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HER NAME IS MARLA

Her name is Marla,
and to her I am Toffee,
though my parents named me Allison.

Actually
it was Mum who made that decision;
Dad didn't care about a bawling baby
and her name
the day I showed up.

He had more important things on his mind.

And now,
Marla sleeps in a bedroom next to mine
with forget-me-nots
climbing the papered walls,
snoring,
lying on her back, lips
parted.

Sometimes, at night,
she wakes,
wails,

flails and begs the air to
leave her alone, leave her alone.
I scuttle in,
stroke her arm with my fingertips.
I'm here. It's OK.
You're just having a bad dream.

That usually settles her:
she'll look up
like I'm the very person she expected to see,
shut her eyes and
float away again.

The mattress on my bed is so soft I sink.
The cotton sheets are paper thin
from too much washing.
Nets, not curtains, cover my window:
streetlights blare in.

This is not my home.
This is not my room.
This is not my bed.

I am not who I say I am.
Marla isn't who she thinks she is.

I am a girl trying to forget.
Marla is a woman trying to remember.

Sometimes I am sad.
Sometimes she is angry.

And yet.

Here,
in this house,
I am so much happier
than I have ever been.

AT THE BUS STATION

A bearded man sits
by me on the bench
in the bus station.

His nails are broken, dirty.

His trainers have holes in the toes.

Want a Pringle?

He conjures a red tube from his khaki coat.

I edge away,
focus on the backpack by my feet
stuffed with clothes, bread rolls.

I couldn't carry much –
hadn't much to take anyway.

What the hell happened to your face?

The man squints, crunches on the Pringles,
slides towards me.

There are crumbs on his coat,
in his beard.

Looks like someone got you good.

I turn away

hoping

he'll think I don't understand,
mistake me for a foreigner.

And I feel it today,
an alien far from home already,
the world all noise and nonsense.

A bus pulls up. I hand the driver my ticket,
a yellow square to Elsewhere
paid for with Dad's contactless card.

Runaway.

Liar.

Thief.

In a seat near the back
I press my forehead against the
cold, sweating window.

I am heading west –
to Kelly-Anne,
who never wanted to go –
never wanted to go without *me* anyway.

The bus revs and judders.

I am leaving.

THE RUBY RING

Her suitcase bulged in the middle
like it had overeaten.
She must have packed the day before – planned it.
Sorry, Allie, I gotta get out.
He's getting worse.
Kelly-Anne took off the dull ruby ring Dad had
given her.

Her face was bloated and pale.
No smile in weeks.

Still.

Don't go.
I yanked at her jacket.

Come with me.

Her eyes were on the wall clock,
feet in her boots.

*We'll get somewhere cheap and
work it out, yeah?*

Go and throw some stuff into a bag.

Do it quickly.

Come on. Quick!

I let go.

Don't you love him?

He's a bastard, Allie.

She had a plummy bruise on her arm to prove it.

Don't you love me?

I can't stay. And I can't explain.

She eyed the ring.

Surely you above all people can understand.

I do but ...

My forehead felt hot.

My knees locked.

He isn't all bad, is he?

He works so hard.

He's tired.

Allie –

We could make him happier together.

Both of us.

We could try again.

I can't try any more, she snapped.

She twisted my wrist.

She'd never

hurt me before,

yet here she was

stacking it up.

You don't need to stay here.

She unintentionally gestured to the mirror –
to herself.

The reflection stared back,

broken and

unconvinced.

What she didn't realise was that

I didn't have any choice.

I had to stay.

He was my dad, not my boyfriend.

You can't just walk out on your parents.

Who else did I have apart from him?

Who did he have but me?

I sobbed in the hallway.

Kelly-Anne pulled a scrunched-up tenner from her
bag,

a pound hidden inside like a present.

*Here, she said,
as though money might make it all right.
I'll get settled and call you.
Be strong and don't piss him off.
Tell him you didn't see me leave.
Make him believe I'll be back
so he doesn't look for me.*

And that was that.

I watched her from the window,
worrying about what would happen when
Dad got home
and discovered his fiancée was gone,
 the engagement ring left on the hall table,
 the same red ruby that had belonged to my
 mum
 back when he loved her
 best.

M5

This road must be the longest in the universe.

Concrete and concrete and concrete.

I fiddle with my phone,

follow the jagged blue line to Bude.

A few months ago I would have spent the journey

sending Jacq crude emojis

and taking sly photos

of losers on the bus,

their mouths gaping open in sleep.

Now I have no one to message

and nothing to go back to.

I hope Kelly-Anne still has space for me

in her life.

Concrete and concrete and concrete.

The longest road in the universe.

BUDE

Buckets and spades

hang from an awning.

Titan white gulls yap overhead.

A gaggle of girls slurp ice cream from waffle cones
despite a slight drizzle.

One girl pauses
then suddenly skips after the others:

Wait up!

I lug my bag after me

down the

steps of the bus

and on the pavement,
inhale salty air.

I have an address on a scrap of paper,
a map on my phone.

It is two miles to Kelly-Anne's place.

FOREVER

A man in a chequered football shirt
opens the door. *Yeah?*
He unashamedly stares at my cheek.

Is Kelly-Anne home?
My shoulders are burning.
I put down my backpack.

Kels? Nah.
I doubt we'll see her again.
She bugged off, didn't she?
He lifts junk mail from the mat,
flicks through it,
 steps outside
 and bungs it into a wheelie bin.

She's in Aberdeen.
Got a job in sales. Owes me rent.
He picks his ear, stares at his finger
like he might discover something fascinating.
Try her phone. Not that she'll answer.

I'll try.
 I don't tell him
she hasn't replied to my messages recently either,

or that it seems pointless
if she's in Aberdeen and
I've come to Cornwall.

We are a whole country apart.

You all right?

The man examines my backpack.

I better go, I say.

Do you have somewhere to go?

His expression has softened.

A cat is nudging his trainers.

I don't know.

But not home,

I know that for sure.

THE MARK

I tap
my cheek
with the tips
of my fingers.

It is still hot.

S H E D

The air is bruised by the blast of fireworks
and the dusk smells faintly of gunpowder
though it's weeks until Guy Fawkes.

Straight ahead
 a gravelly lane separates
two rows of gardens,
and despite Google Maps telling me to
 turn right,
I cut through it, back into town,
down towards the sea.

In one garden,
 a greenhouse with mouldy windows.
In another,
 a collection of toys piled into a pyramid.
In the next,
 a stack of deckchairs and folding tables.

But near the end of the lane
 is a ramshackle shed,
 its door ajar,

overshadowed by an abandoned house –
no lights on inside,
ivy like lace across its windows.

I slip through a gap in the fencing,
push open the door to the shed,
slip inside.

It is strewn with rusting cans of paint,
a split bag of cement.
Heavy tools hang from hooks;
the one small window looking on to the lane
is curtained over with a torn cardigan.

I can use my jumper as a pillow.
I can lie with my feet against the door.

There are worse harbours.

NOTHING

I check my phone
though I haven't switched off the sound,
would easily have heard a ping,
but still nothing from Kelly-Anne.

And nothing from Dad either.

I try lying down,
imagining tomorrow's sun
and pleading with sleep to swallow me
before the night rushes in with full force
and switches on the fear –

not of rats or mice

that might, in the night,
nibble away at my burn
like it's barbecued meat,
tender and theirs for the taking,

but of people

and how they could hurt
an already damaged girl

hunkering
alone
in the dark.

I reach for a rusty spanner,
feel its weight in my hand,
then

 swing with all my might
at an invisible stranger,
at looming danger.

 My face stings.

I drop the spanner and close my eyes.

My phone remains silent.

DURING THE NIGHT

Shuffling, scuffling noises outside the shed
like boots on gravel.
I sit up, surprised I've slept.

The door creaks,
I squeak,
and slinking into the shed
like silk
comes a grey cat
with luminous mini-moon eyes.

Pss-pss-pss-pss-pss, I hiss,
tapping my fingertips together,
offering an empty hand.

The cat noses the air,
then turns,
tail aloft,
arse exposed,
shunning my affection.

POPCORN

He suggested a
Movie Night,
said we'd watch anything I wanted
after he'd had a
quick shower.

He loved
The Full Monty,
it made him laugh out loud,
so that was what I chose,
what I wanted for us both,
had the TV ready and everything.

He also liked salty popcorn,
fresh,
so I made some
in a pan on the hob,
the corn
pop
pop
popping into puffs.

But I popped so much
the oil got too hot,
the kitchen too smoky

and the alarm was raging,
filling the house with
noise.

Dad ran into the kitchen, hair wet.

Jesus hell! he shouted,

and before I could
explain about his

popcorn

surprise

he had me by the wrist

and was twisting it,

twisting it,

and hurting me into the garden,

where I was made to

sit

for several

cold hours

and think carefully

about my behaviour.

BRUISED

I cannot get back to sleep,
so pull a banana from my bag
and peel it.

Brown spots
dot its length.

I throw it aside.

I have never
been able to eat
bruised fruit.

COVER UP

There wasn't much I couldn't hide
with sleeves, a pair of tights
and a forged note from home:
Allison can't do PE today
because *blah blah blah*.

The teachers rolled their eyes
(unsympathetic to period pain)
and let me sit on the sidelines.
My classmates trampolined in their shorts and T-shirts,
front dropping,
somersaulting,
soaring
into the roof of the gym,
howling from the fun of it,
the freedom,
while I had time to plot
how to stay out of Dad's way
that day
and give the blue bruises a chance
to fade to yellow.

BREAKFAST ON THE BEACH

Waves steamroll the sand
while toddlers eat fistfuls of it.

I buy a bag of open chips
with my last bit of cash,

 Dad's card declined already,
and drown them in vinegar,
finish them off with a pink lollipop
like I am eight years old.

Then the sky starts to spit,
dotting the sand into darkness,
and I've nowhere to hide but back in the shed.

So that is where I head.

THE EMPTY HOUSE

The wide windows are shut tight
but much cleaner up close than they seem from the
end
of the garden.

With cupped hands against the back door,
I peer into the kitchen:
brown cupboards and a tin draining board
make it look like it was built before I was born,
and on the hob, a kettle.
A kettle boiling,
whistling for someone to
come quick, come quick,
and stop the steam from screaming.

Then I see her,
emerging from behind the fridge door,
face fragile and
filled with fear
when she spots me.

We stare.
And do not move.

Come back for the love of Christ!

Toffee!

The woman holds up one hand

like a child in a classroom.

Toffee? she repeats for the third time,

an invitation, probably,

to come inside and eat something sweet.

Desperation spikes her tone.

And I know that feeling –

pleading with someone not to flee.

So.

Water burbles and glugs.
A light bulb flickers.

*I wanted to wash the nets.
But, you know, I'll throw them out.
I'd rather throw them than wash them.
Sure, who needs nets?*

Not-quite-white net curtains rolled into a ball
are piled high in the sink.

I gotta go.
I step back,
eyeball the front door.

The woman tilts her head to the side.
Can't you stay? she asks.
I'll get Mamma to do another plate.
It's not like there'll be much to eat at your place.

Huh? No, I've got plans, I try,
but don't move,
my body knowing more than my brain:
I have no money and nowhere to go
and leaving will mean traipsing in the rain.

The woman smiles,
showing off a set of tiny yellow snaggle-teeth.
She is examining my face.

Does it hurt? she asks.

I touch the burn.
Yes, I admit. *A bit.*

She doesn't really look all that sorry but says,
I have ointment ... Let me find it ...
and shuffles back to the kitchen,
roots in a cupboard
and hands me a bottle of factor 30 sunscreen.
Is that what you were after? she asks.

I turn the bottle over, smile.
Um. Not exactly the weather for it, is it?

She looks irritated all of a sudden
like I am to blame.

My stomach pinches with hunger pangs.
Can I have a hot cross bun? I ask.

Oh yes,

it's just like you to come over when you're hungry.

She pulls out a chair.

Now sit there.

Go on, sit there.

HOT CROSS BUNS

The crunch of the bread,
and melted butter

in my mouth at once.
anything

juice of the raisins
all mingling

I've never tasted
so good.

I AM MARLA

What's your name? I ask.

She wags a finger accusingly,
then clouds over,
contemplating the question.

I'm Marla.

Yes.

I am Marla.

Now ...

did you hear back from Connor

about the hurling on Saturday?

Are we going or not?

I can't stand the way he messes us 'round.

Every bleedin' week it's the same old shite.

He's a messer all right though. You know?

A pause. A glance at the window.

The weather's turned, hasn't it?

Felt like summer yesterday.

I was meaning to plant some mint.

Can you smell something burning

or is it just me?

Hailstones, like little glass beads,
patter against the window panes.

Marla hands me a cherry ChapStick
and points to my cheek.

Try that.

Can I have another hot cross bun? I ask.

I AM TOFFEE

I tell Marla my real name,
twice:

Allison. Allison.

And she uses it for a while,
not looking at me,
then continues to call me Toffee.

She thinks that's who I am,
so I stop correcting her,
and anyway,
I like the idea of being

sweet and hard,
a girl with a name for people
to chew on.

A girl who could break teeth.

BACON

I stare into Marla's bathroom mirror,
focus on my cooked and battered cheek.
I thought the redness would have faded by now,
the mark dissolved a bit,
but there it is,

blazing,

less like I've been burned
and more branded,
the colour and shape of a slice of bacon
slapped against my face.

Behind me in the mirror Marla is
watching,
her almost-not-there eyebrows furrow.
It looks awful. Let me help.

No, I snap,
not knowing what to do with her concern,
turning away so she sees less
of my wincing face in the mirror.

I don't need pity from this stranger.

The hurt is half my doing anyway.

Stupid me.

Stupid mouth.

Stupid fault.

It'll fade.

Her voice is dashed with anger.

I don't remember it so brutal.

She is wearing a ring with a bright blue
sapphire.

Her ears are studded with pearls.

Both would sell for a decent amount.

My mouth gets stuck.

I blink.

I better go, I tell her.

I step into the hallway.

A leather handbag is hanging
unbuckled
from the
newel post.

Marla shakes her head. Looks sad.

It'd be deadly if you stayed.

We could play poker. Ah, don't go, Toff.

I'll stay until the worst of the weather passes.

A mound of loose change is
lying in an ashtray.

The forecast
predicts rain
for days.

HOBNOBS

We watch a talk show, the news,
eat Hobnobs and drink tea.
At ten o'clock Marla's phone beeps.

That's me, then.

She switches off the TV.

*When I was doing my exams
I used a reminder to tell me
to go to sleep too, I say,
speaking more than I have all evening.*

Oh, I have reminders for everything.

*I mightn't remember otherwise, she
says.*

She peers at the phone.

Peggy put them in.

Goodnight then.

Are you going now?

I'm shattered.

Yes, it's late.

She nods and leaves,
switching off the lights on her way to bed.

Without knowing why,
I tiptoe up the stairs
after Marla,
my ear against her door,
listening,
pushing on another door, where
a bedroom is revealed –
 the bed stripped bare,
 walls painted avocado.

No one else lives here.
That's obvious.
So I could have one night.
 What harm would one night do?

I dash downstairs
and in the kitchen stare out at the shed.
But instead of leaving,
 I lock the doors
and return
to the avocado
bedroom.