

Promises to Keep

Knife cuts through skin, through flesh. Layer upon layer, the pieces softly falling apart on the chopping-board. Tears drip among them. But it's not the onions that are making me cry.

Maybe I'm crying for Dad. This morning I went to see him, at the home. It's obvious now: he's going downhill, slowly losing his grip on reality, on his memories, on the man he was. Even the photo albums don't interest him now, not even the pictures of Mum that he used to stroke with his forefinger. The carers at the home do their best, of course; they're not bad at their jobs. But they don't love him and he just sits there, tugging at the string of his pyjamas, staring at nothing. A mug of cold tea and a soft biscuit lie forgotten on the bedside table. When I visit, he mostly calls me by my name, but sometimes he calls me by Alice's, and sometimes that's too much for me.

But maybe it's not about Dad after all. Maybe I'm crying out of fear. 'Cause yesterday I heard the news that Todd Gerrity's out of prison. He's been seen in the neighbourhood. Yeah, it's been a long time; but my guts still twist with fear whenever I think on him, even though I've never seen him in the flesh. (I didn't go to the trial, back then. It didn't matter that Alice was my twin. They just said it'd be too much for me.) But oh, I saw his pictures in every newspaper, and on every TV screen. His face – the buried eyes, the hard jaw, the flattened nose – haunted my dreams and my waking hours for weeks, for months. For years.

Now I leave the onions on the board. I leave the kitchen, I leave the flat. I turn right, down the footpath behind the houses, between the faded fence panels and the smell of last year's leaves, until I come to the footbridge. The stream spits and splashes under thick boards slippery with moss and algae. I hold onto the handrail and peer into the woods, letting the wind ruffle my hair. To my left the sun's setting, sprinkling the nearest trunks with crimson.

We used to come here in the summer, Alice and me. Cheap fishing nets on canes, hoping for tiddlers, catching only mud and leaves. And she'd smile and laugh, and her face was my face and her freckles were my freckles. It was like being with yourself, like being alone yet with a friend. Hand in hand, heart in heart.

It feels like it's Alice who's willing me to go in among the trees. It's the same time of day, the same time of year. In all these ages I've never been back into the woods. Now *he's* out, I know he'll be there; yet Alice beckons me on.

She'd been missing for three days, three long days of wrenching fear, of despair, of telling ourselves she'd be all right and that any minute she'd come back through the door. They'd tried to stop me joining in the search, but they couldn't. Mum went, Dad went, the neighbours and the police went: tramping the streets, the fields, the woods, prodding the ground with sticks, scanning every ditch, every mound, every pile of leaves. And I followed. I had to. Then I found her shoe, strappy and black, not shiny now but smeared with mud.

But they did stop me from seeing her body later, and I've always wondered: how did she look, in death? There were words I heard people saying: *abducted, raped, murdered*. It was only later that I came to understand those crimes, crimes fastened to other people, other victims.

Gerrity was a local. I read about him in the papers. Hungry to know more about the man who took away my sister, I found every report I could, cut them and kept them. I've still got them in a box upstairs. What did they say? He was a loner. A quiet boy at school, a bit odd, but never violent before. Not till then, not till Alice. *The Face of Evil*, said the papers. They said he was physical, strong, he used to bodybuild. He could have crushed her like a leaf, a leaf on the forest floor, squashed into the dirt by the weight of his body, the weight of his lust, the weight of his guilt. Smothered. Violated,

bloodied and broken. The judge gave him life, said the papers, and I thought, how can you give life to someone who's taken a life? But life isn't life. It's only been twenty years and now he's out.

I shake myself and step forward, across the bridge, up the slope towards the trees. Alice urges me on. I see her now, her face pale as milk but streaked with blood. Her brown curls are matted. She's wearing her blue coat with the white collar, just like she did the day she went missing. She has white socks, but only one shoe. Do I have to go into the woods? I ask her. Must I?

Mum wouldn't have let me; not at first. But as the drink took her, the empty Gordon's bottles hidden in the rubbish, the pop of the sherry-cork at night, she cared less and less. They said she hadn't been drinking when she crashed the car just three years later. No trace of alcohol in the blood, they said, even though that must have been the first time since Alice's murder. But she hit a wall at sixty-five, and I ask myself how could they tell? Why did they bother? Were they just saying that, to make Dad and me feel better? But if it wasn't the booze that killed her, it must have been the despair: the hope and the determination and the strength all gone, all leached away.

By the end, she couldn't have stopped me going into the woods; but I never wanted to. I wouldn't dare. Because I knew, even though Alice's killer was locked up forty miles away, that he was somehow still there in the woods, waiting. Waiting for me. He'd murdered my sister, and he'd kill me if he had the chance.

Yet the woods is where I am now. This is where Alice has led me. The soil is soft, the leaves crush under my boots, there's the smell of pine needles. There are birds singing, fearless. He can't catch *them*. I swallow. Why, Alice? Why am I here?

Dad was different from Mum. He had his work, I suppose: work feeding a machine that couldn't hurt his feelings, couldn't ask questions, couldn't avoid talking to him in the coffee-room. After they'd buried Mum, he carried on. Week after week, month after month, getting paid, giving me the money for shopping, helping with the housework when he wasn't too tired. But his friends had all faded away like stars on a cloudy night, and when he dragged himself to the football on a Saturday he wouldn't stay out afterwards. 'Keep an eye on you,' he told me.

His machine got old before he did, and they laid him off. Just short of retirement. 'Never get a job now,' he said. So there was the pint a day at Wetherspoons, where it was warm and he could read the papers; and there was always the telly. But then he began to forget things. First it was his glasses, then it'd be his socks; then he'd come home from Tesco's on the bus, the car still in the car park. And at night he'd weep, and pretend he was talking to Mum.

I put one foot in front of the other now. It's getting darker. I want to stop but Alice still leads me on among thick, twisted trunks and straggled bushes that snag at my clothes, and I smell smoke. Dimly I see its wisps among the boles and I see Dad's plucking fingers, the black stubble that escaped the razor by hiding in the fissures in his face. I see the emptiness in his eyes. I hear Mum, *don't ever go there, don't ever go to those woods*, and I see her sobbing and beating her fists on the wall. And I see me, holding a shoe. It's scuffed and scraped, and I can read the *Size 4* print, and there's mud on my wrist and fingers. The shoe still smells of Alice: sweet, like soft sweat in summer.

I'm breathing hard. The trees crowd closer, watching. There are signs of a camp: a tarpaulin under the bushes, the embers of a fire. And there's someone there: a parka, a dirty hood, heavy boots. A matted beard and eyes like glass glinting in the dusk. He gets quickly to his feet and stares. I scream, and I scream. Sister, sister, why did you leave me? For now I know how it felt: I know the dirt, the wet soil, the roots under my hands, the hot breath, the sinking of knife in flesh, layers falling away, the smell of blood. Darkness falling.

In that darkness there are lights. They're in the clearing at the end of the footpath where the trees stand back for you, stand back to let you escape. Fluorescent-striped police cars. Torches, waving. A

policewoman, wearing a stab vest and high-vis. 'Come on, Wendy,' she says. 'It's okay now, it's okay.'

Something falls from my hand: it looks like my kitchen knife. When I turn my palm upward it glistens red in the torchlight. My sleeve's all sticky and dark, too. I look at the policewoman. 'Where's Alice?' I say.