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one

Will realises there is something about Rosie Winters the night he meets her at the bonfire.

When he tells her that his mother left.

They are sitting beside each other with the blaze lifting into the November darkness, part of a broken circle of sixth formers. Fingerless gloves, beer cans. Distant waves beyond the pines. He doesn't know Rosie, really, despite sharing a school and some friends, but tonight, they are talking. A little.

Small talk, at first. Insignificant. Until his friend Josh – her twin brother – makes a comment about their parents, and Rosie laughs, barely audible above the bonfire, and before he can think what he's doing he's told her he doesn't know his own mother. It is something he's never said out loud before. Navigated, usually, with a dip of the head, a passing of the moment. But he finds himself telling her, this girl, with her split ends and untamed eyebrows, and her pale, slender hands. That his mother walked out, years back, while he was watching cartoons before school.

She looks at him when he says it, the flames held in her eyes. There isn't sympathy or curiosity in her face; no frown or twitching mouth, reactions he might have expected, if he'd had time to think about it.

Where do you think she is, she asks him, after a moment.

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He pauses. Looks at the sky, patched through the gaps in the trees. The smoke from the fire curls upwards, and there are stars, with one larger, whiter, than the others. A planet perhaps, or a moon.

I don't know, he says to her. Anywhere.

And Rosie Winters repeats the word back at him, like she's really thinking about it. Like she's wondering what anywhere might look like.

It is early winter and the wind slices through the forest, but still they remain outside. It is better than being at home, warm yet uninterested in the television.

This, their skin turned blood orange in the firelight, is new.

It sets something burning.

They spend the night talking, their knees almost touching. Saying very little, though he has never known himself to be so attentive, so desperate for another sentence, so surprised by the words she chooses. People drift away in pairs, to touch one another behind the trees and fumble in the sand, or to seek out late-night noodles, chips in oil-stained paper. Only he, Rosie, Josh and two others remain. One of them gets out a guitar and strums, alongside the dying fire. Will watches the bark glowing red, the salt-and-pepper peel of the ash.

It is down to its embers when Rosie begins to sing.

Her brother asks her to, at first. Has to encourage her, then plead, until she concedes with a small tilt of the head.

The wind has dropped. The air, without the fire, is like glass, cold and still. And when she sings, it is a sound unlike anything Will has ever known. Choral, and pure.

They listen until the fire dies and their hands go numb, and then they all part ways. Will pulls his helmet on, clips it beneath his chin and kicks his motorbike into gear, thinking

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that it'll be a one-time, memorable night where he spoke to someone's sister and she sang a strange song and there was nothing more to it than that.

But her voice keeps him awake that night.

And again, the night after that.

He rises late at the weekend. Pulls on a hoodie, trying to ignore his simmering need for a cigarette as he pads down the stairs in his socks. Dave accosts him on the bottom step, pawing at his knees, and Will knuckles his wiry head before he skitters back to the lounge. The dog spends his days curled on his grandpa's old chair. Like he's waiting, Will thinks, for him to come home.

His grandmother is frying bacon in the kitchen. It smells of hot oil and broiling fat; of salt and pork and toast. She trills at him when he passes through the doorway.

Afternoon, she says.

It's only ten, he reasons.

And you're only eighteen once, lad, she says. No point wasting those cheekbones of yours hiding under the duvet.

I wasn't hiding, he says, and he heads for the kitchen table, pours himself a glass of water from the jug.

Amber's been to swim club already, his gran says, her back to him. *And* finished half her homework.

Good for Amber, Will says.

There is a short silence in which the bacon spits, the winter sun blanched on the walls. His sister is nowhere to be seen. Baricaded in her bedroom, he's sure, colour-coding notes with gel pens, organising her life with heart-shaped paperclips.

You look tired, his grandma says. He doesn't answer just yet, takes two triangles of toast from the table and moves to the back door.

I'm fine, he tells her, as he turns down the handle. She is saying something else as he slips outside and closes the door on her, makes his way to the garage.

He feels bad, for the briefest of moments.

Knows she'll seethe for a while, then bring him bacon, later, for lunch.

Inside, he flicks on the lone light bulb hanging from the ceiling. It's a windowless space with a concrete floor, an aerial-pronged radio on his grandfather's old workbench. It smells of sawdust and long-ago diesel, and there's a toolbox in the corner, a pile of unused timber lying on the ground. It is the only place where things feel somewhat right to him, where everything has a purpose, and nobody talks or doubts or expects things.

His new motorcycle stands, stripped back and unfinished, just where he left it.

He lingers in the doorway and eats his toast dry, scanning the floor for the tools he needs. And then he gets to work, without switching on the radio. Just him and the bike. Repainting mudguards, tightening headlamps. Hardly thinking of the Rosie girl while he works.

Only a little.

*

Rosie stays late in the music room. She meant to just practise her scales, to duck out after fifteen minutes. But an hour goes by and then the cleaner is there, with the swirl of her mop on the tiles. Rosie hears the drag of the bucket, the slosh of the water, and says shit, quietly, to herself, before shuffling her sheet music away. She shuts off the light, lets the wooden door thud behind her. Calls goodnight to the cleaner, who is always kind; always smiles at her when they pass late in the halls, like they share some kind of secret.

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Outside, it is already dark, and the air feels cleansed, the kind of cold that foreshadows snow. It is not a night for bare legs. For running under strip lighting.

But she promised her mother, and so she goes to the gym. Changes into her kit and sprints on the treadmill, but only for half the time she should, because she forgot, because the music took over, because she was wasting her time, yet again.

The sweat musses her fringe and burns her eyes, and she wonders, as her feet pound the belt, why she is always trying so hard. Who she is trying for. Why everything matters, all of the time.

She gets a stitch halfway and stops, has to lean on the side and catch her breath. She hopes that nobody notices. That nobody's looking at her. And afterwards, she heaves her bag back onto her shoulder, zips up her jacket and begins the short walk home, her hair hanging damp at her ears. Stars scatter overhead, and cars move past her in a stream of headlights. She counts her steps, and recounts again. Avoiding the cracks in the pavement.

At home, she finds her twin brother lying on the sofa.

You're late, he says, without taking his eyes from the television.

Not by much, Rosie says, glancing at her wrist, only to see that it's bare. She's left her watch in the music room again. Can't write when she's on the clock.

Mum'll be mad, Josh says, and she pushes his head down with her palm, leaves the room before he can throw a cushion at her.

Her mother is not mad; only distracted. She is in the kitchen on the phone, and she holds a finger up at Rosie, her habitual way of saying hello while also saying wait, I'm doing something

important, and you understand, don't you, you know how things are.

How was school, her mother asks when she hangs up. She doesn't make eye contact, instead turns around to open the oven.

Good, Rosie says.

And the gym?

Hard.

Well, good, her mother says. It's supposed to be.

Have I got time for a shower?

Her mother glances round, takes in her shining face and uncombed hair.

I should say so, she says. Can't be sweating like that at the dinner table, can you, darling?

Rosie looks back at her, for a second too long, then nods and heads for the stairs.

In the bathroom, she turns the water on so hot that it nearly scalds. Her skin turns a livid red, but she stands there and endures it. Counting, not her steps this time, but the seconds. Elongating the numbers, over and over, in this way that she does – like blood flow, unable to stop.

When she's out, she wraps her hair in a towel, grateful for the steam that hides her reflection in the mirror. Then she dries herself off and wanders to her room, where sheet music scatters her desk and books line her shelves, tattered and tea-stained from being handled so often, trailed over like old maps. Patti Smith. Oliver Sacks. The Sylvias, both Patterson and Plath.

After tugging on some clothes, she lowers her blackout blind. Stands, for a moment, with her hands on the window sill. She is hungry, in every sense of the word. She thinks about walking out of the door, with her hair wet and the snow about to fall, straight into the Norfolk night.

How was school, her mother asks again, once they're all seated at the table. She has dished up squares of shop-bought lasagne, passes the plates to Rosie's father and brother, says careful, they're hot. Rosie takes her plate with two hands, notices that her own square is smaller than everyone else's.

Earth to Joshua? her mother nudges. How was your day?

Good, he says, through his pasta.

Rosie?

I handed in my history coursework, Rosie tells her. And finished a classics paper.

How'd that go?

Okay, I think.

Good girl.

There is a minute more of silence, knives squeaking on plates. Rosie takes a sip of water, and then her mother launches into a story from work, something about her client surrendering to his wife, not putting up the fight that she knows she could win for him. Again, nobody speaks. The kitchen clock ticks. White sauce oozes on their plates.

Maybe it's just too much, Rosie ventures.

Hmm?

For your client. Maybe it hurts, his marriage ending like this. And he just wants it, you know. Over with.

Her mother pours herself another glass of wine, spears a tomato with her fork.

Let's not presume to know his motivations, Rosemary, she says, after she has swallowed. Josh catches Rosie's eye, soundlessly asking her why she bothers, and she drops her gaze to the table. Her father is doing the crossword.

When her mother rises to clear, Josh scrapes his remaining lasagne onto Rosie's plate, and she finishes it, fast, before standing to help, knocking his shoulder with hers.

A sibling thing, or a twin thing.

She doesn't know the difference.

And it's as she's rinsing the salad bowl that a new melody starts up. Like early birdsong, those first, tentative notes that nobody is around to hear. She is barely listening as Josh mentions revising tomorrow with Will White, from his further maths class, because she's trying to hold the notes in her mind.

Repeating them, over and over, before they can fall away.

Marley rings her early the next morning.

Rosie is awake already, picks up on the second ring.

You're up, Marley says.

Couldn't sleep, she says. She wishes, for a moment, that her friend would ask her why. That someone would notice, or care.

I was thinking we could do something tonight, Marley says, instead. Rosie says that'd be nice, but she's got revision to do.

So? *I've* got revision to do. We could revise together, even. Imagine that.

Rosie turns over in bed. The morning light is pale through the curtains, like cloudy water dipped with paint.

You say that, she says, but then you'll put on a film and we'll end up doing nothing.

Inevitably, I guess, Marley agrees, and Rosie hears the smile in her voice, familiar and slightly taunting.

I could do with a break, though, she reasons, swapping her phone to her other hand. She has ink on her palms from her late-night songwriting, all crossings out and attempted riffs.

Good! says Marley. How about we do something this weekend, then? A Saturday night treat, or something equally tragic.

Why is that tragic?

Because we're *seventeen*, Rosie. We shouldn't need Saturdays

as an excuse to see each other, or go out, or do something remotely exciting.

We go out! We went out the other night.

Yeah, and all I got out of it was a bag of chips and a snog that tasted of Tic Tacs.

Rosie snorts. She can hear her mother getting ready for work, the drone of the coffee machine downstairs.

Who'd you snog? she asks.

Never you mind, says Marley.

Fine. It'll be someone new next week, anyway.

Are you calling me easy, Rosemary Winters?

Would I ever?

I guess not. But only 'cause you're a vanilla virgin.

Good name for a nail polish.

It is, isn't it? And Marley laughs, her big, swooping laugh, so that Rosie has to pull back from the phone. This Saturday, then. I'll buy a mountain of popcorn and a packet of those old lady sweets you like.

Werther's are not old lady sweets.

And we can replay all the Leo scenes as many times as we want. Or the Patrick Swayze ones. I feel like we need some arousing pottery in our lives.

Marl!

What?

Arousing pottery?

Doesn't have to be pottery. Some dry humping to Solomon Burke. Tabletop sex to Berlioz.

I'm hanging up now.

Prude.

I'll see you Saturday.

Knew Berlioz would get you, Marley says.

Rosie thinks about what Marley said to her as she walks to school. Josh left early for basketball, so she is alone, her coat zipped to her chin against the cold. She is a virgin, and she is vanilla. She tries not to be. But she can't care enough to be more than what she is, which is, essentially, one of the good girls.

She has never had a boyfriend. She's kissed someone, or rather, was kissed, badly, her shoulders pinned against a bathroom door at a friend's house party. The handle bruised her coccyx, and the boy tasted of over-chewed gum.

She's never been drunk. Never snuck out. Never smoked a cigarette or lied to or even sworn in front of her parents, though she's not sure they'd notice, or mind.

But there is time for all of that, she reasons, as she steps off the kerb to cross the road. Seventeen is just the start. She will work hard, she will do all that she is supposed to do, and her life will be good and right and whole, filled with music and poetry and wine and sex, and life-altering moments that last longer than three minutes, and don't leave her with bruises down her back.

That is her plan.

She has to cross the road once, twice, three times on her way to school, tapping her foot on the pavement until she can stop, and that is when the snow begins to fall. Lightly, at first, more of a fine rain. It clings to her sleeves like salt.

two

Josh tells him he doesn't get it. They are both staring at their further maths textbooks, the snow swirling outside the classroom window.

They are the only two in class, the only two in their year who study this subject. They knew each other before, had shared a few lessons throughout school, but now, in their last year of sixth form, Will supposes they'd call each other friends. His other mates are more break-time acquaintances; they don't ask him questions, or seem to care, at all, about his life, which suits him just fine. But Josh is different.

What's your first choice, then, Josh had asked him, back in their first class.

First choice of what, he'd asked, and Josh had said uni, and so he'd had to explain that he wasn't going.

Josh had looked up from his worksheet at that.

Come on, he'd said, and Will had said come on what.

You're like, really smart.

Thanks.

Seriously. If you knuckled down, mate, you could get in anywhere you want.

And what if I don't want it? Will posed, and Josh had

looked at him then with a crease at the bridge of his nose, like he didn't quite understand.

Now, though, they're both staring at a page of hyperbolic functions and hoping it will make some semblance of sense before the lesson is through. Their teacher, Mr Brookman, has already left. He quite often uses their class as an excuse for a prolonged break in the staff room, and in Will's mind, this works both ways.

Let's just call it a day, Will says.

Josh leans back, tilts his chair onto two legs.

I can't, man. I need to get this before our mock exam.

Why, Will asks, as he sweeps his pens into his bag.

Why what?

Why do you need to get it for the mock? You only need to know it for the real thing, in the spring. You've got ages.

Mocks matter, Josh says, still tipped backwards on his chair. For the provisional offers, and stuff.

Right, he says.

You're really not going to uni?

Nope.

What you gonna do instead?

Work, he says, hauling his bag onto his shoulder. Travel, maybe.

That's cool.

I'm not trying to be, Will says, because this is what people think about him, he knows, with his motorcycle and his school record and all that trouble he got in, years back. It was so long ago, now, but it's all anyone remembers. All they ever want to see.

You still coming over, later? Josh asks.

You still need me to?

Definitely, Josh says, letting his chair drop back onto all

fours. I'm on Crescent Gardens – you can park on the street. It's the white house with the blue door.

Outside, Will makes his way through the courtyard, snowflakes landing on his hair. The school looks like a chalk and charcoal drawing, shapeless and smudged.

He doesn't give it much thought, the fact that he's heading to Josh's house that night, to help him revise. And that he happens to be the brother of the girl that he can't stop thinking about.

This isn't unusual, for him. He thinks of girls often. What is unusual is the content of his thoughts; nothing about the soft, wet parts of her, the weight of her thighs around his. Just her voice, and her eyes. How intently she listened, and held all that he had to say.

You're sure you can stay for dinner?

I'm sure.

You're sure you're sure? You've not just assumed?

Gran, Josh *said*, come for dinner.

You won't get hungry?

I doubt their cupboards are empty.

You can't eat like a horse round someone else's house, Amber pipes up from the table. Like you do here.

She is swinging her school-socked feet, scribbling something in a notebook.

Thanks for the tip, Ambs.

It's rude, she adds, with a flourish of her fluff-topped pen.

Home by ten, his grandma says.

Might be ten thirty, he tells her. Depends how long Josh takes to get it.

Remind me who this Josh boy is, his grandma asks, following him out into the hall.

Will sighs as he shrugs on his jacket, pats down his pockets for his phone.

Josh Winters, he says. He's the other kid in my maths class.

Further maths, she corrects him.

Further maths. And he needs help with this module, so I said I'd tutor him, like I told you. He's a meat-eater, possibly a Gemini, and he doesn't smoke weed. I think his shoe size is a twelve, but I couldn't be sure. Oh, and he –

His grandmother cuts him off with a whip of her tea towel.

Home by ten thirty, then, wise guy, she says, and he says yeah yeah, grabs her car keys and shuts the front door behind him.

The house is a similar layout to his own. Semi-detached but painted white, with a perfect lawn and potted olive trees saying things that his gran's front garden does not, with her gnomes and her overgrown grass.

There is no trace of Rosie when Will arrives. Upstairs, all the doors are closed, and he has no idea which room would be hers, so he puts her from his mind and turns to the logic of maths. Something familiar, and consistent, like an engine.

The night is long. Josh takes several hours to understand the system, to accurately answer four mock-exam questions in a row. They eat dinner in his room, at his large corner desk, when Josh pleads with his mother that they be excused – *we're almost there, Mum, please* – and it is close to ten when he sits back, rubbing his eyes, and says he's finally got it.

Took you long enough, Will says, and Josh flicks him, hard, on the arm.

It's confusing, Josh says.

I never said it wasn't.

S'all coming together, though, Josh says, and he sounds almost gleeful as he leans back in his chair, stretches his arms over his head. He is tall and gangling, reminds Will of some kind of cartoon. Limbs too long for his body, like he still has some growing to do.

Gonna smash that exam, Josh says. Get into Cambridge, and boom.

What's boom?

I don't know, Josh says, and he laughs. Just boom. Just the way things go, you know?

I guess, Will says, though he doesn't know anything about how things are going to go. He plans for the next day, the next weekend. The next part he needs for his bike.

Thanks for coming, man, Josh says, after he's packed up his things. Can we do this again, maybe? You're better than old Brookman.

Not hard to be, says Will. He doesn't think Josh needs an answer, but he's looking at him, as if he's waiting. Not taking his eyes from his face.

You can come to the workshop after school, he suggests. I'm behind with my woodwork project, so I'm there sometimes. Wednesdays, mainly.

Maths, further maths, and woodwork, says Josh, ticking them off on his fingers. That's the weirdest combo of subjects.

Will shrugs. Not if you want to be a civil engineer, he reasons.

And do you?

God, no.

What *do* you want to do? Josh asks.

It's late, mate, Will says, because it's true, and because he has no desire to get into this. I'd better go.

Out on the landing, the walls are adorned with childhood

photos; Josh in dungarees, Rosie picking up shells. One of her at the piano. Will feels strangely alert as he follows Josh down the stairs, aware that she is somewhere nearby. He wonders if he'll see her. If she'll say hi.

He wonders why he's wondering this.

Downstairs, all is quiet; just the murmur of the television from the lounge. But after he pulls on his shoes and tells Josh he'll see him tomorrow, he opens the front door and is greeted by a world of white. His gran's car is wedged against the kerb, topped like a Christmas cake, the snow sifting down like sugar.

Whoa, says Josh, as they both squint out of the door. I guess you're not going anywhere.

Mrs Winters is overly apologetic. Says she hadn't noticed how bad it was, that all the curtains had been closed. That she's *so sorry* he has to spend the night here. Will gets the sense that she's sorrier for herself than for him; her face is pinched, two spots of pink high on her cheeks. There is something feline about her, he thinks, as she fusses in the hallway. She is well kept and hard-edged and she looks at him with vague disapproval, like she knows something he doesn't.

They make him a bed on the sofa, and Mrs Winters tells him to help himself to the filtered water in the fridge; her words imply that this is all he should help himself to, and he thanks her, before she heads upstairs.

Comfy? Josh asks, as he punches one of the cushions. He has given him a spare T-shirt, and Will tugs off his school shirt, pulls it on. Josh looks away while he does it, as if suddenly fascinated by the carpet.

All good, Will says.

Cool. Well. Night.

Josh stands there for a moment too long. Goes to say

something else, seems to decide against it, and flicks off the light on his way out. Will hears him clump up the stairs, then pulls out his phone to see five missed calls.

Sorry, he says, as soon as his grandma picks up. I didn't know the snow was so bad.

You're staying, presumably?

Yeah. On their sofa.

Be on your best behaviour, William.

I always am, Gran.

There is a silence. He looks at the glow of the street light, blurred through the slats of the blind.

You know what I mean, she says. No funny business.

Goodnight, Gran, he says, and he hits the end call button.

*

Rosie cannot sleep. She'd gone over some revision before bed and now it is whirling around her brain, snagging on names and facts that she cannot, must not, forget. She sits up after a full hour. Checks some things. Decides that her mouth is dry, that she needs a drink of water.

She pads down the stairs in the dark and jumps when she sees a boy sitting at their kitchen table. William White, the guy from the bonfire. The aloof, brooding boy from school she hadn't exchanged one word with prior to that night.

Sorry, she says, even though it is her house, and even though he was the one to startle her.

He raises his eyes, very slowly, from his phone, his face tinged blue in the light from the screen.

For what? he asks.

I didn't know you'd be in here, she says.

It's the snow. Your mum said I could stay.

I know that, she says. I knew you were here. I just. Forgot.

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He raises his chin, as if all the better to look at her. She is keenly aware that her feet are bare. That her pyjamas are a faded pink, and arguably much too young for her. But then she remembers that it is dark; that he will hardly be looking at her feet, or her clothes. Or at her, generally, at all.

I just came down for some water, she says, unable to keep the apology out of her voice.

There's filtered water in the fridge, he says.

My mum told you that, did she?

She did.

God knows why we can't drink water out the tap like everyone else.

Well, you could, he says.

She pauses at the fridge door and glances over at him. She can't work out, in the dark, whether he is smiling, but she thinks she can hear it in his voice. A slight teasing perhaps, which is new to her. Like him talking, all night, by the fire.

All right, she says. I will.

And so she goes to the tap and fills her glass and takes a mouthful, looking out of the window as she does it. The garden is lost beneath the snow. So pretty, she thinks. So perfect and untouched, for such a short while.

So? Will asks her.

So what?

The water. How is it?

Oh. She looks down into her glass. Entirely comparable.

He laughs at this, so quietly he could simply be breathing, and something floats up and through her.

She has thought of him once or twice since the other night. It was odd, to her, that he barely moved from beside her, and she was self-conscious about the way he kept looking at her, even when she looked away.

She's always thought of Will White as detached and stand-offish, despite his popularity and long list of girlfriends. Gold-brown hair, grey, unreadable eyes. It's laughable, to her, that these sorts of people really exist, like in the films she and Marley spend their weekends watching. And yet here he is, looking at her again, in her kitchen.

Well, night, she says, and she turns in her naked feet and heads for the door.

Rosie, he says.

Her name in his mouth.

Yeah?

He has put his phone down, its screen still lit up where it rests on the table. It deepens the shadows on his face, the rings beneath his eyes.

I don't know what I was going to say, he says.

She tilts her head.

I wanted to say something, he corrects himself. But I don't know what.

Okay.

Sleep well, I guess.

I never sleep well, she tells him, because she thinks she should be honest, and because he's being strange, so perhaps she can be her strange, most honest self in return.

Me neither, he says. Not at other people's houses, anyway.

They look at each other across the kitchen, the light silvery soft with the snowfall. The fridge breathes its low, barely there sound.

Are you hungry? she asks.

Always, he says. He leans back in his chair, and for some reason at this moment she remembers that he is a smoker, and that he is undeniably attractive. Two reasons to end this conversation now, to leave him to his phone and his sleepless

night. She has a mock exam in the morning. She needs to try to sleep. Her mother would not approve of the late hour or, indeed, of him.

She pours them both bowls of cereal.

They talk until the early hours of the morning. Rosie has turned on the light above the oven, and it bathes the kitchen in gold, the underfloor heating warming the tiles, the slipperless soles of her feet.

They eat cornflakes with cold milk and she watches him dribble a spoonful down his chin, and this makes him seem less intimidating, especially when he fails to notice. She tells him, eventually, with a small laugh, and he wipes it away with the back of his hand, says that's embarrassing, and when she asks him why he shrugs and grins, his canines pointed, sharp-looking.

He doesn't try small talk. Doesn't ask her about school or subjects or being a twin. He asks her, immediately, why she rarely sleeps, and this is what does it; this is what catches her, places him in her sphere in a way she wasn't ready for.

I just worry about things, she says. Sometimes.

What things, he asks, and she says stupid stuff, and he says surely not, if it's keeping you awake.

All normal things, she says. School. Grades. Life.

One and the same, right? he says, and she wonders if he's mocking her.

I told you it was stupid.

Did I say that?

She says nothing, lifts her spoon out of the milk.

We're taught to care so much about all of that, Will says. Like every decision we make will lead us down a particular path.

And you don't think that's true?

Nope. I think we have a path, but it doesn't change based on the decisions we make. It's a path that leads to the same place, anyway.

She sips the milk off her spoon. It tastes sweet from the cornflakes, reminds her of late-night study sessions and her primary school breakfast club, the years spent rising at 5 a.m. so her mother could get to work.

What do you mean, she asks.

What do you think I mean?

She lets his question hang in response to her own, sees his eyebrows rise, just slightly.

Dying, she says.

Right.

Will leans forward in his chair, as though it's no big deal, which she supposes it's not, when you're seventeen. When it's so far away, so implausible.

I figure we're all dying with every day, he says. So we might as well do what we want, before it happens.

He is looking at her as he speaks, and she drops her eyes to the table. There is a crescent of milk, from the bottom of her bowl. She dabs her finger into it, draws it out in a line.

That's kind of morbid, she says, and he shrugs, says it's true.

So what do you want to do, then? she asks him. She doesn't add *before you die*, though she thinks about it.

Guess I'll figure that out, Will says.

Rosie nods, her fingertip wet from the milk.

And what do you want, Rosie Winters?

She looks back at him. He is smiling, again, but barely. The edges of his mouth are lifted, his eyes soft, lamp-like, in the semi-dark. The use of her surname seems either aggressive or affectionate; she cannot quite work out which.

I want all the things you said I shouldn't, she says. To do

well at school. To get good grades, have a good life. All of that.

You think those things will get you a good life? Will asks. I think they'll help me *get* to the things that will, she says. He holds her eyes. Doesn't argue, or ask her about it again. She lowers her spoon, watches the milk ripple.

It is half past three in the morning when she says God, it's late, and Will follows her gaze to the microwave clock and says that technically, it's early.

I should go, she says, rising out of her chair. She rinses their bowls under the tap, and Will watches her as she does it. Her hair is dark and mane-like, falling just beyond her shoulders. He can see her ankles, so pale beneath her pyjama legs.

He doesn't want to be interested. Doesn't have the time or the inclination for that, not if she's going to university. Not if she's Josh's sister. Not if she'll be too desirable, which he's sensing, already, that she would be.

That song you sang, he says to her, raising his voice so she can hear him over the running water.

What about it, she says. She shuts off the tap, turns the bowls upside down to drain. He wants to tell her it was beautiful. That her voice, that she, is beautiful. But it is so far removed from what he would ordinarily say, so daring, even, to think.

I can't get it out of my head, he says.

Like an earworm, she says. She has turned her back on the sink, is leaning against the counter. Looking at him, with those eyes.

What's an earworm?

When you get a song stuck in your head and it goes round and round. I get it sometimes, when I can't sleep. Like my brain's caught on a loop.

Will considers this. Tells her it's nicer than that.

She half smiles at him then, all lips and no teeth. He wonders what she would say if he got out of his chair now, and pressed his own mouth to hers.

I'm going to bed, she tells him.

Night, then, he says.

She doesn't move. He doesn't, either.

It's been nice talking to you, he says.

So formal, she says, still with that half-smile, and then she leaves him, her footsteps light on the stairs. He sits there a while, in the honeyed glow from the oven. So many hours to go until sunrise.

He pretends to be asleep when Josh jumps on his legs in the morning.

Rise and shine, he says, bashing on his side with a fist. Will grumbles, though he's glad it's daytime, glad he can get up and source some caffeine and maybe speak to Rosie again.

Breakfast? Josh offers.

Is the snow gone?

Better than that, he says. It's a snow day, mate.

Really?

Really! No school. Praise the Lord, or whatever deity you may or may not worship.

I don't know how you don't get shoved into walls more often, Will says, sitting up and massaging his temples with one hand. The room tilts with his lack of sleep, with the too-bright-white of the wallpaper.

Just lucky, I guess, Josh says. *And* endearing.

That's one word for it, Will says, and groans as he gets elbowed in the ribs.

Pancakes, Josh declares. You like pancakes?

I guess.

You know what I like about you, Will, Josh says, as he springs up from the sofa. Your boundless enthusiasm.

Will gives him the finger, still rubbing his head. But when he looks around, Josh is gone, and his twin sister is standing in the doorway. Her hair is loose past her shoulders, and she's cradling a mug in her hands.

I thought you might want some coffee?

Christ yes, he says, and he stands and takes it from her, burns his tongue when he drinks. He is suddenly conscious of his bed hair. Crumbs of cereal stick in the craters of his teeth, and he can taste the tar of his breath.

I didn't know if you'd want milk?

Black is fine, thanks.

Did you get any sleep? she asks. He wonders if that's a loaded question, whether she's asking if he was lying awake, thinking of her.

In the end, he says.

A loaded answer.

Rosie crosses her arms like she's cold, though he heard the radiators clunk on before dawn, the water banging in the pipes. She has blue eyes, he sees now. Full, dark eyebrows that match the wildness of her hair. She opens her mouth to say something just as Josh sticks his head out of the kitchen.

Rosie, he says. There's no butter.

Use oil then, she says.

Where's that? The fridge?

She shakes her head, says it's in the cupboard, and Will looks at the crease of love in her face as she turns towards her twin.

He has never looked at Amber that way, not even when they're getting along. He holds the coffee in his mouth before swallowing, and it's bitter, still too hot.

D'you want to go for a walk, he asks her, before he even decides to say it.

Rosie looks back round at him.

Now? she says.

Or after breakfast, maybe.

What is happening, he asks himself, as he watches her question the same thing. Her eyebrows pleat together and she sucks in her bottom lip. Just for a moment, before her face returns to neutral.

Maybe, she says.

Then she walks into the kitchen, leaves him standing alone with his rumpled bed covers, in his not-slept-in T-shirt and boxers. He listens to them talking, the clank of pans, roll of drawers. It is the sound of routine, familiarity. He has distanced himself from these things in his own house, spends most of his time in the garage.

When he joins them, dressed, Rosie is mixing batter, Josh peering in cupboards and foraging for honey and syrup.

Every snow day should start with a sugar hit, Josh says, as he clunks the condiments down on the table. Rosie is quiet as she ladles the batter into the pan.

This one stresses about snow days, Josh says, nodding over at her.

I'm not stressing, Rosie says.

She had a history mock today, he tells Will. And she'd rather be in school, taking it, than sitting here eating pancakes with us.

No, I wouldn't, she says, and she cranks the heat up high. It's just more days to forget everything, is all.

They watch her flip the first pancake onto its uncooked side. The kitchen smells of vegetable oil and yolk, the windows steamed up with the heat. Will offers to help, because it feels wrong letting her cook for them both, and to his surprise she

steps aside. He ladles and flips while she slices strawberries from the fridge, fills a small bowl with a mound of sugar. He tries not to notice as she dips a strawberry into it, sucks the grains off with her mouth.

*

The boys head out to do whatever it is that boys do in the snow. Throw packed ice at each other, no doubt, get their jeans soaked, stay out until their fingers turn numb and they can't put their keys in the door.

She is trying to revise. Trying to embed historical facts into her mind, and when it fails, she tries to practise her scales, but they come smoothly, and she is bored within the hour. She thinks back to breakfast, when she is sure that Will kept trying to catch her eye, and in the light of day, she decides that she doesn't understand why. She isn't interesting, and nor can he be interested. Everything felt different in the dark, the room hushed with the snowfall outside. Their feet almost touching under the table.

He'd told her he had a dog named Dave.

That he lived with his grandmother.

They talked about death and guitars and travel plans, Will's fear of rats, her aversion to cotton wool. Not once did he mention his motorbike or his suspension from school, nor did she feel she could ask him about it.

The part she's replaying, though, the part that's distracting her now, is that he told her he couldn't get her song out of his head.

Her song. One she wrote, herself, though there's no way he would have known that.

She catches up to them on the playing field. Children dressed in padded onesies drag sledges to the hillock beyond the playground, ridged footprints trailing from their wellies.

They are by the swings. Will is sitting on one, his legs stretched out in front of him. His boots are black leather, like his jacket, and his hair is laced with snow. She is this close to him, can see how it looks like dew, when Josh lobbs a snowball at her head.

You came! he says, as it explodes in a puff. He bounds over from his place by the railings, his ears shrimp-pink from the cold.

Just for a bit, she says, dusting the snow off her hair. I needed a break.

Her brother takes her wrists in his hands then, and his gloves are moist, reptilian; the palms dotted with tiny grip pads. Rosie forgot her own gloves, and the air prickles her skin.

That's great, Josh says, and he squeezes, once, to show her he knows how hard it is for her to choose fun, to choose snow, over study. To ease up, like he's so often asking her to. She feels suddenly hot under her coat, wondering what he would say if he knew she had not come out for him or for herself, but for William White, and that she is not even sure why.

They lean on the railings and talk, a little. Watching the kids play, a dog on the field chasing a ball. Josh drops onto his back and makes a snow angel while Will watches from his swing, and Rosie watches Will watching him. Fixing her gaze beyond his head, as though she's looking at the trees.

I love snow, Josh says, when he stops moving.

Will catches her eye, at this, and they share something in that look. Appreciation, she thinks, or affection, for the unapologetic candour – the innocence, even – of her seventeen-year-old twin.

I don't, says Rosie.