

Daddy's Girls

Helen sits still on the back seat, next to Mary, keeping an eye on their father's expression. At this moment his jaw is clenched at an awkward, familiar angle and she knows, although she can't see it, that his forehead will be scrunched into furrows, his eyebrows drawn into an angry V. Her mother sits in front of her, humming to herself, her head nodding gently as, now and again, a line of song drifts back. *'All the lonely people, where do they all belong?'* They slide past the sweetshop, the gates to her primary school, the climbing frame in the empty playground and then a row of neat terraced houses which soon give way to hedges, trees, and fields. As the car gathers speed, Helen reaches forward, staring through her reflection to spot her favourite sign which hangs from a post at the entrance to a long farm track. There it is - the silhouette of a black stallion prancing above the engraved words **STUD FARM**.

'Slow down, please Daddy!' she cries, too late, craning her neck to catch a glimpse of the wide grass paddocks, dotted with grazing horses. She flops back into her seat.

The success or failure of the day depends on the angle of their father's jawline, Helen knows that. Last summer, on holiday in the mountains of North Wales, their mother had clutched her seat in silence as he drove too fast along the high snaking passes, chin jutting out, white knuckles protruding from strong hands. Helen studies his hands now, as they grip the steering wheel. The bony knuckles remind her of the diagram of a human skeleton that is pinned on her classroom wall. She inspects

her own small hands, clenching them into fists, stretching them wide to span invisible piano keys, fingers tapping out a scale.

These weekend days out have become a ritual. Their mother says that she needs a break from the house and ‘that wretched typewriter’. Most evenings after school, a distant, relentless rattle signals that their father is still working and must not be disturbed. So, on Saturdays they drive off into the country or to the coast, along winding lanes that make Mary, clutching a scruffy, one-eared pink rabbit and sucking her thumb, feel car sick.

Their mother looks round and smiles.

‘Helen, play a game so that Mary feels better, there’s a good girl.’

They play ‘I spy’ and count the number of red cars that pass the other way. They shout, ‘Four!’ ‘Five!’ and get the giggles but it ends in a jostling, back seat falling-out.

‘Stop fighting, you two. Helen, move over to your side.’ Daddy doesn’t look round, but Helen wriggles back along the bench seat and into the corner, pressing her face to the window to breathe a vaporous O on the cold glass. *Hhhoo*. She knows by heart the number plates of each the cars they have owned - the first one was *FWF 284* and it had black with red seats and woolly blankets for winter journeys. Helen recites the new one in her head like a poem. *YOY 145D, Why oh why? 145D*. She writes the figures with her finger in the steam circle; slow drops of condensation, like a snail’s trail, dribble down the glass.

‘Sit up, girls. Look, can you see the sea?’ Mummy’s voice lifts as she points across the hills towards the blue line on the horizon. Today they are heading for Fraisthorpe where, at low tide, there is an endless beach of golden sand overlooked by

a crumbling cliff edge which, their father tells them, is being gradually swallowed by the sea.

‘Isn’t it lovely? We could be anywhere!’ says their mother, as they drive into the grassy car park overlooking the beach. Helen wishes they still had their dog, Molly, who used to sprawl between them on the back seat of their old car. Molly loved the sea. She’d gallop in mad circles, paw marks like giant embroidery patterns printed behind her in the damp sand. When Daddy threw a ball into the waves, Molly would swim after it like a seal. Then she would run back to him and shake her glistening coat from head to tail, showering them all with salt water, and he would laugh and throw the ball again.

They always eat their picnic as soon as they arrive, staying in the car out of the breeze, all the windows wound down a crack. As usual, their mother has prepared neat packets of sandwiches wrapped in greaseproof paper - corned beef, nicknamed ‘seaside meat’, regardless of their destination - and she hands out tomatoes cut into drippy quarters, chunks of cucumber, followed by apples, chocolate biscuits and cups of tea from a flask. It’s important not to drop anything on the cream mock-leather seats of the Morris Oxford, so Mummy always brings four clean tea towels, one for each lap.

Helen nibbles her sandwich and looks down at the sea. It is quiet in the car, apart from the murmur of the radio. In the distance she can see a couple walking with two big dogs who charge along the foamy water’s edge, taunting the creeping waves and dashing in and out to their owners like yo-yos on a string. No dogs in the new car, her father has decided.

‘Wind your windows right down to smell the sea,’ urges their mother. The pages of the yellow AA map book, folded open on the dashboard, flap wildly in the draught and Helen shivers, winding her window up again with a clatter.

Once most of the picnic is eaten and leftovers packed away, the children are allowed to get out of the car. They scurry ahead, following the familiar sandy path that cuts between the dunes and the clumps of coarse, reedy grasses, then hurtle across the beach towards the placid sea. They stop at the foamy water’s edge, panting and staring out to sea, before running in zigzags along the sand as far as the weather-beaten sign in the shape of a pointed arrow, that announces ‘Nudist Area, Half a Mile’. They are not allowed to venture past.

The sun is shining properly for a while, but there is a stiff breeze and thin lines of cloud streak the pale blue sky. The air smells of seaweed and the pewter waves look chilly even in August. They head back to join their parents, who have put up a stripy wind-break in the lee of the dunes, staking their claim to a small portion of the beach. Their mother folds herself down onto a beach towel, smoothing out the skirt of her pale green cotton dress which is sprinkled like a meadow with tiny white daisies. She digs her bare heels into the sand, trickling it through her fingers like flour. Daddy stands nearby, still in his brogues, shading his eyes as he peers out to distant silhouettes of cargo ships on the horizon.

‘Aren’t you going to paddle, girls? Go on.’ They undress, kick off their sandals and skip down to the sea in their swimming costumes, as excited as puppies. The breeze has kicked up little seahorses and the girls chase each other into the icy ripples, screaming and splashing in the shallows before running up the beach to

marooned lakes of warm, shallow water. Seagulls waddle close by on the glassy sand and a troop of bobbing waders scuttle in line like schoolgirls.

Eventually the sisters run back to the windbreak den. Mummy rubs their goose-pimpled arms and rakes through a canvas holdall for a tube of wine gums whilst they struggle into itchy jumpers. Sarah sucks a stingy little cut on her finger and tastes salt.

‘Had enough yet, girls?’ asks Daddy.

‘No!’ they cry together, giggling. He has sat down next to their mother and they squeal at his long white feet as he wriggles his toes at them. With his help the girls build an elaborate sandcastle, but the turrets crumble into the moat as they run back and forth from a rock pool with buckets of sea water. Daddy lights two cigarettes, hand cupping the flame of his silver lighter, and he and their mother talk sporadically between puffs. Helen thinks of the indistinct murmur that drifts from her parents’ bedroom in the mornings. Do they talk about her?

‘Come on, Helen - you’re a big girl. Let your sister sit down,’ says their father as she and Mary scuffle for position on the towels. Mary plonks herself between his legs and snuggles in, an impish grin signifying victory. It’s not fair. Helen stalks off, ignoring her mother’s pleas. She follows a footprint trail along the beach, stepping into the middle of each indentation left by a pair of much bigger feet, measuring her stride until the prints fade and disappear in the soft sand of the dunes. She scrambles upwards, picking her way through the long, spiky grass, rigid as daggers, before perching on an angular chunk of concrete that sticks out of the sand. Are they watching her? She stares into the distance, not at them, face lifted to the sunlight filtering through a sea haze. Two dark forms appear in the distance, moving fast along the beach towards her. Horses! Helen stands up, shading her eyes to see them better.

Two brown geldings canter past, ducking in and out of the shallows; their riders are girls, both hatless and laughing, long hair tossed by the wind like their ponies' manes. Helen lifts her hand in a shy wave, but they do not see her. She watches them until they have dwindled into dots at the far end of the beach.

She shivers – it has grown chilly and she ought to go back. She picks her way back down to the beach, dragging her toes through the soft sand. Something sharp pokes her foot and she jerks it up, balancing on one leg to look, thinking that the grass has stabbed her. There's a jagged, gaping cut, raw as meat, weeping watery pink blood. Nestling in the sand like a twisted red and silver flower, a rusting cola can has lain in wait, sharp edges glinting. She feels sick.

'Daddy! Daddy!' she screams and, although it stings, she hops and scrambles down onto the gritty sand. He is already running towards her, scooping her up into his arms.

'What have you done?' He sounds angry and she looks at his crumpled face. Now the wound is bleeding, red drops falling darkly onto the beach. Her mother runs to them holding a towel - wraps it tightly around the foot, her mouth a wobbly smile.

'Mummy, it hurts.' Helen's tears come in little heaving sobs and then Mary, hovering nearby, is crying too.

'Darling, be brave. It's all right. You'll have to carry her to the car, Robert.'

He nods and turns, hugging Helen close to his chest as he struggles up the beach.

He lowers her onto the back seat. They swerve out of the car park and he drives with fierce concentration, jaw clenched, following signs to the local hospital, braking hard on a corner. Helen sees the driver of a passing car mouthing at them through his windscreen. Her father stabs a finger towards the back seat, at her mother holding Helen's swaddled foot aloft.

‘Slow down, for God’s sake, Rob!’

Helen glances at her mother, at the smear of blood on the cream upholstery, at her foot. A tawny stain has bloomed like a flower on the blue and white striped towel. Mummy squeezes her hand.

Later, on the way home Helen dozes, her stitched and bandaged foot resting on her mother’s lap, a grubby one-eared rabbit tucked in the crook of her arm. Mary is hidden from view in the front seat, even though Daddy has told her to sit up straight like a grownup; now and again she peeks behind to take a look, tear stains frosting her pink cheeks. Too drowsy to speak, Helen smiles at her sister from under heavy eyelids.

‘Mummy,’ Mary whispers, ‘did you see the bone?’

‘No, of course not, darling. Shh!’ Helen’s tummy squiggles as she imagines her bones - twenty-six in each foot, her teacher told them - each as delicate and fleshless as a bleached twig.

Eventually the car’s lulling rhythm changes and Helen opens her eyes, but they are not home yet. They have pulled up onto the verge of a country lane, by a high hedgerow near the entrance to a field. Daddy turns off the engine and they sit for a moment, suspended by a warm, quiet stillness. Mary is asleep, her head resting on Daddy’s rolled up jumper.

‘Look, Helen.’ Mummy points at the hedge, alive with small brown sparrows bobbing and twittering amongst the branches. When her father opens the car door they erupt from the hedge like pellets from a gun. Helen shuffles off the back seat, her mother guiding her leg. He carries her over to a gate, lifting her onto the top rail while

he stands alongside, sliding his arm around her waist to balance her. Inside her ribcage, her heart beats like sparrow's wings.

Together they gaze into a field filled with horses - bay and chestnut brood mares, coats burnished as conkers, heads down as they graze with their foals at foot. The air smells sweet and green. Helen rests her head on her father's shoulder and he strokes her cheek. Nearby, a colt nuzzles his mother's side, stubby tail waving like a lamb's as he suckles. The mare lifts head and waits, staring out to some distant plain, her thick black tail swishing away clouds of midges that float like dust in the low evening sunlight.
