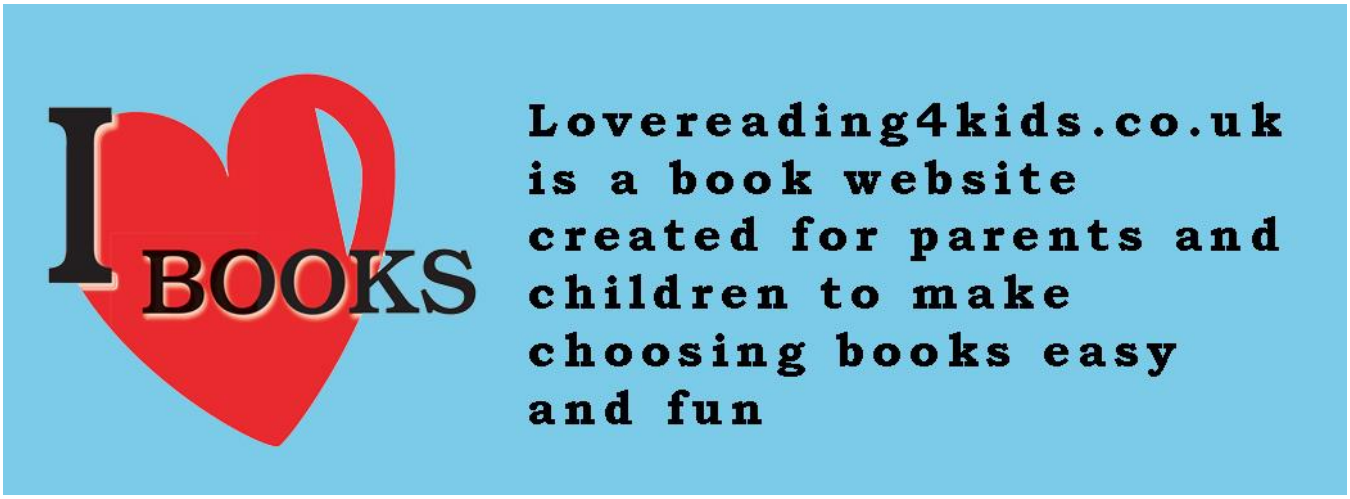


Opening extract from

The Art of Not Breathing

Written by

Sarah Alexander

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"For whatever we lose (like a you or a me),
It's always our self we find in the sea."

e.e. Cummings

The Art of Not Breathing

SARAH ALEXANDER



For PJER

D

I need to talk to you about what happened that day.

I'll be at the Point tomorrow at 6. Please come.

Part One

ELSIE: Why did the lobster blush*?*

EDDIE: I don't know.

ELSIE: Because the seaweed*!*

One

THE THING I HATE MOST about my father is that he hates me.

And he has good reason to.

It's something we don't talk about.

He has pale blue, cold eyes that are one minute full of hate, the next full of so much sadness that I pity him. And I can't stand to feel sorry for him. When I look at him I get this sensation in my throat that feels as though maggots are crawling about in there. The only way to get rid of the itching is to hold my breath and swallow until I almost pass out. The best thing to do is not look at his face or eyes, or better still not look at him at all.

Fortunately, he's hardly ever home. He's either out running so that the village women can drool over his "chiselled jaw", or he's at the bank where he works in Inverness, or travelling about Scotland selling loans. You'd think he loved his job, the amount of time he spends doing it, but he grumbles that his clients only care about cars or TVs and not about the terrible wars and disasters that happen around the world. "Never mind the rain on the Black Isle," he says. "What about remote villages that flood every year?" Or, "Thousands of people die *every day* from mosquito bites in some countries." He says this one a lot when it's midge season here and I'm complaining about them. (The midges love my blood.)

My mum tells him, "Do let us know when you've found a cure for malaria, Colin. In the meantime, your son needs study books for his exams and your daughter has grown out of another school uniform." I wish she didn't use my weight as a way of getting his attention. Why can't she say the gas bill needs paying or the damp in my room wants sorting?

In the drawer by his bed is an atlas covered in ink; the blue dots places he's been to, the red ones places he's desperate to go. There's a massive red dot on Australia – he pressed the pen so hard there's ink on the next page, right in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He nearly made it to Australia once, when he was twenty and had a job as a

singer on a cruise ship. When we kids were small he told us bedtime stories about his travels, his voice smooth and soft like melted chocolate. His favourite story was the one about the port in Jakarta. The weather was thundery and the cruise ship had just left the port, next stop Australia, when he received the call to say that Dillon, my older brother, had been born. He used to say, "I was so surprised, I nearly fell overboard, but then I jumped off anyway and swam to shore."

Mum says this isn't true, that he wanted to stay on the ship. I often wonder what life would be like if he had stayed on that ship. Or if he'd actually fallen overboard.

I've picked up a few snippets about my parents' life pre me being born, mostly from Granny before she died (and before she fell out with Mum). My parents moved into our house on McKellen Drive, the cheapest house in Fortrose – and probably on the whole of the Black Isle – when Dillon was a few months old. It was cheap because the walls were crumbling and it backed onto a cemetery. My father wanted to work on the ship for a few more months so they could afford to move to Inverness, but Mum wouldn't let him go away again. She didn't think he'd come back.

Instead, he tried to make money by singing in pubs around Inverness. The house never got fixed and the bills never got paid.

When yet another FINAL WARNING arrived in the post and Mum was hormonal and pregnant again, she marched my father to the nearest bank and made him fill in an application form to be a bank clerk. (This is how *he* describes it.) When he'd finally made enough money, we packed up ready to move to the city. We kids had a box each with our names on, full of our clothes and toys. But then everything changed.

My brother disappeared.

"How can I leave all these people," Mum said, staring out of my bedroom window at the headstones in the cemetery on the day we were supposed to move, "when my son is one of them?"

It wasn't strictly true – there's a headstone with his name on it but my brother isn't buried anywhere.

We didn't unpack his box. Mum taped it up good and proper so nothing could fall out. I think about his toys in the loft sometimes: a grey furry dolphin called Gordon that my father bought for him after he'd had a tantrum at the Dolphin and Seal Centre; a wooden xylophone; a *Toy Story 3* Etch-a-Sketch with his name on it in wonky black lines – he would cry if it got scrubbed off; handfuls of pine needles that he'd collected (the dead ones because they were softer than the spiky green ones – they've probably turned into compost now). I try not to think of his clothes, all folded up, damp and creased. It just reminds me that

he's not in them. Instead, I imagine my own clothes all folded up. One day, I suppose someone else will have to try not to think about that.

Two

ON SUNDAY MORNING, DILLON IS hogging the bathroom. The tap's running but I can still hear the disgusting noises. He's always been a bathroom-hogger, but he spends even more time in there now he's got a girlfriend.

I pound on the door and give it a kick for good measure.

"Just a minute," he yells.

He sounds as though he's holding a boiled sweet inside his cheek, his voice strained and muffled.

"Hurry up, Dillon. I need to pee!" I shout through the door.

Mum leans on the banister at the end of the landing, glancing down the stairs, watching out for my father

coming home from yet another "work trip".

She asks me if I've done my homework and I lie and say I did it all yesterday. She raises one eyebrow at me and scratches her head.

If I don't do my homework, she often tells me, I won't pass my exams and I'll end up being a receptionist like her. But I wouldn't mind being a receptionist because you just sit all day.

"Think of your exams, Elsie," she says. "Dillon will get all As for his Advanced Highers."

Dillon's got two years on me and he's a complete brainbox, so it's not really fair to compare us. I'm already a school year behind because of my Laryngitis Year and I'm only taking half the exams I'm meant to be taking – the school thought I "needed more time". Dillon's a year behind too because he also lost his voice, but he's making up for it by taking extra exams. He likes to be the best at everything, whereas I take pride in being the worst.

Dillon eventually emerges from the bathroom with bloodshot eyes.

"What were you doing in there?" I hiss.

He ignores me and disappears into his bedroom.

There's something that looks like a piece of spaghetti in the toilet. Mum calls to Dillon but he doesn't answer. I flush the toilet to drown out his silence, then turn to the mirror.

Unfortunately, my father didn't pass his good looks onto me. I got my mother's dark, wild curly hair and green eyes, which I don't mind too much, but I didn't get her petite figure, dainty nose or perfect skin. My face is blotchy and my double chin grows by the day. I tried losing weight once but the more my mum commented on what I was eating, the more I wanted to eat. I'm hungry just thinking about it.

Ruby Red is the colour of my lipstick today – stolen from Superdrug along with a packet of condoms, which I might put in Dillon's pocket as a joke, and some hairspray. The lipstick feels silky smooth on my lips as I apply it and it glues the chapped bits of skin back down. I don't blot with a tissue like Mum does. I like it when the red comes off on my cigarettes.

When I come out of the bathroom, Mum is sitting halfway down the stairs with her chin in her hands. I prod her shoulder and she slowly turns around as though she has no idea who might be behind her.

"Your father is on his way. As soon as he's back we're all going to the supermarket."

She doesn't move so I climb over her to get downstairs.

No matter how carefully and quietly I try to open the fridge, it always makes a loud suction sound.

"Elsie!"

"I'm just getting a drink," I call back, reaching for a Coke. I take a few slices of ham and throw them into my

mouth before anyone comes in, careful not to wipe my lipstick off. Mum says I eat her out of house and home but this isn't true because my father pays for the food and Dillon eats like a baby sparrow, so I'm entitled to his share. Anyway, I do most of the cooking, so it's fair payment.

"A watched door never opens," I say as I climb back over her.

But then we hear the keys jangling. Neither of us goes to open the door so my father is surprised to find us staring at him from the stairs. He looks as though he's been up for days.

"I'm back," he says, as if for some reason we couldn't see this.

Three

THE SUPERMARKET IS COLD AND I've got my arms inside my orange raincoat so that the sleeves hang lifelessly by my side. Dillon trails behind me with his hands in his pockets, looking embarrassed to be seen with us. I get an urge to do my zombie impression. Twisting at the waist, making the sleeves swish about, I stagger towards him with my mouth open and eyes rolling around in my head.

Dillon raises his eyebrows and shuffles close enough to whisper, "What are you doing? You look like you should be in a mental hospital."

"You should see yourself," I reply, slipping my arms back into the sleeves.

"Have you forgotten why we're here? You're going to really piss them off."

It's impossible to forget. Especially because it's my fault we have to go through this.

"Course not. But zombies don't like miseries. If you don't cheer up they'll get you." I roll my eyes back again and hang my tongue out. As I lurch into him, a very convincing zombie-like groan escapes from my mouth.

Dillon smiles. A tiny sideways smile, but it's there.

Then my father picks up some chocolate fingers and Mum freaks out.

"He hates those, Colin," she says, loud enough that people turn and stare at us. I look at Dillon. He shakes his head and pretends to read a label on the shelf behind.

"Well, he won't have to eat them," my father mutters.

"That's not the point!"

When my father puts the biscuits in the trolley anyway, Mum whimpers and pulls her hair, her fingers working through her curls like hungry little worms.

"Why are you being so insensitive?" she says, spitting the words out.

My father stands quietly, looking around, shaking his head. I'm not going to help him out; he *is* being insensitive. He steps back as Mum starts hurling packets of biscuits at his feet. We seem to have taken over the snacks aisle and there's a crowd of people at one end watching us. Two of

them I recognize from school so I hide behind a trolley filled with Jaffa Cakes. I think about doing my zombie impression to distract them from my parents' argument but I'm stuck to the floor with shame. Dillon is still reading the label on the shelf but it's obvious he's pretending because even from here I can see it says OUT OF STOCK in big red letters.

Mum starts on the pink wafers.

"Celia," my father cries, jumping out of the way, "we're going home."

He slams the trolley against the shelf and walks off. The shelf wobbles and packets of bourbons tumble into the trolley. When everyone else has run after my father, I unzip my jacket a little way and slide one of the packets inside so it sits neatly under my arm. Then I scoot to the next aisle where the party bits are and grab some candles. They're the flimsy ones that go in cakes, but they'll do. At least we'll have something for tomorrow.

The wait is like listening to a ticking bomb. The closer the day gets, the louder the ticking; the louder the ticking, the more my parents shout; the more my parents shout, the more I want to get in a car and run my father over.

I catch up with them as they're leaving the supermarket. Dillon walks by Dad'sside and brushes Mum away when she goes to him. He always defends my father – sucking up, is the term I'd use. I don't know why, because Dad's so hard

on him. He goes on at Dillon all the time about getting good grades and makes him sit in the kitchen revising if he gets a low mark. I get shouted at and banned from going out, but my father never actually makes me do my homework – he knows I'm a lost cause. For that, at least, I'm grateful.

I start on the bourbons before we've even left the car park. No one says anything. Eventually I offer them around.

"Did you pay for those?" my father asks. In the rear-view mirror I see his nostrils flare.

I shake my head.

"For Christ's sake, Elsie. Do you want to end up in a detention centre? Because you're going the right way about it. They've got CCTV, you know?"

I do know this because I've been dragged into a back office and shown footage of myself trying to get a packet of noodles into my back pocket. I don't know why noodles. At the time it seemed like something that might be useful.

"You can go back and pay for them if you're that worried."

My father accelerates, and when we get home he grabs the packet from me and chucks it in the dustbin. Mum doesn't defend me like she usually does. She's distracted with everything else. With tomorrow.