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Never Ending

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Before Kyritos

Waking in the dark chill before dawn, she imagined her first glimpse of the swimming pool, shimmering at their journey's end.

The sun soaking honey-coated heat into her skin as she stands at the water's edge.

Liquid light unfurling before her. Blue and white and silver and gold.

She imagined diving in.

The unearthly night, the wearying hours that would carry her from it, dissolve in a swirl of water and light and bubbling air. Down and down she plunges, then rises again – laughing, *bursting* to the surface of a new, scintillating morning.

Their best holiday ever.

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After Kyritos

The start of something else.

They drive for hours to a remote part of the country Siobhan has never been to, or heard of. She listens to music, gazes out at the passing countryside, the relentless unspooling of the road – pick-pick-picking away at the edge of her seat until the seam rips and she can work her fingers inside to excavate the foam padding bit by bit.

After a while, she catches herself at it. Makes herself stop.

Beside her, Dad keeps his eyes dead ahead, gripping the steering wheel like he expects someone to try to take it from him at any moment.

From time to time, he points things out: a lone deer at the edge of some woods, a microlight, an exit sign for a city where he lived before he met Mum.

Handfuls of words separated by long stretches of silence.

The sight of the shredded foam piled up in the well beside her seat makes her feel sick; not nauseous, but sick with self-disgust. Like someone on a diet confronted with

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the empty wrappers of all the chocolate they'd vowed not to eat. The tips of her middle fingers are rubbed raw and she has broken a nail.

"Dad…" she begins, and a conversation of sorts starts up.

If you smile when you speak you say nicer things.

Granny O'Driscoll told her that. The one whose name she inherited, Siobhan. Shiv, she calls herself, though Granny O'D. refused to shorten it – making her point by always addressing Shiv as Shi-*vawn*. As in, *Shi-vawn, will you put a smile on your face before your mouth drops off altogether*. Now, Shiv tries hard to smile, to be pleasant company. To be normal. Dad doesn't deserve to have her shut herself away inside her head. He loves her. That's why they're doing this.

She almost tells her father she loves *him* but the words stall in her throat.

"How're you feeling about it?" he asks. "It" is their destination.

Shiv shrugs.

His eyes stay fixed on the road. "You don't want to back out?"

Back out. Not "change your mind", which would amount to the same thing but also something quite different. "No," she says, "I don't want to *back out*."

There. Nasty again. She managed about ten minutes of nice.

Dad lets it drop. They've been over this too many times. *Backing out* would mean going home, to that house. It would mean continuing to live with Mum, the way she is; with Mum

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and Dad the way they are. Without Dad, much of the time. Without Declan, of course. Above all, it would mean having to live with the person she has become, the long weeks of the summer holiday laid out before her like a maze with no centre and no exit.

Even so, her "no" sounds more certain than she feels inside.

What she's leaving behind isn't the problem, it's what she's heading towards. After weeks of anticipation – looking forward to this, willing it to come sooner – the day has finally arrived and her determination will dissolve if she lets it.

What if it doesn't make her well again?

It has to. Nothing else has worked and this is her last shot.

"I don't want to be like I am any more," she says.

Dad lowers a hand from the wheel to hold hers. He goes to speak but has to start again, his voice husky. "Two months really isn't so long, Shivvers."

Shivvers. He hasn't called her that since primary school.

After a moment, Dad tries to release her hand but she holds on, squeezing his fingers, and he has to drive one-handed for a bit longer.

Before leaving the motorway, they stop for lunch. Shiv isn't hungry but her father makes her choose a sandwich and they take their food over to a window table.

She inspects her fingertips; they sting like crazy.

He didn't seem to notice her damaging the seat; what

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would he have said if he had? Nothing. Before Kyritos, Dad would've flipped over something like that. Not any more. Not with her.

"You OK?" he asks.

"Uh-huh."

His gaze flicks to her fingers, then away. "Another hour from here," he says. "Give or take."

Travelling with him, just the two of them, reminds her of a trip to London a year or so ago, during her "budding artist" phase. Dad decided to whisk her away for the weekend to an exhibition. They went by train and stayed in a posh hotel. It had been wonderful, having Dad to herself. In the gift shop at Tate Modern, he bought her a pad of cartridge paper and a charcoal set in a sleek black folder which she carried around for weeks afterwards, until it was filled with sketches.

Dad took two for the wall of his office. As far as she knows, they're still there.

She looks at him, opposite her, stirring sugar into his tea. His shirt is creased from the drive and he looks tired. Dad's been in Kyritos again, the past few days; not that you'd guess it from his pale complexion. Yet another link in the long chain of *due legal process*. He only flew home late last night and she suspects he would still be out there now, if it wasn't for *her*. And if Mum wasn't such a mess.

As though sensing her watching him, Dad looks up and smiles; she smiles back. Her smile feels ill-fitting, like a false moustache, or like she has forgotten how and is having to

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learn all over again. Dad's smile looks much the same.

It's too warm in the café. Shiv removes her hoodie and drapes it over the back of her chair. She catches Dad registering the T-shirt.

"What?" Her tone is hard.

"Nothing."

"I wear his stuff a lot. If you didn't spend so much time at work, or in Greece, you'd know that."

In the hush that follows, a waitress appears at a nearby table, clearing the clutter. Her gaze lingers and Shiv wonders if the waitress recognizes her from the papers or the TV news. No; there's nothing odd in her expression.

"Sorry, Dad," Shiv says.

He waves her apology away.

Dad has almost finished his sandwich; Shiv sips at her hot chocolate. "Eat up," he says, indicating her plate, his mouth half full.

She leaves her food where it is. A song is playing; the one Shiv, Laura and Katy sang (appallingly, hysterically) at the school Christmas karaoke. Just seven months ago. It hardly seems possible she could have been so unconditionally happy.

"She's no better, is she?" Dad says.

Mum, he means. That dig about him not spending enough time at home must have been turning over in his mind. "She talks to him," Shiv says. "Most of the day, she lies just on his bed."

"You wear his T-shirt."

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How easy it would be to send Dad's drink into his lap. But she puts the anger in a box and puts the box in another box, like she's been taught to. Dad keeps his eyes on the table, his food, the window, anywhere but her face.

"We're not very good at this, are we?" she says, softening her tone.

"No." Dad shakes his head. Laughs, sort of.

"I have to pee," she says, after a moment.

In the loos, Shiv imagines breaking something – a hand-drier, a soap dispenser. It'd be over before either of the women in here could stop her. She shuts herself in a cubicle. The urge to destroy hasn't been this strong for days. It's as though the "bad" part of her brain knows where she's being taken and is reminding her that – wherever she goes, whatever she does – it won't give in without a fight.

Afterwards, at one of the basins, she catches sight of herself in the mirror.

Tell me how to stop this.

Then, under her breath, "Tell me. Help me, please." The mouth in the mirror opens and closes, as though it's the reflected Shiv asking for help, not the real one. Staring at that face, she couldn't say for sure which is which.

Back at the table, Dad is consulting the directions.

"All set?" he says, offering a smile of reassurance. Shiv knows she looks terrible and can see him trying to hide his concern.

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Keep her spirits up, that's his strategy. *Be positive at all times*. She can only imagine how much effort that must take, what with all he's had to deal with.

Soon, they'll say goodbye, Dad will hand her over to strangers, and they won't see each other again for two months.

They have played out this kind of scene so often: the troubled (in trouble) daughter; the protective father trying to do his best for her. With the police, with consular officials, the press, social workers, solicitors, with her form tutor, her head teacher, with magistrates, counsellors, doctors, therapists.

"Siobhan, I don't know who you are any more," he said, a month or so ago, after she'd piled all her school books in the back garden, doused them with paraffin from the shed and set them alight.

"Me neither."

The final leg of the journey takes them through rolling farmland. *Undulating*, Dad calls it. She likes that word. Satnav is no use here, so Shiv has to navigate. It's a pretty route – black-and-white cows grazing beside a twisty river, sunlight glazing the wooded hills that huddle above the valley. Blue sky and fluffy clouds. If you asked a young child to paint a picture of the countryside it would look like this.

At a T-junction, Dad asks, "Left or right?"

"Straight over," she says automatically.

It's the sort of joke her brother would've made, and they both laugh – naturally, at first, then self-consciously.

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Amusement trails an echo of loss; Declan's sense of humour tuning in and out like a wayward radio signal.

"Left," she says.

Dad puts the car in gear and makes the turn.

He switches off the air-con and lowers the windows to let in the breeze and the scents of the hedgerows and the sounds of birdsong. The lingering traces of the noisy, too-warm, too-bright, food-stinking motorway café are swept away, along with some of the tension between them.

"Hello," Dad says, "I'd like to buy a goldfish."

"Certainly, sir," she replies. "How about an aquarium?"

"I don't care what star sign it is. I just want a goldfish."

Another of Dec's *many* terrible jokes. They do the funny-but-sad laugh again. Take turns to tell a few more. When they eventually lapse back into silence, the grin stays fixed on Shiv's face until they reach the next turn and Dad has to jog her out of her reverie to tell him which way to go.

"Oh, er … right, I think." She looks at the map, points. "Yeah, turn right."

They are close. Silence falls.

The entrance lies at the end of a lane that is only wide enough for one vehicle at a time. Not that there are any others. They haven't encountered another motorist – or cyclist, or anyone on foot for that matter – for so long the country might be under curfew. They're confronted by tall, wrought-iron gates mounted on stone pillars. A CCTV camera on top of one pillar is aimed at their car. To either side, a perimeter

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wall, at least five metres high, runs in both directions as far as the eye can see. "Eden Hall" is etched into the right-hand gatepost, its letters worn and blotchy with lichen. There is no more recent nameplate, nothing to identify what goes on here.

Reaching through the open window, Dad presses the button on an intercom panel set into a metal post. Staticky crackle. A disembodied voice asks for *the resident's name*. "Siobhan Faverdale," Dad says, and reads out the reference number from the acceptance letter.

After a pause, the huge gates swing open to let them through.

Parallel lines of poplars tower over the drive, flanking it like soldiers forming a guard of honour. Then, as the drive curves, the land rises and the trees give way to banks of rhododendrons, a sweeping, vibrantly green lawn, a backdrop of woodland – and she catches sight of the buildings.

"Oh, *wow*."

The weeks of waiting, today's long journey, all the hopes and fears she has assembled around her stay. Shiv can scarcely believe she's finally here.

The main house could be the setting for a TV costume drama. It's built of sand-coloured stone, transformed into glistening honeycomb – so gorgeous in the lemony sunlight you might break off a chunk of wall and eat it. Just three storeys high, but wide, with a terracotta-tiled roof and a domed clock tower. Smaller buildings – old stable blocks,

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a coach house, a gardener's cottage – cluster around a courtyard, where a sign directs them to VISITOR PARKING.

Just then, a break in the rhododendrons to their left brings a surprisingly large lake into view in the lower part of the grounds, a flash of sun silvering its breeze-chipped surface before it disappears again behind a conifer hedge.

The sight of the water is so fleeting she can almost believe she imagined it.

It's a lake, she tells herself. *That's all. Nothing to be afraid of.*

Even so, by the time Dad slows the car to a halt in the courtyard, her breathing is only just beginning to return to normal.

He kills the engine and they sit quietly for a moment. If he spotted the lake as well, he doesn't say so; but her reaction can't have escaped him. He's busying himself with paperwork from the folder in the glove compartment, although there can't be a document in there he hasn't checked five times today. A couple of cars are parked here already and Shiv wonders if they belong to the parents of some of the other new arrivals and, if so, when she'll get to meet them. And what they'll be like. And why they're here.

Shiv swallows. Dries her palms on the legs of her cut-offs. They're both still wearing their seat belts, she realizes. Like they're ready for a quick getaway if either of them changes their mind.

"You'd think someone would come out to greet us," Dad says.

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As though his words have caused it to happen, a door opens in one of the buildings across the yard and a woman emerges – no more than a silhouette, in the glare – her footsteps clicking on the brick cobbles as she approaches the car.

Behind her, fixed to the wall, is a sign, neat blue text on a grey background:

Welcome to the Korsakoff Clinic.

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