

Freddie Bettles-Lake

Sister

I FOUND MY SISTER on the sofa, a dressing gown closed tight against the cold and her feet propped up on the coffee table. The TV was on. She was watching *Cash in the Attic* at 1pm., which meant she was skipping school.

She didn't look away from the TV as I stood in the doorway, though I knew she'd heard me come in. I waited a moment and watched two pigeons land on the cherry tree outside and then said, 'No school today?' as it was the first thing I could think of.

'Hello Fred,' she said, snapping her head around and smiling. The sudden movement knocked the TV remote from the arm rest and she stretched down to grab it.

'Didn't see you there. Were you trying to scare me or something?'

'I thought you'd hear the door.'

'No, didn't hear it. Didn't expect to see you.'

'Mum told you I was coming back,' I said, and I moved into the room a little.

'I don't remember.'

'You don't remember?'

'She says a lot of things, maybe it slipped my mind. She probably made a note.'

I came into the room and sat down on the sofa opposite the TV. It was the auction section of the show - the climax - and the participants were waiting on their lots. The auction house was full and the patrons held up their number cards until the auctioneer closed the sale and it was done. 'They only made 14 quid on that one,' Flora said. 'Not really worth it.'

'You shouldn't smoke in the house,' I said, pointing at the ash tray on the table.

Flora shrugged.

'The smell will be gone by the time they get back. Plus, it's my day off. I can do what I want.'

'You should be at school,' I said.

'I quit,' Flora said. 'Handed in my notice. I couldn't handle it. A toxic environment. Okay?' 'Be serious - you have to go.'

'Are you a truant officer now, Fred? Is that what you've been doing the whole time?'

'Mum asked me to look after you,' I said. 'She'd be pissed if she knew you were smoking.' Flora turned back to the TV. There were only a few half smoked cigarettes in the ashtray but I'd never seen her smoke before, and didn't know she'd started. Without taking her eyes off the TV, she asked where I'd been.

'Norfolk. Around some other places as well. Near Lincoln. Lincolnshire, I guess.'

'You've been gone for a while. I can't remember the last time you were here.'

'Christmas. And after for a while.'

Flora nodded,

'What were you doing? I mean, I know you were working, but doing what?'

'Whatever they wanted me to do. For a while I was milking.'

Flora turned from the TV and looked at me.

'Milking what?'

'Cows.'

Flora shook her head and let out a little laugh.

'What do you know about milking cows?'

'Nothing. But you don't do it by hand. It's all with machines.'

'But why?'

'Why what?'

'Why would you be milking cows? It's not the sort of thing you move into. It's not a career choice.'

'I know that,' I said. 'I know that.'

'I don't understand,' Flora said, re-crossing her legs on the coffee table. 'I don't get why you'd do that.'

The pigeons I'd seen earlier started out of the cherry tree in the garden and landed on a chimney stack across the street. I watched them shifting and turning for a while before they flew again and I lost sight of them over the houses.

There was a crate of Heineken in the fridge, but it was too early for beer. Instead I took a carton of juice and poured two glasses. 'No ice!' Flora shouted, but I knocked the cubes onto the counter and dropped them in anyway.

'I said no ice,' Flora said when I put the glasses down.

'Too late,' I replied. 'They were already in.'

Flora scooped the ice out with her fingers and flipped the cubes into the fire grate. Outside it was beginning to rain, and dark clouds were building up like a huge, dirty meringue over the estuary to the east. Below the clouds, seagulls floated in slow circles looking for a place to land.

I lit a cigarette and lent back in the recliner to flip the foot-rest out. I sat for a while and then put the cigarette out, took my bag and went upstairs. I opened the door to my parents' room and put the bag down on the bed. The room hadn't changed since I'd been away. In fact, the layout was unchanged from my childhood; a big wooden frame bed in the centre of the room, a chest of draws on the opposite wall and a newer, built-in wardrobe by the window. There were also two chairs and a wash-hand basin with toothbrushes and a few bottles of perfume on a shelf above it. Apart from that there were photos of my grandparents on their wedding day and shots of my sister and me as children.

I unzipped my bag and opened the window. I thought about unpacking, but I didn't have many things. Instead I brought out a couple of books I was trying to read and left them on the bedside table. I brushed my teeth, washed my hands and used a flannel to clean my face. I went back downstairs and sat on the recliner.

'Do you want to do something tonight?' I asked.

'I'm busy tonight.'

'With what?'

'This.' Flora nodded at the TV.

'That's not something. Come on, I'm going to see if anyone's around and we can go out. There's a Cuban bar in Waterloo that has a three-hour happy hour.'

'We never go out together,' Flora said.

'Exactly,' I said, reaching for the phone. Most of my friends from school still lived in the area and I dialled through numbers memorised as a child, a list of digits cemented in my mind by the repetition of a thousand phone calls. In those days we always knew where to find each other. We were always home. But as I rung around, I could only leave messages with parents and talk into voicemail until I could think of no one else to call. It was mid-afternoon, and happy hour started in forty minutes – enough time to get the train and make it in before the commuters arrived and turned the place to shit.

'No one coming then?' Flora asked.

'It doesn't matter. We can get a head start and I'll call around later on.'

'I already said I wasn't coming.'

'You're going to make me drink on my own then? There's nothing to do here. The TV isn't going anywhere. We can be back by eight, no problem. Come on.'

'Never heard you so desperate, Fred.'

Flora got up, tied her dressing gown in a knot at the front and walked out of the room.

At the station, the wind shrunk and tossed the small siding oaks, pulling some of the new leaves free. A plastic bag rose in an updraft and snagged on a telephone wire, while a morning Metro flapped in a news stand. In the sky above the tracks, a group of Canada geese flew westward, heading for the Atlantic and their summer breeding grounds. As we boarded the train, we followed the geese west, crawling through Lewisham, past the shopping centre and the new swimming pool, and under the railway bridges towards New Cross, where the train changed gear and built speed on the long run up to London.

Inside the train, the carriage was almost empty. We spread out on the seats and I rested my feet on the upholstery. The blue painted stands of The Den passed by, and the buildings of Canary Wharf rose up through the cloud in the east. The rain fell evenly around us, and the dull tracks turned bright and shiny with water, reflecting the sky above until they resembled a lake or wide stretch of river. Rain streaked in long, winding veins on the carriage itself. From an open window a few drops began to fall onto the seats. I watched as a dark pool formed where the material absorbed the water. Flora saw it too, but neither of us closed the window. Soon we were creaking through the high, bricked terraces of the old factory slums and onwards into the heart of glass around Waterloo.

From the station we took the Sandell Street exit, coming down the stairs to make a jump on the crowds. We crossed past the Jubilee Line escalators and turned right at the Old Vic onto Millennium Square. At the opposite end of the square was *Cubanas*. I left Flora at a table beneath a fake palm umbrella.

Inside the bar was empty, and the staff were stocking the counter with fresh buckets of ice and mint. I ordered two mojitos and took them outside. Flora sat with her arms folded smoking a cigarette. She was wearing a thin woollen coat and I could see the wet patches where water had been absorbed.

‘We can go inside if you want?’

‘It’s fine,’ she said. ‘I’m fine.’ She asked what we were drinking.

‘They’re mojitos,’ I said.

‘I wanted a beer.’

‘You said you didn’t mind.’

‘I meant a beer.’

'It's a cocktail bar.'

'Everywhere sells beer, Fred.'

I stirred the ice around in my glass and took a sip.

'I'll get you a beer if you want.'

'No it's fine,' she replied. 'I don't want anything else. I'll just have this one and go.'

'Go? We only just got here, you can't leave after one drink.'

'I only came out to save you getting pissed on your own, but maybe it's better if you do. I mean, I don't know why you even brought me here.' She crushed her cigarette in the ashtray. 'And don't give me that sympathy bullshit. I don't need it, Fred. You didn't bother with it before, you can keep it now.'

It looked like she was going to say something, but instead she turned and went inside. I waited a minute then ordered two beers for the table. I sipped mine. After about ten minutes Flora came back and sat down.

'I got you a beer,' I said.

With a 'Cheers,' she drank from the bottle. The liner on her eyelids was carefully reapplied, and the skin on her cheeks and jaw was coated in new foundation. We drank in silence and watched the taxis begin to file up the station slip road, looking for fares. A few kids waited at the bus stop further down Union Street and jostled to get on first when the bus arrived, turning up the stairs onto the top deck. I could see them throwing something back and forth.

The bar itself was starting to fill up, and three women in heels and jackets sat down at a table beside us.

'Alright,' Flora said. 'Sorry I went off the handle.'

'It's fine, it's forgotten.'

'What's forgotten?' she deadpanned.

'I've no idea.'

'But I am okay, Fred. I don't need an intervention or whatever. I'm okay.'

'I didn't say you weren't okay.'

'Don't be difficult. What's done is done. You can't help it, so get your nose out, alright?

'Alright.'

'I'm not having a go, I'm just saying there's nothing to be done. That's it.' Flora finished off her beer and stretched. 'Let's get some more beers. You're buying.'

I finished what was left in my glass and went inside. I ordered four beers and took them back outside on a tray. At the table Flora was smoking a cigarette. Groups of people were circled between the tables and starting to spill out onto the pavement.

'It's getting crowded,' she said.

'Probably people for the theatre. We can go if you like.'

'We'll finish these. Why did you get four?'

'It's still happy hour,' I replied.

'That's just a way to make you drink more.'

'It worked,' I shrugged.

By now the light was starting to fade and a few streetlights flickered into life along the road. The rain had slowed to a drizzle and finally stopped altogether, though the dark clouds still lingered above the station.

We finished what was left of our drinks and walked back towards Waterloo. At Sainsbury's we turned right along the tracks, following the high brick arches that curve towards Charing Cross and the river. We walked on for a while.

'Are you going to tell me what happened?' I asked.

'Why can't you drop it, Freddie? It's not important. It's not even unusual. There's nothing to tell.'

Above us trains clattered on uneven lines, their electrical pick-ups sparking in the growing darkness.

'He left you then?'

'This isn't twenty-one questions. Just drop it.'

'But it matters.'

'It hasn't mattered for very long. And don't make it out like you're trying to defend my honour or some macho bullshit. You just don't like being kept in the dark.' She turned again to face me and stopped walking. 'And don't give me the "I'm-only-trying-to-help" routine because where the fuck have you been, Fred? You can't pick and choose when to care, or just turn up and expect me to have it out heart-to-heart with you. I mean, you're here out of obligation anyway, so don't make this into something it's not.'

She finished and started walking again. Up ahead I could see the painted steel of the Hungerford Bridge framed across the river by the massive station behind. We walked on towards the bridge. I didn't know where we were going, but neither did Flora, and I was happy to walk. The pavement was still wet from the rain and we jumped across a puddle that had formed over a blocked drain. Cars passed slowly and steered to avoid the puddles, their tyres picking up water in the tread and sending it backwards in showers of spray. We crossed through Jubilee Gardens and climbed the steps onto the footbridge where

we could see the river. It was low tide and the banks were exposed, with only a thin band of water flowing beneath the bridge. The water itself was dark with sediment and I imagined the sewage that's washed through it daily. When we were nearly over the bridge, Flora spoke.

'You can't believe it, really.'

'What?'

'You can't believe it because it looks so dirty.'

'What are you talking about?'

'The river.' She pointed towards the water as we came down the steps onto the north bank. 'It looks filthy but apparently it's full of fish. I read something about it in the paper. All kinds of things they thought had died out have come back. Eels and flatfish and all sorts. They've all adapted or returned.'

'Adapted to eating shit? I don't believe that. Nothing could live in there.'

'That's what I thought, but I guess someone did a study.'

'Bullshit,' I said. 'I don't believe that for a second.'

Flora shrugged. 'Why would they make it up?'

We walked east along the Embankment towards Cleopatra's Needle with the river on our right. Rain began to fall again as we passed Somerset House, so we headed quickly for a bar with a big awning and tables and chairs out beneath it. Flora went inside to the toilet and I ordered two beers from a waiter. I watched the rain beating on the pavement, coming down hard in big drops that streaked off the concrete into the gutter. People were running both ways along the street and a few were waiting under a bus shelter, shaking out umbrellas and looking up at the sky. Flora came back.

'It's really pissing it down,' she said.

'Good thing we got in when we did.'

'That's the kind of rain that'll kill you.'

'Not directly.'

'No. Like pneumonia. If you get wet and stay wet, it'll kill you.'

'Yeah. I heard a story about someone who died from pneumonia.'

'In London?' Flora asked.

'No, some forest somewhere. The New Forest or Epping Forest, I don't know.'

'The whole of England used to be forest.'

'I know,' I said.

'From coast to coast, virtually.'

'Anyway, this guy died from pneumonia.'

'It probably happens sometimes.' Flora took a sip from her beer and put the bottle down on the table.

'The point is, this was deliberate. The guy got left out there to die. He wasn't trekking or anything, he got driven out there and dumped.'

Flora looked at me.

'Like by the Mafia?'

'By his wife,' I said.

'His wife?'

'Yeah. This guy was a big alchy. Drink before work, drink at work, hit the pub after work, then drink at home. You know what I mean. Stereotype wife-beater, nasty piece of work. The point is, one day the wife had enough and decided to do something. Somehow she coaxed the guy into her car. I think he was

already pissed at this stage. Maybe she said they were going for a drink, I don't know exactly. But basically she just kept on driving and driving until the guy needed a piss and got out in a layby. As soon as he's out and unzipped, the wife leans over, pulls the door shut from the inside and drives off.'

Flora put her elbows up on the table and lit a cigarette.

'Okay. But when does he get pneumonia? He was probably only a mile from some village.'

'As I said, I don't know exactly but obviously the husband is furious. He's been dumped in the middle of nowhere in pitch black darkness. He gets kind of crazy and starts walking down the road, as you said, trying to follow the tarmac to the next village or whatever. It wouldn't be impossible, it's not like he was in the desert or Antarctica –

'Antarctica is a desert,' Flora said. 'Technically.'

'Okay, yeah. But this guy is blind drunk anyway. It's raining. He falls a couple of times on the road. There are no cars. It's completely deserted. Desolate. Well, the next day they find his body in a field half a mile from the layby. He just fell down and froze to death. Right there.'

Flora didn't move.

'I thought you said it was in a forest somewhere?'

'I don't remember. I was drunk when I heard this story myself. After they found the body and traced it and tracked down the wife, the husband's family tried to get the wife done for murder. They brought a proper case against her and said she'd knowingly let him die.'

I stopped to have a drink. Flora lit another cigarette.

'I don't get it,' Flora said. 'Is there meant to be some kind of moral to the story?'

'No, not that I can think of. Just the rain reminded me about it.'

Flora laughed.

‘You’re drunk.’

‘Don’t you think it’s tragic?’

Flora wiped some ash off the table and turned her palms face up.

‘Sounds like he had it coming,’ she said. ‘Maybe not exactly like that. But I don’t feel sorry for him, if that’s what you’re saying.’

‘I know. I’m not saying that. I suppose it would be less tragic if she had just shot him in the back and been done with it.’

The rain was easing up and people were beginning to circulate normally again on the pavement. Across the street, a group of tourists were taking pictures of the Needle. One of the group was setting up a tripod and looking for the best angles in the viewfinder. On the other side of the river, directly opposite, an electronic board flashed adverts for upcoming shows at the National Theatre. It quoted reviews from familiar titles, but the letters slid past too quickly and my eyes lost focus. Suddenly Flora stood up and drained what beer was left in her glass. She pulled on her jacket and lit a cigarette.

I followed her away from the bar and across the street to where we could see the river. She stood with her hands splayed out on the stone balustrade that lined the bank. A few small boats rocked in the current below us, while further downstream the big dining ships appeared motionless in the water. The bow waves from a passing clipper formed a widening arrowhead and rocked the tethered yachts backwards and forwards, while a piece of drift wood floated slowly downstream. We stood for a long while before climbing the stairs onto the Hungerford. We left the buskers and chestnut hawkers on the

bridge and, without looking back, worked our way east past the National, where the lights flowed red
and stained the river in their reflection.