

NOW

I **STILL** dream of Eden. Not the burnt, broken shell it is now, nor even the sweating, stifling coffin it became that last summer, when it was shrouded in dust sheets, awaiting burial like a corpse. No, the Eden in my mind is the one from my childhood when my entire world was contained within its cool, granite walls and high hedges, and my imagination played out on its velvet lawns and in the creeping dampness of the woods.

The slightest, strangest thing will open up a chink in my veneer: the curve in a flock-papered wall; the plastic taint of squash from a child's beaker; a nettle sting on a grazed knee. And then through this crack the memories swarm, teeming from unfathomed depths into my consciousness,

like the swift surge of ants across a careless drip of jam. I remember the faded roses on the drawing room carpet under my always-bare feet, and the bright rhomboids of light from the leaded windows that cast their own tessellation on the black and white check of the hallway tiles. I remember the sound of Bea's breath, the comfort of its steady rise and fall as she lay in the narrow wooden bed next to mine.

Then these clear-as-yesterday sensations are joined by other fleeting glimpses in time, thirteen-year-old Bea reading, stretched across a princess bed in a turret, locked away from our world and immersed in another, or sixteen-year-old Bea holding court in the back room of a smoky pub, its carpet sticky with spilt lager and Coke and patterned with the fallen ash from her cigarettes, or almost-adult Bea's laughter spilling out through the trees like bright butterflies as sweet-sixteen-year-old me runs down the path to the boathouse to meet her. An unceasing parade of Kodak moments surround me – a swirling dustbowl of memory that lifts me up and sends me soaring. Like Icarus seeking the sun, I fly so high that the trees become the odd, spongy miniatures from a toy train set, the house a shrunken version of itself rendered in painted plastic, and the creek a sliver of foil stuck down with a brush and glue.

Then I see them: Bea and a boy, my boy – Tom – or one I want for my own. Their brown-limbed bodies are close, too close. Their fingers are touching, now, their lips. A hot hand rests on a sand-spackled back. I hear a sound, his,

of pleasure; then my own, of disgust. Bea could have had anyone. So why him? Why Tom?

And I begin to fall – a giddy, stomach-swirling tumble down towards the water. It is a fall I cannot possibly survive. I hit the surface, and my breath is knocked from my body, but I don't sink. Instead I'm thrown, gasping, onto the shore of the "now" me: the writer, her fingers poised mid-sentence above a keyboard; the mother kneeling at the refrigerator door, milk carton in hand; the wife wrapped around the familiar curve of her husband's spine in a bedroom twenty-something years and two hundred and more miles away from Eden.

I wait for my heart to slow and my breathing to even out into a tick-tock rhythm, like a clock counting out a life in hours and minutes. And then I begin the game. Not an I-spy or a who-am-I or any of the charades that Bea and I would conjure up and convolute to fill a rainy afternoon or dark winter morning, but a darker game, filled with the danger and deliciousness of truth or dare. It is a game of "what ifs" and "if onlys". If I could turn back time; if I could have been different – looked different; if I had said this and not said that. Would there have been a different ending? Would Eden still stand? Would Bea still be alive?

But the game is pointless. For I can't change what has been. Only what I take from it. Besides, paradise is not lost in a single day. Eden didn't fall in the furnace of that afternoon, nor because of the match struck a year before by a single kiss. A kiss that at the time meant everything, meant

the world – or at least the end of mine – but which I know now was worth less than nothing. The truth is that the decay had crept in to Eden long ago. Only I, rose-tinted, and blinded by hope, didn't see the flames already crackling beneath my feet. The tinder set for every loss, every argument between me and Bea, every “wish you weren't here”; kindling stacked on high over months and years, until Eden's very foundations were a dessicated, precarious heap, waiting for a single Lucifer to be dropped.

JULY 1988

“EVANGELINE?”

The sound of my name wrenches me from the paradise inside my head – the moss-ridden lawn between my toes, the clink of glasses of cream soda, their ice-cream hats melting in the summer heat. I am back to the cold, hard corners of the classroom, and the whispers of twenty pinafore-clad girls with polished accents and shinier hair.

“Sir?”

I wait for Mr Winters to repeat his demand for Pythagoras’ theorem or Occam’s razor or a verse of “Kubla Khan”. But then I see he’s not alone. At his side is Miss Crane, the school secretary, a pinched woman in glasses with the perpetual scent of breath mints and witch hazel. My stomach

lurches with fear and possibility, because I'm not being summoned to give an answer, but to see the headmistress.

I stand quickly and my chair clatters to the ground. As I stoop to right it, I feel the pink heat of embarrassment bloom across my cheeks and the prick of salt in the corners of my eyes. I bite my lip – a trick Bea taught me as a way to stop the tears coming – but I bite too hard and, as I walk past the stares and the sniggers, I taste the metallic tang of blood.

The headmistress, Mrs Buttle, is a hard-faced woman with a tight, grey perm and lips like leather, and her office is the setting for only two scenes: punishment or devastation. But I can see by the depth and direction of creases in her high brow that it is pity, not anger that furrows it now.

“Sit down, Evie.” Her voice is low, grave, and coloured with the tone of a command, not a question, so I do as I am told.

Silence hangs heavy, like the drape of the velvet curtains, but my head – fuelled by a diet of too many novels and an unhealthy interest in the news – buzzes with possibilities: maybe Uncle John has had a heart attack. Not a fatal one, but one that means he will have to return to Eden and be nursed by his devoted-again wife. Or perhaps it is Aunt Julia who is sick. Perhaps she has cancer – not so bad that she will die – but just bad enough that he cannot leave her. He will realize he still loves her, and call off the divorce and the house sale.

But this isn't about Uncle John, or Aunt Julia.

"It's Beatrice," Miss Buttle says. Then, as if I may be confused or slow-witted she adds: "Your cousin?"

I feel my chest contract, my throat tighten. I clutch at straws: maybe she's been cast in a film and had to leave uni after just a year. Or she's been offered a part on Broadway. Yes, that's it. And she's asked me to go with her. I will finally escape from this school on a hill with its Dettol- and deodorant-reeking dorms and peeling paint to a world where the streets are, if not paved with gold, then at least lit with pink neon. Our anger and our disappointment in each other is gone and we've remembered who we love best and who we need more than anyone. We'll go to America, and then back to Eden, to those endless summers of before, where the wide world was the creek and centre stage was just the two of us.

But I'm wrong. Bea is going nowhere.

"There's been an accident; I'm so sorry. Bea ... Bea is dead."

And in a single sentence my world falls apart.

The words come in waves, a strange hollow ring to them as if spoken into a glass then tipped over me, soaking me, penetrating my clothes, my skin, my soul.

"There was a fire," she says. "At her hall."

"House," I hear myself correct. "She lives in a house now." Then another correction, unspoken this time: "lived". I close my eyes and wish for the sudden jolt and

flood of relief that comes with waking from a bad dream. But there's none. When I open my eyes again, I'm still in the headmistress's office with the smell of custard creams on a tea plate turning my stomach. And my cousin is still dead.

"She was asleep, they think. So she wouldn't have felt anything."

I taste the bitterness of bile at the back of my mouth and have to suppress the sudden urge to vomit. This is a lie. And I'm transported. I'm no longer caught in the claustrophobia of this dull room, this suffocating situation, but in the stifling heat of a bedroom ablaze. I'm no longer Evie, I'm her, I'm Bea, my body consumed by flames, smoke filling my lungs so that I can't scream, can't breathe. I feel the chair give way beneath me; hear a crack, then a cry. And then there is a sickening swirl of colour. Lurid oranges and reds devour a peacock blue dress, a pair of silver shoes, the pale fawn of a paperback, until everything is black.

As small children, our greatest fear was waking up with the house on fire. It ranked above being eaten by a giant or torn apart by wolves; a pain terrible and complete. And she would have felt it all.