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Supernova

Carolyn Jess-Cooke

Now that she thought about it, the change had not been sudden at all but very gradual, beginning with her senses. The scent of an unpeeled tangerine modulated to a silk scarf unfolding spices, memories of Christmas stockings, melodies in the key of G major. She had never been more aware of her own body, of the way each fine hair on her forearm speared the air, reading it. Of the drop and rise of her hormones like the silent beating of a drum, a rhythm that dictated her moods and dreams. By the third week her chest was a map of blue veins. Her mind was a glass of sugar-water. The thought of drinking wine or coffee sent a vine of feathers around her wrists.

Her body was renewed and powerful. She felt a shift in her sense of self each morning, as though she become a climate of her physicality. How right it was, she'd thought, that the belly becomes planet-shaped. She felt planetary in more ways than one. Before the second line showed up on the test she'd been the sort of person you might not realise was in the room for a good half hour or so. It wasn't just that she didn't talk much. She had a presence that was more of an unpresence, a trace of a person – her mother used a variety of words and phrases to capture it in language, such as 'pig-headed', 'mulish', 'mousey'. Sometimes she dreamt of herself as a kind of bestial hybrid, a mouse's ears peeking out from beneath her hair and her slender feet replaced with a mule's cloven hooves. Her nose a pale pink snout.

Some people had an energy about them that was clamorous or colourful which she had often tried to mimic. Her mother Aoife's energy was the kind that made the air in the room noticeably heavier. As a child Clodagh had discovered a measure of power in retraction, using it precisely to challenge the way her mother viewed her. She'd stop breathing until she passed out and her mother had to call an ambulance.

She would stop eating until she was skin and bone and Aoife implored her to eat. If she'd felt like putting it into words, she would have said, *silence is not submissiveness or weakness*. When the fire had swallowed up the Johnsons' house on the Newtownards Road they'd told anyone who would listen that it hadn't made a sound, not a single sound.

At the age of nine she spent the school year studying Mrs Adair, trying to absorb the way she filled the room with herself, the way the light changed according to her moods. The language of her footsteps across the parquet floor. Mrs Adair was an odd teacher. That is to say, she was much younger and prettier than any of the other teachers, and she wore turtle-neck sweaters and long A-line skirts that made her cello-shaped, her shining chocolate-coloured hair twisted up in a knot with a red ribbon wrapped around it like a present. Her mouth was a glossy claret heart and her neck was long and milk-white, and when she flicked her slate-coloured eyes across the classroom Clodagh felt a sickly apprehension, as though the gaze could penetrate her.

One cool April morning, whispers drifted around school one Monday morning that Miss Adair's husband was in Belfast the day of the bomb, and she didn't come back.

Clodagh resented school after that. She came to associate the bombs, the army tanks, the soldiers with English accents and dirty faces on street corners, the hollow thud of another bomb late at night and even the thick spiral of barbed wire at the entrance to her street with school. At the age of fourteen she stopped going. She'd go to the Albert Bridge and sit beneath it, the black birth-waters of the Titanic sucking at her scuffed shoes. Sometimes she would take a book and read, but mostly she liked just to sit until sundown, when all the starlings flung up into a murmur of

morphing blob-shapes across the sky. Sometimes she would go to the ancient woodland near the Giant's Ring, where her father had shown her the pathways carved by Irish Kings thousands of years before. *If we dug up this path we'd probably find arrowheads from ancient battles and the Queen's jewellery, so we would*, he'd said. *Why don't we dig, then?* she'd asked. *Let them be*, he'd replied, continuing on. *Wheesht, now.*

The dolmen in that field was a prehistoric arrangement of huge stones making the sign of Pi, a sure sign that her distant Irish ancestors were mathematical prodigies. They knew about the stars and planets, and one year he'd taken her to the tomb at Newgrange where people who'd lived before the flood of Noah had managed to align their architecture with the solstice. When she'd stood in that silent chamber with all the ghosts and watched the winter sun bleed all the way up the passage she felt such a swell of pride in her heart that she wanted to cry.

She did not show until well into her fifth month. She was slim enough to be able to pass it off as weight gain. She filled out in odd places. Her waist and thighs thickened, and later her ankles would vanish, the swerve and knuckle of bone smoothed by flesh and water. The bones in her chest withdrew behind plumpness and the gap between her thighs closed. Finally her stomach chevronned, forcing her to break the news to her mother, who sobbed and declared that her life was over. Her boss lit a cigarette and asked when she would be leaving work. She did not know.

She did not tell Jim about the baby, for although they did not know each other well she could foresee how the news would be received. He would be alarmed. The room would grow uncomfortably quiet. He would recoil and darken, ask her if she was sure it was his. Then he would turn cruel in an attempt to avoid responsibility. She wanted this, and she knew Jim did not want it. Not with her. And anyway, by the

time she was showing Jim had been redeployed to a new building across town. He wasn't interested enough to keep calling more than a handful of times.

The sudden heightening of her senses transposed the troubled world around her to an exotic landscape in which colours, sound, taste and even language gave up their boundaries: the key of D major was sky-blue and the taste of fresh bread. She heard voices in the wind, became alert to the sea's musics. People noticed her, as though she'd emerged from a fog, and commented on how she looked. She was luminous and luscious. Her hair grew quickly, a dark muscle of it down to her shoulders. She felt other people's eyes on her as she waddled, bovine and heavy, through the supermarket. *Mousey. Mule.* She wanted to tell her mother, *supernova.*

There were three of them with her when she gave birth: a midwife, a doctor, and her mother. She growled and bellowed. The *sharp stinging sensation* and *urge to push* they'd spoken of was instead a pride of lions who sank their jaws into her pelvis. Someone stuck a plastic mask to her face and she sucked in air like someone about to be drowned, but it didn't stop the next contraction biting down on her. The baby was *back to back*, they said, which was meaningless aside from the sensation of her spine being slowly crushed like a plant stem under foot. Finally, someone arrived in a mask wielding a pair of scissors, and in an instant the child was free of her.

Florence Pearl Caughey looked like nobody but herself. Clodagh spent a long time watching the little being in the translucent plastic basket by the hospital bed, struck by how creaturely she was. Not human, not female. Somewhere between a bald squirrel and a bear-cub with shades of seal and kitten. When they'd guided her out of Clodagh she was still in the amniotic sac, at which point her mother had burst into tears, crossed herself and pronounced it portentous of good luck. The sac torn, Florence was placed on Clodagh's stomach. She was a conch shell, Clodagh thought,

her small head bowed between her folded knees, her round back slicked with blood and white mucous. The long blue umbilical cord was a rope holding them together, as though Clodagh was an anchor. The nurses cut the cord and took the baby away, bathed her and towelled her down. Clodagh felt woozily elastic and conceptual, a third-degree tear and subsequent nest of stitches temporarily soothed by morphine. When they returned, Florence's skin was rufescent. Then she turned golden Clodagh mumbled something about Midas.

‘She’s jaundiced, dearie,’ a nurse said, wheeling the basket from the ward. ‘A bit of phototherapy’ll set her right. Get some sleep. She’ll need feeding in an hour or so.’

It seemed unthinkable to Clodagh that anyone would expect someone who had just been through what she’d been through to care for a child. The nurses asked expectantly whether or not the baby had fed yet, and when Clodagh looked blank one of them reached through her clothes and squeezed her breast until a creamy substance emerged.

‘Now put the baby to it,’ she said. Clodagh lifted Florence from the basket painfully and tried to manoeuvre her head to the breast. She had seen other women breastfeeding. It was normal. But when Florence finally opened her mouth and latched on, Clodagh let out a shriek. Someone had lined the baby’s gums with razor blades. Clodagh curled her toes and squeezed her eyes shut, panting the way she’d panted through each contraction. The baby only fed for a few agonizing minutes, and the nurse didn’t look pleased when Clodagh laid her daughter back in the basket with trembling hands.

‘She’ll need fed again in an hour or so,’ the nurse said.

Her mother fussed and fretted over Florence but strangely deferred to Clodagh when it came to caring for her. Aoife went home to get some sleep and said she would return, and so Clodagh found herself surrounded by nurses and wailing infants and other women shuffling along in hospital gowns but entirely alone. The hospital ward was outer space, the unkind lights overhead exploding stars. When she caught a glimpse of the gardens and car park through the window it was like gazing through a singularity at a parallel world.

That first, long night as a mother, she could not sleep. Her body seeped and ached. The urge to go to the bathroom nagged at her and she pushed it away. Her abdomen had already begun to deflate and became an apron of doughy skin around her thighs. She smelled of blood and milk and chemicals, and there was a new smell, too, something she could not place. She was amazed at what her body had done, that it had grown and delivered this child. Florence was barely six pounds and tiny, one foot the length of Clodagh's thumb, and Clodagh marvelled at her architecture – the detailed whorls of the ears, the stubby hazel eyelashes, the perfect button nose. The downy striations on her head, thicker on the crown, odd tufts of black hair poking up from the top of her ears. Aoife insisted she had Clodagh's mouth and chin but Clodagh wasn't convinced. The baby was entirely herself, integral, conjured into this new place.

Clodagh was allowed to leave the hospital once the pebble-like remnant of Florence's umbilical chord had dropped off. She noticed how abruptly the attention had shifted from her to Florence. Her stitches were checked, her womb palpated and her milk squeezed by hand, all of it out of concern for this new being. Clodagh had the mild sense of being an appendage when she had expected feelings of ownership, of being The Mother. It might have bothered her had she not agreed that Florence was

worthy of her servitude and constant distraction. Still, it didn't quite add up. Even in the white Moses basket in her mother's front room Florence seemed so small as to be something dropped there by the cat, a gnarled offering, her whole body still coiled, as though she didn't yet realise she'd come out of Clodagh. She matched no definition of beauty that Clodagh could think of and yet she *was* beautiful. She was so ridiculously helpless and yet when she bawled for milk it was with a force and insistence that indicated absolute disavowal of her vulnerability.

Clodagh sat in her mother's old armchair by the window and fed her, and as she looked around she noted all the otherwise innocuous objects that posed harm. That sharp corner on her mother's coffee table was indeed very sharp. Someone could put a stone through the window and the glass would rip Florence's velvety skin. These were things she had never considered, and the fact that she had never before considered these was daunting. She worried about gas fumes, diseases other people might pass on, whether or not the blankets people had knitted for Florence would smother her, or spontaneously combust. Why had all of this not occurred to her before now? The world was brilliantly dangerous, and the weighing of all its threats made Florence's survival seem all the more miraculous. Clodagh watched the news and felt overwhelmed by the things she saw, how they suddenly mattered. The riots outside and reports of paramilitary executions acquired different gravity. She would have to become more than she was to protect Florence. She would have to leave Ireland.

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'You can't leave,' Aoife cried. 'You just can't.'

'Why not?'

‘Well, there’s your job, for one.’

‘I’ll get another one, Ma.’

Aoife gave a bitter laugh. ‘Where, exactly?’

Clodagh looked through the window at the street outside. An army tank had been parked outside Mrs Doyle’s for a good half hour and she worried about someone blowing the thing up. She continued bouncing Florence against her shoulder, her knees bending precisely two inches, one bounce per second, while she lightly patted her bum. She’d learned over twenty combinations of holding positions accompanied by movement that worked to keep Florence quiet, or occasionally settle her to sleep.

‘I was thinking of moving to England,’ Clodagh said.

Her mother looked appalled. ‘*England?* Why the devil would you move to England?’

‘It’s supposed to be nice in parts.’

Aoife began to pace. She was a tall, skinny woman, and her short hair was greying and her hands had become knotty at the knuckles from arthritis. Her voice was deep from years of smoking, though she hadn’t touched a cigarette in a decade. Clodagh spotted her mother glancing at her father’s photograph on the mantelpiece as if he was part of this conversation.

‘And how’ll you manage?’ Aoife said, and there was a tone in her voice that told Clodagh she was not asking out of concern but out of disbelief. ‘You’ve got a child, now. Or had you forgotten?’

‘I’ll get another job.’

‘What, and Florence’ll fend for herself at home?’

‘I suppose I’ll put her in a nursery.’

Aoife crossed herself. Then she sat down and folded her hands into her lap like a child.

‘Well, you might as well know, then,’ she said.

‘Know what?’

Aoife’s voice trembled. ‘I’m going blind. I’ve been getting injections in my eyes for a few months but they said it’s only delaying it.’

Clodagh reeled. ‘Did they say *why* you’re going blind?’

‘It’s all down to this diabetes malarkey.’ She gave a deep sigh. ‘Goodness knows how I’ll manage when you’re gone.’

Clodagh studied her mother very carefully. Aoife worked at the mill five or six days a week, early starts and late finishes. Early widowhood and hard work had aged her, grinding away a lot of the independence and verve that Clodagh had admired as a child without fully realising it. It was only now that she found her mother’s tendency to complain and manipulate so distasteful that she recognised how much she had once looked up to her, their many disagreements notwithstanding.

‘You’ll have to give up work if you go blind.’

Aoife nodded and drew a sharp breath. ‘Aye.’

‘Maybe you could move to England, too.’

Aoife stiffened and flashed her a sour look. ‘There’ll be pigs in the papacy before you see me living there.’

*

Clodagh took the overnight ferry from Belfast to Liverpool, then a train to Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. She’d overheard one of the other typists mention that her uncle was

setting up a typing pool there in a few months' time and was looking for workers, and Clodagh had wangled a verbal promise of a job.

She brought just two suitcases, having managed to locate a flat that the landlord promised would be furnished with a cot. Florence was just seven weeks old and slept most of the way, waking only to clamp on to the breast and wring Clodagh of milk. The midwife had said it would get easier and less painful the more she breastfed, but it was what she said a few moments later that pricked Clodagh to persist: *You'll probably give up.*

She had had no expectations when she reached Newcastle. Aside from Bertie Grimes, the man whose company she'd agreed to work for, she didn't know anyone from Newcastle and she hadn't even thought to look at pictures of the place. It was just another big, industrial city with a black river running through the middle, though as the taxi wove from through the streets she saw that there were no tanks, no soldiers smoking on streets corners and no men standing against walls with their arms and legs outstretched being searched by policemen. No feather of black smoke in the distance announcing a street on fire and none of Belfast's pot-holed, stone-cluttered roads lined with burnt-out cars, signatures of another riot. She liked the idea of becoming anonymous, not recognised by a childhood bully or the Owen brothers on Henry Street. She could be anyone here.

The flat in Heaton had just four rooms – a living room, a single bedroom, a bathroom, and a kitchen. It was small but clean, offering a view of rooftops and highrise flats, and there was a small children's park a few streets away. Clodagh felt herself lurch between terror and excitement. She laid Florence in the cot and noticed how long she had become, stretching herself out on the wide mattress. Her features were rearranging themselves in her face, the squashed look from being stuck in the

birth canal for so long beginning to even out. Clodagh lay on the edge of the unyielding mattress, her arm reaching through the wooden bars of the cot to hold Florence's hand. The sounds of the cars outside were alien sounds, the glow of the moon pooling on the carpet the light of an unknown sky.

It seemed as though the journey across the Irish Sea had taken weeks instead of just one night, as though they'd crossed into another time zone. Or maybe the change was more than time. Clodagh had put down what she'd seen in the cabin of the ferry to nerves and exhaustion: as she'd held Florence in the crook of her left arm and stroked her face to sleep, her right hand had seemed to fade to a nothingness. She couldn't bring herself to think the word *invisible*, because it snagged on memories of watching a talentless magician at a friend's party attempt to pull a rabbit from a black hat. And it had been dark. She had flexed her hand, willing it to come back to visibility. She could feel her own outstretched fingers and her wristbone clicked as usual. She could feel Florence's soft skin beneath her fingertips, but even when she turned into the light of the emergency exit sign it seemed as though her hand had disappeared, all the way to the wrist. Gone. She had been tired. That was all.

She used her savings to pay three months' rent up front and buy things for Florence. A second-hand buggy with a raincover, some toys and a small wooden box containing colourful blocks intended to develop Florence's hand-to-eye coordination when she reached six months. Clodagh couldn't imagine Florence ever being old enough to play with toys and be curious about the world, though she had developed a fascination with bright lights. Before it had seemed that she didn't see Clodagh or much of the world around her, but now, in England, a switch had flipped: now she lay on the beige rug by the electric fire, mesmerized by the living room light.

Clodagh lay down next to her and watched as Florence murmured and grunted. Her body felt used up, full of aches. Florence, however, began to smile – she had not done that yet – and began to kick her heels against the ground. Until now, Clodagh had felt the baby perhaps didn't love her, that she wasn't up to this task. After all, she was both parents in one, and she was her mother's daughter – a poor education in mothering if ever there was one. Florence thrust her leg's up and down, arms stretched out at her sides and waving as though she was making snow angels. She made noises that sounded like attempts at words, kittenish vowels, and when Clodagh blew a raspberry Florence's eyes widened and focused on her, and she smiled again. Her small, exuberant articulations seemed meaningful: she was happy.

Clodagh stumbled into a friendship with the woman who lived in the flat upstairs, a small round woman with a thick Welsh accent and a penchant for large gold earrings called Carys. She had recently moved to Newcastle, too, though from a place in Wales called Aberystwyth, and her husband worked long hours at a local legal firm and she had two kids, both settling into the primary school nearby. After polite exchanges in the hallway, admirations of Florence's outfits and two requests for sugar, Carys invited Clodagh and the baby to her home for coffee.

'Sorry the place is such a tip,' Carys said, leading Florence through a hallway littered with wellington boots and raincoats and toy tractors. There was only Carys at home and yet the flat seemed ablaze with noise, colour, childish paintings of bugs with dead leaves stuck to them, abandoned bowls of breakfast cereal, and on the floor she noticed someone had left a trail of potato chips and then smashed them into the carpet.

They sat at the kitchen table. Carys boiled a kettle and made them cups of coffee. Florence was awake, taking in her new surroundings in a state of revered fascination.

‘She’s such a gorgeous girl,’ Carys said, setting her mug down and holding her hands out to take Florence. ‘I’d love a little girl but I think two boys is our lot.’

Clodagh wasn’t good with personal divulgements. There was a measure of expectation in the giving of such information that she didn’t know how to meet.

‘How old are your boys?’

‘Harry’s seven, John’s four. We lost a baby last year at twelve weeks. A day after we’d told everyone, too. That’s life, isn’t it?’

Clodagh didn’t know what the right answer was. She was glad of Florence, who was now distracting Carys with her smiles and coos.

‘How are you finding it?’ Carys asked.

‘Finding what?’

‘Motherhood,’ Carys said. ‘I take it she’s your first?’

‘Alright, I suppose. Tiring. I suppose it’s early days.’

‘The early days are the hardest, I think. Especially with the first child. When Harry was born it hit me like a ton of bricks. I think I cried every day until he turned a year old. No one tells you that sort of stuff, do they?’

Clodagh smiled. Carys’ tone was light, as though she might be discussing a holiday she’d taken or a recipe for chocolate cake, her gaze on Florence.

‘Does it get easier?’ Clodagh found herself asking.

‘Yes and no. I kept wishing for the boys to hit each milestone. “I can’t wait until he’s sleeping through the night because then life will be so easy!” or “Once he’s walking, then, *then* it’ll be easier!” But then there’s always something else to worry

about. John, for instance, has decided he doesn't want to talk, so we've got him in speech therapy. Harry refuses to eat anything except toast.' She gave a shrill laugh. 'I don't know about you but I thought it would be easier than this.'

Clodagh wondered if she should mention it, the thing that kept happening to her. First, it was her right hand that disappeared on the ferry to Liverpool. Then a week ago her left ear vanished for an hour or so. She had seen it in the mirror when she was brushing her teeth. Her entire ear, completely gone, though she could still feel it and her hearing wasn't changed. She checked it different surfaces in case there was something wrong with the mirror. Then she had rubbed it, as though she could bring it back by improving the circulation. When it finally appeared again it was red and slightly swollen from all the rubbing. Then this morning, when she was putting on her socks, her big toe was gone from her right foot, and the foot itself looked faded, as though it was about to disappear as well. She tapped her foot against the leg of the chair, as though checking it was still there.

'When you had your sons,' she began asking Carys slowly. 'Did you... I mean, did anything... Did anything change? Physically, I mean?'

Carys raised her eyebrows, and for a moment Clodagh's heart leapt, as though she was finally going to learn that the random disappearance of body parts was just another one of motherhood's unuttered commonalities.

'Oh, *definitely!*' Carys said. Florence had started to become unsettled, her head turning towards Clodagh as though to check she was still there. Carys turned her against her shoulder and bounced her lightly.

'Oh gosh. Where do I even begin? This, for a start,' she said, grabbing a handful of her stomach. 'I was so skinny when we got married. It's depressing. I put on so much weight with Harry, you know. He was a ten-pounder. My stomach

muscles separated. Gutted. And you'll know how it is when you've got a new baby. You're so knackered all the time you just reach for anything that'll keep you going. Coffee, cake.... And when do you ever get time to exercise? Though I don't know what you're complaining about – you're so slim!

Clodagh opened her mouth to explain that her problem was slightly different than this, but Carys continued on.

'And not to freak you out but my pelvic muscles are *still* shot to bits four years later. And I think my brain has changed. I don't know about you but I had crazy baby brain when I was pregnant. I forgot everything! It was like early dementia. Joe – that's my husband – got used to looking in the fridge for the car keys. They said it would get better once Harry was born but, nope. Not at all.'

Florence started to cry, and Clodagh felt her arms reaching out to her without thinking, her body responding of its own accord.

'Ah, Mummy's girl, eh?' Carys said with a wink. She passed Florence back and she quietened, looking up at Carys with a look of suspicion.

'Well, her father's not exactly in the picture so I guess it's a good thing that she's a Mummy's girl.'

Carys' face fell. 'So you're doing this all on your own?' It was a statement of respect rather than a question.

Clodagh nodded but she couldn't bring herself to return Carys' smile. She was worried sick about the fading, the disappearing, whatever it was. She wanted someone to tell her it was normal, that it had happened to them. She was worried about it being some kind of genetic condition that would affect the baby. This was the terror that crept up on her in the shower, in the large, empty bed, in the supermarket: that Florence would disappear. That she would lose her.

Carys had excellent ideas when it came to looking after Florence, including laying her on a mat with small toys dangling from an arc above her head at which she would kick and coo, and she had a list of local venues that held baby mornings with books and songs and such like. But it didn't stop Carys from crying every morning on the way to her job. She had her own tiny office in a tall building overlooking the River Tyne and was left alone all day with piles of paperwork and dictaphone recordings to type up. At the end of the day she placed her typing in a folder and slid it into a filing cabinet for collection. It was a sterile, unsociable role. Still, Bertie Grimes paid her slightly more than the wage she'd earned in Belfast, which was more than a stroke of luck – her rent and household bills were higher in Newcastle. After a moment of panic, a glow of satisfaction at being able to provide for herself and Florence without help from her mother, or a man.

By September, however, the fading was happening daily. Her right hand would come and go, and she started to notice that it was preceded by a sudden tightening of her chest, a quickening of her pulse and a drop in her body temperature. She would watch, breathless, as her whole hand slowly vanished right in front of her eyes. Her senses were at odds with each other. She could feel, smell, and even hear her hand as she swivelled it on the wrist, clicking the fine bones, but she just couldn't see it. Then, right as the trees along the park were turning gold and red, she woke up one morning to find she was missing a whole arm.

She scooped Florence out of her baby bouncer and raced upstairs to Carys' flat. After a minute or so the door opened; John, the younger of Carys' sons, wearing a snorkel mask on his forehead and a pair of shorts.

'Is your Mummy in?' she asked.

John responded with a flat stare. The woman at his door was excited or possibly angry, and his usual encounter with adults in such a state was when he had done something punishable. He gave a small shake his head. His mother was in the kitchen, and he had a handful of seconds before her inner radar picked up on the fact that he was not in the living room where she had left him. He made to close the door.

‘Will you tell her I need to see her, please?’ Clodagh said, but the door clicked shut. In the stillness of the landing she lifted the sleeve of her sweater to check whether she had been dreaming. But no – the arm was still invisible, like some cruel magician’s trick.

She heard a sound in the hallway downstairs. Carys, no doubt, returning from the shops. Florence drooled over Clodagh’s neck and grabbed fistfuls of her hair. Clodagh turned and ran quickly and carefully down the stairs to meet Carys. She saw a figure closing the front door and approach the door to her flat. The figure carried a long cane in her right hand and knocked it hard against the wall.

‘Carys?’ Clodagh called.

The woman looked up. She was not Carys.

‘Mum,’ Clodagh said. She had not spoken to her mother since she left. She moved forward and saw that Aoife was thinner, her face etched with deep lines. Her eyes were wet and unsteady, and she swished the long white cane around as though searching for something. Florence said *yah-yah-yah*.

‘Is that the baby?’ Aoife said. ‘Is that Florence?’

‘Yes, it’s Florence. Has she grown since you last saw her?’

‘I’m afraid I couldn’t tell you,’ Aoife said. ‘I can’t see much of anything anymore.’

Clodagh didn't sleep well that night. She wondered if there was a disability called invisibility. If it could be treated or if the doctors would think she'd gone insane. She knew that her mother was here to stay, and she couldn't exactly kick her out now. She was blind. That also meant that somehow Clodagh would have to take care of both her and the baby. Her arm didn't return to the realm of visibility until the morning, but even then it seemed like her flesh was made of a smoked glass.

She left Florence with Carys as usual and asked if she'd noticed anything strange about Florence's limbs.

'Like what?' Carys said, bouncing Florence on her hip. 'Is there something wrong with her joints, do you think?'

'No, no. It's just.... They don't...change... at all, do they? Like... they don't disappear?'

Carys held her gaze for a moment and then laughed. 'Oh, don't worry. I know my boys got their legs stuck a couple of times in the cot. Such wriggly devils. When she starts crawling I'll be putting the stair gates back up and locking all the cupboards. I'm such a paranoid-head, too.'

Christmas, then the New Year. When Clodagh's right leg vanished she bought fake tan and a pair of thick tights. When both arms turned to glass, then mist, she bought long-sleeved shirts and gloves. She grew her hair to cover her missing ears and concealed the macabre space between her head and neck with turtlenecks. When she disappeared altogether, she wore heavy make-up, a wig, dark-lensed glasses, and bought a home whitening kit for her teeth.

Florence took her first steps on the morning of her first birthday. Aoife heard the rhythm of her feet against the ground and clapped her hands. Clodagh grabbed her Polaroid camera to capture the moment. She wasn't wearing gloves and so the camera

seemed to float before Florence. She took another six steps towards it and tried to suck the lens.

Later, Clodagh would drop her mother off at a day centre where the careworkers knew her as 'Mrs Caughey's daughter'. Then she would take Florence to nursery where the women called her 'Florence's mum'. Then, when both were in asleep, she would pull off the wig, the clothes, wash away the film of makeup. She would step out into the night and go down by the river where the skies were speckled with distant galaxies and the water was an onyx skin.

She would study the half-face of moon, the light of dead stars as they grew stronger, becoming different matter.