Circling the Stars

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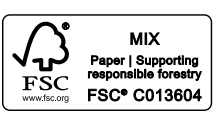
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Dedicated with love to the memory of
Robin Hall and Tony Layton.



My room is at the front
of the house.
Mum made me a window seat
with a cover of unicorns
when I was eight
and loved unicorns.

If I turn off my light
and move my curtain
no one can see me
watching.

I like the idea
of being the eyes in the night.
Like an animal
waiting for prey.

I push my forehead
against the cool glass
that smells like earth and water
and watch the street.

Our house is on the corner.

I can see all the way
down to Sam Rowland's house
and all the way up
to the block of flats on East Street
and over the roofs
I can see the lights
from the football ground:
bold and blaring
when they're lit,
but blank
like they've forgotten what to do
when they're not.

I wonder if Mum's remembered about me.
It's gone 9 o'clock
and she still
hasn't told me to

go
to
bed.

I've pressed my forehead
against the glass
for so long
that it feels bruised.

My eyes are blurry around the edges
and I'm wondering if I should go
to brush my teeth
or see Mum
or put my pyjamas on,
when I see him.

The boy across the street.

The boy from number 56.

I don't know his name.
He moved here last year,
and he goes to the comp

I'll go to in September.
I've seen him in his uniform.

Always on his own.

He shuts the door
behind him
quietly,
carefully.
He's sneaking out.

He holds on to something
in his pocket
and walks quickly,
with his head
bowed.
He ducks into the alleyway between two houses
halfway down the street…

I realise I've been holding my breath
when I breathe out
and mist up the window.

I rub it with the curtain
and it smears
but I can still see,
just about.

I wait for him to reappear.

I'm so focused on watching
and not breathing too hard
that I don't hear Mum.

What're you up to, Ani?
Do you know the time?
C'mon sweetie,
time for bed.
Have you brushed your teeth?
What're you watching?
You've misted this window up
good and proper.



It's still misty in the morning.
I'm watching the drips
drip
drip
dripping
and pooling on the plastic
of my windowsill
like a watery egg timer
marking the moments
before Dad gets here.

And though I've been waiting
and my feet are numb
beneath my folded legs,
when Mum shouts
up the stairs,
He's here!

I don't move.

I don't answer.

She shouts again
and I hear her saying,

She'll be down now.
She doesn't say
come inside.

The air from
the open door
rushes up the stairs,
hurrying me along.

And my mind is telling me
to hurry
to worry
that I haven't moved
that I'm a terrible daughter
but my body is stubborn
and frozen.

Mum comes in
about twenty drips later
and she stands in the doorway.
I feel the grump of her gaze.
She waits for me

and I wait for her,

we're the same.

Granny Della says,
Peas in a pod,
when we scowl
and fold our arms.
But Mum's hair swirls around her shoulders
and her eyes glint green.
Mine are grey.
My hair drops to my waist
in a boring brown curtain.

Your dad's here.
I tell her I know
and I don't want to go
but I don't know where that came from,
perhaps
the same strange place
as this stupid tear
on my cheek.

She wraps me up
in a hug
and somehow, I find myself

on the back seat of Dad's Ford Focus
next to a puddle of jumper
and an empty Snickers wrapper.
I watch the closed door across the road
as we drive past
and think about the boy
on the other side of it.

Dad tells me about the weather
though I can see out of the window.
He tells me about Corfu
how he'd like to take me –
not this time,
he's taking Tina,
maybe next.

We go to an old cinema;
he likes the building
its arcs and stone
and high ceilings.
It smells of feet
of popcorn and something sweet.
He buys me a bright blue slushy
and I drink it

very fast
very loud
and then feel sick.

We sit on red seats.

I bounce on the springs
until he stills me
with one hand
and I'm glad to feel the slushy
stop swishing in my belly.

The film is about
some kids who want to be heroes
but they keep messing up
and we laugh at them
fooling and tripping
and mucking about.
When we laugh at the same time
it's a bit like a song.

