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**SISTERS**



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My sister is a black hole.

My sister is a tornado.

My sister is the end of the line my sister is the locked door my sister is a shot in the dark.

My sister is waiting for me.

My sister is a falling tree.

My sister is a bricked-up window.

My sister is a wishbone my sister is the night train my sister is the last packet of crisps my sister is a long lie-in.

My sister is a forest on fire.

My sister is a sinking ship.

My sister is the last house on the street.

# PART ONE



## September and July

A house. Slices of it through the hedge, across the fields. Dirty white, windows sunk into the brick. Hand in hand in the back seat, the arrow of light from the sunroof. Two of us, shoulder-to-shoulder, sharing air. A long way to come, up the bone of the country, skimming the Birmingham ring road, past Nottingham, Sheffield and Leeds, breaching the Pennines. This the year we are haunted. What? This the year, as any other, in which we are friendless, necessary only to ourselves. This the year we waited in the rain by the old tennis court for them to arrive. Sounds on the radio: *Higher temperatures are coming from the South ... Police in Whitby*. The shush shush shush of Mum's hands on the wheel. Our thoughts like swallows. Front of the car rising and falling like a bow. There is sea out there somewhere. Pulling the duvet over our heads.

This the year something else is the terror.

\*

The road edging away and then dropping from sight, the judder judder judder as we move from tarmac to dirt. Is Mum crying? I don't know. Should we ask? No answer to that and – anyway – the house is there now and no time to go back or try again or do things over. This the year we are houses, lights on in every window, doors that won't quite shut. When one of us speaks we both feel the words moving on our tongues. When one of us eats we both feel the food slipping down our gullets. It would have surprised neither of us to have found, slit open, that we shared organs, that one's lungs breathed for the both, that a single heart beat a doubling, feverish pulse.

# July

## 1

Here we are. Here it is.

This the house we have come to. This the house we have left to find. Beached up on the side of the North York Moors, only just out of the sea. Our lips puckered and wrinkled from licking crisp salt, limbs heavy, wrought with growing pains. The boiling-hot steering wheel, the glare off the road. It has been hours since we left, buried in the back seat. Mum said, getting into the car, Let's make it before night. And then nothing else for a long time. We imagine what she might say: This is your fault, or, We would never have had to leave if you hadn't done what you did. And what she means, of course, is if we hadn't been born. If we hadn't been born at all.

I squeeze my hands together. Not being able to tell yet what the fear is of, only that it is enormous. The house is here. Squatting like a child by the small slate wall, the empty sheep field behind pitted with old excrement, thorn bushes tall as a person. The suck of stale air

meeting new as I push the door open. The smell of manure. The hedges overgrown, the grass and weeds forcing their way through the concrete, the front garden narrow and gnarled up with odds and ends, ancient spade heads, plastic bags, shattered plant pots and their almost-living root balls. September up on the uneven garden wall, balancing, teeth clenched in what might or might not be a grin. The windows shuttered with the reflection of her body and of my face beyond, eyeholes like caverns and, beyond that, our mum leaning exhausted against the bonnet.

The white walls of the house are streaked with mud handprints and sag from their wrinkled middles, the top floor sunk down onto the bottom like a hand curved over a fist. Scaffolding heaped against one wall, broken tiles from the roof shattered on the road. I reach for September's arm wondering if I might push my teeth down into the skin to see if I can tell, by the contact, what she is thinking. Sometimes I can. Not with great certainty but with a numb buzz of realisation. Like when Mum turns on the radios in different rooms and the timing is off just a little and you can stand in the corridor in between and hear them echoing; but she whirls away out of reach, cackling like a magpie.

I dig for a tissue in the end of my pocket, blow my nose. The sun is just starting to drop but still it burns on my bare shoulders. There are cough sweets in my pocket, soft with fuzz. I suck one into my cheek.

On the wall of the house there is a sign, covered in grime. I wipe it with my tissue until I can read the words:



THE SETTLE HOUSE. We have never lived in a house with a name before. Never lived in a house that looks the way this one does: rankled, bentoutashape, dirty-allover. September's body spins. I close my eyes five times quickly so that she won't fall and if she does she will land like a cat.

I look back for Mum. She is heaving herself away from the car; her body looks as if it is too much to carry. She has been this way, taciturn or silent, ever since what happened at school. At night we listened to her moving around above us in the Oxford house. She would speak only stray phrases to us, barely meeting our eyes. She is a different person in a recognisable body and I wish she would come back to us. She knocks the garden gate open with her toe.

Help me, she says, as she passes. Ursa said the key was under the frog.

We look for the frog. The ground is loose with insect activity. I dig for a worm and then panic at the feel of it, soft, giving.

Stop mucking around, Mum says and we look bent over in the grass, searching until I find it with my fingers, a stone frog, fat-lipped, button-eyed, almost hidden beneath the undergrowth. Mum tips it with her boot and then groans, no key. Typical, she says. Typical, and then knocks her fists three times against her thighs.

Down the line of the field the May clouds have turned steely and begun gathering and swelling ominously. I point, say, Look.

OK. Quick. Hunt.

We leave the bags in piles and lift the empty pots, kick through the scrub of grass. I find coins in the dirt. Around the side of the house there is a path and a garden with flagstones stacked against the walls, grass torn back to muck, metal rakes abandoned. What might have been a barbecue with a mound of ash inside the split brick structure. There are shells embedded in the side of the house, set into the concrete, and the ground is grainy with sand, loose with sea-smoothed pebbles. I look through one of the windows. Through the glass: the dusky shape of walls, shelves; a pantry perhaps. I spit on my palm and rub. The lighter square of a door frame beyond which there are dim shadows, what might be a sofa or a table, something that could be the first tread of a staircase. Next to me, September presses her face forward, hands curled on the glass, the sweet smell of the perfume we stole from the Boots near our school, the smell of her unbrushed teeth. She goggles her eyes at me, rolls her tongue, pinches my arm. My face looks wrong, the perspective all off, my cheeks longer than they should be, my eyes narrow as coin slots in parking meters.

I look like Mum. Or like her mum she says, our grandmother, in India, where we have never been. September does not look like us. We do not remember our father but she must look like him, smooth-haired, cheeks soft with blonde fuzz, pale-eyed like a snow animal.

The information about him comes drip-drip through the years, rarely wrangled without a fight. He'd met

Mum when she was twenty-three and on holiday in Copenhagen, where he lived at the time. He'd followed her around the city for three days. She told us that he was like that. His English was perfect – he had grown up here – but he liked to speak to her in Danish, enjoyed the fact that she could not understand. He was like that too. He had died. How had he died? we asked for four years before she caved. He had drowned in the swimming pool of a hotel in Devon. They had not been together when he died and the three of us, September barely five, me a little younger, had been living somewhere else. It had taken nearly a year for his sister to ring and tell her he was dead. We learned not to ask about him. We do not have the words to describe him. We did not know him. September once said to Mum that he was a howlingbanderlootinggrifter and she had laughed and said it was true but had then gone quiet for a few hours, got the look we had come to recognise. Every three or four Christmases his sister Ursa comes to visit and September and I sometimes try and wring information out of her but she never caves. Ursa drives a convertible car, never comes for more than a day, stays in a hotel rather than at ours. Her hair is short and blonde so that, coming upon her from behind and unawares, we would at times be convinced that she was him; long-lost father, the reason for our mother's sadness and our existence. The house on the moors belongs to her though she rents it out, does not live here, fills it with people like us who do not know where else to go.

Down the side of the house, the wind picking up a bit now, we find another window, not large but loose-looking, opening inwards when we press on it.

At the front of the house Mum has a rock out of a nearby field and is about to throw it through the pane of glass beside the door. I lift my hands to cover my ears. The blood goes boom boom boom and the alarm grows in my bone marrow and swans up my throat.

There's an open window, September yells. I think we can fit inside. Mum turns her stony face towards us, mouth drawn down and carved into the skin.

The room the window leads into is a pantry. We are holding hands by the time we get inside. Beneath the window there is a dirty tiled floor, chipped where it meets the damp wall. Wooden shelves. Some cans of soup and beans, a couple of packets of off-coloured spaghetti. There is a smell, almost sweet with an undertone that I cannot quite identify. The ceiling is low and the bare bulb bumps off the top of my head.

September is humming the way she does when she is excited and wants me to know it. Her hums can mean all sorts of things. Hello, where are you/ Come here/ Stop that/ I'm annoyed with you. I realise that I am afraid of the house and of Mum being angry and of September being annoyed. We have been here before, only once, but I do not remember it well.

What is that? I say.

What?

That smell.

I don't know. A dead mouse?

Don't say that.

Through the door of the pantry we can see into the corridor beyond; to the left is the front entrance and, beside it, another closed door leading, perhaps, to a bathroom. Ahead are the stairs and to the right another door and in front of us, opening out, a sitting room. The layout of the house feels wrong, unintuitive, the pantry opening directly onto the sitting room the way it does. It smells like food left out too long. They go out into the sitting room. In the corner of the room there is a hunched shape, formless, folds of material. I squeeze September's hand. It is impossible that we are here and it is impossible to stay. There is a lamp on the table nearest us that I lunge for. Something is knocked from the table and falls. My insides are filled with bees. The light comes on, emitting a high-pitched whine.

There's nothing there, September says. Don't worry, July-bug.

She goes around turning on switches. Everything is a little too bright, as if the bulbs are not quite right for their fixtures. There is the smell of burning and, when I look into one of the deep-bowled lamps, I see the mulch of web, the dead flies in the base. There are mangy blankets on the sofa and the armchair, a coffee table with a couple of mugs on it, a pile of newspapers below. There is a wood-burning stove underneath a wooden mantle with a dirty rug in front. A small window lets in a little light. The ceiling is low and beamed. If we were any taller we would have to bend. Behind the stairs there are empty bookcases. The thing I'd knocked from the table is on the

floor, half under the sofa. When I pick it up there is dirt on my hands. The glass is broken jaggedly. September puts her arms around my middle and her chin on my shoulder.

Don't worry, look, it's an ant farm.

I turn it the other way up. She's right. Two panes of glass welded into a narrow box and filled with dirt. There are tunnels, excavations, runnels set through the earth, falling in on themselves as we move it.

I broke it, I say and feel – thick, cloying, unavoidable – what it would be like to live in the dirt and force your way mouthily through.

We can fix it, she says. There will be tape somewhere. We'll find some ants to put inside.

There is a rapping at the door, Mum reminding us. I go to let her in. Her face looks so tired, as if she hasn't slept in a week. It had been a long winter, a bad Christmas already flavoured with what would come, a creeping spring. There had been the fight at school in March, the sodden surface of the abandoned tennis courts, the mud on our bare feet and my hands looking as if they belonged to someone else. We'd stayed in Oxford for two months after what had happened and now it's May, the storms given way to heat. I want to touch Mum's face, have her hold me the way she used to do when we would all pile into the double bed. Except she is already pushing past, jaw rigid, the bags dropping from her hands to the floor. I have felt tired too, since we left school; some days it is as if I am carrying a second body draped over my shoulders. I want to tell her this, have her say she is the same or that she can help me feel better.

We watch her going up the stairs. September whistles between her teeth and says her name – the way she does when she wants to annoy her – quietly, Sheela, and for a moment it looks like she hesitates and might come back but then she is forging forward, boots on the wooden steps. She’s got her duvet under one arm, her work folder under the other. We stand listening to her until there is the sound of a door closing. She has been sad before but it was not the same as this. This is worse.

She’s so angry, I say. I can feel September’s rising annoyance.

She won’t be angry forever, she says.

She might be.

Not at you, September says and pulls my plait, makes my eyes water.

The door furthest from the front of the house leads into a small galley kitchen. There are caked baking trays in the sink, an empty bread bag on the side, more mugs. There is a tiny window. I grapple awkwardly up onto the counter, pull at the catch except it won’t open, has, I see, been painted shut, nails forced into the soft wood for good measure. I get down. There are yellow notes stuck to the fridge – I recognise Ursa’s handwriting from the birthday cards – the A and J from a set of magnetic letters. It feels intrusive to read the notes but I do, leaning forward, looking for some kind of secret language or information to show September. But there are only details about bin days, a door at the back that sticks, a list of what not to put in the fire. The kitchen around me is so

dirty it makes me itch. I let the tap run until it comes cold and then scrub my hands but even the water feels coated, soft with slime. From the doorway September whistles for me, a few notes, drawing me back together.

All right, July-bug?

Yes.

Next to the pantry there is a bathroom with a bathtub and a toilet. September tugs at the halogen. There are signs of someone having been here and not long ago: a sliver of soap on the scummy sink, a couple of shampoo bottles dropped into the bath, a smudge of what might be make-up on the floor.

Whose stuff is this? I say, nudging the soap with my thumbnail and then feeling sick.

Don't know. One of Ursa's renters. I heard Mum on the phone with her, I think she turfed them out so we could stay.

How long are we going to be here?

Why are you asking me? September huffs and then, I don't know why Mum would want us to come.

Dead skin, I say, running my finger along the sink and September glares at me and marches through the door.

My teeth feel furry with the long journey, the cheese and onion sandwiches we'd bought from a service station somewhere. I remember, suddenly, that we have left behind our toothbrushes, propped up on the sink in the old house, the house we will not be going back to. I go into the sitting room to tell September but she is upstairs; I can hear her moving around. Some of the dirt shifts in the ant farm, as if something had just moved through it.



Warm air comes beneath the front door and down the chimney. I want to hear my voice against the white walls. The room has the feeling of having been busy moments before. I say September's name as quietly as I can but even that is too loud. I can feel all the rooms behind me. It is impossible to face every part of the house at once; I look in the kitchen and the pantry but they are empty, filled only with the murmur of the low lights. I go up the stairs fast, two at a time. Something behind me, something on my heels. Except, at the top looking back, there is nothing there.

The narrow hallway has three rooms leading off it. The nearest is a bedroom with a bunk bed wedged into one corner, no other furniture. The bunk beds had not been here before, we had slept – I think – on mattresses on the floor. There are things I remember and things that are not the same. I can't see September and then she sits up on the top bunk and laughs at me. My blood presses at my throat.

Where did you go? My voice is high, dog-whistle-like. Often – since we were young – I wait for her to abandon me, to go her own way.

I went here, she says. I wanted to see where we were sleeping. Look. She is holding a pair of battered binoculars.

What are they?

You know what they are.

I remember the photo we'd found of Dad once, crushed into the glove compartment of Ursa's fancy car; he looked maybe ten and the binoculars were around

his neck. He nearly broke my arm over those, Ursa said when she caught us, tugging the photo from September's grip.

There are marks from old posters on the walls and a clock over the door. The bunk bed is narrow like a bench. September shimmies down the ladder and waves her arms: ta-da.

Sometimes I think I can remember the days when we were so small we slept in one cot, four hands twisting above our heads, seeing the world from exactly the same vantage point. I couldn't talk then but I think, still, we must have understood one another. I wish and wish for it to be that way now. Or when we were a little older and she'd heave herself over the bars of the crib and drop down, yell at me to do the same until Mum came in and put her back or took us into her bed, all of our arms tangled then, Mum's chest under our cheeks, September's eyes so close to mine that I could see each teary eyelash. I say to September: Do you wish it were that way? Do you wish it was still like that? And she says, I don't know what you're talking about, July.

We crouch outside Mum's closed door but there is nothing to hear. This has happened before, listening through this door. She is asleep, maybe. We open the third door off the corridor. It is an airing cupboard. There is a great bellied water tank and a complicated array of controls for heat and hot water. There are mouse traps on the floor but nothing caught in them. We stand

considering the buttons. We can hear the insides of the tank churning. The rain is coming down tinnily on the roof. Through the palm of September's hand I think I could probably hear the slow motion of her thoughts if I listened well enough, the chuckle of words. I remember those last few weeks at school. It had rained often, flooding the gutters, sheeting down the windows. There had been a dead badger we'd seen from the car on the way in. The other girls' faces. There is only one reason we have left the house in Oxford and come here, and though it had been September's idea to get those girls to the old tennis court, to teach them a lesson, to scare them just a bit, September is not the reason we're at the Settle House. There is only one person at fault for that.

September is jabbing at the buttons on the boiler at random. She still has the binoculars around her neck and they move as she does. From behind the wall there is a bovine groan.

I don't think that was right.

The floor rattles a little under our feet.

Maybe not, September says. Let's go downstairs, I'm hungry.

We go to raid the fridge but there is nothing to be raided. The tins in the small room by the door are years out of date, bent as if someone has battered them.

Let's do something else, she says.

The rain comes sideways against the windows. We flop on our bellies on the sitting-room floor and September talks about what colours we will paint our

walls, the posters we will put up. I am only half listening. The room feels the way it did before, as if there is activity happening just out of view. September holds the binoculars to her face and swivels them.

I lean into the pantry and fumble for the light switch. The bulb is shifting in the small room, illuminating one wall and then the other, throwing the shelves into relief and then into shadow. I peer at the tins, not wanting to move further into the room, and the bulb makes a click-click sound and then blows, dropping the room back into darkness.

September finds a chicken pie in the kitchen freezer and we decide to try and cook it. While we wait we watch old downloads of January Hargrave interviews on our laptop. I try to listen at the same time to the sound of Mum coming down to forgive us. To forgive us for everything.

I don't think we should stay tomorrow if the Internet isn't up, September says.

We leave the pie in for too long. I hold it over the bin while September tries to scrape the burn off the top.

I grilled it.

Never mind.

Except it is raw inside when we cut it open. Pink flecks of chicken which I spit into September's open hand. She doesn't even taste it. We fork the whole thing into the bin.

I don't want to go into the pantry again but September sighs at me and wades into the dark, comes out with her arms filled with dented tins. There is one of peaches

which is only a year out of date. September hacks at it with a knife and then gives it to me to suck the juice from the gap. I am suddenly so hungry I feel dizzy. I take the knife from her and gouge at the opening, widening it until I can get my fingers in, jabbing out peaches, swallowing them without chewing.

Do you want any?

Not hungry any more, she says.

We sit on the floor rather than the sofa. There is quiet for a while. The peach syrup is gritty. September puts on a Darcey Lewis album on her phone, and we know all the words.

She sits up straighter, says, I was born here.

What do you mean?

She doesn't answer. There is a creep of cold down the chimney, a finger. We can hear the boiler in the walls. I get up on my knees.

What do you mean you were born here?

I mean. I was born here. I overheard Mum on the phone the other night talking to that bookseller friend. Mum said: It's probably the same bed, actually.

I thought we were both born in Oxford.

So did I. But only you were. I was born in this house.

It had, I realise, meant something that we had been born in the same place. Ten months apart, the same hospital, the same bed perhaps; one chasing the other out. September and then – soon enough we might as well have come together – me.

Mum doesn't like this house, she says.

Why do you think that?

I just know. She didn't like it when we were all here before. You remember that summer we were here? She didn't like it then and she doesn't like it now.

You don't know that.

September bares her teeth. I do.

How?

I just do. From things Mum said.

What else did she say?

That there was nowhere else to go. She came here with him and Ursa when I was inside her. And later, when she was sad, September says. She opens her arms out to take in the low-ceilinged sitting room, the ant farm, the stained coffee table, the mouth of the kitchen door. Dad was born here and I was too. I remember.

I look at her to see if she is lying. I know that sometimes she lies to me for fun or to see if I can catch her out and sometimes she lies because she can and I'm not sure why. I put the peach tin in the bin. The evening sinks away.

Later, half asleep – the sound of September whispering in my ear, the sound of Mum crying in the room at the end of the hallway. Half asleep – the pressure of her fingers on the sides of my face.