

## Praise for *Little Darlings*

‘Chilling story, beautiful prose. *Little Darlings* is stunning’  
Clare Mackintosh, number one *Sunday Times* bestseller

‘Dark, richly evocative, tense and thought-provoking. Taps into every woman’s fear that she will not be believed’  
Mel McGrath, author of *Give Me The Child*

‘Melanie Golding tells the truth about motherhood like no other writer since Sylvia Plath ... It delivers on all fronts and will continue to rattle you, long after you have put it down’  
Felicity Everett, author of *The People at Number 9*

‘Deep. Dark. Utterly addictive ... Be warned – you can’t unread this story. It will haunt you’  
Teresa Driscoll, author of *I Am Watching You*

‘A story that is in turn enthralling, creepy and downright sinister, Melanie Golding turns fairy tales on their heads in *Little Darlings* ... A brilliant, heart-pounding read’  
Lisa Hall, author of *Between You and Me*

‘*Little Darlings* is brilliant – beautifully written, disturbing and deliciously creepy’  
Roz Watkins, author of *The Devil’s Dice*

‘Riveting, terrifying and at times heartbreaking ... Melanie Golding’s disturbing portrait of a new mother’s paranoia is superbly written, cleverly plotted and gruesomely beautiful in an unforgettable way’  
Annie Ward, author of *Beautiful Bad*

**Melanie Golding** is a graduate of the MA in creative writing program at Bath Spa University, with distinction. She has been employed in many occupations including farm hand, factory worker, childminder and music teacher. Throughout all this, because and in spite of it, there was always the writing. In recent years she has won and been shortlisted in several local and national short story competitions. *Little Darlings* is her first novel and has been optioned for screen by Free Range Films, the team behind the adaptation of *My Cousin Rachel*.

# Little Darlings

Melanie Golding



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

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Dedicated to the memory of Amber Baxter (née Fink)

1979-2012



August 17th  
Peak District, UK

DS Joanna Harper stood on the viaduct with the other police officers. On the far bank, across the great expanse of the reservoir, a woman paused at the water's edge, about to go in, her twin baby boys held tightly in her arms.

Harper turned to the DI. 'How close are the officers on that side?'

Dense woodland surrounded the scrap of shore where the woman stood. Even at this distance, Harper could see that her legs were scarlet with blood from the thorns.

'Not close enough,' said Thrupp. 'They can't find a way to get to her.'

In a fury of thudding, the helicopter flew over their heads, disturbing the surface of the reservoir, bellowing its command: *Step away from the water*. It loomed above the tiny figure of the mother, deafening and relentless, but the officers on board wouldn't be able to stop her. There was nowhere in the valley where the craft could make a safe landing, or get low enough to drop the winch.

Through the binoculars, Harper saw the woman collapse into

a sitting position on the dried-out silt, her face turned to the sky, still clutching the babies. Perhaps she wouldn't do it, after all.

A memory surfaced then, of what the old lady had said to her: 'She'll have to put them in the water, if she wants her own babies back . . . Right under the water. Hold 'em down.'

The woman wasn't sitting at the water's edge anymore; she was knee-deep, and wading further in. The DS kicked off her shoes, climbed up on the rail and prepared to dive.

# Chapter 1

The child is not mine as the first was,  
I cannot sing it to rest,  
I cannot lift it up fatherly  
And bliss it upon my breast;  
Yet it lies in my little one's cradle  
And sits in my little one's chair,  
And the light of the heaven she's gone to  
Transfigures its golden hair.

FROM *The Changeling*

BY JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

July 13th  
8.10 p.m.

All she cared about was that the pain had been taken away. With it, the fear, and the certainty that she would die, all gone in the space of a few miraculous seconds. She wanted to drift off but then Patrick's worried face appeared, topped by a green hospital cap and she remembered: I'm having my babies. The spinal injection she'd been given didn't just signal the end of the horrendous contractions, but the beginning of a forceps extraction procedure that could still go wrong. The first baby was stuck in the birth canal. So, instead of allowing herself to sink inside her glorious, warm cocoon of numbness and fall asleep – which she hadn't

done for thirty-six hours – she tried to concentrate on what was happening.

The doctor's face appeared, near to Lauren's own, the mask pulled down revealing her mouth and most of her chin. The woman's lips were moving as if untethered to her words. It was the drugs, and the exhaustion; the world had slowed right down. Lauren frowned. The doctor was looking at her, but she seemed so far away. She's talking to me, thought Lauren, I should listen.

'Ok, Mrs Tranter, because of the spinal, you won't be able to tell when you have a contraction – so I'll tell you when to push, ok?'

Lauren's mouth formed an 'o', but the doctor had already gone. 'Push.'

She felt the force of the doctor pulling and her entire body slid down the bed with it. She couldn't tell if she was pushing or not. She made an effort to arrange her face in an expression of straining and tensed her neck muscles, but somewhere in her head a voice said, why bother? They won't be able to tell if I don't push, will they? Maybe I could just have a little sleep.

She shut her eyes.

'Push now.'

The doctor pulled again and the dreaminess dispersed as the first one came out. Lauren opened her eyes and everything was back in focus, events running at the right speed, or perhaps slightly too quickly now. She held her breath, waiting for the sound of crying. When it finally came, that sound, thin and reedy, the weakened protest of something traumatised, she cried too. The tears seemed projectile, they were so pent-up. Patrick squeezed her hand.

'Let me see,' she said, and that was when the baby was placed on his mother's chest, but on his back, arse-to-chin with Lauren so that all she could see were his folded froggy legs, and a tiny arm, flailing in the air. Patrick bent over them both, squinting at the baby, laughing, then crying and pressing his finger into one little palm.

‘Can’t you turn him around?’ she said, but nobody did. Then she was barely aware of the doctor saying, ‘push,’ again, and another pull. The boy was whisked away and the second one placed there.

This time she could reach up and turn the baby to face her. She held him in a cradle made of her two arms and studied his face, the baby studying her at the same time, his little mouth in a trumpeter’s pout, no white visible in his half-open eyes but a deep thoughtful blue. Although the babies were genetically identical, she and Patrick had expected that there would be slight differences. They’re individuals. Two bonnie boys, she thought with a degree of slightly forced joviality, at the same time as, could I just go to sleep now? Would anyone notice, really?

‘Riley,’ said Patrick, with one hand gently touching Lauren’s face and one finger stroking the baby’s, ‘Yes?’

Lauren felt pressured. She thought they might leave naming them for a few days until they got to know them properly. Such a major decision, what if they got it wrong?

‘Riley?’ she said, ‘I suppose—’

Patrick had straightened up, his phone in his hand already.

‘What about the other one? Rupert?’

Rupert? That wasn’t even on the list. It was like he was trying to get names past her while she was distracted, having been pumped full of drugs and laid out flat, paralysed from the chest down, vulnerable to suggestion. Not fair.

‘No,’ she said, a little bit too loudly. ‘He’s called Morgan.’

Patrick’s brow creased. He glanced in the direction of possibly-Morgan, who was being checked over by the paediatrician. ‘Really?’ He put his phone back in his pocket.

‘You can’t stay long,’ said the nurse-midwife to Patrick, as the bed finally rolled into place. Sea-green curtains were whisked out of the way. Lauren wanted to protest: she’d hoped there would be

some time to properly settle in with the babies before they threw her husband out of the ward.

The trip from theatre to the maternity ward involved hundreds of metres of corridor. Thousands of metres, maybe. Patrick had been wheeling the trolley containing one of the twins, while the nurse drove the bed containing Lauren, who was holding the other one. The small procession clanked wordlessly along the route through the yellow-lit corridors. At first Lauren thought that Patrick could have offered to swap with the nurse and take the heavier burden, but she soon became glad she hadn't mentioned it. As they approached the ward it was clear the woman knew what she was doing. This nurse, who was half Patrick's height just about, had used her entire bodyweight to counter-balance as the bed swung around a corner and into the bay, then, impressively, she'd stepped up and ridden it like a sailboard into one of the four empty cubicles, the one by the window. There was a single soft 'clang' as the head of the bed gently touched the wall. Patrick would only have crashed them into something expensive.

The nurse operated the brake and gave a brisk, 'here we are!' before delivering her warning to Patrick, indicating the clock on the wall opposite. 'Fifteen minutes,' she said.

Her shoes squeaked away up the ward. Lauren and Patrick looked at the babies.

'Which one have you got?' asked Patrick.

She turned the little name tag on the delicate wrist of the sleeping child in her arms. The words *Baby Tranter #1* were written on it in blue sharpie.

'Morgan,' said Lauren.

Patrick bent over the trolley containing the other one. Later, everyone would say that the twins looked like their father, but at this moment she couldn't see a single similarity between the fully grown man and the scrunched-up bud of a baby. The boys

certainly resembled each other – two peas popped from the same pod, or the same pea, twice. Riley had the same wrinkled little face as his brother, the same long fingers and uncannily perfect fingernails. They made the same expression when they yawned. Slightly irritatingly, someone in theatre had dressed them in identical white sleep suits, taken from the bag Lauren and Patrick had brought with them, though there had been other colours available. She had intended to dress one of them in yellow. Without the name tags they could easily have been mistaken for each other and how would anyone ever know? Thank goodness for the name tags, then. In her arms, Morgan moved his head from side to side and half-opened his eyes. She watched them slowly close.

They'd been given a single trolley for both babies to sleep in. Riley was lying under Patrick's gaze in the clear plastic cot-tray bolted to the top of the trolley. Underneath the baby there was a firm, tightly fitting mattress, and folded at either end of this were two blankets printed with the name of the hospital. The cot was the wrong shape for its cargo. The plastic tray and the mattress were unforgivingly flat, and the baby was a ball. A woodlouse in your palm, one that curls up when frightened. Patrick moved the trolley slightly, abruptly, and Riley's little arms and legs flew out, a five-pointed star. He curled up slowly, at the same speed as his brother's closing eyes. Back in a ball, he came to rest slightly on his side. To hold a baby, it ought to be bowl-shaped, a little nest. Why had no one thought of that before?

'Hello, Riley,' said Patrick in an odd squeaky voice. He straightened up. 'It sounds weird, saying that.'

Lauren reached out and drew the trolley closer to her bed, carefully, trying to prevent the little ball from rolling. She used her one free hand to tuck a blanket over him and down the sides of the mattress, to hold him in place.

'Hello, Riley,' she said. 'Yeah, it does a bit. I think that's normal, though. We'll get used to it.' She turned her face to the child in

her arms. ‘Hello, Morgan,’ she said. She was still waiting for the rush of love. That one you feel, all at once the second they’re born, like nothing you’ve ever experienced before. The rush of love that people with children always go on about. She’d been looking forward to it. It worried her that she hadn’t felt it yet.

She handed Morgan to Patrick, who held him as if he were a delicate antique pot he’d just been told was worth more than the house; desperate to put him down, unsure where, terrified something might happen. Lauren found it both funny and concerning. When the baby – who could probably sense these things – started to cry, Patrick froze, a face of nearly cartoon panic. Morgan’s crying caused Riley to wake up and cry, too.

‘Put him in there, next to Riley,’ said Lauren. The twins had been together all their lives. She wondered what that would mean for them, later on. They’d been with her, growing inside her, for nine months, the three of them together every second of every day for the whole of their existence so far. She felt relief that they were no longer in there, and guilt at feeling that relief, and a great loss that they had taken the first step away from her, the first of all the subsequent, inevitable steps away from her. Was that the love, that guilty feeling? That sense of loss? Surely not.

Patrick placed the squalling package face to face with his double, and, a miracle, the crying ceased. They both reached out, wrapping miniature arms around each other’s downy heads, Morgan holding onto Riley’s ear. All was calm. From above, they looked like an illusion. An impossibility. Lauren checked again, but as far as she could tell the rush of love still had not arrived.

The fierce nurse squeaked back down the ward at just after nine and began to shoo Patrick away home, which would leave Lauren, still numb in the legs and unable to move, alone to deal with every need and desire of the two newborn babies.

'You can't leave me,' said Lauren.

'You can't stay,' said the nurse.

'I'll be back,' said Patrick, 'first thing. As soon as they open the doors. Don't worry.'

He kissed her head, and both babies. He walked away a little too quickly.

## Chapter 2

After Patrick had gone, Lauren sat, dry-eyed in the quiet, knowing there was chaos to come. For the moment, though, they slept. From the bed she observed the twin cocoons that were the babies, swaddled in white, with a disbelieving awe: did I do that?

The hospital was not silent, neither was it dark, although by now the windows were made of black mirrors. Lauren's reflection had deep shadowed holes where it should have had eyes. A vision of horror. She turned away.

The building had a hum of several different tones forming a drone, a cold chord that wouldn't resolve. Lauren put her head on her pillow and realised that one of the singers was her hospital bed, which harmonised dissonant with the slightly lower, much more powerful hum of the heating. Then there was the hum of her bedside lamp, which had a buzzy texture that she actually found quite soothing. She closed her eyes, still propped in a sitting position with the bright lamp blasting through her eyelids. She breathed deeply in and out, three, four times. Sleep was coming. She'd waited so long for this.

A whimper from one of the babies struck through her thin slumber with an urgency that felt physical. Her eyes were forced to open, but every time she blinked she could see a backdrop of red with dark streaks where a map of the veins in her eyelids had

been burned onto her retinas. She batted the lamp away from her face with a clang.

Perhaps he'll go back to sleep, she thought, with a desperate optimism. Riley's whimper became a *cluck*, and then a *cluck cluck cluck waaaa*, and then she had to take action. One crying baby was enough.

She pulled the trolley as close as it would come, but found she couldn't lift him. She needed one of her hands to stop her numbed useless lower half falling out of the bed as she leaned over, but two to lift the baby, with a hand under his head and one under his body, as she had been shown. Riley's mouth was open, his eyes screwed shut, legs starting to stretch out and arms reaching, searching trembling in the air for some resistance, finding none.

Lauren thought about the womb and how it had contained them both, fed them and kept them warm. She felt bad for them, that nature had taken away their loving home and put her there in its place; that they'd been pulled from her uterus and placed in her arms, where she was the only thing standing between them and oblivion, them and failure, them and disappointment. She, who couldn't even pick up her boy and fill his little tummy, which was now, face it, her only purpose in life.

Morgan heard his brother's crying. He was shifting in his sleep, not quite awake but he would be soon. Lauren reached out and gathered up the front of Riley's sleep suit in her fist until he was curled around it tightly in a storks' bundle. She held her breath and lifted him one-handed, worrying about his head dangling backwards on his elastic neck for the second it took to transport him to her lap. But then she figured, two hours ago during the birth he'd been gripped with metal tongs and pulled by the head with great force on the confidence that that neck, seemingly so fragile and delicate, would bring the rest of him along safely.

As she struggled to feed Riley, Morgan woke up properly and cried with hunger. She listened, helpless, the sound an alarm she

couldn't turn off, a scream wired directly into her body, taking up all of the space in her brain so that she could think of nothing but feeding him, of doing what was necessary to soothe the boy, to make it stop. After a few agitated minutes, she found herself sliding a little finger into the corner of Riley's mouth to unlatch him. With difficulty, she placed him back in the cot, one-handed, straining crane-like to swap him over with his hungrier brother. For a while there was only the sound of little lips smacking, one baby feeding and the other contemplating until Riley remembered he hadn't finished his meal and thought that his heart might break.

She fed one while the other demanded to be fed, and went on in this way like Sisyphus, thinking there had to be an end to it but finding that there was not. She pressed the buzzer for help, but when the midwife came she seemed so irritated and abrupt that Lauren didn't feel she could call again. The night stretched out and jumped forward as her shredded brain tried to doze, to rest and recharge after the labour, the day and night and day of not sleeping and then this night, this long night of lifting and swivelling and feeding and sitting in positions that hurt for scores of minutes too long, her back complaining and her arm muscles torn and her nipples cracking and bleeding and drying out only to be thrust into the hard, wet vice of her baby's latch. And then, as the drugs from the blessed injection wore off, there was the pain from the destruction of her pelvic floor. Where they had cut her and sewn her, where her mucus membranes had been stretched to the point at which they tore.

She lost track of whether she slept. It seemed to Lauren that she did not, yet she found herself setting one baby down gently in the cot, blinking once and noticing that most of an hour had passed.

The curtain between her bay and the next had been drawn across. The nurses must have brought in another new mum. The twins were quietly dozing, inverted commas curling towards each other, peaceful.

From the other side of the curtain she could hear a cooing, a mother talking to a baby. The voice was low, muttering, somehow unsettling. Lauren couldn't work out why it sounded odd. She listened for a while longer. Just a woman, murmuring nothings to her baby – why was it troubling her? There were baby sounds too, though this baby sounded like a bird, squawking softly, quacking, chirping to be fed. Then something else, another sound, more like a kitten. Lauren let her eyes close and drifted, dreaming of a woman with a cat and a bird, an old woman all skin and sinew, holding an animal in each hand by the scruff and feeding them worms from a bucket. Both hands full, the old woman used her long black tongue to encircle and trap each worm, pulling the wriggling thing free of the squirming tangle before trailing it into the mouths, the open beak of the bird and the gaping jaws of the kitten. The kitten's needle teeth nipped at the membrane skin of the creature and it recoiled, panicked, in a futile effort to escape before it was dropped, falling from the mother's black unfurling tongue across the beak and the jaws of the bird and the cat, each snapping at the fat wet worm until they tore it in two and turned away from each other, mouths working with smacks and gulps, sulkily satisfied with half. The old woman was telling the animals something as they fed, some urgent legacy, the details of which Lauren couldn't quite catch, whispering, pressing on them the importance that they remember everything she said to them, that their lives depended on it. In the dream, the animals listened for as long as they could, but then they cried out because they needed more food. And as they cried out, the sounds became less like a bird and a cat and more like human babies, a squawk became a cry, the kitten's meow trailed off to a soft baby whimper. In the dream, the woman held the animals and shushed them as they transformed, rocked them gently as their human forms emerged and then she laid the twin babies gently in the hospital cot.

Lauren's eyes flew open. The dream lingered – there was a smell

of something animal in her nostrils and she shook her head to rid herself of the disturbing images. All was silent except the breathing of her twins and the nearly imperceptible sounds of another set of twins in the next bed. Another set of twins. The woman in the bed next to hers had twins too, she was suddenly sure of it. She listened carefully – two babies snuffling, definitely. What were the chances? The dream forgotten, Lauren was pleased – she wanted to peek around the curtain and say hi but she couldn't have reached. Besides, it was still the middle of the night. She'd have to wait until morning. Two sets of twins in one day. Maybe that was a hospital record.

Stuck in the bed, her body weakened by the spinal injection, sleep-deprived, sore and exhausted, Lauren consoled herself. At least she'd have someone to talk to now, someone who'd been through something similar. The sun was creeping into the edges of the windows, lending its peach to the white and yellow of the electric light on the ward. Behind the curtain, all fell quiet; the other mother of twins must have fallen asleep. Lauren shut her eyes again, but the moment her eyelids met she could hear the breathy swoosh of her baby's cheek rubbing up and down on the cot sheet as his little head moved left to right, searching out a nipple. She forced her eyes open, pushed her body into an upright position, braced herself for the pain in her arms as she swivelled and lifted the child to feed.

## Chapter 3

Come away, O, human child  
To the waters and the wild  
With a faery hand in hand  
For the world's more full of weeping than  
You can understand

FROM *The Stolen Child*

BY W.B. YEATS

July 14th  
One day old  
9.30 a.m.

The nurse swished the curtain back against the wall, jolting Lauren awake. There was nothing behind it, only an empty space where a bed could be parked.

She had shut her eyes between feeds and the world jumped forward three hours. The sun was up and getting on with things, drowning out the electric lights and transforming the room, from a cave to an open space. From the window there was a view of the car park three floors down, and across the way she could see the main entrance to the A&E department. The wide sky was a shade of bright grey but it would be hot, as it had been every day for all of July. Fresh now, clammy later. The heatwave had been

going on for a week, and the forecast was more of the same. It was set to break records.

The nurse was removing a catheter bag filled with yellow fluid from below the bed. She dropped it in a bucket and reached for an empty one.

‘Where’s the woman who was brought in last night?’ asked Lauren.  
‘Who – Mrs Gooch, over there?’

The bay diagonally across from Lauren was occupied. Mrs Gooch seemed to be asleep, a serene baby tucked into the bed with her. The mother had long red hair arranged artfully across the pillow and pale bare arms – the effect was akin to a Klimt painting.

‘No, I don’t think so. I thought there was someone next to me. I was pretty sure.’

Riley was awake. His windmilling arm smacked his sleeping brother across the head and Morgan’s eyes opened in shock, then screwed up shut in sorrow, his mouth a little zero of injustice. There was a pause while Morgan inhaled expansively, a comprehensive gathering of breath that would certainly be used for something loud. The long wail, when it finally came, hit Riley’s face and crumpled it. Riley, in turn, inhaled at length and soon the anguish was doubled. Within a few seconds the sound built into a crescendo of indignation that interrupted their mother’s thought pattern like scissors through ribbon. Lauren flapped her hands, struggling to know what to do, where to start, who to tend to. Both of them crying, and only one of her. She knew she had to be quick – she’d read so much about attachment disorder and rising cortisol levels in the brains of babies in pregnancy and early childhood. You couldn’t leave children to cry. It had damaging effects and might do radical things to brain development, causing terrible long-term consequences. Already they seemed so angry.

‘Please,’ she said to the nurse, feeling her eyes filling up, ‘can you help me?’

‘Hey petal, no need for that.’ The nurse whipped three thin tissues from the box by the bed, pressed them into Lauren’s hand and turned to lift baby Morgan, a furious, purple-faced wide-mouthed thing from which came forth a sound that made you want to cover your ears. ‘There’s enough crying round here already without you joining in.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Lauren, wiping her eyes and blowing her nose, then uncovering herself ready to feed. ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with me.’

In what seemed like less than half a minute the nurse plugged Lauren firmly into the twins. She manoeuvred Lauren’s body, lifting the weight of her breasts, helping her get into a position to feed both at once, a rugby ball baby under each arm with pillows holding them in place. The nurse was so efficient, so quick and practised. It made Lauren wonder how she would ever manage on her own.

‘There. Snug as bugs.’

She started to stride away, but Lauren stopped her.

‘That woman over there,’ she said, ‘has she got twins?’

Mrs Gooch had opened her eyes. She looked as fresh and unlikely as Sleeping Beauty. Even as Lauren spoke it was obvious that there was only one child contained in the idyll – baby Gooch was with her in the bed and there was no sign of any other.

‘No,’ said the nurse, ‘just the one. Yours are the only twins we’ve got at the moment.’

Patrick brought vegetable sushi, fruit and dark chocolate. ‘Thanks,’ she said, without gratitude. She didn’t fancy anything but white-bread toast.

‘You need something with nutrients in,’ he said.

She stuck her lip out. She ought to be able to eat whatever she felt like. ‘All food has nutrients in. Sugar is a nutrient. So is alcohol.’

‘Alright, clever clogs. You need something with vitamins. Tell me what you want, I can go to the supermarket and bring you something else this afternoon at visiting time. Avocado?’

The thought of avocado made her nauseous. She wanted crisps.

Patrick took photos of Lauren holding the twins as they slept, and then turned the screen for her to see. In the images she was both gaunt and bloated, her smile weak and her hair greasy.

‘Don’t put that online. I look terrible.’

Patrick looked up from his phone. ‘Oh, I, sort of already did.’ The phone started pinging with notifications as comments came in. He tilted the screen to show her:

Congratulations!

Glad you are all well!

Hope to see you soon!

Soooo beautiful!!!

Wow well done you guys can't wait to meet the boys Xxx!

Later she took matching photos of him, holding the twins while he sat in the vinyl-covered armchair next to the bed. His appearance was just the same as always. Maybe he seemed a bit tired, perhaps as if he had a mild hangover, but there was no radical change. He’d lost a tiny bit of weight recently and people – friends of theirs – were saying how much better he looked for it. Where was the justice in that? They were both parents of twins now but it was her body that had been sacrificed.

Patrick put both babies back into the cot. He was handling them with less trepidation than before, putting them down as if they were fruits that bruised easily rather than explosives that needed decommissioning. He sat down but he kept one hand in the cot with them, counting fingers, self-consciously trying out nursery rhymes he could only half remember.

‘Round and round the garden, like a dum de dum. Like a . . . what is it like?’

‘Like a teddy bear,’ said Lauren.

‘Is it?’

‘Yes. I think so.’ She pictured her mother’s finger, tracing circles on her palm. The anticipation of the *one step, two steps, tickle you under there*. More rhymes came to her then: Jack and Jill, Georgie Porgie, a blackbird to peck off a nose. It was like lifting the lid on a forgotten box of treasure. These gifts, not thought of for years, there in her memory all this time, waiting for her to need them, to pass them on.

‘Teddy bear?’ said Patrick, still sceptical. ‘Well, that doesn’t make sense.’

Lauren put her hand in the cot, too. She stroked Morgan’s cheek and for a few seconds there was peace. It was such simple joy to feel the grip of a miniature hand around your thumb.

‘Are they breathing?’ said Patrick.

A sudden panic.

‘Of course they are.’ Were they? They both stared hard at the boys’ chests but it was difficult to tell. She tickled them in turn until they cried, voices twining together, so similar to each other, the two sounds in parallel like twisting strands of DNA.

‘Yes, they’re breathing.’

They laughed nervously, relieved, as if they’d come close to something unspeakable but not close enough to say what it was. The ground was shifting under them. What would life look like, now?

The anaesthetist came and poked Lauren in the swollen ankles with a pointy white plastic stick. She dangled her legs so he could test her reflexes with the hammer end. She could feel it fine. It was a relief to be paraplegic no longer.

‘You should be able to get up now,’ he said. ‘The nurse will come along soon to remove your catheter.’

She'd miss that catheter. For months she'd been up seven or eight times in the night to empty her oppressed bladder. She quite liked not having to think about it – not being at the mercy of yet another uncontrollable bodily function.

'When can I go home?' She was sweating in the dry heat, the skin on her lower limbs stretched shiny with the swelling. Why was the heating even on in the summer? The hottest summer Sheffield had seen for forty years. Apart from anything else, what a waste of money.

The anaesthetist looked at her notes.

'Well, I can safely discharge you once you've moved your bowels.'

'Moved my—'

'Bowels?' The doctor smiled indulgently at her.

She'd understood, but the term was unfamiliar. Not much mention of bowels in her former life sculpting moulds for garden ornaments. No one ever ordered bowels cast in concrete with a fountain attachment for their garden pond.

Though the talk was of catheters and bowels, she bathed in the doctor's easy confident manner and was sad when he went away again, leaving her trapped in her little family unit, her perfect four. Patrick made a little whistling sound at Lauren as she gazed moonily at the doctor's retreating back.

'What?' she said.

'I thought you went for tall men.'

She laughed darkly. She was thinking of that moment again, when the needle went in and the pain went away and the anaesthetist carved a place for himself in her heart, made of gratitude and respect and a little bit of girlish adoration.

'You should have a walk around now, check that everything's working fine.'

The nurse had taken out the catheter only ten minutes before

and Lauren felt slightly aggrieved by the abruptness of the suggestion – one moment a bed-bound dependent, the next dragged out and forced to march around, quick smart hup-two-three. She hadn't used her legs at all in twenty hours. They needed time to think about it. No part of Lauren liked being expected to perform at short notice.

She planted her two fat bare feet onto the cool vinyl floor, feeling the many specks of grit on its surface. The nurse gestured to Patrick to take the other arm.

'Oh Jesus,' said Patrick as he helped her stand up.

She twisted to see. A puddle of blood on the white sheet almost the width of the bed, a red sun. Oh, thought Lauren, it's just like the Japanese flag. And then she felt it, rivulets down the inside of her legs, pooling on the floor, red and black and hot like the fear.

After the birth, Lauren was convinced that nothing could be as awful. But towards the end, when they'd decided forceps would be needed, the worst of it had been performed behind a screen of drapery and anaesthetic. She'd not seen or felt the whole of it, not even a significant percentage of it. Where was the lovely anaesthetist now, now that she had a further stranger, a medical person (who could actually be anyone at all, some goon off the street in a costume and how would she even know) inserting a whole hand into her and squeezing her womb until it stopped bleeding? One blue-gloved hand ('Gloves, Mr Symons?' 'Do you have Large?' Oh God.) on the inside, one pushing down from the top and nearly disappearing into the spongy mass of stomach flesh created by the absence of the babies.

'Just try to breathe,' said the person (a doctor, she hoped). An older man this time. 'This shouldn't hurt too much. Tell me if you really need me to stop.'

'I really need you to stop.'

The person/doctor did not stop. A nurse gave her nitrous oxide.

Lauren bit down on the mouthpiece and spoke through her teeth, 'Please stop.'

'Just relax if you can. I need to carry on applying pressure for a few minutes longer. The bleeding has nearly stopped. Breathe slowly. Try to relax your legs.' He was grunting with the effort.

'Oh,' said the nurse, as a sharp pain distracted Lauren momentarily, a hot feeling of flesh unzipping around the man's forearm. 'We'll have to do those stitches again.'

'Please—' Her voice caught in a sob, but there was no energy for crying. 'Please. I can't. It really hurts.' The hand inside her shifted horribly. She cried out.

'Just a minute longer.'

And she kept the terrible silence for as long as she could, unable to fight or fly, a strange man's hands compressing parts of her body that she would never see or feel with her own. Not just in her but through her, further inside than felt natural, or right. She was a pulsating piece of meat full of inconvenient nerve endings and un-cauterised vessels. No intrigue here, no mystery, no power. She'd been deconstructed by nature, and then by man, then nature again, and finally by man – the two forces tossing her hand over hand, back and forth like volleyball. Where was Lauren in this maelstrom of awfulness? Where was the person she had previously thought herself to be? Intelligent, funny, in control, that Lauren. She'd been hiding as best she could, sheltering in the back of her psyche somewhere, allowing the least evolved part of her instinctive self to be the thing that was present in this trauma. Disassociation, the word like a mantra within her silence as the older man withdrew his hand with exaggerated carefulness, the nurse took away her gas and air and inserted a needle for a drip in the back of a hand so pale she barely recognised it as her own. She was flaccid, weak, beaten. She was all shock and pain and sorrow.

Patrick was waiting, trying to comfort the screaming twins by poking his pinkie fingers in their mouths.

‘You scared me for a minute there,’ he said, his voice only decipherable over the din because of its low register.

She couldn’t think with the crying – the interference caused her mind to fill with white noise. She made an effort to form a sentence, her language processors struggling uphill in the wind against her reptilian brain.

‘You were just afraid I’d leave you alone with these two.’

He looked at her. His eyes were glazed in a film of tears. ‘Well, yeah,’ he said, ‘that too,’ and he kissed her.

Immediately a midwife started to arrange pillows, propping her up so she could feed the babies.

‘You should feed as much as you can now,’ she said. ‘It helps your uterus to contract.’

Feed as much as you can, she thought. As opposed to the meagre efforts I’ve been making so far.

As the midwife stuffed a tender nipple into the mouth of one twin and then the other, Patrick turned away. He shuffled around looking for change for the vending machine and headed off to get them both a cup of tea. By the time he came back and sat down, the midwife had left. He picked up a magazine but didn’t open it. His hands were shaking.

‘It’s six o’clock,’ he said.

‘Right,’ said Lauren.

‘I should go, before I get kicked out.’

‘I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if you stayed for a while.’

‘OK.’ He breathed in loudly through his nose. She waited for what he would say next. ‘But I’ve got to get to the shops, and everything.’

She wanted him to take her home and look after her. He’d done that once, early on. Only the second time Lauren had gone to his flat. In the night she’d started having terrible stomach pain, food poisoning most probably, from a bad takeaway. The next day he’d boldly insisted she stay with him until she was better. She didn’t

want to stay – it was early days and they were still being polite, seeking to impress each other. Neither had yet heard the other fart. For a week she vomited near-constantly and her bowels had never moved faster. If this doesn't put him off, she'd thought, and it hadn't. He set up a bed for himself on the couch and tended to her every need. He did it all without complaint, and yet even then there'd been signs that he wasn't a natural caregiver. She heard him, unable to prevent himself from gagging on the smell when he entered the bathroom after her, twice or three times that week. Also, he cooked with a certain undisguised reluctance (always did, she would discover), huffing when required to alter anything at all during the process. It didn't really matter then because she ate almost nothing that week anyway. And it meant she loved him all the more, for doing what he did, making such an effort to override his natural inclinations. It proved without question that he loved her.

The erosion of enthusiasm for self-sacrifice can happen fast in those for whom it's an effort to start with. It can be like dropping off a cliff: I care, I care, I care, I don't care; for how long exactly are you planning to be ill? Patrick must have used up all his caring that week. When she was ill in the early months of pregnancy, he'd seemed more irritated than sympathetic. She found ways of coping. She would list all his good points, in between retches.

He fidgeted in his seat for a few more seconds, then looked at his phone and got up. He kissed all three of them on the head and said he loved them, the new names sounding less strange now but still out of place somehow. 'Bye-bye Riley, I love you. Bye-bye Morgan, I love you. Bye-bye Mummy, I love you.' The word *Mummy* jarred. It took a moment before she realised he meant her.

Patrick walked the short distance to the corner of the bay, turned and gave a weary wave.

'See you in the morning,' he said.

He earns enough so I don't have to work, she thought. My mother liked him, when she was alive. He's funny. He's got lots of friends. He's really good looking, in my opinion.

With a son on each breast she watched the tendrils of steam diminish as her tea went cold in its brown plastic cup on the bedside table. The sun sank beyond the car park but the electric lights held back the darkness. Home seemed like a different country, one to which she might never return.

## Chapter 4

Night fell outside, and the babies seemed to know it: they were awake.

‘Sleep when they sleep,’ the nurse had said, Patrick had said, her mother-in-law had said many times when she was pregnant. Sleep when they sleep: neat, and as far as unsolicited advice went, sensible enough. I would do that, she thought, if I could, but they were asleep all day in between crying and being fed. Now they were awake and she wanted to watch them discovering themselves and each other and the edges of their little world but her eyelids were heavy, her head throbbed. If she closed her eyes she knew she’d be dragged under in an instant. She felt she should be awake for them, that she was duty-bound. This and the pain helped to keep her conscious at first. Her nipples were torn and raw, and the pain in her uterus was dulled only slightly by the co-codamol she had recklessly taken despite the implied threat of further confinement (‘Are you sure? It might make you constipated, flower’).

Coos and snuffles turned into cries and she fed them, both together for the first time without the midwife’s help, managing to balance one while positioning the other with one hand. Riley, the smaller of the two, seemed to find it harder to get started and she had to reach around Morgan and slip her little finger between

him and the nipple, repositioning him twice before he was able to feed. She wasn't watching the clock. Hours started stretching out into lifetimes when she did that. Feeding time went on and she thought it might go on all night but then they each dropped off the breast, asleep, like ripened plums from a branch, and she set them down. The moment both twins were in the cot she let her eyes shut and her brain shut down and her body melted into the bed. She entered a kind of sleep in which she was poised, a part of her remaining on high alert, jerking her out at the slightest snuffle. A meagre kind of rest, but all she could afford.

And then she woke when there was no sound: why was there no sound? Had she done something wrong, were they suffocating? Were they breathing, had they died? She placed a hand on each baby and waited for the rise and fall, the sound of air being drawn in, a sign of life. Under the harsh light, under her two hands they breathed, they moved, they lived.

Lauren's heart slowed by degrees. She thought of all the people that would be heartbroken if she let them die. Her gran, his mother, his father and hers. Patrick's sister Ruthie and the cousins, Sonny and Daisy. The funeral, how she did not want to go through that or watch Patrick go through it. Was this the love, this fear of them dying? Perhaps it was. She lay with her eyes open, unable to stop a series of appalling ideas from flashing in her mind. Dropping them on their heads on the hospital floor. Crashing the car with them in it. A plastic nappy bag on the face, obscuring the airways in seconds while her back was turned. These things were so easy, so quick, and they actually happened, they were real. She was right to be scared. She looked at the babies, fixing them in her memory, their personalities emerging already – Riley frowning in his sleep, dissatisfied with something. Morgan, abandoned to it, relaxed and satiated. I will never forget this, she thought.

They were asleep. *Sleep when they sleep.* And she wanted to

watch them to make sure they kept breathing but she clicked off like a light.

She dreamed of the bird and the cat again and awoke drenched in sweat and dread. How long had she slept? Impossible to know. The curtain between her bed and the next had been drawn across once more. This time there was no mistake: there was a woman in the next cubicle. The lamp inside was lit; she could see a silhouette on the curtain, long thin shadows stretched out to the ceiling. A creaky voice began to sing an unfamiliar song.

*As she was a-walking her father's walk aye-o  
As she was a-walking her father's walk,  
She saw two pretty babes playing the ball  
Lay me down me dilly dilly downwards  
Down by the greenwood side-o*

And the woman had two babies, Lauren was sure. There, the sound of two together, both cooing and grunting, as if they were singing along with the strange lullaby.

*She said pretty babes if you was mine aye-o  
She said pretty babes if you was mine  
I'd dress you up in silken fine  
Lay me down me dilly dilly downwards  
Down by the greenwood side-o*

Lauren felt an urge to visit the toilet, a sudden pressure on her bladder strong enough for her to answer it with a movement a bit too fast for her body. She swung her legs out of bed. Her knees buckled as she stood, but she held herself up with both hands on the bed rails. She perched there, testing herself. She could walk; she was just a bit unsteady. There was no sunburst of blood on the sheet. The muscles in her pelvic floor, cut and torn and sewn

up, held her in place for now and she took her hands from the bed, allowing her feet to take their burden back. She checked the babies, still breathing, feather breaths on her cheek. Blood rushed from her head to serve her limbs and she waited for the feeling to pass, the floor to cease shifting under her like the deck of a sea vessel.

The clock read 4.17. The windows, black mirrors.

*She took a penknife long and sharp aye-o  
She took a penknife long and sharp,  
And pierced the two pretty babes to the heart  
Lay me down me dilly dilly downwards  
Down by the greenwood side-o*

Maybe Lauren would ask her to stop. The singing might wake Mrs Gooch. Plus, it was a horrible song, the words were creepy and the tune was weird, sort of sad and angry. She'd been pleased, initially, when she'd realised there was another woman on the ward with twins but she wasn't sure she could be friends with someone who had no consideration for others.

The curtain had been pulled all the way around the cubicle, boxing it in. There was a gap of a few centimetres at one corner and Lauren widened it, peering through. The lamp was angled at her face, she was caught in the glare. She held a hand up to shield her eyes.

'Excuse me,' she said. The woman did not respond, kept humming the strange old tune. She tried again, a bit louder. 'Excuse me?'

There was no hospital bed. The woman was sitting in the chair, the same as the one of pale green vinyl next to her own bed, next to all the beds on the ward. The scene was too small for the cubicle – without the bed there seemed too much floor space. The distance between Lauren and the woman was as wide as a river. The woman

was leaning forward with her elbows on her knees and a large basket between her bare feet, feet dirty enough to stand out black against the floor. Rags from the woman's dress were long fingers trailing against those feet, against the floor, forming a fringe over the basket. The glare from the angled lamp meant that Lauren couldn't see the babies in the basket but she could hear them, ragged phlegmy breaths and two – definitely two – high-pitched voices murmuring. She took a step inside the cubicle, moving to get a better look, more from curiosity than anything else because she could see at once that this woman shouldn't be there. She must be homeless. She wore several layers of clothing, as if she were cold even though it was oven-hot in the hospital. But when Lauren stepped closer she began to shiver. She was at once aware of the thinness of her hospital gown, cold air surrounding her, whispering around her exposed legs and entering the gown from below so that she wrapped her arms across herself to stop it. There must have been an air-conditioning outlet right there above them. It was a damp cold and there was a muddy, fishy smell which must have been coming from the homeless woman. Lauren sensed that she had been noticed, she knew it, but the woman hadn't moved at all, not a millimetre. She was singing again.

*She throwed the babes a long ways off aye-o  
She throwed the babes a long ways off  
The more she throwed them the blood dripped off  
Lay me down me dilly dilly downwards  
Down by the green-*

‘Listen, I don't mean to be rude but can you stop singing, please? You're going to wake everyone up.’

The woman stopped singing with a sharp intake of breath. She raised her eyes from the basket. Lauren heard a high whining sound, another layer of hum but getting louder. It came from

nowhere but inside her own ears. *Run*, it told her, *leave, go, now*. But her feet were rooted. Heavy as lead.

It took a long time for the woman's eyes to meet hers and when the moment finally came Lauren had to blink away cold sweat to see her. She was young, perhaps eight or ten years younger than Lauren, but her eyes seemed ancient. She had hair that had formed itself into clumps, the kind of hair, a bit like Lauren's, that would do that if you didn't constantly brush it. The woman's face was grimy, and when she opened her mouth to speak the illusion of a rather dirty youth who could even be beautiful if given a good scrubbing was destroyed. She seemed to have no teeth and a tongue that darted darkly between full but painfully cracked lips. There was something about the way the woman eyeballed her. What did she want?

'You've twin babies,' said the woman.

'Yes.' The word had tripped out, travelling in a cough. Lauren wanted it back.

'Ye-es,' the woman drew the word out lengthily, 'twin babies. Just like mine, only yours are charmed.'

Lauren couldn't think what to say. She knew she was staring, open-mouthed at the woman but she couldn't not.

'Mine are charmed too,' said the woman, 'but it's not the same. Mine have a dark charm. A curse. You are the lucky ones, you and yours. We had nothing, and even then we were stolen from.'

She must have had a terrible time, this woman. And those poor little mites in the basket, what kind of life would they have? There were people who could help her, charities dealing in this kind of thing. She must be able to access something, at least get some new clothes. The long dirty hair hanging in dog's tails each side of her face was doubtless crawling with infestation. It wasn't healthy.

'I'm so sorry,' said Lauren, 'shall I see if I can get someone to help you?'

The woman stood up and took a few steps around the basket,

towards Lauren. The muddy smell became stronger and the air, colder. It seemed to come out of this woman, the cold. There was an odour of rotting vegetation stirred up with the mud and the fish. Lauren wanted to look into the basket but the woman was standing in the way. Closer now, she lowered her voice, breathy, hissing.

‘There’s no one can help me. Not now. There was a time but that time passed, and now there’s more than time in between me and helping.’

The woman moved slightly and Lauren could see that the basket was full of rags, a nest of thick grey swaddling and she couldn’t see a face, not even a hand or a foot. She hoped the woman’s babies could breathe in there.

‘Maybe social services could find you somewhere to stay,’ said Lauren. ‘You can’t be alone with no help, it’s not right.’

‘I’ve been alone. I’ll be alone. What’s the difference?’

‘But the babies.’

They both looked at the basket. The bundle was shifting, folding in the shadows. One of Lauren’s boys sneezed from behind the curtain and she was unrooted.

‘I’m sorry, I’ve got to go, my baby.’

She leapt away from the woman, out of the cubicle, into the dry heat.

‘Your baby,’ said the woman. And she lunged, crossing the space between them in an instant. A bony hand gripped Lauren’s wrist and she tried to pull it free but she was jerked bodily back inside the curtain walls. They struggled, but the woman was stronger.

‘Let’s deal,’ hissed the horrible woman, bringing her face up close to Lauren. ‘What’s fair, after all? We had everything taken, you had everything given. Let’s change one for another.’

‘What?’

‘Give me one of yours. I’ll take care of it. You have one of mine,

treat it like your own. One of mine at least would get a life for himself, a taste of something easy. What's fair?'

'You must be mad, why would I do that? Why would *you*?' She pulled against the woman, their arms where they were joined rising and falling like waves in a storm. Nothing could shake her off. Lauren felt her skin pulling, grazing, tearing in the woman's grasp, filthy nails scoring welts that she was certain would get infected, would likely scar. 'Get off me,' she said through gritted teeth. She would bite the woman's fingers to make her let go. But they were disgusting.

'Choose one,' said the woman, 'choose one or I'll take them both. I'll take yours and you can have mine. You'll never know the difference. I can make sure they look just the same. One's fair. Two is justice done.'

The sound that came out of Lauren was from a deep place. It burst from the kernel at the centre of her, the place all her desires were kept, and all her drive. It was the vocal incarnation of her darkest heart, no thoughts between it and its forceful projection into the grimacing face of the woman. A sound of horror, and protection, a mother's instinct, and her love. The shape of the sound was *No*.

And in that moment the sound took her arm from the iron grip of the woman, her body away to the trolley where her babies lay, her feet to carry her and the sleeping twins into the hospital bathroom where she swung the handle into place to lock the door.