

opening extract from

the innocent's story

written by

nicky singer

published by oxford university press

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

1

OK. This is what I think happened: I got blown up. Boom boom, explosion, Cassina Dixon, aged thirteen, is blasted limb from limb. I'm not trying to be funny about this (a characteristic of my father's) but to try and explain it, if only to myself. You see, I'm not quite the person I was at 5.11p.m. yesterday afternoon. In fact, I may not be a person at all.

Perhaps it would be helpful to return to some sort of beginning. The pivotal point could have been my mother saying: 'Would you mind picking Aelfin up from gym club, Cassina?' Doesn't sound like a death sentence, does it? In fact, as requests go, it has to rate pretty high on the innocuous scale: just walk your sister the ten minutes home from school. No big deal, and not like I hadn't done it before. Besides, Mum had a good excuse: she's a teacher at Aelfin's (yes, I know it's a stupid name, we'll come to that) school and it was parents' evening. It's not wise to cross my mother on the morning of parents' evening, not her best mood day. So I didn't say, 'No, I won't pick her up, the little squit, because I've got better things to do', like homework (yeah, yeah), and a life to live, not to mention some urgent texting, I just said: 'Sure, I'll get her.'

You should see Aelfin in her gym slip—well, navy-blue lycra leotard, actually. She's eleven, Aelfin. I have the

word ‘was’ trembling on my lips, (incidentally, ‘lips’ is purely metaphorical as I don’t have lips any more)—Aelfin *was* eleven. Who would have thought so much could change in twenty-four hours? Anyway, Aelfin is (was) blonde and willowy and supple and incredibly athletic. She turns somersaults like that’s what God put her on earth to do (not that I believe in God, you understand—we’ll come to that later, too). When Aelfin boards the horse she could be flying. She wins prizes for her antics, so many it’s begun to annoy the other mothers. I don’t mind about the prizes, she keeps them in a cupboard with the door wedged shut. You actually have to ask to look at them.

‘Do you think I could look at your baubles, Aelfin?’

She has cups, shields, medals, certificates, and ribbons. She doesn’t even smile when you look, just opens the door a crack, gives you a glimpse and then snaps it all away again. Hardly gloating, so it can’t be the prizes that annoy me about my sister. Besides, I was never into gym. I’m too big, too fat, too uncoordinated. And I have spots. Or used to. That has to be an advantage of my current situation. I no longer have spots. Hey—let’s celebrate.

Mum always said I had a tendency to ramble on, to digress, maunder, expatiate, whatever. She also said, yesterday morning: ‘Don’t stop anywhere on the way home.’ She said this because I have another tendency—to drift into music shops—and there’s an excellent little CD place at the train station halfway between Aelfin’s school and home. A CD shop just begging you (as you’re passing anyway) to drop in and spend a little of that birthday money that’s weighing down your pocket. And as my birthday’s irritatingly close to Christmas (thinking about it, I’m so glad I got my birthday in before this happened) you don’t have long to wait for renewed funds. Anyhow, I picked Aelfin up as instructed (got there a

little early, just in time to see her execute a perfect sky-dive and double twist pirouette, impeccable two-foot landing and shy, engaging smile), made sure she had all her gear (she can be a little vague, our Aelfin) and set off for home.

'Just going to pop in here for a mo,' I said as we passed the station.

'But Mum said . . .' Aelfin began.

'Yeah, yeah, but who's taking you home today? Me. And I say our route lies via the station.'

'But I'm hungry.'

'Fine. I'll get you a bun.'

The price you have to pay for a younger sister. We got the bun first. A cinnamon Danish—her favourite. That was a mistake—not the Danish but the fact that we went to the cake shop first. If we'd got the CD first, all this might never have happened. We'd have been in the right place at the right time, instead of the wrong place at the wrong time. So if one's attributing fault (which, of course, I'm not) you could say it was Aelfin's stomach's fault, or my flawed generosity. You could also say it was to do with me disobeying Mum, but I'm not sure even Mum would hold that against me in the circumstances.

Right, so—we got the Danish and adjourned to the CD shop. Aelfin munched in her irritating way (how come she can eat so many Danish pastries and still look like a pencil anyway?) while I checked the latest hot hits. I'd like to say that, at the time of impact, I was clutching to my breast the divine Robbie Williams, but of course I wasn't. I was just replacing some poxy *Hits 53* album that had fallen off the shelf. In fact, that was my first impression of the explosion: not the noise, not the screaming, but movement. The CDs beginning to rumble and jump. Now, of course, the explosion must have happened first and only then can the CDs have begun to jump. But that's

not how I remember it. The CDs were definitely jumping first. And then there was the noise. Noise is a bit of an understatement. There was what they call in the papers a 'deafening bang'. It's quite a good expression because although the noise was certainly louder than anything I have ever heard, there was also a weird kind of silence as if my ears had been overloaded and decided to cut out. So the noise had the quality of seeming far away and not at all to do with me. So much for the brain in a time of crisis.

The CD in my hands fell, of course, but as an entire rack of CDs was falling on me anyway, that didn't seem to matter too much. Then there was the sound of glass shattering, as if a million windows popped at once. The window of our shop had the virtue of being sucked outwards, so while we were certainly being hit by all kinds of flying objects, we were not, mercifully, being shredded by glass. Not then anyway. I guess that's when I actually got to look at Aelfin. And you know what? She looked terrified. I actually put my arm around her.

I tried to say, 'Let's get out of here' (Smart thinking, eh?) but no words actually came out of my mouth. It was as if all the air had whooshed out of my lungs. Not out of everyone's though. Some people were screaming. Really screaming. Later I thought, maybe these were the ones not really hurt. Anyhow, I pulled Aelfin towards the absent door (read modern sculpture of twisted metal) and out into the concourse. If I'd been thinking, it would have been about the open space and the decreased likelihood of falling debris, but actually, of course, I wasn't thinking, I was just acting instinctively: station—bad: out of station—good. Or, put another way: let's run, Aelfi!

Only we didn't run, we ambled. I'm not sure whether that was because we were injured, or shocked, or simply waiting for someone to tell us what to do; because there's

always someone, isn't there, telling you what to do? 'Get behind the cordon, move on, not this way, please, line up, sit down, shut up.' Did you see the first images of the Twin Towers falling in New York, when they just replayed the building falling, falling, again and again, rerunning the disbelief? I kept waiting for them to say who was behind the attack, or what it meant, but nobody did because nobody knew. And I realized then that normally everything comes to you packaged, people tell you what to think, frame events for you. Well, here were Aelfin and I and no one was framing the event, it was just happening, exploding around us, and we were walking it as if in a dream.

Anyway, we were out on the concourse, not so very far from the ex-entrance of W. H. Smiths. Then it happened—Aelfin fell. I didn't see her hit by anything, and nor was I hit (not then, anyway) but she just fell, even though I thought I had my arm around her. And then she lay there, on the ground. She was quite still and her body was arranged beautifully: one arm above her head, the other tucked in behind her waist, her back and legs a graceful curve. Her head was only half turned to the concrete, her hair falling lightly across her cheek. She didn't look hurt at all; she might have been a ballerina, playing the part of an exquisite bird resting after a long flight. Not that I had much time to look, because something did hit me then, whacked me in the back. I can't say, even now, what it was, only that it was hard, angular, swift—and painless. I hope it was like that for Aelfin. I didn't lose consciousness, but my consciousness changed; I felt all parts of my body slow, my mind was quite calm, and I experienced myself as much less involved than only a moment before. It was as if my perception had moved from participant to observer. I didn't feel any regret, or even any surprise, I just felt slightly airy, slightly lifted up.

I'm not sure how long I hung there, in that quivering, hovering state, probably only a few moments, though it was sufficient time for me to view the whole station panorama. My main thought was that people were rushing too much, that they ought to slow down, there was no need for so much frenzy. But that was mainly the outer ring of people; the inner ring, near where the crater was, was more still. There were people lying there, some quiet, some twitching just a hand or a foot, as if they were cold, or nervous. Which is why the coming of the man was so strange. I should have seen him immediately, because he was standing, and no one else was, not at the edge of the crater anyway. He was covered in dust, perhaps that's why I missed him at first, stripped naked by the blast but so stuck with grime he might have been just another piece of debris. Then he moved, lifted his hands in front of his dirt-brown face and stared at them, as though he couldn't believe his own palms, the existence of his fingers. Then, very slowly, he lowered his hands and began to walk, away from the inner ring where the fallen were and towards the outer ring. He didn't look right or left, didn't pause at all, until he came to Aelfin. Then he stopped and stared again: at the lie of her body, at her half-turned face. A terrible shudder seemed to pass through him. It sounded to me, so close above him, like a door banging in the wind, only I think the door was his heart. He flung himself over Aelfin, then. Didn't drop to his knees, touch her lightly, but threw the whole force of his body over hers as though he might be able to protect her, shield her. And she never moved, for she was dead. At least, I think she was dead.

What happened next I didn't see, because that's when I began to be taken up. I say 'taken up' as though someone was pulling me, but actually it was rather the reverse. It was as though I was being pushed, as though someone

had thrown a switch and reversed gravity, and there I was spiralling into space. No, spiralling's the wrong word, it wasn't as fast as that, it was more floating, hazy. I'm pleased to say there still wasn't any pain, although I did experience the cold, the higher we got. *We.* Afterwards I thought there should have been a 'we', because it wasn't just me knocked about down there, so there should have been plenty of us floating upwards, but I think it was only me. Not that I felt alone: being pushed into space was so unlike anything I'd ever experienced before I wasn't about to shout: 'Hey—what about the others?' I was just busy with the business of movement, of keeping whatever was left of me together.

Of course it occurred to me that I must be dead, too, but then I didn't feel dead. I still felt pretty much like myself, like Cassina, so I went with the flow, didn't even feel cross or resistant. As I've spent most of my thirteen living years being cross and resistant, I guess this supports the being dead theory. 'No, I won't tidy my room, why should I, it's my room, isn't it?' 'Yes, sure I'll float up beyond the known universe, why not?'

I'm not sure how many miles, or thousands of miles, high I was when I realized that the floating sensation was probably to do with the fact that I had no body. You'd think you'd notice, having dragged around this large, bulky suitcase all your life, if it parted company from you, wouldn't you? I suppose that supports Mum's view that I always lived 'too much in my own brain for my own good'. I don't know exactly whose brain she expected me to live in. But here's the question that's bugging me: if Aelfin's body is lying neat and intact on the station concrete—what precisely has happened to mine? OK, perhaps I shouldn't go to that place, perhaps it's enough to be grateful that I've become this sort of mist. Yes, that's what it most feels like; I'm some sort of shapeless (no

change there, then) mist. I belong together but I'm formed of tiny malleable particles.

But I'm running ahead of myself (well, not *running* exactly, due to the absence of legs) because, on the ascent, I thought I was mainly brain, or mind anyway, didn't notice myself as a physical presence at all. It was what happened at the top that changed things. I had a sense of 'arriving'; not because the landscape changed much, or St Peter burst through some pearly gates exclaiming, 'Cassina, what took you so long?' but because I began to slow down, like a train does when it approaches a station. I felt it as inevitable that I was going to stop as it had been inevitable that I had been propelled upwards. And although, as I've said, I'm not a great one for believing in God, I was expecting a welcoming committee of some sort. Because *someone*, I reckoned, must have wanted me somewhere other than that station concrete, or why all that pulling or pushing? No such thing as a free flight in space, right? Wrong.

I did stop, I remember that; the agreeable feeling of being at rest, of having arrived. But what was my destination? A starless galaxy, high and dark and cold and spacious. Not unpleasant, merely vacant, absent, like a universe that hadn't been born yet. It felt like being inside some cosmic tinderbox that was patiently, oh, so patiently, waiting for a spark to bring it to life. It occurred to me (grandiose, I know) that maybe I was supposed to be that spark, that that was my purpose, what I'd been sent for. You'll see a theme here, my constant expectation that *someone's* in control, in charge, that things have to have meaning and purpose. More than that—that *I* have a purpose, and that, in this case, my purpose was to switch on this new universe much as a celebrity might switch on the Christmas lights in Oxford Street. Well, that's not quite how it turned out.

I'd only had a moment or two to scan my new playground and think my grand thoughts, when I fell. 'Fell' would be a bit of a mild description. I plummeted, I hurtled, I vortexed in a downward direction. Someone, (here we go again) *something*, reversed the gravity switch. I whirlwinded about. This is when I realized I must have a physical presence after all because I could feel myself being sundered, driven apart. The little, wettish particles which had followed me on my upward journey like some gloomy cloud were now following me downwards, only now they were spinning apart. I was spinning apart—and that was painful. Imagine yourself in the drum of a giant washing machine, only instead of water being wrung out of the holes, it's bits of you. So I had to grab for myself, centripetal myself, call all my little droplets together. It gave a whole new meaning to my father's favourite phrase: 'Pull yourself together, Cassina.' I pulled and cajoled and begged myself together, and eventually—eventually—the drum stopped turning.

But I didn't; I still felt like I was revolving. But maybe I was evolving: Cassina Dixon, solid thirteen-year-old hominid becomes small, exhausted patch of mist. Mind you, considering what happened next, that was the good news.