

MOÏRA FOWLEY-DOYLE

ACCIDENTS HAPPEN.

OUR BONES SHATTER, OUR SKIN SPLITS, OUR HEARTS BREAK.

WE BURN, WE DROWN, WE STAY ALIVE.



THE

ACCIDENT

SEASON

THE
ACCIDENT
SEASON

*So let's raise our glasses to the accident season,
To the river beneath us where we sink our souls,
To the bruises and secrets, to the ghosts in the ceiling,
One more drink for the watery road.*

When I heard Bea chant the words, it was as if little insects were crawling in under my spine, ready to change it. I was going to crack and bend, become something other. Our temples were sweating under our masks, but we didn't take them off. It felt like they had become part of our skins.

The fire broke and moaned in the middle of the room and the arches above the doors whispered. I don't know how I knew that Sam's eyes were closed or that Alice had a cramp in her side. I only knew that I was everyone. I was Alice with her mouth half open, maybe in excitement or fear; I was Sam with his hands in fists; I was Bea swaying in front of us all, her red dress soaked with sweat; and I was me, Cara, feeling like I was coming out of my skin. Bea's feet struck drum beats on the wooden floor. Her words

grew louder. Soon we were all moving and the floorboards were shaking the ceiling downstairs. Wine flew from our glasses and dropped on the floor like blood.

When we stamped around the fire in the remains of the master bedroom, we woke something up. Maybe it was something inside us; the mysterious something that connects every bone of our spines, or that keeps our teeth stuck to the insides of our mouths. Maybe it was something between us; something in the air or in the flames that wound around us. Or maybe it was the house itself; the ghosts between the walls or the memories clicked inside every lock, the stories between the cracks in the floorboards. We were going to break into pieces, we were going to be sawn in two and reappear whole again, we were going to dodge the magician's knife and swing on the highest ride. In the ghost house in the last days of the accident season, we were never going to die.

1

Elsie is in all my pictures. I know this because I have looked through all the pictures of me and my family taken in the last seventeen years and she is in them all.

I only noticed this last night, clearing six months' worth of pictures off my phone. She is in the locker room at lunchtime. She hovers at the corner of the frame on school tours. She is in every school play. I thought: *What a coincidence, Elsie's in all my photos.* Then, on a hunch, I looked through the rest of the photos on my computer. And the ones glued into my diaries. And in my family photo albums. Elsie is in them all.

She turns her back to the camera at birthday parties. She is on family holidays and walks along the coast. A hint of her even appears in windows and mirrors in the zoomed-in background of pictures taken at home: an elbow here, an ankle there, a lock of her hair.

Is there really such a thing as coincidence? *This* much of a coincidence?

Elsie is not my friend. Elsie is nobody's friend, really. She's just that girl who talks too softly and stands too close, who you used to be sort of friends with when you were eight and your father'd just died but who mostly got left behind with the rag dolls and tea sets and other relics of childhood.

I've put a representative sample of seventy-two pictures taken in the last few years onto my phone to show to Bea before class. I want to ask her if she thinks there's something really strange going on or if the world really *is* so small that someone can turn up in all of another person's photographs.

I haven't shown the photos to Sam yet. I don't know why.

In the older pictures, my house looks like a cartoon house: no cars in the driveway, colored curtains framing the windows in hourglass shapes, a cloud of smoke attached to the chimney like white cotton candy. A seven-year-old me playing *Steal the Bacon* with Alice on the road in front of it. And there, at the side of the frame, a leg, the hem of a tartan skirt, and the heel of the type of sensible brown shoe that Elsie always wears.

Those pictures were taken a decade ago; this morning there is no cotton candy smoke coming from the chimney, and the hourglass curtains of the sitting room frame the image of my mother hopping on one leg as she tries to wrestle

a boot onto her other foot. Alice, outside, stamps her own feet impatiently. She stalks up to the window and raps on the glass, telling our mother to get a move on. Sam laughs from the hallway, invisible in the morning sun that casts everything past the front door in shadow. I push my fists deeper into my pockets and look up at the sky. There are a few wisps of cloud just hanging there mirroring me leaning against the side of the car.

Alice is my sister. She is one year older and a million years wiser than me, or so she'd like to believe (and she may be right; how should I know? I am hardly wise). Sam is my ex-stepbrother, which is a mouthful to say, but as our parents are divorced, he isn't technically my brother anymore. His father was married to my mother until he disappeared four years ago. He ran off with a biological anthropologist and spends his time studying gibbons in the rainforests of Borneo. Sam has been living with us for seven years now, so I suppose to all intents and purposes he is my brother, but mostly he's just Sam, standing tall in the shade of the hallway, dark hair falling in his eyes.

Knowing that getting everyone into the car will take some time, I take my hands out of my pockets and pull out my phone again. I flip through the photos for the third time this morning, playing Spot-the-Elsie like in those *Where's Waldo?* books.

I'd never realized that Elsie always looks worried. Frown

lines crease her forehead, and her mouth makes a little pout. Even her hair looks worried, somehow, when her head is turned. That's quite an accomplishment. I wonder what my hair looks like when my head is turned. The back of my head is not something I see very often; unlike Elsie, I pose when a photo is being taken, and smile.

When Alice's head is turned (when, for example, she is banging on the front room window for the twentieth time to hurry my mother, who has forgotten something—her phone, her bag, her head—and has gone back upstairs to fetch it), her hair looks severe. It is dyed two shades lighter than her natural blond, always right to the roots, perfectly straightened, tightly wound into one of those make-a-bun hair donuts and stuck with two sticks. Alice has don't-mess-with-me hair.

My mother's hair is purple. It tumbles down her shoulders in unbrushed waves as she drives, and swings when she shakes her head. Strands of it stick to her lip gloss; she spits them out as she speaks. Today, she has painted her nails the same color. If it were any other time of year on this drive to school, she'd be reaching across to Alice in the passenger seat or fixing her hair, licking the tip of her finger to smooth the edges of her eye makeup or drinking from a flask of coffee like some people drag on a cigarette, but it's coming up to the end of October and Alice fell down the stairs last night, so my mother grips the steering wheel with white-knuckled, purple-nailed hands and doesn't take her eyes off the road.

She wouldn't have driven us, but she's convinced walking is more dangerous.

"How's your head feeling, honey?" she asks Alice. It's the thirty-second time she's asked that this morning (the eighty-ninth since coming home from the hospital last night). Sam marks another line on his hand in red pen. Every time my mother asks this question, Alice's mouth gets smaller and smaller.

Sam leans over and whispers in my ear. "Bet you a ten Alice screams before a hundred." I hold my hand out to be shaken. Sam's grip is firm and warm. I silently urge Alice to hold on until we get to school.

"You all have your gloves, right?" my mother is saying. "And, Sam, I'll write you a note for chemistry. Are you all warm enough? You did take your vitamins this morning, didn't you?"

"Sure, Melanie," Sam says to my mother. He grins at me. Alice will never last under this onslaught. My mother chances the tiniest peek at her before hurriedly looking back at the road. Alice is carefully tying a silk scarf to hide the bandage around her head. She has darkened her eyes with kohl so the bruise on the side of her face seems less severe. She looks like a storybook Gypsy in a school uniform.

We come to the intersection before the school. My mother's hair whips around as she frantically tries to look every way at once before crossing the light traffic. We crawl

past at a snail's pace. The other drivers sound their horns.

When she has parked, my mother cracks her knuckles and shakes out her hands. She takes off her sunglasses and gives us each a packed lunch. "Now, you will be careful, won't you?" She squeezes Alice's shoulder affectionately. "How's your head feeling, honey?"

Alice's lips disappear. She gives a short, wordless scream without looking at our mother, and storms out of the car and into the main school building. I slump back in my seat.

"Cough it up, sister," Sam cackles.

When we've gotten out of the car, I reluctantly hand over a ten. We wave my mother good-bye and she drives carefully away. "I'm not your sister," I remind him.

Sam drapes an arm over my shoulders. "If you say so, *petite soeur*," he says.

I sigh and shake my head. "I know that means *sister*, Sam. We're in the same French class."

When Sam heads for his locker to get the books for his first class, I go find my best friend in the main school building.

Bea is sitting at the back of the library, her tarot cards spread out on the desk in front of her. She likes to read the cards every morning, so she can know what kind of day she's getting into. Bea doesn't like surprises. It wouldn't surprise her to know that the small group of eighth graders sitting a few desks away from her are snickering and whispering be-

hind her back, so I don't draw her attention to them. Anyway, I'm half convinced Bea can give the evil eye to anyone who insults her.

I take one of my two pairs of gloves off my uncomfortably warm hands (it's not the weather for hats and gloves, but my mother wouldn't let us out of the house without them) and pull up the chair behind me to face Bea across the little desk. I rest my chin on the chair back in front of me.

"Elsie is in all my pictures," I tell her.

Bea and I automatically look across the library toward the window. Usually by this time in the morning Elsie will have opened up her secrets booth for the day. The youngsters are always the first to come to her, before the bell rings for assembly, before the janitor opens the locker rooms and the librarian comes out of her office to tell us to get to class. They come one at a time, type up their secrets on Elsie's antique typewriter, and shuffle out of the library, heads bowed, pretending to be engrossed in the contents of their school bags. Elsie's box gets fuller and fuller with the things that can't be said. She isn't here this morning, though. Maybe she's running late.

Bea turns back to me. "What do you mean?"

I take out my phone and show it to her. I point out the mousy hair, the sensible shoes, the worry lines on the brows of every Elsie in every photograph.

Bea takes a long time over the photos. Finally she looks

up. Her eyebrows are drawn together and her mouth's a thin line. "Cara, this is . . ." She shakes her head slightly.

"A little weirder than usual?" I rest the tips of my fingers against my forehead and close my eyes. Bea reads tarot cards and lights candles for ghosts. She talks about magic being all around us and laughs when our classmates call her a witch. But this is different.

Bea goes through the photos again, scrolling, stopping, tapping the screen and peering close.

"Do you think it's real?" I say to her from behind my hands. "Or do you think I'm crazy? Please don't say both."

Bea doesn't say anything. Instead, she shuffles her cards and lays them out slowly one by one on the desk between us. She looks down at the cards, and up at me, and back at the cards again. When she finally looks back at me, she's wearing an expression I haven't seen in a long time.

She takes in my woolly hat, my remaining pair of gloves under the pair I just took off, the thick leggings I'm wearing as well as tights under my uniform skirt, the Band-Aid on my finger, the ACE bandage around my wrist, the vague aroma of echinacea and anxiety following me around like a strange sad cloud.

Bea sighs and nods; she understands.

It's the accident season, the same time every year. Bones break, skin tears, bruises bloom. Years ago my mother tried to lock us all up, pad the hard edges of things with foam and

gauze, cover us in layers of sweaters and gloves, ban sharp objects and open flames. We camped out together in the living room for eight days, until the carefully ordered takeout food—delivered on the doorstep and furtively retrieved by my mother, who hadn't thought how she would cook meals without the help of our gas oven—gave us all food poisoning and we spent the next twenty-four hours in the hospital. Now every autumn we stock up on bandages and painkillers; we buckle up, we batten down. We never leave the house without at least three protective layers. We're afraid of the accident season. We're afraid of how easily accidents turn into tragedies. We have had too many of those already.

"Alice fell down the stairs last night," I tell her. "All the way from the top. Her head cracked on the banister rail on the way down. She said it sounded like a gunshot in a film, only duller."

"Oh God."

"There was no one in the house. They said at the hospital that she had a concussion, so we had to keep her awake, walk her around and around."

Bea's eyes are wide. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine now. Mom didn't want us to come to school today, but Alice insisted." I take off my hat and shake out my hair, then try to smooth it down. Unlike Alice, I don't dye my hair (also unlike Alice, I'm not blond), and it's too short to straighten, so my perpetually-growing-out pixie

cut sticks up in fluffy brown spikes whenever I wear hats.

Bea covers my hands with hers. The pinkie of her right hand loops through the wool of the hat I'm holding. "Why didn't you call me?" she asks; then, as if to answer her own question, she looks back down at the cards. She clears her throat, as if she's hesitating before she speaks. Then she says it. "I think . . . It's going to be a bad one, Cara." She tries to look me in the eye, but I stare down at her cards instead. It takes a minute for me to answer.

"How bad?"

Bea touches my gloved hand gently. She says it softly. "One of the worst." She turns one of the cards to face me. On it there is a figure on a bed being pierced by swords. I shiver. My knee knocks into one of the desk legs and I feel a sharp pain. When I look down, I see that my leggings and tights have been ripped by a huge nail sticking out of the wood. A few drops of blood collect around the edges of the tear. I can feel my eyes start to fill.

Bea gets up and wraps her arms around me. She smells like cigarettes and incense. "It'll be okay," she whispers into my ear. "We'll make sure nothing happens to you. I promise. We can change this. And I don't think you're going crazy. We'll talk to Elsie. It doesn't look like she's in school today, but we'll talk to her together tomorrow. It'll be okay."

I squash down the panicky feeling rising in my throat and take a packet of pirate-print tissues out of my schoolbag.

I blot the blood off my leggings, trying to move my wrist as little as possible. I don't remind Bea that something's already happened to me, even if it's just cut skin from a nail and a sprained wrist getting out of the car last night. It's always like this: Things happen and things keep happening, and things get worse and worse. I look back across the library at where Elsie's secrets booth usually is. The empty desk is like a missing tooth.

2

For the rest of the morning I am careful, holding tight to banister rails, watching where I put my feet, avoiding corners and sharp edges. At lunchtime Alice follows me, Bea, and Sam down past the soccer fields to the train tracks behind the school. We like to come here and smoke sometimes (the teachers rarely walk by, and if we sit close to the tracks, we are hidden from the school's windows), but Alice, who is in the year above the three of us, usually spends her lunch hour in the cafeteria with her friends.

“I just can't take any more questions,” Alice says when I ask why she has joined us today. “Or staring.” I look away from her bruised face. Sam and I like to invent elaborate, nonsensical backstories for our injuries at this time of year. Nobody believes us, of course: The teachers wearily tell us to stop exaggerating and some of our classmates call us crazy under

their breaths, but at least nobody asks us too many questions.

Alice prefers never to talk about the accidents, even with her friends. It bothers her a lot more than it does us when people in school whisper about us behind our backs. A lot of things bother Alice.

“Also,” she says as an afterthought, “I could use a smoke.”

Bea doesn't mention the fact that Alice doesn't smoke. She also doesn't mention Alice's bruises or the bandage peeking out from underneath her scarf. Instead, she sits down on the edge of the ditch with the train tracks at her feet and takes out her ukulele and a pack of cigarettes. She takes a drag on one and hands it to Alice. She exhales as she strums her ukulele, and her face is wreathed in smoke. With her bright-dyed halo of curly red hair, it looks like she's on fire. Beside her, blond, pale Alice looks like Snow White to Bea's Rose Red. Although Alice would never describe herself as a fairy-tale girl.

Bea likes to say that Alice is like a looking-glass version of us: practical rather than poetic. I've always thought Alice's namesake would make more sense for Bea, but then, we don't get to choose our names. Bea was named for a Shakespearean heroine, Alice for a children's book. They could never swap now. Sam doesn't know why his mother chose his name, because she died just after he was born. As for me, my mother's always sworn that my full name is Caramel. Sometimes I don't even think she's joking.

Alice hands the cigarette back to Bea, who takes a couple of drags. Her lipstick leaves bright red stains on the filter.

“Some people say that sharing a cigarette is like sharing a kiss,” Bea tells us as she hands me the cigarette. I grin and close my lips around the filter.

“What people?” Alice asks. Alice questions Bea more than the rest of us do. Maybe because Alice’s life is anchored in the real world a little more than ours are, or so she likes to think. She tells herself (and she tells us, loudly and often) that she doesn’t believe in the accident season or in tarot cards, but sometimes I wonder if she’s telling the truth. She ignores my mother’s pleas to dress in protective layers, but I often think that’s just so the kids in school won’t stare.

“All kinds of people.” Bea is used to Alice’s cynicism. Sometimes I think she says even more outrageous things around her because she enjoys the challenge. “There’s something so intimate about putting your lips where someone else’s were just a moment before, inhaling the same air.”

Sam reaches across me and takes the cigarette. His fingers brush against mine.

“It’s not air.” Alice pulls up tufts of grass. She has one eyebrow raised as if in disapproval, but she is smiling. “It’s tobacco and tar.”

“Same difference,” Bea says. “You inhale it anyway.”

I take out my book and look across the train tracks. The day is still bright, but fading, like it’s tired of holding on to

the sun and the birdsong and the green smells of the fields just outside town. Like this weird warm October weather is finally tired of pretending it's still summer and is just waiting for the rains and winds of autumn to start, to make it feel real again.

Sam leans against me and we swing our legs out over the tracks. My feet dangle over the iron and weeds: big red Docs over thick socks over small feet that could break too easily. I try to concentrate on my dog-eared copy of *Wuthering Heights*, but I keep having visions of the train arriving suddenly and crushing our fragile limbs. I try to convince myself I don't believe that for one month of every year a family can become suddenly and inexplicably accident-prone. I try to pretend I don't remember the accidents of the past—the bad ones, the big ones, the tragedies.

Involuntarily, I look over at Alice. Bea's cards said this would be one of the worst. When the worst ones happen, people die.

My heart jumps into my mouth and beats there instead of in my chest. There are too many things I'm trying not to remember and sometimes there's just no use pretending. I fold my legs underneath me and pull Sam and Alice up onto the bank of the ditch, away from the tracks. They don't ask why, only sit with me, cross-legged in the middle of the dirty grass, and Bea joins us, strumming her ukulele softly.

I put my book back in my bag and we all take out our

lunches and the cardboard cups of tea we got at the cafeteria. The tea has gone cold, but at least that means we won't scald ourselves.

Sam takes a sip of his and makes a face. "Tepid," he says. "Delicious." He looks over at Alice with a crooked smile. "So, how's your head feeling, honey?" he says in a passable imitation of my mother's voice.

"Ugh, don't." Alice tilts her head back and rolls her eyes. "She really needs to learn that sometimes *I'm fine* means *I'm fine*."

I watch Alice tear her sandwich into tiny pieces and eat them slowly, the butt of the cigarette she just smoked smoldering at her feet. I'm not sure I believe her *I'm fine* any more than my mother did.

"She's just worried about you," Bea says.

Alice brushes sandwich crumbs off her skirt. "My friends' parents worry about them applying to the right college and not getting too drunk on nights out," she says. "My mother worries when I'm not wearing more than one pair of gloves. That's not worry, that's pathological."

"No, you're right," Sam says to her with mock sincerity. "It's not like you have a serious head injury and were in the hospital last night or anything."

Alice opens her mouth to retort, but before she can, I jump in quick and change the subject. "So what kind of schools *are* your friends applying to?" I ask.

Alice is one of those people who has a fairly large group of casual friends. She usually hangs out with the popular crowd at school, without being particularly close to any of them. They have lunch together and she gets invited to all their parties, but after class she mostly spends time with her boyfriend, Nick, who is more popular than any of them.

Nick is a musician with wicked finger-picking skills and a voice like a fiery god's. His talent comes off him like a scent that every girl can smell half a mile away. I suppose that when your boyfriend writes epic love songs to you at three in the morning and pulls you up on stage after every show, you don't really need too many more close friends.

I, on the other hand, am one of those people who has a small group of very close friends. Those friends are Bea and Sam. It is, I have to admit, a rather tiny group.

Alice pops a little piece of sandwich into her mouth. "Kim wants to do nursing," she says. "And Niamh's first choice is business and French. So if I don't get into computer science in Trinity, I'll be in DCU with her. It's, like, fourth on my list, though."

Alice will end up being the only person in our family not doing something arty or literary, but I think for her that's part of the appeal. "I'm sure you'll get your first choice," I tell her.

"If I don't die of overwork first," Alice says. "Do you know Mr. Murray has us doing two hours of study a night? As well as homework?"

“It’s only October,” says Sam. “No wonder you’re so crabby.”

Alice reaches out and shoves his shoulder.

“What you need,” Bea muses, taking an apple out of her bag, “is a big, crazy party to get everybody’s priorities straight.”

“You’re right,” Alice laughs. “Homework should never be a priority.”

“Homework!” Sam suddenly exclaims with dismay. He starts to root through his bag for his schedule. “Please tell me that essay on the First World War wasn’t due today.”

“I would,” Bea says, amused, taking a bite out of her apple, “but I’d be lying.”

“*Shit.*” Sam pulls his history book out of his bag and opens it on his lap. “Have you done this?” he asks me and Bea.

“We won’t be able to copy each other’s homework next year, you know,” I say sadly. “Not if we want to do well in the exams. And we’ll probably have to hand it in on time too.”

“Never,” Bea says solemnly.

“Well, I can tell you that most of my class definitely *doesn’t* give their homework in on time,” Alice says as Bea takes her history folder out of her bag and hands it to Sam. “Except for Toby Healy, of course.”

Toby is one of the most popular boys in school. He has sandy blond hair and an inexplicable tan and small dimples when he smiles. He’s one of the best players on the soccer

team and top of his year, and still spends almost every evening in supervised study. Not that I've noticed.

Bea gives me a mischievous look. "Cara thinks Toby's cute."

"Everybody thinks Toby's cute," I say.

"I don't," says Sam.

"Everybody except Sam thinks Toby's cute."

"You don't actually, though, do you?" Sam asks me.

Alice's phone buzzes. She checks her messages but puts her phone down without replying.

"Cute or not, it would never work out," Bea says blithely. I am about to protest—despite only being very vaguely interested in Toby Healy, I feel I should stand up for myself—but Bea goes on: "For one thing, there's only room for three in our Parisian loft apartment."

Sam, Bea, and I have a carefully constructed and oft-daydreamed-about plan for when we leave school. We will move to Dublin together to study literature and philosophy, which will give us the education we need to run away to Paris, where Sam will direct French art house films, I will spend my days in dusty bookshops, and Bea will pay the rent by working as an artist's model (nude, of course).

I give Bea a playful smack and correct a few lines of Sam's history essay from the notes in my own notebook. Alice's phone buzzes again.

"Doesn't that boyfriend of yours know you're in school

right now?" Bea asks as the phone starts to ring in earnest.

"Back in a sec," Alice says, getting to her feet and moving a few feet away from us to answer. Nick finished high school four years ago; who knows what you forget when you've been away that long.

Bea starts picking out a tune on her ukulele. I recognize it as one of the particularly depressing folksongs she likes to play. Ms. O'Shaughnessy, the Irish teacher, had Bea play the song in the original Irish a few weeks ago in class. Since then she and the music teacher, Mr. Duffy, won't stop raving about Bea's "new spin on traditional music," but no one in the school folk group wants a ukulele in the band. Or maybe they just don't want a Bea.

Alice returns to us with a smile on her face. "He sent me flowers," she says, sitting down to gather her things into her bag. "To the school cafeteria. He thought I'd be there now. Kim says there are a dozen roses in a big glass vase. Everybody's talking about it."

I'm about to ask Alice what the occasion is or if Nick is just being romantic and spontaneous, when the ground beneath us begins to shake. The tracks sing. We turn to face the train. It flies past us like a snaky bird, screeching and screaming. There are faces in the windows all streaming by. The station is just down the road from the school, and the train slows to let another train by, and in one of the cars I think I see a reflection of the four of us, but different, dis-

torted by the light and sky on the other side of the window.

They look like they are dressed up for a costume party. The redhead who looks like Bea could be dressed as a mermaid, scaly skin and all. I imagine there is a starfish stuck to her face and that her sequined dress ends in fins. Another girl with light brown hair as short as mine is sitting with her legs up on the table between her and the mermaid. She almost looks like she's wearing a strange, fluid dress the color of oil puddles, and silver Converse, with blue-green fairy wings attached to her shoulders. They are squashed up against the seat back behind her. The girl sitting beside the mermaid—in the same position as Alice, who's beside Bea on the grass—seems to be dressed as a forest, with leaves stuck to her face and to her mossy dress, and twigs and little flowers twined through her long blond hair. The boy of the group, sitting beside the fairy girl, looks like he's just walked out of a silent film. His skin is gray and he could be wearing a sort of vaudeville-circus-ringmaster top hat on his black hair. I'm a little disappointed when the train pulls away, because he's really quite beautiful.

“I wonder where they're off to,” I say to Bea, who is also watching the train move away.

Alice, texting one-handed, stands up, slings her bag onto one shoulder, and hurries back toward the main school building.

“Where who are off to?” Bea asks distractedly, turning to

look after Alice. She starts to retune her ukulele with a series of loud twangs.

“The kids in the car right there,” I say. She and Sam look after the departing train, but of course the car with the dressed-up kids in it has moved away.

“What kids?” says Sam.

Bea shrugs. “I didn’t realize there was anyone in the window.” She strums a couple of chords experimentally. “I just saw the four of us reflected in the glass.”

I snap my head back up to look after the train, but by now it’s gone. Maybe I’m just hallucinating from lack of sleep. I think of the hospital last night; the nurses who know us by name at this point, the way we had to walk Alice around and around, ask her questions, keep her awake. My knee itches around the little cut from earlier where the blood has stuck the tights to my skin.

All the rest of the day I find it hard to concentrate. When the three-o’clock bell rings, I follow Sam and Bea to the doors of the PE hall, but instead of going inside to get changed, I plead with Mrs. Smith, the PE teacher, to let me off class because of my sprained wrist until she agrees to allow me to go home. Bea, who would clearly rather not have to halfheartedly run laps in the sweaty, smelly hall, waves morosely at me as I leave to walk home alone slowly in the afternoon light.

Our house is a couple of miles outside town, down the

main road past shops and houses and housing developments, past fields and farms, and farther, down a smaller country road lined with hedges and whitewashed houses. Mostly, though, to get home from town, we follow the river. A little way off the main road, there is the river walk, which is sometimes no more than a rough track and sometimes a proper area with picnic benches and bridges to take you to the woods on the other side.

The place I like to sit is close to the smallest of the bridges—really just a wooden placeholder across the water waiting for the council to build a proper bridge of stone. Instead of going straight home, I climb down and sit on the riverbank and take out a cigarette. The ground is hard and gritty beneath me. Across the river everything is yellow and red, the fallen leaves dry and crackly and inviting. There's something about autumn leaves that just begs to be stepped on. I can hear them whispering in the breeze. I take off both pairs of gloves so the cigarette won't singe them and I sit there for a while, a splash of color on the duller bank, smoking and trying not to think about Bea's cards.

Since I was little, since long before Elsie started with the secrets booth, I've come down here when there's no one else around, to tell my secrets to the river. Sometimes I almost think I can hear it whispering them back at me.

I open my mouth to talk about what Bea said and how I'm afraid this really will be a bad one; the worst one, if

that's even possible—although I can hardly imagine what could ever be worse than the one four years ago we so often try to forget—when suddenly I think I see a shape between the trees. When I squint my eyes against the sun to look closer, it's gone. I stand up and come right down to the river, the toes of my Docs almost touching the water. I could have sworn I saw a flash of mousy brown hair moving between the trees.

I take a last drag of my cigarette, put the end in the bin by the bench, and hurry over to the bridge. I'm halfway across when it begins to creak. I stop. I've crossed this bridge a thousand times. It was built before I was born, but it's sturdy; it has weathered the years. I take a careful step. Another creak, louder this time. Then, in a rush of wood and water, the bridge collapses.

I grab the hand rail and hold on for dear life as the bridge plunges toward the river. It's a short drop. The middle section of the bridge hits the water and stops, caught between two rocks. Water whooshes over my legs to my waist, but I'm still standing, leaning against the rail in the middle of the river.

I'm shaking all over, but not from the cold. *I'm okay*, I tell myself sharply. *I'm okay*. I breathe deeply until I can move again. Carefully, hand over hand, legs heavy in the water, I make my way across the rest of the fallen bridge to the other side of the river.

I climb up onto the opposite bank. Still breathless, I

edge toward the copse of trees where I thought I caught a glimpse of Elsie. Moss and bits of twig stick to my boots. They squelch as I walk. I part a row of branches and peer into the little clearing behind them. Everything is dark here, shadowed by trees. The light is watery and weird, full of whispers.

“Hello?” I feel like that girl in the horror films, the one who makes you scream at the screen, telling her to turn and run away. My heart does a little flutter dance. “Elsie?”

I think I hear a tiny noise coming from a clump of bushes at the far side of the clearing. Everything else is strangely silent. I can't hear the leaves crunch or the river flow behind me.

“Hello?” I say again. I tiptoe toward the bushes. The leaves rustle as I approach.

“Elsie?” I reach forward and part the branches quickly, like ripping off a Band-Aid. There's nothing there. Nothing except a small box squirreled away to the back of the bushes. I get down on my hands and knees and stick my head in under them. The branches catch in my hair. I blow at the leaves to get them out of my way, and that's when I see the mousetrap nestled in a pile of dusty moss.

For a minute I scan the ground, worried that I've gotten too close to a rodent's nest, but then I notice what's on top of the trap and it's not (thankfully) a dead mouse, nor is it a piece of perfectly holey cheese like in *Tom and Jerry* cartoons. What it is, is a doll.

It looks like it's been made of cardboard and wire and cloth, like the Guatemalan worry dolls my mother keeps in a little pouch hanging from the rearview mirror in her car. Only this one looks exactly like Elsie. It's got mousy brown woolen hair and pale cloth-skin and it's wearing a tartan skirt that looks like our school uniform and a shapeless red sweater of the kind Elsie always seems to wear outside of school. It even has the Peter Pan collar of a tiny shirt coming up from underneath the sweater's neck. I back away and stand up slowly.

"Elsie?" I call. "Elsie!" No one answers. A little breeze whistles through the clearing and my legs break into goose bumps underneath my wet layers. Or at least I tell myself it is the cold and the wet, and not the little cardboard doll set out like the bait in a trap.