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Opening extract from

Crossing the Line

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BACK WHEN

In this life you have to look after yourself. It's not that your parents don't want to take care of you; it's not that they don't have the best of intentions. It's just that parents have other things on their minds. They have things to do. They look away.

Like Dad looked away from the paddling pool.

I don't know how much of this is my own memory, and how much is what Dad told me later. Because he did tell me. He never let me forget it.

My sister Alexandra was strange and quiet from the day she was born, checking us out with her enormous dark eyes till she found she liked us enough to stay. The midwife said she was comparing the world to the way it was the last time around, and finding it slightly wanting. Mum liked this. Mum believed in reincarnation the way

she believed in almost everything else, so maybe Allie really was a tsarina in a previous life. She certainly acted like one.

The first time I was admitted to her presence, I leaned on the chair arm and stared at her as Mum, Dad and a procession of friends and neighbours gurgled at the baby and ignored me altogether. Which was funny, because Allie was ignoring them entirely, too, her dark liquid eyes locked on me. If it's possible, given that her mouth was clamped round the woman's nipple, she was even ignoring Mum.

Not knowing what to do with my hands besides unscrewing the baby's head or trying to pull off its toes or something (I was only three and a half), I shifted from foot to foot and thought longingly of my electronic-sound Buzz Lightyear. I already felt inferior but Nan Lola took pity on me. She was a little out of the circle too, and as I glanced up, bored almost to infanticide, I caught her mischievous smile. Her hand covered mine and squeezed it, and her creased girlish face beamed down at me and only me. Then Nan Lola winked, as if to say *You're mine now, Nick.*

And I was.

Allie hardly ever cried. Not that she was one of those giggly happy babies; her silence was still and solemn and deadly calm. Apparently this is not an adorable trait in a baby, though I for one was pleased with it. I think Mum was unnerved by her ever gazing coolly into the middle

distance and not looking terribly bothered.

So Allie was handed over to Dad, and they had their bottle feeds together. Very bonding, I'm sure, but it pushed me even further off the radar.

This is probably why I tried to kill her.

I remember that the day was hot, June-hot. Mum was holed up in her little understairs office in the house, on the phone to some magazine editor; Dad, of course, had gone for another beer. When Dad was sad he smelt of whisky, but that was usually in the evening. By midday he'd be only mildly gloomy, or maybe tired, and he smelt only of beer. I knew the difference very early.

That day I sat beside my little sister in the paddling pool, our bottoms cold in the freshly hosed water, our heads hot under our cotton legionnaire hats. She watched me, her pupils darker than ever in the shade of her hat brim but glittering with the sun bouncing off the pool. And I hated her as only a child can hate.

Several things riled me. Her unswerving gaze. Her silence. The fact she was only nine months old and she wasn't even fit to play with. And the reddening of her cheekbones, the concentration in her dark creased eyes, that meant she was about to poo in her swim nappy.

It offended me beyond belief. The shameless, remorseless nerve of her. I thought about grabbing the end of the hose out of the corner of the pool, where it was still churning out water, and skooshing it straight in her

impassive face. That'd make her cry, all right.

But I didn't dare. Instead I made a face at her and shoved her hard, so hard that she toppled over backwards into the water.

I looked down at her, and she stared solemnly back. The rippling, sun-dazzled water made a sweet little round frame for her face and it was creeping up her cheeks and forehead and chin. She looked a bit astonished but not scared. I wondered whether to let her lie there and I wondered what would happen.

I knew I'd find out faster if I put my hand on her face and pushed her gently down. So that's what I did: I pressed on her nose with a forefinger and watched.

The water was trickling into her nostrils when I changed my mind. Reaching for her wrist, I tilted her back up on to her bottom. She sneezed out water, wobbled, got her balance back and smiled at me. It was a huge direct smile, just between us. I basked in it and smiled back, loving her for the first time.

Then she was snatched up and away from me. When I squinted into the sunlight I saw Dad, unsteady and panting for breath, Allie clutched against him, and he was staring down into my face, anguish all over his own. So I knew he'd seen me from the house.

At least, he'd seen me shove her in. Then he'd come running, but he hadn't seen me rescue her. So who did he think had pulled her upright? The pool fairies? Who would have saved her if I hadn't been there? Honestly.

'Never do that again,' he shouted. 'Never, never, never.'

You know, I think he was talking to himself.

I never did do it again. *He* did. It wasn't the last time he left her, just for a minute, just to get something out of the fridge. It wasn't that he loved Mr Carlsberg more than he loved Allie, of course he didn't. But each time he must have balanced the possibilities, and reckoned he had a moment to spare.

So occasionally I had to stop her climbing into a filing cabinet, or sticking her finger in a socket, or grabbing a pan off the stove. Mum was very busy, writing or broadcasting, and after all she knew Dad was keeping an eye on us. Besides, I loved my alien changeling now, fiercely, violently. There's a photo of me at five years old, the toddler Allie gripped in my arms, and I'm glaring defiance at the camera because she's *mine.* My dour eyes glower out from under straight jutting brows: menacing even at that age, I was.

When Nan Lola came to live with us, Mum thought I was upset. She couldn't have been more wrong: I was crying with sheer relief. I'd been terrified of starting school because it would mean leaving Allie to be supervised largely by Dad. Nan Lola understood this and she understood Dad, so for my sake she oversaw Allie like a benevolent hawk. She loved Allie, of course, but she guarded her principally for me. To make me happy, to make me feel secure. I was Nan Lola's one true love and

I knew that would never change.

But nobody is there for anybody all of the time. So the central fact of life is this: you have to look after yourself.

NOW

1

I knew that voice on the radio. Warm and folksy and caring. Sympathetic words of wisdom to get you through the day. That's what the slot's called: Words of Wisdom.

This was not a nightmare, unfortunately. I knew that because I'd just woken from one, and now I wished I was back in it. Rolling on to my stomach, I hauled my duvet over my head and crammed it against my ears. The voice was still an audible murmur, so I hummed till I thought it had stopped.

I surfaced just in time to hear a jaunty 'Goodbye, and good day!'

Good day? She'd just destroyed mine. If she hadn't tidied my pit yesterday and messed around with my radio, I might have lived in blissful ignorance till I got through the school gates. Come to think of it, maybe an hour's warning was just as well. I yanked the duvet down

and spun the tuner back to its proper position, then turned up the volume so it would drown me out.

'Good day, Mother,' I moaned. 'You utter, utter cow.'

I didn't mean it. Much. At least, I wouldn't want her to hear it, since as far as I know she still has sensitivities. None of which, obviously, coincide with mine or Allie's, or she wouldn't do this to us.

Poor old Allie.

I'd have liked to spend ten happy minutes fantasising about wild sex with Orla Mahon, which took up a lot of my time lately. (Fantasising, that is, not actual wild sex.) But Mum had killed the mood, so I dragged myself out of the warm tangle of duvet into a cool August morning.

Barefoot, I padded through to Allie's room. Mum had hung one of her stupid crystals outside, so I used it to rap on the door, then waited for Allie's grunt, though I knew I could walk in with impunity. There was no way she'd be out of her bed. Indeed, in the dim light I could see only a misshapen heap of duvet and a splayed fan of impossible hair. Her radio was chuntering inoffensive eighties pop: Mum's local station again. I sat down on the edge of her bed and tousled the hair. 'Morning, Allie.'

Fingers appeared on the edge of the duvet and shoved it down, revealing her delicate face. Delicate but incredibly grumpy. Her eyes were sandy with sleep, what you could see of them through the strips of brown hair.

'Nick,' she said, 'you're sitting on Aidan.'

I sighed and shut my eyes. It was too early in the

morning for this. I'd had that disturbing nightmare and I was still sleepy. In fact I was drowsy enough to drop off right here and slump over sideways on to Allie's bed and start to snore . . .

'Get *off* him!' She was shoving and punching me, and her voice was turning shrill. 'Get off!'

OK, game over. I shouldn't have started it in the first place. Sighing, I righted myself and shuffled round to sit obediently on her other side. 'Better?'

She was still glowering at me. 'You'd better ask him.'

'Allie –'

'Forget it. Don't bug me in the morning. And don't bug Aidan.'

'OK.' I smiled at her. 'Sorry.' And I genuinely was.

Her dark eyebrows were still bunched in a resentful frown, but when I sorted out the blunt spikes of hair across her eyes, tucking them behind her ears, her features softened and I finally got a smile.

'You can feed me a grape while you're at it,' she said.

'Oh aye? What's wrong with Aidan?'

'Aidan,' she sniffed, 'doesn't do food.'

Everybody knew fourteen was way too old for Allie to have an imaginary friend. One of these days, one of these days very soon, I was going to have to have this conversation with my sister. For her own good, as well as for mine and the whole family's. But not right now. And not, at any point in the future, at half past seven in the morning. 'You're hell first thing, aren't you?'

'Only because my mother is a minion of Satan.' She wiggled her eyebrows.

'Allie,' I growled, then grinned. 'You heard it, then.'

'Oh God. Did I ever.' She pulled the duvet back up over her head. 'Nick,' came her muffled voice, 'I don't want to go to school today.'

'Tough,' I said. I tugged the duvet down from her face.

'We're not going. We talked about this already.' Back under the covers she went. 'You can't make us go.'

'Allie, you're beginning to sound like Gollum. *You can't make us, preciousss*.' I peeled back a corner of duvet to hiss it in her ear, and she squealed crossly.

'Get lost, Nick.'

'Allie, it's all right for Aidan. He can hardly get excluded, can he?'

'Yeah, and they won't exclude me either. Just you watch.'

'Allie,' I began, then stopped, too much of a coward to tell her off for being manipulative. My sister had Issues. Of course people didn't like to face up to her and tell her not to be so damn naughty. Anyway, it was everybody else who was uncomfortable with her Issues. Allie was perfectly fine with them.

Abruptly Allie flung off the duvet and sat up. Her wild hair fell across her face, so she pushed it back with one hand. First thing in the morning it was just like her: a mess. When she'd brushed it, it would hang thick and straight, a blunt wedge of hair that could swing forward

to screen her eyes. Together with her sulky mouth, her angular brows and massive dark eyes, it made Allie look like a manga heroine, brave and adorable and jaggedly beautiful. She didn't look anything like me. I had shaved brown hair and straight jutting brows and a narrow mouth. And a hard jawline, and a nose that was slightly too big and once got broken. Rugged, Mum would say kindly. Thuggish, said almost everyone else.

Allie was staring at the opposite wall, wide-eyed and haunted. 'Today's the day.'

'Yes,' I told her gently.

She turned and gazed at Aidan.

No, no, *no.* She had me at it now. What I mean is, she turned and gazed at the place she imagined Aidan was.

'How d'you think he feels?' she snapped.

'Well, don't have a go at me,' I said. 'It's not my fault.'

'I know. OK. But how could *Mum*?'

'Yeah, yeah.' I agreed entirely. 'Bad timing.'

'Doesn't she even think?'

'Allie, I don't think it really occurs to her.'

'God.' She scowled. 'She must have changed the radio yesterday, it drives me mad when she does that. Came on ten minutes ago and there she was. I could've died.' Her almost-black eyes widened and she nipped her lip and glanced aside. 'Sorry.'

I sighed and rubbed her shoulder. 'I'll go and wake up Lola Nan.'

'She's awake,' said Allie. 'She's been awake for hours.

She was hoovering downstairs. She woke me up at four o'clock and I've hardly slept since.'

'Liar,' I told her. 'Get up. And you,' I added in Aidan's direction.

Just to humour her, of course.

Allie didn't learn to speak till she was nearly two, at which point she found Nan Lola an inconvenient arrangement of consonants. So she took a unilateral decision to turn it round, and Nan Lola was Lola Nan ever after.

Yawning, I shambled downstairs. I thought Lola Nan had stopped hoovering, but when I pushed open the lounge door she was still at it, only the Hoover wasn't switched on. Her head jerked up and she stared wildly at me, shoving the vacuum cleaner back and forth. Her bone-white hair stuck out all over, as if she'd plugged herself into the socket by mistake.

'Want a cup of tea, Lola Nan?' I said.

'I can't hear you!' she shouted.

'Cup of tea?' I shouted back. God, I'd make someone a great husband one day. I was that used to humouring crazy women.

'WHAT?' she yelled.

I caught the flailing plug and stuck it back in its socket. The Hoover roared and Lola Nan went back to her pointless work. Pointless, because she kept going over the same two square feet, ignoring the rest of the gritty carpet.

In the kitchen, Dad had his hands over his ears. His eyes were tight shut: against what, I don't know. Maybe just the light. He ran from everything: shadows, light, reality. I was not going to grow up like Dad, that was my big ambition. I wasn't going to spend my life running.

'She's off again,' moaned Dad. 'She's been at it since four!'

'Morning,' I said, switching on the kettle. Really? Four o'clock? That would explain the nightmare, which was something to do with trains. 'Heard you just now, Mum.'

She turned away from the sink and gave me a bashful look. Mum was still pretty, with her wide-spaced hazel eyes and her tumble of auburn hair that sometimes showed tell-tale grey at the roots. It was pulled back into a rough ponytail as usual. At her age I thought she should really get it cut, but short hair wouldn't go so well with the loose hippy chick blouses and the glittery swishing skirts.

Besides, her ponytail was an improvement on Dad's, which was that shade of ashy-blond that looks as if it's always verged on grey. I think ponytails look great on a twenty-year-old, or a girl. Not on a rather drawn, worn-looking guy with mystical tattoos on his wrists that I'm sure he regretted. He regretted a lot, my dad.

'Words of Wisdom? You listened to me?' Mum's cheek-bones pinked as a smile twitched her mouth. 'Oh, did you like it, Nick?'

'Yeah,' I lied. 'You were great, Mum.'

'Oh, thanks, love!' The smile broke open and made huge dimples in her cheeks.

Well. She's my mother. I'm not a bad person. At least, I'm not as bad as I used to be, but I'm still a great liar.

I'm never sure if Mum believes in God or Buddha or the fairies, but I suspect it's a peach-fuzz combination of everything. Her favourite song is 'Imagine', so she has a pan-pipes version to introduce the Words of Wisdom slot. Mum just wants everyone to be nice to each other. I'm not sure if she knows herself what she believes in, but neither does her target audience, and they don't care. She's very popular. She writes poems for the local paper and short syndicated articles for magazines, down-to-earth homilies that make you wince. I can't bear to read her stuff and when she asks for my opinion, I bluff. Just grunt on a positive-sounding note. You can get away with that when you're seventeen. Monosyllabic grunting is expected of you. It's especially expected of me.

The hoovering had stopped at last so I took Lola Nan her tea, but I didn't linger. She was sitting in her thread-bare wing-back chair, smiling at the corner of the room and nodding. Her right hand was patting the chair arm as usual – well, not quite patting it, but stopping about an inch above it, as if bouncing off an invisible cushion. Lola Nan's mannerisms mostly didn't bother me, but this one was really irritating, and I was tempted to take her hand and shove it aside to put the cup down on the chair arm. She must have sensed it, because she focused on me and

growled like a bear.

Sighing, I squeezed round to the other side and put the cup on the chair's left arm. She probably wouldn't spill it so I left her to it.

Back in the kitchen Dad was glancing nervously at the ceiling, roughly where Allie's room might be if it was ten feet further south. For a bloke, Dad didn't have a lot of spatial awareness. 'Where's Allie?' His spoon hovered in mid-air.

'She's just coming,' I said.

'She's a bit late.' His spoonful of home-made organic muesli vibrated slightly, and milk dribbled on to his beaded placemat.

'It's the anniversary,' I said.

Mum's shoulders stiffened and she gave a little gasp, but she didn't turn round.

'Oh. Is it?' Dad blinked. He was trying his best to focus.

My dad has only one problem with alcohol: he doesn't find it a problem. He tolerates it just fine and he's never drunk but he always goes to bed looking vaguely dazed, and wakes up much the same way. When the shadows in his mind close in, though, and he flounders in self-pity and black misery, the only thing to do is leave the house.

Mum says he finds it hard to cope with Lola Nan, but I know he finds it hard to cope with life: he doesn't have the resources. He's underfunded in the defence department. Dad is a right one for getting into squabbles he can't win, then having to capitulate because he can't see

it through. He always leaves it just too late to salvage his self-respect, too, just when the contempt of some traffic warden or neighbour or council bureaucrat becomes palpable. I'd seen my dad buckle and retreat and back off so many times, his pride pulled from under him like a rug, I could hardly bear to watch any more.

'The anniversary,' he said dully. 'Oh.'

Mum rubbed her temples with her thumb and finger. 'Oh Lord,' she said to the kitchen window. 'I hadn't . . . that hadn't . . .'

Occurred to you, I thought. Yeah. Quite.

'You've seen Allie this morning?' You wouldn't believe the aggression Dad put into that. 'Is she all right?'

I didn't answer, just poured milk on to my Frosties and pretended I couldn't feel his glare. I was the one person Dad could stand up to. Go ahead, I thought, if it makes you feel tougher. The best thing was to ignore him, since I knew he'd like to hit me but he'd never dare. Not after that first time.

Feeling the hostility, Mum sat down, over-brisk and bright, and clasped her hands. For a hideous moment I thought she'd ask us to say grace, but she unclasped them again and folded them round her mug of nettle-flavoured swamp water instead. 'A year,' she said, in her steady, professionally compassionate voice. 'A whole year. Perhaps we need to move on with our lives.'

'Some of us won't,' I muttered.

'Oh, Nick! Kevin Naughton was very young. And he

must have been very unhappy.'

Sometimes my mother's so generous and understanding I could slap her. Kev Naughton wasn't any younger than me, I thought, and I didn't do anything like that.

But I might have. That's the thing.

Mum was pouring herbal pee into Dad's mug and the flow juddered a bit. That's how I knew her hand was shaking. She said, 'Shh. Allie's going to be down in a minute.'

Adults are funny that way. Thinking a thing can't hurt you, just so long as they make a huge effort not to mention it.

It was like every other morning. I took Lola Nan some toast and Marmite, and made an effort to talk for a bit, and she yelled at me. Nothing specific, just a yell, but I left, and she ate the toast. Allie appeared, stopped dead and stared accusingly at the table, then ostentatiously pulled up a chair for Aidan. When Mum put on her happy face and offered to set him a place, Allie reminded her, in a tone of extreme patience, that Aidan Didn't Do Food. Dad looked troubled, Mum looked brisk and positive, and I ate my breakfast as fast as I could and got out of there.

Sometimes I liked Lola Nan's company best.

Before school I had my little ritual, same as ever. Pulling out the drawer at the bottom of my wardrobe, I pushed aside winter clothes and tugged out the narrow package wrapped in newspaper. I kept it sharp, for old time's sake, and even through several layers of *Daily*

Record I could feel the edge of it. If I pressed the tip, it could almost prick blood from my finger.

A blade is a beautiful thing. I'm not saying that to sound macho, it just is. It doesn't sparkle like sequins on a flouncy skirt. It doesn't have the glitterball dazzle of one of Mum's crystals against a sunny window. The gleam of a blade is smooth and flat and unbroken, shining steel, an understated glow. This knife felt light and flexible and true, and there was something reassuring about it.

So I was reassured. I did not want to unwrap it and take it with me. I never wanted to do that again but I always needed to know it was there. It was my totem, my charm. Pushing it gently to the back of the drawer, I laid the jumpers over it and shoved the drawer shut. Then I yelled for Allie, but she yelled back that she didn't need my company, she had Aidan.

And so I walked to school alone.