

Katy, My Sister

Jenn Ashworth

We didn't have much stuff when we moved into the new place. Not carpets or a dining table, or even curtains or beds at first. My dad must have thought if we weren't allowed our things we'd come back. But we didn't, and when the council gave us our new house the members in the Ward gathered round and donated things to us and because we didn't have a car any more, they made a rota for who would give us lifts to church and to the supermarket too.

"If there's one thing we know how to do, it's service," Mum said, as we accepted the boxes of other people's chipped dishes and dented baking pans. We were all called to serve, each according to his talents. Mum had given so much to the Ward that there was no shame at all in accepting help this time. This is how we met Brother Johnson, who'd only recently moved into the area himself. After a couple of weeks of doing his share on the service rota, he took Mum to one side and told her he'd had a personal revelation about marrying her. He still had a wife, Mum explained, but she was very ill and going to die soon so would we like to meet her, and the boy and girl who would be our new brother and sister? Me and Anthony said yes, and we were invited round to theirs for tea.

Sister Johnson lay in a special hospital bed sent over from Ireland before the rest of their stuff had properly arrived. I never saw her leave it. It was slotted into the wide bay window at the front of the house so she could watch people going past during the day and wave at the neighbours. I wanted to ask if they'd bought their new house specially with this window in mind, so they could have

her out in front like that, like an expensive thing for sale. Tubes snaked over the blankets and down to little green and orange pouches at the side of the bed. She had a side cabinet full of bottles of Gaviscon and tubs of Vicks and Sudocrem. The whole front room smelled like a bedroom someone had been sleeping in with the windows shut.

“Here’s Amy,” Brother Johnson said. His daughter and son were standing with him; not in Sunday best, but close to it. Katy and Jake.

“Go on and meet her,” said Mum, a bit irritated because we were hanging back and holding things up. Me and Anthony went forward but I looked over my shoulder. They stared back at us and didn’t move. Katy was scowling slightly, her gingerish hair cut in layers around her face like a girl out of a magazine. Jake was just like Anthony—pale and fidgety. Brothers everywhere are all the same.

“Sit down then,” Katy said. It was the first time I’d heard her speak. Her accent was something special. Brother Johnson had put three dining chairs out next to the bed and we sat in them. I suppose the third was for Mum, but Mum had already got to know her by visiting during the day when we were at school, so she stayed back with Brother Johnson.

“Hiya,” Anthony said.

Amy said hello. She was puffy, with grey curly hair and grey shadows under her eyes.

“Have you been at school today?” she asked. I wondered what she knew about us; if she knew about the problems I used to have at school. Surely not, I thought, Mum would only have told her the good things about us.

“Yes,” I said. My brother nodded. She made a rattling sound as she breathed—she might have been laughing. She sank back onto her pillows and I tried not to stare.

“Do you like school?”

Anthony shrugged. I said, “It’s all right.”

Behind us, Mum and Brother Johnson were smiling at our awkwardness, as if we were five year olds mangling our lines at a nativity. Sister Johnson signalled urgently for Katy.

“What is it? Is it . . .” Katy gestured at the blankets.

“Not now, but in a minute, it will be,” Sister Johnson said. “Can you . . . now?”

Katy did something strange then. She pulled a basin out from under the bed, lifted one of the coloured pouches into it, disconnected it from the pipe and then emptied it into the basin and reconnected the pipe. There was a smell of something funny: unpleasant and hot and familiar. We knew something private was happening, even though Sister Johnson was no more uncovered than she had been when we were speaking to her. My brother looked at his feet. I tried to be mature and not embarrassed but it was difficult.

“Why don’t you kids go upstairs,” Brother Johnson said. He pulled a comb out of his top pocket and swept his comb-over back over his red and sweating scalp. “Go up and get to know each other. We’ll stay down here.” Him and Mum sat next to the bed on the wooden chairs. I saw him hold her hand, and Sister Johnson started to talk in her soft, wavering voice. Perhaps they were praying about something but I don’t think so.

* * *

Jake had a bird-eating spider for a pet that he kept in an aquarium in his room. He’d been allowed to get it as a reward for not making a fuss about moving over from Ireland and having to leave all his real friends at his old school behind. It was black and orange and he showed us how it would rear up and strike if he put his long school ruler into the tank and nudged it with the edge of it.

“Is it a boy or a girl?” I asked.

“It’s a boy. It’s called Legend,” he said proudly. “I can hold it in my hand, it knows me. But if you held it,” he pointed with his ruler, “either of you girls, then it would sink its fangs into you and pump you full of venom and you’d die.” He put his hands round his throat and fell to the floor, pretending to choke and splutter. He rolled his eyes backwards into his head and let dribble come out of the side of his mouth. It was very realistic. His face went purple and as his legs writhed about on his bedroom carpet, his fingernails scratched at his neck and face and a terrible noise came out of his mouth.

“I’m dying,” he said, “I’m really dying.”

Katy rolled her eyes. She had these triangular sweeps of green eye-shadow on that I hadn’t noticed at first. Dead subtle, but you could tell if you looked carefully.

“How can you tell it’s a boy?” she said. “Have you been looking for its dick?”

Anthony started laughing then, and Jake got up off the floor and shooed us out of his room. “You can hold it,” he said to Anthony, in a confidential voice, “if you’re not scared. But those two girls can’t. They’d scream.”

“You’re such a baby,” Katy said.

I followed Katy into her bedroom. You could tell they’d just moved in. There were built-in wardrobes either side of the chimney breast, but the only other furniture was a mattress on the floor. All her things were scattered about, chiffon scarves hanging from the lampshade. She only had one poster, a black and white picture of Courtney Love torn out of a magazine and stuck crookedly to one of the wardrobe doors.

“Do you think it will be good when we all live together? When you and me share a room?”

Katy sat on the floor and unzipped her makeup bag, stirred its contents, looked up at me, and then chose an eye pencil. She didn’t say anything.

“You could teach me to do make up and stuff.” I said. I wasn’t actually allowed to wear any yet, not until I was sixteen, but I thought when we all lived together it wouldn’t be fair to have one rule for me and another for Katy, so I’d probably be allowed then. I looked at Katy leaning over the hand mirror propped against the edge of the mattress. She was pulling her eyelid taut with one finger and drawing a line of eyeliner against her upper lashes. She liked it dark, and thick.

“Have you ever had sex?” she asked.

This was more like it. This was what it was going to be like, having a big sister. It was going to be really great.

“No,” I said.

“My friend did,” she said. “She said she liked all the before-stuff, but as soon as it went in,” she waved the pencil through

the air like a wand, “nothing. She didn’t know what all the fuss was about.”

“Oh.” Katy stared at me. “Why did she do it then?” I asked. She laughed gently.

“People just do. The urge comes over them and they’ve just got to.” She shook her head and I couldn’t tell what she was thinking about. “That’s why they’ve got to get married.”

“Are you going to get married?”

She shook her head. “No way,” she said.

There wasn’t anything else to say. I leaned against the wall in her bedroom and watched her put her makeup on and then take it off again. After a while Brother Johnson crept up the stairs and tapped on the door to say it was time for us to go home. He drove me, Mum, and Anthony back in his car. Anthony was shouting and excited about the spider, telling us that Jake had let him hold it, let him walk about with it sitting on his head. I caught Brother Johnson and Mum smiling at each other, his hand bumping hers accidentally on purpose as he reached for the gear stick. Him and Mum stayed in the car a long time talking, once he’d dropped us off. There were a lot of plans to make for the future. I made us toast and we put ourselves to bed.

In the morning, Mum had breakfast set up ready when we came downstairs and sat at the table with us watching us eat. Eventually she asked us what we thought.

“Can I have a spider as well?” Anthony asked. Mum smiled.

“No, but you can share Jake’s, when the time comes,” she said. She looked at me. “Well? What did you and Little Miss Panda eyes get up to?”

“We were just talking,” I said. “She’s got her own CD player.” I looked at Mum hopefully.

“She’s been allowed all kinds of things since Amy got ill,” Mum said. “Don’t get any ideas.”

I went and fetched my journal and showed her a page I’d written a few weeks before. I’d been in a funny mood when I’d been writing it, and had done a whole page all about how horrible

things were and how black they felt and how something was going to have to change, how everything would have to change, really soon, or I didn't know what I was going to do. I just couldn't stand it anymore, that's what I'd put. I couldn't hack it and something needed to be different.

Mum read it out loud and then asked if she could take it to work and make a copy of it on the machine there because it looked like I'd had my own revelation too, that things were going to change completely, for all of us, for the better, and me writing this before I even knew about what the plans were was confirmation of Heavenly Father's hand in all of our lives.

"When will the time come?" I said. I remembered Sister Johnson and that bad smell in the room. The way the skin hung off the top of her arms, and her stained night dresses hanging on an airer in the back of the kitchen.

Mum shook her head. "We work on the Lord's time. No one knows when he'll take Amy back home. The Doctors say very soon. Before Christmas. You might start sorting through your things, deciding what you want to keep. We won't have room for everything. Compromises will have to be made."

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During that winter, while Sister Johnson was still on earth with us, there was to be a short period of adjustment during which it was important that we all got to know each other. It was especially important for us to learn to love Sister Johnson as a kind of second mother while she was still here, because she would be forever part of our eternal family, and when she died she would be getting our house in heaven ready for us.

But I didn't like to go and see her. I'd pretend to be ill, or busy, and so instead she sent me notes and cards in unsealed envelopes and my mum would leave them on my pillow or prop them against my bowl at breakfast time. The cards always had pictures of Jesus on them, either ascending to heaven, or showing the holes in his hands and feet to his disciples, or showing Mary Magdalene the rolled back stone in the doorway of his tomb.

"James is a good man," she wrote in one of them, and for a minute I didn't know who she was talking about. "He wants to

look after you and your brother, and most of all your mum. We know you've had a hard few years and you all need a time of peace and for home to be a sanctuary, a place of safety and calm to return to. You don't ever need to worry about him shouting at you or hitting you. He will give you your privacy and the support—both emotional and financial—you need to grow up into the intelligent and sober young woman your mother knows you can be. I will be praying for you.”

When I finished reading I noticed Mum was standing over me. She was pretending that she just wanted to get near to the window with her hand mirror so she could put on some lipstick but I knew she'd been watching as I read.

“Well?” she said.

“He sounds,” I said, putting the card back into the envelope, “like he's applying for a job.”

“Don't be hard on him,” Mum said. “It's not an easy thing that Heavenly Father is asking him to do. He's pulled in all sorts of directions. He's got to make sure this is best for his own children, as well as you and Anthony. It's his job to lead us in this. Have you prayed about it?”

“No,” I said.

“Well, I think you should.”

I said I would but every time I tried I imagined Sister Johnson in her resurrected body, those strange pouches trailing behind her. She was always in her nightdress, her glasses on a pink string around her neck. Maybe when we got to heaven she would brandish those plastic tubes at us to prove that it was really her, that we'd come to the right place.

Because I wasn't keen on going back to their house, Brother Johnson decided that he would start driving us home part of the way from school and that would be a good way for us to spend time together and get comfortable in each other's company. I didn't like the idea of Brother Johnson picking us up right outside the school gates, so we made a compromise—we'd walk to the train station, which was about half way, and he'd pick us up from there.

He had a small black car—a Fiesta Pride, with several combs tucked into the driver’s side sun visor. Anthony got me to distract him by asking questions about the Millennium while he dawdled around the back of the car, writing “gay” in the dust over “Pride.” It made us laugh and when we got home and he’d gone back to his own family, we told Mum. Mum told us off but not really; I could tell she was laughing a bit too.

Sometimes my brother wasn’t there in the car because he’d decided to go and have tea at our dad’s instead. So Brother Johnson would let me sit in the front and would park a little way away from the house so we could have a chat.

“Katy’s very close to her mother,” he said, even though I didn’t ask. “She’s looked after her since she left school. When things change,” that’s how he referred to it, when talking to us, “then she’ll be able to go to college.”

“That’s good,” I said. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

“She’s bright, is Katy. Very,” he narrowed his eyes and smiled, “canny. She came to me and asked me what was going on before me and your mum even thought of telling the children. She’d noticed.”

“I noticed too.” I said. “I had a revelation as well. In my journal.”

“Yes, you did,” he said. “Your mum told me. Amy saw the copy. Very astute of you.”

I felt pleased.

“The thing is,” he said “between us, in our family, we know what all this means. Amy broached it with me before I was ready to listen to what the Lord wanted from us all. This isn’t,” he said, “anything to do with immorality. Your mum and Amy, they’re busy getting to know each other. Becoming sisters. Do you understand?”

“I do.” I said.

“That’s why I don’t think it would be a good idea to talk about this much, at church—even to your friends. People could get the wrong idea. I asked Katy what she thought—she’s seventeen now—mature enough to have an opinion on these things. She says she doesn’t want people talking about her mother while she’s so ill. You can understand that, can’t you?”

Mum had told me about this. I'd asked why they sat outside in the car all the time, why he just wouldn't come into the house to talk when he dropped us off at home. "It wouldn't be appropriate," she'd said, "him coming into the house with us not being married yet and no other adult here. It could give the appearance of evil." It was important that through the whole transition we were all above reproach. That our new family started as we meant to go on: spotless.

"We wouldn't want people talking about any of us," I said. "Anthony would feel the same way. No one wants to be gossiped about, do they?"

"Your mum said you'd say that," Brother Johnson said, and reached for his comb. "You've got wisdom beyond your years. You and Katy are going to get on well, I can see that."

I was pleased again, and smiled as I got out of the car and went inside. I didn't usually bother, but that day I even turned and waved to him before I went into the house.

In the run up to Christmas, when it was dark before we got home from school, Mum started spending a lot of time with Sister Johnson during the day.

"I've got a lifetime with those children to catch up on," she said, which made it sound like she spent her time learning the faces in old photograph albums and making lists of what kind of food Katy and Jake liked to eat. In fact, it was the other way round—Katy was teaching Mum the sort of things that Sister Johnson needed doing for her: the trick to changing a bed with a person still lying it, or giving someone a bath even if they couldn't stand up. Brother Johnson would take us back to his house instead of our own after school, and Katy and Mum would be in the kitchen together talking about the best way to get a crispy top on a shepherd's pie, or how to get Anthony and Jake to eat their veg, and whose turn it was to do the washing up afterwards. Brother Johnson brought back a prospectus from the college down the road and made Katy look through it.

"You should try nursing, or childcare, or holistic therapies," Mum said, looking at the brochure over Katy's shoulder. Me,

Anthony, and Jake were eating sausage and peas. Anthony was rolling his peas over the table to Jake, and Jake was using the salt pot as a goalie. Katy shrugged.

“I don’t know. There’s no rush, is there? I can always wait another year.” She looked through the archway into the front room at her mother, propped up on her pillows with her plate resting on a wobbling tray.

“A year my foot! I can take care of things here, during the day,” Mum said. She was wearing Sister Johnson’s old apron. I wondered why they’d bothered bringing it over the water with them when they must have known she wasn’t going to get any better.

Katy looked like she was going to say something else, but Sister Johnson’s fork slipped down the side of the bed and she started to cry: a little high pitched growling sound like a cat. It sounded funny and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from laughing. Katy went in from the kitchen but Mum got to the bed first.

“You sit and have your tea, love,” Mum said. “You’ve been on your feet all day. Eat, go on.” Brother Johnson sat down at the head of the table and smiled, but Katy picked up her plate and took it to her room.

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Christmas came and went and between Christmas and New Year Jake and Katy’s older brother, Michael, came back from his mission. He’d only been serving in Edinburgh but they’d not seen him for two years, and Mum said we should admire him for sticking with it because he’d been worried the whole time that Sister Johnson wouldn’t last until he came back. When he did arrive home, we were all there, Mum with her chair right close to the head of Sister Johnson’s bed, and nervously holding her hand.

“Michael!” Katy stood up and ran towards him as he came in at the front door. She hugged him and didn’t let him go for ages. I suppose she’d not liked being the oldest, and in charge of being canny about everything while he’d been away. Try doing it full time, for fifteen years, I thought, but then realized that would change too so I didn’t say anything. Michael hugged her back but over his shoulder, he was looking at us.

“Hello Michael,” I said, and “welcome home. We’re glad you’re back safe,” which is what my mum had told me to say. She said things were bound to be awkward the first few minutes, but just to smile and get through it. So I did.

Michael didn’t shake his dad’s hand, but hugged Jake and told him how much he’d grown and made a joke about having to fight him for who got to be the man of the house now. Then he went to sit on the edge of his mother’s bed.

“Are you missing Ireland, Mum?” he said quietly, as if there was no one else in the room.

“Things move on, son. We move on with them, or we get stuck,” she said, which even I knew wasn’t an answer. I wondered who’d packed up his things in the old house, who’d chosen what would be sent over to England and what would be thrown away.

“And who’s this? New friends?”

Brother Johnson introduced us properly and he leaned over and shook our hands. Sister Johnson and Katy were staring at him hard. I couldn’t tell by looking at him if he knew who we really were, or not.

“Merry Christmas,” he said quietly, and turned away. We pulled the last of the crackers and ate some Christmas pudding that was a bit past its best. Katy sat near him, looping her arm through his, and whispering in his ear. I watched her, seeing what it was like to have a big brother.

“Come on now, Katy,” Brother Johnson said, “say it in front of everyone, or not at all. We don’t do divide and rule in this household.”

Me and Anthony gave Michael the Christmas presents we’d saved for him; nice things to make a good first impression. Mum had bought a good shirt and some new black socks. I’d made a photo frame out of cardboard and Christmas wrapping paper and glitter pen. I thought he’d want to put a picture of all of us together in it. Anthony hadn’t done anything but I let him write his name on the tag along with mine, just to be nice. But when we gave them to Michael he put them next to him on the chair and didn’t open them. Mum said he was just tired, and felt a bit awkward because no one had warned him we’d be doing presents and he hadn’t brought anything for us.

When Brother Johnson said it was time to drive us back, Michael said he'd do it himself, and there was silence in the car all the way home.

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In the New Year, the Youth had a special dance to prepare for the show we were putting on for the Ward Valentine's social. We were going to do the barn raising bit from *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, with us learning the dance and also the song. It was really hard to do the dance and sing at the same time. Jake and me had been assigned to each other as dance partners, which Brother Johnson took as further evidence of Heavenly Father making our paths cross and putting us together as family. We'd practice once a week after school, and now and again on a Saturday afternoon.

"Come on then," the Bishop said, "strike up the band and let's get on with it."

When Jake put his hand on my waist and twirled me the other boys and girls said "wooop wooh" and made kissing noises.

"Oi fancy you, oi does!" someone said, doing a really fake Irish accent. Everyone laughed.

Jake took his hands off me and turned around quick to see who had said it. The big skirt I had to wear as part of my costume was still swishing and settling around my legs. Katy was playing the piano and when the music stopped we realized everyone was staring at us.

"Jake," she said gently, "it doesn't mean anything. Just leave it."

Someone giggled nervously and Katy turned back to the piano and started to play the first few bars of the chorus. But Jake had rushed across the room, pushed someone out of his way so hard that they fell and skidded across the polished wooden floor of the cultural hall, and went into the lobby. There were piles of hymn books in wooden boxes out there, and we could hear him shouting and grunting as he picked them up and threw them against the glass doors. The Young Men's President stood up but Katy was there, shaking her head. "Leave him," she said, "I'll go out to him." She looked right at me. "Go and ring Michael, will you? Tell him we need picking up early."

Me and Anthony felt sort of special, being the ones let into the Bishop's office to make the call and talk on the phone. We could hear Katy and Jake outside in the lobby, the books bouncing off the glass doors, and Jake shouting and crying.

"What's wrong with him?" the Bishop asked, once we'd hung up. "Is it his mum?"

"She's ill," Anthony said, then we shut our mouths and wouldn't say any more.

* * *

It wasn't as if Anthony and me spent a lot of time discussing these things when no one else was around. Unlike me, he liked to go to our dad's and once the school holidays finished, he spent more and more time there at weekends. Eventually, he almost gave up coming to church all together. I would remind him now and again about Legend and sharing a room with Jake and how we all needed to be pulling together during these last few weeks, now more than ever, but it didn't make any difference to him. Sometimes though, it was like it used to be.

"Who's this? Guess who!" he'd say, combing his fringe to one side and waddling into the room with a cushion stuffed up his school shirt. "*The thing is,*" he said, in an Irish accent that was actually fairly good, "*eternal families aren't born, they're made with effort, with tears and sweat and prayer. We work our hardest when we're on our knees!*"

We fell about laughing at times like this, and even when Mum caught us doing our impressions it wasn't so bad—she'd laugh too, or close the door gently with a twinkle in her eye and pretend she hadn't heard us. I suppose she thought it was part of our adjustment process, and that all this light mindedness and levity would have to stop when we started living together, so we may as well just get it out of our systems now.

* * *

Around Valentine's Day Mum knocked on the door of my room. I was busy cutting out red hearts to sew onto the skirt I was going to wear for the dance. They'd actually swapped the partners around and given me Anthony instead of Jake, which was embarrassing

and also totally ironic. And who even knew if Anthony was going to bother turning up for the performance or not? She told me to put the scissors down.

“What is it?”

“We’re going to move house,” she said.

I thought Sister Johnson had finally died.

“When? Have you told Dad?”

Mum had been crying. “There are cleaning jobs going at the Temple. I’ve asked the council if we can transfer to the estate up there. There’s a school bus, you won’t have to move.”

“What about ...?”

“No. We’ll be in a different Ward from now on too. It will be all right. You’ll make friends quickly. Do you know where Anthony is?”

I shook my head. “What happened?”

“It’s Katy,” she said, “she’s in the hospital.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Michael found her. He drove her in himself. They waited ten minutes for the ambulance and then he just put her in the car and went.”

“What did she do?” I said, but Mum put her hands over her face and wouldn’t tell me.

* * *

We’d not been very good at keeping our secrets—the Ward was supposed to be one big happy family in Christ and the Gospel and because people cared enough to talk to each other, I eventually found out what had happened.

Brother Johnson had been taking us to church every week, and because Sister Johnson was always too ill to come with him, the lot of us had started sitting together every Sunday. It just seemed to make sense. But when Michael came back, he’d decided he didn’t like it, and had talked to the Bishop. Apparently, he hadn’t been the first. Some of the women from Relief Society had noticed Katy and Brother Johnson turning down their help with the household things because Mum had been covering all that side of things for them. The Bishop had had his eye on the situation for some time

now. Five days ago he'd gone over to the house, and while he'd been in the sitting room with Sister and Brother Johnson, Katy had gone upstairs and tried to hang herself from the back of her bedroom door.

After a few days the Bishop came to our house specifically to tell Mum that the revelation had been all wrong. It had been a bit of a lie, and Sister Johnson wasn't going to die, at least, not any quicker than the rest of us, and we'd to stop accepting lifts from him and going round to his house, and we certainly weren't to sit together in church any more.

"You weren't ever family," he said to her, and I heard my Mum start to cry in the way she always does when she's trying to keep it in because she thinks me and Anthony are asleep, "You've got to get that idea out of your mind because it wasn't ever true."

"Can I go and see her?" Mum asked. I was on the stairs and couldn't hear what the Bishop said, but I reckon it was a no because she started to cry properly then, and said, "But what about the children?" and I wasn't sure if she meant Katy and Jake, or me and Ant, or all of us.

"Just pray for them," the Bishop said at the front door, "but stay away from now on."

Mum left it to me to tell Anthony. I was mad about it, but there wasn't any choice. She'd gone right back to the way she'd been when we'd first moved into the new house. That meant hours of her just sitting on her own watching the telly. She never went to bed properly and just slept where she was on the settee. I kept waiting for her to snap out of it and even thought about ringing up Brother Johnson and getting him to come and talk to her. But he wouldn't have come in the house. He probably wouldn't even have answered the phone to us. It was all down to me again. So I took Anthony upstairs where Mum couldn't hear us and just told him.

"You might as well know, it's all off," I said. "Not that you cared anyway."

I told him what Katy had done to herself.

“How did she do it?” Anthony whispered. We were in my bedroom, sitting side by side on the divan bed. There was still no carpet on the floor so the little castors on the bed would roll suddenly if you tried to lean back against the wall. It was a pain, but we were used to it.

“With her dressing gown cord,” I said, “over the coat hook.”
“Grim.”

I nodded. “She’s still in hospital. Mum says she’s got a pipe up her nose and everything.”

The windows in my room were bare—before Christmas Mum had promised to let me choose the material and she’d sew them for me herself, but then when it looked like we’d be moving again in a matter of weeks, or less, she’d never bothered and I’d almost got used to getting changed with the lights out, or pinning a sheet up against the window at night.

“You’re not to get yourself upset. I knew there was something wrong with her,” I said. “I could tell from the beginning. I had a revelation about it.”

Anthony had something in his hand, a dark, ragged bit of fluff, and he kept stroking it with his finger as if it was something special.

“You thought she was all that and a bag of nuts,” Anthony said. “Don’t lie.”

I shrugged. “That was when I thought we’d all be living together. You’re supposed to think the best of your family, aren’t you?”

“Jake said she used to get up in the night and do weird things,” Ant said. “He said she’d been at it for ages.”

“What sort of things?”

He shrugged, “Tearing the pages out of books. Dropping plates on the kitchen floor. She ate a whole block of butter once, for no reason.”

“Jake might have made that up,” I said. I realized then what was in was in Anthony’s hand—an old spider skin. Jake said Legend would shed them now and again, as he grew bigger, and Anthony had made him promise to save one for him if and when it happened. He wanted to use it to scare the girls at school with, I bet. It lay on his palm, limp and leggy but just like a real spider

with the guts sucked out. I made myself a promise not to scream if I woke up someday soon and found it on my pillow or draped over my face.

“You didn’t ever think it would really come off, did you?” Anthony said. “I knew it was never going to happen. From when Michael came home. The look he gave us when he saw us sitting in that front room.” He carried on patting at the skin and arranging its legs to make it look more life-like. “I could tell that his mum and dad hadn’t said anything about us. He didn’t know our names or anything, did he?”

“Maybe they didn’t want to bother him on his mission. Maybe us three were too important to mention, just like that, in a letter.”

Anthony snorted, then tapped the side of his head. “It’s some sort of game they play.”

“Don’t be stupid,” I said.

“Go and ask your Katy then,” he said, “I bet she’ll tell you the truth.”

I thought about her and her machines. Blue marks around her neck. Pipes and wires and things to help her breathe. Hospital smells and bottles of Fruit and Barley.

“Is she going to die?” Ant asked.

“No one knows. We’ve just got to wait, and pray.”

Anthony held up the skin on the palm of his hand and blew—*whoomph*—and it flew at me, hit me in the mouth and landed on the front of my jumper, the little stiff hairs on its legs making it stick there. I rubbed my lips and shook and shook but it wouldn’t come off, and Anthony rolled back on the bed and laughed like he was going to be sick.

“Why do you always have to—” I couldn’t find the words, “spoil things?”

I suppose I was thinking about *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, and how in the end we didn’t bother with it because there’d been no Katy to play the piano, and no Jake to dance with me, and Anthony had refused to stand in for him and how I’d cut out all those hearts and done all that practicing and sewing for nothing.

“You’ve always got to spoil everything!”

I tried to push him off the bed but he rolled and dodged me easily.

“Don’t be like that,” he said. “Dad told me to work on cheering you up. Said it wasn’t our fault our *bloody mother* had taken up with a *load of nutters*.” He gently picked the skin off me and stood up. “*Ant*,” he said, doing his Dad impression, “*don’t let yourself get sucked into their fuckery, my son*.” For some reason I didn’t move or say anything, but kept thinking of Katy, and her middle-of-the-night butter eating. Maybe the thought occurred to Anthony at the same time as it did to me, but all of a sudden I was picturing Brother Johnson rushing backwards and forwards between Katy’s sickbed and his wife’s, getting all red and stressed and shedding combs and loose hairs everywhere. I tried not to laugh but when Anthony shook the spider at me and mouthed *fuckery* again I couldn’t help it, I lost it, and we both let rip.