

## Shards of Glass

*You throw your shoulder hard into the bathroom door. The bruise will bloom under your skin and stay for weeks. Warped wood keeps the door tightly jammed; the lock has been broken for years. Your parents never bothered to fix it.*

*Clinging to the door as it finally swings open, you stumble over your own feet as they tangle beneath you. The bathroom is hot and damp, and the water vapour drips down the mirror. You are not here for that. You notice the overflow of laundry, spilling out from the wicker basket.*

*The bathtub is full of pink water.*

*Pale flesh peeks out, the mountain of a knee, jutting up. Discarded on the floor, a kitchen knife. You recognise it. Black plastic is peeling away from the handle, but the blade is still sharp. It is best for carrots. It is out of place on the faded blue bathmat. What the knife has cut now, is not a carrot but a wrist. One after another.*

*It is a slippery body, the one you wrestle from the bathtub, as you yell for help.*

I had woken, groggily, in the night, vaguely aware that I was meant to be doing something tomorrow. I peeled off my jeans, set an alarm, and managed, this time, to get under the duvet. As I tried to drift off back to sleep, I realised I could hear the running of the tap. Our parents – they would be sound asleep across the house, earplugs in. But Petal – Petal. I threw myself out of the bed.

Celeste was the first person I had called. Celeste was the first easy friend I had made. The first friend that Petal didn't know, and that didn't know Petal. I hadn't had any friends at primary school. Having Petal, I didn't need any. At secondary school, knowing Petal usually meant no one wanted to know me. It was difficult back then, something slightly feral about being a young teenager. It always reminded me of the farm cats at Grandma's, out on the edge of the fens. There were the ones that lived in the house, and then there were the outdoor ones who were skittish; they moved in packs, were fed on old plates, the harshly scrubbed patterns only just remaining. I would sit on the step, patiently enough for a child, and wait for them to come. Slinking in, rough fur and bellies slung low. Throwing up quick glances to check I hadn't moved. The moment I did they'd be off, bounding back out into the safe shadows of the decaying outbuildings.

I made a joke once, early on, to Celeste about being a stray cat. She laughed and said if I was one, she was one too. At the end of our first shift at The Urban Bean, town's newest coffee place, we swapped phone numbers. At first it was light-hearted, a barrage of memes sent back and forth, about how much we were dreading work. I didn't tell her at first about Petal. I met her just after Petal had gone away, up to Nottingham. She'd been out of the program for a year by then and had just drifted for a bit. I dreaded anyone remembering it, bringing it back up. In a small town, nothing ever goes away. Before I met Celeste, it felt as though I was smuggling a dirty secret around with me. Like I was dragging around festering rubbish, small at first, a few handfuls stuffed into a tote bag. But as time dragged on, stretching out into weeks, months, perhaps even years. The turn from a stranger into an acquaintance, and then into a friend. But as friendship grew, so would the secret. It would then grow larger and larger until I would be saddled with this bulging refuse sack, overflowing with used tissues and rotten food, accompanying me to every meeting with them.

Maybe they wouldn't see it or smell it. They'd sit there, leaning back in their chair, having enjoyed their meal. Sipping their after-dinner coffee. I'd be hunched and fidgety, waiting to leave, so it would just be me and the sack. And they wouldn't have a clue about it. This dirty, festering thing, that's yours and yours alone. I could lug it home, doing that funny, lumbering to one side walk you're forced to do when you're carrying something impractical and heavy.

Before I met Celeste, I had dreaded anyone knowing. Anyone putting two and two together as they looked at my name. Watching their eyebrows draw together and their eyes get wide. They wouldn't immediately remember everything of course, but a quick internet search later, and they'd bring up all the old headlines. Throughout all the difficulties, our parents used to tell me that, no matter how bad it got, me and Petal would always be siblings, always be 'SydandPetal'. I hated them for that. But when I met Celeste, I got to just be Syd. And eventually, I got to be part of 'SydandCeleste'.

We would go into town together, her driving us to the park and ride, because I didn't have my licence yet. Stopping for coffee first, I'd get a vanilla frappe, what she called the most basic of drinks. She'd get a matcha latte, hot in summer, iced in winter. We'd have gone shopping, straight to Primark, and then round all the charity shops. She'd stay over on nights after we'd been out. She liked that my parents left me alone. It was at one of these sleepovers that I told her about Petal.

One of the first times was when we were swimming. We'd been dropped off in the morning at the summer day camp, picked up in the late afternoon. Our parents had thought it would be good for us, to play with other children. They'd told us, you can't spend all summer cooped up together. They sounded strange when they said it, sitting us down together at the kitchen table. It was always this way, everything was serious. Them on one side, me and Petal on the

other. They told us they didn't want any arguing from either of us, but they were looking straight at her.

At first we both enjoyed the days we spent at camp. Our parents were so pleased. Petal had been so difficult that year. It seemed that almost every week, we'd be sat on the scratchy blue sofas outside the reception of our primary school. Waiting for our parents to get out of yet another meeting with the head. So, this was a relief. For me, as well. Even though Petal was always nice to me, I sometimes wondered if that would change.

It was better being outside that summer. In my memory, it is warm and bright every day. We'd play team games outside on the field, rounders, or wink-murder. That's the game where you attempt to kill off the other players. I didn't know the rules then, and I don't now. Was one of us assigned, secretly, the role of killer? Or was it a free for all, each to their own? The best part as a kid was getting to fall down, playing dead. Lolling about on the grass, the coolness of the earth a relief from the heat of the sun. Sometimes I'd even forget that Petal was there, and that we were part of a set. It was like she'd disappeared into the crowd of other kids. But she hovered on the periphery.

The best days at camp were the ones we spent swimming. I loved being buoyed by the water, feeling at ease. I was never as good as some of the other kids, who would shove themselves down under the swell of the water, rather than resting on top of it. There was always a kid who could do a whole length underwater, and with their eyes open. I couldn't ever. The chlorine would burn my eyes, make them red and streaming as I came up, gasping for air.

They'd throw the floats in the pool first. We'd be stood there, shivering with excitement on the edge of the pool. All skinny limbs and sunburn. We'd get rowdier as they piled more in. The plastic toys would go in last, and then it would be a free for all. Splashing through from the shallow end to get the biggest and best floats to play with. We'd settle into

it after about fifteen minutes. We used to do noodle battles, two people, each on a square float, each with a pool noodle, trying to knock one another off. Wet foam doesn't sting. It just stinks, of years and years of chlorine and piss.

Petal had fallen off her float, either by chance, or by a well-aimed blow. Maybe if I'd been closer, I would have seen the glint in her eye, would've known what was coming. It's hazy, my memory of what happened. I remember the sharpness of the whistle, how it cut through all the squealing and laughter. Shouting lifeguards crowded at the edge of the pool, beckoning us all out. It was a wonder another accident didn't happen in the swarm of small bodies that whirled around me to get out. One of the lifeguards jumped in, swimming towards the centre. The other helped haul us out of the pool, ushering us back against the wall. I shivered with cold, my damp trunks stuck to my thin, hairless legs as I looked around for her. The other children started to whisper and point. I felt a ball of barbwire shame lodge itself in my stomach.

The male lifeguard was swimming back to the edge now. As the children around me started to scream, the other lifeguard started to hustle them out, pale-faced. The boy looked like a discarded toy, flaccid limbs dragging in the water. Petal was there. Her bicep safely in the clutches of the male lifeguard as he pulled them both free from the water. I had avoided being forced out. I pressed myself back against the tiled wall and thought about invisibility. As a child I thought it was my superpower, but now I realise my ability to disappear was something else entirely.

The lifeguards had all gathered at the side of the pool and to help pull the boy out. I saw them roll him onto his side, I heard him cough up water.

'Jesus, thank God for that.' One of them muttered. Petal was sat on the edge of the pool, dangling her feet in the water. None of them seemed to want to go near her, to touch her. I took a step towards her, cringing as my feet touched the dampness. She turned and

looked at me. I expected her to be red in the face, incandescent with rage, to have struggled and fought against being pulled out of the pool. She didn't. She just looked blank. I wasn't even sure she could see me.

‘What happened? Tell me right now.’ He was angry. His voice seemed to fracture the silence that had built up, punctuated only by the lapping sound of the water as it hit against the edges of the pool, still reeling from all the commotion. Petal stared at him, and then looked back at me.

‘You!’ he turned to me. ‘Did you see what happened?’

‘No.’ My voice was quavering. I was shivering, it was cold in there, without the water to keep me warm.