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opening extract from

something invisible

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The Daisy follows soft the Sun –
And when his golden walk is done –
Sits shyly at his feet.
He – waking – finds the flower there –
Wherefore – Marauder – art thou here?
Because, Sir, love is sweet!

Emily Dickinson

1

Nobody ever blamed Jake for what happened.

2

Except himself.

3

But let's go back to the beginning.

4

There was a girl at the bus stop. She looked about Jake's age, or maybe a bit older. He didn't usually notice girls much, except to make a mental note to avoid them. That was because he found they generally acted superior, which unsettled him. But he noticed this one because she was so thin. Not undernourished thin. More sort of greyhound thin. Her long, wispy hair was pale brown or dark blonde, no colour really; that made her even more greyhoundish.

She had two of those very green shopping bags, the ones that last for ever, one dragging her right arm down and one on the ground, between her feet. Two younger children who were playing on the pavement behind seemed to be vaguely attached to her. They never looked at her, nor she at them; nor did they speak to each other. But somehow Jake knew they were together. Something invisible linked them.

The bag at her feet had a tube of aluminium

foil in it, the extra-big kind, for turkeys, which was too long to balance properly among the rest of the shopping. Jake noticed that she tipped at it with her knee, to keep it from falling over.

She was waiting for the same bus as he was, but when it came it was full to bursting, and the driver only allowed two people on board, Jake and an old lady on an aluminium stick that had three little legs with rubber feet. The girl and the younger children pressed forward and looked hopeful, but the driver shook his head and pointed over his shoulder, to indicate that there was another bus coming soon.

Jake dithered for a moment. He ought to let the girl on instead of him – not because she was a girl, but because of all the shopping – only there wouldn't be room for the children too, and they would only get in the way of the woman on the funny stick, trip her up, even. She didn't look as if she could cope with small children getting tangled in her stick.

So in the end he got on the bus and squirmed his way into a gap between two tall people. He didn't have much space, but at least he could see out of the window. He watched as the thin girl transferred the bag with the long tube of foil in it to her hand, and put the other bag, which looked lumpy and heavier, at her feet instead. She put her chin to the top of the foil carton to steady it and

shuffled her feet to make space for the other bag between them. Then Jake's bus drifted away from the bus stop and he lost sight of her.

5

He swam up out of a dream in the night and thought, someone should tell her about the other kind of aluminium foil you can get. It comes in a shorter roll, like cling film, which makes it easier to manage in your shopping bag. Though she might be going to cook a turkey, of course, in which case maybe she needed the longer foil. He didn't know much about cooking.

6

His mother woke him in the morning, as she always did, by chucking his curtains open. He flung his arm over his eyes to shut out the painful sunlight. She drew the top sheet over his head and said, 'OK, you can take your arm away now.' Under the sheet, he moved his arm gingerly away from his face and opened his eyes. His eyelashes brushed the fabric of the sheet, which filtered the light. The smell of washing powder and fabric conditioner mingled with his own slight whiff in his nostrils. Slowly, he slid the sheet down and faced the daylight.

His mother was standing at an angle, looking out of the window, but partly turned towards the room, and him. Her body was outlined against the light. She'd got awfully fat lately, heavy and slow, but her hair was the same as ever, wild and rich and bright. He liked looking at her, blurred against the sunshine. It made her seem more herself. He couldn't explain it, but it made him want to touch

her, to put out a hand and stroke her arm or finger her hair.

He wouldn't, though. That'd be soppy.

'Come on, Jake, breakfast time,' she said, turning towards him. She sounded tired. 'Hot or cold milk on your cornflakes?'

'Hot,' he said. 'Thanks,' he added.

By the time he got downstairs, though, the milk was only lukewarm. There's a lot to do in the mornings. He'd read that you should brush your teeth before breakfast, for example, not after, and that took time, among other things.

'Do you think a person could have a job making up colour names?' Jake asked as he dug into the lukewarm cereal, hardly realizing he was speaking aloud.

He'd been thinking about it for a while. He often thought about things that didn't seem to occur to other people. Not that this was a job he thought he would like to have himself, because he was going to be a fish painter when he grew up, but he wondered all the same about where the paint names came from.

'Colours already have names,' his dad said. He was one of the other people who didn't seem to think about the kinds of things that Jake thought about. He was eating toast and reading the paper, in that jolly, Dad-ish, what-a-lot-of-endearing-rubbish-you-think way. 'Red, orange, yellow . . .'

Breakfast was the only meal where you were allowed to read in Jake's family, but Jake never wanted to read at the table; he preferred talking. Thinking and talking were his favourite things, next to football and fish.

'No,' said Jake. 'I mean, like on paint cards: "Applemint", "Aqua", "Sunburst", "Cinnabar".' You had to spell things out for Dad.

'Donkey,' said his dad.

'I know what you mean,' said Jake. 'A sort of greyish brown. Or brownish grey.'

'No, I mean, that's what you are.' His dad grinned stupidly. 'A donkey. Hee-haw.'

Jake ignored this, or pretended to. 'Stickleback,' he added.

'Stickleback?'

'They go blue,' Jake explained. 'The males. And red. But mostly blue.'

'People wouldn't know that,' his dad said. '*Normal* people, I mean, about sticklebacks going blue, so it wouldn't mean anything.'

'They would know it,' said Jake reasonably, 'even normal people, if they'd got our encyclopedia, the one we have at school. There's a picture of a stickleback when it goes blue. Anyway, "Cinnabar" doesn't mean anything either. Or "Aqua". Water is colourless – usually. That's how you can see the fish so clearly.'

Jake had a fish tank in his room. There were

tropical fish in it, scarlet and royal blue and zebra striped, and rocks with fronds and pieces of coral (not real coral, as far as he knew) and grit in the bottom and a thing shaped like a sugar cane that bubbled. He liked to look at the tropical fish, from time to time, because they were pretty, but he wasn't especially interested in them – they were like slowly moving wallpaper – and he wouldn't have bothered with a fish tank himself. He was more interested in real fish. But he never let on to his dad, because the tank had been a present for his last birthday and Dad was dead proud of having bought him such a cool present.

Jake's dad tried pretty hard to be mates with him, and Jake tried to remember to appreciate that. Sometimes it was tough going.

'What makes them go blue?' his dad asked now.

'Fatherhood,' Jake said.

Jake's dad coughed. He coughed and coughed and splattered toast crumbs all over his plate. Jake ran the tap and filled a glass of water for him.

'Here,' he said. 'Drink this. Aqua, haitch-two-oh, a colourless liquid, key substance for life on earth, boiling point one hundred degrees, freezing point zero.'

He'd learnt that from the encyclopedia, the one at school with the blue stickleback picture in it. He liked encyclopedias. He usually took one down from the shelf during Reading Time on Fridays.

The girls always read storybooks. That was another reason he didn't much like girls, the way they were always reading stories. He bet they did it just to please the teachers. Teachers thought you were great if you liked reading stories. But Jake had noticed that teachers were mostly girls, or used to be, which probably explained this.

'Did you know that a litre of water weighs a kilo?' Jake said, watching as his dad drank the water.

'No,' said Dad. 'That's extraordinary. What a coincidence!'

Jake sighed. There was no point in talking to some people. They just didn't get it.

Dad stood up from the table and jerked his arms a few times, to make the tips of his shirt cuffs appear out from under the sleeves of his jacket. That meant he was getting ready to leave for work.

'Good lad,' he said, catching Jake's eye watching him.

Jake didn't know what he'd done to deserve this kindly form of address, but he nodded gravely all the same and tried to look as if he was indeed an excellent lad that any father would be proud of.

Lavender Dusk, he thought, as his dad left the room. He'd seen this weird poppy yesterday at the edge of the football pitch, not a wild one, but growing wild. If there were a paint the colour of the poppy, that's what he'd call it.

'Lavender Dusk,' he said, trying the sound of it aloud.

The front door banged.

He asked his mother what that made her think of.

'Lavender Dusk? Sounds like a lipstick,' she said unpoetically. She was often unpoetic; he'd noticed that about her, though she was supposed to be a poet.

'Oh!' said Jake, taken aback. Disappointed.

It did. That spoilt it.