

Sarah

The world is black. The sun above me is black.

I stand, head thrown back, eyes wide open. I try to drink in the moment, to commit it to memory, to block out any other thought. The trees are rustling softly, almost ceremonially. Only the birds high in the branches seem unimpressed: they sing as if to spite the darkness, as if singing is all that matters. The sun is black and I stand and bask in the sight. There is no more warmth. No light.

This is not the first eclipse of the sun I have witnessed. When I think of the first, I have to smile, in spite of everything. Philip had wanted to get out of town and go to the woods—he thought the birds would suddenly stop singing when the sun went dark and wanted to know if he was right. I wanted to stay in town

with our friends—all of us together, young and silly and keyed up, with our special glasses on our noses. I talked him round. It wasn't hard—back then he was happy to let me talk him into all kinds of things. He made one last attempt to persuade me, saying how much more romantic it would be in the woods, just the two of us, but I said, 'Don't be soppy!' and he laughed and we ended up staying in town with the others.

The strange thing is that I can't remember the eclipse itself. I remember all the rest—our friends' chatter, the music coming from the radio, and a smell of burning because someone had put sausages on the barbecue and forgotten about them. I remember Philip's hand in mine. I remember that we ended up taking off our glasses because they got in the way of kissing. We held each other's hands and must have missed the moment. For the first time, though, we talked about the future. I had always refused up until then—the future wasn't something I believed in. But someone had said that the next eclipse of the sun we'd see would be in 2015 and that there wouldn't be another one until 2081, and that was real—I could believe in that. We worked out that Philip would be almost forty at the next eclipse and I'd be thirty-seven. We laughed at the sheer madness of the thought that we would one day be that old, but we promised one another we'd be more careful next time, that we'd see the black sun and that we'd see it together—in the woods, so that Philip could find out if he was right about the birds.

And here I am now, thirty-seven years old, standing in a small clearing alone in the middle of the woods. I am staring at an enormous black sun and it stares back at me and I wonder if Philip can see it too—if it's visible wherever he is. Our son will be seventy-five at the next eclipse—I will no longer be around and Philip will no longer be around. Today was our last chance. As I

stand here watching the moon edge its way across the last sliver of sun, I realise that Philip was wrong—the birds around me aren't any quieter at all. I wonder whether he would have been disappointed or pleased and tell myself that it no longer matters. Philip isn't here anymore, I think. Philip has gone. Philip has disappeared. Philip has fallen off the edge of the world.

And at that moment the birds stop singing.

The hairdresser has a beautiful face with prominent cheekbones. His hands are slim and feminine. I was hesitant to enter the salon and deliberately walked past a few times before pushing open the door. Now I am sitting here in a swivel chair, at the mercy of this man.

Fingers spread, he runs his pianist's hands through my hair, which is so long now I can almost sit on it. He does it once, twice, three times, all the way from the roots to the tips, making admiring noises, and a colleague who introduces herself as Katja comes over and does it too. The physical contact embarrasses me—it is far too intimate. For so many years there was only one person allowed to touch my hair, and that person loved it. He rested his head on it, dried his tears with it. But I let the two of them have their fun and pretend to be pleased at their compliments. Eventually they stop oohing and aahing and Katja goes back to dealing with her customer's extensions.

‘So,’ says the hairdresser, his fingers already twining through my hair again. ‘You want the ends trimmed?’

I swallow drily.

‘I want the whole lot off.’

The hairdresser—his pretentious name has slipped my

mind—gives a brief giggle, but falls silent when he realises that I'm not laughing with him, that this isn't a joke. He looks at me. I am prepared. I rifle through my handbag, produce a page torn out of a fashion magazine, hold it up and point.

'Like that,' I say. And then, as if to reassure myself, I say it again: 'Like that. That's what I want.'

The hairdresser takes the glossy page from my hand and studies it. At first he frowns, then the steep line bisecting his forehead vanishes. He looks at me, looks at the magazine again, and eventually nods.

'Okay.'

I breathe a sigh of relief, glad not to have to argue with him. I'm a grown woman, and I hate it when other people think they know what's good for me. Patrice—the hairdresser's name has suddenly come back to me—is enough of a pro not to challenge me. He sets out his equipment on the little table in front of the mirror: scissors and combs, brushes, liquids and sprays, and a hair dryer with an assortment of nozzles. A hand mirror, which he will presumably use later to show me what my hair looks like at the back, is lying on a stack of magazines. But it slides off the slippery surface of the tower and falls to the ground. Patrice curses and bends down to pick it up. The glass is lying in smithereens on the floor.

'A broken mirror brings seven years' bad luck,' I say.

The hairdresser looks at me, startled, his brown eyes wide, and gives a nervous laugh. How wonderful to be afraid of bad luck—it means, after all, that it hasn't yet found you. I could smash up an entire hall of mirrors and it wouldn't make the slightest bit of difference to me.

Seven years ago my husband disappeared without trace on a business trip to South America. I've been waiting for him ever

since, my life on hold—seven years of hopes and fears and a lost feeling so intense that sometimes all I wanted was to wipe every last memory of Philip from my mind.

I've already put seven years' bad luck behind me.

Patrice fetches another mirror without a word. Then he carefully gathers the biggest pieces and sweeps up the rest. I keep quiet and let him get on with it. I close my eyes and run my hands through my hair, very tenderly, as if I were fingering precious lace. Like my mother, many years ago. Like Philip, once upon a time—and no one since. Philip, playing with my hair.

I think of our first night together, water all around us and stars overhead, my wet hair draped over my naked shoulders like a cloak, drops of water glistening on Philip's skin. No sound, apart from our breathing. Darkness. The world suddenly tiny, shrunk so small that there's no room for anyone but us. A cocoon of silence and stars. And Philip's hand in my hair.

'Okay,' the hairdresser says. 'Ready?'

He has cleared away the broken glass and is standing behind me, a pair of scissors in his hand.

I nod.

With his other hand he grasps a hank of my hair and lifts it, then he catches my eye in the mirror.

'Sure?' he asks.

I swallow.

'Sure,' I say.

He puts the scissors to my head and starts snipping.

I can hear my hair screaming. It is a frail, silvery sound, like a whimpering child, like a whisper. I close my eyes.

The hairdresser works in silence, swift and efficient. Soon there is nothing left—nothing to run your fingers through dreamily.

I mourn my hair with three big, silent tears that fall to the ground as softly as the first snow of winter. Then I dry my eyes, get up, pay and leave the salon. Life goes on—at last.

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That roller-coaster feeling you get in your stomach when you've done something you can't undo—deliberately smashed up a priceless family heirloom, finally spoken a terrible truth, broken with the past—that feeling is still with me when I get home. I can't put it any better—I'm not good with words. But there's a warm heaving and churning in the pit of my stomach, as if I'd been drinking homemade liquor. My footsteps echo off the walls. This house, rather a grand one, left to me, if you like, by Philip, has been my home for many years, and yet I still feel out of place here. Its cool elegance suits me as little as the long, straight hair I've had hanging down my back all my life, like a fairy princess in a storybook. Maybe it's time to move out, I think—find a place that suits me better. For Leo and me.

I push the thought aside.

One thing at a time.

I go into the bathroom, wash the dust and dirt of the outside world off my hands and look at myself in the mirror over the basin. Since carrying this secret around with me, I have the feeling that everyone must see it in my face, but it's nonsense. My face looks the same as ever. I hazard a smile at the woman with the short brown hair who suddenly looks boy-like rather than fairy-like,

and she smiles back. I leave the bathroom, take my shopping bags into the kitchen and am about to start getting dinner ready when I remember something: the plastic bag the hairdresser gave me.

I find my handbag in the hall, open it and take out the bag of hair. I have no idea what to do with it, but I'm certainly not going to hang on to it like a sentimental idiot. There are enough ghosts in this place as it is, and they don't need hair to play with. Without stopping to think, I go out the back door to the covered area where we keep the bins. It feels strange carrying my hair in my hand, holding something that was once part of me.

Telling myself to be strong and get on with it, I undo the loose knot tied in the bag and slide my hair into the compost bin. I close my eyes for a second. There it is again—Philip's hand in my hair, in the small hollow at the base of my skull. My chest suddenly tightens and my cheeks flush warm. For a moment I can't get my breath, but I soon chase away the thoughts I must have brought back from the clearing with me—taunting woodland sprites who go off reluctantly, murmuring and giggling—and then I can breathe again. The lid of the compost bin is still in my hand, and when I look down I can see my hair, lying there among the wilted flowers, coffee filters, potato scrapings, orange peel and eggshells. I look away, clap on the lid and go back inside.

I had been dreading today—the day of the eclipse. For so much of my life I have been steering towards it, and I often wondered what I would feel when it arrived. On that day, I was convinced, all the hurt I had buried, the questions I had forced down, would be washed to the surface as if by a ravaging flood. And now that day has come and almost gone, like so many other days. It hasn't swept me away. I am still here, and the pain and bitterness have subsided. Since leaving the hairdresser's, I feel as if I'd done something thrilling and forbidden, like a teenager

who's just smoked her first cigarette on the sly: a little queasy, a little dizzy—but free.

I sort out my shopping, packing everything for Mrs Theis next door into a big paper bag and putting it to one side. I'll get Leo to take it round later. Our old neighbour isn't as steady on her feet as she was and doesn't have a car—I've been doing her shopping for about a year now. Usually I like to have a chat with her when I drop it off, even if she is a funny old stick, but today I don't feel like getting caught up in a conversation.

I have a lot to do. Have to get everything ready for the dinner party and then pick Leo up from Miriam's. I'm hoping to catch my best friend on her own—I need to tell somebody what I've done. Or rather, what I haven't done.

Better hurry then. I take the chicken I bought earlier—free-range, organic—and lay it on the kitchen counter, almost dropping it on the floor. I'm ridiculously nervous. I tell myself it's no big deal. Just a few friends to dinner. No big deal. At least, it shouldn't be. Unless, of course, it's years since you last had any friends round to the house.

Things change, I tell myself. I turn on the oven and take out the olive oil, salt and pepper, the bunch of fresh thyme I went specially to the market for, a few stalks of parsley, a bulb of garlic, a tin of fennel seeds and two lemons, setting everything out on the bench as if preparing for some elaborate game. I examine the chicken, wrapped tight in its plastic packaging. It's years since I cooked a chicken. Leo doesn't like eating meat of any kind. He takes after his father in that respect—Philip turned vegetarian when he was still a teenager, and I followed suit when we moved in together. My guilty conscience pricks me for a second, but I shake it off. Doesn't matter now. I've got guests coming and

they're not vegetarian, so we're having chicken—chicken with salad and potatoes.

I take a deep breath, smooth a non-existent strand of hair behind my ear and unpack the chicken. It looks sad and somehow ridiculous, its flesh exposed, with no head and no feathers. At first it's hard even to touch its dead skin—I feel nothing but coldness, the coldness of a corpse. The life that once inhabited this strange little body has long since flown from it, who knows where. It seems bizarre that I am standing here, planning to cook something that once ran about, pecking grain, but I pull myself together and push the thought aside. It's time I stopped thinking Philip's thoughts, it really is.

I take the chicken in both hands, give it a quick rinse under running water and pat it dry with kitchen paper. I cast an eye over the recipe I found in one of my old cookbooks and make sure I haven't forgotten anything.

Then I strip the thyme leaves from the stems, put them in the mortar with a little salt and plenty of olive oil and begin to crush them. When I've finished, and the kitchen has begun to smell of herbs, I dip my hands in the marinade and begin to rub it into the chicken's skin. It feels strange to be doing this, like some archaic, occult ritual: herbs, oils and dead animals. Witchcraft. I watch myself performing these rites as if I were an actor in a film.

When I've rubbed oil all over the chicken, I cut the lemons, crush the garlic and chop the parsley for the stuffing. Once, many years ago, when roast chicken was my favourite food, I could stuff a bird without thinking about it. Now I hesitate, but eventually I grit my teeth and push the lemon, herbs and garlic into the cavity until no more will fit. The chicken is cold on the inside, too, cold and dead, and it couldn't care less what I'm doing to it. What's dead is dead. What is dead feels no pain. What is dead doesn't

suffer. What is dead is invulnerable.

I have so often wondered whether Philip is dead, but I could never really imagine it. Sometimes, on particularly dark nights, I have almost wished he was dead. So I could be sure—so I'd know it for a fact. To have it over with.

I put the chicken in the hot oven and begin to peel potatoes. Then a word comes to me.

A word for this feeling of newness coursing through my body.

A fresh. I'm beginning afresh.

The summer is back. In the sky above me, swifts are jousting with the wind. Miriam's front garden reminds me of my beloved gran's—a hotchpotch of marigolds and morning glories, sunflowers and honeysuckle, roses, poppies, delphiniums and dahlias. On the little patch of lawn is a child's bike. Martin's car isn't in its usual spot outside the house, so I'm in time to catch Miriam on her own. I press the bell. Beneath it, a sign decorated with a hedgehog reads in clumsy letters: *Mum, Dad, Justus and Emily*. The second I take my finger from the bell, Miriam appears in the door, looking tired but happy. Her ash blond hair is pulled back into a short ponytail. Behind her glasses, her eyes are slightly red from lack of sleep.

'Oh my God,' she says impulsively. 'Look at you!'

I'm not surprised—I knew she'd be shocked.

Then Miriam gets a grip on herself. 'Sorry, I didn't mean it like that. You look...' She pauses. 'You look great. Different. Older somehow, but at the same time younger. I don't know how to describe it, but I like it.'

I smile at her.

'Thanks.'

‘Come on in,’ she says. ‘The boys are upstairs.’

I adore Miriam’s lovely, rather chaotic house, home of the M&M’s—Leo’s nickname for Miriam and Martin—and their children. There are always toys lying about, always a vase full of brightly coloured flowers from the garden. A faint smell of cooking wafts towards me, and from upstairs come the usual rumbustious sounds of boys at play.

‘Calm down, boys!’ Miriam calls, but gets no reaction.

She rolls her eyes and I have to smile. I love being here, in this completely normal house with this completely normal family. Emily, Justus’s six-month-old sister, will be sleeping peacefully in her cot, oblivious to the antics of her eight-year-old brother and his best friend.

‘Is that Sarah?’ I hear Martin’s voice, and a moment later he is rounding the corner, a drill in his hand.

I hastily swallow my disappointment. Maybe it’s for the best.

‘Whoa!’ says Martin. ‘Love the hair!’

I laugh.

‘Really?’ says Miriam, pretending to be annoyed. ‘I only have to say I want my ends trimmed and you launch a major protest, but when Sarah gets all her hair cut off, you love it?’

Martin chuckles. Then he remembers the drill in his hand.

‘Oh yeah,’ he says. ‘I dug this out for you. As promised.’

He holds it aloft for a moment, then deposits it by the front door so that I’ll remember to take it when I leave.

‘Great,’ I say. ‘Thanks.’

Martin is always keen to lend a hand when I need something done around the house, but I prefer to take care of things myself. I like banging nails into walls and drilling holes. You perform a simple action and get a clear, predictable outcome. You create order. You get things under control. I love order and control.

‘So?’ Martin says, grinning. ‘Have you got something to tell us?’

‘What do you mean?’ I ask.

‘Don’t they say that when a woman cuts her hair, there’s a man involved?’

‘Martin!’ Miriam exclaims in horror.

She knows I’ve been alone since Philip’s disappearance. She thinks I need protecting.

‘It’s all right,’ I say. ‘Martin’s never known when to mind his own business.’

He grins again. ‘How’s the training going?’ he asks.

‘Fine.’

I trained for my first marathon with Martin. Since then he’s stopped running because he has trouble with his knees, and I’ve progressed to triathlons.

‘You’re amazing,’ he says.

‘Oh, give it a rest.’

I glance at Miriam. Sometimes I worry that it might bother her, Martin showering me with attention the way he does—but she actually seems to like it. I think she feels sorry for me, even now, after all these years. In fact she probably told Martin to be especially nice to me back when we first met, and to offer his help with DIY jobs around the house.

‘Will you stay for dinner?’ Miriam asks.

‘No, I have guests of my own tonight,’ I say. ‘I can’t stay long.’

‘Ah yes, of course, the dinner party with your friends from work,’ Miriam replies.

I immediately begin to feel nervous. Miriam doesn’t notice.

From upstairs comes the sound of muffled laughter.

‘I’ll go and fetch Leo,’ says Martin, starting off up the stairs. He looks back at me, winks and is gone.

Miriam rolls her eyes as if she were annoyed, but really she loves Martin just the way he is. She knows where she is with him. He's not an adventurer or a romantic or a seducer. He's Martin the joker, Martin who likes manning the barbecue, Martin who still wears T-shirts of his favourite rock bands even though he's pushing fifty, who loves to play with the kids, who's fond of telling jokes and then laughs at them louder than anybody else, but without getting anyone's back up, because he's just so nice—because he's Martin. Miriam sometimes complains that he never buys her flowers or springs romantic surprises on her. Privately, I always think, *Not every man can be like Philip*, but out loud I say, 'What do you want with florist's bouquets when you have a whole garden full of the most beautiful flowers?'

'Hello, Mum,' Leo calls from the top of the stairs. He runs down and gives me a hug, oblivious to the fact that I've had all my hair cut off.

Then he discovers the drill and abandons me again.

'Cool,' he breathes, holding it in front of him like a laser gun, taking aim at an imaginary enemy and firing. 'Pew, pew! Pew, pew!'

'All right then,' I say, giving Miriam a kiss. 'We'll be on our way.'

'Take care!' she says.

I smile at her and wrest the drill from my son.

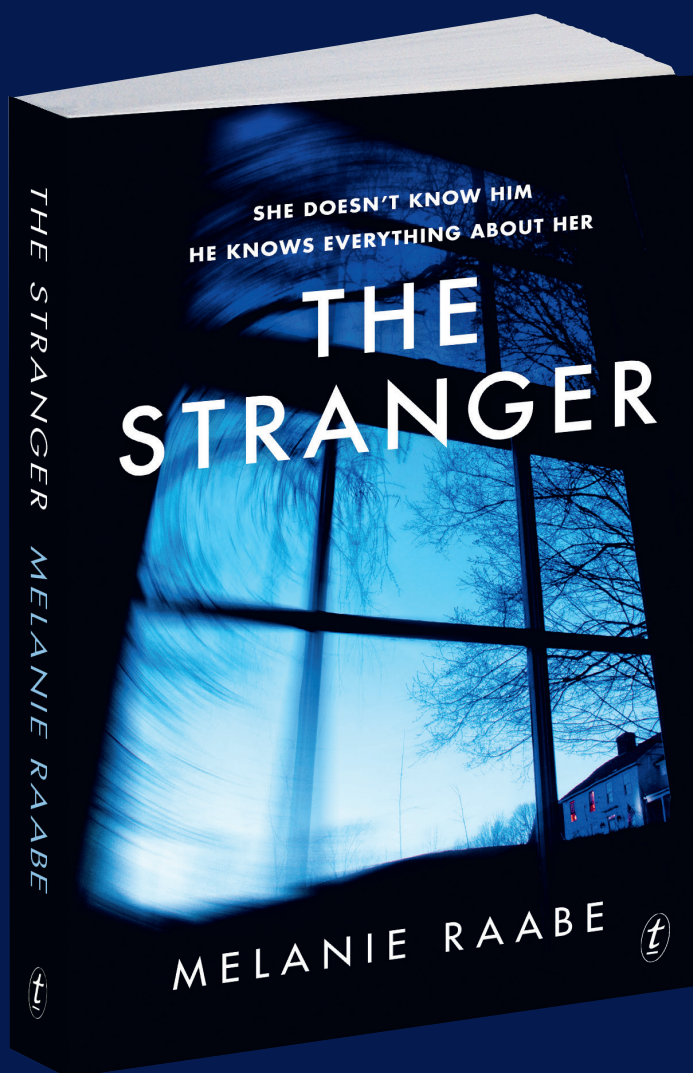
'Bye, Martin!' I call.

Martin's head appears on the landing.

'See you later, alligator,' he calls after me.

I can't see Miriam, but I know she's rolling her eyes.

I feel light as I speed through town with Leo in the back seat, even though I didn't manage to get anything off my chest. I probably couldn't have done it anyway. Some things are just so hard to get out.



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