The Heart Fails Without Warning
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September: when she began to lose weight at first, her sister had said, I don't mind; the less of her the better, she said. It was only when Morna grew hair – fine down on her face, in the hollow curve of her back – that Lola began to complain. I draw the line at hair, she said. This is a girls' bedroom, not a dog kennel.

Lola's grievance was this: Morna was born before she was, already she had used up three years' worth of air, and taken space in the world that Lola could have occupied. She believed she was birthed into her sister's squalling, her incessant I-want I-want, her give-me give-me.

Now Morna was shrinking, as if her sister had put a spell on her to vanish. She said, if Morna hadn't always been so greedy before, she wouldn't be like this now. She wanted everything.

Their mother said, "You don't know anything about it, Lola. Morna was not greedy. She was always picky about her food."

"Picky?" Lola made a face. If Morna didn't like something she would make her feelings known by vomiting it up in a weak acid dribble.

It's because of the school catchment area they have to live in a too-small house and share a bedroom. "It's bunk beds or GCSEs!" their mother said. She stopped, confused by herself. Often what she said meant something else entirely, but they were used to it; early menopause, Morna said. "You know what I mean," she urged them. "We live in this house for the sake of your futures. It's a sacrifice now for all of us, but it will pay off. There's no point in getting up every morning in a lovely room of your own and going to a sink school where girls get raped in the toilets."

"Does that happen?" Lola said. "I didn't know that happened."

"She exaggerates," their father said. He seldom said anything, so it made Lola jump, him speaking like that.

"But you know what I'm saying," her mother said. "I see them dragging home at two in the afternoon, they can't keep them in school. They've got piercings. There's drugs. There's internet bullying."

"We have that at our school," Lola said.

"It's everywhere," their father said. "Which is another reason to keep off the internet. Lola, are you listening to what I'm telling you?"

The sisters were no longer allowed a computer in their room because of the sites Morna liked to look at. They had pictures of girls with their arms stretched wide over their heads in a posture of crucifixion. Their ribs were spaced wide apart like the bars of oven shelves. These sites advised Morna how to be hungry, how not to be gross. Any food like bread, butter, an egg, is gross. A green apple or a green leaf, you may have one a day. The apple must be poison green. The leaf must be bitter.

"To me it is simple," their father said. "Calorie in, calories out. All she has to do is open her mouth and put the food in, then swallow. Don't tell me she can't. It's a question of won't."

Lola picked up an eggy spoon from the draining board. She held it under her father's nose as if it were a microphone. "Yes, and have you anything you want to add to that?"

He said, "You'll never get a boyfriend if you look like a needle." When Morna said she didn't want a boyfriend, he shouted, "Tell me that again when you're seventeen."

I never will be, Morna said. Seventeen.

September: Lola asked for the carpet to be replaced in their room. "Maybe we could have a wood floor? Easier to clean up after her?"

Their mother said, "Don't be silly. She's sick in the loo. Isn't she? Mostly? Though not," she said hurriedly, "like she used to be." It's what they had to believe: that Morna was getting better. In the night, you could hear them telling each other, droning on behind their closed bedroom door; Lola lay awake listening.

Lola said, "If I can't have a new carpet, if I can't have a wood floor, what can I have? Can I have a dog?"

"You are so selfish, Lola," their mother shouted. "How can we take on a pet at a time like this?"

Morna said, "If I die, I want a woodland burial. You can plant a tree and when it grows you can visit it."

"Yeah. Right. I'll bring my dog," Lola said.

September: Lola said, "The only thing is, now she's gone so small I can't steal her clothes. This was my main way of annoying her and now I have to find another."

All year round Morna wore wool to protect her shoulders, elbows, hips, from the blows of the furniture, and also to look respectably fat so that people didn't point her out on the street: also, because even in July she was cold. But the winter came early for her, and though the sun shone outside she was getting into her underlayers. When she stepped on the scale for scrutiny she appeared to be wearing normal clothes, but actually she had provided herself with extra weight. She would wear one pair of tights over another; every gram counts, she told Lola. She had to be weighed every day. Their mother did it. She would try surprising Morna with spot checks, but Morna would always know when she was getting into a weighing mood.

Lola watched as their mother pulled at her sister's cardigan, trying to get it off her before she stepped on to the scales. They tussled like two little kids in a playground; Lola screamed with laughter. Their mother hauled at the sleeve and Morna shouted, "Ow, ow!" as if it were her skin being stretched. Her skin was loose, Lola saw. Like last year's school uniform, it was too big for her. It didn't matter, because the school had made it clear they didn't want to see her this term. Not until she's turned the corner, they said, on her way back to a normal weight. Because the school has such a competitive ethos. And it could lead to mass fatalities if the girls decided to compete with Morna.

When the weighing was over, Morna would come into their bedroom and start peeling off her layers, while Lola watched her, crouched in her bottom bunk. Morna would stand sideways to the mirror with her ribs arched. You can count them, she said. After the weighing she needed reassurance. Their mother bought them the long mirror because she thought Morna would be ashamed when she saw herself. The opposite was true.

October: in the morning paper there was a picture of a skeleton. "Oh look," Lola said, "a relative of yours." She pushed it across the breakfast table to where Morna sat poking a Shredded Wheat with her spoon, urging it towards disintegration. "Look, Mum! They've dug up an original woman."

"Where?" Morna said. Lola read aloud, her mouth full. "Ardi stands four feet high. She's called Ardipithecus. Ardi for short. For short!" She spluttered at her own joke, and orange juice came down her nose. "They've newly discovered her. 'Her brain was the size of a chimpanzee's.' That's like you, Morna. 'Ardi weighed about 50 kilograms.' I expect that was when she

was wearing all her animal skins, not when she was just in her bones."

"Shut it, Lola," their father said. But then he got up and walked out, breakfast abandoned, his mobile phone in his hand. His dirty knife, dropped askew on his plate, swung across the disc like the needle of a compass, and rattled to its rest. Always he was no more than a shadow in their lives. He worked all the hours, he said, to keep the small house going, worrying about the mortgage and the car while all she worried about was her bloody waistline.

Lola looked after him, then returned to the original woman. "Her teeth show her diet was figs. 'She also ate leaves and small mammals.' Yuk, can you believe that?"

"Lola, eat your toast," their mother said.

"They found her in bits and pieces. First just a tooth. 'Fossils hunters first glimpsed this species in 1992.' That's just before we first glimpsed Morna."

"Who found her?" Morna said.

"Lots of people. I told you, they found her in bits. 'Fifteen years' work involving forty-seven researchers.'"

Looking at Morna, their mother said, "You were fifteen years' work. Nearly. And there was only me to do it."

"'She was capable of walking upright,'" Lola read. "So are you, Morna. Till your bones crumble. You'll look like an old lady." She stuffed her toast into her mouth. "But not four million years old."

November: one morning their mother caught Morna knocking back a jug of water before the weigh-in. She shouted, "It can swell your brain! It can kill you!" She knocked the jug out of her daughter's hand and it shattered all over the bathroom floor.

She said, "Oh, seven years bad luck. No, wait. That's mirrors."

Morna wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. You could see the bones in it. She was like a piece of science coursework, Lola said thoughtfully. Soon she'd have no personhood left. She'd be reduced to biology.

The whole household, for months now, a year, had been enmeshed in mutual deception. Their mother would make Morna a scrambled egg and slide a spoonful of double cream into it. The unit where Morna was an inpatient used to make her eat white bread sandwiches thickly buttered and layered with rubber wedges of yellow cheese. She used to sit before them, hour after hour, compressing the bread under her hand to try to squeeze out the oily fat on to the plate. They would say, try a little, Morna. She would say, I'd rather die.

If her weight fell by a certain percentage she would have to go back to the unit. At the unit they stood over her until she ate. Meals were timed and had to be completed by the clock or there were penalties. The staff would watch her to make sure she was not slipping any food into the layers of her clothes, and layers in fact were monitored. There was a camera in every bathroom, or so Morna said. They would see her if she made herself sick. Then they would put her to bed. She lay so many days in bed that when she came home her legs were wasted and white.

The founder of the unit, a Scottish doctor with a burning ideal, had given the girls garden plots and required them to grow their own vegetables. Once she had seen a starving girl eat some young peas, pod and all. The sight had moved her, the sight of the girl stretching her cracked lips and superimposing the green, tender smile: biting down. If they only saw, she said, the good food come out of God's good earth.

But sometimes the girls were too weak for weeding and pitched forward into their plots. And they were picked up, brushing crumbs of soil away; the rakes and hoes lay abandoned on the ground, like weapons left on a battlefield after the defeat of an army.

November: their mother was grumbling because the supermarket van had not come with the order. "They say delivery in a two-hour time slot to suit you." She pulled open the freezer and rummaged. "I need parsley and yellow haddock for the fish pie."

Lola said, "It will look as if Morna's sicked it already."

Their mother yelled, "You heartless little bitch." Iced vapour billowed around her. "It's you who brings the unhappiness into this house."

Lola said, "Oh, is it?"

Last night Lola saw Morna slide down from her bunk, a wavering column in the cold; the central heating was in its off phase, since no warm-blooded human being should be walking about at such an hour. She pushed back her quilt, stood up and followed Morna on to the dark landing. They were both barefoot. Morna wore a ruffled nightshirt, like a wraith in a story by Edgar Allan Poe. Lola wore her old Mr Men pyjamas, aged 8-9, to which she was attached beyond the power of reason. Mr Lazy, almost washed away, was a faded smudge on the shrunken top, which rose and gaped over her round little belly; the pyjama legs came half way down her calves, and the elastic had gone at the waist, so she had to hitch herself together every few steps. There was a half moon and on the landing she saw her sister's face, bleached out, shadowed like the moon, cratered like the moon, mysterious and far away. Morna was on her way downstairs to the computer to delete the supermarket order.

In their father's office Morna had sat down on his desk chair. She scuffed her bare heels on the carpet to wheel it up to the desk. The computer was for their father's work use. They had been warned of this and told their mother got 10 GCSEs without the need of anything but a pen and paper; that they may use the computer under strict supervision; that they may also go on-line at the public library.

Morna got up the food order on screen. She mouthed at her sister, "Don't tell her."

She'd find out soon enough. The food would come anyway. It always did. Morna didn't seem able to learn that. She said to Lola, "How can you bear to be so fat? You're only eleven."

Lola watched her as she sat with her face intent, patiently fishing for the forbidden sites, swaying backwards and forwards, rocking on the wheeled chair. She turned to go back to bed, grabbing her waist to stop her pyjama bottoms from falling down. She heard a sound from her sister, a sound of something, she didn't know what. She turned back. "Morna? What's that?"

For a minute they don't know what it was they were seeing on the screen: human or animal? They saw that it was a human, female. She was on all fours. She was naked. Around her neck there was a metal collar. Attached to it was a chain.

Lola stood, her mouth ajar, holding up her pyjamas with both hands. A man was standing out of sight holding the chain. His shadow was on the wall. The woman looked like a whippet. Her body was stark white. Her face was blurred and wore no readable human expression. You couldn't recognise her. She might be someone you knew.

"Play it," Lola said. "Go on."

Morna's finger hesitated. "Working! He's always in here, working." She glanced at her sister. "Stick with Mr Lazy, you'll be safer with him."

"Go on," Lola said. "Let's see."

But Morna erased the image. The screen was momentarily dark. One hand rubbed itself across her ribs, where her heart was. The other hovered over the keyboard; she retrieved the food order. She ran her eyes over it and added own-brand dog food. "I'll get the blame," Lola said. "For my fantasy pet." Morna shrugged.

Later they lay on their backs and murmured into the dark, the way they used to do when they were little. Morna said, he would claim he found it by accident. That could be the truth, Lola said, but Morna was quiet. Lola wondered if their mother knew. She said, you can get the police coming round. What if they come and arrest him? If he has to go to prison we won't have any money.

Morna said, "It's not a crime. Dogs. Women undressed as dogs. Only if it's children, I think that's a crime."

Lola said, "Does she get money for doing it or do they make her?"

"Or she gets drugs. Silly bitch!" Morna was angry with the woman or girl who for money or out of fear crouched like an animal, waiting to have her body despoiled. "I'm cold," she said, and Lola could hear her teeth chattering. She was taken like this, seized by cold that swept right through her body to her organs inside; her heart knocked, a marble heart. She put her hand over it. She folded herself in the bed, knees to her chin.

"If they send him to prison," Lola said, "you can earn money for us. You can go in a freak show."

November: Dr Bhattacharya from the unit came to discuss the hairiness. It happens, she said. The name of the substance is lanugo. Oh, it happens, I am afraid to say. She sat on the sofa and said, "With your daughter I am at my wits' end."

Their father wanted Morna to go back to the unit. "I would go so far as to say," he said, "either she goes, or I go."

Dr Bhattacharya blinked from behind her spectacles. "Our funding is in a parlous state. From now till next financial year we are rationed. The most urgent referrals only. Keep up the good work with the daily weight chart. As long as she is stable and not losing. In spring if progress is not good we will be able to take her in."

Morna sat on the sofa, her arms crossed over her belly, which was swollen. She looked vacantly about her. She would rather be anywhere than here. It contaminates everything, she had explained, that deceitful spoonful of cream. She could no longer trust her food to be what it said it was, nor do her calorie charts if her diet was tampered with. She had agreed to eat, but others had broken the agreement. In spirit, she said.

Their father told the doctor, "It's no use saying all the time," he mimicked her voice, "'Morna, what do you think, what do you want?' You don't give me all this shit about human rights. It doesn't matter what she thinks any more. When she looks in a mirror God knows what she sees. You can't get hold of it, can you? She imagines things that are not there."

Lola jumped in. "But I saw it too."

Her parents rounded on her. "Lola, go upstairs."

She flounced up from the sofa and went out, dragging her feet. They didn't say, "See what, Lola? What did you see?"

They don't listen, she had told the doctor, to anything I say. To them I am just noise. "I asked for a pet, but no, no chance – other people can have a dog, but not Lola."

Expelled from the room, she stood outside the closed door, whimpering. Once she scratched with her paw. She snuffled. She pushed at the door with her shoulder, a dull bump, bump.

"Family therapy may be available," she heard Dr Bhattacharya say. "Had you thought of that?"

December: Merry Christmas.

January: "You're going to send me back to the unit," Morna said. "No, no," her mother said. "Not at all."

"You were on the phone to Dr Bhattacharya."

"I was on the phone to the dentist. Booking in."

Morna had lost some teeth lately, this was true. But she knew her mother was lying. "If you send me back I will drink bleach," she said.

Lola said, "You will be shining white."

February. They talked about sectioning her: that means, their mother said, compulsory detention in a hospital, that means you will not be able to walk out, Morna, like you did before.

"It's entirely your choice," their father said. "Start eating, Morna, and it won't come to that. You won't like it in the loony bin. They won't be coaxing you out on walks and baking you bloody fairy cakes. They'll have locks on the doors and they'll be sticking you full of drugs. It won't be like the unit, I'm telling you."

"More like a boarding kennels, I should think," Lola said. "They'll be kept on leads."

"Won't you save me?" Morna said.

"You have to save yourself," their father said. "Nobody can eat for you."

"If they could," said Lola, "maybe I'd do it. But I'd charge a fee."

Morna was undoing herself. She was reverting to unbeing. Lola was her interpreter, who spoke out from the top bunk in the clear voice of a prophetess. They had to come to her, parents and doctors, to know what Morna thought. Morna herself was largely mute.

She had made Morna change places and sleep on the bottom bunk since new year. She was afraid Morna would roll out and smash herself on the floor.

She heard her mother moaning behind the bedroom door: "She's going, she's going."

She didn't mean, "going to the shops". In the end, Dr Bhattacharya had said, the heart fails without warning.

February: at the last push, in the last ditch, she decided to save her sister. She made her little parcels wrapped in tinfoil – a single biscuit, a few pick'n'mix sweets – and left them on her bed. She found the biscuit, still in its foil, crushed to crumbs, and on the floor of their room shavings of fudge and the offcut limbs of pink jelly lobsters. She could not count the crumbs, so she hoped Morna was eating a little. One day she found Morna holding the foil, uncrumpled, looking for her reflection in the shiny side. Her sister had double vision now, and solid objects were ringed by light; they had a ghost-self, fuzzy, shifting.

Their mother said, "Don't you have any feelings, Lola? Have you no idea what we're going through, about your sister?"

"I had some feelings," Lola says. She held out her hands in a curve around herself, to show how emotion distends you. It makes you feel full up, a big weight in your chest, and then you don't want your dinner. So she had begun to leave it, or surreptitiously shuffle bits of food – pastry, an extra potato – into a piece of kitchen roll.

She remembered that night in November when they went barefoot down to the computer. Standing behind Morna's chair, she had touched her shoulder, and it was like grazing a knife. The blade of the bone seemed to sink deep into her hand, and she felt it for hours; she was surprised not to see the indent in her palm. When she had woken up next morning, the shape of it was still there in her mind.

March: all traces of Morna have gone from the bedroom now, but Lola knows she is still about. These cold nights, her Mr Men pyjamas hitched up with one hand, she stands looking out over the garden of the small house. By the lights of hovering helicopters, by the flash of the security lights from neighbouring gardens, by the backlit flicker of the streets, she sees the figure of her sister standing and looking up at the house, bathed in a nimbus of frost. The traffic flows long into the night, a hum without ceasing, but around Morna there is a bubble of quiet. Her tall straight body flickers inside her nightshirt, her face is blurred as if from tears or drizzle, and she wears no readable human expression. But at her feet a white dog lies, shining like a unicorn, a golden chain about its neck.