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Opening extract from **Apple and Rain**

Written by
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*For my grandmothers Olive Fox and Mamie Crossan
And for Andreas and Aoife, of course*

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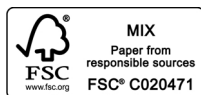
The publishers are grateful for permission to adapt 'Stevie
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I don't know if what I remember is what happened or just how I imagine it happened now I'm old enough to tell stories. I've read about this thing called childhood amnesia. It means we can't remember anything from when we were really small because before three years old we haven't practised the skill of remembering enough to be able to do it very well. That's the theory, but I'm not convinced. I have one memory from that time. It never changes, and if I wanted to make up memories, wouldn't they be good ones? Wouldn't all my childhood stories have happy endings?

I woke up crying. I could hear angry voices downstairs and thunder outside. I got up and stumbled on to the landing. A white gate was attached to the newel post to stop me tumbling down the stairs. I couldn't figure out how to open it, no matter how hard I tried. I wasn't

wearing socks. My feet were cold. I carried a white blanket that dragged across the floor.

Two figures stood by the front door under a sprig of mistletoe, their faces in shadow. I whimpered. Nana looked up. 'Back to bed, pet,' she said. 'Go on now.'

'Can't sleep,' I said.

Nana nodded. 'I know. I could never sleep before Christmas Day either.'

I shook my head. It was nothing to do with Christmas. I just didn't want to go back to bed. The thunder sounded like it might blast through my bedroom window. And why was everyone shouting?

I started to cry again. I wanted the person in the green coat next to Nana to turn around because although I could tell from her long hair and narrow waist she was a woman, I couldn't see her face.

But she wouldn't look up. She was staring at the doormat and holding tight to the handle of a suitcase.

'I'll call you in a few days,' a voice from inside the green coat whispered, and I knew then it was my mum.

'Mummy,' I said.

She opened the front door with her free hand. When Nana tried to stop her stepping into the night, she shrieked and pushed my grandmother against the mirror on the

wall. ‘Stop trying to ruin my life!’ my mum shouted. The wind slammed open the door. Rain came thrashing into the hall. The air smelled especially salty.

Finally Mum turned and saw me, but she didn’t smile or wave or blow me a kiss. She stared like I was something strange and sad that she couldn’t decipher.

Then she sniffed, turned and left, banging the door behind her.

And it was quiet again.

No shouting.

And no thunder either.

‘Mummy,’ I whispered.

‘Mummy’s gone, pet,’ Nana said. She climbed the stairs, opened the gate at the top and lifted me into her arms. She was shaking. Her eyes were wet. ‘It’s you and me now. You and me, OK?’

‘Mummy,’ I repeated.

‘Let’s go to bed,’ Nana said. ‘And in the morning we’ll see what Santa brought you.’

But I didn’t care about Santa’s presents. All I could think about was what had been taken away.



Again and again I've asked Nana about the Christmas Eve that Mum left. I want to understand why she walked out. But when Nana tells me what happened, she makes it all Mum's fault. Mum was the one who ran off to New York to be on Broadway, without once thinking about the child she'd left behind. And every year when Christmas rolls around, it's the memory of that night – Mum in her green coat and the thunder crashing around the house – that consumes me.

'I'm not waiting a minute longer!' Nana calls.

'Another thirty seconds!' I shout. I pull my purple hoodie over my head.

'I'm counting to ten!' Nana replies.

I tumble out of my room and down the stairs. Nana is brushing her black coat free of Derry's hairs. I take my scarf from the hallstand and wrap it around my neck a few times.

Nana's been spending the morning peeling parsnips and potatoes for dinner. The Brussels sprouts are soaking in broth and the turkey is slow cooking in the oven. The whole house smells of orange and cranberry stuffing.

Unlike me, Nana still loves Christmas. Every year she plays her favourite carols on repeat and turns the volume up really loud when *In the Bleak Midwinter* comes on. The sound of her singing fills the whole house and forces me to hide out with Derry, our Labrador, in my room. Nana isn't really much of a singer, but she's very enthusiastic.

Nana leaves the clothes brush on the hall table and tucks her feet into a pair of navy, low-heeled slip-ons. 'Where do you think you're going in those?' she says. She points at my trainers. I don't answer because it's a rhetorical question. She uses them when she's annoyed. 'We're going to Mass and it's *Christmas*.'

'They're comfortable. And they're only a bit scuffed,' I say.

Derry sniffs my feet, giving away the fact that they probably smell. I shoo him away with the toe of one trainer.

'I don't mind what you wear as long as it's clean and

those old things are *not* clean. Wear some nice shoes please,’ she says in her soft Irish voice that’s both gentle and firm.

The only *nice* shoes I have are heavy and blister my heels. I’m about to tell Nana this, when her eyes meet a spot on my hoodie.

‘Now come on, Apple, what are you playing at? You don’t have a clean top on either?’ she asks. I scratch at the spot where I dripped egg yolk this morning. I’d forgotten about it, and you’d think by Nana’s tone and big bulging eyes that the blotch was poisonous. ‘It’s my favourite top,’ I say. And I want to wear it. I want to wear it with my smelly trainers.

‘Get yourself up those stairs immediately and change, young lady,’ Nana says. She pinches her mouth into a prune. When she does this, there’s no arguing. When she does this, I always wish my mum were still here.

In my room, I squeeze into a dress and a pair of too-tight lace-up shoes. The last time I wore this outfit was six months ago to Nana’s friend’s funeral. Since then, Nana hasn’t stopped talking about death. She says things like, *Oh, you’ll miss me when I’m six feet under like poor Marjorie* or *I don’t want everyone wearing black to my funeral, Apple. A bit of pink here and there won’t harm.* It’s not good for a thirteen-year-old to be around someone who thinks she’s going to drop dead any second. I told

Nana as much, and she laughed, flipping her head back and showing off her black fillings and missing teeth. But I didn't understand what was so funny.

When I get back downstairs, Nana is penning Derry into the kitchen. His golden hair is all over her coat again. 'Much better,' Nana says, seeing me. I go to Derry and kiss his silky ears. He turns and slobbers all over my mouth. Nana grimaces. 'Oh, Apple, he licks his boy bits and then you let him lick your face. It's disgusting.'

Nana double-locks the front door and hurries ahead of me down the path to the car. Seagulls squawk and circle in the sky. A fog is climbing up the hill from the beach.

I slip into the back seat, because Nana still won't let me ride with her in the front, and do up my belt. My feet already feel cut up from the shoes. I can hardly breathe in the dress.

'Do you think she might come home today?' I ask.

'Who?' Nana says. I don't reply. She studies me in the rear-view mirror. 'I don't think so, Apple. Do you?'

I shake my head. I know Mum isn't going to magically show up today or any other day. Just because she left at Christmas doesn't mean that's when she'll come back.

And who knows, she might never come back at all.



After dinner, Dad and Trish arrive from London carrying a bag of presents and an M&S trifle. Trish nips my cheek between her fingers and Dad kisses the top of my head.

‘Everything well with you?’ he asks.

I nod.

‘School ticking along?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Sorry I missed the end of term concert.’

‘That’s OK,’ I say.

‘You’ll have to play me a tune from it later,’ he says.

‘OK.’

Even though Dad lives less than two hours away, I don’t see him much. Not since Trish showed up.

Dad and Trish got married three years ago. It was completely out of the blue. One day he made me speak to Trish on the phone, and the next they asked me to be their

bridesmaid. I said yes, not knowing I was going to be forced to wear a bright yellow dress that made me look like a stuffed lemon. Trish only spoke to me once the whole day, to tell me to ‘cheer up’ because she didn’t want me spoiling the photographs. She really shouldn’t have said anything because then I went out of my way to ruin them. I stuck out my tongue and rolled my eyes back in my head and even pretended to be crying. I thought it was hilarious until the photos got delivered and Dad went ballistic. He said he’d spent over a thousand pounds on the photographer and made me write a long, fake letter of apology to Trish.

She still hasn’t forgiven me.

Nana tips custard all over the steaming Christmas pudding she’s saved for Trish and Dad’s arrival and serves everyone a dollop in a reindeer-patterned bowl. ‘We can have the trifle for supper,’ she says. ‘So, tell me now, how’s the new house?’

‘It’s absolutely marvellous, isn’t it, Chris?’ Trish says. She touches Dad’s arm.

‘It’s a lot of work keeping up a garden, but we were sick of being stuck in that flat,’ Dad says.

Nana wipes her hands on her apron and sits down. ‘Oh,

I wouldn't give up my garden for anything. We have our own little herb patch now, don't we, Apple?

I pop a piece of pudding into my mouth. 'Um-hmm,' I say. It's still scorching. I have to spit it back into the bowl to stop the skin peeling away from my gums.

Trish clears her throat.

Dad frowns. 'I've warned you about your manners,' he says.

When? Six months ago when you last bothered visiting?
I want to snap back. But I don't.

'It was boiling,' I say. I put down my spoon. 'Sorry.'

'So, Apple, I hear you're about to take your Grade Four in clarinet. That's brilliant.' Trish smiles, keeping her thin red lips pressed together.

I shrug. 'Yeah, but I don't enjoy playing it that much.'

'But it's a wonderful accomplishment to be able to play an instrument,' Nana says.

'I paid three hundred pounds for that clarinet, not to mention the cost of the lessons,' Dad says.

'Three hundred pounds? That's more than our new coffee table cost,' Trish announces.

I ignore her. 'I didn't say I was giving up. I just don't love playing, that's all.' But what I do love about the clarinet is going to orchestra where I get to see Egan Winters.

Egan Winters can play the flute while kicking a football

between his feet. He actually seems more like a drummer or a bass guitarist; he wears leather bracelets and ripped jeans and is without doubt the best-looking person in our whole school. Plus, he's in the sixth-form, which means he isn't immature like the boys in my class. I know he doesn't see me. I know I'm only 'that Year Eight girl with the clarinet' to him, if anything. But I can't stop my heart thumping every time I'm near him.

'Teenagers are so bad at sticking with things. It's because of all these new phones and apps and things,' Trish says, as though she hasn't heard me telling everyone that I am *not* giving up the clarinet. She tucks her wispy blonde hair behind her ears and daintily wipes her mouth with one of Nana's linen napkins. 'How much are these smarty-pants phones anyway?' It isn't a real question; she's just trying to make Dad see how much I'm costing them. She's trying to say, *Your kid is far too expensive*.

I push away my pudding. I really don't feel like eating anything more. I hate Christmas. And I hate Trish. 'I don't feel well. Can I be excused?'

Dad sighs. 'You look fine to me,' he says. He's trying to act serious, but he's wearing a gold paper hat from one of the crackers and I can't help smirking. 'Apollinia, it's important you learn to persevere with things. You can't be

someone who gives up as soon as you get bored or the going gets tough. You don't want to be one of those people, do you?' His voice has gone all tight, and I wonder whether he's thinking about Mum: how she split up with him when she found out they were going to have a baby; how she ran away when she realised you couldn't stuff a baby into your handbag like a chihuahua.

Dad's worst nightmare must be that I turn out like my mum.

Nana stands up and pours Dad some more red wine. 'Why don't we open our presents now and talk about this another time?' She doesn't like arguments at Christmas. She's into peace and joy.

Dad is staring at me. He isn't speaking. He seems mesmerised by something in my face.

'Chris?' Trish says. She taps him and he flinches.

'We will continue this discussion,' he says to me.

'Presents!' Nana says, and we follow her to the plastic tree in the sitting room where a few small, sad boxes sit waiting to be unwrapped.

I get a new pencil case and a book token from Nana, and an Argos gift card from Dad and Trish. I don't know what I'm meant to get in Argos, but I say thank you then sit in

front of the TV with my legs draped over Derry, waiting for Christmas to be over.

EastEnders is on and when Nana notices, she quickly changes the channel. ‘Don’t you watch soaps, Bernie?’ Trish asks. Nana’s name is Bernadette. Trish is the only person I know who calls Nana ‘Bernie’.

Nana points at me. ‘Not appropriate,’ she says.

‘I’m not a baby,’ I say.

‘You’re not an adult either. When you are, watch what you like,’ Nana says.

Trish pretends to bite down on the tip of her thumb. ‘Oops. Hope I haven’t opened a can of worms,’ she says. If I had the courage, I’d slap her right across the face.

‘*Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* is on,’ Nana says. She forages for the remote control.

Trish helps her search and then draws in her breath gently. ‘Oh, I almost forgot. Here’s another gift,’ she says. She hands me a package. Dad starts to chew the inside of his cheeks.

I peel back the tape. It’s a white T-shirt. ‘Thanks,’ I mutter, without taking off all the paper.

‘You didn’t unwrap it properly,’ Nana says.

‘You didn’t *read* it,’ Trish says.

I shake open the T-shirt. Written in swirly letters are the words *Big Sis*. I turn to Dad, who is pink around the jaw. Nana is staring at Trish with her mouth open.

‘You’re having a *baby*?’ I say.

‘What lovely news,’ Nana says. She rushes at Dad and kisses him like he’s her own son, which is what people always assume when they see them together. But he isn’t. Dad was simply unlucky enough to be dating my mum when she got pregnant, and Nana always felt sorry for him, like he wasn’t as much to blame for a baby coming along as Mum was. So Mum couldn’t go to university, but Dad took a train to Liverpool a month before I was born and spent the next three years studying economics and getting drunk. Mum was stuck in Brampton-on-Sea and by the time Dad came back from university, she was gone. She’d had enough of changing nappies and waiting for Dad’s help.

And she’d had enough of me too, I think.

I fold the T-shirt and tuck it under Derry’s paws.

‘We found out a few weeks ago,’ Trish says. Her face is full of pride.

Dad looks a bit sad.

‘You must be delighted,’ Nana says. She is smiling so much it must hurt.

‘We’re thrilled,’ Trish says. She kisses Dad hard on the

lips right in front of Nana and me. A bit of custard-flavoured sick rises in my throat.

Nana laughs nervously. 'I'm going to have to get out my knitting patterns,' she says.

'Wait until we know what we're having, Bernie. I hate to see a baby in yellow,' Trish says, even though she made her bridesmaids wear yellow all day for her stupid wedding.

I hold Derry's collar and lead him out of the room. 'I think he needs to pee,' I say, but no one is listening.

After Derry's done his business, I let him into the kitchen and close the door. I sit on the back steps. The ground is icy. The air is thick and hazy with frozen fog.

'You'll get piles,' a stranger's voice says. I look up but it's too dark to see anything. I stand, afraid of who's watching, and see a boy by my back fence. 'Haemorrhoids are nasty things. Can't say I even know what they are though.'

'Why are you in my garden?' I ask.

'Because I'm talking to you,' he says. 'There's a big gap in this fence. Someone should repair it.'

'I know there is, but until now no one decided to use it as a gate.' I came outside to be alone. I'm not in the mood for people. 'You're trespassing,' I tell him.

‘You’re right. Someone call the police!’ he shouts.

He steps over Nana’s flower beds and stomps up our garden. He’s wearing a jumper with a giant frog on it and a pair of green wellies that are far too big for him. His cheeks and forehead are smeared with what looks like black warpaint.

‘Are you going into combat?’ I ask.

‘Sort of. Dad forgot to go shopping. I reckon we’ll be having pasta and rice pudding for Christmas dinner. Mum’s furious, so I’m hunkering down outside until it blows over.’

I noticed a new family move into the house behind ours a few weeks ago. It had been empty for so long, I thought it would stay that way – become a home for spiders, mice and homeless people.

‘I think your house is haunted,’ I tell him. I’m being mean, but I’m not really sure why.

‘Yep. It’s totally haunted. I hear ghoulish whispers at night. I’m not worried though; it’ll keep the robbers away.’

I gaze at the moon.

‘So why are you out here? Shouldn’t you be working your way through a box of After Eights?’ he says.

‘Not that it’s any of your business, but my dad and stepmum just told me they’re having a baby, and my nan

is trying to make me act like I'm pleased. So if you could leave me alone to be depressed, I'd appreciate it.'

'Ugh. Babies are so boring. I don't know why everyone gets all freaky around them.'

I shrug and look through the kitchen window into the sitting room where Trish is laughing and clapping. 'I'd better go inside,' I say.

'OK,' he says. He walks away. 'What's your name?'

'Apple,' I say hesitantly.

'Apple? Like Apple Blossom?'

I blink. Normally when I tell kids my name, they make a nasty joke about Crab Apples or Bad Apples or go on and on about iPads.

Not that Apple is even my real name. My given name is Apollinia Apostolopoulou, which hardly anyone is able to pronounce. So instead of even trying to get people to say it, I tell them my name is Apple. The Apostolopoulou bit is still there; I can't do anything about that, and I often wonder why Mum even gave me Dad's surname. She wasn't going out with him when I was born. And I don't think she loved him. But she went ahead and chose a Greek first name too. There must have been a reason. When she returns, I'm going to ask her all about it.

I wish she were here now. I wish she'd never left me in the first place.

'My real name is Apollinia,' I tell him. 'But people have been calling me Apple since I was a baby.'

'Cool. All right. Well, nice to meet you, Apple. I'm Del.' He hops over Nana's gnome. Its fishing rod is broken. 'Oh, and Happy Christmas.' He vanishes through the gap in the fence.

'Happy Christmas,' I say quietly, even though it's anything but happy.

The back door opens. 'What are you doing out here?' Nana asks.

'Nothing.'

'Do you want to catch your death? Come inside.'

'I don't mind catching my death,' I say.

Nana tuts. 'Don't talk nonsense.'

I pick at my nails. 'Nana, did Mum send a message? Did she email you?'

'Wouldn't I have told you? No, she didn't. I haven't heard from her in about a year, Apple. You know that.'

'How hard is it to send a card?' I say. At least she could pretend to remember us. Give us a bit of hope.

'Stop worrying about that. It's Christmas. And you've had some lovely news. A little brother or sister, Apple, like

you always wanted. Now let's go inside and crack open that tin of Quality Street.'

'You bought Quality Street?'

'Of course I did,' she says. I think for a minute she might hug me, but she doesn't. She nods briskly and pulls me inside.

'That's a good girl,' she says. 'Now close the door behind you. It's bitter out.'