DON'T STOP thinking about TOMORROW

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WALKER
BOOKS

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"My life is a lovely story, happy and full of incident."
Hans Christian Andersen

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Stevie

"Anne Frank. Malala. Stevie Nicks," I whisper as I lie in bed gazing at a crack in the ceiling, wishing I could get sucked up inside it, genie-style. "Anne Frank. Malala. Stevie Nicks."

I do this every time I'm feeling close to vomiting with dread – like before a science test or a sports day or a dental appointment when I know I need a filling. I say the name of my heroines to remind myself that even the very worst of challenges can be overcome. If Anne Frank could stay hopeful in spite of the Nazis and Malala could stand up to the Taliban and Stevie Nicks could overcome her cocaine addiction – and then write an awesome song about it – I can definitely face the first day of a new school year.

I hear Shriek-Beak begin his dawn chorus and I get up and go over to the window. Shriek-Beak is my name for the seagull who stands on the roof of the cottage opposite every morning and squawks like a maniac until he's woken the entire street. Or woken me, at least. Sure enough, Shriek-Beak is perched in his favourite spot, on top of the chimney stack, his bright yellow beak opening and closing

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like a trapdoor. I undo the rickety window latch and lean out. The air is humid, with the salty hint of sea. My mum and I live in an ancient cottage in an ancient town called Lewes, about ten kilometres from the coast. My bedroom is tucked away beneath the roof. When we first moved here, two years ago, I found the low ceiling and sloping walls claustrophobic. It's kind of like living in a cave. Now I like it.

I glance around the room, which has been my sanctuary for the long, rainy summer holiday. I wonder if this is how death-row prisoners feel when they're looking around their cell for the last time. I wonder if they feel the same inappropriate rush of love for their surroundings. I'm suddenly overwhelmed by affection for the wonky bookshelves and the saggy armchair and the damp patch on the wall that looks like Jesus … if Jesus had a Mohican. And the thought of being separated from my beloved guitar, which is leaning against the armchair, literally makes my heart ache. I stroke the old oak dresser and gaze at my collection of 1980s-inspired accessories – bangles, large hoop earrings, leather-studded wristbands – and the remains of last night's dinner, a couple of crusts of toast. Toast was all I'd been able to stomach on Back to School Eve, which was just as well, as all there was in the kitchen cupboard was half a loaf of bread. Then I look at the vintage record player on the floor beside the old fireplace and instantly my mood lifts.

I go over to the tiny fireplace, take *Stevie's Little Book*

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of Big Song Wisdom down from the mantelpiece and flick through the well-worn pages, searching for just the right song. I need something uplifting. Something that will stop me from vomiting with dread. I stop on the page with *SONGS THAT MAKE YOU HAPPY TO BE ALIVE* written in capitals across the top. The first song listed is "The Whole of the Moon" by The Waterboys, 1985. I search through the stack of records in the alcove beside the chimney breast until I find it. I slip the record from its sleeve, inhaling the smell of vinyl, and place it on the turntable. Then I gently lift the arm of the record player and bring it to the beginning of the track. As the needle touches down and the crackles drift from the speakers I feel the tension inside me ease a little. Maybe this year won't be so bad. Maybe Priya will have had a personality transplant and the government will have decided to ban homework and teachers will have decided to make learning fun. And maybe pigs will fly – or however that freaky saying goes. I start changing into my school uniform and let the lyrics soak into me. I want to be the kind of person the singer's singing about; the kind of person who sees the whole moon instead of just a crescent. But it's so hard to see any of the moon when the sky's covered in thick black cloud.

The
cloud
of

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your

gloom

eclipses

the. . .

The first random words of a song start dropping into my head and I fight the urge to pick up my guitar. I haven't got time for music now! I have to get ready for my execution. As I do up my school shirt I notice the buttons straining over my chest – you can actually see through the gap to my ever-expanding cleavage. *Please stop growing,* I silently beg. I literally can't afford for my chest to get any bigger. Mum didn't have enough money to buy me a new uniform this summer so I'm stuck with this lousy shirt from last year. I put on my school jumper and hope it doesn't get too warm today. Thankfully, my skirt fits fine. If anything it's too loose. Without a free school meal every day I've lost quite a bit of weight from my stomach and hips. Once I'm dressed I tie back my hair and sit down on my bed with my make-up bag. My fringe comes down halfway over my eyes, just the way I like it. I sweep it to one side and root through my make-up bag, in need of some warpaint. I take out my black eyeliner, worn down to a stub, and apply a thick cat-eye. I started doing my eyeliner like this last year, inspired by Siouxsie Sioux. Of course, modelling my look on an eighties pop icon caused Priya's tiny mind to go into melt-down. But anything that hasn't been deemed "cool" by her

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airbrushed-to-so-called-perfection celebrity heroes causes her to go into meltdown.

"The Whole of the Moon" comes to an end and I go out onto the landing and listen for Mum. She's normally not up this early but as it's my first day back at school she might have set her alarm. The cottage is silent. I go downstairs to the kitchen. No matter how warm it is outside, the kitchen is always cold. The flagstones on the floor are freezing beneath my bare feet. I turn on the kettle and stare out of the grimy window into the backyard. When we first moved to Lewes, two years ago, after Dad died, Mum vowed to fill the yard with pots of flowers and a honeysuckle trellis and a herb garden. But then her depression swept in and the yard became just a place to dump things. My eyes scan the old mattress, the broken TV and the countless bin bags stacked against the wall. I'm not bothered though. If I want to go outside, there are loads of cool places to hang out in Lewes.

I take two mugs from the draining board and put a teabag in each. Then I pop a couple of slices of bread in the toaster. I'm too tense to have breakfast but I need to make some for Mum before I leave, to be sure she eats something while I'm gone.

I take the tea and toast back upstairs. I look at Mum's firmly closed bedroom door and instinctively my stomach clenches. I once saw an advert for a mental-health charity on YouTube where they called depression "the invisible illness". I guess they meant that it isn't physically noticeable in the way something like meningitis is, but to me my

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mum's depression is all too visible. Placing my own cup on the landing, I knock on the door. There's no answer. I open the door and step inside. The room is steeped in darkness and smells of stale sweat and sleep.

"Morning, Mum, I've made you some breakfast!" I say cheerily, placing the cup and plate on her bedside table.

Mum mumbles something and rolls onto her side. I open the curtain a chink. A thin shaft of sunlight pours into the room, landing like a spotlight on a pile of old magazines next to the bed. Faded copies of the music magazine Dad used to write for. Now it's my heart that clenches. She's been looking at mementoes of life BDD (Before Dad's Death) again. I don't know why she does that; it only ever makes her feel worse.

"I made you some toast," I say to the Mum-shaped lump in the bed.

The lump grunts.

For a moment I feel the overwhelming urge to climb in beside her. To hide from the world beneath the faded floral duvet, like Mum has been doing for months. But if I do that who'll take care of us? I have to keep going. I have to stay strong. *Anne Frank. Malala. Stevie Nicks*, I remind myself in my head. "I'll get ready for school then," I say loudly.

"School?" Mum heaves herself upright, her tangled brown hair spilling over her shoulders.

"Yes, it's the first day back today, remember?"

"Oh, yes. Of course." A look of panic flickers across Mum's

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face and I feel instant guilt at leaving her on her own.

"I'd better go then." I wait a moment, hoping she might ask me to stay. She is the parent, after all. If she asks me to stay, I'll have to.

But Mum just nods and slides back down in the bed. "OK, love."

I swallow the lump in my throat and return to my room. I look at the picture of "Real Mum" on the mantelpiece. It was taken when I was little, when she saw life as an adventure instead of a curse. She's sitting on a park swing, her bobbed hair dyed bright turquoise, her face an advert for happy. As I put on my frayed-at-the-edges blazer and scuffed-all-over shoes I feel my real self shrinking away to nothing.

On my way downstairs I open Mum's door and peer inside. The curtains are closed again. The plate of toast lies untouched on the bedside cabinet. I take a deep breath and force myself to stand taller. "See you later then."

"Yes. See you later," Mum mumbles. She rolls away from me and pulls the duvet up over her head.

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HAFIZ

One day, when I was about eight years old, my dad called me to join him on the roof terrace of our house in Syria.

"I have to tell you something," he said, gesturing for me to sit beside him on the warm terracotta tiles.

The sun was setting, the cicadas had begun whirring and the evening call to prayer was drifting over the rooftops from the local mosque.

"What I'm about to tell you will change your life for ever – if you choose to allow it to," Dad said mysteriously.

"Is it how to score the perfect penalty?" I asked. I'd already been badly bitten by the football bug and was desperate for any knowledge that would put me in the same league as my heroes Ronaldo and Beckham.

Dad laughed and shook his head. "No, my son. It is something even more important than the beautiful game."

I frowned. Surely nothing was more important than football. "What is it then?" I asked.

"There is a story to be found in everyone," he replied.

I waited. There had to be more to it than that, but no, Dad

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just sat there with a knowing smile on his face. "Is that it?" I asked. This wasn't big news. This wasn't exciting. Dad was a writer by profession. One in a great line of Arabic storytellers, as he liked to remind people at every opportunity. He didn't have one story inside him, he had thousands. He'd even named me after his favourite writer – the Persian poet Hafiz, who'd lived in the fourteenth century.

"There is a story to be found in everyone," Dad repeated, lighting his hookah.

"You mean everyone is able to tell a story?" I asked.

Dad shook his head. "Everyone is born with a story, here, inside of them." He placed his hand over his heart.

"I don't understand."

"There is a story inside of you, Hafiz – a story you were born with. One that will help you greatly in your life and carry you through its challenges."

"Will you tell it to me?" I asked. Even though I was disappointed that I still didn't know how to score the perfect penalty I loved my dad's stories, the colourful casts of characters, the way he could conjure magical new worlds out of thin air. But he shook his head.

"This is one story I am unable to tell," he said.

"Why?"

"Because it is your job to find out what your story is."

I frowned. "But how?"

"You need to pay close attention to the stories you hear in life. The moment you come across the story that's for you,

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you will feel a recognition deep inside. It will feel like being reunited with a long-lost friend. It will touch you in here." Again, he put his hand to his heart. "And once you have found it you'll be able to use it for the rest of your days, to help guide you through your life."

I sighed. He was speaking in riddles.

I'd forgotten about that rooftop conversation until the night I left Syria, two years ago, when Dad was hugging me goodbye.

"This journey you are about to go on, my son, is a great opportunity," he said, his eyes glassy with tears. "It is your chance to find your story."

I looked at him blankly, too full of fear about what was to come to understand what he was saying.

"Pay close attention to the people you meet," he continued. "Listen to their stories. Wait for the one that touches you deep in here." He placed his hand on my heart. It was trembling.

These past two years, I've clung to the search for my story as if it were a life raft. Every stage of my journey from Syria has been made slightly easier by the thought that maybe, just maybe, that would be the place I'd find my story. During the long trek through the desert heat. Shivering in the icy waters the night the boat capsized. In the Greek camp nestled among the silvery olive trees. On the endless crowded buses and trains. Arriving in France. Every step of the way I've tried to distract myself from the fear gnawing away at me

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by searching for my story. And every time I've been disappointed. It isn't that I haven't found any stories. I've found hundreds among my fellow refugees. Stories of triumph and pain and hope and disaster. But none of them has felt like the story that will guide me through my life. None of them has reached into my heart and said, *It's me*.

And now, as I stand in front of a tall, red-brick high school in a town in England called Lewes, some five thousand kilometres from my parents and home, I ask myself the question once more: *Will I find my story here?* As a rowdy group of students barges past me, I really hope so. I feel in need of guidance like never before.

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