

## in the beginning

I almost died when I was five. It was one of those hot stretches of January, when as a little kid all you do is eat icy poles and give up wearing clothes. Mum was pregnant with my brother and lying down on the couch to have a rest. She'd put the television on for me, but for some reason I wandered off, looking for something more. The back door must have been open, because I remember sneaking outside, walking on the grass and loving how free I felt. I wasn't often in the backyard without a parent, and the few times that I was, Mum or Dad would be watching me from inside the house.

There was a short fence between our house and the one next door, and I'd tried to climb it a couple of times, but Mum or Dad would always appear just as I teetered on the edge and sail me away before I could make it over. This time, though, I pulled myself up, swung my bare legs

over, and scratched all the skin on the back of my thighs as I slid down and into our neighbours' backyard. They had a dog. An Alsatian, I think it was. It used to terrify me when it barked at night. And that afternoon, it was prowling around on the hunt for someone to frighten.

We stared at each other; the dog as surprised as I was that there was something else in the yard. Then it snarled. Its gums stretched back, revealing its teeth, and it started to move. Not fast – it didn't need to move fast, because it had me trapped. Even at five, I knew I couldn't climb back over the fence fast enough, so I ran. My heart was galloping as I hit the hot concrete and kept running, even though my bare feet were frying. I was so focussed on the dog behind me that I didn't notice I'd reached the terracotta tiles, or that I'd stepped off them and hit the water, or that I was in a pool where I couldn't touch the bottom.

Finally cool for the first time that day, I sank in seconds. I looked up and saw the dog leaning over the pool, its face waving in the ripples and its bark hard to hear with the two feet of water above me. Weird, but I felt safe. Like I'd found a way to escape the dog, and if I could just stay down there on the bottom of the pool, then no one would ever hurt me.

I was down there for minutes. I kept trying to breathe, and panicked when my mouth flooded with water. It was hard to keep my eyes open and all the sound was sort of sucked in. I didn't think I was dying, but I did feel changed. Like the world was no longer kind.

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And that's where it stops. When I started to drown. I couldn't see anything and all the noises just stopped. Dead.

The strangest thing was, the only reason anyone found me before it was too late was the barking of the dog. Apparently its bark sounded just like a child crying. Or that's what my dad said later. He'd come home from work early, Mum was asleep on the couch and he couldn't find me. So he walked out the back and heard what sounded like a low cry in the neighbours' yard. He peered over the fence and saw the dog lying on the ground, growling at the pool, and he looked in. He saw a shape, a blob, something lying on the bottom, and realised it was me. I wasn't breathing when he pulled me out. I'm glad I don't remember the next bit. It's a fairly gross thought: my dad's mouth blowing air into my lungs, trying desperately to make me breathe.

I've often imagined it. How panicked he must have felt. How fast his heart would have beaten. How terrified he would have been that it was too late. And sometimes when we fight, I remember that he saved me, by arriving just at the right moment and knowing what to do.

After I started breathing again, I vomited up all the water over Dad and he hugged me like crazy; great howling tears falling from his eyes. We sat there on that hot concrete for ages. He just rocked me and cried, and I stared at the dog, now silent, and wondered if he was glad I was alive.

They sent me to hospital for a couple of days just to check there wasn't any damage to my lungs or brain. I ate

a lot of ice-cream and Mum burst into tears every time she looked at me. For weeks afterwards, she apologised. A lot. To me, Dad, to anyone who would listen. But it was when she apologised to the neighbours, after I came home from hospital, that Dad finally yelled at her. He was furious – with her and with them. He went on and on about how it was mostly their fault that I'd almost died. The new fence hadn't been built around their pool yet and anyone could just fall in and drown. I think Mum was relieved when he said all this, because up until then, she thought he blamed only her.

Dad must have talked to the neighbours about his anger, because not long after that, the trucks came. I sat up on his shoulders and watched over the fence as the cement was poured into the empty pool. Then just like that, any evidence of where I almost drowned disappeared.

For a while afterwards, Mum wouldn't let me out of her sight. She trailed around the house wherever I went, scooping me out of danger. I loved having all her attention. But then my brother came along, so Mum stopped following me and started following him instead. I had no one to play with and everything scared me.

Just before I started school, a girl called Ruby Harada moved in next door with her parents and hundreds of boxes. Within seconds of her arriving, we smiled at each other over the fence, then spent that afternoon pretending the packing boxes were our houses. She was four days

older than me, but about half my size. That was ten years ago. And we've been best friends ever since. She's still half my size and four days older, although it often feels like she's years ahead.

Ruby takes things, sees their potential and then fixes them. That's what she did with me. If she hadn't found me alone in our backyard, waiting for someone to rescue me, I might have sat there for the rest of my life.

'Lil, we're going to be late.'

Ruby is already walking, and talking at the same time, expecting me to jog and catch up with her.

'Don't care. It's maths.'

It's Monday morning. Not one of my favourite days. We've got maths first up and no matter how often our teacher, Mr Parks, tries to explain it to me, I don't get it. Nor do I get why it matters if I don't get it, because after all, I live in the age of technology and if a computer can do it for me then why do I need to do it too?

'Maybe he'll be away today,' Ruby says, trying to be positive.

She stops and waits for me and I see she's painted her nails, each one a different colour, like a bizarre childish rainbow.

'Finger painting again, Rubes?'

'Hilarious. I couldn't decide which one I liked best, so I thought it would help me decide if I saw them all lined up together,' she says.

'Did it?'

‘No. What do you think?’ she says, holding out her hands. ‘I’ve been waiting all morning for an opinion.’

‘The green,’ I tell her, sounding more bored than I mean to.

‘Light or dark?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Why are you so cranky?’ she asks.

‘I’m not.’

‘Are too.’

I want to tell her that Mum and Dad have been whispering all weekend and it worries me, puts me on edge, but I know she’ll just laugh it off and think I’m being paranoid.

‘Sorry,’ I mumble.

‘Used to it.’

‘You are not.’

‘Well, I like the light green best. Think it goes with my eyes.’

And just like that, any risk of fighting is gone. If only it was that easy with my parents.

I love my parents. I do. I just don’t trust them when they start whispering. The last time they whispered, they wanted me to change schools. To go to some girls’ school in the city, because they thought it might help me focus on my schoolwork. I had to make all sorts of promises about improving my grades to stay at Graceview High, but I would have done anything to stay. There was no way they were going to make me leave Ruby and my other friends, Sarah and Brigid.

This time, though, I can't work out what they're whispering about. I've even bugged my little brother Max for information, but he doesn't know anything either. Not that he'd care if he was going to a different school. He makes friends walking down the street.

I tried asking my parents straight out if anything was going on, but Dad just squirmed and Mum changed the subject. And *they* complain that teenagers are secretive.

'Isn't that Tom?'

I look to where Ruby is pointing and see the familiar shuffle. 'Yeah.'

'Where's the other half?'

Tom always walks to school with his girlfriend, Becka. None of us like her. Sometimes it seems that even Tom doesn't like her, but no matter how many times they break up on a Friday, they're always back walking to school together on a Monday.

'Don't know.'

'Maybe -'

Ruby can't finish her sentence, because ever since she was eleven, she's had a crush on Tom, and since she was thirteen, she's been desperate for him to notice her. Since she was fourteen, she's been hoping that he'll finally open his eyes and leave Becka.

I squeeze her hand. It's good to be hopeful. 'Maybe, Rubes.'

We walk to school like that, holding hands as if we're still five.

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Mr Parks is trying to stay calm as he explains the rules of using measurement for the fortieth time. ‘Geometry, Lil. Remember?’

‘Yeah, sort of.’

‘Okay, well you just need to tell me the surface area of these shapes.’

‘Sure.’

I stare at the shapes, waiting for him to walk away, but he doesn’t go, and I have this awful feeling that today he expects me to work them out while he watches. I can smell his breath. He’s been drinking coffee and it has that horrible stale, bitter smell that I can’t stand. Even though he’s nowhere near me, not leaning into my space, I can sense he’s still there, waiting for me to start writing. I have absolutely no idea how to work out the surface area of some of these shapes. I don’t even remember what they’re called. I’m sure there are rules and patterns that I’m supposed to have memorised, but they’re failing to appear in my head when I need them most.

I pick up my pen and start tapping it on the paper. Why hasn’t Jody Mathieson asked for help? She’s always next after me for a bit of remedial attention, but for some reason today she’s not distracting Mr Parks for me. I’ll have to talk to her later and remind her that it’s her duty to be worse at maths than me. I lean over so it looks like I’m concentrating and I start to scribble. It must be working, because finally I hear Mr Parks sigh and walk away.

I shoot a desperate glance at Ruby, hoping she’ll look up. But she’s too busy actually working out the answers.

‘Rubes. Help.’ I whisper as loud as I can without Mr Parks hearing me. She smiles as she looks over. If she weren’t in my class, I’d be failing maths. Luckily, I only have to finish this year and then I can specialise in subjects I’m actually good at.

She looks around, checking that Mr Parks is still busy, and then she slides over her answers. I scribble them down on my sheet, without understanding a single one.

‘Thanks.’ I hand them back.

‘Do you want me to explain anything to you?’

‘Nope. I just want to hand the answers in and never think about geometry again.’

‘How do you know I’ve got them right?’

‘I hope you do, or he’ll know we cheated.’

‘*You* cheated, Lily Frost. Not me.’

‘Well, you’re an accessory after the fact, so that’s just as bad.’

‘Such loyalty.’

The thing is, I’m sure Mr Parks does know that I cheat sometimes. Well, I’d rather think of it as borrowing Ruby’s brain, but still. I barely scrape through in exams when I have to work alone, and then somehow, miraculously, even though I can’t explain how I get the answers, everything I do in class is usually right. I’ve often wondered why he doesn’t say something. Maybe he’s just given up on me, or maybe he understands that for some of us, no matter how many times maths is explained, we just don’t get it.

## breaking the news

Dinner on Mondays is usually something out of a tin, because no one's got around to doing the shopping after the weekend. Tonight, though, when I walk into the house with Ruby, it smells good. But instead of making me happy, it's making me suspicious. The only reason Mum would be bothering to cook something edible, is if she's got news that we're not going to like. She believes we'll be more receptive to bad news if she softens it with sweet stuff.

'You cooking, Mum?'

'Yes, honey.'

So she's not just cooking with sugar, she's calling me sugary names too. Now I'm really worried about what this all means. She spies Ruby lurking behind me, and frowns. She doesn't usually frown when she sees Ruby, so that's another tick in the odd-box.

'Can Ruby stay for dinner?'

‘Um, not tonight.’

‘Why?’

‘I’m cooking your favourite.’

‘Cool. But it’s Ruby’s favourite too.’

Ruby must sense I’m about to start a fight, because she frowns, trying to raise her eyebrow and give me a message. When I look away, refusing to take a hint, she knows it means I’ll persist, so she tries diplomacy instead.

‘Lil, it’s fine. I’ll stay for a bit and then go home for tea,’ she says politely.

‘Mum, please.’

Ruby’s always at my house. She eats with us at least four nights a week. It started after her dad died, and her mum had to work late some nights, then it just sort of stayed that way, and Mum and Dad have never seemed to mind feeding her till now.

‘Sorry, Ruby, but tonight we need to have a family discussion.’

Alarm bells are ringing in my head as Mum says this. What could it mean? If Ruby leaves there’ll be no witnesses and they can say anything they like.

‘Ruby’s like family. If she can’t stay then I’m going to eat in my room.’

Before Mum can really get stuck into the argument that’s probably brewing, the timer on the stove goes off and she jumps. I’m sure I hear her swear as she opens the oven. The cake she pulls out is my favourite – normally. But this time it’s burnt. All crusty and black on top and saggy in the middle.

Mum looks at it and starts to cry. She doesn't even try to shield us from it, and if it was anyone other than Ruby standing next to me, I'd be really embarrassed. Ruby nudges me and I realise I should do something. Like try to comfort her. I shuffle up close and put my arm around her shoulder.

'It's okay, Mum. I don't care if it's burnt. I like burnt cakes. They taste more interesting.'

This just makes her cry more. I look at Ruby to see if she's got any ideas, but she just shrugs. My mum never cries. I don't know what to do. 'Has something happened?'

She looks at me sharply when I say that and I notice how grey her hair is getting at the front.

'Lil, there's no good way to say this. We're moving to the country.'

She's joking. I don't know why I think so, but I start to laugh. She's not laughing, though, so it's clearly not something she's said to be funny. I keep on laughing.

'It's not funny, Lil. We were going to tell you tonight. We've bought an old house and we're moving.'

At this point, that sense of being under water, suffocating and sinking, floods back and there's nowhere to go. There's just my mum's face and her words, slamming into me. When I spin round, Ruby looks white. She reaches for my hand and pulls me towards her.

But Mum hasn't finished. 'I'm sorry. But this house, it's -' she stumbles.

'Ours.' I raise my eyebrows.

“Expensive” is what I was going to say. With your dad being out of work over the past year, we can’t afford the mortgage.’

‘He’ll get a new job.’ I sound really whiney.

‘Maybe. Maybe not. But we want to make some changes. We think it’ll be good for all of us.’

‘How? How can it be good? It’s not good for me.’

‘I know you think that now—’

‘No, Mum. I don’t think that. I *know* that. This is my home. I love this house. I’m not leaving.’

‘Let’s talk about it later, when your father comes home,’ she says softly.

‘Why?’

‘Because he wants to be part of the conversation, too.’

At this point, all our yelling triggers something in my brother Max, because he wanders into the kitchen in that slouchy way of his and opens the fridge, looking for something to eat.

‘Did you hear what Mum just said?’ I’m hoping to get a reaction. ‘We’re moving to the country.’

Shutting the fridge door and holding a plate of cold sausages, he shrugs. ‘Is it beach country or country country?’

‘How would I know? Maybe Mum can tell us all about it, now that her little secret’s out.’

Mum stares past me, maybe at the door, hoping Dad will come home from wherever he is and take over the difficult bits of this conversation. Now that she’s broken the news, she doesn’t want to go into the details.

‘Mum?’

‘It’s country country. About two hours away.’

‘Two hours!’ I slam out of the kitchen, smash my way through the house to my bedroom, which is down the back, away from the others. And I’ve never been happier about that. The further away I can get from Mum the better. As I throw myself on the bed, Jasper, my cat, leaps up after me and nuzzles in under my stomach. He always knows when I need someone, but tonight nothing’s going to work.

Trailing after me, Ruby shuts the door as she comes in and surprises me. I’d forgotten she was even there.

‘Lil ...’

‘What?’ It comes out sharper than I mean it to.

‘I didn’t see that coming,’ she says quietly.

‘Why would they –’

‘I dunno.’

‘But what about me?’ Even to myself, I sound pathetic.

‘It’s okay.’

She sits down on the bed and leans into me, trying to get me back, but I’m gone – already sinking down inside my head with angry thoughts about running away.

‘It’s not, Rubes.’

‘No. It’s not great, but it could be worse.’

‘How?’

She smiles. ‘You could be dead.’

‘How would that be worse? At least then I wouldn’t have to move.’

She takes my hand. 'Moving to the country might even be good.'

She's my best friend, but I hate anyone telling me things are going to be okay when they don't know they are. I just want it straight; not Ruby trying to be positive.

'How will it be good? Moving away? A new school. New house. New everything. How is that good?'

She sighs then and wraps her muscly arms around me, not quite reaching all the way. I really want to cry, but I haven't got any tears.

Ruby's left; she's not stupid. She knows it might not be one of our happier family dinners, so she's escaped, even though Mum's made lasagne. Normally this would excite me, but tonight I'm slumped at the table watching my brother eat his third serve, and waiting for the 'conversation' to start. If they think I'm going to start it, they're so wrong. I'm going to make them squirm through this for as long as possible.

Dad's tried to smile at me a few times, but he's got tomato sauce on his chin and it makes him look ridiculous. I don't smile back. I've moved into punishing mode and I'm pretty good at it, so they'd better watch out.

'Lily -'

I look at Dad. I know what he wants to talk about, I can even guess what he's going to say, and I'm not going to make it easier for him.

'Did Mum show you the house?'

'Nope.'

‘Do you want to see it?’

Before I can answer, my traitorous little brother is nodding with a mouthful of lasagne. ‘I do.’

‘Nope,’ I answer as I glare at him.

Mum smiles at Max. ‘I’ll show you after dinner.’

‘Thanks, Mum.’

This is all just getting worse. Mum often takes my brother’s side, but it’s not fair to do it when they’re making me move to the country. As if I was ever going to be happy about this.

‘Lil, your mum tried to explain why we’re moving.’

‘Yeah – because you’re unemployed.’

‘Well, that’s only half the reason. Your mum has been offered a retrenchment package and it’s a good time for us to make some changes. We really want to spend more time together. And living in the country will mean we can live more cheaply, and hopefully I’ll get work there.’

‘I don’t want to spend more time together. I’m fifteen. I’m not supposed to spend any time with you.’

Dad smiles at me and reaches out to touch my hand, but I move away.

‘Well, *we* want to be around more,’ he says gently.

‘Why?’

‘Because we love you.’

‘Oh please. That’s got nothing to do with it. You bought a house without telling me and now you expect me to be happy about it. Well, I’m staying here. With Ruby.’

And as I say it, I know that’s the answer. I can just move in next door and live with her and her mum.

‘No, honey. You’re coming to Gideon with us.’

‘Gideon? What sort of name’s Gideon?’

‘We know it’s going to be hard for you to leave this house and Ruby and school, but it’ll be exciting.’

‘I don’t want exciting.’

‘I do,’ pipes up Max.

‘Shut up, Max.’

‘No. It’s not all about you.’

‘Clearly. No one bothered to ask me what I thought.’

‘We wanted to surprise you,’ says Dad.

‘Well, it worked. Thanks.’

Dad looks at Mum and does that half-smile where he knows he’s not going to win. She starts clearing away the dinner plates, even though I’ve eaten nothing.

‘Max, you can help me and then I’ll show you the house.’

As soon as they’ve left the room, Dad moves his chair closer. It scrapes along the floor. ‘Lil, we need to try this.’

‘I don’t.’

‘We need to do it as a family.’

‘Why can’t I stay here with Ruby?’

‘Because you’re part of our family and you’re a child.’

‘You’re always saying I’m not a child, but now when it suits you I am.’

‘Sorry, Lil, but we’re putting this house on the market. We’re moving in a month.’

‘A month!’

He nods and now I feel the tears coming, rushing up

from every part of me. I don't want to cry in front of him. I want to stay angry.

'Please, just try.'

I blurt out a sob and then I can't stop the tears. Dad tries again to touch my arm, but I jump up and hurry away from the table.

This time I slam my bedroom door and throw myself on the bed like I'm four again. Ruby has sent me about twenty text messages, but I can't even bear to answer them. Going to Gideon is the worst news I've ever had.

My clock glows 4.00am. I haven't slept much. I never can when I'm worrying. The house is quiet, except for Dad snoring. I open the door to the study and turn on the light. Maybe they've left the page open on the computer, or I'll be able to track it. Then I can find out everything I want to know without them realising.

Scrolling back through their history pages, it doesn't take long to find it: 4 Simpson Street, Gideon. I hold my finger on the return key. I'm not quite sure I'm ready to see it.

Then I click and the screen flashes up a picture of a big old house. It's the sort you first learn to draw as a child. There's a triangle-shaped roof on top of a rectangular box. There are four windows at the front like two sets of eyes glaring at you, and a door right in the middle on the bottom. There's even a little path leading from the street to the front door, and a chimney. It's all symmetrical.

But something doesn't look right, something that makes my skin prickle. It's as if the house is pretending to be nice so that I'll like it, but then on the inside, it's got plans for me that don't include learning to knit. How did my parents come up with this place? It's not the sort Mum would usually be drawn to – nothing like our modern, open-plan house.

I click through the strip of other photos. The first room's really big: no furniture, but it's probably a lounge room. There's a fireplace in the corner, the walls are covered in dark green swirly patterned wallpaper and there's burgundy carpet and high ceilings. All it needs is a deer head stuffed and hanging from the wall, and a man with a rifle swilling a glass of scotch. Then there's the kitchen: cupboards the colour of vomit.

The bathroom looks disgusting and there doesn't even seem to be a shower. Imagine us all trying to have a bath before we go off to school or work!

There are no photos of bedrooms and the only other photo is of a plain room that looks added on. It doesn't fit with the rest of the house. There are wooden floorboards and the ceiling slants. It's a weird shape; maybe it's an attic.

Clicking on the original photo of the outside, I zoom in on the triangle part at the top to see if there's a room that I missed. And there it is. Small, dark and circular like a forgotten porthole, a tiny round window. As I look at it, something cold sparks around my legs, like I'm looking into a secret. And, despite myself, I do really want to be inside that room.

While I'm staring at the computer, imagining myself walking through the house, Jasper swirls around me, rubbing his fur against my ankles. I bend down to pick him up, but as I do, he flicks his claws out and scratches me.

'What the hell's that for!' I drop him back onto the ground and he hisses and runs off. He never scratches me. I don't get it. How will he go moving to the country, where he'll be kept inside for the first six weeks?

A floorboard creaks behind me and I freeze. Someone knows I'm poking around in the Gideon house and they're trying to scare me off. The screen suddenly goes dark. How black the room is without any computer light. I can feel myself holding onto my breath, gathering it up.

And then a door opens somewhere and I breathe again. It's probably just Mum going to the toilet. Quietly, I slump back down in the chair so if they look in here, they won't see me straightaway. I couldn't bear to get caught by Mum. She'll make such a thing about it, she'll assume it means she's won me over, and I don't feel like dealing with her smugness.

Now that I'm sitting here alone in the dark with a picture of the house in my head, it all seems unreal. My parents have never expressed any great desire to live in the country. I didn't even know they liked the country. They like being able to walk to a café and meet friends for breakfast, or go to the movies, and do all the other things they can, now that Max and I don't have to be babysat. What are they going to do two hours out of Melbourne? Chase koalas down the street? Join the local fire brigade?

Hold community meetings? I can't imagine how that's going to work. And I'm going to have to walk into a new school, see a whole bunch of kids who've grown up together, then try to smile and be friendly in the vague hope someone will be nice to me. I hate making friends. That's why I've got Ruby. She's my friend and she's nice to people, so they think I am too. But without her around to look after me, or talk to me –

Hello, lonely girl.