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Opening extract from

My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece

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For Mum and Dad, who got me here.







1

MY SISTER ROSE lives on the mantelpiece. Well, some of her does. Three of her fingers, her right elbow and her kneecap are buried in a graveyard in London. Mum and Dad had a big argument when the police found ten bits of her body. Mum wanted a grave that she could visit. Dad wanted a cremation and to sprinkle the ashes in the sea. That's what Jasmine told me anyway. She remembers more than I do. I was only five when it happened. Jasmine was ten. She was Rose's twin. Still is, according to Mum and Dad. They dressed Jas the same for years after the funeral – flowery dresses, cardigans, those flat shoes with buckles that Rose used to love. I reckon that's why Mum ran off with the man from the support group seventy one days ago. When Jas cut off all her hair, dyed it pink and got

her nose pierced on her fifteenth birthday, she didn't look like Rose any more and my parents couldn't hack it.

They each got five bits. Mum put hers in a fancy white coffin beneath a fancy white headstone that says *My Angel* on it. Dad burned a collarbone, two ribs, a bit of skull and a little toe and put the ashes in a golden urn. So they both got their own way, but surprise surprise it didn't make them happy. Mum says the graveyard's too depressing to visit. And every anniversary Dad tries to sprinkle the ashes but changes his mind at the last minute. Something seems to happen right when Rose is about to be tipped into the sea. One year in Devon there were loads of these swarming silver fish that looked like they couldn't wait to eat my sister. And another year in Cornwall a seagull poohed on the urn just as Dad was about to open it. I started to laugh but Jas looked sad so I stopped.

We moved out of London to get away from it all. Dad knew someone who knew someone who rung him up about a job on a building site in the Lake District. He hadn't worked in London for ages. There's a recession, which means the country has no money, so hardly anything's getting built. When he got the job in Ambleside, we sold our flat and rented a cottage and left Mum in London. I bet Jas five whole pounds that Mum would come to wave us off. She didn't make me pay when I lost. In the car Jas said *Let's play I Spy*, but she couldn't guess *Something beginning with R*, even though Roger was sitting right on my lap, purring as if

he was giving her a clue.

It's so different here. There are massive mountains that are tall enough to poke God up the bum, hundreds of trees, and it's quiet. *No people* I said, as we found the cottage down a twisty lane and I looked out of the window for somebody to play with. *No Muslims* Dad corrected me, smiling for the first time that day. Me and Jas didn't smile back as we got out of the car.

Our cottage is the complete opposite of our flat in Finsbury Park. It's white not brown, big not small, old not new. Art's my favourite subject at school and, if I painted the buildings as people, I would turn the cottage into a crazy old granny, smiling with no teeth. The flat would be a serious soldier all smart and squashed up in a row of identical men. Mum would love that. She's a teacher at an art college and I reckon she'd show every single one of her students if I sent her my pictures.

Even though Mum's in London, I was happy to leave the flat behind. My room was tiny but I wasn't allowed to swap with Rose 'cos she's dead and her stuff's sacred. That was the answer I always got whenever I asked if I could move. *Rose's room is sacred, James. Don't go in there, James. It's sacred.* I don't see what's sacred about a bunch of old dolls, a smelly pink duvet and a bald teddy. Didn't feel that sacred when I jumped up and down on Rose's bed one day when I got home from school. Jas made me stop but she promised not to tell.

When we'd got out of the car, we stood and looked at

our new home. The sun was setting, the mountains glowed orange and I could see our reflection in one of the cottage windows – Dad, Jas, me holding Roger. For a millisecond I felt hopeful, like this really was the beginning of a brand new life and everything was going to be okay from now on. Dad grabbed a suitcase and the key out of his pocket and walked down the garden path. Jas grinned at me, stroked Roger, then followed. I put the cat down. He crawled straight into a bush, tail sticking out as he scrambled through the leaves. *Come on* Jas called, turning around at the porch door. She held out a hand as I ran to join her. We walked into the cottage together.



Jas saw it first. I felt her arm go stiff. *Do you want a cup of tea* she said, her voice too high and her eyes on something in Dad's hand. He was crouching on the lounge floor, his clothes thrown everywhere as if he'd emptied his suitcase in a rush. *Where's the kettle* she asked, trying to act normal. Dad didn't look up from the urn. He spat on it, polishing the gold with the end of his sleeve 'til it gleamed. Then he put my sister on the mantelpiece, which was cream and dusty and just like the one in the flat in London, and he whispered *Welcome to your new home, sweetheart.*

Jas picked the biggest room. It has an old fireplace in the corner and a built-in wardrobe that she's filled with all her

new black clothes. She's hung wind chimes from the beams on the ceiling and they tinkle if you blow on them. I prefer my room. The window overlooks the back garden, which has a creaky apple tree and a pond, and there's this really wide windowsill that Jas put a cushion on. The first night we arrived, we sat on it for ages, staring at the stars. I never saw them in London. All the lights from the buildings and cars made it too bright to see anything in the sky. Here the stars are really clear and Jas told me all about the constellations. She's into horoscopes and reads hers every morning on the Internet. It tells her exactly what's going to happen that day. *Doesn't it spoil the surprise* I asked in London when Jas pretended to be sick 'cos her horoscope said something about an unexpected event. *That's the point* she replied, getting back into bed and pulling the covers over her head.



Jas is a Gemini, the symbol of the twins, which is strange 'cos she's not a twin any more. I'm a Leo and my symbol is the lion. Jas knelt up on the cushion and pointed at it out of the window. It didn't look much like an animal, but Jas said that whenever I'm upset, I should think of the silver lion above my head and everything will be all right. I wanted to ask why she was saying this stuff when Dad had promised us a Fresh New Start, but I thought of the urn on the mantelpiece and I was too scared of the answer. Next

morning, I found an empty vodka bottle in the bin and I knew that life in the Lake District would be exactly the same as life in London.

That was two weeks ago. Since the urn, Dad's unpacked the old photo album and some of his clothes. The removal men did the big stuff like beds and the sofa, and me and Jas did everything else. The only boxes we haven't unpacked are the huge ones marked SACRED. They're in the cellar covered with plastic bags to keep them dry in case there's a flood or something. When we closed the cellar door, Jas's eyes went all damp and smudgy. She said *Doesn't it bother you* and I said *No* and she said *Why not* and I said *Rose is dead*. Jas screwed up her face. *Don't use that word, Jamie*.

I don't see why not. Dead. Dead. Dead dead dead. *Passed away* is what Mum says. *Gone to a better place* is Dad's phrase. He never goes to church so I don't know why he says it. Unless the better place he's talking about is not Heaven but the inside of a coffin or a golden urn.



My counsellor in London said I was *In denial and still suffering from shock*. She said *It will hit you one day and then you will cry*. Apparently I haven't since September 9th almost five years ago, which is when it happened. Last year, Mum and Dad sent me to that fat woman 'cos they

thought it was weird that I didn't cry about Rose. I wanted to ask if they'd cry about someone they couldn't remember, but I bit my tongue.

That's the thing no one seems to get. I don't remember Rose. Not really. I remember two girls on holiday playing Jump The Wave, but I don't know where we were, or what Rose said, or if she enjoyed the game. And I know my sisters were bridesmaids at a neighbour's wedding, but all I can picture is the tube of Smarties that Mum gave me during the service. Even then I liked the red ones best and I held them in my hand until they stained my skin pink. But I can't remember what Rose wore, or how she looked walking down the aisle, or anything like that. After the funeral, when I asked Jas where Rose was, she pointed at the urn on the mantelpiece. *How can a girl fit inside something so small* I said, which made Jas cry. That's what she told me anyway. I don't really remember.

One day for homework I had to describe someone special, and I spent fifteen minutes writing a whole page on Wayne Rooney. Mum made me rip it out and write about Rose instead. I had nothing to say so Mum sat opposite me with her face all red and wet and told me exactly what to put. She smiled this teary smile and said *When you were born, Rose pointed at your willy and asked if it was a worm* and I said *I'm not putting that in my English book*. Mum's smile disappeared. Tears dripped off her nose onto her chin and it made me feel bad so I wrote it

down. A few days later, the teacher read out my homework in class and I got a gold star from her and teased by everyone else. *Maggot Dick*, they called me.

