

Tindersticks, My Sister

Do you remember my sister? How many mistakes did she make with those never blinking eyes? I couldn't work it out. I swear she could read your mind, your life, the depths of your soul at one glance. Maybe she was stripping herself away, saying

Here I am, this is me

I am yours and everything about me, everything you see...

If only you look hard enough

I never could.

Our life was a pillow-fight. We'd stand there on the quilt, our hands clenched ready. Her with her milky teeth, so late for her age, and a Stanley knife in her hand. She sliced the tyres on my bike and I couldn't forgive her.

She went blind at the age of five. We'd stand at the bedroom window and she'd get me to tell her what I saw. I'd describe the houses opposite, the little patch of grass next to the path, the gate with its rotten hinges forever wedged open that Dad was always going to fix. She'd stand there quiet for a moment. I thought she was trying to develop the images in her own head. Then she'd say:

I can see little twinkly stars,
like Christmas tree lights in faraway windows.

Rings of brightly coloured rocks
floating around orange and mustard planets.

I can see huge tiger striped fishes
chasing tiny blue and yellow dashes,
all tails and fins and bubbles.

I'd look at the grey house opposite, and close the curtains.

She burned down the house when she was ten. I was away camping with the scouts.

The fireman said she'd been smoking in bed - the old story, I thought. The cat and our mum died in the flames, so Dad took us to stay with our Aunt in the country. He went back to London to find us a new house. We never saw him again.

On her thirteenth birthday she fell down the well in our Aunt's garden and broke her head. She'd been drinking heavily. On her recovery her sight returned, a fluke of nature everyone said. That's when she said she'd never blink again. I would tell her when she started at me, with her eyes wide and watery, that they reminded me of the well she fell into. She liked this, it made her laugh.

She moved in with a gym teacher when she was fifteen, all muscles he was. He lost his job when it all came out, and couldn't get another one. Not in that kind of small town. Everybody knew everyone else's business. My sister would hold her head high, though. She said she was in love. They were together for five years until one day he lost his temper. He hit over the back of the neck with his bullworker. She lost the use of the right side of her body. He got three years and was out in fifteen months. We saw him a while later, he was coaching a non-league football team in a Cornwall seaside town. I don't think he recognized her. My sister had put on a lot of weight from being in a chair all the time. She'd get me to stick pins and stub out cigarettes in her right hand. She'd laugh like mad because it didn't hurt. Her left hand was pretty good though. We'd have arm wrestling matches, I'd have to use both arms and she'd still beat me.

We buried her when she was 32. Me and my Aunt, the vicar, and the man who dug the hole. She said she didn't want to be cremated and wanted a cheap coffin so the worms could get to her quickly. She said she liked the idea of it, though I thought it was because of what happened to the cat, and our mum.