



Three Sisters of Stone

Stephanie Hutton

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Blow Your House Down

My elder sister Agnes will build her anti-wolf home from metal sheeting. A box with no windows. Inside the shiny walls, she'll sit sweating, breathless. Agnes will sterilise each metal pane surrounding her, channelling unwanted memories into shimmering surfaces. I'll drop in with postcards from the Blue Mountains and photographs of flowers to remind her that there is still beauty in the world to step out into. She'll wrinkle her nose, shaking her head slowly saying 'But Bella, I am safe.' And I'll recall a time when we were not safe, the wolf's vile breath on our faces, his dark, matted fur on our flesh.

Back in my round house of glass bricks, I'll watch treetops shimmer through the arched wall. Each brick will blur the vista slightly, leaving me nauseous. But the green of those trees, the blue of the sky, will still be mine. The price for my view will be that I'm on show in daylight hours. Each neighbour walking a dog, each taxi driver slowing to check house numbers, the lady selling cheap perfumes with names almost like the ones I can't afford - I'll never know who could be watching. So, I'll position a smile on my face and three layers of clothes hanging from my torso and keep watchful wait in the early hours. If sleep creeps up, I'll lean against the cool glass bricks and jolt myself back to duty: wolf watch. There will be no more surprises; I'll see what's coming.

I'll no longer visit my youngest sister Chloe just outside the city. There won't be any doors left on the hinges to her home. Chloe will saw through the walls on both sides to give free access. In the bathroom, she'll smash out the rippled windowpane that offered modesty. People will wander in and out all hours of the day as she swallows

pills by the throatful. She'll never gag. I'll see an old snoring man on her couch still wearing his shoes, a teen under bubbles of lavender in her bathtub, a construction worker in fluorescent overalls eating noodles at her kitchen table. I'll flee the scene before I have time to check for furry ears, sharp teeth, licked lips.

As I make myself dizzy creeping around my home, looking for signs of the wolf, I'll wonder what it would be like if I shattered those glass walls and just invited him in. Could the first bite into my neck, the paws and claws pinning me down, ever be as bad as the waiting?

Sardines

Agnes was, as ever, serious in her instructions: games were there to be played according to the rules. Mother was sleeping late most days and her favourite games for us were fingers-on-lips and statues. It was Saturday, so father worked until noon. My two sisters and I felt brave enough to play outside of our bedroom in these quiet hours, retreating when the back door swung open.

‘It’s like hide-and-seek,’ said Agnes, ‘but once you find someone, you have to squidge up and hide in the same place, like sardines.’

I’d learnt the alphabet of fish so knew what sardines were. I didn’t dare question whether they cuddled up together in the corner of a tank or the bottom of the sea because Agnes would get stressed, and I’d spend a long time soothing her by pretending to have an interest in the facts she could list – life cycles of various butterflies, the history of extreme weather events in coastal Australia.

I found little Chloe behind the couch quickly by tracking her giggles. She was the worst of us at hiding. That meant she was often the most bruised for disturbing father’s sleep, or if he thought the laughter was aimed at him. She’d once said, wide-eyed, ‘You mean your mine is on the ground, you don’t even go under the ground to dig?’ and smiled at the strangeness of it, humming Hi-Ho from the Snow White film. Father’s face had flushed, before he escaped his shame by turning the heat of it against a little girl not much taller than one of his long thick legs. Still I felt the burn of envy at her irrepressible buoyancy. Rather than pretend I didn’t know where she was, the kind way to treat a younger sibling, I marched straight to her. She didn’t care of course, but beckoned me to bow down with her. ‘We’re sardines now’ she said,

leaning into me with her fast, puppy-like breaths.

Agnes bent over the back of the couch and pointed at each of us in turn. 'I can see you Chloe, and you Bella.' Then she folded her growing limbs underneath herself to join us.

We hadn't planned what to do once we found each other, so stayed huddled together behind the couch. Chloe babbled about fairies and diamonds and whether toes could really drop off if they got too cold. Agnes was quiet, perhaps wondering why the rules hadn't stated when the game ended. Then we heard mother out of bed, her sighs carrying up the corridor louder than the drag of her feet. She pushed open the door.

'Girls?'

I placed my hand over Chloe's mouth. I wasn't ready to move yet, entwined with my sisters who each slept in separate beds in the same room rather than like this, all jumbled together in one warm nest like birds.

Mother's head poked over the top of the couch. We were used to her leaving us to it these days, lying in her bed after father left for work or chain-smoking in the backyard, staring at passing clouds that headed to places she'd never visit.

In silence, mother walked around the couch. An off-white nightdress swamped her thin body. She probably weighed the same as Agnes. I held Chloe's hand and drew little circles on her palm with my finger, telling myself it was to soothe her.

'Sardines,' was all I could manage, not knowing what would upset mother. She bent down and I swallowed away my feelings, waiting for the cutting words about us silly girls making her life harder. Mother didn't speak but crouched down onto her hands and knees. There was space next to me. I looked at my sisters one by one. Then mother crawled away from us, out of the room, pit-patting along the floor back to her bedroom. We were back to being just three. Three sardines, hiding from predators in the silence of the sea.

Confession

Even though I'd practised the right words about being sorry and how long it had been since the last time, as soon as I stepped into church and was met by its dark smells and staring saints, I'd completely forgotten all of my sins. But I felt them. They scuttled like beetles in my belly. All the times I'd made father's fist curl tight, mother's head shaking, 'You've spoilt it now, Bella.' And at night, those stories in my head of awful things: a demon maybe, slicing mother's tongue right off, breaking father's arms. Those thoughts must be undone. Only good girls go to heaven.

Father Joseph's kind voice poured through the gap in the holy wardrobe. I swallowed air thick with mysterious scents.

'Forgive me Father, for I have sinned. I took my sister's teddy JoJo and kept him under my pillow.'

Without JoJo, with his one eye and milk-soaked arm, little Chloe hadn't settled. Whining and tears were forbidden: they jangled father's nerves and tightened the band of stress around mother's head. It seemed too late to pull JoJo from under the pillow. Father was due home and mother had taken her headache out to the garden, to unclench her jaw around a cigarette. From the top bunk, my big sister Agnes had pleaded 'You can have *all* my dolls Chloe, just *stop*, play the finger-on-lips game?' Chloe lifted her hand-me-down nightdress up and wiped her dripping nose along the bottom edge. She started a fresh howl just as father crashed open the door and started to unbuckle his belt. Later, she'd crawled into bed with me, silent tears wetting the pillow that still hid her toy. I sniffed her hair, my mouth making the shape of *sorry* so quietly that Chloe wouldn't hear.

'Forgive me Father, I sometimes forget to say my prayers.'

Penance was prescribed: one Our Father, ten Hail Marys and a Glory Be. The beetles scurried down my legs with the sins into a dark corner. I pressed my fingers around the cool beads in my pocket. If only everything could be forgiven with mumbles and a necklace.

Outside and Inside

Hailstones the size of cricket balls battered our bedroom window as my sisters and I huddled together in fake fear, giggling. We dared each other to open the window and put a face against the elements. After each flash of lightning, we only counted to three before thunder roared. Agnes stood straight-backed, eyes shining. 'This is the worst storm since 1947,' she whispered, as if remembering that time, thirty years before she was born. 'Before that, the worst recorded in Sydney history was 1792.' At last, other kids might be interested when she talked about the weather. Chloe pressed her hand against the shaking glass. 'Can we go out? Can we catch them?' Our hearts pounded along with the stones, the street awash with icy invaders. We were so used to being scared of what might happen inside the house, that what happened outside was just a show, a spectacular event sent to make us grateful, just for once, that we were in here rather than out there.

'The cars will get bashed into pieces,' I said. Father's truck was parked at the side, just out of view. 'His windows will be smashed all over the driving seat. He might not know, he might sit right on them and they'll jab into his legs and arse!' Chloe acted the scene out in slow motion, the horror over her face as she was skewered by glass, writhing on the floor pulling out invisible shards from her backside. We covered our mouths, laughing to tears.

I continued, so happy to have the audience of even my eldest sister who was usually indifferent to my stories, calling them unrealistic as she flicked through her textbooks.

'The wind is so wild, mother will go into the garden, pretending as usual that she doesn't know what's going on, and it'll blow her right up in the sky. Then she's

zapped by lightning. It fries her face into a smile, she just can't help it!' Chloe jumped off the bed, face contorted into different emotions. She didn't smile though. None of us could imagine mother doing that.

The sounds from outdoors covered our games – we were free for one night. But I was bursting for the toilet. Chloe froze when I signalled my need to leave. We knew better than to make a sound with the door open. Out of habit, I crept along the hallway, while hailstones clattered on the roof.

As I passed our parents' room I heard sobbing, deep and loud. Unlike anything I'd heard before. I curled into a ball like an echidna right outside the door. I caught my mother's voice, softer than I'd heard in years, saying 'It'll pass John, it'll pass.' My father, with arms like Popeye after spinach, who told us that this home was his castle, and we should be bloody grateful to get food in our stomachs. My father, who said we were cry-babies trying to get attention if we reacted at all to our bodies' moans the day after we had got under his skin, or feet, or routine. I didn't dare unroll myself. The urge was strong to open the door, to cry along with him, mother stroking my hair and saying *It'll pass, it'll pass*, to the two of us. From the floor outside their room, I listened to the hammering hailstones and my parents' strange sounds until I wet myself, taking some small comfort from the warmth underneath me. I'd tell my sisters that I'd curled up like a cat on the bed with my parents, that the storm had changed them for just one night.

Fortune Teller

Agnes had learnt at high school to make the complicated back and forth folds to create a paper Fortune Teller. It was my job to think of the words that went inside each section. There was no point in trying to cheat and choose which fortune would be mine, as Chloe would add the colours on top of each section last of all.

Agnes got lost in the rhythm of moving the paper machine forwards and backwards. Chloe and I watched, lulled by the repetition. Part of me was itching to grow up, to get out of this house with its shouting and smashing, off into the world to do as I pleased. But the thought of doing it all without my sisters left me rubbing my tummy at night. After moving the paper flower with her fingers, a set number of times as chosen by us, we had to select a colour on the outside of a flap. The message hidden underneath that colour was our fortune.

‘What colour, Bella?’ asked Agnes. I stared at the choices in the open flower. Black seemed too gloomy, red too dangerous. The colours started to merge; my eyes felt peculiar.

‘No, you go first Agnes, you’re the eldest.’

Agnes didn’t hesitate in choosing the pencil grey we labelled silver. She liked shiny things and kept a small collection under her bed like a bower bird.

I unfolded the triangle of paper and read out my own words as if they were written by somebody else.

‘You will find your heart’s desire.’ Agnes frowned a little. She had so many desires but each of them small and obtainable – no need for wishes. Chloe bounced around the bedroom. ‘Ooh, Agnes is getting a boyfriend, Agnes is getting a boyfriend!’ Agnes

was bemused, wondering no doubt what on earth boys had to do with her heart's desires.

'You next Chloe, pick a number.'

Impatient as ever, she picked the number one. New colours opened up.

'Pink, pink!' Chloe hopped from one foot to the other. Whenever father wasn't around with his gloom and cracking knuckles she used up as much energy as she could to try to stop it seeping out in his company.

'You will shine bright,' I read. Chloe squealed, reaching her fingers out and wriggling them to become a star. She already shone bright, got invited to all the parties at school, always bounced back the day after one of father's moods or mother's headaches.

I'd learnt at school that all stars die. Even our sun would run out of energy, burn out and take all of life on earth with it. Mother had said that the human race would be long gone before that happened so I shouldn't worry myself with such nonsense. That didn't make me feel better, but I smiled and said 'Thank you' anyway.

Chloe was singing Twinkle Twinkle off-key. I wondered whether she'd move away to shine, maybe to Melbourne or America. I'd stay here, dull and quiet, waiting to watch Chloe's face in a pop video or advert.

'Bella, can I pick your number?'

I let Chloe move the Fortune Teller. She jiggled impatiently while waiting for me to select the right colour for my fortune.

'Green. No, blue, blue,' I said.

Chloe couldn't read well, so Agnes took the Fortune Teller and turned to me. Her face was serious, as if this were not a game, as if this were the most important thing I would hear all year long.

'Hmm, blue. *What will be will be.*'

I wanted to know what was under green – that was the colour I'd really wanted – but was so used to doubting myself that I got confused. This fortune seemed hopeless, as if there were no point in trying. I leant back on the bed and kept my face blank, so Agnes wasn't disappointed in how her creation had worked.

'Well that's always true isn't it, what happens is what happens?' said Agnes to

nobody in particular.

I didn't want to have thoughts about choosing or separation or growing up or what was under green.

'Que será será,' I sang, and both my sisters joined in loudly, as there were two more hours before father was due home.

Later, I cupped the Fortune Teller in my hand. I touched the edges of the flap coloured green, then scrunched the whole thing tightly and placed it under my bed.

Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time my father disappeared. No, that wasn't the start really, that wasn't the defining moment. Once upon a time, half of my father's face melted. The right side of his body gave up, no longer wanting to punch and kick. His mouth got tired of shouting vicious words to little girls who blamed themselves. So he sat in his chair at the head of the dining table and waited. The stroke took his temper, or at least his means to show it. We chewed our vegetables and coarse meat, glancing at our mother spooning mashed potato into a mouth that now spoke in tongues.

There was an unusual ingredient in father's meals from then on: word salad. A higgledy-piggledy mass of verbs and nouns mixed together with a tangy vinaigrette. That's how I remember it anyway. The words poured back out of his mouth in whatever way they pleased.

'Don't the dog business going up and then happy driving.'

Mother wiped his saliva away, added more potato.

'Back view shake more trucks.'

He looked around the room, confused as to why we weren't acting on his orders as usual. But instead of smashing fists and bellowing yells, came tears and confusion. Sometimes that felt worse.

Then father disappeared.

'Your father has joined the circus,' Mother said as my sisters and I wriggled onto stiff dining chairs around the table. We turned in unison to the empty chair at the head of the table. Since father's stroke, he'd spent less time downstairs. The only place he sat was on the dining room chair, leaning his drooped side against the sturdy arm rest.

‘He won’t be back,’ she said, placing green beans on the table next to a dripping beef joint, as if it were already Sunday.

Well perhaps that was how it happened. When we spoke of father afterwards, we wondered in whispers what role he had in the circus. My sister Agnes hated the uncertainty of it all, picking the skin on her bottom lip whenever our younger sister Chloe asked us where he was. We never spoke about father in front of our mother, her phrase ‘That is that’ locked up the matter with all the other things we couldn’t mention.

At night, I told my sisters stories about father at the circus. Our old father would have been the ringmaster, strutting around in full view, cracking his whip at each creature, his voice booming out to fill the circus tent. Perhaps he’d recovered, abandoned us and the coal mine to fulfil a secret dream? Agnes and Chloe debated what shape his moustache would be. We settled on one with ends that twirled around in a coil, a cartoon version of our father, channelling all his faults into circus strengths.

Agnes found it difficult to think of father as anything but the man who had loomed over us with a constant frown, waiting to erupt. Even if we were upstairs she would sometimes put her hands over her ears at his shouting, humming old tunes to soothe herself. After the stroke, she stared at his face as long as she could without being scolded by mother, needing to replace old with new in her mind to believe it was still him.

‘How about The Half-man?’ said Agnes.

‘Before all this, he was half-man and half-beast,’ I said. ‘So what’s left? The man half or the beast half?’

Agnes took the question seriously of course, scribbling into a pad to work out the maths. This time I didn’t share the story that came to mind. I didn’t like to think of father on display in a cage, visitors to the circus taking pictures of his mismatched face, his arm and leg being as disobedient as he thought us to be.

Chloe suggested the Disappearing Man. That left me wondering just when he might return. Or whether he could have been here the whole time, spying on us as we dared to watch television straight after school, as we ran around the backyard

pretending to be pirates, or avoided our prayers at night because what kind of God takes your angry father away but forgets to cure your mother of her sadness?

‘Yes, Chloe, he can disappear now and have a fun time at the circus, winning hide and seek games and stealing all the desserts.’

Chloe laughed and hung her head upside down from the bed. Agnes shook hers at the impossibility of it.

The strange thing was, even though my brain knew that father had gone, my body acted as though he was still around. My stomach churned as if he was just about to crash up the stairs, my mouth was still scared of saying the wrong thing, my feet still tiptoed across the room so as not to disturb him.

Once upon a time, three girls wished their father away so hard that he disappeared. And it was only after he disappeared, that they realised they should have just wished for their family to be happy ever after.

The Art and Science of Kissing

Mother went into hospital for her bunions, so it was the ideal time for my sisters and me to figure out kissing. Chloe had already called classmates her boyfriends. She'd held hands and kissed flat-mouthed to say goodbye. I told her that didn't count, that was baby kissing, but the truth was I'd learnt everything I knew from television shows and gossip at school.

Agnes was not interested in boys or kissing, she preferred spending time with us – we knew her ways and wouldn't shame her like the kids at school who called her freak-girl.

'It's science, Agnes. Working out anatomy and stuff. We could experiment on kissable things, you can be lead experimenter.'

That was enough to get Agnes on board, squared paper and pencil in hand. She could make a graph or table from any data we threw at her. Once she mapped out the average number of times each family member visited the toilet. Father didn't even shout at that one, just picked up his keys and left the house, muttering about bad genes on my mother's side. Agnes was amazing.

Kissing was a mysterious act. In the whole of my class, only Kelly and I had not yet tried it, so I made up stories about a neighbour called Jacob who met me in secret at night. They all made fun of Kelly and I didn't do anything to stop them.

The most challenging bit of kissing was knowing what to do with your tongue.

'Can't you just keep your tongue in your mouth?' asked Chloe.

'No, that's not the proper way. I heard it from Mindy James and she's had three boyfriends.'

Agnes selected items from the fruit bowl carefully, squeezing them and pulling back the peel to press on the fruity flesh for the closest match to a human tongue.

‘I think plums are the best match, although ours are a bit old and squishy. You’ll have to peel them first though. I’m not doing kissing. I’ll make notes for you.’

Now we had the peeled plums ready, I felt a bit silly and not interested in kissing.

‘I know, let’s think about who we can pretend to kiss,’ I said, trying hard not to think about any boy from school in case they were able to tell the next day.

Chloe placed her hands on her heart and pretended to faint to the ground, speaking in her actress voice.

‘My love is Jason Donovan. No, Tom Cruise. We’re in love and going to get married in a castle. On TV.’ She blew kisses into the air.

‘Okay, you have Tom, and I’ll have Jason, and Agnes will write down notes of how it goes.’

Chloe picked up the plum and flashed me a grin. She never seemed to feel shy or self-conscious about things, but I didn’t want to watch her kissing, even if it was just a plum. I didn’t really want her to kiss anyone. Those stupid boys at school were not to be trusted. Sometimes, I saw the older ones look at her long blonde hair and eyes that sparkled at any boy within three metres. Now I wished we weren’t practising kissing at all.

‘Not here, Chloe, go in the bathroom or something. Don’t go in our bedroom, I’m going there.’

She skipped off down the corridor, singing. I held my plum between thumb and finger, juice dripping down my wrist, and carried it to our bedroom.

I lifted the plum up – he would be tall, but not so tall that he was scary. With my eyes closed, I placed my mouth on the flesh, which felt wet and cool. Not unpleasant. Then I pressed my lips down and wondered how kissing people breathe. My tongue pushed against the spongy plum, making juice drip down as extra spit pooled in my mouth. I tried to think about Jason Donovan. The curtains of his hair stroking my face, his strong arms holding me tight.

Back in the kitchen, Agnes wanted to know what notes to write. I asked Chloe for

feedback.

'Juicy. Lovely. Bit drippy. Bit tonguey. Oh, and I ate the plum. I ate Tom.'

Agnes put her pencil down and looked up.

'Should I write that you ate him? That you ate your practice boyfriend?'

'Me too,' I said, picking up another plum.

Room

We couldn't remember whose idea it had been, but mother agreed that if we cleared out the junk room, one of us could have her own bedroom. 'Leave me out of it,' she said, which just about summed up her parenting.

Agnes was studying accountancy as the Australian Catholic University. She made a list, as usual.

'I am the eldest, so I should have the room first because I've waited the longest. I need a study room away from all your noises.' To Agnes, on some days, the noise of an ant crawling across a leaf would be like ten thousand stomping soldiers.

Chloe couldn't help but interrupt.

'You've had the longest to get used to sharing then. I've never had my own clothes or toys or books, all of them were yours first, so I demand to have my own bedroom first. That's fair Bella, isn't it?'

She smiled at me in the way that boys seemed to like – innocent with a hint of what might lie underneath waiting for them.

'The only fair way,' I said 'is to make it random. Let's write yes, yes, no, on slips of paper and choose one each.'

I didn't like to add that I wanted to be able to write my stories at night without using a torch, to not have to listen to Agnes thrashing through her nightmares as if father was still around, or step over piles of Chloe's cropped tops and mini-skirts.

Agnes made three slips of paper of precisely equal size. I labelled them and handed them back to her for folding. Chloe emptied her jewellery box of broken hair clips and stretchy plastic bracelets, and we put the slips inside.

‘Don’t open your paper until we each have one,’ said Agnes.

Chloe snatched hers out of the box and opened it straight away.

‘It’s not fair, that was a stupid idea anyway,’ she said, throwing the paper to the floor as she stormed out of the bedroom.

I unfolded mine but didn’t look down. ‘Congratulations,’ Agnes said, and folded her slip neatly, then placed it into her jeans pocket.

I had never won anything before.

Clearing the junk out of that room took all weekend. Dusty lampshades, boxes of our old school books and reports, broken toys from many years ago that had never been thrown away. Agnes offered to help, but found it too hard to imagine any of her old belongings no longer remaining in the house. She clutched a cracked pencil holder.

‘Why don’t you stick it at the back of the wardrobe, Ag? Then go and study.’ She skulked away.

Our shared room now housed just two beds. They had holes in them from where they used to be joined as a bunkbed, back when I used to hang over, making faces at my sisters below. I dragged the third single bed to my new tiny room, piling my clothes in an old box as there was no more furniture. That night, I missed the movements of my sisters, the irritating sounds that told me I wasn’t alone. Years ago, our father would burst into the room in the middle of the night and pull one of us out of bed to admonish us for some misdemeanour we couldn’t recall. His heavy breath stank of beer and fury. One time, he’d pulled me off the top bunk in a half-sleep, my dream mixing with reality as a rabid wolf grabbed me into his hot, distended mouth.

I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t sleep without my sisters. With one more year before the world of work, I wasn’t ready.

The next day, I claimed a stomach ache and missed school. While my sisters were out and mother hibernated, I moved the bed back into my old room and pushed our battered dressing table along the hallway. Then I decorated some of the old boxes with a roll of leftover wallpaper, after swishing out the cobwebs and insects, and lined them up along the wall. Old things becoming something new, not losing all of themselves, but transforming.

By the time Agnes and Chloe were home, my aching muscles felt even stronger.

‘Guys, come up, come up.’

Chloe muttered her displeasure, but was too nosy not to come and see.

I led them to the new room.

‘Look - a desk for your work Agnes, with all your writing gear in this box underneath, and then it can also be your dressing table Chloe. I’ve filled these boxes with make-up and hair brushes and all your creams.’

Neither of them spoke. They stared at the boxes in the space where the bed had been.

‘I mean, unless you just want to make it a bedroom again. You two could rotate who sleeps here?’

I picked at some cracked wood at the edge of the table, then tried to smooth it over to cover the part that showed lighter wood underneath.

‘No, I changed my mind. Let’s keep it as it is, Bella. But she has to clear all her papers off on Saturday night for me to use,’ said Chloe, pretending to punch Agnes’s arm.

‘Thank you, Bella,’ said Agnes, her brow furrowed. ‘So I have a desk, and Chloe has a place for all her, well I don’t know what it’s called, all her girly stuff. But what have you got?’

‘Well, I’m just happy if you two are,’ I said, gathering up the last of my belongings to head back to the safety of our shared bedroom.

The End of Childhood

On Chloe's eighteenth birthday, Agnes and I called at our old home around lunchtime – catching that window between Chloe waking up and her disappearing into the city until dawn. We gathered around marks on our old bedroom wall. Over the years, the stark difference between the three lines of our height had reduced. Agnes slouched with her head tipped to her feet, and Chloe paraded in new cerise heels: was I still in the middle?

'I'm a grown up now,' said Chloe, applying powder two shades darker than her skin across taut cheeks. 'So long, dream childhood! You know I tell my therapist all about you two.' She winked a sparkly eyelid at us. Agnes frowned her concern, not knowing whether this was a tease or the truth.

'Let's do something to mark it,' I said. I picked up a jewellery box from Chloe's dressing table. The ballerina no longer spun or sang. 'Let's bury it in the garden. Bury our childhood.'

Chloe dashed about the room with her hair in curlers. She placed an eye from her old teddy JoJo into the box. That eye had seen things that we had chosen to forget. Agnes took a photo from her wallet of the three of us one Christmas before father disappeared. None of us was smiling. I had nothing to share now my belongings were across the city. I flattened a tissue on the dressing table. Then I pulled out a hair, feeling the ping of the root out of my scalp. It was a not-quite-pain: a controlled action, not the wrench of a handful of hair between my father's fingers. I stared so hard at it that my eyes watered. Three tears dripped onto the tissue: one for each of us. Finally, I picked the small scab on my elbow where I'd fallen on my roller blades recently. I folded the tissue over these parts of myself, knowing my wound would heal again.

As Chloe buried the box at the back of the yard, I felt my spine stretch and my legs strengthen. With each kick of soil into the hole, the gravitational pull of our history weakened.

What Mother Never Did

In my early twenties, I still felt obliged to visit mother for Christmas, even though my best guess was that she detested it as much as me. My little sister Chloe called me peace-maker – as if that was an insult.

‘The past is the past,’ I said, retouching her roots in deep purple with a little brush.

‘I’ll bring the booze,’ she replied.

Chloe seemed to wear only extra-small band t-shirts adorned with pictures of nude women or skulls or motorcycles. Mother would roll her eyes at the multi-coloured hair and leather trousers, but that wouldn’t bother Chloe, who was more interested in whether her outfit caught the attention of any male passer-by with broad shoulders and stubble.

I invited my big sister Agnes by email to our Christmas pilgrimage to the old house. She was a trainee accountant and would go for days immersed in numbers, not answering the telephone. The way to handle Agnes was to make any plans sound certain, expected.

Fragmented images decorated my dreams in the nights before heading back to our old home, in a suburb of Sydney that had yet to hear of the impending new millennium. As if catapulted back in time, I watched my thin mother stare out of the window at the nothingness of an evening sky, while my sisters and I cried in the aftermath of our father’s anger. I woke to the silence of solitude. That old ache fluttered around my belly, then disappeared. I didn’t know what it was. But sometimes that same ache gurgled at babies in the park, at teen girls passing notes to each other with stifled laughter in the study corner of the library I worked in, at Nicholas the head librarian

with his ginger-flecked beard and soft, baritone voice. That ache whispered from my belly to my arms each time I first caught sight of my shrinking mother, all colour drained from her ageing hair and eyes.

Agnes drove us to our mother's house so we could arrive together. Her large, shiny car seemed too big for a woman who usually drove alone, but it had the highest test safety score.

As we approached mother's house, I turned to Agnes and said 'We could just keep driving, and be up at the Blue Mountains by lunch time.' She hesitated, not knowing whether to stop or not. 'It doesn't matter Agnes, here we are and mother is expecting us.'

What we didn't know, as we stood outside the front door, our shoulders touching, was that this would be our last visit together. Afterwards, I gave myself the freedom of cutting the twisted connective cord between my mother and me.

Chloe had the skill to talk non-stop about not much in particular, which helped to fill the spaces that ached with our painful history in that house. She chatted about bands she'd seen, foreign politics, pollutants in the water. Mother spoke rarely, nibbling at biscuits and frowning in concentration to hear about a world she barely lived in. Agnes sat on her hands, her torso rocking very slightly. She learnt not to move so much when we lived here – our father said it made him sea-sick.

My sisters had gone to the back yard for 'fresh air,' which meant that Chloe would be having a cigarette and glugging something strong from a flask in her handbag. Mother no longer smoked: she'd given up trying to feel any pleasure.

Mother sat opposite me, her stick legs not quite reaching the floor. She poured tea into tiny china cups that were too small to satisfy. I willed my sisters to return. When she started to speak, I wasn't sure if she was talking to me or herself.

'I never laid a finger on you though, did I?'

We never discussed the past.

'I never did lay a finger on you,' mother repeated, staring down into the milk swirling around dark liquid.

I shook my head in reply. My sisters traipsed back into the room, and I picked up

my handbag to signal that it was time for us to escape. No, mother never did lay a finger on me. Or place two arms around me. Or lean her head against mine to kiss me goodnight. She never did lay a finger on me, and maybe that was the ache.

Hall of Mirrors

My sister Chloe's face is a hall of mirrors, showing me what could have been if I'd turned to drink to find my numbness. Her bloodshot eyes drop away from mine, rivulets of red stretching down rose cheeks. I step back from her as she sways. Hundreds of versions of her, of me, reflect all around. Chloe shrinks, becomes so small I wish she were five years old and could start again. My guilt pulls me forwards. Her face contorts and repeats at every angle around me. I long to reach in and hold her, mould her back into what-could-have-been. My hands smash into glass that will not shatter and will not let me in. I can do nothing but close my eyes and wait for the fairground music to stop, nothing but wait for both of us to wake up.

From A to Z

On the way to visit my sister Chloe who'd recently checked in to rehab, my elder sister Agnes and I stopped at a gift store, so we wouldn't arrive empty handed. Chloe had said 'bring some goddamned vodka,' and it was good to hear her still joking. Agnes was puzzled. 'Why is that a joke? She likes vodka. She probably does want some.' But today I didn't feel like explaining things, my battery was depleted. I needed to save what little was left to get through the visit with a smile, and to hold back from telling Chloe that we just couldn't face another year of this, of not knowing where she was or who she was with, of midnight calls asking for money, or reminiscing in slurred speech. Rehab needed to work.

The little store was crammed with confectionary for tourists. I picked up a tin of chocolate cookies with a picture of Sydney Opera House on it; Chloe had always said that she didn't know whether to love or hate that building, but it was part of home. I felt the same about her recently.

Agnes bent over the rack of greetings cards with a frown that meant she was trying to figure out what was suitable for the occasion. This was something Agnes always struggled with, working hard to understand the rest of us. But sometimes her lack of doing things just for the sake of doing them, brought clarity. Like my recent birthday. I was organising a meal with colleagues from work and getting stressed over what would suit everybody. 'But what do you want to do?' she asked. 'I'd like to just put my pyjamas on and watch a film with a huge bag of chocolate peanuts.' Agnes had shrugged and said 'Well do that then.' It felt so liberating that I was astonished not to have thought of it myself.

I stood next to Agnes and peered over her shoulder at the cards she was holding: Congratulations, Our Sympathies and To a Special Lady.

‘I’ve ruled out the others. Which of these is right?’ she asked.

Agnes believed that I knew the rules, because I navigated the social world more easily than her. I usually answered with authority. But I felt the world becoming fuzzy at the edges: there was less clarity in what to do for the best. Maybe I’d just been faking it the whole time, not so different from her after all.

‘People don’t usually give cards to someone for going into rehab, Agnes. But you know what, it would probably amuse Chloe, so go ahead and choose one.’

Agnes stiffened at my ambivalence. I took the Congratulations card from her – the other two felt too close to something sharp and painful under my ribs.

In the car on the way to the rehab centre, we played a word game. Usually, we’d try to make silly phrases from the letters on vehicle registration plates. That day, we went through the alphabet, naming words that reminded us of our sister: *adventurous*, *bonkers*, *chirpy*, *dramatic*. By the time we got to hilarious, my throat ached with the effort of holding back tears. I let Agnes continue, knowing she would love the challenge of the trickier letters to come. And I wished so, so hard that A was only for *adventurous*, not for *alcoholic*.

All the Things that (N)ever Happened to My Sister

I tell myself stories.

In this story, no police officers come to my door with kind faces and leaflets. They don't sit me down and say sorry, as if it is their fault not mine.

In this story, my sister's body is far, far away from the harbour waters, curled asleep. Or else, she is in the harbour but has grown a glimmering tail, then swims back up the river, laughing as she somersaults both under and over the water.

In this story, my sister Chloe is still standing on the grassy edge overlooking the water. Her left hand holds all her hurts. If I look carefully, really zoom in, I can see a miniature figure of my missing father, shaking his fist up at her. His back is covered in grey fur, his ears are pointed. Other tiny wolves encircle him and growl so gently that the sounds are lost in the breeze. They can't harm her now. Chloe closes her palm and crumbles them all beneath her fingers, then sprinkles the crumbs into the river, letting the flow carry away all her memories so there is no need for her to jump.

In this story, I am driving up to see my sister because it doesn't matter if she is still drinking, I haven't given up on her. She knows I'm coming, so sits beside the water and doesn't take off her shoes. The only letter she writes says 'see you soon'.

In this story, my sister is safe and I never have to miss her.

Mask

I ran my fingers over each mask hanging in the wardrobe. They ranged from *dreamy* and *contented* on the left up to *thrilled* and *ecstatic* to the right. On a shelf for easy access were *concentrating* and *thoughtful* which were suitably neutral for working in the library. I had never left the house without one on before. Each mask came with its own phrase production system: 'I'm very well thanks, you?', 'I'm just busy', 'I try to make the most of each day.'

Agnes sent me a magazine article called 'Free Your Emotions' with a quiz. She worried about me ever since our little sister had thrown herself into the Parramatta River, ninety-two days after I last contacted her. I scored in the top range for 'Masking The Real You' and felt strangely proud. Agnes had already circled the advice in red. It said I should try to not wear a mask, to be myself.

'You won't get your needs met if you don't ever show those needs,' said the article in a swirly font. 'You might be surprised at how people react if they get a chance to meet the real, wonderful you.'

I'd learnt a long time ago how to stop a laugh from spilling out. The thwack of leather on calves was an effective teacher. The article seemed presumptuous. How could the writer possibly know the real me was wonderful? The me that had stopped visiting my younger sister to avoid seeing her sunken face while being asked for fifty dollars? The me who sometimes slept naked on top of a sheet in hope that the cat might settle on my flesh, his soft fur caressing my folds as his purrs sent a fizz through my body?

I shut the wardrobe doors together and sat on the edge of the bed. With my eyes closed, I ran my index finger along the line of my mouth. It was slightly uplifted, *I'm*

fine thanks. My brow felt smooth. Of course, I had forgotten to take off my mask, had slept in it. I pressed behind my ears to find the edges of the mask to unpeel. Then along my hairline. Nothing. I scratched my nails at the back of my neck, like trying to find the end of sticky tape. There was no panic; the mask did its job. If anything, I drifted into numbness as I dug at my skin again and again with rough nails.

After ten minutes, I flopped my hands down into my lap. I kicked off my shoes and got back into bed. I would tell Agnes that the article was helpful. I would wear my *sincere* mask and say that I was dealing with my emotions now so she didn't have to worry. It was best to leave the mask there. What if there was no real me underneath, just pulsing raw blood and bone that longed to be held in place?

Virtually Alive

I finally opened up the belongings of my little sister Chloe, who eighteen months earlier had performed her final dance. A stranger had found her body in the harbour. She had spun and swirled down the river, after her grand jeté.

There was so little left to represent her bright life. She'd exchanged all the items that told her history – for money or pills. Or else, she'd left a trail of herself in various places she slept. But I never looked for her in those last few months. I never followed the clues that could have taken me to her.

Before Chloe's drinking became part of her breakfast, she had still been her usual, shiny self, most of the time. She didn't like to conform to sleeping at night, and would call me at two in the morning to chat about a protest march or which band member she had hooked up with after a gig. There was an energy that emanated from her and pulled people in. Despite the broken bones of her childhood, Chloe had always made the most of each moment. Until those darker moments added up, until they blotted out her light.

In Chloe's little red address book that she always kept in her pocket, she'd left her online passwords and usernames.

Agnes was perplexed at Chloe's lack of care with her passwords.

'But anyone could have found this and pretended to be her,' she said, holding the diary tightly to her chest.

We sat in Agnes's study, with a few photos laid out on the desk. Chloe had kept one of the three of us in school uniform, a rare keepsake of us looking towards the camera, nobody red-eyed or moving so much that the picture blurred. Chloe wore pigtails with red bows at the ends. I'd tied those bows, preparing her to start school

that morning.

I planned to log on to some of Chloe's internet groups. Agnes was unsure. But in the end, she relented, as always. I wanted to know more about Chloe's life before she died, those months when I thought I had better things to do than reach out to her, like working overtime at the library or reading the latest novels. Those things seemed to matter at the time. I didn't realise that I was hiding, from my sister and myself.

'We'll just read a few posts,' I said 'to see what was going on for her.' Agnes understood more about technical matters than I did. I handed her the list and asked her to log onto a group fighting for clean water for everybody. Chloe always fought the big battles for little people.

Agnes clicked and typed while I stared at the photo, at the three little girls we were, who only had each other to depend on. Chloe looked the happiest of us all.

'Uh oh.'

'What's the matter?' I said, turning to the computer behind me.

'Someone's just seen that I've logged on as Chloe and has messaged back.'

'Well just say I'm sorry, my sister has died.'

As Agnes typed, I realised my error. She was prone to literal-mindedness, and had typed my exact words, 'I'm sorry, my sister has died.'

A flurry of responses next, sympathies from young women in bandanas and cartoon cats with an anarchy symbol on their chest. 'Sorry C, strength to u' and 'sad news babe, we've missed you.' Love and care from virtual strangers, about the death of the wrong sister.

I told Agnes I would sort it out from home, convinced it was a chance to get to know people who saw aspects of Chloe that I never knew about. To float in her virtual shoes and connect with her.

Back home, I balanced the laptop on my knee while leaning back in bed. I logged into a group about nature walks in Australia. I didn't know my sister liked to hike; even in childhood, her usual movements involved anything but a straight line. Chloe hadn't used her real photo in her profile, but a picture of a blue-winged kookaburra, looking assured and gorgeous. My bird would have been a been a lyre bird. Dull,

ground-dwelling, mimicking others, with no tune of my own.

I read threads about walks and wildlife. There was something mesmerising about the mundanity of the posts. I was disappointed that Chloe hadn't uploaded any pictures to help me see through her eyes.

It was past midnight. I closed my eyes and tried to channel my sister. How she would sit (bolt upright), how she would type (fast, not caring about errors), what would she say in response to a photo of unidentified tracks in the mud (*wowzers, great one, I'll be right there*). Then I changed group, to a political one railing against our government. When Chloe felt passionate about a cause, her arms would whirl as fast as her speech, the profanities increasing by the sentence. I avoided giving opinions usually, as it opened the door to attack.

I thought about the ex-navy guy who sat outside the library some days, begging for money. He told me that at night he relived the horrors as if he was back in a warzone. I once saw a man spit on him as he walked by. My sisters and I knew how the past could become present. In a way, the heaviness of our history did not leave us when father did. I joined a discussion about how our nation treats the homeless. My fingers created long chains of swear words that had never come out of my lips. Despite the lack of exertion, I was panting.

Finally, and for no longer than three minutes, I logged on to a dating group. Rows of men just waiting. Surely some of them were dependable, gentle? Canine not lupine? It was hard to tell which was which. I commented on the profile of a man with a kind smile and floppy blond hair that I'd like to swim with turtles with him, then snapped the laptop lid down.

Would Chloe have done that? Was I channelling her? Or was this lyre bird changing into a bird with flight, a bird with a song of its own?

Double

Agnes liked to repeat words almost as much as she liked to repeat actions. When I arrived for my visit, I nodded to her familiar directions of ‘Shoes, bag, sit.’ My battered leather shoes sat awkwardly next to her shiny pairs.

‘You know in France, kids put their shoes under a Christmas tree on Christmas Eve, waiting for presents,’ I said, relaying something I’d heard on the radio while driving over. Agnes liked facts. I hoped to gain her attention before broaching my concern about her isolated, repetitive life. I wanted my sister back, a real relationship. My skin already stuck to my linen shirt in the airless room.

Agnes rested her glass of water onto a coaster beside her. She spoke to the wall behind me.

‘It’s peculiar that sixty-four percent of Australians class themselves as Christian, and yet so many more make a fuss at Christmas. What exactly are they celebrating?’

I knew better than to try to answer. Agnes was not asking me, but herself. Always trying to figure out why humans acted as they did, as if she were not one herself. As she pondered, she touched each finger in turn to her thumb, up and down, perhaps counting the ways in which we baffled her. Or counting the topics that we would not discuss today or any day: our lifelong bruises from a violent father, our sister’s self-destruction, our estranged mother. A trilogy of loss where the pain was guilt rather than grief. An unspoken fear that we didn’t know how to love.

Agnes was all I had left.

‘Do you want to come down to the library this weekend and help out, Agnes? Get out a bit, meet some of the children who come to our reading group, just to talk about

books and stuff?' My dry mouth made the words sound odd.

My sister's fingers stilled. She looked at me with a smile that somehow turned upside down.

'I've worked from my desk all week, Bella.'

I didn't plan to, but I stood up and the words accelerated so I couldn't stop them.

'There's so much more you could be doing than working and sitting here by yourself, or overworking for money you don't need any more of, or learning statistics off Wikipedia or whatever it is you do. This is it, Ag, this is life and then it's gone, like Chloe, just gone and you don't want to regret doing bugger all except hiding away.' My face felt wet. It was hard to breathe in. But I couldn't take my eyes off Agnes, who for once wasn't looking past me.

'There's no need to be dramatic,' she said. One of mother's lines. But it came out differently from mother's way, tenderly. 'I've been busy making things, there's more to do this weekend. I suppose you could come over, after the library.'

I followed her down to the dining room that had never been used. The whole table was covered in sheets of paper of different colours. Agnes took the lid off a large cardboard box and pulled pieces out one by one: delicate origami foxes, owls, boats, stars. She held up a crane and showed me how flapping his wing made his head bow down. Little satisfied grunts came from the back of her throat with each item she showed me. I'd forgotten that noise, the sound from childhood when she solved a maths question or caught a bug in a jar.

'They're amazing, perfect, I had no idea,' I said, stroking the corners of a kingfisher. 'Do you remember the fortune tellers you used to make? You did the folding and I did the writing?'

Agnes' face had softened since I last saw her. Small laughter lines around her eyes told me that she was happy in her own way.

'I know you worry about me Bella, and I worry about you. Maybe that's what sisters are for?'

She packed the box full again and passed it to me.

'For the children, at the library.'

I nodded my agreement.

‘Perhaps Bella, you should find something that’s for you and not for other people. Have some time where you’re not tearing around. Sit and be at peace with yourself.’

My legs loosened because this was all the wrong way around – *I* was the helper, the sorter, the sensitive one.

She placed her hand on my shoulder. I was so unused to touch that I almost pulled away despite how good it felt.

‘Maybe we’re not so different Bella. *A sister can be seen as someone who is both ourselves and very much not ourselves – a special kind of double.* Toni Morrison,’ she said, leading me to the front door.

The phrase ‘a special kind of double’ repeated in my head as I carried the box out to my car. Despite being full, it felt as light as air, as if it could float right out of my hands up into the sky. Then, the whole city would be sprinkled with precise, beautiful creatures.

The Three Sisters

If I could be with Agnes and Chloe one last time, we would take a trip out of the airless clamour of the city and escape to the mountains.

‘Let’s go to Echo Point,’ I’d say, holding their hands like we were small again, when we had all the choices in the world ahead of us.

At the viewing point, we’d stare in silence across blue mist to the rocks they called the Three Sisters. Back in time, those stones were part of the same mountain.

I’d tell my sisters a story.

‘The myth says that to protect the three sisters from a harmful beast, they were turned to stone by a witch-doctor. He dropped his magic bone on the forest floor and the sisters were doomed to remain as they were.’

My younger sister Chloe would be back in her unbroken body, as it had been before whispers in her head became screams, before river water replaced air in her lungs. ‘Maybe they’re better off that way?’ she would say. She’d lean forward on the railings of the viewing platform, intoxicated only by the scent of evaporating eucalyptus oil.

‘I can breathe here,’ she’d say, the wind whipping around us, ready to carry our words across treetops to our sisters in stone.

My elder sister Agnes would furnish us with facts.

‘These rocks are mostly sandstone, from the mountain, they were formed under enormous pressure over a long time. There’s ironstone in there too, that’s how they’ve avoided erosion for so long, barely changed.’

Agnes would find a shaded spot to sit for lunch at precisely midday. The rhythm of chewing would bring some relief to her from the strain of venturing away from the safety of home. I’d watch her shoulders drop as she found familiarity in her routine,

one of us sitting each side of her.

With my own stone walls crumbling, I would be able to feel fully again. Love for my sisters would bubble up into my chest and arms. The love would swirl around fear for our future, anger at all the harm that came to us, at the piercing pain that Chloe would soon be gone again.

We'd walk the eight hundred steps of the Giant Stairway together, down to the valley floor, watching our feet to avoid falling. Once there, the scale of everything would seem so different. With our view reduced from miles to metres, we'd feel each other's breath and heartbeats, the world shrunk down as if there was only us in it.

Up close, the layered rock would show a fractured history of moving earth and volcanoes. Dry and still, it would appear immovable, incapable of slowly turning to dust.

'Mother coped the only way she knew how. Her withdrawal, lack of love. I don't think she dared to feel,' I'd say, voicing that which had quietly seeped in through my pores over the last few months.

We'd place our palms on the parched stone, as if reaching out to our mother in forgiveness.

'We can get the scenic railway back up,' I'd say, 'no need to make things more difficult for ourselves by climbing all those steps. That way, we can focus on the view, not our feet.'

Sitting in the rail car, Agnes would persist with her facts. 'The railway was originally constructed for mining in 1880.' We wouldn't speak about our father. The way he'd brought back the darkness of the mines to our home each night, extinguishing our light. How the care and precision he took with explosives at work left him gasping to detonate back home.

'They seem so solid,' Chloe would say 'but are changing all the time, eroding, moving. Nothing stays the same.'

Back at the top of the valley, we'd spend our last hours together watching the changing skies, our legs tired but satisfied.

As day passes into evening, we'd notice how different the three sisters of stone

looked in the warmth of a red sky. Then, darkness. Only the Milky Way on show. We'd close our eyes; we wouldn't have to see the stone sisters to feel their presence, their solidity. Those sisters of rock would know what they were and what they had been, now waiting and dreaming about what they could still become.

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