

Chapter 1

‘WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN THERE?’ comes a screaming voice from the kitchen. Because it’s able to penetrate halfway across the house, and through my locked door, clear even with my radio blaring – I know it’s my aunt Via.

‘Coming!’ I shout back, but there’s no guarantee she has heard me. Via is like a broken walkie-talkie – messages go out loud and clear, but not much goes in.

I take another handful of my fringe, hold it next to the cut bits and slice it at about the same length. At least I try to cut it the same length. I’ve got Mum’s kitchen scissors. They’re great for hacking off chicken legs, but they struggle to find a grip on the fine tendrils of hair I am feeding them. An hour of sawing has left my hair staggered. It’s much longer at the front than at the back, and when I drop my head it flicks over my eyes and hides my face completely.

I like it.

I know a crazy haircut isn’t going to erase twelve years of boring Catholic schoolgirl, but it’s a start. No more moss green uniform. No more unnatural politeness. No more apologising

for being different. Me and my hair are now free to take our natural form.

I look at myself in the mirror, trying to get a feel for my new hairstyle, but the nauseating pink shade of the wall behind me is ruining it. I feel like a witch trapped in a fairy castle. Nothing in here has changed since I was nine and, according to my parents, won’t unless there is a fire. Maybe a nuclear explosion. It’s hideously girly – pink blinds and lacy white curtains tied with thick, glossy pink ribbon; white laminate furniture with gold trimmings, and floral pink bedspread, pinched and puffed at the sides like a wedding dress. Topping it off is a crucifix of Jesus hanging over my bed. Every night I have to put up with Him staring down at me, tongue hanging out, blood oozing from the corner of his mouth.

I’m telling you, my family are crazy.

Opening my wardrobe door is like uncovering a gaping black hole in the world of pink. Needless to say, they hate my clothes. I slide on black jeans and a grey T-shirt. I have to dig around for my boots and the short buckled belt that wraps around the ankle. I shake my hair so that it falls messily and casually around my face, and I am done. I give the pink the finger and then squint my way into the morning brightness.

Mum and Via are seated at the table, steaming coffee, a plate of biscuits and a bottle of brandy between them. It’s eight o’clock in the morning but for some reason they think it’s perfectly normal to have a shot of alcohol in their coffee. They reckon it helps them wake up, but I tried it once and all it did was make my eyelids go heavy and my legs so wobbly I had to go lie down. Even their bodies don’t work the same way as normal people.

I clear my throat and Via looks up slowly from her stirring, noting each of my fashion choices with a grimace.

'*Scema, WHAT is you done to yours capelli?*' cries my aunt.

'I'm sorry, what?' I say, because I hate it when she tries to speak to me in English. Not that you can really call what she speaks English. It's more like something that would happen if you forced English and Italian to mate. Ding-lish is probably a better word for it.

Via rolls her eyes, then leans forward on the table. 'You know what I said,' she says in Italian this time. 'What the hell happened to your *hair*? If a hairdresser did that then I hope you're going to *sue*.'

Mum gropes at her neck, looks like she's going to cry. 'Oh Mirabella, your beautiful hair!' she says in a squeaking, pleading voice that sounds so miserable that I almost regret cutting it.

'I did it myself,' I say.

'No *kidding*,' says Via.

Mum gets up, walks over to me with her palms outstretched and knees slightly buckled from the shock. She's like a wounded soldier, struggling to get a final message to a comrade before collapsing under her own weight. She is still in her nightgown, a frayed and shabby looking thing that only just covers her flabby rude bits. She grabs me on both sides of the head, twists me this way and that to get a good look at the damage.

'Can we *fix* it?' she asks her sister.

'The hair, yes,' says Via brushing some biscuit crumbs from the shelf of her bosom, which she has viced into a grey linen top about two sizes too small. 'But the *girl*? She twists her

hand to suggest she's not so sure. I put my hands on my hips, look past Mum to Via.

'Nothing to fix. I like it this way. It's cool.'

Via goes back to flicking the pages of the newspaper. She's bored with me already. 'Ignore her,' she says to Mum, pages whipping through the air, too fast to be read. 'We have *work* to do.'

Mum clasps her hands together like she's praying and looks up at the ceiling. That's where God hangs out. Our ceiling. At least that's what you'd think given the amount of times people around here look up there and pray.

Via takes a long drag of her cigarette. They are organising the menu for Mum's birthday party in two weeks. Halfway smoked, the force of her sucking has almost flattened the cigarette where she holds it between her thumb and index finger. Aunt Via reserves all her energy for the inhaling part of the process. The exhaling part she merely allows, so as she speaks, smoke falls from her mouth like a steamy waterfall.

'Lobster,' she says, flicking ash into her saucer. Smoke and steam entwine.

Mum shifts uncomfortably in her seat, pulls the nightgown out from under her bum. It's hot and everything is sticking. 'Lobster? Do you think? But it's so expensive.'

Via waves her hand magnanimously. 'Nothing is too good for my sister,' she announces, though we all know it's Mum that will be footing the bill.

I put a hand on the newspaper, look at Via who nods quickly to let me know she's finished. I twist it round the table to face me, try and focus on reading instead of listening to them, but

it's not that easy because they have a tendency to include you in the conversation whether you want to or not.

'So much fuss,' says Mum, reaching over absently and pushing hair from my face. 'Just for a birthday.'

'Are you *crazy*?' says Via, thumping the table with her fist, her gold bracelets jingling into each another. 'You know how many times in the last year I wondered if we would even *get* here? My sister is not sick anymore and I am going to make sure we have the best party in the world, *understand?*' (Thump). And we are going to have the best food and drink your money can buy! And we will have a party *this* year (Thump), and *every* year (Thump) for as long as you live (Thump). Everything as before, understand? *Everything as before.*'

Via leans across the table and takes Mum's hands firmly between her own. She allows her tears to brim without spilling; a finely honed skill. Mum looks shaky and I know her well enough to know she has forgotten about her own pain over the last year and is absorbed in Via's anguish instead, as though being the one who wasn't sick is somehow harder. Via keeps her eyes locked on Mum until she's sure she has her full sympathy, then she smiles, pats their joined hands before reaching down and picking up her handbag.

'I have a present for you,' she says. She searches around inside the bag, squinting one eye. She pulls out a used tissue, then a small tin of Italian sweets, then finally the object she is looking for. A palm sized, transparent figure of the Virgin Mary filled with clear liquid. She uses the end of her skirt to wipe crumbs from it then twists off the Holy Virgin's head to reveal it is actually a small bottle. 'This,' she says handing the body to my

mother, 'is holy water from *Lourdes*. I ordered it especially for you. Not that you need it anymore!' she adds hastily and makes the sign of the cross to ward off any bad luck.

'Oh thank you, Via,' says Mum, and she really means it.

Via looks like she's swallowed a bucket of smugness.

Even in Mum's small hands, the bottle looks tiny. I take it from her to get a better look, hold it sideways to let the water drain from Mary's stuck-together feet to her generous bosom. There are probably no more than a few thimbles of water in this thing.

'So how many miracles do you get in one bottle?' I say, clicking the head back on and shaking the bottle at my ear, listening to the water slosh around. 'Do you have to buy a bottle for each thing you want fixed, or does one bottle cover everything?'

'Don't be stupid,' says Mum, snatching the bottle away from me.

'No really. I just want to know how it works.'

'It's *holy* water,' says Via.

'Yeah, but do you drink it? Anoint yourself with it? Did it come with instructions? How do you get the miracle out of the bottle?'

'Like *this*,' says Mum then whacks me in the head with it. A sharp bit in Mary's crown digs into my flesh and it hurts more than she intended, but they still laugh hysterically. They think they're really funny. When they're done holding their bellies, Mum picks up the pen, writes on her shopping list, '12 LOB IS TOR' and Via nods, satisfied.

'And what will we have for main course?' she says, sitting

back with her coffee, holding it at her chin because there's too much stomach to hold it anywhere else.

'Well,' says Mum, taking my hand. 'Mira had a nice idea, didn't you Mira?'

'I did?'

'Yes. It's something a bit different.'

'Tell me,' says Via, leaning forward with interest.

Mum takes a swig of her coffee as Via and I wait to hear what my great idea is. 'Mira thought we could have a *bar-bee-coo*.'

Via grasps her heart-shaped brooch. 'Has the cancer spread to your *brain*?' she says, pushing her palm to her temple.

Mum sits up straight, brushes the streak of white hair from her forehead. She doesn't like the 'c' word, and she's doing her best to look unaffected, but she's starting to blush from her neck to her eyeballs. 'I think it would be nice,' she says pulling her shoulders back so that beneath her flimsy nightie you can clearly see the hollow chunk from her lumpectomy.

'You want to serve me *sausages* at your birthday?'

'*Sausages*!' says Mum genuinely horrified. 'What do you think I am?' She pulls the newspaper towards her and begins to leaf through it desperately. When she finds the recipe section she slides the paper over to Via.

'*Gore-met Bar-bee-coo*,' Via reads out loud.

'We can do *shesh-kee-bubbas*. With *prawns*.'

Via's hand hovers between the cigarette packet and the brooch. Suddenly, as she happens upon an explanation for her sister's outrageous suggestion, she folds her arms across her chest. 'You mean they'll be *cheap*.' she says.

'Don't be ridiculous!' says Mum, but she is unable, as always, to hide her true feelings from her sister.

Via points a podgy finger. 'That tight *bastard*. After everything we've been through he is worried about how much *money* he has to fork out?'

Mum pulls the frayed collar of her nightgown together. She holds it closed with one hand while the other sweeps crumbs from our breakfast into a neat little pile. 'Benito would do anything for me. For *us*.' She shoots a look in my direction. 'But Via, we have to think. We have a lot of bills.'

Grunting, Via pulls her wallet out of her bag, opens it and begins sliding fifty-dollar notes on the table. 'My sister will have the *best*.'

'Stop it, Via,' says Mum, picking notes up as fast as they are being dropped and returning them to a pile beside Via.

'*No*,' says Via, now taking them from her pile and making a new pile next to Mum. It's like a casino table. 'Tell Benito his money is *safe*, this party is on *me*.'

'Please, Via. I will pay. I will *pay*,' says Mum trying to push the money into Via's hands.

'I knew he was stingy, but this? *This*?'

'He will *pay*, Via. He has not said anything. It was me, I was just thinking.'

'Does he think we are still in the *war*? Does he want to hide his precious money under the mattress? Is he scared he is going to have to line up for his bread again?'

'Please, Via. We will have a big party. Just like you want. Won't we Mira?'

But Via is not looking at us anymore. She has taken her

rant to the ceiling, and she's staring up there now, having a conversation with the ceiling god. 'What is *wrong* with him? He is still a little boy, hiding from the bombs and thinking the world is going to end! The war is *over*, we left it behind remember? *Remember?*'

Suddenly, surprising both of us, Mum slams her hand down on the table. We stare at her in shock. She waits a nice, fat moment then she turns to me, her eyes wetting up with tears. She takes my hand and squeezes it tightly.

'I want you to listen to me, Mira,' she says. I hate it when people look into my eyes, even her. I feel my face going red and I look down at my feet but she lifts my head up to face her again. 'Your father is a *good* man, never forget that.' Then she gets up and starts clearing the table. Just like that. Her nightgown has caught in her underwear so that the hem is pulled up past her knees. Its thinness barely hides the soft flabby skin of her legs, arms and stomach. Unlike the firm plumpness of Via's body, my mother's is soft, pale and limp.

'I don't know what you're getting so upset about,' says Via sliding a cigarette from its packet. She is trying to seem calm but I can see that her hands are shaking a little as she lights it. 'It's nothing I haven't said before.'

'I would give you the world if I could, Via,' says my mother leaning over and taking Via's coffee cup in her loaded arms. 'We will have whatever you want. Just write it down on the list. Benito will be pay for everything.' Then she turns on her heel, in a dainty kind of way, and disappears into the kitchen, the very picture of dignity with her pink nightie caught up her arse.

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'You coming or what?' says Via, and I can tell by the way she stares at the end of her burning cigarette rather than at me that she is hoping I won't. This alone tempts me to accept the offer, but luckily for her I have important things to do today.

'Don't be silly,' says Mum answering for me. 'Mira doesn't want to come shopping with us old ladies.' Well, she got that right. 'Why don't you call one of your friends?' she says eyeing me hopefully. 'I'll give you some money and you can go to the cinema.'

I smile. One of my friends, like I have so many to choose from! You'd think she would have noticed after all these years, that I am not exactly in great demand in the friendship department. I'm not a reject or anything, I'm not hated by anyone, but I'm not loved either. There are people I hung out with at school, talked about school stuff with, but that is the extent of our relationship. I don't get phone calls, I don't go out anywhere. So where has Mum imagined these 'friends' have been hiding all these years?

'I'm not calling anyone, Mum.'

'But you haven't seen anyone since you finished school!'

'Mum, there is no one to see.'

'It's been three months. Don't you want to see how they are going?'

I sigh. 'Who exactly are they, Mum?'

'Your friends.'

'I told you, I don't have any friends!'

Mum sucks on her thumbnail as she considers what I have

said. 'Well, maybe if you *call* them once in a while ...' she says, but I put my hand up to silence her.

'Look, there is a reason people don't stay in touch, okay? Everyone at school was boring, and I don't care if I never see them again.'

'And judging by the amount of times they have called you it looks like they feel the same,' says Via sliding open the flyscreen door and flicking her smoking cigarette butt into the garden. 'Come on, Sofia,' she says with an impatient wave of her hand. 'Just leave her. If she wants to be alone and miserable there is nothing we can do about it.'

'I'm not miserable,' I say but she is already turning away from me, sliding her handbag up her arm until it gets jammed tight around her flesh. Mum looks like she is about to cry about my pathetic life. 'I'm fine, Mum,' I say nodding encouragingly towards the door, and then because she looks so mournful I add: 'I'll make some new friends, okay? At university.'

Mum doesn't look any happier, but she allows Via to drag her out the door. I lean back against the wall and wait until I hear the car leaving. Then, when I am sure they are gone and not coming back, I run into my room. I scan my tape collection nervously, eager not to waste this rare moment of alone time with the wrong choice of music. I finally settle on *Born Sandy Devotional* by The Triffids. I push the tape into the deck then flop face down onto my bed and wait for the music to emerge over the hiss of the tape. I am not disappointed. From the first song I am floating in deep water, far away from the shore with just seagulls keeping me company. I listen to it over and over, rising only when I need to turn the tape.

When they get back from their shopping a few hours later, Via notices creases on my face from lying on the pillow and asks me what I have been doing.

'Nothing,' I say.

'I can see that,' she says motioning to the stack of unwashed plates on the sink.

Mum hands me a fat salami and cheese roll and a can of Coke before starting to unload the bags of shopping. Before leaving, Via makes a final plea for me to fix up my hair.

'What are the other children going to say when they see you?'

'Students. And I don't care.'

Via shakes her head. 'I'll be back in the morning,' she says leaning over to give Mum a kiss on the cheek. 'To take your miserable daughter to school.'

'Stop calling it school. It sounds like I'm three.'

'*Oh I'm being so sorry,*' says Via, wrinkling her nose, holding a little finger out like she's got a cup of tea in her hand. '*I am meaning to say university.*' That she is speaking in English again is bad enough, but now she has to try and speak it with a posh English accent. She thinks she is funny, but really, she is just pathetic.

Via finally folds and tucks herself into Bambi; her dirty-orange Datsun 120Y. Bambi strains under her weight, though the several tons of shopping bags in the passenger seat are doing a good job of balancing things out. She beeps the horn and waves as the car gurgles down the street, spluttering smoke and leaking oil like it's flatulent and incontinent.

'Look at this mess,' says Mum, back in the kitchen and

shifting things around in the pantry to make room for the box of canned tomatoes she has bought.

I munch on my roll as I watch her. 'Why'd you get so many?'

'On special. Forty cents each.' She scratches her cheek while still holding a can. 'You think I should have got more?'

'I think you've got enough.' Enough to survive a twenty-year nuclear winter. 'So what's for dinner anyway?' I say, looking forward to eating again even though I'm only halfway through my salami and cheese roll.

'Pasta.'

'All this food, how come we only ever eat pasta?'

'You want meat pies and tomato sauce?' she says, shaking her head in sympathy for all the poor Australian kids that she is convinced are fed nothing else.

'How about kangaroo tail soup?' I say, because there's nothing more amazing than my mother's face when surprised.

'That's a *food*? They *eat* that?'

'They're a weird mob,' I say and take the pasta pot from the dish rack. I turn on the tap and the water pipes groan and thump so loudly I'm afraid the walls will come down. Mum turns on the radio, slides the dial to the Italian station, and pretty soon the room is humming with one of the old tunes. She starts to get a bit of a sway in her step as she moves from the plastic bags to the fridge, to the bench, to the cupboard. It's only a matter of time before the mood gets her and she ...

'Hey!'

Mum sings as she dances me around. She has a firm grip around my waist, her feet move deftly, while my own drag and double shuffle to keep up. She holds my hand at cheek height

and uses my arm as a steering device, pushing, pulling and leaning on it to get me to go the right way.

'Young people today do not understand what real dancing is,' she says as she swoops under my raised arm.

'It's just not the same,' I agree.

'I know when you're laughing at me. One day you'll be sorry you gave your mother such a hard time.' She pulls me close so that our stomachs are touching then she bends me back into a dip, which has me knees bent, bum down and hand groping desperately to the floor for balance. I slide out from her arms and land heavily on my arse. I start laughing. Mum just leaves me there and goes back to the sink in disgust. She slides a knife from the drawer and begins chopping onions.

'Come on,' I say, sliding the radio back to its original station, and thankfully it's playing something decent. 'Now you have to try it my way.' I wait to make sure she is watching, then I start jumping around the kitchen, spinning with my arms in the air and singing loudly to demonstrate how we do things these days.

'You call that dancing?'

'Sure.'

'And where does the boy stand?'

'What boy?' I stop and look around like I've lost something. Mum checks that God is still hanging about the ceiling and watching all this.

'Your generation understands nothing of romance.'

'I didn't think I was allowed to understand romance.'

'Shut up and set the table.'

I do what I am told, for a change, then hang around the

kitchen getting in her way until I hear Dad's car coming up the driveway. The car door slams, then after a moment I hear his boots clunking up the back steps. There's a tinny clink as he drops an empty beer can into the outside bin, the rattling sound of the sliding door opening, then the thud of his workbag on the tiled floor. Inside he shuffles in socked feet to the toilet and, as always, he grunts like it hurts before the house is ringing with the sound of his long, loud piss. These are my father's noises, I have listened to them my whole life and they have never changed. I sit down at the kitchen table and watch Mum playing with her pots and pans, filling the room with hungry smells.

'Bloody hot,' says Dad appearing in the doorway. His blue work singlet is tight across his bulging belly and there are tufts of hair bristling from his armpits, like he's got a couple of kittens stashed in there. Other than the beer gut, he's lean, scrawny even, with rounded biceps that remind me of Popeye. His face is always set in a contemptuous snarl. He wipes his sweaty face with the shirt he's holding, then drops it on the floor before opening the fridge. 'Where's the bloody beer?' he says, pushing around packages of food.

Mum shakes her hands dry then goes over and reaches in around him, instantly producing the can he's looking for. He takes it without comment and she goes back to the sink and starts on the parmesan cheese. Her arms jiggle as she grates.

Dad watches her with his eyebrow raised, then after a moment he says, 'I don't understand why three people need so much food.'

'It's for the party,' says Mum apologetically and defiantly, the way she does with him.

'What party?'

'My *birthday*.'

He opens the beer and it fizzes and splutters to life.

'Don't you think I *deserve* a nice birthday?' she says and her grating picks up pace.

He throws his arms out wide and bows his head slightly, mockingly. 'Nothing but the best, for my darling.' Then he sniggers to himself through a swig of beer.

'Oh shut up,' says Mum, throwing the remaining hunk of cheese into its Tupperware tub. 'Would it kill you to show you *care* for me every now and then?' With a grunt she picks up the pot of boiling pasta and carries it to the sink.

Dad puts down his beer and reaches into his back pocket. He leans forward to get his hand into the tight spot, his eyes narrowed and focused on Mum who is ignoring him as she pours the boiling water into the colander. He pulls out his wallet and slams it onto the kitchen counter. 'You think I don't *care*?' he says prodding the wallet with his index finger. 'This empty wallet says I am pretty bloody caring.'

Mum leans forward onto the sink, while steam from the draining pasta rises up and around her. 'You see? That's why everyone thinks you're *cheap*.'

There's a flinch, but you have to be trained to see it.

'You're mad,' he says.

'*You're* the mad one,' says Mum, and there is an unmistakable bump in her voice, then sure enough, her shoulders start to bounce up and down as she lets out little sobs.

Dad curses silently and runs his fingers through his hair leaving trails of black where they wipe off the dust. 'For

fuck's sake, Sofia!' he says shaking his can and sloshing beer everywhere. He's got foam dribbling down his fist. 'I've been working all bloody day. What are you crying about?'

Mum spins round to look at him. 'Don't you want me to be *happy*?' she pleads. 'You love your money more than me!' Then she's back staring into the sink, marble-sized tears falling into the steaming pasta.

Dad makes a deep noise, like a rumbling fart under a blanket. His face looks constipated, and he is turning from side to side like he doesn't know which way to go. Finally, he takes two stomping steps towards her, and throws his hands up.

'I give you *everything*!'

'I'm just trying to keep everyone happy!'

'I work like a slave for this family! All I ask for is a few lousy beers and some food on the table!'

'You expect me to serve *sausages* at my party!'

'What the hell is wrong with you? I haven't said anything about bloody *sausages*! Sofia! Why are you *crying*?'

'Leave her alone!' I say and I lean up against Mum's back like a shield. Dad is looking like he could kill the both of us but I stay there, stare him in the eye even though my knees are melting.

'Get out of the way, Mira,' he snarls.

'No! You're being an asshole.'

His eyes open wide and he raises his arm, his hand splayed like a baseball mitt. I watch it hang there, looming in my face, swelling as though someone is inflating it, but then he lets it drop back to his side and it returns to its normal size. I breathe an inaudible sigh of relief; hold onto my mother's skirt behind my back.

'I don't understand anything,' says my father grimly. 'Doesn't matter what I do, no one is ever bloody happy.' He waves his hand as he turns to walk away. 'You're *both* bloody mad.' He curses all the way to the lounge room where he switches on the TV, and sinks with a thud into the deep armchair.

I turn around, give Mum a hug around the shoulders. 'He's an idiot,' I say, but instead of a hug back, I get shaken off.

'You shouldn't talk to your father that way,' she says, just like that, like now I'm the bad one! She uses a tea towel to wipe her face, and it leaves smudges of red sauce on her cheek. 'Go sit down at the table. Dinner is ready.'

I want to cry and scream at once. I want to tell her that I don't understand. I want to ask her what the hell just happened, and why does it happen all the time. I want to say I hate him and I hate this and that I want more, different, better. I want her to explain why we are all just pretending like we will never die, and why we go around acting like the world is such a great place. And all of it comes welling up from my chest, bursting and burning at my throat, but this is what comes out:

'I *hate* pasta.'

I run out of the room, slamming every door I can, burying myself deeper in silence until I can't hear him muttering to himself, or Mum crying, or that damned TV. Lying on my bed I jam my head under the pillow and listen to the sound of anger pulsing through my ears.

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Mum knocks on the door and begs me to come out but I am not leaving this room until that man is in bed. When I hear

the TV switch off I jump up and lean my ear against the door, knowing it's only a matter of minutes now before he's finally out of my way for another day. I slide down to the floor, ear pressed firmly against the cold wood, and I listen to his long grunting piss, the toilet flush and then his footsteps passing my bedroom door. There is the familiar creak of the bed as he collapses onto it and finally, the staggered, hiccuping snores of someone who can't keep his airways open. I let myself out.

In the kitchen Mum is dropping empty beer cans in the bin. When she hears me come in she reaches across the bench for the monster serving of pasta she has put aside for me. I take it and go sit at the kitchen table and she brings me a can of Coke. I pick up my fork; hold it above the plate as she waits expectantly for me to take my first bite.

'Any cheese?' I say and she breaks into a smile, grabs both my cheeks in her palms and squeezes tight.

'That's my girl.'

And I swear she does a little skip on the way to the fridge. She sits with me again, piles parmesan on top of my pasta and I start to eat. I'm starving.

For a long time we don't speak. She just sits there, watching me, occasionally stroking my cheek or brushing my fringe from my eyes and I am happy. Just happy to be here with her in the kitchen. I could just sit here all my life.

Hell, we've got enough pasta.

'He loves us, Mira,' she says and the moment is ruined. I don't like it when she talks about him. Most of the time it's like she's talking about someone else; not that drunken snorer at the end of the hallway. 'Everything he does, he does for us. We

are all he's got, do you understand? He is *hard*, but he loves us.'

This is such crap. He doesn't love us! The only thing he cares about is his beer and his TV, and she knows it as well as I do. I wriggle in my chair, drop my head so that my fringe falls forward, do everything to show her that she should just stop talking about him because I am not listening, but it doesn't work.

'He's very proud of you,' she says, sweeping her finger lightly across the back of my hand.

'Mum, stop making things up for him,' I say pushing my plate away. 'I don't need you to.'

'It's the truth. Mira, your father loves you very much.'

'Oh really? So he told you this?'

'He doesn't need to say it, Mira. He is your father. He loves you and he is proud of you. Of *course* he is.'

'You know,' I say, and I am trying to be really casual here but when I get angry I can't help it, I start crying. I push up from the table and the ceramic fruit bowl centrepiece rocks back and forth. 'I don't care anyway. I couldn't care less about it.'

Mum sighs. She gets a little curve in her shoulders and scratches unconsciously at the scar in her breast. For a minute, all I can do is visualise knives cutting through flesh and the more I try and shake the pictures the more vivid they get. I rub my eyes against the images, but Mum seems to take this as me being tired.

'Finish your food and go to bed. You have school tomorrow.'

'University.'

'Of course, darling,' and she pulls me into a squishy, garlic smelling hug.

I sit down again, flick my pasta around the plate; make plough lines into the Parmesan. My stomach is still rumbling but I have lost my appetite. I kick the table, softly so no one can actually hear me, and go back to my room. It's getting late and I am tired, but I know that this is when all the best music is on and I am determined to stay awake, at least for a few songs. If you want to know what the good stuff is then you have to stay up. If you're only prepared to listen during the day, well, then you deserve to think Duran Duran or Genesis is the only music out there. When all the deadheads are sleeping, then you hear some wicked stuff. This is how I found Jonathan Richman and The Sisters of Mercy. I found The Triffids, and I found Joy Division. I found Bauhaus and I found The Smiths. You have to actually make an effort to get to the good stuff, they don't just hand it to you on a platter. If you don't take the time to look for it then you'll never know it's there. Imagine if you died never knowing anything other than Madonna? What a waste. Tonight it's Echo and the Bunnymen, 'The Killing Moon'. This is a song you need to get comfortable for so I slip into my pyjamas and I lie down on the bed. Closing my eyes against the darkness, I let the music haunt me. The words are so sad they are comforting and it makes me strangely happy lying here in the dark, this sound filling the space around me like breathable smoke.

I suppose I should be thinking about university tomorrow. I suppose I should be worried about whether my bag is packed, or whether I will meet anyone interesting, or what I should be wearing, but I really just don't care. Uni was never my idea, but I don't get a choice in this stuff, it's all up to Mum and Via and

their crazy plans for my life. The only good thing about going to university is that I get to start all over again. I've decided already, I'm not going to get sucked into being friends with just anyone, just because they happen to sit next to me in the classroom. This time, I'm going to make sure I find people who think the same way as me so we can have meaningful conversations about important things. Leaving behind the deadheads, that's the bit I am looking forward to. The rest of it I couldn't care less about. To be truthful, if you asked me right now what I wanted to do with my life I couldn't give you a proper answer. If anyone actually cared enough to ask me, I would say I want to sit around, eat food, listen to good music and just think. And sleep. God, some days, I could just sleep forever. I can feel sleep's slippery tentacles pulling me down now actually, and the music getting softer like it's moving away from me, but really, it's me that's going somewhere. Suddenly, I'm not so determined to fight it.