

CUT UP

The pocket knife balances on my palm. It's solid. Cold and heavy. It feels alien, but the longer I hold it the more familiar it becomes. I wrap my fingers around its bulk, close my eyes, and wait for that sense of anticipation and pleasure I might have got from clutching a new lip gloss or sketch pencils...But there's nothing. I don't feel anything at all.

The pocket knife is made of dull, silver metal and although I turn it over in my hand, angling it this way and that, it doesn't throw my image back at me the way a shiny dinner table knife does. My image remains clouded and obscure.

A tiny circle of thin wire hangs from one end,

attached to which is a cheap plastic clip and before I know it I'm getting rid of the clip and the wire. It's the cheapness that disgusts me. My father didn't like cheap things, either. For him it was all about elegance and good workmanship. Leather and real wood. He liked having good tools, too. And he was handy around the house. He could fix things.

I use a pair of pliers to cut the wire. They're his Stanley pliers, of course. *The Mercedes Benz of tools*, he used to say and he'd put in an *Ooh la la* and wriggle his butt.

He was a funny man.

The pliers, some of his screwdrivers, his favourite tie and his passport are all in my bottom drawer. My mother doesn't know I've got his passport. She's been searching for it but I'm not going to give it up. For one thing, the man in the photo actually looks like the dad I remember, although his soft hair is a little slicked down. Usually it was all over the place. A dandelion in a breeze. For another thing, I was with him when the photo was taken. I stood behind the photographer, stuck out my tongue and made my eyes wander all over my face, and my dad's wearing just the hint of a goofy smile.

Eight implements are contained within the pocket knife, but the corkscrew is the one I extract first.

Balancing the knife horizontally on my desk, I see that it could be a steamship, with the corkscrew its smoking funnel. A steamship harmlessly going about its seafaring business on an ocean of wood. How deceptive appearances are. Of course it's not a steamship. It's a knife.

For slicing.

And cutting.

The blade is a disappointment. I've anticipated something slender and jagged, something tapering to a spiked point. But the blade is short and squat. Ugly. Wetting my finger I run it down one side, and suddenly the blade is a mirror and abruptly it's shut closed. I'm not practised at this and almost catch my fingers. I try opening and shutting it one-handed like a gangster, but my fingers are clumsy.

Everything is shoved off my desk on to the floor. Pens, pencils, text books, sketchpad, even my precious copy of *Michelangelo*. The desktop is wiped down and then I place the pocket knife in the middle of the desk. Alone. In turn, I sit cross-legged in the middle of my rumpled bed. The pocket knife and I sit quietly. We gaze expectantly at each other, waiting like children who are curious to see what will happen next. It is the last thing I see before closing my eyes that night, and the first thing I see waking up in the morning.

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The pocket knife is still waiting when I return in the afternoon. It neither smiles pityingly at me nor does it ask questions. It is simply there.

Dumping my backpack on the floor, I perch on the bed's edge. Except for a sliver of light edging through a gap in the curtains, the room is shrouded in darkness the way I like it.

Leaning over I pick up the pocket knife and hold it against my cheek. Tenderly. It is both cold and soothing. And then in one smooth movement I have flicked it open and am holding it like a weapon, clumsily twirling it in my hand and watching the light fall on the blade. Dark and shiny and shiny and dark.

My sleeve is pushed up my arm.

The blade is pressed against my skin.

Dragging the blade down against the skin without cutting into it takes considerable control, and the skin bulges on either side like I've cut into a sponge cake. It leaves a thin white line like a scar but the line quickly fades.

The second time I push down a little harder. Carefully. Slowly. And still the blade does not break the skin. We repeat the process, the blade and I, each time pressing further in. It takes a lot patience. A great deal

of control. And the hand that is doing the cutting soon aches with tension. But at last we are rewarded, the skin opens and blood flowers like tiny red poppies. It is a steady, time-consuming process. Up and down strokes are simple, but when the blade tries to make a turn the skin resists and recoils.

My mother knocks on my door, startling me.

"Ellen?" she says. Her voice is muffled. "Ellen, dinner's ready."

"Coming," I call out. My voice is surprisingly steady.

After a minute I put down the knife and stand up. I'm light-headed, but it isn't from any pain, it's more like relief. A kind of peace seems to have settled on me.

I collect the bloody tissues and flush them down the toilet, and cover my arms by wearing a jumper. It's a cool evening.

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At dinner my mother's eyes are bright with hope. "How are things?" she asks. "How are you coping?"

The words are pushed across the table like an envelope she wants me to open. An envelope with sharp, white corners.

I look at my plate. I concentrate on picking up my peas one by one with the prongs of my fork. The peas are not cooked properly and skitter in all directions.

The woman sitting opposite me has become a little sparrow, a little sparrow with a cocked head waiting helplessly for a titbit of food. *Any* food.

It isn't that I don't have anything to tell her. It isn't that I don't understand she is also in pain.

"OK," I say. Finally.

She's still looking at me. If I could blindfold her, I would.

We play a little musical duet in the silence, clinking our cutlery on the fragile china plates. Swallowing delicately.

The cat silently slips between our legs. She pads backwards and forwards restlessly, as she always does, eventually settling a respectful distance on the rug and beginning to wash her ears. She answers to no-one, shows no emotion.

When I stretch out for my glass of water the weave of my jumper catches on the cuts on my arm, and reminds me of my handiwork. *Engravings*.

"And what did you do today?" I ask.

Out of nowhere I have constructed a sentence.

I'm talking to my mother.

And I have to look up. I have to look at her when I speak.

When I wake up late on Saturday morning the first thing I notice is not the pocket knife but the sliver of light that falls across my desk. And I reach out and push my hand into the light, bathing my skin in a soft and warm glow.

I hold my hand in the light, my thin fingers slightly apart and trembling, the blue veins bulging faintly through my skin. I am reminded of a sculpture my father and I once saw when we were all overseas together. It was a vast and spacious art gallery...Probably in Italy. A sculpture of a pale outstretched hand. A hand reaching out. He'd turned to me and with amazement in his voice, he'd said, "Isn't that a thing of infinite beauty?" And his eyes had blinked at me like they always did when he was being very serious.

I stand up to adjust the curtain. Between my fingers the material has the texture of sandpaper, but I give it a jerk. I open the curtain just a little more and let just a little more sunshine into my room.