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Opening Extract from...

11 MISSED CALLS

Written by Elisabeth Carpenter

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My mother, Debbie, has been missing for thirty years, ten months and twenty-seven days. It's her birthday the day after tomorrow – two days after mine. I'm three years older than she was when she was last seen. She disappeared so long ago, that my father doesn't talk about her any more. I have always taken scraps of information from my stepmother, Monica, and my grandfather, who will never give up hope.

But they have run out of new things to say about her. I was just over one month old when she left. I have no memories of my own, but I have a box. Inside it are random objects, music records, and photographs that belonged to her. There's also a scrapbook with pages and pages of facts I wrote about her: She had dark hair, like mine. She was five foot five (two inches taller than me).She had her ears pierced twice in each ear. (Gran didn't like it and had no idea where she got the money, at fifteen, to do that.) She liked The Beatles and Blondie. She wasn't very happy at the end.

I started the list when I was eleven, so my first entries are naive and in the past tense. What I would like to know now is: What made you leave? and Do you ever think of us? But of course, no one can answer those questions but her.

The letterbox rattles, shaking me out of my thoughts. Sophie runs to the front door. The envelopes look huge in her little hands.

'There are loads more cards for you, Mummy,' she says.

She hands me the three pastel-coloured envelopes. I examine the handwriting on each one to see if I recognise it. I don't know why I do it to myself every year. If the writing is unfamiliar, I get butterflies and a feeling of anticipation. What if this is the day she contacts me? What if it is today that I find out that she's not dead – that she did something so terrible she had to protect us from the truth?