

SOMETHING LIKE BREATHING

Angela Readman



SHEFFIELD - LONDON - NEW YORK

PART I

LORRIE

I could tell you about Sylvie, but you wouldn't believe me. I have just one photo. It fluttered out of her dustbin and lodged by our door. It's a blur of a girl stretching her cardigan over a filthy skirt. She has these skinny fawn legs, ready to canter if you looked at her sideways. It's impossible to figure out the look on her face. The girl is a streak, smudging herself out of the camera's gaze. She prefers life that way. Hushed, soft at the edges. I hear that hasn't changed. I haven't seen her in years, though I hear whispers. Girls swearing there's someone looking over their shoulder. They say she'll appear if they fall off their bikes, or fly a kite too close to the cables, and, just as quick as she came, she'll disappear in the mist.

It was windy. The dustbin lid clattered, rolling along the path. I picked up the photo and squirreled it in my drawer, knowing I'd want it someday. I'm in the picture too: feathers stuck in my hair. I look stunned, mouth open, gormless with confusion. It's not pretty. If you asked Sylvie about the feathers, she'd say she doesn't remember. She'd change the subject to wild flowers, puffins, or something, anything, other than her. So, it's me who's going to tell you about Sylvie. Like it or not, someone must.

I was all about rabbits; she was all about chickens. Looking out the window I saw whiskers, cottontails hopping all over,

making the poppies quiver. The girl next door stood beside a chicken. Now I saw her, now I didn't. The apple tree shuffled in the breeze and covered the girl with leaves. When the wind settled, and I had a clear view, she was gone.

My mother and father stood outside staring up, brows crinkled, knotting their thoughts into one.

'It's so dark in Lorrie's room,' Mum said. 'We should cut that tree down. It's crazy.'

The saw dangled in my father's hands. He circled the trunk, looking. 'It's so close to the cottage, though. Cut it wrong and we could lose the roof.'

Mum wandered to the back door and glanced back, laying a hand on her collarbone.

'I wonder how deep the roots go.'

Roots were a problem. She could almost feel them writhing under the house and pulling us all underground.

'That tree's fine,' Grumps said at dinner. 'It's a rare thing on this side of the island. The story goes my grandmother brought over a seed and planted it herself.'

'I know,' my mother said. 'It's a lovely tree, but it's so near the house.'

'If we want to cut it down, we'll have to get someone in,' my father said. 'Just to be on the safe side.'

Grumps rolled his eyes. We could almost see him add *Cut down a tree* to his mental list of things his son-in-law couldn't do. Mum rose from the table carrying plates.

'It can wait.'

That was that, for now the tree stayed. They were picking their battles, considering the lead water pipes and the woodworm in the kitchen cupboards. She pulled a pencil from behind Toby's ear and scribbled *Do Something about that Tree* on her list.

'Every time I tick something off I add seven things,' she said.

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‘You’re that Greek fella.’ There was a lake of gravy next to Toby’s hillside of potato. He mushed it into a landslide without mercy.

‘What?’ She tilted her head. I’ve seen dogs with their head at the same angle waiting for their owner to return. My mother was fascinated by my brother. He dangled morsels of conversation for her and she leapt for the snippets, shiny as liver. He told her about some bloke pushing a boulder uphill every day, only to start over at sunrise. She rose from the table and said, ‘Yup, me and him should have a cuppa sometime. We may be soulmates.’ I never heard her use that word any other time.

The water coughed into the sink loud as an old man catching a lungful of the morning.

‘The water looks cloudy again.’ Mum pushed back her hair with soapy fingers, suds fizzing in her ear. ‘I suppose I should call the plumber.’

The days of saying the place needed ‘a little tender loving care’ were over, though that’s how she had pitched it before we came here. It was a solid cottage, she said, a beautiful place to grow up. It could be lovely with a lick of paint. We were going. That was that. Grumps slipped a disc shifting a barrel and our whole life was folded into crates and driven north.

The horizon opened as we left the city. The land folded around us. The clouds laid their shadows on the hills. Mario Lanza crooned out the window to a shiver of lavender and started to hiss. He gave up, resigned to the radio losing a signal. The static was as loud as the rain.

We boarded the ferry quietly, bored of I spy featuring mostly mountains and lakes. I clung to the railing, face streaming, tears pinched out by the wind. I stared at the mainland we were leaving behind. The life I’d known narrowed to a streak. The sea heaved. The keel kept us all gripping the railings, except for my father. When the rain cleared, and my mother insisted

we huddle together to have our picture taken on the deck, he held the camera and let himself rock with the boat.

It was funny, how he never put up much of a fight about moving. He had to give up his job selling insurance, and he hated Cullen skink. He couldn't stand mackerel, or weather. Or wildlife, or chit-chat. In short, he cared for the island about as much as he cared for his father-in-law, who, on a good day, he called the Mule-Headed Man. Toby and I called him Grumps. It had been a secret when we were little, but when we blurted it out in front of him one Christmas the old man laughed and we saw no need to stop. Grumps was who he was, he was proud of it, and glad we'd found out. There was no need for pointless small talk any more. He could finally break wind in public. He could see a neighbour approaching, mutter 'fuck that', and we wouldn't judge.

We drove towards the distillery, the roads winding, steam rising from the chimneys and fusing with the clouds. The small windows were coppery, glinting in the sun. We drove on to the cottage. Our belongings all arrived long before we did. Every stick of furniture we owned was sitting outside on the grass. Grumps stood in the middle of it shaking his head.

'You've got a tonne of stuff.' He squinted along the lane, waiting for another van to show up and dump the world on his back. The man was a distiller. The idea of a flawed batch was never far away. Even at his happiest, he never lost that look that something could happen and pour it all down the drain at any time.

'You're looking well.' Dad lit a cigarette and looked for an ashtray, briefly forgetting the lounge he was standing in was outside. Toby and I glared at our mother. If Grumps was well, couldn't she stop worrying about him rattling around the place all by himself? Couldn't we all hop in the car and turn around? The distillery was open. It was business as usual, even

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if its owner used a cane on damp days, had stopped ironing his shirts and ate cereal for every meal. Mum pointed at the creases on his shirt and frowned.

‘It’s not like I’m trying to impress anyone.’ Grumps smoothed out his pocket. ‘Who’s going to be offended by a wrinkle or two? Why cook? Who can make anything better than cornflakes anyhow?’

‘Can I have cereal for dinner?’ Toby asked.

There was a chorus of ‘No’. Mum started it. I was glad to prolong it.

Those first weeks were spent swooping through the cottage clearing the cupboards. My mother forever had a cloth in her hand. There were cobwebs in the pantry, wasps in the sugar and mouse droppings on the floor. The distillery was clean as a pin, but the cottage was irrelevant for a man on his own. It was a place to eat, sleep, dress for work, and do it all again the next day, and the next. Grumps didn’t mind spiders or cobwebs. Without his glasses, he no longer noticed the silverfish. The carpet in my room writhed, a tide of spines under my feet. I got so used to the sheen I told my parents it could stay. They rolled up my opinion and carried the carpet downstairs anyway.

I festered in my bedroom, a fortress of boxes. Toys, Books, Clothes and Bits and Bobs. The sound of the wind in the leaves outside resembled traffic, if I closed my eyes. I could imagine strolling along the street we used to live on in England. The paint on the door of our house was purple. Next door’s was yellow. The buildings of the terrace were identical, but each house found a way to be itself.

On fine days, my mother wouldn’t always make me go to school. ‘You’ll catch up tomorrow,’ she’d say, ‘it’s the first day of summer. Time to learn the feeling of the sun on your face.’ We’d wander to the park, ignoring the ‘Keep Off the Grass’ signs. We used to sit on our coats and tuck into our lunch in

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waxy bags from the bakery. It wasn't possible to walk past without salivating. The aroma of sweet buns glazed with honey would waft onto the street and we'd breathe deep. The bakery was so close to our house we bought something several times a week. Then we didn't. My mother would cross the street to buy bread from the burnt-bottom place instead. My father wouldn't look the baker in the eye. I'd see him turn over his bread, inspect his slice of disappointment and sigh. 'I'm not sure I put that cigarette out properly,' he'd say, scurrying to his office to check the ashtrays.

Eventually, we stopped eating bread altogether. Mum did without her lemon curd on toast, rather than risk inspiring another conversation about insurance, and the importance of planning your escape routes in advance of an emergency. There was only one spare set of sheets in the linen cupboard on the day we moved out. My father had taken the rest and knotted them into ladders we could dangle out the window of the top floor.

I pushed my hands over my ears to block out the shuffle of the wind in the leaves. I hated the island. I hated the sulky skies and the rustling quiet. I swore I'd never unpack. If I did, it would be saying: This is it, this is my life. I'll never leave.

15TH JULY 1957

THE DIARY OF . . . SYLVIE TYLER.

KEEP OUT!

(I MEAN IT, MA)

The lass bursts out of the Ford like it can't contain her. *Pow!* The parents and the wee lad follow, his ears are peachy-coloured cups lit up by the sun. I'm looking out. The mother's stretching all over like a cat in pedal pushers. She's wandering about inspecting this and that, polishing the china cabinet with a hankie. Everyone's picking up lamps and pointing to scuffs on the dresser. They all look dead amazed anything's still in one piece. That is, everyone but the lass.

She drags a pouf to a chair, brushes a bee off a sunflower-patterned cushion and sits. Arms folded. Firm. I freeze behind the curtains like she's mummified me or something. I can't budge, and I can't look at anything but her. I reckon she'll never go inside and might just live outside in the wild for all her days like a hare. Just because she can.

Everyone's carting stuff indoors, except for her. She's slipping pink sunglasses off the top of her head and staring at the clouds. The sky is her cinema. I picture doing the same, just sitting, thumbs twiddling, while everyone else is skittering about. I could never do that. I'd have to carry stuff in. I'd be in the kitchen already, knee-deep in newspaper. I'd be listening to Ma give me a sermon on how to correctly stack the bowls.

The lass is bonnie, feisty looking, and bored. I bet she'd rather be blowing bubbles into orange juice with a straw. Or

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hanging cocktail-stick fangs out of her gob, just because folk say it's rude. She looks up and I lurch from the window, heart filling like a balloon. *Pop!* It could burst. It's aching to know her that much.

Urgh, I doubt that sort of lassie would knock around with me anyway. And if she did, what good would it do? Ma would hate it. 'What do you need friends for? I'm your friend,' she's always saying, 'I'm the only friend you have or need.' This has to be the saddest sentence any lassie my age ever wrote, I know.