that beer, like olives or celery, was an acquired taste, an appreciation born of persistence, because by day eight, something changed in her. She pulled the staff to one side, and flushed from the heat of the ward and the alcohol, she told her, "You know I've grown quite fond of this stuff."

And so it was, after the stipulated lying-in and a fair bit of Stout that Mum wrapped me up against the North-East London chill, and took me home to Chingford Hall Estate. The place was built upon shit, literally. It had been a sewerage farm before it became our home. Just a few feet beneath the concrete, excrement still festered and bubbled, and rats ran amok. Some days when it was especially hot, the smell wafted up through the outside drains, and the rats—their noses twitching, taking in the air and a change of scenery—clawed their way along the exposed part of the River Ching, from which centuries earlier, Chingford had got its name.

The estate was a common entity. So many of the capital's homes had been blitzed two decades earlier that the government had no choice but to buy up cheap land, and build up rather than out. Mum knew there were a lot like us, poor blighters with nowhere else to go.

She had papered the living room of our new flat in bold mid-sixties flowery print, perfect stimuli for an infant.

“These are the only flowers you'll see around here bubbeleh, the only greenery for that fact.”

It was true. The council had allocated us to number 49, Yew Court, Marigold Way. No one knew why this dismal block of council flats was named after a tree, or the street for a flower. Perhaps wishful thinking, because aside from a square patch of grass that was used as a dog toilet, nothing much grew there at all.

None of this phased Mum. She had prepared for me by snapping up a large perambulator at Doctor Barnado's charity shop. She wheeled me up and down the living room in the great thing, and made permanent tracks in the thin blue wall-to-wall carpeting. I was a fussy little mite by all accounts, and suffered bouts of colic. Mum relied on a dummy to buy her a bit of a peace, and between feeds, as if we were at the local park rather than inside Yew Court, she pulled the brake up on the pram, lifted the hood and apron, opened the balcony door and let the breeze sweep into the flat.

Mum smoked her Player's Number Ten on that balcony, and it was while perched on the six by six square feet of concrete that she looked out at the place we called home.

Chingford Hall had three other courts in addition to Yew—Spruce, Pine and Sycamore—and it was said that from the air the buildings' outlines spelled FISH. Yew Court was "I."

As well as the low rise accommodations there were three separate tower blocks. Saint Alban, Saint Francis and Saint Fabian soared twenty-one floors into the hazy sky, keeping Yew Court in shadow most of the day.

When the smog cleared from the London Rubber Company, Mum could see the perfectly round reservoir on the far side of the dual carriageway, and the illegal Gypsy caravans squatting near the water. Beyond that there was marshland and the toxically polluted river.

The bedrooms offered more scenic views of North Chingford, and Epping Forest, the Essex land that was once owned by Queen Elizabeth I. "Still think they're fucking royalty up there," Mum said of such folk. "Bloody snobs."

When it was time for me to be named, there was a certain amount of discrimination on Mum's part. Anything too posh and I might be mistaken for a child above my station, from the west side of the river, too ordinary and I'd blend in with the Paul's and Sharon's on the estate, titles that Mum said were as common as muck."

There was a 42-day window in which to register a birth. Anyone who failed to abide by the stipulation was fined a handsome few bob. Mum had to be snappy. She wished she could reach my father to share the responsibility of naming me. She had tried to get a message to him before leaving for the registrar's office to do the deed, but Brixton Men's Prison was a force to be reckoned with. Everything took a month of Sundays, and her request had been denied because it was received after office hours. He

would like it, she decided. Besides she had done all the work, the least he could grant her was the authority to choose my name.

She decided on Hannah, a soft sounding Hebrew name that meant beauty and passion. Although she had abandoned the rigours of keeping kosher and honouring Shabbat, it was important to her that I should have an Old Testament name, lest I should want to embrace my roots later in life. Besides she liked to play with names and Hanny, Han, and Hannahla rolled off her tongue with all the ease in the world.

I was a month old before my father got to meet me. I imagine Mum wanted us both to look pretty for the occasion, although pretty wasn't really an apt description for someone of her heft and attitude. She chose comfort over fashion, and in the photographs of the period, though I had long been brought into the world, she was still wearing her tried and trusted maternity smocks, and Dr. Scholl's sandals. Aside from her clothing, her Russian roots made her look strong rather than fetching. She wore her black hair short and feathered around the nape of her neck. With her chiseled cheekbones and prominent nose she was handsome, manly.

On the day that I met my father, I wore a white dress with a pink bow. When the outfit was cinched in and tied up, I looked like a freshly wrapped gift. It was May, the days had started to brighten, but there was still a brisk nip in the air. So as well as the frock, Mum donned me in thick woolen tights, booties, and a knitted bonnet because Doctor Benjamin Spock said that covering the head could conserve up to eighty percent of body heat.

My father's full name was Alexander Mordecai Frank. Mordecai being the Jewish name he got after he was circumcised. Everyone knew him as Alec.

During that first visit, Mum took a photograph of me with him, and when it was developed she wrote on the back in blue ink, "Daddy and Hannah. Brixton, May 1965." He looked gaunt in the picture. His jumper was baggy and his trousers loose around the waist. His hair curled around his temples like mine, and we both had the same almond shaped eyes. Mine were no doubt still changing from a neonatal dark blue to a soft hazel, whereas his were a sad green, like the heath after a heavy rainfall. My father's feet were huge in the shot. I might have blamed it on perspective, but as well as being large, they sat all wrong on the floor, awkward and restless as if in mid stride.

Positioned as I was on my father's lap, I rested with my back against his front. I was less than a stone, clothing and all, but by the look on his face he felt weighed down by every ounce of me.

Mum told me that my father approved of my name. "It's fitting," he said when he found out it meant beauty and passion. Maybe having me helped him buckle down, because with legal aid and a good solicitor, he was out in three months on good behavior.

They didn't stay together for long after his release, there was sufficient time to make my brother Dan, who would be just shy of a year younger than me, and a little more in which they fought over Alec's compulsion to gamble and lie and spend the rent money, then that was it, poof he was gone.

The months that my father was behind bars would turn out to be one ninth of the life that we had together. Mum said that he had suffered a difficult childhood, and that

might have been why he grew up to favour get rich quick schemes that got him into trouble. I wasn't led to believe he was a violent man, apart from once when he bent Mum's fingers back in a fit of frustration. She used that against him when she petitioned for divorce. He was long gone by that time though. He just left one day and never came back. Mum thought his debtors might have murdered him. She cried and paced the flat for a few weeks then she turned around and said, "good riddance to bad rubbish." She never spoke much about him after that, even in her stories, but the change registered in her face. Her jaw tightened whether busy or in repose, and she spent a lot of time biting the inside of her cheek.

She tore up every photograph we had of Alexander Mordecai, apart from the one in Brixton, on the day he and I first met.

"There is no way you can recall him," she said. "You were just three years old when he left, much too young to be able to remember his face."

Mum didn't seem to know whom to blame for being left alone with two under three's. It would have been easy to point the finger at Alec, or his parents who had pretty much wiped their hands of us, or the bloody snobs whose homes and gardens sat ostentatiously on the slopes of North Chingford and Epping Forest. But she showed little interest in trying to understand why being born east of the River Ching had made such a difference to her life. Instead when Dan and I hit six and seven respectively, at my insistence she brought us back a new dad called Bert.

"He'll be more of a father to you than that other thing," she said, and so that Alexander Mordecai wouldn't haunt us from the grave, Mum pursed her mouth to spit

three times, just like Yenta in Fiddler on the roof. She did this even though my father was still alive as far as we knew.

Mum's friend Skinny Doreen introduced her to Bert. She belonged to the gingerbread club, a place where single parents met other single parents and made new families. Behind her back, Mum said that Skinny Doreen was a trollop and that she'd had more men than hot dinners. But you'd never have guessed, for the night that they left together for the club, they giggled and linked arms like best friends.

"Shirl, you'll love it. There are some real heart throbs." Doreen said. Her hair was pulled up in a bun, so tight it tugged her forehead up with it. She wore high black stilettos, another reason that she may have held so steadfastly onto Mum.

Mum had washed her thick black hair and tried to flatten her cows-lick. She wore a freshly pressed smock dress and a string of costume pearls. Doreen sprayed Mum with perfume, and persuaded her to wear the most modest amount of make up. Mum agreed. She still looked like a man, despite such titivation, but she seemed jovial, and her eyes shone with excitement at the rarity of getting out.

"They won't give you any trouble love," she said to the babysitter. "Look at the pair of them, easy money."

Mum had fed us each two big spoons of Phenergan even though we didn't have a cold or a cough. We were sprawled out on the couch in a medicated half sleep before she'd even made it out of the door.

The next morning Mum seemed tired and not especially jubilant for someone who had met what might be her lifetime mate. "His name's Bert, don't get too excited Han,

let's just see how we all get along.”

Actions speak louder than words, Mum always told us, and Bert's actions pleased us all. “Here,” he said when he visited, holding up a crisp pound note to the light, so we could see the metal strip running through the centre. “Go to Martins, get yourselves some sweets.”

Mum balked at the idea, “That's too much Bert.”

“Oh let me spoil them,” he replied, and Mum's face softened and they smiled at each other and winked in the knowledge that what they had could be translated through that crisp pound note. As well as the abundance of sweets, Bert liked to treat us to home made entertainment. He would mosey back to visit us way after dark on Friday nights, after being at the pub with the lads, as he referred to them. With slurred speech, a wobbly gait and a sweet-sour smell about him, he insisted that we played Godzilla and King Kong. He was always Godzilla and he roared and swooped down squeezing me just a tad too tight.

Rather than come to my aid, Mum giggled. It was constrained, nothing like her normal hearty laughter where she wobbled backwards and forwards and clutched her stomach or wet herself. In Bert's presence Mum kept her mouth closed too, so he didn't see the gaps where her back teeth were missing.

Bert soon got fed up with the game and my squeals. He kept a beret and a fez on a coat-hook on the back of the living room door. These were the only props he required to aid his repertoire of impressions. He became Norman Wisdom, Frank Spencer and Tommy Cooper, in exactly that order, spitting jets of frothy saliva in the air and

slamming his body to the floor with a series of hard deliberate stunts. He laughed really hard and furiously at himself, much more than all of us put together and he finished the performance with a few smutty songs that he'd learned in the army and an attempt at walking in a straight line.

Bert was born within the sound of the Bow bells, just like Mum, but whereas she crossed the river to live in the suburb of West Norwood, Bert stayed in Hackney, the home of the Kray twins, Reginald and Ronald. He went to school with them, drank with them and like a true cockney rebel, loved them with all his strawberry tart.

“They were good lads, Reggie and Ronnie, they looked after their old girl,” he told us.

Mum shook her head and laughed. “They were gangsters Bert, hardened criminals. That’s why they got life.”

“Let’s not have a barney over it,” he said.

Mum laughed again. She liked Bert’s use of cockney rhyming slang. It meant they could talk about stuff without us kids understanding.

It wasn’t long after they met at the Gingerbread Club that Mum told Bert that rather than paying for digs, he could move in and put a few extra coppers in her purse. He turned up on one of those Friday nights with an army kit bag, two Sainsbury carriers, and a quip about being a man of little means. He was my live in step-dad after that, not handsome like Alexander Mordecai, but my step-dad nonetheless.

One of the most exciting things about Bert was the fact that his uncle had given him a car. “Oh Ziggy, she’s just an old banger,” he said. It was true that the white Zephyr

had dents on every conceivable panel and was starting to rust. Bert had to push her most days to bring her to life, and when the fan belt broke, he used Mum's tights as a stopgap. But it was a car, and we had never known such a luxury. "You shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth," Mum said to Bert. "She gets us from A to B."

As well as his cockney rabbit and Pork, Mum liked the fact that Bert was a hard worker. "He's a real grafter," she said. "When you grow up you should find a man that can hold down a job, that's what counts Han, you mark my words."

I was pleased for Mum and I expected the neighbours to feel the same way. Dobby Linda didn't seem too fussed either way, whether Mum had a mate or not, but Skinny Doreen thought it was too soon for Bert to move in. "I think she's jealous if you ask me," Mum said. "She would probably like to settle down herself in all honesty."

I agreed with Mum. Skinny Doreen was still going to the Gingerbread Club, but so far she hadn't found a Bert of her own. Maybe she needed to tuck away a bit more to attract a male. When Bert first came to visit he squeezed Mum's thigh and said, "Men like a woman with a bit of meat of them."

2.

Even though Mum had a mate, she was quite an odd fish. It may have been life at Chingford Hall that got on top of her, or perhaps she was always a bit touched. Somewhere between Alec leaving and Bert arriving, she started to leave the door open when she went to the loo, and once a month I would spy the thick wedge of her Dr. White's sanitary pad, stained with red-brown period, as it sat exposed in the crotch of her big knickers. The knickers had holes in them, tiny perforations that were oddly enough meant to be there. The pad was hoisted into place with a belt-like contraption. My brother Dan, made the mistake of screaming once when he saw the scene, rather than just swallowing hard, which is what I did. This presented Mum with the idea of chasing us with the offending article. She called it her jam rag and laughed at our squeals of disgust, thrilled that she had found a novel way of punishing them.

I knew not to talk about this. Some things we just kept to ourselves in our family, stuffed them down our gullets with Mum's chip butties and cups of steaming hot sweet tea.

"Don't feel sorry for yourself," Mum used to say. "There are people far worse off than you." We knew she was right, because she brought them home to meet us. There was Molly, a girl whose growth was so stunted that she only came up to my waist, even though she was older than me. Bert called her a cretin and Mum said that wasn't a nice thing to say. Molly wore nappies and liked to sit in the kitchen and grunt until Mum brought out a packet of custard creams or made her a Marmite sandwich.

“D’you not get fed at home?” she joked.

When Molly was otherwise engaged, Mum invited Roger, a boy who wore iron calipers on his legs, making them heavy and a sight to behold. He had to leave a good ten minutes before us for school because of his apparatus. Heaven forbid anyone should tease him. If they did it was only the once, for even from a few paces behind, he could put on a sprint and deliver a blow of great magnitude, kicking out with his specially made orthopedic boots and the full weight of his metal clad limbs.

“You must learn compassion,” Mum said. Other times she said, “Beauty is only skin deep,” or “It’s what’s inside that counts.” But her all-time adage, beyond any other was, “you have to make the most of what you’ve got,” which she did.

Nothing went to waste in our flat. When the fridge stopped working, she unplugged it and used it for storage.

Shel, where’s my work-boots?” Bert said one morning.

“They’re in the fridge,” she replied.

Mum called herself thrifty. “It’s because I was a war baby,” she said. Or occasionally when she felt overburdened, she’d blame her habit on Big Sadie, her Yiddisher Mama who came into the country with nothing but the *shmata* that she stood up in. Mum’s ancestors had come over from a *shtetl* that she couldn’t even remember how to pronounce. Big Sadie had told Mum the story before she got the diabetes and popped her clogs. Mum in turn told me, and only me.

I was about to turn thirteen. We were in the kitchen frying chips in the deep fat fryer that had been earned with Green Shield Stamps from Tesco’s. It had taken almost a

year to collect the required 34 full books of stamps. Mum designated us kids with the task of sticking them into the etched out squares on the page. Dan didn't like the taste of the glue and neither did I, but when I did a good job, Mum said, "here, this is for not making a fuss, don't tell your brother, the lazy little git," and she gave me a penny ice pole.

I watched her, marveled at how well she knew the pan's shape and dimension. With a flick of her wide wrist the raw potato sizzled and the kitchen grew smoky from the lard.

"Our people came with a load of others just like them, all crammed aboard a boat bound for America. That's where they would have landed if the mission had gone to plan. It was all Uri's fault." She seemed perturbed by Uri's weak constitution, and the bad timing of it all. "Uri was one of my uncles," she continued, though I hadn't posed the question. "He was just around bar mitzvah age when he got sick. By the time the ship docked in London en route to New York, he was too weak to stand up. There was a Jews Poor Shelter just a stone's throw from the Aldwych docks."

Mum paused and looked out of the kitchen window to take in what it really meant to be here instead of America. Resolutely she carried on, "So this is where we ended up.... the lot of us," she said, including herself in the equation, though she hadn't been as much as a twinkle in her mother's eye.

"I was born a good decade after that ship docked, in a one room tenement, smack bang in the middle of the rag trade. I was a bastard," she said, without the slightest reprehension. "There were probably a lot like me." She hoisted up her trousers and shuffled her feet forward in her Doctor Scholl's. Lifting the wire basket from the pan, she

shook it from side to side to drain the lard, turned off the gas and looked me in the eye.

“Big Sadie was simple and slovenly,” she said. “I know I shouldn’t talk like this about your bube, but you’re old enough to know, already as precocious as they come. Big Sadie bit her nails down to the quick and wore bright red varnish on what was left of them.”

I didn’t see the harm in a bit of nail polish, but Mum was in the throes of further disclosure, so I daren’t interrupt.

“She was on the game too, in that one room. It didn’t take much for the authorities to realize that us kids would be better off at the orphanage; that in time some benevolent soul would save us, teach us our Yiddishkeit.”

She picked up a chip, blew on it and popped it into her mouth. She made a huffing noise as she tried to cool the morsel. For an instant I toyed with the idea of my grandmother being a prostitute. I couldn’t digest it. Like the smoke, it hung dense in the heat of the kitchen, too much to take in. And besides, what was Mum doing giving so much away when it was time for supper? Wasn’t she always saying, “don’t talk, eat?”

She tipped a pile of chips on a plate and smothered them with salt and vinegar. The sour fumes rose and made me salivate.

By early evening everything was quiet, save for the rattle of the central heating vents. Dan coughed because he was allergic to the dust mites that puffed out with the air. It was a dry irritating cough, the kind that seemed staged for attention.

As the night wore on and the Greyhound Pub emptied out, Chingford Hall morphed into a nocturnal world of parties and fights.

For a time when we first lived on the estate, Mum opened the bedroom windows and screamed, “Keep the fucking noise down, people are trying to sleep up here.”

The revelers hooted with laughter and said, “shut up you miserable cow,” then they fought harder or turned their music up defiantly louder.

Finally she invested in earplugs. They were pink and made out of wax, the latest invention by all accounts. Each night before she retired, she softened and rolled the material into two neat pellets, which she pressed into her ear canals.

“Makes me dead to the world,” she said, pleased with her purchase. During the day the wax sat hardening on the dresser, the pink slowly fading to grey. “You should try them,” she offered when I complained about the noise one night. She balled a couple up and pushed them hard into my ears, alienating me so completely from the world that I felt dizzy.

“Oh no,” I said, taking them out, “I can’t hear a single thing.”

“Well that is the point,” Mum said, snatching them from me and molding them into my own ears.

Every night after that as she slept and snored loudly in the room next door, I stayed awake to the beat of heavy dub from Tyrone’s new sound surround system at number 51, and the roar of car engines from the underground car park, where only brave souls dared to keep their cars.

The night that Mum told me that big Sadie had been a prostitute, I felt more awake than I had all day long, more enlivened than the most exuberant Greyhound Arms reveler, more vigilant than the caretaker on night duty who burned the rubbish that had

collected since morning. I wondered how my grandmother got her punters, and how often, and whether my mother was sleeping in that one room tenement when the punters and Big Sadie were doing it, when the punters were dipping their wicks. That was Mum's expression, and it seemed to work up to a point until Dan misbehaved and she told him that he got on her wick, and then it all became a bit confusing.

From midnight onwards, Mr. Patel at number 47 went to relieve his bladder so often that he overworked the cistern. It rumbled and choked with each pulling of the chain. Mum said he had prostate trouble, and I was still meaning to look it up in the collection of *Doctor's Answers*. The magazines had been ordered after seeing an advert on the Telly. They came each week in the post, and Mum piled them up on the floor in the loo until they were a great wobbling tower of advice on everything from Acne to Zygomycosis.

As I waited for Mr. Patel to settle down, I thought about Big Sadie, and the rest of the family. They were different, funny. Not funny ha-ha, but funny peculiar. I decided there and then that I would lead an average life when I grew up. I would have normal children and live in an ordinary place. I would be trim and beautiful. I wouldn't be caught dead rummaging. Of all of Mum's occupations, rummaging in the estate bins was her prime delight. The bins were the perfect place to salvage all kinds of items, and she frequented the site just enough to keep her home full of clutter.

3.

When Mum wasn't bargain hunting or rummaging, she kept herself busy by popping to the neighbors for cups of tea.

"Ooh-ooh," she called through the letterbox, "it's only me. Put the kettle on."

Then later she traipsed back home with Skinny Doreen from St Fabian's Tower or Doppy Linda from Pine Court bringing with her a fine cloak of smog from the North Circular Road. It stunk and brought on asthma attacks. Dan got them all the time, whereas Bert only got them when he was nervous.

Once inside the flat, she and the neighbors gossiped and smoked Players Number Ten in the kitchen at the yellow Formica topped table. The cats did their business under that table, scrabbling around in a litter tray.

"For Christ's sake, Shirl," Bert shouted one night when the cats' frantic scratching in the litter got too noisy to ignore. "Can't you put that bloody thing somewhere else? It's putting me off me supper."

"Oh, for crying out loud, Bert," Mum said. "Where else can they go with us living six floors up in the air?"

Bert didn't answer her. He hardly spoke to her anymore. He took to eating his supper off a tray in front of the telly in the living room and he stayed there the whole evening, moving closer and closer to the set to play around with the aerial. He loved that aerial even more than Mum, so in the end we married him to it. We put a scrap of net curtain around the metal prongs and pronounced them man and wife.

"Here comes the bride, all dressed in white," I sang, as I walked the aerial along

the top of the set while Dan declared himself the vicar, even though we were Jewish, and said, “Do you take this aerial to be your lawful wedded wife?”

“Tell ‘em,” Bert shouted to Mum in the kitchen, who tore herself away from Dobby Linda and appeared at the doorway out of a haze of smoke, hands on her bulging hips, formidable in her crimplene smock dress.

“I’m telling you,” she said, before disappearing back into the smoky gloom.

Bert sighed and pushed away the rest of his sausage and mash supper. He got out his asthma pump. Nothing about him shined anymore apart from a perfectly round bald patch on the top of his head. He looked tired from going up the road. Up the road wasn’t just to the top of the street, as they knew it, but miles and miles along the straight wide motorways in a thundering juggernaut lorry. His father had done the same work and his father before him, and they were all called Bert. Big Bert, Middle Bert and Little Bert.

Bored with the wedding ceremony, I ambled across the living room and stood at the kitchen door. The ping-pong of chatter bounced between the two women. Dobby Linda was comfortably seated at the Formica top table, captive audience. Mum discreetly slipped an LP on the record player. A blast of opera, really loud opera, flew into the living room and made Bert grimace. It never bothered Mum that she was the only living soul on the council estate to like such music.

“Listen, you’ll like it,” she said as she waved her hands around the smoky kitchen, to “The Love Duet” from *Madame Butterfly*, conducting an imaginary orchestra, her voice straining to reach the high notes.

Doppy Linda, who seemed to be enjoying herself until then, turned her nose up and looked at the clock and said, “Oh, is that the time already?” Then she got up to leave in the midst of the first aria when the pitch was sufficiently piercing to shatter a glass if we had owned one, but as it was, they’d all been broken and we kept to Tupperware beakers, stained Tupperware beakers that smelled of spaghetti bolognese. The music stopped. The two women emerged from the kitchen, their Friday evening gossip over.

“I’d better get the ole man’s dinner on,” Linda said, looking at her watch. “He’ll have my guts for garters.”

Bert nodded as if to suggest she had overstayed her welcome and then he followed her to the door with his eyes, looking her up and down. Linda slammed the front door hard and for a moment there was nothing but the sound of her stilettos click-clacking along the corridor.

“That woman doesn’t know her own strength,” Bert said.

“Can you look after Dan? I think I’ll go for a little walk,” Mum said, bending at the knees, warming up. We all knew what her little walks entailed. She had the glint in her eyes that we recognized so well, the vitality and passion that rose from the depths of her when she was ready to go rummaging, to accumulate, to hunt and gather, to search for more stuff.

“You don’t need anything else,” Bert said without opening his eyes.

Mum didn’t answer him, she just looked at me, lifting her brows, and widening her eyes. It was a request for me to accompany her. I felt obliged, even though rummaging was an embarrassing business for a girl on the cusp of puberty. My biggest

fear was seeing Nick Woodward or Woody as I called him. I was more smitten with him than ever and I knew that he frequented the rubbish bins. He bragged about setting fire to the cars in the area and using spray paint to write “Fuk off you Kunts” on the Caretaker’s garage door. Mum said if he was going to do such things he should learn to spell properly.

“Woody gets the most detentions in the whole class,” I boasted as we waited for the lift to arrive.

“Bloody lift,” Mum said, giving it an impatient kick. Then she returned to bouncing the pram in anticipation of her little walk. Mum loved her prams. She had owned quite a number of them since my birth. This one had been acquired at The British Legion Jumble Sale. “It’s got great suspension,” she bragged, as if talking about a sports car. “What a bargain.” She spat on her cuff and polished the chrome handle bar with her saliva.

The lift arrived and a whiff of stale urine seeped out.

“I’ve written Woody’s initials on all my schoolbooks,” I said. Mum entered backwards stepping over a puddle, pulling the pram in after her and wedging the handle up against her bosom. I squeezed in on tiptoes, attempting to evade contamination.

Taking a deep breath and holding my nose, I pressed the button for the car park.

“I think he likes me,” I said, after jumping out of the lift and adding to the array of wet footprints on the slippery red linoleum. “At registration, he turned his eyelids inside out and stared at me.”

“Umm,” Mum said, trying to maneuver the pram back out of the lift.

“He chased me with a chicken foot that he got from the butcher. He could make

its claws move by pulling on a tendon.”

“Umm,” she said again, and I could tell her heart wasn’t really in it.

“Annie asked him out for me last Friday in P.E. He said I was too fat. If I do a hundred sit ups a day, and don’t eat any more of the mint creams…”

Mum had a far away look on her face. I held tight onto the side of the pram as they jostled down the concrete ramp and along the walkway. The bins loomed so close I could smell them. Mum was smiling. She hadn’t been rummaging for a few days.

“If he’s at the bins, can we pretend to be chucking the pram away?” I asked.

After a pause, she answered me. Perhaps it was due to the fact that the question had the word ‘bins’ in it.

“Don’t be such a snob,” she said. “And will you stop blimbling well going on about that boy, he’s from a no good family and you’re too young to be fancying boys.”

“But, Mum, I’m almost thirteen. Dawn Johnson is only eleven and a half and she’s got a boyfriend already.”

“Well, Dawn Johnson isn’t my daughter,” Mum said. “And while we’re at it, you’re not fat, you’re fine. Don’t keep on about being fat. How many times do I have to tell you it’s what’s inside that counts?”

We made our way through the sprawling underground car park, weaving between dumped and burnt out cars. I winced at the sound of our intrusion, the squeaking pram, Mum’s labored breathing, and the crystal beads of shattered windscreens grinding beneath the pram wheels and our steps. I waited just beyond the huge metal bins, far enough away to disassociate myself from the task but close enough to watch Mum’s

outline come to life then fade under the car park's blinking fluorescent light. She worked deftly at her craft, leaning so far into the huge metal bin that I thought she might topple head first into the vast container. Luckily, the broad blackened soles of her feet in her fat Doctor. Scholl's kept her grounded. Each time she rose from the endeavour, she inspected her find, measuring it with keen squinting eyes.

Mum was enthused despite having risen so early. I thought back to the start of the day, how her mother had pulled her coarse black hair into a stubby ponytail, the strands springing out of the elastic band, framing her red face. The change around a couple of nights before clearly hadn't been enough for her and she was restless again. Her gentle pottering from kitchen to living room gathered momentum, patches of sweat spread like ink into the underarms of her nylon nightie. I recognized the signs, an emptying of items from cupboards and drawers onto the floor, a growing tower of ornaments looming up from the couch. It could only mean one thing. Mum was having a sort out. As her sharp eyes scanned the living room, Dan and I laid low, hoping and praying that as so often happened Mum would peak too early, run out of steam and abandon the mission until next time.

The dust that she had disturbed made her splutter, the spluttering was significant because it caused her to stop what she was doing, crouch into a cross-legged position where she remained until the spluttering ceased.

"Oh crikey, I've wet myself again," she said.

"Ugh," was all that Dan managed to say, whilst I just stared at her in utter distaste.

“I can’t help it can I?” she said. Neither of us answered her, because it didn’t seem humanly possible that you could wet yourself without meaning to, not unless you were a baby who was learning to use the potty.

“I wish I’d remembered to do my ninny squeezes,” Mum sighed, with a look of regret.

“Ugh,” Dan said again, and I vowed never to have a baby with a big head. I’d heard Mum say that it was Dan’s big head that had caused all the trouble.

In the underground car park, the flicker of the strip bulbs above the bins lit Mum like a rock star at the London Palladium. She bobbed up and down as if doing the pogo then slowed to a sway as she lingered over the highlight of the loot, a posh frilly dress fit for a bridesmaid or a Catholic girl’s confirmation. It must have been earmarked for me as it was much too small for Mum, and besides, she held it aloft as opposed to up against her bloated belly. There was an array of boys and men’s trousers. Mum hauled them out and selected those she would keep with no less deliberation than choosing pick ‘n’ mix from Woolworth’s. She stacked furniture and bric-a-brac in a pile beside her and draped clothing over one arm until it became too cumbersome, whereby it was placed atop the bric-a-brac forming a bundle that soon became a pile and then finally a mountain.

When Mum stretched her arms into the air and brushed the dirt off her hands, I knew we were close.

“Hannah, come and help me,” she said, much too loud for my liking.

She darted out of the shadows and we piled up the goods onto the lumbering pram, an assortment of clothes, shoes, a sea green ashtray coated with soot, and a coffee table

with a missing leg. Covering the load with a crochet blanket we began steering it back towards home.

“It just needs the leg gluing back on,” she said, revealing a stubby table leg sticking out from her pocket. Then gathering speed in her desire to return home and sort everything out, she misjudged a corner and ran over my toes.

“Ouch,” I squealed, as the pram almost careered into the wall of the car park, and that’s when I saw him approach, his unmistakable wiry frame, oil stained jeans, and determined strut.

“Woody,” I said, in a voice so low it was pitiful.

“Jumble Princess,” he remarked, his face lighting up, as if he was genuinely pleased to see me, as if my fears were totally unfounded.

I stopped dead in my tracks and felt Mum stop too, both of us dwarfed by the mound of rubbish in the pram. Mum reached out a grimy hand, redistributing the load, making a steadfast claim to her prized possessions.

“Good evening, Jumble Queen,” Woody said to Mum, bowing like a thespian, and clasping a family size box of Bryant & May matches close to his chest.

“Don’t you ‘jumble queen’ me, my boy,” she responded. “Facetious little blighter.”

“Facetious? What you gone and swallowed the dictionary?” Woody asked.

He shook his box of matches like a skilled percussionist and was gone, eyes scanning the concrete horizon. I loved Woody’s eyes. They were intense, narrow, and so close to his nose that they set him apart from other boys. Bert said those eyes made him look shifty. I tried to follow Woody through the shadows, to have one last look at his

nimble body and long legs as he gained ground on us.

Mum sped up again, regaining control of the vehicle and planning the evening ahead. She squeezed herself and the pram through the hallway and into the living room. Bert was asleep with the aerial on his lap, and the television flickering in bursts of static.

“I’ve got some nice bits for everyone,” Mum said.

I knew I was in for a night of trying things on, other people’s things, castoffs.

Bert came to, when Mum tried to squeeze his bare feet into a pair of moccasins.

“Sorry love, I couldn’t wait,” she said. She patted him on the arm. “They’ll warm the cockles of your heart. Go on, you can go back to sleep now.” He did as he was told, closing his eyes and cradling the aerial between his thighs.

“Oh, that was just what I was after,” Mum rejoiced, pulling item after item from the pram. “It only needs a good wash and a stitch,” and “look, I can put a zip in here and a button here. Turn around,” she demanded, as she threw the frilly dress with puff sleeves over my head. “Now stand still,” she said, pulling and prodding at me with her hard, stubby fingers. “Breathe in, breathe out, arms up, arms down.”

I looked down at myself in the item. “That’s the find of the night,” Mum said, “almost regal.”

“Like a jumble princess,” I added, wishing Woody could get a glimpse of me in such finery.

“Umm,” Mum said.

Finally, having exhausted us both, Mum reached for her sewing kit and sunk deep into the couch, gloating over her finds and the good fortune that a little walk could bring.

4.

Choosing what we wore, and how the home was arranged and fashioned might have been a full time job in itself, but Mum was a hard worker. Her thriftiness knew no bounds. When she said, "I've got some nice bits for everyone," she truly meant everyone, at least everyone who knew her. The clothing she picked out for Skinny Doreen was so skimpy it exaggerated the woman's skeletal frame, especially when she and Mum were in close proximity.

"Of course you can get away with it," Mum said of the plunging necklines and short skirt hems. "I would if I had your figure."

Doppy Linda liked disco wear, the kind worn by Alvin Stardust and Gary Glitter on Top of the Pops. "See I know what you like," Mum said, presenting her friend with boob tubes of sequins and sparkles.

"Mutton if you ask me," Bert said whenever he saw Doppy Linda in all that shining attire. "Mutton dressed as lamb."

"Well, I didn't ask you," Mum said, "and it doesn't stop your roving eye does it now?"

As well as being responsible for what so many of us wore, Mum was in control of what was said and unsaid, the keeper of family secrets, the custodian of the past. Once upon a time, in the years after Alexander Mordecai left, Mum had talked the hind-legs off a donkey, and I'd hung on to her every word. But now that I wanted to revisit the past, it was as if the well had run dry. Maybe she told Bert what she might otherwise have told

me, although I doubted it. By night she was as deaf as a post, and by day she had her work cut out. It might have been the Yiddisher in her blood that got thicker as she aged, and made her tight mouthed and fearful that something bad might happen if her jaw should slacken. Whatever it was, I knew that when Mum bit her lip and drew her brows together in a deep furrow, it was better to overhear things than to ask questions. If I pretended to be reading or watching the Telly, but kept one ear out, I picked up a fair bit of gossip. Making Mum's tea had its perks too. When she was on the phone in the kitchen and she couldn't separate herself from the conversation, she called out, "I'm busy on the blower, put the kettle on will you Han? I really fancy a cuppa." As the water boiled and misted up the kitchen window, I got to hear all kinds of things. Who was carrying on, who had left their missus, and who was in the pudding club again, even though she didn't have a penny to her name.

I was slow and deliberate in the way I poured the boiled water into Mum's mug and dunked the Typhoo tea bag up and down, up and down, stalling for time, waiting for mention of my past, of my family. Soon the tea was a deep brown curdle of tannin and full fat milk, strong, steaming with a familiar pungent smell.

Once Mum said, "blimey, I know I like it full bodied, but it's going to get up and walk away at this rate." Then she biffed me lightly around the kisser and said, "You can clear off now, you nosey little swine."

In this way I was taught that estate gossip was harmless, but truth was taboo, and that people could have an open heart and mouth, one minute and be guarded and conservative the next. Stiff upper lip and all that. For the most part Mum didn't mention

her forebears who were gassed at Auschwitz, the prostitutes like Big Sadie, nor the orphans and bastards like her, or those who were locked away, off their trolley, three-pence short of a shilling, and round the hat-rack.

The best-kept secret of all was Klothilde, my paternal grandmother. She wasn't so poor that she had to become a prostitute like Big Sadie, and she wasn't obese like Big Sadie either, but she had been hidden away in a mental hospital for thirty years after the armistice. All that remained of her for me at least, was her name, Klothilde. It was a strange name at that. On the very rare occasions that Mum happened to mention Big Sadie, she stopped as if grappling for something to make her feel better, someone who was worse off, and she came up with Klothilde.

"Big Sadie may have had it hard, but I don't suppose the other side was much better," she said. "Poor Klothilde, nutty as the day is long." Then, as if she was worried that I might have questioned her further, she said, "there's no point living in the past, you've got to let bygones be bygones."

So I was left with the stories or half stories or fragments of stories, and the sense that perhaps one day I might be able to piece them all together like the puzzle that Mum bought from the Spastics Society thrift store. "Edges first," she said. "It makes it easier to fill in the middle that way."

The first time I understood that not everyone was like my mother, was in the autumn of 1976. I was eleven years old, and deemed ready for junior high school. Mum bought me a Henry Taylor pinafore of shiny grey crimplene. Together we walked the fifteen minutes that took us past the launderette, the newsagent, and The Spread Eagle. At

the gates of Chingford Junior High, the purpose built environ that was reserved for estate kids, Mum placed one hand on the small of my back and pushed me at Mrs. Briggs.

“She’s all yours,” she said to the teacher, “I hope I haven’t mollycoddled her too much.”

Mrs. Briggs was from Glasgow. She wore round thick glasses, and her hair sat high on her head, tucked in with brown metal clips. “Put your hand up if you have a question,” she told the class, her voice a singsong that echoed in the brown-carpeted room they called the quiet corner. What a novelty, I thought, questions. Mrs. Briggs wanted us to pry. I was filled with a longing, a yearning to be all grown up and nosey, but it was early days. I kept my hand down all of the first term, and then the term after that. My eyes were big though, and they took in everything. People had stopped Mum in the street when I was a baby, brought her to a halt to comment upon my eyes in all their deep amber seriousness. “Don’t cry, it’s only a joke,” or “cheer up, it might never happen,” they said.

At Chingford Hall, I was ever watchful and all-ears, I relished afternoon story time and Mrs. Briggs’ praise of my abstract art, but most of all I liked it when she called the register and said my last name. “Friedman.” She rolled the R and the sound reminded me of my tabby cat Tony’s purr.

By the end of the first school year, I was brave enough to put up my hand. Mrs. Briggs encouraged the notion. “Your daughter has a very inquiring mind,” she told Mum during Parents’ evening.

“I know,” Mum replied. “She wants to know the ins and outs of everything that one.”

At home with my curiosity stifled, I made Dan do most of the asking. I whispered interrogatives into his ear, and he obliged me by repeating them out loud with much candour. His constant barrage of “but why?” finally led Mum to invest in a why stick.

“I’ll get that why stick,” she threatened when his, “but why” became annoying. It was a limb from a silver birch that she had taken from the floor of Epping Forest, during one of our rare Sunday afternoon rambles. She used it to help her balance as she edged around muddy banks, and in a couple of instances she stabbed it into the ground as if to pole vault across the gullies. She picked at the most prominent knobbles of bark as we watched model airplanes soar above the tree lines, and she swung the stick high into the air to knock hard shiny conkers from a giant horse chestnut. We didn’t stay long at the forest. Dan and I were urban dwellers, more interested in getting an iced lolly from the tea hut at High Beech, than we were in admiring the ancient woodland.

On the way home I had Mum all to myself, well almost. The muddied branch rested upright between us on their seat. Mum was there though, within arm’s reach, her body tired and satisfied, her breath soft and even. Dan played at being a fireman, swinging around the pole of the upper deck. We watched him and listened to the slide of his hands upon the stainless steel.

“Why are we bringing the stick home?” I asked, knowing that Dan was far too engrossed in play to ask the question.

“You’ll see,” Mum said. She stroked the wood, and peeled a few remaining strips

of bark. I moved as close to her as the stick, and her busy fingers would allow. The main heating ducts for the upper deck were just inches away from our feet. I curled my toes inside my wellington boots and felt the blast of hot air. Finally Mum placed the stick across her lap and her hands behind her head, her branch-stripping task complete. I leaned into her warm armpits and closed my eyes.

Upon their return home, Mum tucked the branch under the couch. “This will come in right handy,” she said. “It is going to be my why stick.”

The first time Dan succumbed to the wrath of the why stick, he wanted to know why his friend Paul Miller couldn't come and play. “But why?” he whined.

“That's it, where's that why stick?” Mum said. She grabbed the silver birch branch with one hand, and Dan with the other. I watched as she tried to find a way to hold down Dan's trunk, and get sufficient leverage on the weapon. She found a rhythm for the beating. It was fast and a little uneven because of Dan's wriggling. I laughed as Dan tried to say he was sorry, but there was a brittle edge to my voice as it came out of my mouth. I knew it was wrong, as annoying as Dan was, and as much as he got on Mum's wick, I felt responsible. I had orchestrated Dan's role as the interrogator, and it had been for my own gain. I could see little red welts beginning to form on my brother's fat thighs.

“Too late for that now,” Mum said, unaccepting of Dan's apology. I could have sworn I saw her eyes glint with sadistic pleasure, or perhaps it was with relief at the outpouring of angst, the getting out of some of what she normally kept inside.

By the time I was ready to leave Chingford Hall Junior High and start at William

Fitt Senior, I had learned to ask questions in subtle modes, my tonality cautious, more like a comment than a query.

“I think Grandma Klothilde ended up in the loony bin because of her hormones,” I said.

“No, I think it was more serious than that,” Mum said.

I couldn't perceive of anything much worse than the monthly hysteria that plagued Mum.

“I can't help it, it's my estrogen dominance,” she said. “Thank God it doesn't last for more than a few days. Some poor souls get like this almost all month long.”

Mum held a hot water bottle to her stomach, and reached for the why stick quite regularly during such times, and she cried more easily at the weepies. With sufficient practice, Dan learned to duck and run away from the why stick. As he gained muscle and might, he began to stand his ground and fight the weapon away from him. Sometimes I still chuckled as the two of them wrestled. I had to be astute though, in case Mum's attentions might be diverted away from Dan, and levied upon my innocent self.

I was convinced that if Klothilde had anything like Mum's tearfulness, tummy aches and episodes of unrestrained aggression, all month long, it was no wonder she was locked away. I never really contemplated what form of treatment might have been bestowed upon Klothilde, not until the B.B.C. televised *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Mum had read the book, so when the film was advertised she circled it in red pen

in the *Radio and T.V. Times*, an entire week before the broadcast date, and taped it to the kitchen wall.

“I’ll let you both stay up to watch it even though you have school tomorrow,” she said. “You might learn something. The bloke who wrote it worked at a nuthouse. He knew the patients firsthand.”

Bert was up the road, and maybe that was part of the reason Mum really let herself go. She cried harder and longer than usual, using the velour cushion cover as a handkerchief. She cheered chief on when he smothered McMurphy, and resumed crying when he used his indigenous strength, and long legs to break out of the institution.

“See how his silence saved him,” she said, “see how it saved them both.”

“I don’t think it’s meant to be a weepy.” Dan whispered to me.

I would have liked to ask Mum if she was crying for Klothilde, as well as McMurphy, or whether her tears were caused by her estrogen dominance, but before I had managed to formulate the words, and while the credits were still rolling, she shooed us up to bed.

Alone in the dark, I replayed the way that McMurphy’s body jerked when he was given the electric shock treatment, how the spasms did nothing to curb his waywardness, and how after he was operated upon, there was nothing really left of him, just a shell and a vacant stare.

If Klothilde, really was as nutty as they come, then surely she could have broken out of the institution like Chief, and made her way to our home, angry that we had let her down, that we hadn’t visited, that we had failed to remember who she was. When I closed

my eyes I saw her, a cross between the wild woman of Borneo and Mrs. Rochester, raging and savage. When I opened them again, she was still there, only this time she was hiding in the shadow of my dressing gown that hung on the back of my door. Grandma Klothilde, a dark shape, restless and forgotten.

“Mum, I’m scared. Can I get in your bed?”

“Why, what are you scared of?”

“Klothilde.”

“Don’t be a silly sausage. How is Klothilde going to harm you?”

I couldn’t say. It wouldn’t sound plausible and I knew it, but still I wanted to be next to her, in what was normally Bert’s spot. I wanted to hide behind Mum’s broad back, and have her be the closest person to the door.

“Come on in you get. I’m not letting you watch stuff on telly anymore if it’s going to affect you like this.”

“But it was your idea,” I reminded her.

I felt my heart quiet and my throat loosen as I sank into the safe-haven of Mum’s worn mattress. And it wasn’t just me that relaxed. In the dark of her bedroom with just the soft hum of her transistor on Classic F.M. Mum let her guard down too. She turned to face me, and although I couldn’t see her, I felt her open up, until she was fully exposed, no hint of her former estrogen dominance, or reliance upon the why stick.

“Alec went to visit Klothilde once,” she said. “I don’t remember how he found out where she was. She was as good as dead in that place; she had been such a well-kept secret. He went alone, poor bugger. He was all washed out and weary when he came

home. Klothilde didn't recognize him, her own son, but then how could she have done? As well as being off her rocker, she hadn't seen him for almost two decades. She had been carted away from a boy of four, and here was a man of twenty-three. He left us soon afterwards. It might have been the last straw, seeing her so deranged."

"Maybe she had been given a Lobotomy," I whispered, still consumed by *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

"It was all the rage then," Mum said, as if she was talking about the mini-skirt.

She lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. The end glowed orange and the familiar saltpeter smell hung above us. I knew that if there had been more light, I would have noticed the dark yellow stains on the inside of her middle and index fingers.

She ground out the thin stick after just a few puffs, and left it sitting in the cut glass ashtray on her bedside cabinet, where she would find it the next morning. She popped her earplugs back in.

"Okay, let's get some shut eye shall we? Ready, one two three in the groove." She turned her back on me, whereupon I bent my knees and arched my upper body around her.

"One two three in the groove," I repeated, and we stayed like that until I heard her gentle snore that grew and fell like the tide.

5.

Far away from all the grey there was a land that shone dazzlingly bright. I knew this first hand because Auntie Liz lived there, and she told me all about it. From the time I was able to read, I received letters typed on thin blue weightless paper. Before opening them, I traced my fingers over the nine cents worth of U.S.A postage stamps. I read and re-read Auntie's address, 3945 Ridge Crest Road, Hollywood, California, 90028, United States of America. "See there's the proof," I said to myself. The letters brought news about the places that Auntie Liz visited when she was on vacation. The Grand Canyon, which she informed me, could be seen from the moon, and Death Valley, purported to be one of the hottest places on earth. Vacation meant holiday in American lingo. Aside from it reminding me of the public loo at Bamford Central, which read vacant when it was empty, it was a nice enough word.

Auntie Liz had lived in America for twenty years, so it was no wonder she had picked up a few Yankee terms. Mum never got as excited as me when the letters arrived. It was as if she was untouched by the light.

"Can't you feel it on the page?" I asked her.

"No, and to be honest it makes you sound like a religious zealot when you talk like that," she scoffed.

In a way Mum was right. I was fanatical about Auntie, buoyed up by her words and information. Auntie Liz in America liked to research facts and regurgitate them; in fact she made a living out of it. Like a fairy godmother, she had saved the day, or at least

she had saved Mum, for a time anyway. I knew that she would save me too, and take me away from the council estate built upon shit. Auntie Liz was big. Unlike Mum whose largeness spread out from her middle and was rolled into her crimplene dresses, Auntie Liz stretched upwards to a height of almost six feet, making her the tallest lady I knew. When I was a baby, Auntie Liz had visited, and then seven years later, she graced us with her presence once again. She wore a candy striped pink coat. The pattern climbed up her torso as if she was a stick of peppermint rock from Southend on Sea. When she opened her mouth she spoke like the queen, making us humble in her majestic company. Her real name was Lizette Beaumont, but we called her Auntie Liz in America. She was Mum's auntie by all intent and purpose, her foster auntie. By rights Dan and I should have called her Grandma or Great Aunt Betty, but she turned up her freckled nose when I suggested such a thing and said it would make her feel far too old.

Auntie Liz was a generous soul and sent me my very own brown view master and a set of slides. On Sunday afternoons when the weather was too rotten to play out, I lay on my back on the living room floor, pointed the view master at the ceiling light and brought the images to life. Land of the Giants, and Lost in Space were my favourites mostly because Auntie Liz had helped to make them. She had her own library in the 20th Century Fox studio from where she made sure the story line was properly researched.

At night on her return home from work, she drove past Mann's Chinese Theatre in all its elegance, and as she wound her way up into the hills she saw the Hollywood sign perched on the Cahuenga Peak. Auntie Liz in America actually lived in this land of fame and fortune, though none of my friends at school believed it for a moment. And I

was her surrogate niece, or great niece, or granddaughter or whatever. I was family through fostering, by proxy, and if I played my cards right, worked hard at school, and learned to check story facts like my aunt, surely I would be shipped out to assist her. I did make a blimming good cuppa, and I looked like my mother too, something that I felt sure that Aunt Liz would appreciate. Mum and I both had long noses. Mum said that mine took the biscuit as far as length went. She measured them once with my school ruler, calculating every last millimeter. Mum won, but only just. She said that mine was still growing, and had a bigger bump at the bridge. She called our noses schnozzles, and blamed the shape and size on them being Jewish. When I asked her why they were cursed this way, she said, “The Lord said to Moses, all Jews shall have long noses, except for Aaron, he shall have a square-un.”

As well as us both having big noses, our eyes were alike too, although Mum’s were darker and more earnest. When she was down in the dumps, it was as if all the years she had been separated from Big Sadie and housed at Norwood Jewish Orphanage, could be seen in her basalt eyes, and the way she was unable to cuddle Dan and me.

“I think Norwood stopped me from getting close to anyone,” she told us, “apart from you kids.” The latter part of her sentence seemed tacked on as an afterthought, a response to my face dropping.

It was in my first year of history at Senior High when I learned that most children from the cities had been Berteted out into the countryside during the war. In this respect, Mum was no different. She had been taken from Big Sadie, soon after being born and evacuated to Worthing, East Sussex. The difference was in what happened after the war.

“Do you know what I remember most, more than the bombs falling and the rationing?” Mum said.

“No, what?” I asked.

“The armistice, and afterwards, all the time spent waiting for Big Sadie to come and pick me up and take me home. She must have made arrangements with the Coopers, and promised them that she would return for me, because I recall the afternoons on the station platform, holding my breath as the train from Liverpool Street chugged into Worthing, looking at every large woman who stepped down from the second-class carriage. None of them were Big Sadie. Other Berteted children in the village were reunited with their mothers, but not me.”

Mum never did find out why Big Sadie took so long to collect her after the war was over, or if she did she never told me. When it seemed as if she might have forgotten all about the war, the Bertet, and Norwood, she went to meet with a social worker who gave her a copy of her admission papers from the orphanage archives.

Upon close inspection the record said, *Shirley Citron remained unofficially Berteted with the Cooper family of Worthing after the end of the war. Transported back to her mother, Sadie Citron of Stepney Green in January 1946 by the Jewish Board of Guardian.*

Maybe Big Sadie had been busy trying to make ends meet and raise the fare to get all the way to West Sussex. Maybe she was sick. Maybe she felt that the Cooper family might want to keep the child they had Berteted, and it would be for the best.

The same document went on to say, *Sadie Citron is simple-minded. She entertains*

men late into the night. Shirley, her third child has scabies and is malnourished. Sent to convalesce. The word entertain made it sound as if Sadie had been having parties in that one room tenement, smack bang in the middle of the rag trade, but I don't think that's what it meant. There wouldn't have been money for such frivolity. The only other information that was spelled out on that paper was a couple of lines of scrawled prose that read, *Occupation: Washerwoman. Wages: Two shillings and six pence. Tenement Rent: Two shillings and four pence.*

Even with my very basic mathematical skills, I realized that Big Sadie must have had quite a shortfall. Maybe she closed the gap by being on the game.

On the day that Mum received the records, she marched into the kitchen, shoved the evidence amongst the odds and sods and spare coppers in the junk drawer. "Sod you Norwood," she said, slamming the drawer closed. I thought she might have said sod you Big Sadie, but she never did, even when the papers yellowed with age and wore thin at the creases, she blamed Norwood Jewish Orphanage.

I would have laid the damage fair and square on Big Sadie, the grandmother that we never met, who weighed in at twenty stones, and pegged it at forty-four from diabetes and heart disease. I knew her as nothing more than a small black and white photograph, a colossal woman in a flowery dress, seated upon a park bench, eating a banana and smiling at the world. I always wondered how she could smile when she had given three children away.

Some nights after an especially big supper, Mum said, "can you believe I was sent to a convalescent home? To think they had to fatten me up." She pushed her big belly out

in her crimpolene smock, and patted the mound of flesh. “It’s all paid for,” she said.

As infrequent as it was, when the fancy took her, Mum told me a few snippets about her life before Norwood. Her eyes looked soft and dewy, and when she finished she lifted her dimpled arms into the air and yawned as if the memories tired her.

“Before Norwood I begged and stole for my supper. Big Sadie taught me how to thief pickled herrings from a stall in Hessel Street market, and run all the way home in my bare stocking feet with them. It’s funny, even though I got a pair of shoes, a school uniform and a belly full of food at Norwood, I still cried myself to sleep at night, and I wet the bed a fair few times as well.”

I didn’t think it was funny at all, not one bit, not funny, peculiar or ironic, just plain sad.

“On the day that Big Sadie dropped me off at the orphanage, I didn’t think I would ever see her again. She said she would visit, but I knew that the train fare from Stepney Green to West Norwood was a tuppence and halfpenny more than she could afford. I knew this even though I was only five years old. She hugged me so tight when it was time to say goodbye, I thought she might change her mind and take me home again. She locked her arms around me and clasped her hands together, and it was left up to Matron to separate us, to wrestle us apart.”

I imagined Mum, a stick thin waif of a child. How absurdly small she must have looked next to the enormity of Big Sadie.

“Poor Sadie, she only wanted the best for me,” Mum said. “She told me that Norwood would teach me my three R’s, that I would learn a trade. And of course there

was the subject of my sisters, Ann and Barbara. This was the first I had heard about having sisters. Ann was eleven and Barbara was eight. Big Sadie had spaced us out so evenly, it was as if she had considered keeping us. Ann was blonde haired and blue eyed, but Barbara had brown hair, copper eyes and a tanned skin tone despite it being winter in West London. We don't have another sister, Frances said. She was outspoken, the brazen one of the two of them.

I looked for Big Sadie to referee the conversation, but she was already on her way home by then, unable to stay composed for long enough to see all of us three girls together.

I was still new to Norwood, when Lizette Beaumont came to visit. 'I am in want of a spot of philanthropy,' she told the matron. She always used big words like that.

It was just what Big Sadie had hoped for, a wealthy Jewish woman who wanted to foster me. My scabs had healed over, and I'd gained a few pounds by the time we met. Matron invited the two of us into her office. It was Friday afternoon and the whole place smelled of schmaltz.

'This is Shirley,' the Matron said, introducing me. 'She's named after the child star Shirley Temple.'

'I can see why,' Lizette said. She must have been trying to be polite, because there wasn't a hint of Shirley Temple about me. I was dark instead of fair, thin rather than plump, and I didn't know a single step of tap dance. As well as this I had buckteeth, pigeon toes, and I was mute.

Matron said there were lots like me. I just needed to settle in. She made me sound

like a blimming puppy that had to be house trained or a horse that required breaking in.”

“Did she have a husband? Was there a Mister Beaumont?” I asked.

“No, there wasn’t, and it turned out to be a bit of a problem in the long run,” Mum said. She didn’t elaborate and I didn’t press her. She had started to reach inside and unlock the parts of her that had closed after Al had left. Sometimes, like the sun when it peaked between the tower blocks, she lit up, forgot herself, just like old times. That’s when I remembered that she told a bloody good story, and all good stories deserved a good ear.

“Sundays were visiting days at Norwood. I woke early and waited for my long-legged special auntie to arrive at the orphanage, stroll up the stately path, and into the foyer. Without saying a word, I held out my hand and she whisked me away to Kew Gardens, London Zoo, Hyde Park, Carnaby Street. Every week she showed me somewhere new. Afterwards we returned to her large Belgravia home on Eaton Terrace, where I sat on an embroidered chair in the parlor and listened to tales by Beatrix Potter.”

“What about the fact that you didn’t speak?” I asked.

“It was understood,” Mum said. “The war knew no bounds. I wasn’t the only one to suffer. Lizette’s brother John was killed in the battle at Arnhem Bridge. He was in the Parachute Regiment. Just twenty-eight years old when he was shot in the chest. She had been close to her brother. Losing him must have been quite a blow.

‘You don’t have to talk,’ she told me. ‘I know how you feel.’ We drank Earl Grey tea and ate bread and honey, served by a maid. I ate my fill, making up for lost time, and when no one was looking, I wrapped some bread and butter in a serviette for Big Sadie,

who I never saw, and never stopped missing, and still cried out for in the night.”

Mum’s talk of Norwood stayed with me long after she had mentioned the facts. Always it was the Norwood where she stood on her first day in the great hall with its Victorian busts and white marble staircase, trying not to pick at the itchy scabs on her face and body. The Norwood where a sign hung over the arched entranceway of the building, that read, “Jews’ Hospital and Orphan Asylum.” The Norwood that had memorial bedplates and plaques all over the hall, that she said reminded her of a graveyard. The dark imposing Norwood, where she wet her bed and cried herself to sleep, the Norwood where Mum was starving and left alone for the second time in her short five years.

6.

I awoke to the smell of mothballs. Mum was digging around in a bin liner full of stuff that she had rummaged for the neighbours. I was tired of pretending not to be offended by the aroma, or Mum's habit, especially first thing in the morning. But it was silly of me to let my true feelings show. I didn't think Mum had the energy or inclination to chastise me, not with all those freshly sorted clothes to distribute. If I'd known I might have hidden such ingratitude and feigned interest in the screeching Maria Callas, tried on an outfit or two, anything to placate her. But it was too late.

"Look at you, your face is as long as a fiddle. Why don't you go and knock for Burned Janey and No Cheeks Mike?" Mum said. Though her sentence rose at the end and started with an interrogative, I knew I had no choice. Mum didn't ask, she told. I looked at her, the resolve in her dark eyes, her adamant stance, the enormous space she took up. It was starting to spit outside and the drip-drop was loud on the aluminum-framed windows.

"Why?" I asked, knowing full well that the why stick was a thing of the past.

"Z," Mum answered, and her jowls quivered as she laughed, the way they always did when she threw a joke into a situation that was otherwise unfunny.

"Take your brother with you, and see if No Cheeks Mike's mum wants to come back with you. Tell her I have some nice bits for her."

Mum returned to the task in hand, and was making camphor-scented piles of clobber before Dan had even tied his shoelaces

“Of all the freaks that we know,” I said to Dan. He nodded as we started toward St Finbar’s Tower, to knock for Burned Janey. We dawdled despite the rain. No other child on Chingford Hall went anywhere near Burned Janey let alone played with her. It smelled like wet dog and beef cobbler on Janey’s doorstep. I pulled my polo-neck jumper up over my mouth and nose, breathing in and out through the filter of fabric.

“You knock,” I said to Dan, pointing at the letterbox and standing back just enough to be able to run away should it be necessary. Dan tap-tapped on the door, and the Alsatians that Janey kept for protection barked deep and long, as if we were prey. Janey’s grandmother opened the door, trying to control the unruly dogs with one hand and turn her hearing aid up with the other. I stood behind Dan, a head taller, and twenty months his senior, and I tried not to cower.

“You can’t let them smell your fear,” Mum said whenever I shirked away from dogs in the street.

“Can Janey come to our house and play?” Dan asked. I nodded with vigour, and tried to dispel the thought that Janey’s grandmother had caused Janey’s disfigurement. Word had it that she panicked when the little girl’s flammable nightdress went up in flames, resulting in Janey’s third degree burns.

“Oh that’s so nice of you.” Janey’s grandmother said, pushing the dogs into a sit and stay mode. “Janey, your friends are here.”

Janey left with us, though she seemed anything but jubilant about the idea. She kept her head down and shuffled quietly between the two of us, her burned skin concealed by her posture, a hat and scarf and thick woolen mittens.

“We only knocked for you because we were made to.” I said. I kicked an empty beer bottle along the gutter. I saw Janey follow the spinning brown glass.

“I’m meant to be getting ready to go to Hollywood,” I said, skipping ahead, trying to think good thoughts and to twirl like Gene Kelly in *Singin in the Rain*.

“What now?” she asked, her voice raspy, and dry.

“No, not now silly,” I said, getting acquainted with my brave facade, wondering if it hid my compulsion to know if Burned Janey was burned all over, whether she had to pee out of a scarred nunny. “When my auntie gets here, my auntie Lizette from America,” I continued. “She knows the movie stars.”

“Take no notice of her, she’s a big fat liar,” Dan said.

“I’m not so,” I screamed at him in an American accent.

“You are too,” he reeled back in the same mocking accent, as if we were in a pantomime on Broadway.

Janey slowed once more, her spine hunched over like a jack knife, her face to the ground. She flicked rainwater from under her eyes; at least I assumed it was rainwater, as surely my talk of movie stars couldn’t make her cry.

“I’d ask you to visit, but I know you can’t miss school,” I said. She shrugged, and as she brought her shoulders up to her ears, she looked like an old lady, even though she was only twelve years old, my age. Janey went to a special school, which struck me as odd, considering it was her body that had been melted and not her mind. Our school didn’t take anyone like Janey. Apart from Roger who hobbled around in his calipers, and the odd kid who broke a leg here and there and turned up to school in Plaster of Paris

with a pair of crutches, there were no kids who couldn't walk or talk at Chingford Hall Primary School, and there were no kids who were burned from head to foot like Janey.

Each morning Janey's special school bus pulled into a reserved bay outside the community centre, and each afternoon it dropped her off again.

"We have to knock for No Cheeks Mike," I said, and at that she seemed to perk up. She quickened her step and looked out into the rain, as if this was a real treat, a get together based on friendship rather than penance for my long face. She looked at me through the rain with her narrow eyes, two slits beneath mounds of scar tissue. Her frizzled hair escaped her hat. But it was her nose that was most peculiar, burned to a snub that resembled a pig's snout.

"Come on, I'll race you," I said, running into the distance, gaining enough ground to stop, bend over and exhale a full deep breath of resolve and deliberation. I looked at her hobbling to catch up with me. "I will not be scared of Burned Janey," I said to myself. I halted at No Cheeks Mike's ground floor flat. Without being prompted, Burned Janey took it upon herself to knock on the door.

We had met No Cheeks Mike at Chase Lane Park and Mum realized rather quickly that there was a chance of educating us even further. She recognized how much Janey and Mike liked each other, and being the Yenta that she was, she ordered them up as a pair for visits thereafter.

Mike and his mum, Margaret came with us without any hesitation whatsoever. Mike wore nothing but his school shirt even though it was the weekend and a cold weekend at that. He put one arm over Janey's sway back and kissed her burned cheek.

She smiled and I tried not to grimace. Mike had been born without any cheekbones, his face caved in on both sides, making his eyes bulge. He had undergone even more operations than Burned Janey, but rather than looking down at the ground like she did, he actually looked us straight in the eye so that we could see the full terrifying scale of his disfigurement.

Unlike Mike, Margaret didn't make much eye contact. She was pale, and she constantly wound her lank greasy hair around her index finger, even as we walked.

Upon reaching our flat, Mum looked at Mike in his damp school shirt and said, "You'll catch your death of cold dressed like that." She sorted through the bin liner for a jumper, and threw it at him.

"Oh thanks Shirley," Margaret said, and she wove her hair around her finger at a greater speed.

"Okay kids, clear off downstairs," Mum said. "Why don't you have a look at the rest of the bits Marge? I'll put the kettle on."

"I'm going to Hollywood." I said, once we settled in my bedroom. "I'm going to be famous."

Mike pulled the door shut behind him, affording us just a weak glow from my nightlight. He and Janey stared at me.

"Or I'll marry someone famous."

The two of them kept up their gaze, and I saw them squeeze each other's hands, a pact demonstrating their disbelief.

"Well I will meet famous people, that you can't deny." I stamped, assertively, like

I'd seen Shirley Temple do.

"You're too fat," Dan said.

Mike and Janey laughed with Dan unashamedly. Mike swayed with glee, bending forward at the waist to put him on a par with Janey, the two of them hunched and crippled.

"Auntie says I'm beautiful, more than can be said for some people around here." I pulled a face that stretched my skin taut, and made my eyes bulbous. I climbed up onto my bed, and made myself tall.

"You didn't take your shoes off," Janey said.

I looked at my wet footprints on the eiderdown. "So what, I won't be here much longer."

Mike shook his frightening face at me and put his arm around Janet. "Let's play a game," he said.

"*Babes in the Wood*," I said. "I'll be the witch and Dan can be the wizard."

"No, Janey's the witch and I'm the wizard, and this here is my wizard apprentice," Mike said, pointing to Dan.

I noticed how Mike's missing cheekbones caused his lower lids to droop which in turn exposed his red-rimmed sockets to the world. It was the same effect that Woody went for when he turned his eyelids inside out and chased me with the chicken foot. The difference was that within seconds of Woody doing his trick, his eyes watered and flicked back to normal, Mike's look on the other hand was permanent.

"So *Babes in the Wood* it is. You are the beautiful famous Hollywood babe and

we have to catch you,” Mike said. “We’ll close our eyes and give you fifty to hide.”

“Yes, Yes,” Janey croaked in her raspy voice, she seemed braver with Mike in her midst. She wheezed a lot and spoke like a gruff old man that had smoked too many Woodbines. It made me wonder if the fire had damaged her vocal chords and respiratory system.

The two of them, self-defined witch and wizard turned their backs and began to count, as if it was decided. 1,2,3,4,5.... I looked at Dan, 6,7,8... grabbed his chubby hand and ran. There was no way they were taking him. He was a babe, not some freak’s apprentice. There was only one place that I could think of to hide. I dragged him out into the hall and towards the ladder that reached up into the high cupboard, the place where Mum kept all the stuff from her rummage sprees. With a surge of adrenalin, I helped to heave his body up onto the first rung, “come on, hurry up,” I pleaded. His cooperation was a rarity, but one that neither of us could dwell on right now.

The cupboard seemed darker than usual, and despite Mum being upstairs there was something unsettling about this game. I looked at Dan through the darkness and hoped that he wouldn’t cough or fidget or attract attention to us.

“Fifty, coming, ready or not.” I heard Mike shout.

“She took our wizard apprentice,” Janey said.

“She’ll pay for it,” Mike said.

“Be quiet or I’ll surrender you to them,” I told Dan.

I stared at the shadows of the bin liners, a black mountain range that framed Dan’s small body. There was something I had overlooked in my haste to get away from the

enemy. The dust. It was Dan's number one irritant. I saw him rub his eyes with his bare knuckles. He sniffed, and I braced myself, willing him not to cough or sneeze. I looked at his allergy-ridden face so hard it started to change. His eyes grew red and he sneered at me, his face a grotesque mish mash of horridness. I looked away, my body growing heavier beneath me.

"Achoo," Dan sneezed. The sound and snot ricocheted at me. The cupboard amplified the noise like a concert hall with fine acoustics. I held my breath. Moments later the ladder creaked under the weight of a body creeping up the rungs. The heavy door swung open and smashed against the wall. Mike balanced precariously at the entrance to the den. Dan and I clung together and screamed.

Janey stood at the foot of the ladder and clapped her hands in appreciation of the scene. Mike smiled at her, the two of them fulfilled with their find.

"Move over, I want in," Mike said.

"Me too," Janey croaked, as she climbed haphazardly up the ladder, her spine twisted and her clawed fingers clutching at the rungs. When she reached the top, she held out one of her hands. She expected me to hold it, to pull her into our sacred space. In a sideways glance I saw Dan scuffling over to the furthest edge of the cupboard, a look of dread plastered on his sweaty face. It was up to me. I held out my hand and closed my eyes. Janey's hand was dry and coarse, like the split leather boxing glove in our toy box. She gripped me tightly, her thick talons pressed taut against my wrist. She wheezed and puffed from the effort of hauling herself up and in. Burned Janey and No Cheeks Mike were in the hall cupboard either side of me.

Mike smirked in anticipation of his next trick. He reached toward the cupboard door in order to trap us, his victims, to ensnare us in pitch and utter darkness. Dan let out his loudest squeal so far. It brought Mum hurtling down the stairs with Margaret at her heels. “What’s all the noise about?” Mum asked.

I couldn’t tell her and neither could Dan. Speaking out would have gone against her best intentions for us.

“Well?” she said. The ash fell from the end of her cigarette, and she ground it into the carpet with her rough calloused heel. I looked pleadingly at her. Dan began to cough.

“If you scream again your friends are going home,” she said.

The two women turned their backs on us and retreated upstairs. That was when Dan and I knew what to do, we squawked and hollered until our voices were as raspy and hoarse as Janey’s, until Mum and Margaret could bear it no longer, until the witch and the wizard and the wizard’s mother with the greasy hair were sent home with the bin liner of stuff, and we were sat down and given a lecture on how appearances are deceiving and beauty is only skin deep.

7.

1976 was sweltering, the hottest summer on record for more than a century. The Council declared a ban on hosepipes, which affected the people with houses and gardens in North Chingford and Uppington more than us.

On the estate, the square patch of grass that the dogs monopolized turned to straw, and Martin's the newsagent, ran out of ice poles. Each stuffy and drought-ridden afternoon when I made my way back from school, I detected Chingford Hall before I saw it. It smelled of cheap barley wine, sticky and sweet where it had spilled on the scorched pavement outside the Spread Eagle Pub, rubbish that the caretaker hadn't yet managed to burn, and dog shit. Always there was the stink of dog shit. As well as the scent of the estate, there was the sound. Mum's opera blasting across the podium. "It has to be loud to get the full effect," she said, as if there was some kind of mandate on the volume.

I wondered if Dan would stay here his whole life, joining the queue at the dole office every Monday morning, and sitting on that low wall outside of the pub to drink his giro away, his face turning ruddy in the sun.

I didn't want to end up on the dole or outside the pub drinking barley wine. Nor did I want freaks for friends. I wanted to be beautiful, even if it was only skin-deep, and I didn't care about what was inside, even though that was the part that was meant to count according to Mum.

At twelve and three quarters, I was fed up with living in a box in the sky, and I could afford to be. I had Auntie Lizette in America.

To my dear Auntie Liz in America,

Thank you for the new view-master slides. I have been looking at them a lot recently. I would love to see some of the sights in real life.

I would also like to know how the special effects were done for Land of the Giants. Mum said it is probably a secret and I shouldn't ask, but I'm good at keeping secrets.

I am learning how to improve my writing at school, and using an encyclopedia to check facts. I hope that this will be helpful for my future career.

Everyone sends love, well not everyone. My friends at school do not believe that I have a famous auntie in Hollywood, even though I have shown them my letters from you.

Hannah xxxx

Dearest Hannah,

I am so proud of you. You are very special to me, like my own little girl, just like your mother was once upon a time.

Remember you can do anything and go anywhere you want to in life...

Work hard at school, and don't worry if your friends don't believe you have an aunt in Hollywood. I will ask our cameraman and editor for Land of the Giants exactly how they managed to pull off such a trick.

Your devoted Auntie Liz xxx

By night I contemplated the differences between Mum and Auntie. I knew that everything was better in America. Auntie wouldn't be caught dead rummaging, I imagined her driving a convertible Cadillac, pink to match her coat, her hair and silk scarf stretched out behind her in the warm breeze. Auntie's steering wheel and controls for her automobile were positioned on the left as opposed to the right, and she drove on the right hand side of the street not the left.

In my mind's eye I saw her shopping in Beverley Hills, rubbing shoulders with film stars, then returning to her house on the hill, a spacious house with an unlimited supply of candy, which is what Americans call sweets. She threw what she called her purse and not her bag over her arm, checked to make sure her wallet and not her purse was inside, sat the purse on the hood and not the bonnet of the pink caddy, and got her groceries out of the trunk and not the boot. Once inside her kitchen she unloaded the candy into a decorative jar and positioned it just so on the mahogany table in the dining room. On a clear day this room boasted a view as far as the Pacific Ocean. Auntie wouldn't eat the candy. She had to stay trim and beautiful. I would be trim and beautiful too one day. I would be Auntie's famous research assistant for the disaster movies and programs about space and other worldly things.

My best friend Donna was the one and only person who I properly confided in about Auntie Liz's plan to adopt me. Donna knew to keep her griddle shut about the things I told her. I loved her for that, for that and for how she looked. She had a blonde bob that she washed and blow-dried every morning before school. I thought she was the prettiest girl on our estate. Her features were small and tidy, not big and protruding like

mine. Mum on the other hand thought my best friend had squinty eyes and a snub nose.

Bert liked Donna a lot. He had proven it time and time again. When she came over on Thursday evenings to watch Top of the Pops, he insisted on dancing with her. She giggled and looked awkward about the idea, but he was persistent. He wrapped himself around her for a slow close dance, even though the music was fast. Between the two of them they seemed all out of rhythm.

On this particular Thursday, Jimmy Saville was hosting a Top of the Pops special. Bert was fresh out of the bath, making the whole room smell of old spice. He did a few solo dance steps for our benefit, and then pulled Donna up from the couch to join him. His maroon dressing gown was tied loosely at the waist, flapping in rhythm to Kool and the Gang. This was all well and good, even entertaining at a pinch until he made a sudden wide maneuver and I witnessed the fact that he wasn't wearing any under pants. I hoped Donna didn't notice.

I looked towards the kitchen at Mum, busy frying bangers for supper. She wore a gaudy apron that she wiped her hands on intermittently. I was hoping she might happen to glance in at us and tell Bert to stop.

“Bert, that's enough,” she would say. “You don't want all that do you love?” to Donna.

As of tonight Mum didn't interrupt the routine. Bert huffed and puffed hard enough to need his asthma pump. I kept my head down, and studied his fancy footwork, compromised by his feet slopping in his bathroom slippers. Donna was such a good friend to suffer the dancing like she did. I think she would have done anything for me.

At 8:15 am, on the dot, every morning, she called for me and together we dithered the mile and a half to school along the side of the North Circular Road. On the very morning after the Top of the Pops special, it was so foggy we could barely see the path through the alleyway that led us out of Chingford Hall. The first leg of the journey saw us walking alongside the industrial estate, and that was where I told Donna about my plan.

“I’m really going,” I shouted above the noise of the traffic, “to live with Auntie Liz in Hollywood.” She threw me a puzzled look, as if she was stuck on her Maths homework. “Mum doesn’t think I know.” Donna stared at me, her new Woolworth’s azure shimmer starting to flake and crack in the grooves of her lids.

“I hope you’re right,” she said, stopping to pull up her pop socks that fell down again almost as quickly because the elastic had gone from the top of them. I assumed she must have been jealous, that’s why she wasn’t pleased for me. It was only natural with her being stuck here while I was going off to get famous.

Donna’s mum and dad and her older brother, like most of the people on our estate worked at The London Rubber Company. They pumped the stinking grey out of the chimney all day and night making condoms for men, and marigold gloves and disposable knickers for women. I wondered if Donna would end up there as well.

“It’s good money,” Donna’s mum told us. “Time and a half on a Saturday and double time on Sundays.” Donna’s dad had been working there for so long, he had been promoted to the supervisor on the graveyard shift.

“Hang on,” Donna said, “my feet are killing me.” She was stuffing wads of tissue in the back of her shoes, trying to bridge the gap where they slipped up and down

wearing the skin away and leaving bloody sores on the backs of her heels. As I waited for her, I looked out into the road and the rush of traffic and I saw Bert. He was bouncing above the rest of us in the firm's juggernaut. I waved furiously and jumped up and down on the spot shouting "Bert, give us a lift." I ran a few paces along the side of the dual carriageway, but his window was wound up, and he was too busy singing and bouncing to the radio and slurping his morning tea from a Tupperware beaker to notice me.

"If that had been my real dad he would have heard me," I said. Donna seemed more quizzical than before, screwing up her button nose.

"How come?"

"He drove with the window down, all year round. My mum told me."

It was true, she had, and she said that my father was handsome too, that he looked like Gene Pitney. Forever afterwards when a dark haired man in his mid-thirties drove slowly past me with his window wound all the way down, and his arm resting on the sill, I strained to see if he was my father.

"Can you remember him?" Donna asked, "your real dad."

"I think so," I said, "he had green eyes and big feet."

It didn't give either of us much to go on. Donna probably found it hard to remember a time when Bert hadn't been on the scene, and to be honest so did I. He had planted his feet so firmly under the table that Mum had suggested I should call him Dad.

8.

From the very first moment that I realized Auntie Liz was planning to adopt me, I had asked Mum and Bert to make me a baby sister. She would be the daughter that would replace me. Mum preferred girls. “Don’t have boys when you grow up,” she said, “nothing but trouble, apart from you Dan.” She winked at me, because we all knew Dan was a bloody nuisance.

I knew what Mum needed to do to make a baby. She may have been mealy mouthed in some respects, but she had told Dan and I the facts of life sooner than we could fully comprehend them, sooner than our peers at school had any inkling of such matters. “You should know early on so you don’t bring any unwanted children into the world.”

“So can you?” I nagged, “I really want a baby sister. Dan does too.”

“Is that right Dan?” Mum said. Dan shrugged.

Bert and Mum needed to click in order to make my baby sister. Not a click of a light switch or a click of the tongue, and not the clicking of fingers but the kind of click when sperm meets egg and an embryo is formed.

“Have you clicked yet?” I asked them in the mornings. “Well have you?” They laughed at my compulsion, the desperateness with which I pleaded. It wasn’t long before I got my way. Mum and Bert had clicked. Mum was throwing up on a daily basis and suffering terrible headaches. By the end of what the visiting midwife called Mum’s first trimester, which I thought sounded more like a festive holiday than the third month of

pregnancy; Mum asked Susan Dearle from next door to take us to school.

“I was never like this with Han or Dan,” she said, rubbing at her stomach, which was already growing to quite enormous proportions.

“Your Mum’s quite old to be starting again with another baby,” Susan said one morning. “Won’t you be fourteen, by the time the thing is born?”

“Yes, and she’s having a girl you know, you can call it a she, not just a thing.

“How do you know?” Susan asked me. “You can’t be too sure.”

“I just know,” I answered, even though there was no proof other than my own bossy insistence.

As Mum started to change shape and waddle as opposed to wiggle I felt smug.

“Show Susan the baby Mum,” I said before we left home in the mornings. I lifted Mum’s nightshirt, placed my hands on her belly and stared at the bulge with avid concentration, sometimes I even poked and prodded to get some action. “Look see that,” I said, amazed by what looked like my sister’s hand or foot as it made contact with the underside of mum’s silvery lined stretched skin.

The kicking was most fervent in the bathtub, but Susan resisted coming into the bathroom. “I have to draw the line somewhere,” she said.

Mum seemed softer after those long baths, not just in the way she looked and felt but in the way she talked to me, and asked me if I really approved of Bert and the fact that she was having another baby after more than a decade.

Dear Auntie Liz in America,

We are all so excited about Mum being pregnant. Well to be honest Dan isn't that overstruck on the idea, but Mum says it's because he's a boy and boys his age aren't really bothered about babies. I'm making up for his lack though. I can't wait. I know that it is a girl. Mum, Bert and Dan think that there is no guarantee. But they don't believe in wishful thinking. Not like you. I think often about the risks that you have taken and how lucky you have been. I want to follow in your footsteps and see the world.

I love you Auntie Liz.

Hannah x

It was all I could do to stop myself from saying, I know that it is meant to be a secret, but I cannot wait for you to come and get me and make me your own little girl. I would be happy to be your assistant as well.

To my dearest darling Hannah,

I think it will be wonderful for you to have a new sibling after so many years. I think you are absolutely right about the power of positive thought. However, I hope you won't be too disappointed if the baby is a boy. A baby brother might be fun too.

I am happy that you want to travel. It certainly broadens the mind. I know that you get to see most of the U.K countryside by journeying in the lorry with Bert. What a marvelous opportunity that is for you. As for me, you are right. I have been very lucky. Most of my very interesting work assignments have come about unexpectedly. When I

was working as an editor for Doubleday children's books in New York, I decided I didn't like living in such a cold climate. There was ice on the streets in the winter, and then horribly hot humid summers. At one of the company meetings they said that they wanted one of the editors to accompany the sales person out to the West Coast. I jumped at the chance. The trip took two months. I visited many different bookshops all over Southern California, Arizona and New Mexico. I loved the country. I got to see the Grand Canyon, the Petrified Forest and some of the old cities in New Mexico - very romantic - I thought it was a beautiful way of life, the Indians, all the dome shaped buildings - I loved it. You will love it too when you get to experience these things, and I know you will.

That's when I decided I wanted to live somewhere in the west. I told one of the senior editors of my plan. He said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I don't know! I am hoping I will be lucky." He introduced me to the head of the reading department at Warner Brothers, and there my luck held because she said she couldn't take on any more staff, she had to just keep the people she had. By chance, however, when they closed their office in New York, they had an overflow of books, so they took me on temporarily and had me read manuscripts and books, writing them up with suggestions for making films.

So you see my darling, life is serendipitous. I want you to remember that, always.

Of course there is more, so much more, but I am running out of room, so I will tell you the next chapter of my life in my next letter. Give my love to Mummy and Bert and Dan,

Your loving Auntie Liz in America xxxx

I thought about Auntie Liz constantly, Auntie Liz and the baby. They were symbiotic even though they had never met. The baby would guarantee my freedom. I could not have one without the other.

9.

When Mum reached the end of the second trimester and her stomach swelled to unbelievable dimensions, Bert asked me to accompany him up the road more frequently. Most of the time I conceded without too much fuss, but on this particular Wednesday morning as I stood in the kitchen making his flask of tea, I looked at Mum and pulled a troubled face.

“Mum, I have a lot of homework.”

“Why don’t you take it with you?”

“Don’t you need me to stay and help you?” I asked, trying a different tack.

Bert whistled a verse of “one enchanted evening” from the living room, and then he called out, “okay let’s get this show on the road.”

“Your dad likes you with him Han,” Mum said, as she pushed my fringe out of my eyes.

I grabbed hold of one of her hands and squeezed it, the puffiness of her flesh warm in my grasp. For a split second I thought I registered a glimpse of understanding.

"Please," I said, looking cautiously toward the living room where Bert was busy pulling out the army kit bag, and smoothing down his remaining few wisps of hair that flew up again in immediate defiance. I thought I saw it again, in the way that Mum bit her lip, pensive, as if she might relent, but then Bert came in, all frisky and deodorized.

"Okay you two, enough of that jibber jabber," he said to us, opening the door and taking a wide manly stride into the corridor. Mum freed herself from my grasp, “go on be

off with you, you silly sausage. You know you'll enjoy yourself."

"She's worrying about homework," Mum called out after Bert.

Bert tutted, "as if that business can teach her anything compared to life on the frog and toad."

Mum blew us a kiss and retreated, the door slammed hard in the wind.

"I'm your teacher now," Bert said. "Grab a hold of this." He offered me a greasy strap of the army kit bag and we made our way through the dowdiness of the morning, he whistled once more, and the cold air whipped at my back.

The lorry took up almost half of Marigold Way. It sat unapologetically, a gleaming monstrosity of a vehicle.

"Hey Betsy girl," Bert said, giving her two friendly thumps on the driver's side door. Mum said she should have been a he and called Bert boy, but Bert said vehicles were always female, vehicles and natural disasters. It took a fair deal of leverage to get from the ground to the seat of the cab. Bert helped by cupping my bum cheeks and hoisting me up. He chuckled to himself as I scanned the horizon in embarrassment. I perched on the edge of my sit bones, tentative. I saw Bert in the interior mirror. He was on the trailer jumping between the delivery sheets that Bertowed in the breeze, fighting to bring them to a neat arrangement, tying them down with thick hemp, his thin lips cursing at his fate. He checked his knots, nodded at his craftsmanship, which he said he'd learned in the army, and in his usual style he side stepped into a modest front garden, unzipped his trousers and watered one of the only flowering shrubs that was left bracing the advent of winter.

He landed hard in the driver's seat, his sturdy brown work boots splattered with telltale drips of urine. "Now you know where the expression comes from," he elbowed me, "splashing my boots." He turned the key in the ignition and the juggernaut quivered, rising after a long sleep.

"Good ole Betsy girl, always starts first time," he said, banging his fist on the dashboard. Waves of diesel fumes merged with blasts of stale air from the heating vent. I sank into the worn give of the passenger seat. Bert swung the vehicle round with a sway of his entire frame, straightening up, he brought the radio to life. With one hand he fumbled around in his kit bag, pulled out the flask of tea and handed it to me.

"Pour your ole dad a cuppa Rosie will you love?"

By the time we reached the midlands I had counted over fourteen thousand lampposts. We pulled into our first stop; a warehouse much like the others with a narrow cobbled yard, and men with grey faces smoking roll-ups and operating forklifts. Bert hauled himself out and brought one of them to the window to ogle at me.

"That's my daughter, pretty ain't she?"

"Yeah, not like you, you ugly bastard."

"Piss off."

They laughed and punched each other playfully, then covered their mouths in mock horror at swearing in front of me. We were delivering planks of wood on this job. Bert got into the back and pulled the pallets down the length of the vehicle where the forklift waited, sliding its metal arms under the load and lifting it clean off the bed of the lorry. The whirring of machinery and shouts of the workers filled the yard. I finally got

out of the cab to stretch my legs and go to the toilet, a grim cubicle with no soap, no hot water and just a couple of squares of toilet paper.

On my return Bert had got me a slim cold bottle of coca cola, a bag of cheese and onion crisps and a hot soapy flannel from the staff canteen. I wiped my hands, and settled back in the vehicle for the long afternoon. From the Midlands we carried on North up the M6. I opened the window just a crack to feel the force of air take my hand. A cold current swept into the cab, damp with the threat of rainfall. The sky darkened with tones of mauve and grey. The moors insatiable as they were, rose greedily in swathes of green, each blade of grass and head of clover braced for the torrent. The animals knew too, moving in great bleating and mooing entities, sniffing their surrounds, their vulnerability unnerved me.

When Bert finally pulled over for the night and silenced the engine. I was asleep. At least I hoped it seemed that way. I had burrowed deep into my sleeping bag at dusk and was busy practicing a gentle expression and even breath. This entailed closing my lids tightly enough to cover my eyes completely yet not so tightly that it creased my brow. I heard Bert stretch, sigh and jump down from the cab, landing heavily on what sounded like gravel. He must have stayed close to the vehicle to splash his boots as I could discern the stop start spray from where I lay.

As he climbed back in and onto his sleeping shelf, he reached for the overhead interior light. It clicked off. I waited for the swish of the homemade curtain to divide the two of us. Mum had got the fabric from a second-hand stall at Walthamstow High Street. It was fresh floral cotton.

“I worked my fingers to the bone,” she said, holding up the hand-sewn curtain rucked on a thin cream wire. “It will give you both a bit of privacy, and it was only 50 pence a yard.” She inspected her right hand, and rubbed the groove in her index finger.

I knew that if I dared to open my eyes in the half-light of the lorry park I would see how the curtain had since lost its fresh appeal, dotted with oil-stained fingerprints and faded from the sun beating through the window.

My sleeping bench was hard and unyielding. It compounded my stiff posture, exacerbating the feeling that sleep was some far away concept. I lay still, facing the dashboard, curled in the darkness of the cab. I heard the unevenness of Bert’s wheezy breath and I smelled diesel fumes on his clothes. He never woke me; at least according to our pretense. I moved over without protest as I felt his body impinge on my space and curve spoon like against my spine. I closed my eyes tighter as the zip to my sleeping bag clicked down through its teeth. Exposed to the now frigid air, I felt the hairs on my arms stand to attention from a blanket of goose pimples. Bert’s calloused hand reached around me and moved down the length of my torso, stopping at my knees to unclamp my scissored legs. I heard the steady tick tock of his wristwatch. I felt it too, the metal links of a big man’s Timex, cold against my inner thigh.

“Babies like ticking,” Mum once told me. “I saw it on a documentary. When the baby is born we should put the mantel clock next to its cot. The ticking will remind it of my heartbeat.”

Bert found a gap beneath the stiff waistband of my jeans and groped inside. I held my breath and listened to the radio that played in my mind, no channel but every

channel, a garble and fusion of songs and plays, Bert whistling one enchanted evening. Footsteps in the gravel, a swatch of black that dimmed to navy then purple, fat drops of rain bouncing off the windscreen, the wipers, swish, swish, swash and the lamp posts, 2311, 2312, 2313, and the whoosh of the wind channeling its way through my ears into my brain. I gasped for air then held my breath again. When my body betrayed my pretense with an involuntary shudder of pleasure, Bert stopped pressing his hips into my buttocks, turned over onto his back, took his hand and attention away from me, unzipped his jeans and began fumbling around in his underpants.

Once he took my hand and put it down his trousers, but that was a different time and I tried not to think about it. This time he wheezed on his inhale and blew jagged raspy exhalations. I opened one eye, a mere and cautious slit, saw his face, pained and contorted, the blasts of his hot breath rising through the cold air of the cab and drifting above his frenzied push-pull movements.

My own hands moved to my sleeping bag, I ran my fingers along the zipper, each tooth perfectly even, square and cold. I worked my fingernails over the neat uniform metal, up and down the straight edge, counting, in my head, to myself, without moving my tongue or my lips of my parched mouth.

One giant convulsion and a series of short asthmatic like coughs and Bert stopped dead. With what felt like his entire unrestrained weight, he leaned against me. I kept my eyes closed. I faked sleep as I always did during the aftermath of his trembling, a sleep that allowed me to feel his big head and flushed face close to mine and smell his breath, stale and putrid as he whispered, “don’t forget this is between us, there’s a good girl.

Your mum will only go and do something silly like get rid of the baby if she found out, you know what she's like."

Bert was asleep on the count of 946 zipper teeth. He didn't stir when I edged out of the cab to do a wee. I was careful as I squatted, gentle and slow in the release of my urine, hoping I could avoid the telltale signs of his heavy handedness and the sharp sting from his ragged fingernails.

I would never tell or squeal or split on Bert. No way. My little sister was not even two thirds cooked, and already it felt as if I had been waiting for her for an eternity. Once she came into the world I could make firm plans to leave. I couldn't wait.

It was after eleven o'clock the following night when we arrived back at Chingford Hall Estate. Bert did his signature rat a tat knock at the front door, then turned to face me full on with a wink and a gap toothed smirk. Mum shuffled up the stairs, peered through the spy hole, unbolted the mortise lock, and slipped the security chain from its runner.

"Ooh ooh," she called, pulling back the door to reveal her sleepy face and disheveled hair, her pajama bottoms were hoisted high and taut over her bump, her bosoms hung low and soft, traced by the clinging fabric of her nightshirt.

She reached for me, pulled me to her. I felt the warmth of her recent slumber and smelled sleep on her breath. It was a fleeting reunion for there was no time to procrastinate. I wrestled myself from her grip. Bert was behind me with the kit bag in hand, saying, "you'd think we'd been gone for a week. Come on it's my turn."

"Lucky I thought to leave my earplugs out, you'd have had to break the door down otherwise," Mum said.

Slipping past them both in their clumsy embrace, I hurried downstairs to the bathroom, and locked the door. It took just a moment to locate the worn rubber plug and place it firmly in its home on the bottom of the scratched enamel tub. I turned the hot tap as far as it would go, knowing it would yield a good scorching half a tub before it turned lukewarm and then cold. I unpeeled my clothes and kicked them into a heap adjacent to the tub. I checked my expression in the mirror before the last patch of glass clouded over, rendering me invisible in the mist even to myself.

I brushed my teeth and rinsed, once, twice, three times. Submerged in the bath, I took the flannel, soaped it thoroughly and rubbed my skin until it reddened. I scrubbed circle after circle counting each one and making sure not to miss the patches of skin between my fingers and toes and behind my ears. I tried to withstand the sting of the soap upon contact with the part of me that Bert had tampered with. Finally I rose from the tub, reached for the pile of clothes, and threw them into the water. I leaned over and using the long handle of the back brush I swished them about submerging the parts that floated to the surface. My knickers, bra, Levi's jeans, socks, a fruit of the loom royal blue T-shirt, and a grey sweatshirt were all to receive the same scrubbing treatment as myself. I was working on the gusset of my jeans when Mum knocked confidently on the door.

"Han, couldn't you wait? I wanted to chat to you about your trip. Did you have a nice time? What did you do?"

"Oh, not much." I shouted, rather too loudly considering she was only on the other side of a flimsy sheet of plywood.

"Couldn't you wait until the morning to have a bath? It's so late."

I didn't answer.

"Come and chat to me when you get out, I've missed you."

"Okay will do."

"And don't take a month of Sundays like you normally do."

I heard the slip slop of her Dr. Scholls as she retreated a few steps. I pulled the wind-a-way line out and secured it in the bracket above the bath, then hung the sodden items up to dry. I hadn't rung them very thoroughly and the rhythmic drip drop bouncing in the tub was all at once deafening.

Mum was snoring when I eventually sneaked out of the bathroom. As I crept past her open door, I saw her large body sprawled out on top of the covers. George on the other hand was tucked under a mighty heap of them, his own and the ones that mum had discarded. The only thing visible was the top of his head, glowing in the ambient estate light that shone through their window.

If Mum had still been awake and I'd had to tell her what Bert and I had done, I'd have talked about the crackling radio and how Bert tried constantly to tune out the interference, one hand on the wheel and one hand on the radio. I wouldn't tell of the times that he moved that same hand from the radio to my knee, squeezing it like a doctor testing my reflexes. I'd tell her how I shared his flask of tea and stopped at the transport café for greasy breakfasts, lunches and dinners, how we bounced over miles of motorway, until night turned into a hypnotic stream of headlights. I wouldn't tell how he wolf whistled out of the window at pretty girls, some of them not much older than me."

What I would and wouldn't say was immaterial in the final analysis, for Bert

would have answered for me. “Travel broadens the mind,” he’d have said. This would no doubt have satisfied Mum, but if it hadn’t, he’d mention the Celtic white horse carved into the steep chalk downs that we saw from the transport café in Wiltshire or the walled city of ancient Cirencester, or the fact that I now knew the network of motorways that carved up the country, that the M1 ran North, the M3 ran south and the M6 ran North West.

“What’s with all those wet clothes on the line in the bathroom?” Mum asked the following morning, peering around my bedroom door and flicking on the harsh ceiling light.

My eyes stung and a startle caught in my chest. “There was axle grease on them,” I said.

“Again? Why didn’t Bert get any on him? That’s weird.” Mum said, then she closed my bedroom door with her usual brusque manner.

10.

After Alec left us, and well before Bert came on the scene and got his feet under the table, we visited Auntie Frances and Uncle John every Sunday without fail. Uncle John hadn't approved of my idea to send Mum to the Gingerbread Club, and he was even less enthused by the fact that Mum had a bun in the oven. He told Fran that as much as he loved Shirley, he didn't think she made very good choices when it came to men, and that to be honest he would prefer it if Bert stayed at home when the rest of us went to visit. Franny let it slip one Christmas after she'd drunk one too many snowballs. It had offended Mum so much that for a while none of us went at all.

"My own blimming sister and she sides with him, well sod them then, sod the bloody lot of them." Mum said.

I loved going to see Auntie Frances, she spoiled me rotten, and aside from Auntie Liz in America, who no one in this world could compete with, Auntie Frances was my favourite. Of course there weren't many folks to choose from. Maureen, Mum's middle sister had left for America before I had been born. Auntie Frances received a postcard from her in 1961. "I'm having a wonderful time here working as a bunny girl. I think I want to stay." That was the last anyone heard from her. There was no address on the card, and by the time I was born, people just shrugged their shoulders and said I wonder what happened to Maureen. So as far as close family went, it was just us, Auntie Frances, Uncle John, my three cousins and Auntie Liz in America.

I knew it would have been a real loss to sever links with Mum's eldest sister, she

had looked out for Mum in the orphanage, darned her socks, showed her how to get rid of the food she didn't like at mealtimes, especially the boiled fish with silvery black skin on its belly. Long after they had left Norwood, Franny still looked out for Mum. The story was that before I was born, Alec and Mum sold the little they owned, got rid of their red setter dog, and took the boat to Ireland, where my father said he had great opportunity for work. He later confessed that the prospects weren't quite what he had envisaged. He managed to find a rabbi, and borrowed a few quid to get them back to England. They turned up on Auntie Frances' and Uncle John's doorstep, the two of them full of lice from the halfway house in Limerick.

"That's what family are for," Uncle John had said. But when Mum met Bert, he seemed to change his mind. "Your mother doesn't seem to learn her lesson does she?" he said to me.

It was during her late trimester when Mum's hands and feet swelled up, and the midwife put her on bed rest, that Mum changed her tune and asked her sister if she could have Dan and I at the weekends. "I wouldn't burden you Franny, but I've got no one else," she said.

"It's not a burden, I've missed them, especially Han."

From then on, when we finished school on a Friday or sometimes even earlier, if Bert was in a bad mood, we'd be carted off in Ziggy the Zephyr to East Ham. Bert said it was nice of Auntie Frances to give Mum a rest, even though to my mind she never looked that rested when we returned.

Franny, as Mum called her, was a good five years older than Mum. She was

round all over apart from her face, which was, strangely enough, long and thin. She wore her coarse brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, emphasizing her nose, which was long just like Mum's and mine. She would probably have worn a brace if she had been born a few decades later, but she hadn't been, so when she was relaxed or resting, her top teeth hung gently over her lower lip. She may have been stern looking to other people, but I thought she looked perfectly serene. She had wanted a daughter but she and Uncle John had three sons, my cousins, Richard, Trevor and Douglas. I think that's why she liked me—I mean really liked me.

It was the first blustery day of the Whitsun half term, when our arrival in East Ham saw Bert go through his usual repertoire of motions. First he pulled off the road and onto the mud driveway, snapping off the engine and heaving up the handbrake through its noisy ratchets. Next, when we didn't exit the car swiftly enough for his liking, he cranked his body around in the driver seat, to face Mum, "What they waiting for Christmas?" he asked, even though Christmas was a half hearted celebration with us being Jewish. Not that we celebrated Hanukkah either. We were kind of holiday-less in a way.

"Come on let's be having you," Bert said, reaching over to throw open the passenger door, so Mum could get out and in turn help us do the same. No sooner had we placed our tiptoes on the ground, Bert punched out a rhythm on the horn. It signified our arrival to Auntie Frances, warned Mum to get back in the car and show her allegiance to Bert, and told us kids to steer clear of Ziggy's chassis, for within moments the car revved up and backed out over the uneven bumps of mud, throwing Mum about and squashing her belly so hard against the dashboard that she winced.

“It’s not your auntie I have a problem with,” Bert shouted out of the car window. “It’s her sodding communist husband. He should piss off back to Russia where he belongs.”

Uncle John laughed, for he happened to be in earshot. It was a deep laugh that shook his upper torso, the kind he reserved especially for Bert.

“Oh look who it is,” Uncle John said, “the man with the false class consciousness. How’s Maggie Thatcher?” he pronounced the words as though her name in itself was an expletive. “Wait till she sells off all the council housing and you have nowhere to live. She’s sold off everything else. You’d think she’d know better being a grocer’s daughter.”

I was tempted to side with Uncle John as far as Thatcher was concerned. She had allowed rubbish to rot and pile up on the estate during a recent strike. The pile of bin-liners grew higher and higher and then it started to spread sideways too. Woody’s sister tripped on her way to Brownie’s one night, and dislocated her shoulder, all because Maggie Thatcher refused to pay the dustmen a proper wage. She also took away our school milk. I really missed it. It was always tepid from sitting in the school courtyard from early morn, and sometimes the aluminum foil cap smelled a bit sour, but it was thick and creamy on top, and satisfying after P.E. or playtime. Some of us had seconds, especially at the end of the week before our Mums got their social, or Dads got their dole, when the cupboards and fridges were low.

“Maggie Thatcher milk snatcher,” I whispered in uncle John’s ear. He laughed, not his sarcastic laugh, but a genuine one that made me feel comfortable to be there.

Finally when Ziggy had reversed so far away from the house that neither Bert nor

Uncle John could hear each other. Bert's hand crept out of his side window, his fist opened, releasing two fingers, raising them skyward. We recognized Bert's two finger sign. It meant fuck off. It also meant that Mum and Bert would argue all the way home with Mum saying things like "John's more educated than you. I don't ever see you reading anything other than the boxing news," and Bert saying, "that's it, side with him, Karl fucking Marx."

Auntie Frances pulled Dan and me into her home, ruffling our hair, and patting our backs. Her house was called a prefab. It was built after the Second World War, all on one level, a large oblong of corrugated iron. It should have been pulled down soon afterwards, but thirty years on, it was still standing strong.

Winter was well and truly in the making, "I can feel it in my bones," Auntie said. Uncle John went immediately to work stoking the coal fire in the front room. Embers sparked from all the poking, and soot fluttered into the air, then settled in a charred layer on the tiled wall above the grate. Uncle John smelled from tending to all the coal and burning embers. The aroma stayed with him, trapped in the wool of his cable knit jumper.

"There, warm as toast," he said, rubbing his thick soot stained hands together.

A series of thuds sounded from the back bedroom where the boys had already got down to practicing Judo throws on each other. Dan wasn't privy to the footwork and intricacies of the moves, as he'd never taken classes. Richard, Trevor and Douglas were on their third belt and showed us as much by running in and out of the front room, demonstrating the various ways that they could each in turn tackle Dan and bring his

flailing body slamming to the ground. Dan's face was blotchy and strands of damp hair stuck to his temples from the machismo of it all.

“Okay boys, let's change the game, we want to send him home in one piece,” Uncle John said. The boys agreed, even if somewhat reluctantly, and Uncle John got out the compendium of board games, plopped it on the coffee table, wiped his blackened hands on his plump belly and nodded at Auntie Frances.

She knew just from the timeliness of such a nod that it was wise to get the supper going. I accompanied her to the kitchen. She switched on the lights and brought the room to a flickering yellow hue. It was chilly, at least initially, until she lit the oven and we hovered over it, warming our hands and tapping our feet. Auntie called it her kitchen dance and started every meal-making venture in the same spirit. She had her own special seat at the table and so did Uncle John, but the rest were interchangeable. I pulled up a kitchen chair, and waited for her to gather the implements that she needed.

“It's sausage rolls for tonight,” she said, sprinkling a mound of flour directly onto the metal surface of the kitchen table and tipping out the flaky pastry that she had prepared earlier. With a wide rolling pin she flattened the dough, dousing the pin with more flour in order to stop it from sticking. It was my job to cut neat oblongs, which I would later use to house the sausages, folding them up and sealing the seams with a dab of milk, making corners as perfect as a well made hospital bed.

“Han could you run a sink full of hot water?” Auntie Frances asked, showing me her hands and forearms covered in flour.

I moved to the ceramic butler sink beneath the kitchen window, and felt the

draught slip in between the worn sash frame. I secured the rubber plug in the hole. The water was soon scalding enough to cause steam to rise into the air and settle on the kitchen windows, masking the garden view and closing Auntie and I in the privacy of that backroom. The water rose. I added some Sainsbury washing up liquid, swished it around making my own mini whirlpool.

Despite my activity, I could feel Auntie Frances' attention from the other side of the kitchen. Just moments earlier she had appeared desperate to rinse her hands. Now she didn't move. She looked at me, through me, her eyes wide and unblinking, like Dan's when he was playing staring ab-dabs.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Oh nothing.”

Auntie crossed the kitchen, her steps slow, white flour clad hands held aloft, an apparition within the parting steam. She was quiet for a time. Out of the semi silence, the intermittent sound of my wave making, the surge of flames from the gas boiler, and our self-imposed seclusion, she spoke.

“I used to duck my head under a sink full of water like that...well not as hot,” Auntie said, dipping her fingers tentatively into the scorching water and peeling off the melting raw pastry. “It was during our time at the orphanage,” she continued, and her muddy brown eyes twinkled just like Mum's did. “We would sneak into the dormitory bathroom late at night after the matron had gone to bed, fill the sinks with water and see who could hold their breath and their head under water for the longest time.”

Auntie took her now clean fingers and illustrated how deep the water would have

been. “We had to allow for the laws of volume,” she said, “the weight of our head caused the water to raise.”

I smiled, imagining the scene, six girls in their long white high-necked nightdresses, and bare stocking feet on the cold tiled floor, trying to stifle their giggles, each one of them taking turns to plunge under water, their long hair floating up and around them, pale faces, ghostly as if in death.

Auntie splashed a little water on her face, then dabbed it dry with the tea towel. “I soon got a reputation for being the champion at ducking. I was so good that I held the title for almost an entire summer, until one night when I was doing brilliantly even by my own standards. I felt someone tugging on my arm. I ignored it until it was so persistent it hurt. When I surfaced spluttering, I was face to face with Matron.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Got ten of the best,” Auntie said, “Matron must have hoped that this would stop us from further acts of delinquency. It didn’t hold us off for long though. I was a ringleader. I always got a couple more strokes of the cane because of this.”

Auntie pulled the plug out of the sink with much deliberation, and walked across the kitchen with an air of defiance, grabbing a pack of bowyers beef sausages from the fridge and slamming the door.

I was proud that Auntie had been a ringleader. All at once I knew that I would miss her, Uncle John, Mum and maybe even Dan and my cousins when they were nice.

“What about Mum, was she a ringleader, did she play that game too?”

“No, your Mum was mute for the longest time. She spoke to me a little, but

nobody else. She had such a deep voice for a little girl. It was as if it grew gruff from being kept inside for so long.”

“What did she say?” I asked, hoping to get a better idea of who Mum was, who she had been.

“She wanted to run away from Norwood. She did once. The police picked her up just a stone’s throw from the Aldwych Docks. I teased her that another half an hour and she might have been a stowaway on a ship to China. But I knew where she was trying to get to that night.”

“To see Big Sadie?”

Auntie nodded.

“It’s a shame your Auntie Betty couldn’t have taken your mum to America. I think she might have really come into her own. Just shows you all that money and the best will in the world couldn’t overturn those silly laws. It shouldn’t matter which way you swing, love is love.”

I wanted to ask Auntie what silly laws she was referring to, but she grabbed my cheek and said, “But you wouldn’t be here if your mum hadn’t met Alec, and we couldn’t have that now.”

The boys, right on cue, as if sensing the crux of the tale, came bounding in like horsemen, not an inkling of decorum amidst them. “We’re hungry. How long will supper be? Can we have a biscuit?”

“Come back in here and finish the game, Supper’s ready when it’s ready” Uncle John bellowed from the front room.

On Sunday night, with a weekend of cooking and story telling behind us, Mum and Bert arrived to take us home. I heard the impatient beeping of a car and looked out of the window to see Ziggy parked haphazardly in the narrow drive. Bang, bang, bang. Mum's quick succession of hard knocks on the front door meant that Bert was in a hurry as usual. I pulled open the heavy front door. The haze of the East London afternoon made me squint. It was definitely Mum standing at the door, but there was something grotesque about the way she looked. It was her mouth, swollen, split and bloodstained like a prime black pudding. She lifted her hand to try and cover it, saw my shocked expression, and looked down at the pavement, at the chalk hopscotch that Douglas and I had drawn that morning.

I looked at the chalk patterns too and at a couple of fruit salad and black jack wrappers that lay discarded against the garden wall. Then I looked at Auntie Frances, who had joined me at the door.

"Did he do that to you?" Auntie Frances whispered. She reached out, pulled her sister into the house, and began to inspect her, holding her face up to the light, grimacing at the extent of the damage. "Is that bastard knocking you about?"

"Leave it Franny, don't make a scene," Mum said. "Han, get your brother, Bert's in a rush."

Mum smelled of Dettol and her eyes looked enormous. She raised her eyebrows, her sign, our sign, but it was lost, overshadowed by her likeness to the tribal woman in our customs of the world book. I'd studied the picture at length. The footnote read; *Tribal woman with lip plate. Zaire 1919. P.12 fig. XIV.*

The three of us were lined up like a relay team. Mum closest to the door, eager to leave, Auntie hot on her heels and tugging on the straps of Mum's maternity pinafore dress, and me at the back of the line, bringing up the rear, when Auntie asked again, "Shirl, did he do that to you?" but this time she let go of her sister, turned around and pulled me in to her bosom, wrapped her thick arms around me and squeezed with what seemed like all her might. At such close quarters I could smell the residue of coal tar soap on her bosom, feel the scratchy lace edging of her apron bib against my cheek, and the pressure of her fat hand on the back of my head, making my lashes splay out and my eyes water.

My position rendered me unaware of Mum's nodding response, which I realized must have been Auntie's intention. It worked well enough until Auntie unwittingly let out a gasp of "that rotten swine," and an "I knew it."

Mum leaned in pulling on my right arm. I twisted my head to one side, her side. She was within spitting distance, her face puffy, thread veins weaving under the skin of her eyelids. Her Players No 10 cigarette breath whooshed hard against my face. It smelled like the dog ends that she stubbed out and saved in her apron pocket, like the ashtray when it was left soaking in the kitchen sink, and most of all like her index and middle fingers where the deep mustard stain remained even after she had washed her hands.

"Come on Han. We need to find your brother and get going."

"You can leave her with me, leave them both, if it's easier," Auntie said, trying to regain a firmer grasp on me. It sounded more like a command than an offer. Auntie's

voice deep and deliberate with all the authority of an older sister, a ringleader.

“No they have school tomorrow,” Mum said, “but thanks.”

For a few moments the two of them tussled over me. Mum pulling on my right side and Auntie at my left. I felt a mild burn around my right wrist and pressure between my shoulder blades as my body warbled from side to side with each jostle. I thought about whom I might prefer to win. Auntie with her stories, her flaky pastry sausage rolls and drop sultana scones, or Mum tired and preoccupied with the baby coming, my baby sister. Aware of the competition, Mum dug her feet into the hall carpet and took a stance like Woody on sports day in the tug of war, her fat lip pouting and her breath growing fast.

Mum needed me, especially now. I was waiting for her to claim ownership, to say, “she’s my daughter, give her over,” or “I need her with me Franny.” But she didn’t, or rather she said it all with her eyes, eyes underscored with charcoal like smudges of fatigue. After a few back and forth lunges, Auntie Frances was the first to admit defeat and I thought I heard a little sob in her throat before she coughed, loosened her grip and called for Dan. Mum hauled me out promptly as if she feared Auntie might change her mind, and demand a rematch.

Dan must have witnessed the commotion, for as he stepped out from the prefab, I could see it, his fat filthy hands clenched into tight fists and his body arched forward. I saw a bag of crisps that he had crushed into shard like pieces dangling from his pocket.

“I mean it, about what I’m going to do when I’m older Han.”

Mum looked down at her wide feet and stubby toes that peeked out from the

straps of her Dr. Scholl's. She still had her apron on. She would have cooked a Sunday roast dinner for Bert and the baby she was carrying. Got to eat for two now, was her motto.

“So is Auntie right, did Bert beat you up?” I asked, screwing my eyes up as much with anger as from the dust of East Ham squalor. I stared past Mum and Dan, into the white zephyr where the bald headed man that she wanted me to call Daddy, was tapping at the steering wheel and revving up the engine, blasting a stench of petrol fumes into the air.

“Come on Han, not now,” Mum uttered, in a low voice, and then she pulled open the back door of the car and pushed us both in with one hand, the other hand still trying to cover her disfigurement, the tip of her tongue flipping lizard like over the swelling,

It was quiet in the car on the way home. Nobody said a word until we got to the Bakers Arms. Dan, who normally initiated a game of I spy with my little eye, sat with his fists still clenched, his foot kicking the back of Bert's chair.

“Okay, that's enough.” Bert quipped as we passed the pub, and the model of the burly baker with his arms held high, sporting a rolling pin. Dan rested for a few more traffic lights and then began again, this time with a tad more force and rhythm.

“It's just a habit, he doesn't even know he's doing it,” Mum said. Dan nodded, a subtle smirk on his face.

By rights Mum and Bert should have been all argued out and done with fighting, but the bad afternoon led to a tense evening, and the tense evening made for a restless night. The angst was cumulative like cloud gathering cloud, or dust attracting dust. It

must have been the early hours of Monday morning when I heard Bert, his deep voice was riled and it came in bursts. I couldn't quite make out the words but the tone was clear, followed by thuds and crashes. Mum squeaked an interjection here and there, all behind their closed bedroom door. I got out of bed and loitered in the hallway, it wasn't long before Dan joined me, the two of us looking at each other as if to gain cues about what to do.

"You don't know what goes on behind closed doors," Mum used to say to us. It was true. We didn't have a clue whether the quietness that followed the bangs and shouts meant Mum and Bert had made up and were in the throes of passion or that one of them had killed the other and was in a state of silent shock.

After a few interminably long minutes Mum emerged from the bedroom to go to the loo. She was up and down a lot these days due to the baby pressing on her bladder. She jumped when she saw us both huddled together at the top of the stairs.

"Go back to bed," she whispered. "He's just a bit over protective of me and concerned about the baby that's all, and you two of course. It takes a lot for a man to take on someone else's kids. Let's just try and keep the peace."

I agreed with Mum, but I could see Dan was ready to argue. He opened his mouth, "but, but..." was all he could say.

"No buts it's got to be butter," Mum said, trying to make light of the situation, she shooed us away, did a tinkle and waddled back to the bedroom where Bert was waiting for her. Before Dan and I parted company, he put his arm around me, his little boy arm that was already sturdy enough to beat me in an arm wrestle.

“Don’t worry Han, I promise I’ll kill him when I get older,” he said in a voice that hadn’t broken yet, a voice laced with vengeance. I tried not to cry at the mere thought of my brother killing my step-dad, but I felt my lip tremble and my head tingle, sure signs that the tears were imminent.

Mum looked puffy eyed when she emerged from the bedroom a couple of hours later. It was still early as she sat nursing a cup of tea and a slice of dry toast. She continued to suffer from morning sickness, though the midwife had said that it should have passed after the obligatory three months. She’d lost so much weight that she could fit into Bert’s trousers. She couldn’t do them up of course because her belly had grown to a gigantic circumference. Her weight loss elsewhere resulted in her looking like a mismatched head and torso. She put her tea down and looked straight ahead of her at the multitude of knick-knacks that sat collecting dust on the room divider.

“Han, I want you to know that I may be getting rid of the baby,” she said, her voice flat, her hand resting nonchalantly on the curve of her bump. I cocked my head to one side, Mum’s words funneling through me. Her hand made a circle on her bump.

“It’s Bert, he’s mad, touched. I can’t go through with it,” she said. “It will tie me to him.”

I cocked my head the other way, listened for Mum to correct her words, substituting getting rid of the baby with getting rid of the Beethoven bust, the three wise monkeys, or the set of our Doctors Answers.

“She’ll be well provided for, plenty of people want to adopt babies,” Mum said, still focusing on her ornaments, continuing to avoid my gaze. I covered my face, feeling

my hands grow wet and hot with the truth. I was still weepy an hour later when she returned from the post office. Squashed into the edge of the pushchair along with the white bread and four pints of full cream milk was a life-sized plastic baby in a cardboard box. It was wearing a bib inscribed with its name in big letters. MICHELLE.

“Han, I got you this,” Mum sniffled, trying to thrust the oversized package at me.

“Is it instead of the baby?” I asked.

She nodded. I folded my arms tight, pushed myself back into the couch. Mum placed the box at my feet and sniffed again. I wasn’t sure whether she had the start of a cold or whether she had been crying as well, as her eyes looked redder than before she’d left.

Michelle was still sitting unopened in the cardboard box by suppertime, her fixed grin and glassy eyes visible through the packaging. I placed her by the front door. I wished she could walk herself straight out and climb into the soot-blackened chute. She was a bad omen, interfering with the natural order of things. This lifeless bit of plastic boasted platinum nylon hair, smelled of Rossi’s toy shop and bore a 5.99 price tag and a made in Korea sticker. Michelle was not welcome.

Later that evening, as the night closed in, it got chilly. Mum threw a blanket over me, and squeezed her body onto the end of the couch, placing my feet high up on her bump. I looked from Michelle, still unpacked and sitting by the door, to Mum’s big belly, then back to Michelle.

I knew Mum was a tad agitated. I could feel it in the way she gripped my ankles, and failed to look in Bert’s direction. It took a while but somewhere between World in

Action and the Nine o'clock News, she warmed up a bit and loosened her hold on me.

When the adverts came on, she rose to make Bert a cup of tea. She placed it on the coffee table, slopping it on the tray, and didn't say anything other than, "here Bert, I made you a cuppa," but it was a start.

"Thanks love," he said.

By the time I was ready for bed, Mum had agreed to watch the late night football with Bert, even though he shouted and jumped into the air whenever the Arsenal team scored.

"Off you go Han," Mum said once the match was about to start. I made my way downstairs, aware of how cold it felt to be separated from Mum, the bump, and the blanket. I hoped that Mum and Bert would patch things up, and make another go of it. I pattered slowly to my room, listening for further evidence of them making amends, of something that would show that they had more in common than the baby sister that I had asked for, and the money that Bert earned and Mum needed for her Players number ten, and the jumble sales. I hoped that Skinny Doreen wasn't right, that it hadn't been too soon for Bert and Mum to have shackled-up together. I remembered those early days when Bert was new on the scene. It was his doing that I got to stay up a bit later than Dan, because I was the eldest. When I fell asleep on the couch, he threw me over his shoulder and carried me to bed. I had liked that, the feeling of being moved through the air against his strong body, and not having to walk in my drowsy state.

11.

“Han, you’ve got a letter from Auntie Betty,” Mum said. I was thrilled. So much so that I almost forgot about Mum’s threat to get rid of my sister. Once I saw Mum’s great bulge and the ugly doll swinging from her hand, I remembered.

“I’m going to get a refund,” Mum said, “if you’re sure you won’t play with her.”

“I’m positive,” I said.

Getting Mum’s money back on Michelle was the right thing to do, a good omen. She was chirpy just at the thought of the few quid that would be reimbursed to her.

“It’ll be a bit extra for the week,” she said. “I don’t know what came over me buying you a doll like that willy-nilly.”

She pointed at the letter, “well open it then, let’s hear what her majesty has to say.”

To my dearest darling Hannah,

I said I would give you the next installment of my life, so that you understand how important it is to believe in yourself, to take a chance when it’s necessary. Of course it helps to be at the right place at the right time too. So here goes:

After a time of working for Warner Brothers, the head of the reading department came to me and said, "I'm so sorry, I can't keep you on any longer. I'd like to, but I haven't got the money for an extra person. Have you got anything else in mind?"

"No, I don't," I said.

"Well, there's a man called Irwin Allen who is looking for a researcher," she

said. *"I think he is going to have trouble because he has a reputation of being very hard to work for. However, he is a bit of an anglophile. Being English might give you an edge. Try it, you never know."*

Well, I got an interview with Mr. Allen. He sat back and put his hands behind his head and said, "Talk to me!" so I did. I told him about my life in England, and my work as a book editor and more recently as a story analyst. Then he said, "Do you drive?"

"No, I don't," I said.

"I'm afraid that won't work. There is no way to get around here except by car and I'm very strict about people being punctual. I don't think you could possibly take this job without having your own car."

"Mr. Allen, if you will have me, I assure you I will be prompt. You needn't be afraid that I won't be on time because I will. Whatever it takes."

At that moment, the man who was doing the drawings for the cameraman stepped into Mr. Allen's office. His name was Maurice Zuberano, or Zubi, once you got to know him. He was well liked by people in the film world. Anyway he was in the process of illustrating the next film, 'The Lost World' when he said, "Mr. Allen, I've got Professor Challenger – he has just arrived at the airport and I don't know what sort of hat he would be wearing." Mr. Allen looked completely nonplussed. He didn't know either.

"May I make a suggestion," I said. "I know the book very well and I know exactly what Professor Challenger is like. He is an eccentric, self-opinionated Englishman who boasts an enormous amount of dark hair. He wouldn't dream of donning a hat, not for a moment. Both Mr. Allen and Mr. Zuberano were very relieved,

and I pleased Mr. Allen so much, he decided he would take a chance and give me a job as his researcher. So that is how I started with Mr. Allen!

I loved the job and I didn't find Mr. Allen a difficult man at all whatsoever. I'll tell you some very funny stories about our work together on the set in my next letter.

In the meantime I want you to see why you have to speak up, and believe that you too will find opportunities to prove yourself.

Your dearest Auntie Betty xxxx

Mum pouted when I got to the end of the letter. Her lip was starting to go down a bit, but there was still a fair amount of swelling, every bit of it emphasized by her expression. "Well, it's alright for some isn't it?" Mum said. "Don't suppose she could have done all that if she'd had a husband and a couple of kids to worry about. Mum was right. In the photographs that Auntie sent to us, we got to see Irwin Allen, the executive producer, Zubi, the story board illustrator, Bert Abbott the special effects person, and writers, Richard McDonagh and Tony Wilson, all of them men. Each photograph was carefully labeled so we got to learn everyone's names and remit. Auntie was the only woman in the shot and on the studio floor.

It was a shame that Mum didn't seem as enthralled as me about Auntie Betty and her life and work. I hoped it was because she was tired and aching from being pregnant with my baby sister, and nothing else, not jealousy about me going to Hollywood while she was stuck with Bert and a couple of kids, and not fear of losing me. It was crucial that she kept to her word and the secret plan to let Auntie Betty adopt me.

Bert must have been truly sorry about knocking Mum about. Later that day he came home from work with a box of Black Magic. On top of this he gave Mum an extra couple of quid for us to get saveloys, chips and pickled wallies all round, and as if that wasn't enough he said, "I think we should have a family holiday once the baby is born," and I'll get a job close to home without so many nights up the road, so I'll be able to keep an eye on you and the baby."

Mum arched her eyebrows when he said that last part and her tongue flicked out to speak, but then just as quickly she popped it back in and her expression softened again as she thought better of it.

By the middle of the following week, Mum's lip was almost back to its normal size, or at least it blended in with her general all over swollenness.

"You still have edema," the midwife said when she saw Mum. But she didn't say it with much sense of conviction in her voice. She poked her fingers into Mum's spongy feet and scribbled on her chart. Edema, it sounded serious, mostly because I'd never heard of it. Would Mum keep puffing up and be at risk of some sort of spontaneous combustion? I'd read about such conditions in the 1976 Guinness World Book of Records.

Mum winked at me. "It's okay," she said,

"It's just a bit of water retention. You'll be right as rain if you stay off your feet for a bit," the midwife said to Mum.

"I'll help," I said, relieved at the prognosis. For the rest of that day I made her cups of tea, ran to Martin's to get her Players no. 10 cigarettes, and cooked beans on toast

for supper for everyone, trying not to argue with Dan, who insisted that beans on toast didn't classify as cooking. He was such an irritating child, using words like classify at his age. I wanted to hide his fossils or spit on his toast when he wasn't looking, but it might have caused Mum more upset and the upset may have caused more swelling, so I ate my beans on toast, washed up and gave Mum's feet a little rub, as they sat plump and heavy on the coffee table. It was a cautious rub, for her veins squiggled close to the surface, and felt bumpy under my fingertips. After the foot rub I helped Mum fold a pile of baby growers and vests that she had bought at the Salvation Army jumble sale, balancing them atop the mountain that was her stomach.

Mum, are you going to keep the baby?" I dared to ask her.

"Yes, of course," she replied, almost shocked at the insinuation that she might consider anything otherwise.

"You wont get her adopted then?" I asked.

"God no, take no notice of me when I say silly things like that," she said. "Take no notice at all."

Mum was up and waddling as usual by the next morning, her gait just a little wider, and a touch slower. She swung the fridge door open to get the milk out for Bert's tea when it happened. She bent forward like a runner with a stitch, only instead of attempting to reach for her puffy feet to stretch out the spasm, she let out a grunt, cupped her stomach with both hands, separated her hefty thighs and looked at the stream of fluid that flowed from her as if it was a normal state of affairs to be piddling on the linoleum.

"Ugh," Dan said and promptly removed himself.

“It’s not what you think it is,” Mum shouted after him. She grabbed a couple of tea towels from the airing cupboard, crouched and began mopping up the spillage.

“My waters have broken,” She said. “The baby’s coming.”

“What right this minute?” I said, alarmed at the immediacy of it all, wondering if I’d somehow brought this about with the foot rub, or my inattention to Mum being back on her feet.

“No, it could still take a while, but it’s started. Grab another tea towel,” she instructed.

The puddle of fluid was warm and slippery, almost gelatinous, like the under-cooked egg whites that Dan called snotty and refused to eat. There were a few spots of blood, just sitting in the midst of all that broken water, reminding me of the nuclei of the amoebas that Mr. Edwards made us draw for biology.

“Oh my giddy aunt,” Bert said when he entered the kitchen expecting his morning cuppa and the boxing news to be awaiting him.

“We need to get ready Bert. The baby’s coming.”

Bert had attended all the antenatal classes with Mum, and should have known what to do. I expected him to take the tea towels, now sopping, out of Mum’s hand, which amazingly enough looked less puffy already, remind her how to breathe, and get her away from the puddle of slither. Instead he took one look at the two of us and promptly disappeared. Mum just shook her head.

“Han, help me up,” she said, rubbing her tummy, a sharp groan growing constant, like the background hum of the telly after hours.

I thought I detected a flicker of worry in her knitted brows. I hoped I was wrong and it was just discomfort.

“I wish I could come with you Mum, I promise I’ll be helpful.”

Mum closed her eyes, as if focusing on the task that awaited her. When she opened them, I knew by the way she grabbed Bert’s army bag that was already packed with clothes she had recently rummaged for us, and by the way she pulled both of our winter coats off the pegs and slung them determinedly over her arm, that I would have to leave her, that there would be no persuading her otherwise.

This time the number 58 bus would take us to Auntie Frances and Uncle John. Ziggy was reserved for the all-important job of transporting Mum to Wanstead Maternity Hospital, and by the look on Mum’s face there wasn’t much time to mess about.

Sharon Dearle knocked on the door. She was all dressed up and modeling the highest platform shoes I had ever seen. She reeked of Charlie, Charlie the perfume, not Charlie a person, or a dog or anything. I knew it was Charlie because of my free sample that I’d got from my Blue Jeans magazine. She brushed past me into the living room where Bert stopped in his tracks to look her up and down and then up once more.

“Blimey how can you walk in those clodhoppers?” Mum said between contractions.

“They’re really comfortable.”

Mum bent over again, clutched at her stomach uttered a few low groans and checked her watch. Her face glistened with a fine mist of perspiration.

“They’re five minutes apart now Bert, we should leave, oh and thanks so much

Sharon,” Mum said in the same breath.

“I’m meeting Jimmy at The Nag’s Head so it’s on my way,” Sharon said, making for the front door and beckoning us to follow her.

“Make sure you sit downstairs where the conductor can keep an eye on you both,” Mum said. “Uncle John’s meeting you at the other end.”

As we were leaving, I looked back at her and blew her a kiss. She clutched at her stomach more desperately this time and made strange blowing sounds. Bert didn’t seem quite ready to leave. He was still busy pacing the living room and making his bald patch perspire and turn red.

Sharon tripped up a lot as we walked to the bus stop, even though she’d told Mum that her clodhoppers were comfortable. As if this wasn’t distressing enough, it was pissing down, a hard spiteful rain that showed no intention of stopping. Huge droplets careened into our faces. Sharon squinted and shielded her eyes.

“I didn’t use my waterproof mascara,” she mumbled to me, and I noticed beads of black liquid, rolling like the Northern line down her cheeks.

“That’s the last straw,” she said, when Dan waded through a large dirt puddle, spraying a series of black dots up the back of her white tights. She raised her arm into the air, about to bring it down on him, cursing under her breath, her mouth puckering up at the seams. Dan ducked and ran, well versed at such sporty maneuvers.

Finally Sharon decided that I would be the anchorage she needed to navigate the way. With the weight of her on one side and the kit bag on the other, my arms ached with a vengeance by the time we reached the bus stop. The wind was picking up and Dan

ventured closer to moan that he was cold.

“Can I have a jumper from the bag?” he asked, his body beginning to jitter.

“Not now, the bus will be here any second,” Sharon said. She was trying to maintain some control over her hairstyle. The elements had transformed it into something wet and wild like the Vidal Sassoon windswept look that Donna’s mum paid a fortune to achieve.

The 58 double-decker bus lumbered into sight, pushing a surge of rainwater over the kerb. Sharon hauled Dan onto the platform then shoved him toward the lower deck. She turned to help me, supporting the weight of the bag as I hoisted myself onto the vehicle. I threw the bag into the luggage rack and turned around in time to see her tottering off in the direction of The Nag’s Head.

I pointed to my preferred spot on the lower deck at the rear of the vehicle, so Dan would know where to park himself. We sank into worn cushioned seats, welcoming the refuge from the downpour. I could hear the conductor tramping down the stairs. Sure-footed and steady, he made his way to our seats.

This was my moment. “Please God, Buddha, Allah, Mum, anyone, grant me a lucky twenty-one.” I mouthed silently. Dan gave me one of his if looks could kill stares.

I’d first coined the idea of a lucky twenty-one just a month before, by adding up the numbers that ran across the bottom of my bus ticket. They equaled twenty-one and that very afternoon not only did I get an A in my Maths test, but Farhana Shariff’s mum survived the tuberculosis. Both things were nothing short of miracles.

“It’s just a bus ticket,” Donna had said, but I knew the truth about the power and

magic of numbers.

I put 10p in the conductor's hand. "Two halves to the Green Gate please," I said.

I stared at the ticket dispenser, it swung like a pendulum from around his neck. I could see my face in the barrel of the machine, my eyes darting and impulsive. I grabbed at the tickets and the conductor looked annoyed, as if I was a rude and surly child. I crossed my fingers and held the cartridge-like paper strips up to my mouth, kissing them. I began to count the digits that ran across the foot of each ticket.

"0 7 5 4 8 = 24. 0 7 5 4 9 = 25."

"Useless rubbish," I said out loud, as I brought my fist down hard on my thigh.

The fluorescent ceiling lights flickered to life, revealing the overcast sky, the rain streaming down the windows and the dust that puffed up from the seat every time Dan fidgeted. Cigarette smoke wafted down the spiral staircase from the top deck, and mingled with the damp smell of coats and upholstery. The musty odor was diluted momentarily as the cold breeze whooshed in at the bus stops, then between stops it rose into the air more pungent than before, propelled by the blast of the heater. Dan sat loose and limber next to me, his body sliding into mine with each gear change and deceleration.

"Can't you keep to your own side?" I asked him. "You're soaking."

He reached behind me to touch the back of my neck with his icy hand, his wet cuffs trickled raindrops down my back.

"Oww," I screamed.

I retaliated by pinching the flesh of his inner thigh as hard and long as was possible in public. The old dears sitting adjacent to us heard him shriek, they swiveled in

their seat and tut-tutted at us.

They looked comfortable and almost dry, those old dears, as if they'd been perched on their seats for hours. Maybe they had. Old dears could ride for free all day long if they fancied. There were just two rules. First, they weren't allowed to board any earlier than nine o'clock in the morning and second, they required their pension book as proof of their seniority.

Mum called the old dears the Twearlies. This was because they often tried to travel before the stipulated hour, searching for compassion in the driver and asking "Am I too early?" As the bus drew into the next stop, two of the twearlies rose from their seats, jostled through the aisle with their shopping trolleys, taking faltering dance-like steps, lurching from handrail to handrail and cursing the driver, reminding me how cross they could get. In the process of them attempting to disembark, a couple of boys from Dan's year were trying to get on. There was a momentary collision with neither party backing down, until the conductor said, "let the passengers off first please," whereby the twearlies nodded at him and muttered "kids of today, not like they were in my day."

I hoped the boys would be a good source for lucky twenty-ones. They were fearless, preoccupied with skimming the tops of each other's heads, slapping palms and playing dares. I sat in wait, watching their every move, the sparring up and down the aisle, the tickets dangling from their loose carefree hold.

In unison they grabbed hold of the central pole and swung themselves dizzily round, flying above the road. Out went their lanky bodies, the wind slapped their faces, made them breathless. I stood up, took a few steps, my hand outstretched to swipe their

tickets as they spun by me on the inward part of their gyration. But I was too slow, clumsy, uncoordinated.

“Now,” one boy shouted to the other as they attempted a double dare, leaping from the bus whilst it was still in motion. The twearlies gasped and brought their hands to their mouths. I craned my neck in time to see them make a high-speed landing, the precious tickets abandoned, fluttering behind them to the gutter.

I held tight to the handrail, my knuckles whitened with the tense grip and as the bus slowed at the next stop, despite knowing that all eyes were upon me, I delved shamelessly into the used ticket bin, pulling out a great handful of the little stubs of paper. I thought about Mum, her huge pregnant belly housing my baby sister, her blood stained waters that had broken on the kitchen floor. It was a dangerous business pushing a baby out, anything could go wrong. Mum’s distant gaze and deep noisy breathing were evidence of such a risk. I returned to my seat, placed the bundle of tickets on my lap and began the painstaking task of inspection.

“What are you doing? Dan asked.

“I’m making sure that Mum will be okay during the labour and that our baby sister will be healthy.”

“And what if your baby sister is a boy?” he teased.

“No way,” I answered, making the sign of the cross at him with my index fingers.

At the top of the pile the tickets were creased and weathered. I smoothed one out Rainwater had blurred the ink and thinned the paper of the next, making it unreadable. I tried another. This one had been used to wrap unwanted chewing gum. As I teased it

apart I caught a whiff of mint. I peeled at the grey rubbery substance, scraping strands and blobs of it away with my thumbnail. In spite of my diligence, the last number remained concealed.

I moved on to a folded ticket, a delicate origami-like expression of art.

0 7 4 2 4 = 17

Finally all that was left unopened and uncounted were tickets that had been rolled into the tightest little balls, perhaps having served as some kind of anti-worry therapy. I unraveled, unrolled, flattened out the creases and totted up the numbers. 0 7 4 4 9 = 24
0 7 5 2 0 = 14 0 7 5 2 1 = 15.

The bus rolled closer towards Auntie's house, the conductor pulled intermittently on an overhead cable, twanging out a ding-ding, dictating the vehicle's stops and starts.

"Baker's Arms, Thatched House, Whipps Cross," he sang in a thick Pakistani accent.

I was down to the last ticket. My stomach grew queasy. I gathered my thoughts, garnered my strength and with all the willpower I could summons I focused on the ticket.

0 7 5 1 9 = 22

"Flipping heck." I hit out blindly, my hand made contact with the edge of the seat. I was hurt more from despair than the brunt of the bash. I stood up, and stuffed the tickets into the top of the kit bag, just in case I needed to do a recount later. I walked to the furthest end of the bus where I could see the back of the driver's head in a square Perspex interior window, and crouched into a low squat as if taking a leak in the wilds. On the bus floor among dog ends and ash and a sprinkling of wet leaves were a few discarded

tickets. I felt around passengers' feet. "Sorry I lost something," I said.

I gripped the floor with my toes, scuttling crab-like, trying not to obstruct the conductor still doing his rounds, and passengers getting on and off. $0\ 6\ 3\ 4\ 9 = 23$

$0\ 6\ 3\ 5\ 0 = 14$ $0\ 6\ 3\ 6\ 2 = 17$

"Stratford Broadway," the conductor called as the bus swerved into the stop. I was close now, but so was the Green Gate. I felt my eyes fill. Perspiration gathered at the nape of my neck, under my arms and at my crotch.

"Canning Town," the conductor shouted.

I wasn't sure whether we had missed our stop. Did the Green Gate come before or after Canning Town? I could ask the old dears but the last time I recruited them in my efforts to navigate, they disagreed between themselves for so long that the bus flew straight past my stop. In my tearful state the interior of the bus and people's faces blurred to an unreadable mass, the outside to streams of blinding ribbons. I squeezed my lids tight, and saw the OPEN sign of the Green Gate pub.

"Dan," I shouted, moving back along the aisle. "It's our stop."

He really had fallen asleep. The bus slowed to a halt. The conductor, looked at me. I must have been a sorry sight, all dirt stained and desperate from my failed mission. I looked down at my grimy fingernails, the wet snot patches on my sleeves. I was a cry for help. It came in the final moment, when the conductor loomed in and lifted Dan from his doze. He moved more like a fireman than a conductor, and deposited Dan and the kit bag in a heap on the pavement. Afraid to touch me where I was damp and revolting, he gave me a swift pull at the elbow before turning his back on us, climbing up inside the

bus and leaving us like street urchins exposed to the night.

Dan began crying that his leg hurt where I'd pinched him and that he missed Mum, even though we'd only been gone for an hour.

"Stop making a fuss," I said, upset by his ignorance of the danger that we faced without a lucky twenty-one. I looked down at him, a bundle of bag and boy. He was shivering and wheezing, his pigeon chest rising high into the air with every breath, I grabbed the bag from under him, pulled him up by one arm, and shot him a look of despair. I thought about how I should have counted the passengers on the bus or the amount of times the conductor ran up and down the stairs, the stinky dog ends on the floor or the graffiti on the backs of the chair. Any number of things might have added up to twenty-one. Second fiddle to the ticket, but a substitute nonetheless.

I'd failed. It would be my fault if things ran amok, went awry, if dare I even think it— I lost Mum and my baby sister, and was unable to go to Hollywood. I had no option but to calculate my steps and avoid the cracks between the paving slabs to compensate for my lack. This was no easy feat in the dark with a crying asthmatic at my heels.

Step on a crack, break your back. 1,2,3 together, 4,5,6 together. Each careful pace made up part of the sequence of twenty-one steps. Dan had to run to keep up with me. His high-pitched cries and wheezing made him sound like Pinky and Perky.

Uncle John was too far away to hear me counting, and Dan whimpering, but as his big burly frame got closer to us, I felt myself give into a sigh. He tapped me playfully under the chin.

"Crikey kid, you look like you've been on the slag heap rather than the 58, let's

get you home and in the bath.”

He slung the kit bag under his arm and crouched low so that Dan could climb onto his back. With ease they gathered speed. I knew Dan was squealing on me by the way he pointed to his thigh then cupped his telltale mouth around Uncle John’s ear, excluding me from his boy to man whispers. After each exchange Dan looked back at me with a gleam of fulfillment.

The counting got more difficult at the new pace in the wind and the rain. I needed to land on an exact multiple of twenty-one when my feet touched Auntie Frances’ and Uncle John’s front door step. I was all out of synch. It was clear that I had to do a few steps back down the front garden path and then estimate the forward paces. Uncle John let himself and Dan into the house and left the door ajar.

“Come on in Han,” Auntie Frances called from the prefab. “There’s a storm brewing. It’s like the arctic in here with that door open.”

Normally I liked storms, found them comforting. Before Bert came to live with us, Dan and I would sneak into Mum’s room during bad weather, squeeze into her double bed, one of us each side of her, and listen to the pelt of the rain and the wind against the window.

“Just think of the poor people out in this, while we’re all dry and cozy,” Mum gloated, pulling the covers snug around us, so we were one big pile of limbs, her body warm and at the very centre of us. I relished her musky smell and the comfort of her brush cotton nightdress, how with such few words and minimal movement she buffered any fear we may have had, left us confident that the storm would pass and for a fleeting

moment, Chingford Hall Estate would have a shine and clarity that would make it seem habitable.

“You mustn’t be scared of anything,” Mum said. “Be like me, I can’t think of anything that frightens me.” It was true. Mum wasn’t scared of storms or of the dark. Late at night she walked along country lanes at the edge of Epping Forest, to visit homes where people had advertised prams, stereos, tellies and a slew of other goods for sale. Then she struggled home again with the acquired items, along an even darker path, alone and unafraid. In the daylight hours, Mum walked in the road, smack bang right in the middle of it. I was never sure why she chose not to use the pavement. Perhaps it was nothing more than her belief that she was invincible. Mum didn’t have nightmares, she didn’t fear that murderers would shoot or stab us or end our lives in some hideously blood curdling way or that burglars would steal their way into our home at night. She even found a burglar once. I was six months old, and planted on her thick hip as we entered our home after her late shift at the launderette. Alec was still in the nick and Mum’s job was a way of supporting us and raising his bail. Mum got as far as the bedroom before she realized what had taken place. The burglar had put together an entire case full of goods that he liked as if he were packing for the Costa Brava. He rose up from under the bed, just as Mum was about to settle in for the evening.

“What on earth do you think you are doing?” Mum shouted, challenging the thief in mid flow. He put his hands in the air. Perhaps he was shocked. Perhaps she was lucky. Perhaps it was his first assignment. For whatever reason, it must have made Mum feel brave and powerful. Mum the hero, the untouchable.

“Empty your pockets,” she ordered.

“Yes Miss, okay Miss,” he replied sheepishly.

Mum wasn't scared of dying, of snakes or spiders. Mum wasn't scared of living all of her life in the Grey. She wasn't scared to gossip or of being gossiped about. Mum wasn't scared to be different, to turn her opera up so loud that the neighbors could hear it all the way from Martin's The Newsagent. I wanted to be like Mum. I didn't want to be scared of her dying and leaving me alone, or of the world coming to an end, or of a nuclear attack that would leave buildings intact, while killing anyone unfortunate enough to be above ground, an attack that would unleash a lingering sufferance on those who attempted to come up from underground in the aftermath.

One break time at school, Fatty Prior had told us about the possibility of this happening. I locked myself in the girl's toilet for the entire duration of biology and wept. I liked to think I was well and truly over all that. Two years on and the bomb hadn't dropped. My nightmares of three-minute warnings that had me running on the spot, like Dan's caged rat on his wheel, had disappeared with my discovery of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and the purchase of my very own peace badge. If I could live with the threat of annihilation of the entire planet, I should be able to confront the storm.

I was on the top bunk bed and Dan was on the bottom already thrashing about, grinding his teeth and being restless enough to make me feel a little less alone. The bunks were as old as us, and the metal sprung base and thin sponge mattress sagged beneath my bottom. Auntie hadn't drawn the curtains all the way, and I could make out the limbs of the silver birch waving at me, each one gnarled like Hansel's bony finger, or what he

pretended was his finger, before the witch tried to cook him in the oven.

Mum taught us to track the eye of the storm by counting between the claps of thunder and the streaks of lightening.

“Each second counts as a mile,” she said.

The lightening was jagged, fork-like, illuminating the narrow garden, the staggering birch bracing the gale, the great willow bent over and weeping for all it was worth, the broad sweep of sky, and our room, the spare, though there was little if anything to spare within the prefab. I wondered if the mighty current could flow in down the chimney or through a drafty gap in the window frame and surge into our hearts via the metal mesh under that old mattress? I leaned over the side of the bunk to see if Dan had woken with the last crash of thunder. The decibel reach was enough to wake the dead, and as annoying as Dan was, it might have helped to have him awake.

The next bolt came quickly. A flood of light poured in. I rose to upright, with a squeaking of springs and rustle of covers. I edged down the rickety ladder and prodded Dan to test whether he was still in the land of the living. He let out a grunt and a few words of gibberish as I climbed into his bed. It was warm and damp from him sweating. He tossed and turned and I could have sworn he called me Mum at one point, though I couldn't be sure for the claps of thunder were raging like angry gods, mocking me for my failing on the bus.

At least Mum and Bert would be at the hospital and safe from the storm, was the last thought I had, over and over again, like a mantra, lulling me into sleep. Dan grew quiet, his breathing steady and soft against my cheek. I woke intermittently when the

wind prized at the edges of the corrugated iron roof panels, stirred the fallen leaves, shifted them across the concrete, when the garage door creaked on its hinges and a window slammed in some far off corner of the prefab.

At some point between waking and sleeping and fear and first light, Dan sat up, elbowed me hard and in a gruff thirsty voice said, “What are you doing here, when you don’t even like me?”

“I was just protecting you from the lightening,” I said. “You ungrateful wretch. You could have been struck if it wasn’t for me.”

I eased out of bed. Dan moaned and spread into the empty space I’d created, pulling the covers up and around him, even though he was as hot as a vindaloo. It was still early when I crept into the kitchen. Auntie was awake, standing in her quilted brown dressing gown. She lifted the frilly gingham curtain and slid up the sash window that overlooked the garden. Outside it was unerringly still.

“I thought the calm was meant to come before the storm,” she said.

We took stock of the scene. Piles of leaves and broken branches littered the narrow garden. The sky was tired, heavy-hearted as it hovered above a low-lying mist, observing the carnage it had wreaked. I detected the smell that comes after the rain, herbaceous and woody, wet grass and damp earth.

“Did you hear anything?” I asked her. I crossed everything, my legs, my fingers, my arms, erring on the edge of caution.

“Yes, wasn’t it awful?” Auntie replied. “There hasn’t been a storm like that in as long as I can remember. Did it wake you up?”

“No, I mean from Mum. Did you hear from Mum?” I interrupted.

“Do you need to go to the toilet?” Auntie asked, looking at my scissor-like legs. I shook my head and watched her fill the kettle, the water deafeningly loud as it thumped into the drum. Auntie stared at the kettle, waiting for it to boil, even though Mum said it took forever when you watched it. She twiddled her thumbs round and round, quick and even, like the blades of a rudder. Despite anticipating it, the shrill sound of the whistle made us both jump. I looked around the room. Uncle John’s kitchen chair was pulled up to the table, last night’s cryptic crossword sat unfinished on his placemat. Auntie’s apron and an assortment of tea towels bulged from a kitchen drawer. A couple of empty mugs rested on the draining board. I turned my attention to the mock William Morris wallpaper. I began to count the sunflowers.

“So any news?” I asked.

Auntie didn’t nod, or sigh, or um or ah. There was nothing to impede her vacant look. I wondered if I should call Uncle John? I could just walk into his bedroom and wake him with the crucial news that Auntie Frances was acting out of character, not responding to my questions and that she might be in a catatonic trance, or suffering a stroke or something of the kind.

She passed me a mug of tea. Such an action meant that she was at least partaking of life again. The tea tasted sweet. Auntie used carnation milk and saccharin. She served the brew up in hearty amounts and kept the spoon in for us to continue stirring between sips.

“That’ll warm the cockles of your heart,” she said.

When we were tiny, Auntie had offered us the same sweet drink in a baby bottle after it had been run under the cold tap to make it tepid. It was a comfort, a tradition, this tea, this semi meal, this kitchen ritual that was Auntie all over. I blew into the mug, sat down and crossed my legs under the table. Auntie Frances sat opposite me and after her first swig of tea, she traced a pattern on the table with her index finger.

“Han,” she started, her voice tinny, like an old 78 record. “I want to talk to you after breakfast, once we’ve got rid of this lot.”

This lot was an apt description for Uncle John and the boys. Uncle lumbered in first, stretching and yawning, reaching for his tea, his big belly swaying in anticipation of breakfast. The boys entered next like hungry bear cubs.

Auntie got busy frying and wafted the smells of cooking around the house.

“So you got what you wanted,” Uncle John said, slurping his tea, his eyes and heart on the bangers frying in the pan.

“You’ve got a sister.”

“John!”

“What?”

“I wanted to tell her properly.”

“Oh for Pete’s sake, I’m sorry. I can’t do anything right.”

I felt my eyes sting, my chest heave. I had a sister, a baby girl. Mum had a daughter who would keep her company once I left for Hollywood. A girl. Mum liked girls. But Auntie Frances seemed serious, she tutted at Uncle John, unmoved by the momentous news that he had just broken to me.

Dan was disgruntled. “Another sister,” he said giving me daggers.

I want to be told properly, I don't want to be told properly, I want to be told properly. I counted the baked beans on my toast, and the sips of my tea.

I was relieved that Uncle John was awake. My only means of talking to Mum depended on us being able to use the new black telephone that rested on his bedside table.

I wanted to ask what my baby sister looked like, whether we were going to call her Bianca or Martine, even though Bert said those names sounded like alcoholic beverages, whether we were allowed to take her out in the big pram that Mum used for rummaging, and show her off, or if we had to quarantine her until she had got all her injections, like Doppy Linda's puppy, if we had to get rid of the cats in case they get jealous and tried to smother her, and lastly if she perfect or if there was anything wrong with her? I wanted to be told *properly*.

When Auntie Frances and I had washed and dried the last dish, she said, “Okay, shall we give a ring?”

I nodded with such enthusiasm that Auntie said, “Steady on, your head will fall off if it's not screwed on.”

I followed her into the bedroom. Auntie Frances hovered next to the bedside cabinet, swaying from side to side as if rocking a baby to sleep. Douglas had been reared years ago, but Mum said Auntie Frances still rocked out of habit. I watched her dial the number on the shiny black telephone, the fingers on her right hand trailed in the perfectly round holes, and the fingers of her left hand wound around the wire.

I perched on the edge of the double bed and waited intently. I knew I could

forgive Mum everything now, the rummages, changing the room around, bringing misfits like Molly and Roger home, even pissing herself, or chasing us with her jam rag. I was so full of admiration for her, so proud that she had finally birthed the baby that would allow me to leave her and lead a new life.

“Mum, it’s me, Han. Can I come home?”

“We’ll see, I could be out of sorts for a while yet.” We’ll see almost always meant no, it was just another way of saying it.

“What’s she like?” I asked, my eyes beginning to smart.

“She’s beautiful.” Mum sounded distant as if the phone had slipped away from her.

“Are you okay Mum?”

“Yes, I’m fine darling, just a bit tired that’s all.”

There was a lull on the line and I thought I heard sniffing.

“Can I speak to Bert?”

Auntie, who up until now had been putting the washing away, opening and closing drawers and cupboards, with one ear always cocked toward me, stopped with purpose, drew her stubby brows together and threw down a pile of odd socks onto the rocker. She circled the bed with determined strides, grabbed the phone from me, patted my tangled hair, and pulled me up from sitting.

“Okay, that’ll do,” she said, as if she had to make an important call, or thought that I’d asked all my questions and there was some resolve to the morning? But clearly it wasn’t really okay at all and it wouldn’t do, for her expression was sterner than ever as

she replaced the receiver without saying goodbye, and returned to her chore in silence.

“I want to go home.” I said.

Auntie wiped her hands on her apron. The hand wiping was like the rocking, born out of angst rather than necessity.

“It’ll fly by,” she said, placing her palms against mine, as if we were about to hand clap *a sailor went to sea, sea, sea*. “Just give her time to get her strength back. A few pints of Guinness and some liver and onions and she’ll be good as new.”

I didn’t want to cry. It gave me a headache and a fizzy sensation in my nose, like I had done too many duck dives at the Lido. I could hear Uncle John pushing back his kitchen chair and getting up from the table. Soon he’d enter the bedroom in anticipation of the day’s chores that Auntie would bestow upon him and he would catch me crying.

“Get the buckets out. It’s Sarah Bernhardt,” he would say. I wasn’t sure who Sarah Bernhardt was, but her name was reserved especially for when I was upset.

Uncle John had no time for tears. Maybe crying wasn’t considered communist like. As his big frame appeared at the doorway, I dabbed at my eyes with a corner of the eiderdown. Auntie was quick, quick enough to save me from the wrath of the Sarah Bernhardt routine.

“John, why don’t you take the boys out to the docks? I think Han and I need to have a little chat,” she said.

“Well make sure you tell her what we’ve been talking about. She doesn’t have to go home to that bald idiot of a man. And if he’s touched her,” he said, eyes narrowing, hands curling into fists inside the thin pockets of his dungarees.

“John Pearce.”

“You can tell your auntie if he did,” he said to me, and like a child having the last word, he muttered, “calls himself a father.”

With a slight cough and a shuffle, he turned around in his tracks, called the boys and proceeded to the lean-to, to rifle through the outdoor gear. Auntie shook her head and I kept mine down as we journeyed to the kitchen. There was the sound of rustling for coats and Wellington boots and gloves, and then the familiar splutter and pop-pop-bang of the Morris Minor engine as it chugged away, leaving us alone.

We stood for some time without speaking, Auntie scraped the breakfast plates and piled them up on the side of the deep square butler sink.

“So what do you think of Bert?” she posed.

“He’s been more of a father to me than that other thing,” I answered. Alexander Mordecai.

“I suppose you know your uncle doesn’t like him much,” Auntie said. I remembered her saying that tactlessness ran in our family. “He doesn’t think your mum makes good choices when it comes to relationships.”

“Bert was my idea.”

Auntie stopped washing-up to playfully grab my cheek, leaving soft wet bubbles on my skin.

“You’re such a funny thing.”

“Is Mum okay?”

“I wish I’d had a girl.”

“You have me.”

I felt the tingling of the Sainsbury’s suds on my face.

“Of course I do.”

“And you have my baby sister, is my sister okay?”

“I want you to promise me that you’ll come here whenever you need to,” Auntie said, ignoring my question and growing ever more serious. She straightened up and looked at my breasts. I could feel her eyes on them, so I crossed my arms.

Auntie moved over to do the drying up, taking off the marigold gloves to reveal her red hands. Her dermatitis was just beginning to flare up.

“My best friend Donna’s mum might have made those gloves,” I said. “She works at the London Rubber.”

“Han, listen,” Auntie said, the seriousness back in her expression.

“If Bert tried to do anything to you, anything that made you feel uncomfortable, you would tell me wouldn’t ...?”

“What do you mean?” I interrupted.

“If he tried to touch your private parts.”

I re-dried a mug, peering into the rim to inspect the stubborn tannin stains. Auntie swiveled me around to face her and looked into my eyes, her pupils grew large as if dissecting my thoughts, Like a lie detector, she reached for my sweaty palms.

“Oh you feel hot,” she said, placing a hand on my forehead. “I hope you’re not catching the lurgy.”

“I’m fine Auntie. And of course I’d tell you.

Can we make scones for supper?"

She nodded, and headed for the pantry. I breathed out, not all the way, but enough to feel my pajama bottoms loosen. When she came back into view, her apron was streaked with self-raising flour. She plopped the ingredients on the table, sat down and clamped a powdery white hand over her mouth, momentarily obstructing the sight of her bucked teeth. She looked like one of the three wise monkeys that sat on Mum's room divider. The one whose mission it was to tell the world that thou shalt speak no evil.