

THE LIVING DAYLIGHTS (A Short Story)

The moon is bright enough to cast shadows and the frost is sparkling on the path in front of me. Whisps of mist float above the small stream that runs along the edge of the field. I am warm enough. I changed into boots and jeans for the walk home, my skirt and high heels in my backpack. Hood up on my duffel coat, I am genderless and anonymous, I hope I am camouflaged from any unwanted attention.

I was supposed to be walking home with Cath, but she got off with Greg. I didn't want her accusing me of being a gooseberry again, so I set off walking without them. They said they would catch up with me later. No sign of them yet. Probably still snogging in the porch of the village hall.

The path diverges from the road for a short while and I am briefly silhouetted by the headlights of a car. It skews to a halt in a layby ahead of me. I step back into the shadow of the hedge in alarm. The passenger door flings open, and a head leans out, retching into the road. Laughter and jeers come from the car. The door slams shut and the car drives away. It's only the rugby club lot. Just half an hour ago they had taken over the dance floor singing 'Hi Ho Silver Lining', the traditional final haka of the disco. I don't know whether to be relieved or disappointed that they are gone, leaving me alone and in silence. I jump as a fox barks. I don't like walking home on my own.

There is a man walking a dog up ahead. I know dog walkers are to be trusted. They are the ones that find the bodies – they don't do the murdering. I speed up to get closer and nearer to help and safety if needed, but he turns into another road.

The silver and graphite palette of the moonshine turns to dull sepia under the sodium street lighting. I should feel safer but the dark blank windows of the houses cast no comfort. I think about taking a short cut. There's a path between two houses leading to the playing fields but I notice a smouldering cigarette butt lying on the path and I decide to take the long way round. I walk on, hyper-alert to any noise or movement.

Eventually I pass another path between two houses. If I had crossed the playing fields and come down that path, I would be home by now. I hear a weird hooting noise and footsteps behind me. I am trying to look round, but my hood gets in the way. I speed up. The footsteps speed up too. I am running but the terror is turning my legs to lead. They've grabbed my backpack and I am spinning round trying to free myself. I see their grotesque grinning faces uplit by a torch. I drop like a stone. Black. Neon blue lights flash in my head. The grey mist furls around me and I am gone.

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My name is Greg Harris. So, what happened? We were walking home and Lucy had gone ahead, sulking as usual. We took a short cut across the playing fields to catch up with her. It was Cath's idea. Just a joke she said - creep up on her and scare her half to death.....yes, I know, bad choice of words. No, I don't think she banged her head. Drugs? Lucy? I shouldn't think so, she's never done anything that interesting. She's an odd one that Lucy. I mean Cath can be a cow, don't get me wrong, but you never know where you are with Lucy. She's quiet as a mouse most of the time, but she can suddenly lose her temper in a big way – almost

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frothing at the mouth with rage. It's quite something to see. Do you think it was a fit of some sort?

They don't get on, and I blame the Dad for that. He's always teasing them, setting them up against each other. He likes to be the centre of attention. They both seem to dote on him. Their Mum never has anything to say. She never goes out. I think she's depressed. Door mat, my Mum says.

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Green walls, shiny lino, the smell of disinfectant. Hospitals do my head in. Another tedious, pointless visit. I could cry with boredom. It's been over a year now and they still don't know. They've done loads of scans and tests. No sign of brain damage, no heart attack or stroke. Neurology, toxicology. Nothing. There was a police investigation but no charges were brought. How could they? We didn't touch her; we didn't do anything. She brought it on herself somehow. I heard talk of hysterical paralysis and antipsychotic drug treatment, which makes sense to me – you should see her when she loses it. Complete psycho.

Lucy has always been jealous of me. She's like Mum, quiet and always with her head in a book. I like to think I am more like Dad – outgoing, sociable, sporty. He gets involved, you know? Tennis club, golf, PTA. Lucy thinks she's his favourite just because he calls her Mouse. She never understood sarcasm.

We take it in turns to visit her. The doctors say she should have as much stimulation as possible. I don't like coming with Mum and Dad anyway – all their attention focussed on her. I know they blame me. They don't seem to realise that I am trapped too. Greg is long gone of course. I think Lucy secretly fancied him and now she's driven him away completely. Serve her right. Did she think he would be sat here mooning over her as she lies there like Sleeping Beauty in her hospital bed waiting for his kiss to wake her? Dream on! Instead I am sat here trying to think of things to say. I try to remember things we did together. She was always tagging along behind, but mostly I ignored her. Read to her, play her favourite records they say. I have a tape of the Bay City Rollers. She hates them. Maybe if I irritate her enough she will wake up.

I prefer it when they have her lying down and I can pretend she is just asleep. Sometimes they sit her up in a chair, still hooked up to all the tubes and drips. Her head slumps forward, her hair and hands hang limp, knock-kneed like some malignant scarecrow. I often think there is a glint in her eye. I want to scream at her. I sometimes pinch her and pull her hair. No response. She is stubborn. I know she's in there. Spoilt brat.

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Look at her. Standing with her back to me staring at her reflection in the window. So vain. It makes me sick to hear the nurses say how devoted she is to come nearly every day. If only they knew how she resents and detests me. I am a bit scared of her though. Sometimes, through my fringe, I catch her looking at me as if she can see straight through me. As though

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she knows that I am putting it all on. I steel myself against the pinches and hair pulling that I know will come. I don't flinch.

I wasn't pretending at first. I really couldn't move. I was frozen with fear. After a while I began to enjoy the attention. You see, no one ever really noticed me. Mum gets depressed and pretends to lose herself in a book all the time. Dad goes out a lot in the evenings and plays golf and tennis at the weekends. I am not sporty, not like Cath. She at least could be ball girl or caddy for him. I suppose she is quite attractive in a brassy sort of way. I've always been skinny and shy. 'You'll have your time, Mouse' Dad used to say. Cath didn't like that.

Mum and Dad come together to see me. They argue a lot and forget I am here. I know they never really got on, and part of me hoped that my non-recovery would bring them together – a shared grief that would become a shared joy when I finally 'woke up'. But it seems the rift runs deeper than I thought. Dad's been having an affair with someone on the PTA. Mum wants a divorce and plans to move back down South to be nearer her parents. In normal times it would make sense for me and Cath to stay at the same school and move in with Dad. The fly in the ointment is me. I am holding everyone in limbo. Nothing can happen until I recover or die. I savour my importance for a few days.

I learn that the other woman is a keen golfer and tennis player. I am horrified. She's bound to get on better with Cath. I'll be last in line again. She'll have to go. I need to start planning my comeback. I'm stable enough not to be hooked up to any alarms and I know how to unhook and replace my catheter. There is a dead time between three and four in the morning when no one is around. I will need to get back some muscle tone and strength. I'll start exercising secretly. Once I am strong enough I will wait until she turns her back on me as usual. I'll sneak up behind, like she did to me. I'll drag her back slowly strangling her with one of the rubber tubes attached to the apparatus around my bed. I'll use the bar from the hoist as a tourniquet and squeeze the life out of her. They'll find her slumped against the door, a rubber noose round her neck tied to the doorknob. Suicide brought on by remorse. I'll be innocently vegetative in my hospital bed, ready to make a miraculous recovery after a couple of days.

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He wants to move in with Jean. I've met her and I like her. I dream about us doing things together, just the three of us. But nothing will happen unless Lucy recovers. And I would rather she didn't – I just know that Mum will move out and Lucy will be tagging along again, spoiling everything. She'll have to go. She's the only thing lying between my and my Dad's happiness.

I've been to the sixth form careers tutor to tell her I want to be a nurse and that I am going to volunteer at the hospital. She said I can volunteer on Wednesday afternoons instead of doing sports. What could be more natural than wanting to nurse a beloved sister? I'll find out how all the equipment works, what drugs to use. An air bubble in an injection, an accidental overdose. No one will look too closely. It will be seen as a blessing. A merciful release.

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I'm sleepy this afternoon. Exercise in the early hours is more tiring than I thought it would be. It's going to be a while before I can put my plan into action. For once I have no visitors expected today. No torments from Cath. No arguments and recriminations between Mum and Dad. The room is warm and the sun shines in stripes through the blinds. A fly buzzes against the glass. I doze.

My skin prickles. There is someone in the room, moving quietly, trying not to disturb me. I keep still, smiling inwardly at my subterfuge. They approach the side of the bed and I peak between my eyelids. It's Dad. A surprise visit? But where is Mum? He looks odd and he has a pillow in his hands. I freeze with fear. Literally. It's happening again like before. I am paralysed with terror. I open my mouth to scream, but my mouth doesn't move, no noise comes out. There will be no sign of a struggle. He leans over me and whispers in my ear 'Shush, shush little Mouse. Your time has come'.