Lost For Words

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Look After Me
Too Close to Home

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For Jeff

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'Relax,' says Aiza. She can probably hear my heart beating.

'It'll be fine,' says Ruby, peeling the ice pack off my face.

'Well, I'm looking forward to hearing everyone tackle this debate. Dallas!' says Mr Chaplin, beaming. 'Come on up.'

I get up. I think I might be about to faint, or worse, fart. I walk straight into Libby's table, and she shoves it back against me, but I make it to the front, and I turn around.

I still can't believe it. We got through our SATs, we're about to leave primary school in like, six weeks or something, and Mr Chaplin ups and tells us we're going to do public speaking and debate. I mean, it's literally like a nightmare. He hasn't made me do anything difficult since last October and then yesterday out of nowhere he told me I was listed to go first.

My stepmother Gemma told me to pretend I'm just talking to my friends, so I fix on Ruby's eager face at the back, and Aiza who has her head down on her arm. I know she's drawing ninjas, and I know she's not looking at me so as not to freak me out, but every other sarcastic pair of eyes in the class is still fixed right on me. My older brother Sam told me to breathe, so I do. I look down at the damp piece of

paper that has my notes written on it, and I say, 'What Makes A Good Brexit?'

Everyone laughs. I said it too loud.

'There is no such thing as a good Brexit,' I say. Defiantly. At least I hope so. Sam, who is clever, said to start with a strong line, then people won't even listen to the rest. I wish my heart would stop thumping in my ears.

'The prime minister can say what she likes,' I say, sounding weak, 'because she didn't even want Brexit, and nearly all the politicians lied on both sides anyway, so I don't know about you, but I don't want to be stuck on a small island with just them. I'd rather take my chances with lots of French and Greek and Polish people, actually.'

I didn't get the line anywhere near right, the way Gemma said I should say it – I can't even remember how that should be now, but nobody's listening anyway. The weird thing is they're all screaming with laughter. My stomach has gone from very hot to very cold. I refocus on my friends. Ruby has her head politely tilted to one side, but Aiza is sitting up and making slashing signs across her throat. I stare at her, feeling dizzy, and wonder how much of my five minutes is left.

'I think we should be trying to be friends with more people,' I stumble on, 'not less. And taking more . . . responsibility.' I gaze at Gilbert Finch, who is howling. He hurls a scrunched-up piece of paper at me. It hits me in the middle of my forehead. Libby whispers something behind her hand to Jada,

who cackles. I think that the class in general is tired of giving me a break as well.

I twist round. Mr Chaplin is sitting forward in his chair, with his elbows on his knees and his fingers in his mouth.

'Dallas,' he says, removing them. 'Sorry, Dallas.'

I gaze at him.

'The title of the speech I asked you all to prepare was – actually – "What makes a good breakfast?"'

Afterwards, walking home, Aiza gets halfway through telling me it wasn't that bad, and that it's my own fault for not listening properly, before she starts laughing. I ignore her and pretend to look at my phone. Sometimes when I get it back from the office after school there's a text from my aunt Jessi in Texas, who's the only person who ever texts me besides Aiza and Ruby – but she hasn't sent anything since last night.

Aiza is still laughing. I'm almost glad I'm not going round to her house for once – her dad's taking her to Atomic Pizza even though it's Thursday. Which leaves Ruby and me going off to our own houses. I haven't been home this early in weeks.

Then my almost gladness makes me forget to cross the road in time, and we're suddenly walking past the library – so close that the door slides open and a smell of hot books comes wafting out and I breathe it right into the back of my head before I know what I'm doing.

'What's the matter?' asks Ruby.

I will not let this ruin my week. I will not let a perfectly good Thursday, humiliations aside, be made miserable. I'm in charge of my feelings.

Ruby goes her way when we reach the river, and I trudge along the towpath, waiting for the lurch I get every time I come home. It comes when I turn off along our backwater, under the tangled-up ash keys and honeysuckle.

We live in an old boathouse. Its back is built on the bank, but its front sticks out into the river, on two legs, with a big gap in between where the boats used to live. Momma saw it ten years ago when I was a baby and she'd taken Sam and me on a barge holiday. She came from Texas so she thought it was romantic to live in a building two hundred years old, and she wanted somewhere away from streets and roads. I don't know. I used to like it fine, but lately it seems like there are far too many people and at the same time not enough people living in it.

There's the lurch. I think hard instead about what to say when they ask me how my speech went – Sam spent ages telling me Brexity statistics last night – even Gemma, who is always very busy and only sits still when she's making sandwiches or on the computer, kept giving me tips about public speaking because she works at the council.

The door stands open. In summer at this time of day it gets hot and breathless in the house, and our patch of what we call a garden is too full of sun, even if you don't mind

being looked at by dog walkers. Lonesome our cat is sprawled on the front step. He blinks at me as I stoop and ruffle the brindle fur by his face, and kick off my sandals.

It's gloomy when you step inside on a bright day – there are only small windows downstairs. I can hardly see anything, but I can hear Sam and Gemma having a row.

'You know what I think about this, Sam.'

'I couldn't give a flying toss what you think.'

'You've been planning which university to go to your whole life . . .'

'What would you know about my whole life? You've only been here three years.'

'Hi,' I say.

Gemma glances sideways from whatever she's pounding in the pestle and mortar. 'How was school?'

'Fine,' I say.

'Good. There's a load of washing on the bed, put it away for me, there's a good girl.'

'I said I'd do that,' says Sam.

'Yes, you did,' says Gemma.

'So you mean I can't be trusted to do what I've said I'll do?'

Gemma sighs. 'I don't mean anything except that I'd like the washing to be put away. This house isn't big enough to have great heaps of sheets lying . . .'

'Here we go,' says Sam. Sam is eighteen and has just finished his A levels which I thought would mean he'd start bossing me around again, but he's still too busy with Billy.

What they argue about at the moment is whether he's going to go on to university. He says he doesn't have time, he's got to look after Billy (and me: ridiculous), and why do we all assume he ought to go to uni when he doesn't even have his A-level results yet. Which is funny because he was predicted to come top in the country or something.

I leave them to it and go over to the sofa, where Billy is watching *They Might Be Giants* on the laptop with his feet in the air. Billy is my little brother, he's autistic and he's four. He's starting school in September. I get the feeling that this doesn't help how anxious everyone is all the time. He doesn't say anything, or glance away from the screen, but when I sit down he shuffles over and climbs on to my lap. I look across at Sam, his head almost scraping the ceiling the way it has done since he was fourteen, and try to imagine what it will be like if he really leaves.

'Isn't that stupid DVD *over* yet?' Violet, my stepsister, asks shrilly from the bottom rung of the ladder.

'Nearly,' I say. 'Were you up in my room?'

'No,' she says, which is ludicrous because there is hardly anything else up the ladder besides my room, which is basically just a bed, and Sam's and Billy's room, which is basically two beds and also smells of boy. I give her a look. 'I wasn't, OK? Mummy! Dallas says I was in her room and I wasn't.'

'Dallas,' Gemma calls, 'she was in the wardrobe. Leave her alone, will you?'

Violet pulls a face at me.

'Why were you in the wardrobe?'

'I have to try on stuff for school.'

'You don't start school for nearly three months.'

'Yeah, like you don't think about it,' she says.

I sigh. 'You're four.'

'So what?'

There isn't any point arguing with Violet, like ever. I hear Gemma telling Sam that she's perfectly capable of taking care of the whole family, and I hear Sam not-quite-saying what we all know he thinks – that Gemma is too busy working and running the house and stuff and looking after Violet to be the perfect stepmother to Billy (and me, I suppose) and that anyway Billy likes Sam best. Then he stamps past and goes up the ladder and a couple of seconds later Steve Earle blasts down from upstairs – crashing chords and sneery voice, singing about being born his papa's son, and wandering eyes, and smoking guns.

I put my arms round Billy. Maybe the best thing about my little brother is that when you're sad, or when he's sad, he'll let you hang on to him for as long as you want. Sometimes he goes to sleep with his nose in my neck.

'Can we watch it again?' he says.

Dinner is pasta. Billy and Violet have bread and butter with it, and when I look sad Gemma sighs and chucks the butter knife towards me, so I have some too.

'Did you tell Dallas about the library?' Sam asks.

Apparently he's stopped sulking, although you never know with Sam – sometimes he pretends to be over things and then bites you in half out of nowhere.

I look at him, and at Gemma, who's pouring apple juice and doesn't answer. 'What about the library?' I ask.

Sam drops more cheese on top of Billy's pasta. 'They're closing it down.'

'I don't like pasta,' says Billy, which if you didn't know him would sound like 'I don't height pasta' – he can't say his ls or cs.

'What?' I say.

'Yes you do,' Sam tells Billy. 'They're closing down the library after all. Going to knock it down and build flats. Isn't there any orange juice?'

'They're not really going to do it, though, right?' I say.

Sam shrugs. 'Apparently.'

'If Billy doesn't eat his pasta can I not eat mine?' asks Violet.

'No,' says Gemma, 'you cannot not eat yours.'

'Billy is going to eat his pasta,' says Sam.

'Are you serious?' They first tried to shut down the library three years ago, because Gracie Gallagher who lives on a boat near us and basically is the only librarian at Queen Street was going to retire, but then she didn't and it was all OK. And then we heard they were thinking about it again last autumn, because people were saying luxury flats were going to be built there instead, but I thought it had all gone away.

'What do you care?' says Sam. 'You haven't been inside it in months.'

There is nobody in the world as good at missing the point as my family. It's true I haven't been in the library. It's also true that I try to shut my eyes or stare in the other direction every time I pass it, which I do at least twice every day. It's not like I don't have reasons, I just don't like to talk about them. For one thing I've been off reading – I mean you never know what a book will do to you. A sentence can sneak up on you and punch you in the neck and start you crying when you thought you were finished with all that and even in books you know, you don't always remember what's coming in time. Most books try and get you at some point, especially old books, like the ones I used to like, and if I carry on like this I'm going to start thinking about *The Railway Children* or something and the whole month will be shot and I'll just have to stay in bed.

'But,' I say. 'I mean, I used to be in there every day.'

'I know,' Sam says.

'Gracie can't keep on going forever,' says Gemma. 'Eat your pasta, Billy.'

'And Billy loves it,' I say. The library. Not the pasta apparently.

'So does Violet,' says Gemma.

'Violet only likes it for the computers,' says Sam.

'At least I don't try and unplug them all the time like Billy,' says Violet.

'When?' I ask. 'When's it shutting down?'

'Late July,' Sam tells me. 'The same day school finishes. Are you drinking that juice?'

'Bloody HELL,' I shout, because they're all so annoying and Billy's just shoved his finger in my ear and what about the library that they're all supposed to care about so much?

'We don't need shouting at the dinner table, thank you, Dallas,' says Gemma.

'Looking for a reason to go into a sulk or something, Dallas?' says Sam.

Billy picks up two handfuls of pasta and throws them at the wall.

'For Christ's sake, Dallas, now look what you've done,' says Sam.

I offer to wash the dishes, but Gemma has the face on which says she'll fight to the death to protect her right to hide in the kitchen with the stereo tonight, so I end up in charge of Billy because Sam is getting ready to go out with his girlfriend Prue.

'Shall we go and see Gracie?' I ask him.

'No,' he says. 'Let's play snakes and ladders.'

'Go and get it then. Do you want to play?' I ask Violet, because she's hanging around.

'No,' she snaps. 'Snakes and ladders is boring.'

'Dallas,' Gemma says. I look up and she's leaning against the counter with soapy water dripping off her rubber gloves.

'If you . . . If you're upset about the library closing – because I know what it used to mean to you – well, maybe you need to start going back in there again. While you still can.'

'No!'

'Don't panic,' she says gently. 'Nobody's going to force you to . . .'

'Good, because no. I can't. I . . .'

'Hey, y'all,' a voice calls. The door is pushed right open and my aunt Jessi, cowboy hat tilted over one eye, bursts over the step holding a guitar case and a bag of duty-free bottles. 'You tellin' me you went and ate without me?'

We weren't expecting her.

Jessi lives in Austin, though she travels all around Texas with her job, nursing. We haven't seen her since last November, although since I got my phone we've been texting a lot. She always did like to surprise us.

She throws herself on my neck so I almost buckle. 'How's my best girl that's suddenly – holy crap – as tall as her old auntie and getting near as pretty?'

'Yeah,' I say, holding on to her tightly. 'Not too bad.'

'Lord God, if you ain't turning into the image of your momma.'

'Gosh you should have let us know, we'd have met you or something,' says Gemma through tight lips.

'What are you doing here?' asks Sam.

Billy whimpers. Jessi is older and thinner and has blonde streaks in her hair but she looks like Momma, if someone

had chewed her. And sounds like her too. Billy gets behind Sam, his face crumpling.

'It's just the shock,' Gemma says, sweeping all the cheese off the table with the back of her hand and crashing her chair into place. 'Have you come straight from the airport?'

'Where are you planning to stay?' Sam says.

Jessi ignores Billy being behind Sam's legs and gets right down on the floor to put her hand on his head. 'Billy-o,' she says. 'My hero. Your brother and sister looking after you right?'

'Who is she?' Violet asks loudly.

Jessi reaches up and pats Sam on the behind. 'Don't you fret, Samuel, I got my little tent. You know I'm used to roughing it.'

'Just as well,' Sam mutters.

I'm glad she's brought her tent because it means she can stay as long as she wants, and it's true that we don't have anywhere to put her. My bedroom isn't a room, it's just one side of the loft with a floor that's all bed, and it's the same for Sam and Billy in their side. Gemma and Violet sleep downstairs behind screens.

Before Gemma – when Momma was still married to my dad – Jessi always came to stay during the times when my dad was away being a soldier. So she used to share Momma's bed. Then years later when Gemma and Violet moved in, Jessi started bringing her tent and sleeping in the meadow. Sometimes I'd sleep out too. One night, the summer before

last, there was a meteor shower and we had to hold on to each other because it was so incredible, like we were the only people on earth seeing this magic. And we both broke at the same time and went running back to the boathouse to wake everybody before it was too late, especially Momma.

I go over to the meadow behind our house with Jessi and help set up her tent near the biggest willow tree. Then we walk up to the towpath and sit down so she can smoke a cigarette. We look at the sky and the trees on the other bank and listen to the crickets and the river plashing. When she's finished smoking she puts her arm round me and I lean against her. Something in my stomach almost hurts, like being able to unclench your fist after your hands have been really cold – just having her sitting here on the bank beside me, looking at the water.

'What are you thinking about?' she asks me, when the sky is darkening. We talk a little. I tell her about the Brexit/breakfast cock-up and she laughs her head off and I don't mind. I don't tell her about the library. I just don't feel like going into it.

Last October, everyone around Queen Street and the river was saying that this woman Ophelia Silk who'd just been elected as council leader was going to sell the library to people who would knock it down and build flats on it. And my mother got worked up – she often did get worked up – and

started a campaign to save the library. She asked me one afternoon after school if I would come with her and help deliver some leaflets, but I was tired so I said no. I said I had to go to the library and get out a book – I'd just finished *Northern Lights* so I wanted the next one. She said if we didn't do something I wouldn't have a library at all soon and then what would I do – she nagged me all the way there, until I left her and went in – but it wasn't a serious argument.

Because I wouldn't go with her, she went on her bike instead of walking. She got knocked off it and she died. Apparently a lorry driver didn't look when he was turning left.