Opening extract from

The Year of the Rat

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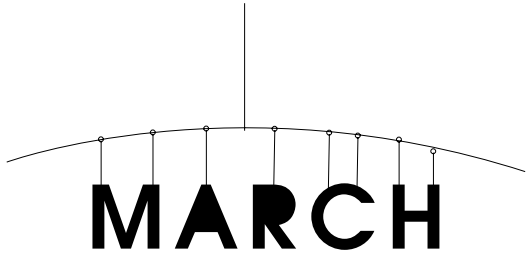
MARCH

The traffic light glows red through the rainy windscreen, blurred, clear, blurred again, as the wipers swish to and fro. Below it, in front of us, is the hearse. I try not to look at it.

My hands fidget as though they don't belong to me, picking at a loose thread on my sleeve, stretching my skirt down so that it covers more of my legs. Why did I wear it? It's way too short for a funeral. The silence is making me panicky, but I can't think of anything to say.

I sneak a sideways look at Dad, his face blank and still as a mask. What's he thinking? About Mum? Maybe he's just trying to find something to say, like me.

'You should do your seat belt up,' I say at last, too loud.

He starts and looks at me in surprise, as though he'd forgotten I was there.

'What?'

I feel stupid, as though I've interrupted something important.

'Your seat belt,' I mutter, cheeks burning.

'Oh. Yes.' Then, 'Thanks.'

But I know he's not really listening. It's as though he's listening to another conversation, one that I can't hear. He doesn't do his seat belt up.

We're like two statues, side by side in the back of the car, grey and cold.

We're nearly there, just pulling up outside the church, when he puts a hand on my arm, looks me in the eye. His face is lined and pale.

'Are you OK, Pearl?'

I stare back at him. Is that really the best he can do?

'Yes,' I say eventually.

Then I get out of the car and walk into the church without him.

I always thought you'd know, somehow, if something terrible was going to happen. I thought you'd sense it, like when the air goes damp and heavy before a storm and you know you'd better hide yourself away somewhere safe until it all blows over.

But it turns out it's not like that at all. There's no scary music playing in the background like in

films. No warning signs. Not even a lonely magpie. *One for sorrow*, Mum used to say. *Quick, look for another.*

The last time I saw her was in the kitchen, an apron tight over her enormous bump, surrounded by cake tins and mixing bowls, bags of sugar and flour. She would have looked quite the domestic goddess if it hadn't been for the obscenities she was bellowing at the ancient stove, which belched smoke back at her.

'Mum?' I said cautiously. 'What are you doing?'

She turned on me, pink-faced, her red hair wilder than ever and streaked with flour.

'The tango, Pearl,' she shouted, waving a spatula at me. 'Synchronized swimming. Bell-ringing. What does it look like I'm doing?'

'I only asked,' I said. 'Don't get your knickers in a twist.'

Which wasn't a wise move. Mum looked like she might actually explode.

'I'm baking a frigging cake.'

Except she didn't say frigging.

'But you can't cook,' I pointed out reasonably.

She gave me a glare that would have peeled the paint off the walls, if it hadn't already flaked away a hundred years ago. 'That oven is possessed by the devil.'

'Well, it's not my fault, is it? You were the one who insisted on moving into a falling-down wreck of a house where nothing works. We had a perfectly good oven in our old house. And a roof that didn't leak. And heating that actually *heated* instead of just clanking.'

'All right, all right. You've made your point.' She examined an angry red stripe down the side of her hand.

'Perhaps you should run that under the tap.'

'Yes, thank you, Pearl,' she snapped, 'for the benefit of your medical expertise.'

But she hoisted herself over to the sink anyway, still swearing under her breath.

'Aren't pregnant women supposed to be all serene?' I said. 'Glowing with inner joy and all that?'

'No.' She winced as she held her hand under the cold water. 'They're supposed to be fat and prone to unpredictable mood swings.'

'Oh.' I suppressed a smile, partly because I felt sorry for her, and partly because I wasn't quite sure where the spatula might end up if I didn't.

There was a muffled snort of laughter from the hallway.

'I don't know what you think you're laughing at,' Mum shouted at the kitchen door. Dad's head appeared from behind it.

‘Laughing?’ he said, eyes wide and innocent. ‘No, not me. I was just coming to congratulate you on mastering the mood swings so magnificently.’

Mum glared at him.

‘Although, from memory,’ he said, keeping well out of reach, ‘you were pretty good at them before you were pregnant.’

For a moment I thought she was going to throw a saucepan at him. But she didn’t. She just stood in the middle of the dilapidated, egg-shell-strewn, cocoa-smeared kitchen and laughed and laughed until there were tears streaming down her face and none of us were really sure whether she was laughing or crying. Dad went over and held her hands.

‘Sit down, will you?’ he said, leading her over to a chair. ‘I’ll make you a cup of tea. You’re supposed to be taking it easy.’

‘Bloody hormones.’ She wiped her eyes.

‘Are you sure that’s all it is?’ Dad sat down next to her, looking anxious. ‘Are you sure you’re OK?’

‘Don’t fuss,’ she said, smiling. ‘I’m fine. Really. It’s just – well, look at me. I’m already so huge I practically need my own postcode. God only knows what I’ll be like in another two months. And my ankles look like they belong to an old lady. It’s most disconcerting.’

‘It’ll all be worth it,’ Dad said.

'I know,' she said, her hands on her bump. 'Little Rose. She'll be worth it.'

Then they sat smiling at each other nauseatingly.

'Oh *yes*,' I said, grinning. 'All those sleepless nights and smelly nappies. It'll be well worth it.'

I pulled my jacket from where it was hanging on the back of a chair and turned to go.

'Are you off out?' Mum said.

'Yes. I'm meeting Molly.'

'Pearl, wait,' Mum said. 'Come here.'

She held her arms out and smiled, and it was just like it always was with Mum. However unreasonable she'd been, and however much you tried not to forgive her, she'd sort of dazzle you into it.

'Sorry, love. I shouldn't have shouted at you before. I've got a splitting headache, but I shouldn't have taken it out on you. I'm a miserable old crone.'

I smiled. 'Yes you are.'

'Do you forgive me?'

I dipped my finger into the bowl of chocolate cake mix on the table and tasted it. It was surprisingly good. 'Definitely not.' I leaned over her bump and gave her a peck on the cheek. 'Put your old lady feet up. Watch some crap telly, will you? Give the poor baby a bit of peace and quiet for once.'

She laughed and took my hand. 'Stay and have a cup of tea with me before you go.'

'I really can't. We're going to the cinema. Molls has booked the tickets.' I gave her hand a squeeze. 'I'll see you later.'

But I was wrong.

It's cold in the church. I hide my hands inside my sleeves to keep warm, but as the service goes on the chill starts to feel as though it's inside me. I imagine ice crystals forming in my veins. All around me there are people crying, but I can't feel anything, except cold.

It's all wrong. Mum would have hated it: the solemn music, the droning voice of the priest. I don't listen. I'm still trying to work out how I got here: how the world tipped and I slipped out of my comfortable, predictable life and landed here, in this cold, unfamiliar place.

At last it's nearly over. Everyone's singing the final, dreary hymn, but I can't join in. I just stand, jaw clenched, wondering why I'm still not crying, panic rising inside me. Why can't I cry? Will people notice and think I don't care? I untuck my hair from behind my ears and let it fall like a long dark curtain around my face. The coffin goes past, all shiny brass and lilies, the smell of them sweet and overpowering. Why lilies? They look so stiff and formal. Mum loved flowers that grew wherever they pleased. Honeysuckle tangled pink

and yellow in hedges. The neon flash of poppies on motorway verges.

And suddenly I know that she's here. I *know* that if I look round I'll see her all alone in the middle of the furthest pew, and she'll wave and give me a big grin and blow me a kiss, like I'm five and in the infant school nativity play. My heart pounds till I'm light-headed. My hands are shaking.

I turn round.

I see rows and rows of sombre, dark-clothed people. I stand on tiptoes to see beyond them. Molly's there with her mum, red-eyed. She sees me looking and gives me a sad smile. I don't smile back.

The furthest pew is empty.

Outside, the rain has stopped. I stand, breathing in the damp, fresh air, trying not to be noticed while Dad is surrounded by a gaggle of dark-clothed people. A tall woman wearing a hat like a dead crow is telling him how sorry she is. He's not listening though. I can see his hand edging to his pocket for his phone. He wants to call the hospital to find out how the baby is, I know he does. When he's not actually with her, which is hardly ever, he phones practically every hour. I can tell he's panicking about what might happen if he doesn't. Even now, when all he should be thinking about is Mum.

I hang back as the group makes its way down the hill, keeping away from all the hat ladies and their sympathy, putting off the silent journey to the cemetery. By the time I get to the shiny black funeral parlour car, Dad's already inside, waiting for me. I look in through the window, but I can't see him properly behind the darkened glass, just the shape of him framed by my own reflection. My face is distorted, long and thin. My eyes, close to the glass, are huge. They're the one bit of me that looks like Mum. I always wanted her hair. *Do you know how much stick I got at school for being a redhead?* she'd say. But I did get her eyes: green, dark-lashed. For a moment it's as if she's staring at me through the window.

'I've got to go back,' I say. 'I've left my umbrella.' Dad can't hear me, but instead of opening the window he says something to me; I can make out his lips moving silently on the other side of the glass. For a moment we stare at each other helplessly. He might as well be on the other side of the world.

We've always been so close, me and Dad. I hated it when people called him my stepdad. Right from my earliest memories he's always been my dad. I didn't think anything could change that.

I can pinpoint the moment it happened. We were standing next to the baby's incubator. It was two hours after Mum died.

'Just look at her,' he whispered. I didn't know if he was talking to himself or to me, but even though I didn't want to, and my hands were shaking and I felt sick, I made myself look.

In my mind I could still see the dimpled, blonde, nappy-advert baby I'd imagined when Mum first told me she was pregnant, the baby me and Molly had picked out tiny shoes, dresses and furry sleepsuits with teddy bear ears for.

Then I saw *her*. And for a split second all I could think of was how, when I was five, our cat Soot had kittens. I'd been excited for weeks. I'd told everyone at school and Mum had given me a special book explaining how to look after them. Each night before I went to sleep I'd look at the pictures of those kittens: fluffy, wide-eyed. Then one day Mum took me into the back room and pointed to an open drawer at the bottom of the dresser. And there were these pink, wrinkly little rats, squirming blindly, and I looked at Mum in horror because I thought there'd been some terrible mistake; but she just stood there smiling and not understanding, and I ran out of the room crying because I hated them.

And, as I looked down at the mass of tubes, the paper-thin, purple-veined skin, the skeletal, alien creature inside the incubator, I realized it wasn't shock making me tremble. It wasn't grief. It was hate: big and dark and terrifying. And I felt like I was falling and I

needed something to hold on to, and I was so scared and I turned to Dad—

And he was hunched over her, the rat baby, *the reason Mum was dead*, focused on her as though she was the only thing in the world.

And all I wanted to do was hurt him. 'You love her more than you love me, don't you?' My voice came out clear and cold. 'Because—' I made myself say it. 'Because she's yours and I'm not.'

And it worked. He flinched. It was as if I'd hit him.

'How can you think that?' His eyes were wide with the shock of it. He took hold of my arms. 'You're my *daughter*. You know I could never love anyone more than you.'

And he was right. I *had* always known it. The biology of it had never made any difference. But now . . .

I broke myself free of his hold and turned away from him. What did his tears matter now?

He loved her.

Hours later, we drove home from the hospital through familiar, unreal London streets. It was already light: a sleepy Sunday morning, curtains drawn. The sky was clear blue, frosty rooftops glinting in pale, cold sunlight.

Dad opened the front door and behind it was our life, like an exhibit in a museum: perfectly preserved, hundreds of years old.

I walked through to the kitchen, trying to ignore Mum's discarded slippers on the hall floor, the photo on the fridge of us in Wales last summer.

Sitting in the middle of the kitchen table was the chocolate cake.

We stared at it, dazed. How could it still be there? Perfect and round and delicious. The flour she sieved, the eggs she beat.

And it was like something collapsed inside Dad. I could see it: sudden, but in slow motion, unstoppable, like an avalanche. He made this weird noise – a sob or a shout, scared and angry. Then he picked up the cake and threw it at the wall. Thick dark gobbets splattered and oozed and slid slowly down the wall.

I looked at the shattered mess. And something broke inside me too.

'She made that! She made it for us!' I was screaming, but it didn't sound like me. I ran at Dad and pushed him in the chest so hard he staggered backwards, eyes wide with shock. Then I ran out of the room.

And suddenly, with a force that scared me, I wished it was him that was dead.

Back in the church, I walk up the aisle to where we were sitting. It seems huge in here now it's empty. I kneel down to pick up my umbrella and put it in my bag. For

a moment I feel so heavy and tired I think I can't get up again. It feels comfortable here. The silence isn't stifling like it was in the car. Just peaceful. I close my eyes and bow my head. I don't pray or anything. I just feel the dark pressing against my eyelids. I don't want to go back outside. I don't want to sit in that car with Dad, go to the cemetery, eat dry, curly sandwiches with everyone like at Nanna Pam's funeral. I can't. I just want to kneel here with my eyes closed.

But Dad's waiting outside.

With an effort I stand up and turn to go.

And there she is. Sitting all alone in the middle of the furthest pew.

Her eyes are fixed on me and for a moment I catch a look on her face I've never seen before: a fierce look of joy and longing. But as our eyes meet it vanishes. She smiles and stands up, holds out her arms to me.

I can't move. I don't dare. Any sudden movement and she might take flight like a bird or fade into the shadows. I hardly let myself breathe.

'It's OK,' she says and despite the smile there's a catch in her voice. 'It's only me.'

At last, slowly, I walk towards her. The click of my shoes echoes quietly into the still church. I reach the back pew and I stand facing her, just staring, taking in every last detail: her red curls twisted untidily up in a

clip, the tiny amber flecks in her green eyes, the frayed laces of her old baseball boots.

'What are you doing here?' It comes out as a whisper.

For a second she's silent. Then she laughs, till it rings round the church right up to the vaulted stone of the roof, happy peals of it filling the cold space around us.

'It's my *funeral*, Pearl. Of course I'm here.'

My head is spinning. I put my hand on the pew to steady myself. Mum's here. I can see her.

'But you're . . .'

I can't say it.

'Dead?' She grimaces comically. 'Well, yes. That *is* the downside of attending one's own funeral.'

I stare at her, outraged.

'Don't you joke about it,' I shout. 'Don't you *dare*.'

My anger echoes round the dark hollows above us.

She doesn't say anything, just reaches out and cups my face in her hands and watches me silently till her fingers are wet with my tears. Then she pulls me to her and hugs me tight, kisses my hair.

I can't speak. Great sobs rise from deep inside me, shaking my whole body. Even when the tears stop, I keep my face pressed into her. I know it can't be real, but I don't care. Somehow she's here. I breathe her in, the warm, familiar smell of her.

'How?' I try to say, but she doesn't answer. I don't ask again. Asking might break the spell. And anyway perhaps I don't want to know. I must be mad. Or perhaps I'm dreaming and if I think about it too hard I'll wake up.

I don't care. It doesn't matter. She's here.

Then I push her away.

'Why did you miss that midwife appointment? They said if you'd gone they'd have known something was wrong. They'd have done tests. Why didn't you tell someone you were feeling ill?'

She shrugs impatiently. 'It was just a headache for God's sake. I didn't know it was serious.'

I look at her and more tears slide down my cheeks. 'You didn't even say goodbye.'

'I know.'

She says it quietly and I'm suddenly scared.

'Is that why you're here? To say goodbye?'

She doesn't say anything, just smiles a little. But the smile makes her look sad. Then she sits down, deflated.

'Oh, Pearl, I'm sorry. What a fucking mess.'

'*Mum!*'

'What?'

'We're in church.'

'Yes, about that,' says Mum, 'whose idea was it to give me a full bloody requiem mass? It went on for

hours. By the end of it, I bet everyone was wishing it was them in the coffin.'

'Well, Granny suggested it actually—'

Mum rolls her eyes. 'Oh,' she says. 'Oh *well*. Yes. I might have known. Interfering as usual. You know what she's like.'

I shrug. I haven't seen Granny since I was a little kid. I can't even really remember her. Mum and her didn't exactly Get Along. Dad would phone her every now and then when Mum was out. She'd pretend not to know he kept in touch. 'Dad says she's really upset—'

'Oh, she is, is she? I notice she couldn't actually be bothered to turn up. I suppose she had something more important to do. One of her Pilates classes, was it? Her weekly manicure? Or was my funeral not worth forking out the train fare down from Scotland for?'

I stare at her in wonder. She's dead. She's here. And she's still having a go at Granny.

'Mum—' I've heard the rant she's about to launch into a million times before, but there's no stopping her.

'She never liked me, Pearl. Never thought I was good enough for her precious son. Horrible single mother turning up with a mewling, snotty baby—'

'Excuse me, that's *me* you're talking about.'

'Stealing her darling boy away. She's probably breaking open the champagne as we speak.'

'Actually, Dad told her he thought it would be best if she didn't come, what with everything that's gone on. He said he wasn't sure you'd want her there. She did send some flowers.'

'Oh. Well.' Mum looks taken aback and sits down again, unsure what to say for once.

'Anyway, you can't just blame Granny. Dad agreed it was for the best. Having it in church I mean. I told him you wouldn't like it, but he said *just in case.* You know. Doesn't do any harm, does it?' I looked at her, wondering suddenly. 'Or does it?'

Mum sighs. 'It's always so bloody cold in church.' She shivers and reaches absently into a pocket, bringing out a packet of cigarettes.

'*Mum!*'

'What? Oh right. Yes. Church.' She shrugs. 'It's my funeral.'

She smirks at her joke and looks hopefully at me to see if I'm laughing too.

I'm not.

'You've given up, remember?'

She gives me a look.

'Pearl, give me a break. One of the few advantages of being dead is that you can *finally* stop giving things up.'

And of course she's not pregnant any more. I push the thought away. I don't want to think about The Rat. I certainly don't want to talk about her. I want Mum to myself.

She takes a long drag and blows a smoke ring. We watch it together as it floats upwards, expanding, growing fainter and fainter until it's gone.

How can she be here? The question still echoes round my head; but there's something more important that I need to know.

'How long can you stay?' I whisper it, hardly daring to say the words out loud.

She's about to speak when the church door slams, echoing loudly. The sound makes me jump and I spin round to see Dad.

'Come on, we've got to go,' he says impatiently. 'We can't keep everyone waiting.'

I whirl back to where Mum was standing, but I know already that she's gone.

'What are you doing in here anyway?' Dad asks.

'What?' I stare at him blankly, hardly hearing him. She's gone. It's all I can think of. There were so many things I needed to ask her. And now I might never see her again. 'Why did you come back?' he says, his voice gentler.

'I left something behind,' I say, fighting back tears.

'Did you find it?'

'Yes,' I say, following him out of the church. 'I found it.'

As I step through the door, I look back to the space where Mum had been.

A shaft of light streams suddenly through a stained-glass window above me, making a pool of rainbow colour on the stone floor.

The sun has come out.