



Joss Stirling

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

Copyright © Joss Stirling 2015

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-273739-7

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain

Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

For Samantha Golding

Chapter 1

Kate Pearl stood on the green wheelie-bin in the alley that ran along the back of her mother's house and watched her half-sister play in the sandpit. Sitting in a pool of summer sunshine, the little girl's platinum blonde hair glowed white hot—Kate's own colouring, though hers was hidden under a baseball cap. Frustratingly, Kate couldn't see if the child shared her hazel eyes. She didn't need a mirror to notice the differences between them: the toddler had the plump, pink complexion of a happy three-year-old, nothing like the skinny, tanned older sister. The little girl was having great fun burying her doll in the sand and conducting some kind of funeral with a boy doll officiating in a Hawaiian shirt. Despite her grim situation, Kate had to smile. It looked like her sister was quite a character already.

'Sally?'

Kate moved further into the shadow of the bitter-smelling evergreen hedge that grew on the boundary. Cut back too radically some time ago, it wore a brown scar of the exposed inner branches, never regrown. Kate hadn't seen her mother for four years so her sister had not seemed real until now. What on earth was she doing coming here, Kate asked herself, invading their nice ordinary lives?

Still, there's Sally. I have a sister called Sally. Touching a hand to her heart, she held the thought like a fragile pressed flower.

'Mummy, Barbie is dead.' The little girl patted the top of

the grave with a plastic spade.

‘How lovely, darling.’ Their mother, Maya, clearly wasn’t listening. A slim, dark-blond woman in her early thirties, she had the toned muscles of a regular yoga practitioner, as hinted at by her exercise mat spread out on the lawn. ‘I brought you some biscuits and milk, then it’s time for your nap.’ She scooped the toddler out of the sandbox and brushed her down. ‘My goodness, look at you! You *are* in a state!’

Sally was still staring at the sandpit. ‘She’s dead—like your other little girl.’

Kate almost fell off the top of the bin to hear herself mentioned. Her mother had told her sister that she had died?

The toddler patted Maya’s cheek. ‘So now I’m sad like you.’

Maya swallowed, then buried her head in the crook of her baby’s neck. She cleared her throat. ‘I can see you are sad, sweetness. Let’s find Barbie and everything will be all right. Where is she?’

‘Ken buried her.’ The little girl pointed at the boy doll lying on his back staring wide-eyed at the sky.

Maya put Sally down on the grass and rooted around in the pit. She pulled out Barbie, who was dressed for her funeral in a glittery blue ball gown. With a jolt of recognition, Kate realized it was the same dress she had treasured for her doll when she was Sally’s age. Her mother must have kept it. Kate had a vivid recollection of the pink plastic toy box—something she hadn’t thought about for years. She had covered it in sparkling fairy stickers: was that somewhere in Maya’s house too? Kate hadn’t thought Maya cared enough to give house room to something of hers, seeing how their last meeting had ended so badly.

‘See, Barbie’s fine,’ said Maya, her voice quavering. ‘Just shake her off and she’s as good as new.’

Holding Barbie upside down, death forgotten, Sally ran up

the garden to the table in the tiny conservatory on the back of the pebble-dashed house. She dropped Barbie, picked up a two-handled cup, and grabbed a biscuit. Sally then disappeared inside, some other idea for play having taken root in her quick mind. Maya stayed where she was, hands on hips, head bowed.

Kate's throat went dry. Could she risk speaking? Her mum had remarried four years ago on a beach in the Caribbean, no family invited—that had been the catalyst of their final horrible row. Both had said stupid, *stupid* things to each other like a pair of screaming gulls scraping over the same bit of bread. Maya may not like the existence of her older child but even she had to admit she had given Kate the dubious gift of her temper. And, of course, Kate hadn't been able to resist rubbing salt into the wound by looking up the pictures on Facebook: the sun-kissed couple in white swimsuits and flower garlands, the new husband a handsome computer programmer who worked for the university, dark hair, white even teeth shown by his proud smile. Kate had hated him on principle.

She sighed. Recent events had made her wiser, that row so trivial. Maya's new life had no place for the awkward fact of a teenage daughter, Kate understood that now. Maya had had Kate when she was still at school and it had taken her years to get back on track after that early setback. And now the couple had a sweet little girl—a reward for finally doing everything right.

Had she ever been as cute as Sally? Kate felt so tired of herself, she couldn't imagine anything nice, even in her early years. Her mum hadn't wanted to keep her so she guessed not.

Kate picked a leaf out of her hair and let it fall, still debating whether or not to make herself known to her mother. Kate hadn't lived with Maya since she was five—that was when her grandparents on her father's side took over so the

young mother could go back to college. Mother and daughter had kept in touch, Kate coming to stay for holidays with a young woman who increasingly felt more like an older sister or cousin, but then Kate had had to ask for more and Maya had dropped her bombshell about getting married and moving on in her life. Kate still remembered the gutting pain of knowing she was unwanted. So, after that, Kate had protected her heart and stopped hoping Maya would play a bigger role in her upbringing; Gran had done a grand job of filling in for the absent mother. Even so, it came as a shock to hear that Maya had decided to say Kate was dead.

There were days when Kate felt she might as well be.

She looked over her shoulder at the quiet alleyway. She was being hunted. The last thing she wanted was to bring trouble on her family but she couldn't go without saying something, not after having taken the risk and come all this way. 'I'm sorry' probably about covered it.

'Mum?' Her voice came out rough, barely above a whisper.

Maya lifted her head, disturbed but not certain she had heard a voice. Her cheeks were wet.

'I'm . . . '

A crash from the house, followed by a wail, cut off Kate's words.

'Sally?' Maya spun round and ran towards the house. 'Sally? Are you OK?'

From the loud sobs coming from inside Kate guessed Sally was fine. Silence was always more ominous. Kate closed her eyes and squeezed the frond of evergreen, releasing more of the tart resin smell. Sally had saved her from making a bad mistake. It hurt that her mother treated her as dead but that was safest for the little family. What Maya didn't know about her older daughter couldn't hurt her. Better to remain a ghost.

Kate jumped off the bin, picked up the rucksack that lay

propped against the fence and shouldered everything she had in the world. Family didn't fit inside that.