

Ray Robinson

ELECTRICITY

PICADOR

Confusion in her eyes that says it all,
She's lost control.
And she's clinging to the nearest passer by,
She's lost control.
And she gave away the secrets of her past,
And said I've lost control again.
And a voice that told her when and where to act,
She said I've lost control again.

'She's Lost Control', Joy Division

*and their hairs stand on end to a shimmer of leaves
or the movement of clouds, and the way that the tense
has been thrown like a switch, where the land turns
to dreams*

'Electricity', Paul Farley

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and here's the breath
here's the breeze
here's the shimmer

I grab on to the side, fingernails scratch-scratching the wood.

— Sorry?

She looks at me and we smile and the bolt, it snaps my hand away like fire and the planet tilts, burnt wind blowing around inside me, skin suck-sucking the dust in and the crackles, the coughing . . .

They're here again.

Shadows moving all around me, breathing static breath, smell them in the buzzing as they sliiiiide their long fingers in, tickling the switch and the colours, the sweet colours are here

wrapping their arms around me like they love me

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26

I was thirty years old when they came to take me away again.

Sat in my booth having A Blank One, the din from the machines just getting too much and smothering me. Pulses and bleeps, whirrs and chug-chugs of slots spewing coins, the rat-a-tat-tats of guns and those lasers zapping away. Sounds sinking down the plugholes of my ears, making my eyes wander the signs on the walls:

UNDER 16S NOT ALLOWED IN WITHOUT AN ADULT

TAKE A SEAT, REST, PLAY BINGO!

CHECK IN, CASH OUT!

JACKPOT £50 FULL HOUSE FORTNIGHTLY

THESE MACHINES PAY UP TO £25 CASH!

The letters swimming in and out of my eyes, making me dizzy-as.

And that's when I saw them: two uniforms. They headed to Jim's office and I thought: here to warn us about some gyppos on the make, something like that. But next thing I know Jim's come round the Derby machine and he's pointing right at me.

I put my head down, pretending to count coins.

They tapped on the door and stepped in. The police-woman went Lily? and it looked like my name tasted

proper bad in her mouth. The cloud on her face – it said it all.

I nodded, wondering what the fuck I'd done. Then the policeman asked me to confirm my full name and birth date and address, nodding away like he knew them all along.

And then one of them said it,
— Your mother's ill.

Mother.

I felt my head drop.

Then my eyes went and my arms were all heavy down my sides.

— She's been rushed into hospital. She's in a critical condition.

A hand squeezing me.
— She asked for you.

I wanted to lie down, right there and then. I wanted to go to sleep. Wanted these bastards to go back out of that door and leave me the fuck alone. Come on. Yes come on. An arm through the crook of mine. Come on, Lily. I wanted to smash them away. Find somewhere small and dark to curl up and hide. Never come out again. But something inside said you just couldn't.

They had me again.

I watched my trainers through the blur of my lashes. Moving out of the booth, over the carpet, over the pavement, into the car.

Sirens blared away like I was some kind of murderer.
— Do you really need to do that?

The policewoman turned around.

— We need to get there as soon as we can, I'm afraid.
We did the full length of the promenade and I felt on

show, people turning and staring. An old couple and some kids on bikes outside the chippy – their eyes on mine in the back seat. Their heads moved together, slow, and I wondered what they saw as I gawped back.

I curled up on the back seat and watched the upside-down sky outside the window. It was all murk up there, like dirty dishwater and the clouds were suds. I pictured my hands going into the water and felt cold, felt wet inside.

Because I knew where we were headed.

Over the moors. Along the same road that I'd come on when I was eleven years old. Brought to the care home down near the cliff-edge. Locked up until they could decide what to do with me. Taken away from her, from him, from that house. I remember my heart was hot with never wanting to see them again. The heat went from my chest to my body and I felt the warmth of myself because they were out of my life.

But that journey was in front of me now. I was going back in time.

A couple of hours of hills and cows and drystone fucking walls. The hills making me feel hemmed in. Like brackets in a sentence, but I couldn't find any words to put between them. And I knew I had to. Words that would make sense of the why-am-I-here?

I asked it when I was eleven and I was asking it now.

A couple of hours, then we'd start dropping down those steep roads and into the vale. And those places would be out there. The places that I dream about, though I don't want to dream about.

I hugged my legs. My lungs were folding over into themselves, tucking and pleating. I struggled to breathe. A rattling noise in the back of my throat. I took a quick look

out: sheep with shitty arses staring at me, their eyes slitty and yellow like devils.

I grabbed the back of the headrest. I didn't want it all to go in reverse.

I didn't want to be that girl again.

25

It had that same stink in there. TCP and Germolene. Underneath you could still smell piss and shit and puke. Bodies turning against themselves. The air warm as blood. Sounds ping-ponged off the walls, squeaky trainers and heels clackety-clacking on the shiny floor. The corridors were long and narrow, strip lights running down the middle of the ceiling. Plastic rectangles of white light. Men mainly, wandering about in their scratchy smocks. One with a piss-coloured bag on a tall stand, wheeling it along, doddering in his slippers – he gave me a dark look.

I'd been there a thousand times as a girl and I tried to trick myself that I couldn't remember any of it. But that smell did it. Flick-flickers of memories on the back of my eyelids. Those lights above, burning my staring eyes that I couldn't close – they were the white lines on the road as the ambulance sped. And the swish of the trolley rushing me down to Emergency – I could still feel it on my skin. Sometimes I was too far gone. I got used to coming round to the blue haze of nurses, to blood pooled in my throat.

The police took me into a darkish passageway. A young man was stood talking to a nurse. He looked away when he saw me, greasy black hair hiding a beardy face, scummy-as. But there was something about him. I watched his hands held in front of him, like he was praying. The police took the nurse into a room. The young man sidled off.

And stood on my own in that corridor, I tried to remember what she looked like. Hair long. Down-the-back long. And dark, very dark. Or was I remembering it wet? Or did she dye it? No, it was greying and she always wore it up. Piled high in a queer way that made people stare. A fifties or sixties hairdo. A Bet Lynch beehive. And her eyes were pale blue like the sky in summer, like a seagull's. But a sky that always said rain. I saw the storm clouds in the snarly skin around them.

I could remember curlers and platforms, bright-as-fuck headscarves, and that it was always raining, always raging in that house. But I couldn't remember my mother's face.

They reappeared, all slumped and sagged, moving towards me with that look that says I'm sorry. I watched their mouths open and close. The nurse took my arm and led me down the corridor. We stopped beside a door.

— I'll be just out here if you need me.

I stepped in.

The walls were orange from daylight coming through the yellowy curtains. In the corner of the room was a table on wheels. And – yes – a shape beneath the bedsheets.

They said there was something wrong with her insides. She'd had cancer for years and they'd removed most of her guts. She'd a bag thing on her side but she hadn't passed anything for three weeks and hadn't told anyone. What they meant was that her body had filled with shit and killed her.

Shat her insides to death.

A red plastic chair and a locker next to the bed. There was no name, nothing in the room to say that this lump under the sheets was her. I walked over to the locker and opened the drawer. The letters on the cover were cold on my fingers. Holy Bible. Some queer smell hung in the room.

Sweet, like gone-off fruit. I was trying not to think that it was her making the smell. I moved to her side and sat on the chair.

And then I did it.

The white hair. The shrunk, sunken face. She looked newborn. Her skin was almost see-through. The veins beneath a bluish colour, stuck up like tree roots around her neck and forehead. Like dying had been some massive struggle. Her fingers were a tangerine colour. Years of cigarettes. They were spread out on the bedsheet like she was drying her nails. One of them was chipped and there was something disgusting about it: bright red nail varnish on your deathbed. I looked at her and imagined her getting cold. Going hard.

Then I got this image of her in my head, from when I was a kid: she's vexed and I'm trying not to look at her eyes, so I look at the cigarette dangling from the corner of her lipsticked gob. The red end dances about as she speaks. The grey ash is getting longer – I'm waiting for it to drop off. She grabs my face, her hands cold slabs of meat. She pinches my face and a nail slices in and I try not to scream. Her words loop clear inside my head: ARE YOU FUCKING LISTENING TO ME YOU LITTLE FUCKING BITCH?

I stood, and leaned over her.

I felt my arm go up, high above my head, and heard the loud crack as I brought my palm down, hard, on the side of my dead mother's face.

The skin on her cheek moved slowly back. Like mud. And I swear that she smiled. An itty-bitty little smile like she was saying ha-fucking-ha you're too fucking late.

I left the room, the corridor, the hospital. I was in the outside world that didn't look any different but *should*

have. I felt a tingle of warmth on my skin and tilted my face up to the bright patch in the sky. The heat on my face and in my heart again and I smiled for the first time that day because she was dead.

And I was safe.

24

I got the coppers to drop me off at the phone box outside the Clarendon. I thought fuck work – Jim'll think I'm in mourning or something anyway. I took the crumpled bus ticket out of my purse, the ticket with Ridge Racer's number written on. He answered and I said he had to meet me, now or never and he said yes with surprise.

I put Blondie on loud and danced around my bedroom. I chose my push-up bra and some low-deniers. Then the Clarins face tint and Rimmel eyeliner and Revlon lippy that I got cheap off the market, and that posh smelly I only ever wore for special occasions – not that often. I pulled out my black shoes without the heels and my brand spanking new dress. I'd felt saucy when I bought it because I knew how nice it'd look. I imagined men's roving sex-eyes and I liked the feeling it gave me. I haggled the guy on the stall down to fifteen quid. He said he wished he could see it on and I went in your dreams mister. It was short and hugged me in all the right places, showed off my legs. I have great legs. They make up for what I lack in the boob department.

I necked my two evening pills ☹️☹️ early.

It's what I measure my days by. Six a day. Two in the morning, two in the afternoon, two at night. You can't miss them. Like full stops and my days are three sentences. Awake, two pills, two pills, two pills, asleep.

You just hope life happens in between.

I brushed my hair so many times that it popped with static. I looked electrified with the heat inside me. It made me look even taller than my six foot. I could feel my frizz bobbing soft on my shoulders as I took long-legged strides along the seafront. I had the surprise of a thrill-knot dancing around my belly, and the beam across my face was on full power. The dress felt like something explosive hidden under my coat. I couldn't remember a time when I'd felt better, more alive.

So there was Ridge Racer, waiting for me at Davy Jones Locker, and I was nervous-as. He'd asked me out the week before. He came up to the booth and handed me a fiver.

— Twenties and tens, please. What's your name? You want to go out sometime?

I started laughing and he scratched his head.

— Lily. My name's Lily.

Then he stood staring and went well?

I think I said something like I'm a very busy girl, you better give me your number. I pressed the levers and he scooped out the coins.

— I've got the top three now.

And he strutted off, proud as a dog with two cocks.

When he left, he dropped a piece of paper into the coin tray. He winked at me and smiled from the door. He looked proper made up.

I started marching fast, wishing some of the people inspecting the fresh air and gobbing like goldfish would just move. Hey you, hippopotamus arse, MOVE IT. Couldn't they see I was late, got a date with Ridge Racer?

And though I'd been back heeling it to the rear of my thoughts, it began.

Soft pounding.

Sparks.

Zigzaggedy lines.

Tiny fucking insects crawling in my arms.

Of all the times.

I stared down the street, through the blur of heads towards the sea. I smelt the chips and vinegar from Maggie's Plaice. I saw the band of puke-green sea with mucky seagulls dive-bombing. Heeling it back. Wishing.

No way.

And in my new bloody dress.

Sometimes it's the lights.

The world speeds up and you need to grab on to something like you've forgotten what gravity is. The Earth jumps away from you and you panic panic panic like fuck. You'll find somewhere to sit and take hold of someone's arm, pull at their hair, snatch the child's doll away and chew its face off, all the time screaming mmmmmgreeeee-heeeeyaaaaaNEEEEE then panting like you're squeezing a baby elephant out of your fanny, and they don't know whether to run, cry, hide or shite themselves. Wondering if you're having a heart attack, having a baby. Wondering if you're just the latest Care in the Community fruit-loop. Your nails digging into the wooden bench, knuckles scraping the concrete steps until they bleed.

Sometimes God shouts BOO into your soul, his breath knocks you to the floor.

Sometimes it's like warm trickles running from your feet up to your head.

Sometimes people make no sense, you watch their mouths moving but all you hear is oooo eeee aaaaa.

Sometimes your jaw judders, opens and closes like a fish and your tongue's a lump of gristle in your gob that you can't chew.

Sometimes there's no feeling at all
just wham bam, inhale, and dark electricity.

I spotted a bench over by the fountain. A flat-capped old bloke was sitting there with his dog. He smiled when I sat down, trying to control the breathing, getting that kind of sick feeling, like you're going to puke and it doesn't matter what position you sit in the green waves come flooding over you.

I put my hands under my bum and bit my lips.

I could feel it sizzling away in my head. Static on a record. Egg being fried in a distant kitchen. Jesus it was coming. A strong one. And I knew: soon I'd be down on the concrete, legs and arms shaking, eyes rolling, tongue lolling about while Ridge Racer nursed his pint and watched the door. I checked the ground for dog shite – I didn't want to ruin the dress more than I had to. I wrapped my hands over my mouth.

MMMMMg ERRRRmmmmg

They say I have the strength of ten men when fitting. How many women is that? It's just one of the stupid things the bright sparks say. Like: I'm afraid you'll be on these pills *indefinitely*. That's one of their favourites. And it makes me laugh how they always end with an *I'm afraid*

like they really fucking care. And so I say you mean until I peg it? Then they try to baffle me out of the office with their big words. But I'm smarter than they give me credit. I've spent all my fucking life listening to them going on at me, all my life reminding me, as if I'd forget. For your own safety – how many times have I heard that? I can make people laugh and look away and cry though. But I don't blame them. It must look awful. The kids in the care home loved it. I'd come round and they would be leaning over me, chanting and stabbing their fingers.

Chucking an epi. Epi epi epi epi.

The bright sparks scanned my head when I was a bairn. I've got this large lump, just above my left ear. It's where Mam chucked me down the stairs when I was just a baby. Because I wouldn't stop crying. She wasn't bothered about admitting it. And that's when my fits started.

The bright sparks call it my epileptic focus.

And seven or eight I was, when they came up with this daft idea that they should somehow try and *pull me out* of the fit, because of the way my arms lock under my chin. They thought that by pulling my arms apart, I'd be cured. They haven't got a fucking clue. Not really. None of them have. And I could remember that when I started my squealing, all of a sudden there'd be Mam and whoever else was at hand, their arms open, ready to try and *pull me out*. But they never did. And they gave up after the day I chucked about fifty, one after the other, and they had to call an ambulance.

FIT-TASTIC SPASTIC. That's what the kids in the care home called me.

mmmmmgreeeeehheeeeyaaaaaNEEEEE

The old man was fretting. He probably wanted to say something, if he could only find the words. But there aren't any. No magic spells. Head spinning backwards, I grabbed his jacket and pulled him into me, still looking straight ahead, staring at the fountain and the patterns the water was making. They reminded me of something – headlights, dancing across my bedroom ceiling at night. Cars driving down the seafront. They were like little explosions that left stars behind.

I wasn't imagining things.

A hundred tiny glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling. A Christmas present sent to me by a pen pal in Australia years ago. The care home set me up with him. His letters were the most exciting things in my life. It meant there was more out there than just the seafront and arcades and fish and chips wrapped in greasy newspaper. So on my bedroom ceiling, I marked out the shape I knew best of all, off by heart: the seven stars of the Big Dipper. That's my favourite. I even tried to colour one of them in with a red felt pen, because it said in my *Night Sky* book that it was a red dwarf.

The boy wrote to me that he'd never seen the Big Dipper. He said things were different down there. They had a constellation called the Southern Cross. I thought it sounded fantastic – an enormous cross floating in the black sky. He also wrote that the shadow went across the moon the other way and that everything was upside down and back to front. One time, I tried to write to him standing on my head.

I looked at the stars at night until I fell asleep. They swam my dreams like water snakes.

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Forever staring at lights hanging from the ceiling. In the supermarket, the kitchen, the living room, the classroom, the change booth at work. Being wheeled on a trolley through hospital corridors, lights flashing, whirring past like on the machines in the arcade. The weight, the pressure, the buzz. Electricity passing through my body as if I'm trying to shit through my skin, my pores, shit all the bad stuff out.

MMMMMgreegreegree gree heeeeeyaaaaa ERRRRGH
ERRRRGH

For a second I thought it was passing. A false alarm. It happens sometimes. A little lull. A stillness. I turned to see his old face mumbling and I tried to smile, to nod back, but it must have looked terrible. My brain felt lopsided. I started squeezing the thickness of his jacket and closed my eyes. I knew I was doing the squealing thing and that it was going to start speeding up soon. Then I heard that fucking noise: nee-naw of sirens, getting closer. They're the worst, fingers twitching on those buttons and you always feel like slapping them afterwards. **JUST HANG ON A FUCKING SEC** you want to shout. But of course you can't, your tongue fills your mouth. Then the paramedics give you such grief when you walk away, telling them to

leave you the fuck alone, the crowd around you interfering and all you want is to be invisible, to get home. To get washed and changed into some dry knickers and skirt.

I knew that if I could just get my breathing sorted, it just might go, just might pass.

hernyerrrGGGHHH hergh HERRR hergh

I once threw one and fell into the fire. I was about to get my tea. I was walking across the living room over the rug next to the fireplace. Next to Don's chair, where he'd always be perched in front of the telly, the remote in one hand and a beer in the other.

Don. Mam's man.

He just stared. Sat there and stared as if he hadn't seen it before. My legs buckled and I fell. The burning of shirt and skin. The stench of burnedness. Pain bigger than pain so you can't feel it. My back melting and blood filling my mouth with its rust taste. It seemed to take him weeks to get out of his chair. He grabbed my arms and pulled me onto the hearthrug, struggling to turn me over.

I can still see the look in his eyes: he wanted me to burn.

ERRRGH ERRRGH

Four smooth scars, weaving across the bottom of my back. Don said they were like worms wriggling down into my arse, trying to get back into their hole. He thought it was hilarious; I almost puked. My body is covered with silver flecks, rips of scars. I have a long way to fall and I fall a lot.

mmmmmgreeeeehheeeeyaaaaaNEEEEE

It was coming. Such strong motion. I squeezed somewhere deep inside. Told it to go away. The old man and some others had their hands on me. Dog spinning in circles, barking, howling away. A moonfaced woman above me was blowing bubbles fretting OH LOVE WHAT IS IT LOVE? and I knew.

I knew that soon I'd be down there, lying in a puddle of piss and sweat.

ERRRGH ERRRGH

People will be stood over me, faces looming out of the dark after-fuzz, not knowing what the fuck to do. The old man pulling the dog off from licking me. And I'm like if I don't piss myself, then maybe Ridge Racer won't mind me being late. Maybe he's late too. Or maybe I can rush home and change anyway, or just stick my knickers in my bag. Dry the back of my skirt under the blow-dryer in the ladies, spray some perfume on, right as rain.

I'm like use your head Lily – use your frazzled fucking head.

MMMMMgreegreegree gree

I stood up, took my jacket off, and laid it on the ground. I got down onto my knees and rolled onto my back.

heeeeyaaaaa ERRRGH ERRRGH

I would wait for the fit to come. For my spirit to rip itself out of me and send me back to that moment when I couldn't walk but I could fly. Soaring down the stairs towards the bottom step. I would wait for that moment

when I flap my elbows like stiff jaggy wings and that breeze of quietness and gorgeousness comes over me. And it was then, just before the blackness, that I saw the image of Mam behind a stack of tins in the supermarket, hiding from her little fucking embarrassment

PICK YOURSELF UP, YOU HEAR ME, PICK YOURSELF

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23

I never made it to the Locker. Some bastard called an ambulance and I came through in the back of it. The paramedics knew me; they knew what to expect. They parked the meat wagon up in front of the flat and looked after me until I could speak. The woman, Sandra, she gave me a green blanket to wrap around myself. I'd made a right mess. She helped me up into the flat and said she'd help clean me up if I wanted. Then I didn't know who she was. I saw the writing on my walls and knew not to be rude and asked her to leave. I stuck the plastic shower thing on the taps, crouched down in the bathtub, and got cleaned.

Thrash, get up, get on with it. That's what I say.

I slept right through until the next morning. Nearly twenty hours of sleep, thin as paper. Felt like ten minutes. Because what follows is a slump. Like you've been wrung out. You feel at fault, empty. You can't look at yourself in the mirror, to see the bruises and cuts and scabs. You disgust yourself. You get this lump in your guts like you've killed someone. It can last an hour or it can last a week, but you can't escape it.

I flung the bedroom window open and rubbed my gammy eyes. Children were playing down on the beach. They made sharp sounds that hurt. Yellow light-shapes smoothed along the walls, onto the carpet. I passed through one of them and it caught my skin all warm. It

made me sink even further. I wanted to be outside, out there on the cold wet sands, running with the kids and screaming my fucking head off. Looking for a target to hit. Looking for something to dig my nails and teeth into.

I wrote it all down in my Headache Book. I wrote the same thing three times but it didn't make me feel any better. I wrote it in different coloured inks. Blue and green and red. Nothing. I drew a picture of my face and I was like a giant with the children in my mouth and I was eating them all up. The little fuckers kept on screaming.

The doorbell buzzed. I went to the window and looked down and saw the thick rug of Al's wig. I put my mouth into the gap of the window and shouted down. The distant click, his slow thuddy steps coming up. He tapped on the door three times and came in with a hiya love, all out of breath.

Al owned the flat and Mr Santa, the shop downstairs – a proper grotto of cheap tat. Footballs, beach balls, plastic buckets and spades, blow windmills, chamois leathers, dishcloths, tea towels, value kitchen and toilet rolls, hula-hoops, plastic Union Jack flags, butterfly nets and tennis rackets, you name it. It hurt your eyes if you were in there too long.

It was a weekday so he was wearing his Business Wig – a sort of brown side flick that was too short at the back. He must've thought it looked sensible, but it always looked back-to-front to me. It was his best by miles though. The others were his Pulling Wig – a shiny black mullet that made him look sleazy-as – and his Party Wig – a silvery quiff that he always wore to the karaoke at the Clarendon every Thursday. He was the winner of the past three years' Grand Karaoke Competition. Three hundred and fifty quid

he got each time. He always won with ‘Love Me Tender’. He called it his *pièce de resistance*.

— Hiya, Al.

He stepped towards me, pulling out a small bunch of yellow flowers from behind his back. I looked down into his large Labrador’s eyes, pooling up.

— Sorry to hear about your loss, love. Jim told us.

The flowers still had their Asda cellophane on. The thought of him trudging all the way to the other side of town to buy me them – I got that tingle at the tip of my nose. He told me one time: you’re the nearest thing I’ve ever had to a daughter. I took the flowers into the kitchen and tried to keep the tears down.

I was eighteen when I first moved into that flat. The home set me up with it. The other part of the deal was a job in the supermarket. I remember I turned up that first day at daft o’clock in the morning, but when I saw the naff uniform, I told them to stick it. Besides, my funny-looking new landlord, Al, said he knew of a job going in the arcade, calling the bingo numbers out. He said I could wear what I liked in there. I said I’m good at numbers and he was like you’ll make a good call girl. It sounded proper glamorous.

So I put the flowers in the sink, thinking what could I say? I heard him go you’re a tidy bugger. I knew what he was looking at: the graffiti on the walls, the tiny pillows on the corners of everything. He never asked. Never said anything. Just gawped and looked confused. It was just another way I coped. Notes to myself. No sharp corners. Notes about my tablets and how to make food the safest way. What I should and shouldn’t eat. Sounds stupid. I started doing it soon as I moved in. Had no one to remind me what to do any more. And the words – they made me feel safe, that’s all. The biggest was the one I’d written with

a black marker pen. It was on the wall facing you when you came in. I wrote it there because sometimes I forget who I am or where I am. I forget where I live.

DON'T WORRY HOME BED SLEEP BE OK LOVE LILY

I'd even put some kisses to myself X X X

Sometimes these things are a comfort.

I went back in and he touched my arm and looked up into my eyes.

— You ever need anything, I'm here lass. Don't be afraid to ask. I'm just downstairs. It breaks my heart to think of you upset.

I leaned down and squeezed him tight and said cheers mate. He smelt like a damp cloth. He goes anything, OK. Anytime. Day or night. Your old mate Al is all ears.

— See this?

He pointed at his shoulder.

— It's yours to cry on.

He opened the door, waved his hand, and disappeared down the stairs.



I stayed in the flat for a few more days. The only time I got up was to go to the toilet. Mind you, it wasn't just the fit – I knew if I shut the world out, well, nothing could go wrong, could it. No more fucking surprises, I mean. So I hid. I was good at it. I ignored the front door, Al and Jim's shouts through the letter box. I drew the curtains and left the television on day and night. I ate nothing but jam on toast. Drank nothing but water to wash down my pills. I knew the adverts word for word.

I had thoughts, bad thoughts, they swirled around my room and I saw her again, sitting in the corner of my bedroom. I closed my eyes and put my face into my pillow, but I couldn't do it for long because I knew she was there and I had to look at her. I had to ask her to leave.

It was me. I'd come to visit myself again.

Sitting on the chair, swinging her legs. Her hair full of cotters. Hissing and dirty. I could see her scabbed knees. She picked at them and put the salty flakes into her mouth and chewed on them. She laughed because she knew it was dirty.

I knew that it was dirty.

She was wearing that skirt, the one that stank. Mam refused to wash it more than once a week. Said it would teach me to go pissing myself. They gave me my own chair at school, a grey plastic one with my name written on in black pen. They made me sit at the back, near the door, I stank that much. That'll fucking learn you.

I called out my name: Lily.

I whispered it: Lily Jane.

She didn't answer. She swung her legs and hummed a rhyme. It was the one Nana used to sing to me. My head against her large breasts, her Geordie accent – I hear it deep through her chest as she sings. Violet scent up near her neck and old hands covered in flour. Lily Jane, tall as a crane . . .

I got up and opened the curtains. Winter. The weather does something to you. It's the boredom. It's like the town's waiting. You can see it in the boarded-up shop-fronts. Only the Golden Nugget was alive for the locals, neon flashing away like it was Vegas or something. And next door, the Sunshine Express Café. The sign outside said Jugs Of Tea For Ninety-Nine Pee. Inside the people

smoked and smoked, supping the stewed tea that looked like ah Bisto.

The clouds above the sea were like brains. Lumpy grey brains with migraines.

I got back into bed and sleep came soft, and heavy, and dreamless.

It was the best cure. The only cure.