

1

SHE BELIEVED THERE were two types of disaster. There were catastrophes like tidal waves and landslides that came crashing down on their victims with brutal and unavoidable force. Then there was the type of disaster that happened without fanfare, the terrible thing that crept up and slithered in. This thing was silent and relentless like decay but its accumulated effects were devastating. It not only destroyed your life but it also left you feeling impotent and guilty as if you should have noticed earlier and done more to prevent its advance.

Ricky's disaster had arrived with stealth. At first, the changes were minor and she had resisted in small ways. She'd worried but trouble had seemed like a distant possibility, so she didn't go all out to protect what she had. But things kept disintegrating and falling away until she realised it was too late to do anything. Now her father was packing things into boxes and she was powerless to stop him. She struggled to understand this change, to rearrange the way she thought and felt. But it wasn't any use. The undoing of her family and her life in Brixton was like the drip, drip, drip of water on stone, the wearing away of solid particles by soft persistence until finally there was a hole.

In the move to Camden, Ricky suffered a great loss. It was a yawning emptiness that terrified and disoriented her but what came in its place, the unspeakable slithery thing that inveigled itself, was far worse than any of her losses.

She heard Dan slam the back of the rental truck and leaned over the driver's seat to look in the wing mirror. It was a quick glance but he was already there, as if anticipating her. He raised his eyebrows and smiled at her reflection. She quickly sat up again.

He rapped his knuckles on the driver's window. 'Once I get the bike in the back we'll be ready to rock 'n' roll!'

Her mother laughed, which made Ricky want to scream because Dan was about as hilarious as an infection. She considered various diseases before settling on syphilis.

It was hot inside the truck's cab. The backs of Ricky's legs were sticking to the vinyl upholstery. Her ponytail was damp against her neck. She desperately wanted short hair, a boy's number three, but her mother said no. The ponytail was a compromise.

'How long is it going to take to get to King's Crescent?' Ricky asked for the sixth time.

‘You know exactly how long it’s going to take,’ her mother replied. ‘That must be the fifth time you’ve asked.’

‘Sixth,’ corrected Ollie.

Ricky elbowed her brother.

‘Stop shoving him, Vicky.’ Her mother reached over Ollie to put a hand on her knee.

She shook it off. ‘The name’s Ricky.’

‘Actually, your name is Victoria. It was your grandmother’s name.’

The previous day Ricky had decided her name had to go. ‘If you insist on moving us to Camden, then I insist on a new name.’

‘You know why we’re moving.’

‘Why we’re leaving Dad, you mean.’

Ricky slid her hand into the pocket of her cargo shorts where her fingers curled around the container of junior multivitamins. They were a moving gift from her father. She needed to stay healthy and strong, he told her.

Her mother was looking at her. ‘We’ll still be in London.’

‘The rubbish part of London.’ Ricky imagined the King’s Crescent Estate as a hostile wasteland populated by thugs and crooks. They would swear loudly and have homemade tattoos. Ricky wanted a tattoo about as much as she wanted head lice. They would have plenty of those on the estate, too.

‘Don’t make this more difficult than it already is.’ Her mother sighed. ‘We all need a change.’

‘No, *you* want a change.’

‘You know it wasn’t working with your father. He wasn’t working for a start. He hasn’t had a proper job for a long time.’ Her mother’s voice was getting higher and higher. ‘You know all this.’

‘Dad works really hard on the allotment.’

‘That’s not work.’

‘Dad’s a gardener.’

‘He’s a gardener who doesn’t work.’

‘You’re moving us to Camden so you can be closer to your new boyfriend.’

‘Don’t blame Dan. He’s been really good to me. To all of us.’

‘You hardly know the man. If it wasn’t for him turning up you might have tried harder with Dad.’

‘I did try hard. You know very well how hard I tried. You were there, Vicky.’

‘Ricky.’

Her mother tilted her head. ‘Okay, I’ll call you Ricky if you make an effort with Dan.’

Ricky studied her mother through one eye. What was wrong with the woman? Couldn’t she see what Dan was like? All that fake smiling and flashing of his strangely pointy teeth. Her mother said he had beautiful eyes but they were set too far apart. He may as well have been a bald eagle or a hammerhead shark. His other appearance crimes were a hipster beard and straggly, sandy hair that he sometimes wore in a man bun. *A man bun!* Had her mother gone mad?

The driver’s door opened. Dan’s sweaty man-smell filled the cab, a mixture of hot metal and dog breath. ‘Camden, here we come!’

Ricky squeezed closer to her brother as Dan climbed inside, swinging himself up with the hand grip above the door to noisily settle himself in the driver’s seat. As he dug in his pocket for the keys,

his elbow bumped against the side of her chest. It was like a jolt of electricity, sending a rush of charged electrons surging through her body, aggressive and uninvited.

She jumped and let out a sound.

‘Oops.’ Dan raised his eyebrows comically. ‘My bad.’

She felt her mother’s hand on her knee. ‘Stop being dramatic.’

Ricky stayed pressed against Ollie but sat up as the truck started moving. She had lived on the small council estate in Brixton all her life and loved every inch of it: the allotment, Brockwell Park with its crooked old oak, the overripe fruit smell of Electric Avenue, the way people were all different but everyone got along, mostly.

As the truck idled in traffic outside Brixton Station, she scanned the crowd gathered near the mouth of the Tube. Summer holidays had started in Lambeth, two days earlier than Camden. She pictured her friends meeting up in Brockwell Park, laughing and shouting. Summer in the park was magic. She thought of the Lambeth Country Show and felt her throat tighten painfully. Every year she visited the funfair in the park with her father. She couldn’t remember a summer when they hadn’t gone together. It was their special thing.

The engine shuddered. The truck started moving again.

Her brother gave her a small, nervous smile. At least the seating positions made it difficult for him to talk to Dan.

‘How fast can this truck go?’ asked Ollie.

The little swine was leaning forward. He was smiling at the enemy.

‘It can go a million miles an hour.’ Dan laughed. ‘But I’ll stick to fifty.’

Ricky added ‘liar’ and ‘con artist’ to Dan’s crimes. She closed her eyes. If Ollie was going to stick a knife in her father’s back, she was going to pretend he didn’t exist.

Ricky was roused by loud beeping. They were in the middle of a large estate with a mixture of buildings, modern low-rise blocks of flats and mid-century, red-brick towers. The concrete of the pavement was a white glare under the bright midday sun. Weeds were growing between the paving stones. Nothing was moving, not even the leaves of the London plane trees on either side of the road. The place looked barren and uninhabited. Ricky could almost feel the air crackling with bad intentions.

At first glance, the long, pale-brick building didn’t look terrible. Panels of white cladding had been recently added to freshen up its façade. Each of its three storeys had a communal balcony that fed into a central stairway. Ricky knew from the council plans that their flat was on the first floor.

Ollie was sleeping and began to whine that he was feeling sick as her mother undid his seatbelt. While Dan started unloading the truck, they followed their mother up the grubby steps to a scratched grey door with a spyhole. Ricky’s mother was still fiddling with the keys when a pretty girl in a school uniform came up the steps behind them.

‘Hello, what’s your name and how old are you?’ asked Ollie. ‘Do you live here?’

‘Yes,’ said the girl, her eyes widening. They were brown and, unlike Dan’s, they were located in normal positions on her face. ‘My name’s Samia. I’m twelve.’

‘My name’s Oliver Cromwell Bird. I am six years old and I’m going to start a new school in September.’ Ollie was being very talkative for someone who was supposed to be sick.

‘His real name is Oliver Edward Bird,’ Ricky corrected. ‘Oliver Cromwell’ was their private joke, something she called him when he was being treacherous.

‘If you can change your name, I can change mine.’ He turned his back on Ricky but then said something that made her want to kiss him. ‘This is my big sister. Her name is Ricky. It is not Victoria. She is twelve.’

‘I’m more or less thirteen, a teenager.’

Samia nodded shyly before knocking on the door next to theirs. It opened and the face of a fierce-looking woman appeared. She frowned at Ricky before pulling Samia inside.

‘Finally!’ Her mother managed to push open the door. She gasped. ‘Oh, god, no!’

The first thing Ricky noticed was the smell. It was sour milk, dirty nappies and old fish and chips. Sour, putrid and fatty. There was rubbish everywhere.

They were standing in the flat’s kitchen and it was the messiest room Ricky had ever seen. Drawers and cupboards were hanging open. There were wrappers scattered over the countertops and half-empty takeaway containers piled in the sink. A tinfoil tray of tomato pasta was covered with long, green fibres of mould. Something white, a thick sauce of some kind, had been spilled or thrown over the cupboards and had dribbled to the floor.

Ricky followed as her mother moved trance-like through the living and dining room, and then down the hall to the bathroom before visiting each of the three bedrooms. The corner bedroom with windows on two sides was Ricky’s. She knew it was hers because she’d chosen it from the floor plan. The room was bright but, like the others, its carpet was littered with paper and plastic. A ripped curtain was hanging off a broken rail. There was a collapsed pine bookshelf in the corner. Ricky ran her hand along its surface as she walked over to a window. Below their building was a playground. It was deserted and looked miserable, nothing like the massive adventure playground they’d left behind in Brixton.

‘Don’t cry, Mummy,’ said Ollie, tugging her shorts.

‘It’s not that bad,’ Ricky lied. ‘I bet I can fix that bookshelf. I need a bigger one.’

Her mother didn’t move or say anything. The tears had overflowed and were running down her cheeks.

‘There’s a playground.’ Ricky pointed out the window. ‘I could take Ollie down there for a while. It’s got ducks.’

‘Ducks!’ Ollie said, excitedly.

Her mother moved to the window.

The playground was a narrow, fenced-off rectangle that stretched from the pavement to the back of the building. It was flanked on one side by a hedge and had a climbing frame, swings, a seesaw and two brightly coloured plastic ducks on springs. The ducks were dazzling red and blue and had strange long beaks that gave them a crocodile-like appearance. In one corner was a white plastic construction shaped like an igloo.

Ollie was frowning. ‘Those ducks are definitely the wrong colour,’ he said.

Ricky’s brother knew a lot about birds and animals for a little boy. Whenever someone asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, he would say ‘David Attenborough’ as if David Attenborough was a job like a policeman or dental technician.

‘We could paint them,’ said Ricky.

‘They should be white.’

‘I think we should muzzle them. They look like nippers.’

Ollie laughed.

Her mother sniffed. 'What kind of idiot puts plastic ducks and a fake igloo in a London playground? I doubt there's an Eskimo within a thousand miles.'

'Inuit.' Ricky couldn't help herself. 'You're not supposed to call them Eskimos.'

Her mother allowed herself a smile. 'How do you know these things?'

'Dad used to take me to the library, remember?'

Her mother's expression hardened. 'Stay in the playground. Don't let Ollie out of your sight and don't talk to any idiots.'

As they were going down the steps, Dan was coming up carrying two boxes. He smiled and started to ask where they were going, but before Ollie could respond, Ricky tugged him away. She'd been warned not to talk to idiots.

When Ollie pushed open the gate to the playground, Ricky glanced up and saw that her mother had come outside and was standing on the balcony with Dan. Her arms were wrapped around his neck and her cheek was pressed against his chest. She was crying again, her shoulders shaking. He was comforting her, his hand making circles between her shoulder blades.

Ricky watched the way his hand moved and sensed he'd done this before. There had been another woman, perhaps several other women, who had needed comforting. It was like witnessing a car accident or dog fight. Ricky had to close her eyes, scrunch them up until lights flashed behind her eyelids. She felt a tight pain in the centre of her chest and imagined herself fainting, sinking down until her head hit the pavement. She could almost hear the ugly crack of her skull against concrete. The thought of hurting herself and an image of her mother running toward her, shouting her name, steadied her. When she opened her eyes, she realised she wasn't the only one watching her mother and Dan. The neighbour had pushed open her kitchen window and was looking. The fierce woman noticed Ricky and shook her head before disappearing from view.

'I don't want to sit on a duck,' said Ollie. 'It might bite me and I could die.'

'If you sit on one of those stupid ducks the only thing you'll die of is embarrassment,' Ricky said.

'They're murder ducks.'

Ricky laughed. Ollie knew a lot of words for a child and liked to experiment with them, assembling sentences from overheard bits of conversation and television. He didn't care if his word soup made sense. It was one of the best things about him.

She gave him a squeeze as she lifted him onto a swing. He laughed, his silky hair catching the wind as she began to push.

Between shoves, Ricky looked around, desperate to find something, anything, that would take away the dread sitting in her abdomen like a clump of rotting leaves. The world as she knew it had ended and, apart from Ollie, she had nothing solid she could trust. She gave the swing another shove and stood on the tips of her toes.

There! It was a flash of something familiar in the distance.

She raised herself up again. Yes, she was sure. It was the top of a wigwam like the ones her father made out of bamboo. Somewhere near the tower blocks was a vegetable garden.

Ollie complained as she left him swinging to clamber up the climbing frame. The vegetable plot was located near a grove of trees and was bordered on one side by a ragged hedge. The lush, cultivated wedge of land looked out of place on the estate as if it had been photoshopped. It sat awkwardly between two tower blocks yet, despite its isolated setting, Ricky saw that it was south facing, a suntrap. It was neatly fenced and had a wooden shed in the corner by the gate. On one side of the shed was a frame with a climbing rose. It was a yellow rose, like the one her father had trained over the allotment fence.

‘There’s a nice garden over there,’ she said, pointing.

‘An allotment?’ asked Ollie. He loved gardening as much as Ricky and had a particular soft spot for earthworms. ‘Worms never argue or bite,’ he was fond of saying.

‘I’m not sure. It might be a community garden.’

‘Does that mean we can go there?’

‘Let’s not get our hopes up.’ But, of course, her hopes were already rocketing over the top of the towers. If they had access to a garden, summer in Camden wouldn’t be a complete disaster.

Ricky swung down from the climbing frame and walked over to the igloo, kneeling down to sniff the entrance. Surprisingly, it didn’t smell bad. In Brixton it might have reeked of urine or something worse.

‘Dad once slept in an igloo,’ she said, rocking back on her heels.

‘No, he didn’t.’ Ollie was struggling not to look eager to believe her.

‘He did. He went to Iceland with a team of huskies to collect alpine plants.’

‘How many huskies?’ Ollie was a dog man. Iceland and alpine plants were window dressing. It was all about the dogs for him.

‘Sixteen.’

‘Has Dan been to Iceland?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ She wanted to pinch Ollie on the back of his arm. ‘Dan is forbidden to leave the country or go on an expedition because he has a criminal record. He was in prison for two years.’

‘Why?’

Ricky had to invent a really bad crime or Ollie would continue to be nice to him. ‘He stabbed a dog.’

His eyes widened.

‘To death.’ In her mind’s eye, Dan was walking away from a small, lifeless form, a bloody dagger in his hand.

‘What kind of dog?’

‘A Cavalier King Charles spaniel.’

Ollie sighed in such a sad way that she almost told him the truth. She had to grit her teeth and force herself not to say anything. She needed her brother on her team.

The gate clanked.

A big, solid girl with sandy hair had entered the playground. She was tugging a reluctant dog on a lead, a fat black and white Staffie with an elaborate studded collar. The sign on the gate said dogs weren’t allowed inside the playground but the girl didn’t look like she bothered with rules. She had the flattened, pugnacious face of a fighter. Her hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail which sat high on the crown of her head. She was wearing high-waist skinny jeans and a pink t-shirt that matched her pink Nike trainers. She was older than Ricky and had small, defiant breasts.

‘What’s your dog’s name?’ asked Ollie, leaping off the swing.

‘She’s called Baby,’ said the girl, pulling the lead. ‘Don’t touch her. She’s dangerous.’

Before she or Ricky could stop him, Ollie was on the dog, rubbing it behind the ears. The girl tried to haul it away but Baby was too determined and, with a shake of the head, yanked the lead out of the girl’s hand. Whining excitedly, the Staffie leaped on Ollie, knocking him over and making him shriek with laughter.

‘My brother is a dog whisperer,’ Ricky said. ‘Dogs love him.’

'Baby doesn't love him,' said the girl. 'She's just pretending. Baby's a killer.'

Ollie was clearly in no danger. The dog was playfully snuffling and licking his neck. Ollie's laughter rang out over the playground as he ran into the igloo with the dog hot on his heels.

'My name's Ricky and that's my brother Ollie. We've just moved here.'

'From where?'

'Brixton.'

'Brixton?' The girl looked unimpressed. 'You'll need to toughen up if you're going to live in Camden.'

'Lambeth has more murders than Camden. I googled.'

'Ha! I bet you never had anyone murdered on your actual estate though, did you? A boy was actually killed right here. Dead as a doornail.'

'In this playground?'

'No, stupid. In one of the flats.' She lifted her chin. 'A paedo did it.'

'A paedophile?'

'That's what I said.'

'No, you didn't.'

'Shut up.'

The girl knocked angrily on the top of the igloo. When Ollie and Baby emerged, she pounced, grabbing the lead and dragging the dog toward the gate.

'My name's Caitlin Cloney. You better remember it.'

'Why?' asked Ollie.

Caitlin stopped. Her mouth hung open for a moment before she spoke. 'Because you should.'

'But why?' Ollie was an expert at asking questions. 'Are you going to be our friend?'

'No!'

'Can I be friends with your dog?'

'Piss off!'

'You shouldn't use that word.'

'Fuck off then!'

'Your dog doesn't like you.'

'Shut up!'

The gate clanged shut.

Ricky and Ollie looked at each other.

'That dog likes you.'

'Oh, I know that.' Ollie shrugged modestly. 'That girl is ridiculous.'

Caitlin Cloney was ridiculous but her hostility had made Ricky feel even more out of place and insecure. She scanned the grubby buildings and neglected gardens of the estate and ached for the familiar. She thought of the home they had left behind and imagined a new family moving in: bunk beds in her old bedroom, a new sofa in the living room, alphabet magnets on a different fridge in the kitchen.

She looked up at the windows of their new flat. Somewhere inside, Dan was with her mother, possibly touching or even kissing her. This thought sent a tremor of alarm through Ricky. He would visit more often now that they lived close. There would be no escaping him.

Ricky turned around to survey the miserable playground with its garish ducks and plastic igloo. There was nowhere safe here, nowhere to hide. It felt like the end of the world.