

ATROPHY

Michelle Komala Singh

I don't have a sister, but in my recurring dream I do. I have a younger, nameless sister. I visit her at home, where she has yellow walls and a blue and white chequered tablecloth. When I am with her I am infused with such lightness and euphoria. I take her two handfuls of eggs and she says, let me make you egg on toast how you like it, with no yolks. My make-believe sister looks like my mother used to look, in photographs of her in the 1960s, standing around jauntily in floral London parks before leaving the rat race, a few years before she had me. My sister calls me Danny, a name I don't let anyone else use.

After my long shift ends this evening my brother phones and asks me to stop by to help him out, to 'help' him move a bookcase from one side of his lounge to the other, to block the afternoon sunshine from bouncing off his television screen. I abhor the sound of his voice on the phone – high-pitched, tinny and useless.

'Of course,' I say, 'what time shall I be there? Do you need anything else?'

Yes, he'd like some white grapes. And cocktail sausages, he's run out. And while he's thinking about it milk, tangerines, lattice-topped pork pies from the delicatessen counter, Scotch eggs, jumbo sausage rolls and luxury dog food. It's like he's reading from a list. He doesn't thank me.

I am tired and wrung-out. Work hurts my eyes and shoulders. My arms are jelly, gripping the cutting plastic of cheap shopping bags, carrying them up my brother's

garden path. He'd texted me in the shop, asking for two huge packs of water bottles. Doesn't he know how fucking heavy these things are? Has he forgotten what it is like to bear weight? I let myself in, habit making me kick off my shoes in my mother's old house. I see too late that the puppy, Maximus, named after that idiot gladiator in the film, has pissed again by the welcome mat. Welcome indeed.

'Mart,' I shout angrily, all wet-socked, 'you shouldn't have this bloody mutt! You should have it put down because you can't take care of it any more!'

I walk into the lounge where he's parked at the dining table and instantly feel like a shit because the smile has died on his face. Spread in front of him is an old photo album, which once belonged to our parents. It's made of dog-eared brown leather and has a split spine. He was probably going to show me some birthdays, regale me with tales that have all been legendarily forgotten.

'I'm not being horrible Dan, but just because you've had a bad day at work doesn't mean you can take it out on me!' He's aggrieved. And rightfully so.

I sink into the chair opposite him, letting out a sigh. I sound like a corpse expelling air, one of those corpses they make you bathe in the morgue during training, to see if you can stick it out as a male nurse. I am about to tell Mart everything, on a whim. How our ugly new ward supervisor is a control freak. That the cocky new student lumbered with Jane and me is a lazy, dangerous bastard. Then he cuts across me as I wait to draw breath.

'Now you're here, can you help me go to the toilet? I've been waiting for you. You took such a long time to get here.'

I was there when Mum gave Mart's last girlfriend a pep talk, two years ago. Her name was Liza, short for Elizabeth. She was an exuberant, happy sort, a volunteer at the day

centre Mum used to take Mart to while she was at work. Liza was lovely. I sometimes wanted to push my face into her neck just to breathe her in when she was around. She was five years younger than me, the same age as Mart, laughingly said he looked like Robert de Niro in his younger days. She had been making noises about Mart moving into warden-controlled housing, saying it would be good to be independent, to live away from Mum. She was big, soft and round with wrinkles around her eyes. She really wanted to have children. Mum had me along like a silent bodyguard, her enforcer, when we took Liza for Sunday lunch at the pub. Mart had been fobbed off as to our various whereabouts. I felt like Judas Iscariot, listening to my mother speak.

‘He will die, and you will have to give up work to care for him. Can you do that?’

‘He will die, horribly. Can you watch that?’

‘His chest will collapse. That’s not muscle, that’s fluid. Don’t heed his bravado.’

‘Then his gut will give up the ghost. Your gut is a muscle.’

I’d clenched my fists, my muscles.

‘Can you cope with that? What about having children? Martin isn’t in any kind of physical condition to be able to.’

‘There are ways,’ Liza had mumbled.

Mum ignored her, and talked on in her measured way about future loss of sphincter control, bladder weakness, catheters, enemas, drips, head straps and hoists. I could already see it then, in the slackness of his jaw, the hand that couldn’t quite grasp the knife at the side of the plate, all of a sudden Mart turning down spaghetti bolognese, asking for just the mince to eat with a spoon.

‘I’m just telling you now, Liza, so that one day you cannot turn to me and say I didn’t tell you. I’ve given his few other girlfriends the same information in the past.’

When Mum left I bought Liza a gin and tonic at the bar to stop the poor girl’s hands from shaking. She was quiet for ages, stroking the drips down the side of her glass into the saturating coaster. Liza said to me, ‘There’s gender selection of course. But who can afford that?’

‘Just tell him you have to move to London for your job or something,’ I’d told her, trying to sound carefree. ‘Let him down easily.’ I always imagine my future daughter, if I have a future daughter, hating me for the genetics. Even worse, telling a daughter in the first place.

‘So if Martin and I have a girl one day,’ Liza said slowly, ‘then her son has a fifty-fifty chance of getting it?’

‘Yep,’ I said quickly, taking a long deep lug from my pint. She plunged her fingers into her drink, pulling out some ice and slinging it in the ashtray.

‘You were very lucky, Daniel,’ she said eventually. I grimaced. I don’t like it when people say that to me. But it always makes me tense the muscles in my legs and run up the stairs when I get home.

‘How old was your grandfather when he died?’ Liza asked as I dropped her outside her house – a red-bricked little terrace at the end of a row, with a garden big enough for a swing.

‘I don’t know.’ I sounded so impotent. ‘They didn’t know much about it in those days.’ And, sounding like my mother, I added, ‘It’s quite a new disease, really.’ How could she have been with someone like Mart?

I move the bookcase, after removing what seems like hundreds of video movies from it, with Mart giving me precision orders from a distance. He is scared I will drop the shelves and crack them over his knees. Afterwards, when I am sweaty with limbs trembling he wonders if I could make us both a cup of tea?

‘Bloody hell, are you still scared of using that new kettle?’ I snap at him.

‘No, but you’re here now,’ he cajoles. He’s not looking at me now, but peering at the thirty-one-year-old photographs of us with Dad before he left Mum for Toronto, of Mart perched on the same chair as me as I blow out nine candles on my birthday cake. I remember not too long after my ninth birthday trying to place my father, using our ancient family atlas, scouring the Rockies for him with my fingernail scratching across the page.

‘I like your brown cords in this one, Dan,’ he says laughing. ‘Nice yellow t-shirt.’ When I come back in with the tea he tells me it’s a year to the day since Mum died. As if I didn’t know.

And nearly one year since you’ve left this bloody house on your own, I want to say to him, but I’ve already been too spiteful with the Maximus jibe.

In my recurring dream, sometimes my sister has children, two little boys, with jaw-length soft curls and beautiful smiles. She dresses them well and feeds them homemade food, teaches them about nature. They are always coming in to show me things they’ve found in their garden pail, like snails and worms and caterpillars. My love for them is like pain. I feel an enormous lump in my throat when I look at their faces, when I reach out to rub away a smudge of mud or jam or chocolate from one of their faces.

Mart needs me to stay tonight, he tells me. I say I have worked a double shift.

‘What about Jeremy or Lucas?’ I demand. ‘Isn’t one of them coming at ten as usual?’

‘I’ve given Jez a night off, it’s good for him once in a while,’ Mart tells me, examining his long fingernails. ‘It can’t be easy for them, Dan, every other night here. Jez has got a new girlfriend too. It’d be good for him to spend the evening with her.’

Yeah, but Jez gets paid while he sleeps! I am screaming inside.

‘That was Liza’s problem,’ Mart says, craning down to slurp his tea on the table. ‘She couldn’t be bothered to make the time.’

The routine, the fucking routine. I can feel the knots in my neck bulging out like rigging. I bend down on his wheel-marked floor to undo his boots. They are old army issue, and pathetic.

‘Why don’t you think about wearing a pair of those shoes that undo with Velcro?’ I suggest.

‘I don’t want to look like some mong with special shoes,’ Mart returns, offended. I say nothing. I feel the nerves in my back screeching as I lug his dead weight upright to the high bed, and pull his t-shirt over his head. You shouldn’t undress your younger, thirty-five-year-old brother, I think. You should be undressing a baby before a bath, or undressing your lover before bed but here I am with neither and just him. His arms are like two deflated yellowing balloons. I swallow hard to see the dips in his chest.

‘You all right, Mart?’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ he replies, airily. ‘You going to flick the TV on? We can watch it until I fall asleep. Turn the overhead light off.’

He makes me watch a shopping channel until I’m sure he can hear my teeth grinding. Then he needs the toilet again. I sit him up, balancing him like a Weeble. His piss is frothy, orange and hot. As I rinse the bottle out, with bleach as Mart reminds me, I think of the company that manufactured it, as they have emblazoned a warning on the side to not fill with liquids above 40 degrees. How hot is piss? I recall one of their catalogues of horrors: order forms for padded toilet seats, shower chairs, plaid blankets, waterproof wheelchair canopies, personal alarms that double up as torches.

‘Tangerines, Dan,’ Mart chides me randomly as I lower him, like a sack of cement, back into his bed. ‘You forgot them. You forgot them the time before last, too. You know, you should make a list on your computer. They’re right at the front of the supermarket too, past the newspapers.’

At work we see a girl called Lydia. She’s sixteen and her eyes are all glazed with Diazepam. Lydia’s stomach stopped working when she was fourteen. She’s one of our favourites. She has a bright, brilliant smile and tells stupid, unfunny jokes that we laugh at just because they are ridiculous. Yesterday she was telling us she won’t see us next month, she’s going to Kenya and Tanzania on a group safari, on a truck.

‘But what about your pump? How will you keep your feeds cold?’ Jane was amazed.

‘Ice packs,’ Lydia shrugged. ‘And when I’m knackered, I’ll stay in the van for a kip.’ She grinned.

Lydia will probably die before the next six years are out, from pneumonia or post-op septicaemia, if I was forced to make a guess. Her mother Diane, as usual, greeted us like old friends when she came to take Lydia home. She is going on the safari too, and had just had her yellow fever vaccination at the clinic. Diane told us once that when Lydia was diagnosed, she promised herself that her daughter would see the world. Diane told Jane last week that Lydia's father is so depressed now he's had to give up work.

As he is gripped by the intricacies of some horrific jewellery being bid for on-screen, I remember the days when gravel would become stuck in Mart's wheels and I'd have to prise them out with a blunt dinner knife. The carpet would resemble a driveway. Now his rubber is flawless and perfectly grey. The jewellery suddenly bores him and now he's engrossed in a banal police drama on television, the blue lights on the screen flickering over his face, propped by up a pillow. He looks a bit jaundiced, I think.

'Jane was telling me at work, there are these dating agencies where you can meet people who want to go out with people in wheelchairs. Like people who don't mind.' I announce, watching his face. I wish my words were a bit more graceful.

'What, like they have a fetish for the handicapped?' A little smile is playing around Mart's face.

'Don't say handicapped, say disabled,' I parrot.

'I can say handicapped if I want!' he exclaims, turning his face to me, abruptly. 'Just like a black person can call another black person a nigger!'

'Oh, Jesus Christ, Martin! That's not the same!'

'Dan,' he says, all kindly like I am the ignorant one, 'I can say it because I am. I ain't going to be prejudiced to myself, am I?'

Last week I took Jane out for a drink after a shift on which I'd wanted to smack the new student into kingdom come. He'd been staring at Jane's chest when she bent down to adjust a hoist for a patient. He was smirking like some casanova, she said, thinks he's Don Juan with his little goatee. She handled it herself, she's so confident anyway but I couldn't help wanting to be there too, to give her a hand. I took her to a tapas bar because she loves sangria. She looked burnished in the candlelight, and the drink hit her lunch-free stomach and she was flushed and garrulous. I enjoy watching her talk and all the faces she pulls. In another life, a parallel universe, I sometimes wonder what we are to each other.

If I had a girlfriend, I would want her to be like Jane. It was a shame Liza didn't stick around with her slow dimpled smile.

'Dan,' Mart is saying in the darkness, his wheelchair charger droning like a malevolent beehive in the next room, 'you know you get paid to be a carer these days?'

'You always get paid to be a carer, it's a job, you muppet,' I reply, fed up that my precious night's sleep will be spent on a futon that smells of dog sweat.

'No, that's not what I meant,' Mart says, and I know he's anxious to get it right. He's quiet.

'Well, what then?' I'm always driving these conversations, asking strategic questions. It's like we're actors in a play.

'Like a family member who gives up work to care for you, they get paid. They can get a car and an allowance. Denise was telling me.'

Denise is Mart's occupational therapist, she visits him a few times a month, usually carrying a black leather binder full of glossy leaflets.

'Why was Denise banging on about that?' I yawn, thinking simultaneously how awful I think Denise is.

'Because now Mum's gone, I get a bit lonely,' he says in a near-whisper. 'And Max is a good puppy but he's hard work. I only enjoy Countdown when you are here. We have a good laugh, me and you, don't we?'

When we were kids I used to think it was fun when Mum commanded me to give Mart a piggyback up and down the stairs, to bed or to breakfast. Childishly, I used to feel proud of my role in his life, his keeper and protector. It was helping Mart that made me want to pass my driving test first time so I could drive the two of us in the battered family Cortina to and from school, rocketing our status amongst the other pupils, so he wouldn't be mocked for his increasingly obvious gait. He used to be grateful for that, he thought it was such an honour to sit in the passenger seat with his older sixth-former brother playing The Smiths at top volume on the second-hand tape machine I'd bought. It was my twenty-first birthday when I visited from university, when he finally found he couldn't work his legs, so I stayed home and we all had a drink round the kitchen table. And it was my fortieth birthday last month when his bladder finally began giving up the ghost, turning into an old, stretched whoopee-cushion. I mock his voice in my head - cranberry juice Dan, don't forget the cranberry juice! In the books they say most sufferers don't make it to their thirties, hardly any see forty. Mum said the clichéd thing after she had her second heart attack. As if I haven't always, since we found out about Mart. I feel like Cain. My punishment is greater than I can bear.

For months, horrible thoughts have been spiralling through my head, usually starting with Lydia and how I don't want to see her in the run-up to her being dead. I don't want to be there when Jane announces she's pregnant with the baby she and her husband are trying for. I don't want to be there when that fucking student qualifies and I have to breathe the same air as him. I've been catching myself thinking that when Mart goes, I can ship out, sell Mum's house and my place. I've been reading about Canada, looking at pictures of Vancouver and all the snow and mountains and beauty. I have a vocational job. I have transferable skills. Then I feel like a right fuck, how can I imagine away my brother's life like this? He might last another five years. Even that thought makes me feel physically sick, like his noose is tightening around both of our necks.

I don't even have a wife or a child or a life to combat Mart's request with. He is still talking.

'And if there's a fire or something, who will help me and Max?'

Bile and guilt rise in my throat. The words aren't there.

'We'll sleep on it, yeah?' he ends, soothingly. Jesus Christ, he thinks I'm going to say yes to chaining his millstone to my neck.

'Go to sleep, Dan, I can tell you're still awake,' he says, a while later. 'You work too hard, you know. You need to take a holiday to Spain or something. They say Benidorm's quite cheap.'

In the night he wakes me seven times to turn him, interrupting seven different dreams of my fairytale sister.

THE END

I don't have a sister, but in my recurring dream I do. I have a younger, nameless sister. I visit her at home, where she has yellow walls and a blue and white chequered tablecloth. When I am with her I am infused with such lightness and euphoria. I take her two handfuls of eggs and she says, let me make you egg on toast how you like it, with no yolks. My make-believe sister looks like my mother used to look, in photographs of her in the 1960s, standing around jauntily in floral London parks before leaving the rat race, a few years before she had me. My sister calls me Danny, a name I don't let anyone else use.

After my long shift ends this evening my brother phones and asks me to stop by to help him out, to 'help' him move a bookcase from one side of his lounge to the other, to block the afternoon sunshine from bouncing off his television screen. I abhor the sound of his voice on the phone – high-pitched, tinny and useless.

'Of course,' I say, 'what time shall I be there? Do you need anything else?'

Yes, he'd like some white grapes. And cocktail sausages, he's run out. And while he's thinking about it milk, tangerines, lattice-topped pork pies from the delicatessen counter, Scotch eggs, jumbo sausage rolls and luxury dog food. It's like he's reading from a list. He doesn't thank me.

I am tired and wrung-out. Work hurts my eyes and shoulders. My arms are jelly, gripping the cutting plastic of cheap shopping bags, carrying them up my brother's garden path. He'd texted me in the shop, asking for two huge packs of water bottles. Doesn't he know how fucking heavy these things are? Has he forgotten what it is like to bear weight? I let myself in, habit making me kick off my shoes in my mother's old house. I see too late that the puppy, Maximus, named after that idiot gladiator in the film, has pissed again by the welcome mat. Welcome indeed.

'Mart,' I shout angrily, all wet-socked, 'you shouldn't have this bloody mutt! You should have it put down because you can't take care of it any more!'

I walk into the lounge where he's parked at the dining table and instantly feel like a shit because the smile has died on his face. Spread in front of him is an old photo album, which once belonged to our parents. It's made of dog-eared brown leather and has a split spine. He was probably going to show me some birthdays, regale me with tales that have all been legendarily forgotten.

'I'm not being horrible Dan, but just because you've had a bad day at work doesn't mean you can take it out on me!' He's aggrieved. And rightfully so.

I sink into the chair opposite him, letting out a sigh. I sound like a corpse expelling air, one of those corpses they make you bathe in the morgue during training, to see if you can stick it out as a male nurse. I am about to tell Mart everything, on a whim. How our ugly new ward supervisor is a control freak. That the cocky new student lumbered with Jane and me is a lazy, dangerous bastard. Then he cuts across me as I wait to draw breath.

'Now you're here, can you help me go to the toilet? I've been waiting for you. You took such a long time to get here.'

I was there when Mum gave Mart's last girlfriend a pep talk, two years ago. Her name was Liza, short for Elizabeth. She was an exuberant, happy sort, a volunteer at the day centre Mum used to take Mart to while she was at work. Liza was lovely. I sometimes wanted to push my face into her neck just to breathe her in when she was around. She was five years younger than me, the same age as Mart, laughingly said he looked like Robert de Niro in his younger days. She had been making noises about Mart moving into warden-controlled housing, saying it would be good to be independent, to live away from Mum. She was big, soft and round with wrinkles around her eyes. She really wanted to have children. Mum had me along like a silent bodyguard, her enforcer, when we took Liza for Sunday lunch at the pub. Mart had been fobbed off as to our various whereabouts. I felt like Judas Iscariot, listening to my mother speak.

'He will die, and you will have to give up work to care for him. Can you do that?

'He will die, horribly. Can you watch that?

'His chest will collapse. That's not muscle, that's fluid. Don't heed his bravado.

'Then his gut will give up the ghost. Your gut is a muscle.'

I'd clenched my fists, my muscles.

'Can you cope with that? What about having children? Martin isn't in any kind of physical condition to be able to.'

'There are ways,' Liza had mumbled.

Mum ignored her, and talked on in her measured way about future loss of sphincter control, bladder weakness, catheters, enemas, drips, head straps and hoists. I could already see it then, in the slackness of his jaw, the hand that couldn't quite grasp

the knife at the side of the plate, all of a sudden Mart turning down spaghetti bolognese, asking for just the mince to eat with a spoon.

‘I’m just telling you now, Liza, so that one day you cannot turn to me and say I didn’t tell you. I’ve given his few other girlfriends the same information in the past.’

When Mum left I bought Liza a gin and tonic at the bar to stop the poor girl’s hands from shaking. She was quiet for ages, stroking the drips down the side of her glass into the saturating coaster. Liza said to me, ‘There’s gender selection of course. But who can afford that?’

‘Just tell him you have to move to London for your job or something,’ I’d told her, trying to sound carefree. ‘Let him down easily.’ I always imagine my future daughter, if I have a future daughter, hating me for the genetics. Even worse, telling a daughter in the first place.

‘So if Martin and I have a girl one day,’ Liza said slowly, ‘then her son has a fifty-fifty chance of getting it?’

‘Yep,’ I said quickly, taking a long deep lug from my pint. She plunged her fingers into her drink, pulling out some ice and slinging it in the ashtray.

‘You were very lucky, Daniel,’ she said eventually. I grimaced. I don’t like it when people say that to me. But it always makes me tense the muscles in my legs and run up the stairs when I get home.

‘How old was your grandfather when he died?’ Liza asked as I dropped her outside her house – a red-bricked little terrace at the end of a row, with a garden big enough for a swing.

‘I don’t know.’ I sounded so impotent. ‘They didn’t know much about it in those days.’ And, sounding like my mother, I added, ‘It’s quite a new disease, really.’ How could she have been with someone like Mart?

I move the bookcase, after removing what seems like hundreds of video movies from it, with Mart giving me precision orders from a distance. He is scared I will drop the shelves and crack them over his knees. Afterwards, when I am sweaty with limbs trembling he wonders if I could make us both a cup of tea?

‘Bloody hell, are you still scared of using that new kettle?’ I snap at him.

‘No, but you’re here now,’ he cajoles. He’s not looking at me now, but peering at the thirty-one-year-old photographs of us with Dad before he left Mum for Toronto, of Mart perched on the same chair as me as I blow out nine candles on my birthday cake. I remember not too long after my ninth birthday trying to place my father, using our ancient family atlas, scouring the Rockies for him with my fingernail scratching across the page.

‘I like your brown cords in this one, Dan,’ he says laughing. ‘Nice yellow t-shirt.’ When I come back in with the tea he tells me it’s a year to the day since Mum died. As if I didn’t know.

And nearly one year since you’ve left this bloody house on your own, I want to say to him, but I’ve already been too spiteful with the Maximus jibe.

In my recurring dream, sometimes my sister has children, two little boys, with jaw-length soft curls and beautiful smiles. She dresses them well and feeds them homemade food, teaches them about nature. They are always coming in to show me things they’ve found in their garden pail, like snails and worms and caterpillars. My

love for them is like pain. I feel an enormous lump in my throat when I look at their faces, when I reach out to rub away a smudge of mud or jam or chocolate from one of their faces.

Mart needs me to stay tonight, he tells me. I say I have worked a double shift.

‘What about Jeremy or Lucas?’ I demand. ‘Isn’t one of them coming at ten as usual?’

‘I’ve given Jez a night off, it’s good for him once in a while,’ Mart tells me, examining his long fingernails. ‘It can’t be easy for them, Dan, every other night here. Jez has got a new girlfriend too. It’d be good for him to spend the evening with her.’

Yeah, but Jez gets paid while he sleeps! I am screaming inside.

‘That was Liza’s problem,’ Mart says, craning down to slurp his tea on the table. ‘She couldn’t be bothered to make the time.’

The routine, the fucking routine. I can feel the knots in my neck bulging out like rigging. I bend down on his wheel-marked floor to undo his boots. They are old army issue, and pathetic.

‘Why don’t you think about wearing a pair of those shoes that undo with Velcro?’ I suggest.

‘I don’t want to look like some mong with special shoes,’ Mart returns, offended. I say nothing. I feel the nerves in my back screeching as I lug his dead weight upright to the high bed, and pull his t-shirt over his head. You shouldn’t undress your younger, thirty-five-year-old brother, I think. You should be undressing a baby before a bath, or undressing your lover before bed but here I am with neither

and just him. His arms are like two deflated yellowing balloons. I swallow hard to see the dips in his chest.

‘You all right, Mart?’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ he replies, airily. ‘You going to flick the TV on? We can watch it until I fall asleep. Turn the overhead light off.’

He makes me watch a shopping channel until I’m sure he can hear my teeth grinding. Then he needs the toilet again. I sit him up, balancing him like a Weeble. His piss is frothy, orange and hot. As I rinse the bottle out, with bleach as Mart reminds me, I think of the company that manufactured it, as they have emblazoned a warning on the side to not fill with liquids above 40 degrees. How hot is piss? I recall one of their catalogues of horrors: order forms for padded toilet seats, shower chairs, plaid blankets, waterproof wheelchair canopies, personal alarms that double up as torches.

‘Tangerines, Dan,’ Mart chides me randomly as I lower him, like a sack of cement, back into his bed. ‘You forgot them. You forgot them the time before last, too. You know, you should make a list on your computer. They’re right at the front of the supermarket too, past the newspapers.’

At work we see a girl called Lydia. She’s sixteen and her eyes are all glazed with Diazepam. Lydia’s stomach stopped working when she was fourteen. She’s one of our favourites. She has a bright, brilliant smile and tells stupid, unfunny jokes that we laugh at just because they are ridiculous. Yesterday she was telling us she won’t see us next month, she’s going to Kenya and Tanzania on a group safari, on a truck.

‘But what about your pump? How will you keep your feeds cold?’ Jane was amazed.

‘Ice packs,’ Lydia shrugged. ‘And when I’m knackered, I’ll stay in the van for a kip.’ She grinned.

Lydia will probably die before the next six years are out, from pneumonia or post-op septicaemia, if I was forced to make a guess. Her mother Diane, as usual, greeted us like old friends when she came to take Lydia home. She is going on the safari too, and had just had her yellow fever vaccination at the clinic. Diane told us once that when Lydia was diagnosed, she promised herself that her daughter would see the world. Diane told Jane last week that Lydia’s father is so depressed now he’s had to give up work.

As he is gripped by the intricacies of some horrific jewellery being bid for on-screen, I remember the days when gravel would become stuck in Mart’s wheels and I’d have to prise them out with a blunt dinner knife. The carpet would resemble a driveway. Now his rubber is flawless and perfectly grey. The jewellery suddenly bores him and now he’s engrossed in a banal police drama on television, the blue lights on the screen flickering over his face, propped by up a pillow. He looks a bit jaundiced, I think.

‘Jane was telling me at work, there are these dating agencies where you can meet people who want to go out with people in wheelchairs. Like people who don’t mind.’ I announce, watching his face. I wish my words were a bit more graceful.

‘What, like they have a fetish for the handicapped?’ A little smile is playing around Mart’s face.

‘Don’t say handicapped, say disabled,’ I parrot.

‘I can say handicapped if I want!’ he exclaims, turning his face to me, abruptly. ‘Just like a black person can call another black person a nigger!’

‘Oh, Jesus Christ, Martin! That’s not the same!’

‘Dan,’ he says, all kindly like I am the ignorant one, ‘I can say it because I am. I ain’t going to be prejudiced to myself, am I?’

Last week I took Jane out for a drink after a shift on which I’d wanted to smack the new student into kingdom come. He’d been staring at Jane’s chest when she bent down to adjust a hoist for a patient. He was smirking like some casanova, she said, thinks he’s Don Juan with his little goatee. She handled it herself, she’s so confident anyway but I couldn’t help wanting to be there too, to give her a hand. I took her to a tapas bar because she loves sangria. She looked burnished in the candlelight, and the drink hit her lunch-free stomach and she was flushed and garrulous. I enjoy watching her talk and all the faces she pulls. In another life, a parallel universe, I sometimes wonder what we are to each other.

If I had a girlfriend, I would want her to be like Jane. It was a shame Liza didn’t stick around with her slow dimpled smile.

‘Dan,’ Mart is saying in the darkness, his wheelchair charger droning like a malevolent beehive in the next room, ‘you know you get paid to be a carer these days?’

‘You always get paid to be a carer, it’s a job, you muppet,’ I reply, fed up that my precious night’s sleep will be spent on a futon that smells of dog sweat.

‘No, that’s not what I meant,’ Mart says, and I know he’s anxious to get it right. He’s quiet.

‘Well, what then?’ I’m always driving these conversations, asking strategic questions. It’s like we’re actors in a play.

‘Like a family member who gives up work to care for you, they get paid. They can get a car and an allowance. Denise was telling me.’

Denise is Mart’s occupational therapist, she visits him a few times a month, usually carrying a black leather binder full of glossy leaflets.

‘Why was Denise banging on about that?’ I yawn, thinking simultaneously how awful I think Denise is.

‘Because now Mum’s gone, I get a bit lonely,’ he says in a near-whisper. ‘And Max is a good puppy but he’s hard work. I only enjoy Countdown when you are here. We have a good laugh, me and you, don’t we?’

When we were kids I used to think it was fun when Mum commanded me to give Mart a piggyback up and down the stairs, to bed or to breakfast. Childishly, I used to feel proud of my role in his life, his keeper and protector. It was helping Mart that made me want to pass my driving test first time so I could drive the two of us in the battered family Cortina to and from school, rocketing our status amongst the other pupils, so he wouldn’t be mocked for his increasingly obvious gait. He used to be grateful for that, he thought it was such an honour to sit in the passenger seat with his older sixth-former brother playing The Smiths at top volume on the second-hand tape machine I’d bought. It was my twenty-first birthday when I visited from university, when he finally found he couldn’t work his legs, so I stayed home and we all had a drink round the kitchen table. And it was my fortieth birthday last month when his bladder finally began giving up the ghost, turning into an old, stretched whoopee-cushion. I mock his voice in my head - cranberry juice Dan, don’t forget the cranberry juice! In the books they say most sufferers don’t make it to their thirties, hardly any see forty. Mum said the clichéd thing after she had her second heart attack. As if I

haven't always, since we found out about Mart. I feel like Cain. My punishment is greater than I can bear.

For months, horrible thoughts have been spiralling through my head, usually starting with Lydia and how I don't want to see her in the run-up to her being dead. I don't want to be there when Jane announces she's pregnant with the baby she and her husband are trying for. I don't want to be there when that fucking student qualifies and I have to breathe the same air as him. I've been catching myself thinking that when Mart goes, I can ship out, sell Mum's house and my place. I've been reading about Canada, looking at pictures of Vancouver and all the snow and mountains and beauty. I have a vocational job. I have transferable skills. Then I feel like a right fuck, how can I imagine away my brother's life like this? He might last another five years. Even that thought makes me feel physically sick, like his noose is tightening around both of our necks.

I don't even have a wife or a child or a life to combat Mart's request with. He is still talking.

'And if there's a fire or something, who will help me and Max?'

Bile and guilt rise in my throat. The words aren't there.

'We'll sleep on it, yeah?' he ends, soothingly. Jesus Christ, he thinks I'm going to say yes to chaining his millstone to my neck.

'Go to sleep, Dan, I can tell you're still awake,' he says, a while later. 'You work too hard, you know. You need to take a holiday to Spain or something. They say Benidorm's quite cheap.'

In the night he wakes me seven times to turn him, interrupting seven different dreams of my fairytale sister.

THE END