



HOW

TO

BE

LUMINOUS

Harriet Reuter Hapgood

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There's no such thing as true black.

This is one of the very first art lessons. Squeezing black ready-made from a tube makes a painting look artificial, so instead, you mix the three primary hues: red, yellow, and blue. Because even the darkest shadow or deepest sorrow has a glimmer of color at its heart.

But I know there's another kind of black.

I see it when I close my eyes, and become a paint palette. This black is a bottomless ocean of dark. I dip my fingers in it, smear it across a canvas. Use a paintbrush and flick my finger over the bristles, splattering tiny constellations onto the paper. Each small, lonely speck the color of sadness.

PART ONE

The Dictionary of Color

CHAPTER 1

Life in Monochrome

The last color vanishes with an audible pop, as if it's been sucked through a straw.

And now everything I see is in black and white. Including this pillow fort. At seventeen, I'm too old to be hiding in one, but I can't bring myself to move. I'm a frozen tableau of *WTF?*, staring out through the duvet at my colorless bedroom.

In front of me, my window frames our back garden like an old photograph. It's the last day of August, and white sunshine is cascading over the monochrome flower beds. Roses and clematis and honeysuckle, all rewritten in gray.

There are more than ten million colors in the world, and I can no longer see a single one.

Literally.

The colors began fading ten weeks ago, the day after my mother disappeared.

The last time I saw her was the final day of school before the summer holidays. I was eating breakfast; she was leaving for work. Wearing her usual glaze-spattered smock, cigarette clamped in fuchsia-lipsticked mouth, she waved me madly goodbye. It reminded me of a tulip in a tornado.

After school, I went to her ceramics studio, expecting to find her absorbed in her latest piece. Instead, she had left the kind of note that inspires the police to search the rocks beneath Beachy Head—a cliff with incredible views of the sea, and England's most notorious suicide spot.

But as no body was found—and her long, rambling letter wasn't enough proof—she's not considered dead. She's missing. Vanished into thin air.

Ever since then, the world without her has looked a little chalkier. Like a drop of bleach has been added to the sky. When this first started, it made total sense to me: My disco ball of a mother was gone, of course I was seeing things a little askew.

But then the colors kept fading. With each minute, hour, and day that she didn't come bursting back through the front door . . . or send one of her habitually exuberant ALL-CAPITALS texts . . . or kick off her shoes and dance through the garden . . . the saturation drained from my sight. Until all that was left was the palest gossamer pastels. A last whisper of hope.

And now today. All morning, even these barely there colors

have been disappearing. It's the last day of summer; my baby sister's fifteenth birthday. By not coming home for Emmy-Kate, Mum is really, truly gone.

As I peep from my duvet through the window, the birthday girl herself comes cartwheeling across the lawn. Emmy-Kate is in black and white too. But I bet the dress she's wearing is pink. (The underwear she's flashing as she turns head over heels is *definitely* days-of-the-week.)

My sister concludes her acrobatics and springs upright, her gaze landing on my open window. She narrows her eyes, squinting up.

I turtle beneath the duvet, disturbing the world's stupidest house rabbit: Salvador Dalí.

"Shhh," I warn, putting a finger to my lips. Too late. His ears fly backward, listening as the back door slams, then two sets of footsteps come clattering up the stairs to my attic bedroom. Emmy-Kate's pony-princess prance, followed by Niko's steady clomp-clomp-clomp. No pillow fort in the world is safe from my sisters.

Emmy-Kate arrives first, spinning in her new froufrou frock.

"Minnie! Isn't this dress a Degas? It's *Dancers in Pink*," she says in her bubblegum voice.

With a famous artist mother, we're all walking art encyclopedias—Emmy-Kate, though, actually thinks and talks in paintings, using artwork as an indication of mood. *Dancers in Pink* is an impressionist piece, a blur of lighter-than-air ballet dancers. It might seem strange, given the circumstances,

that she chooses a happy painting. But she's turning fifteen: too young to be told about a letter, a possible suicide, a cliff. As far as Emmy-Kate knows, Mum is merely AWOL, and innocent optimism is the order of the day.

I emerge from the duvet and croak, "Happy birthday."

Emmy-Kate tilts her head, setting off a cascade of what should be strawberry-blond hair. It's gray. Gray eyes. Shiny gray pout. My stomach lurches. Black-and-white vision would be a problem for anyone, but for an artist—even me, a total wannabe—it's an effing catastrophe. Before I can throw up from all this weird, Niko comes stomping into the room.

She snorts at the mess. Then at me, still in my duvet nest. Despite her glam-grunge appearance—think dungarees and flip-flops worn with pinup girl hairdos and perfect eyeliner—the oldest Sloe sister acts more like ninety than nineteen.

"Minnie—you're not still in bed?" she signs, rhetorically. Niko is Deaf, and the movement of her hands as she signs is exacerbated by the bandages on her fingertips. She's a bona fide art student, specializing in cutouts: Think paper snowflakes, only ten times as complicated. Injury is an occupational hazard.

I examine my pajamas, my location on the mattress, and sign back, "No, I'm on the moon."

"Humor. You must be feeling okay." Niko rolls her eyes. "Good. You can help me make the pancakes."

Note: *the* pancakes. It's our birthday ritual: a breakfast feast of pancakes and Nutella. Usually made by Mum—from a box.

This is the house that convenience foods built. But she has the fairy-dust ability to turn even the ordinary, even ready-mixed pancakes, into magic.

The three of us freeze as we consider this: the first tradition without her.

A newly subdued Emmy-Kate trudges to the door. “Minnie?” she prompts, with a single fingerspelled *M*. When it’s only the three of us, we don’t speak: we sign.

I clamber from my fort, as does Salvador Dalí. Niko leads us in a parade down the stairs: sister after sister after rabbit after sister. As we leave the sanctity of my bedroom, I glance out of the landing window. This view stretches across south London’s skyline.

Despite distant tower blocks and terraced streets, I’ve never considered this city to be gray. It has too many trees and parks, lampposts and graffiti and fried-chicken shops; the concrete has too many variations. Smoky hues and soot and shadows and bricks and sidewalks.

But now it looks flat. As if it wasn’t enough for my mother to walk out of the world. She had to take all the colors with her too.

Pale Pink

(An Ongoing List of Every
Color I Have Lost)

*Fairy roses scattering petals across the grass.
Strawberry slices atop heart-shaped pancakes. When
I was little, my unpainted nail beds beneath
Mum's shiny red ones as she held my hands,
teaching me how to sign to Niko. And blood, if it's
diluted with enough water. Like if you're in the
bath when you die, or a river, or the sea.*

CHAPTER 2

The Color of Limestone

In early September, the morning before school starts, I wake predawn to find my heart attempting a jailbreak through my ribs. I sneak from the house, racing myself down leaf-lined streets, trying to outrun the black and white. Can't. Her disappearance follows me, an unshakable shadow. Double-decker buses blast by in pale gray instead of red, near-invisible against the asphalt.

Since I'm not exactly sporty, the fear and I run out of steam at the same time. I slow down and look around. Somehow I've ended up on the far side of Meadow Park. A huge, hilly wilderness that borders my neighborhood, Poets Corner, it contains everything from an outdoor pool to community greenhouses and a wildflower meadow. It's like a piece of countryside got spliced into the city by mistake. In summer, it throngs with people, but since it's early, only birds and joggers and grieving

girls are awake. I step through the gates for the first time since the disappearance.

There's a library hush as I climb to the top of the hill, my destination the walled garden. Home to my mother's first-ever art installation: the *Rainbow Series I*. The work that made her famous—superstarrily so, like Rembrandt or Frida Kahlo.

I hold my breath as I walk inside, hoping for a siren, strobe lights, Mum's sudden reappearance in full color. Nothing happens. The *Rainbow Series I* is minus one rainbow—but it still takes my breath away.

Huge clay spheres as big as racehorses rest on transparent Plexiglas stands. They appear to float among the garden's flamboyant rosebushes. Tinier rounds, the size of marbles or peaches or beach balls, are embedded in the paths and suspended from pagodas. All are glazed in shiny nail polish colors—Mum's signature style. Ordinarily, they make the flowers look muted. Ordinarily, it's like God himself leaned down from heaven and began blowing bubbles.

If anything could restore my vision to a full spectrum, it would be this.

I take another step toward the spheres, then stop, noticing the visitors' plaque. This tells tourists and art pilgrims alike that Rachael Sloe won the UK's biggest art award, the Turner Prize, with this—her debut.

Underneath the sign, an impromptu memorial has sprung up. A gargantuan pile of cellophane-wrapped flowers, sympathy cards, half-burnt candles, and cutesy teddy bears. It's tatty

from weeks of summer rain; the flowers at the bottom of the heap rotten and mushy. The whole thing is gross. Makes me think of morgues, reminds me that my mum's disappearance is headline news.

I give the memorial a wide berth, shuddering as I catch a whiff of the flowers. My skin prickles. I'm being watched . . . Actually, I wouldn't put it past my exhibitionist mother to teleport into existence right here in the middle of this garden. I spin round, certain she's here—

Emmy-Kate is watching me, peeking out from behind the biggest bubble like a mischievous Glinda the Good Witch of the North. Automatically, I stiffen. All I can think about is this enormous secret I'm keeping from her. Suicide. An ugly word, and one I worry will spill from my lips whenever we talk. It's been almost three months since we've had a real conversation.

Guilt manifests as annoyance, and I snap, "Stalk much?"

Emmy-Kate lifts her chin, defiant, and struts over to me. She's fresh from her Sunday morning swim; a damp towel drapes over her shoulder, and her long hair falls in wet curtains, dripping between our feet.

"Hardly," she says, wringing out a rope of hair. "I saw you from the pool and followed you here."

I shake my head, try to be nice. "Em, that's the dictionary definition of stalking."

Emmy-Kate smiles a tiny bit at this, as a breeze sweeps through the empty garden. She shivers, wrapping her arms around herself, eyes landing on the memorial. For a second,

her face empties, like a squeezed-out tube of paint. I wonder how much she actually suspects about Mum being missing, but all she says, in a syrup-soaked voice, is: “Wow, that’s grim. Seriously, *Whistler’s Mother* depressing. Let’s get out of here.”

We walk side by side. Emmy-Kate’s hands flit as she starts painting the air—she’s a girl who treats the sky as her own personal canvas—and compensating for my silence with a lilting monologue on boys, breakfast, school tomorrow . . .

She’s about to start sophomore year; I’m about to graduate. There’s two years between us, and another two between me and Niko. Next year, I’ll leave Emmy-Kate behind and join Niko at the Silver College of Art and Design. SCAD. The local art-school mecca and Mum’s alma mater.

From this vantage point on the hill, the villagey neighborhoods of south London are laid out like a patchwork below. The streets of Poets Corner, the wide avenue of Full Moon Lane cutting through them like Broadway in New York City or the Champs-Élysées in Paris, and as vast. And a few miles in the distance sit the squat toads of SCAD’s brutalist modern buildings.

Even though SCAD is close to my mother’s studio, I’ve never actually set foot on the campus. Visiting before I’m actually accepted seems like I would jinx it. But years ago I did look up the website, copying the ethos onto a piece of paper that I pinned to my wall:

*We believe art and design can change minds and move worlds.
Immersive, imaginative, and hands-on—because theory without
practice is like learning to swim without water. Let's get messy.*

Back then, I totally bought into this concept. Now, I think: It doesn't get messier than a missing mother.

The thought guts me. It's instant wipeout. Mum abandons me on a daily basis. A hollow flies from the hole in my chest, expanding to empty the park and everything in it, me a tiny speck in the middle of all this nothing.

Because even if she comes back, there will never be a moment where she didn't leave me.

I stumble to a halt at the bottom of the hill, near the pool where my fearless little sister swims even in winter. Emmy-Kate takes a couple of steps without me, still babbling, before seeing I've stopped. She turns around, reading the hurt on my face.

Instantly, her eyes mimic mine. What Sloe sisters have in common—despite three different fathers, temperaments, and shades of red hair—is tissue paper-white skin, and eyes that play our thoughts like cinema screens.

"What?" she asks, worry crisping the edges of her voice.

I force myself to swallow away the emotional hurricane, since beyond Emmy-Kate, bumbling along in a tracksuit, is the Professor.

Aka Professor Rajesh Gupta. Bachelor, next-door neighbor, and, by some bizarre twist of fate, Mum's best friend. Think

oil and water, chalk and cheese. My madcap mother and this buttoned-up theology professor, who looks and acts as though he was blown from the dust on a leather-bound book, have been thick as thieves my entire life. He was the first to show up at our door after the disappearance, bearing a casserole dish full of biryani. Unfortunately, his cooking is desert-dry, nothing like the fragrant, jeweled curries you can get in east London.

“Run away,” whispers Emmy-Kate, only half joking.

“Shhhh,” I tell her as he spots us and changes course, ambling over.

“Ah! Girls,” he says, his forehead crinkling in sympathy. “Good, er, hmm.” He jogs on the spot, coughs into his fist, then bends over and straightens up again. This is the entire sentence. The Professor brings his own personal tumbleweed to every conversation.

After he clears his throat for the ten thousandth time, Emmy-Kate bursts and says, “Okay, we were going home.” She grabs my elbow, starts dragging me away. “Bye!”

“Good, good.” The Professor checks his watch, bending and stretching again. “Well. Perhaps I’ll accompany you, see how your, er—sister is. Lead, ahem, the way.”

He jogs on the spot, leaving Emmy-Kate and me no choice but to walk on. When I glance back, I can’t see the walled garden, or the *Rainbow Series I*, or the sky. I can’t see anything.

Sky Blue

(An Ongoing List of Every
Color I Have Lost)

*Sky, obviously. But not the stormy June
afternoon my mother chose not to come home.
The dress she's wearing in her SCAD graduation
photo. Forget-me-nots. Her pastel eyes.*

CHAPTER 3

Everything's White

As soon as the Professor follows Emmy-Kate through the front door, I duck away and go through the side gate, into the back garden. I can breathe more easily out here, among the overflowing foxgloves and roses. Our miniature Midsummer Night's Dream garden is tucked away like a secret between the house and the railway. And I'm a flower freak.

Something Mum and I have in common. The blooms flourish through her sheer force of will. She shapes all her surroundings to fit her particular aesthetic, from our chartreuse front door to this overgrown bouquet—and three redheaded daughters, despite being a natural blonde.

I close my eyes, bury my face in a humongous rose. Inhaling the myrrh scent almost makes up for not being able to see the color. I can imagine it, though. Apricot. A vivid pink-gold

shade that's inherently Mum and brings her back to the garden like a hologram—striding past me with that shocking-pink-lipsticked smile, mermaid hair knotted atop her head, bone-thin beneath her artist's smock. She's holding a cigarette in one hand and a mug of coffee in the other: charisma fuel. Mum captivated everyone: us, the Professor, journalists, SCAD students.

She worked there for a while, after Emmy-Kate was born. She'd made the *Rainbow Series I* while still a student, and pregnant with Niko, and stepped straight into the professional art world after graduation. But then in quick succession I arrived, then Emmy-Kate, and she ended up having to return to SCAD as a lecturer. What her biographies call “the wilderness years” and we call “our lives.”

Then, when I was twelve, she resigned from SCAD and made her headline-grabbing return to the pottery wheel, rein-vigorated. Bigger, better, bolder, more famous.

That's the mother who's zooming around my imagination. Not Mum but her artist self, the one who makes Emmy-Kate look like a wallflower, sucks every inch of oxygen from a room.

It's so good to see her. I breathe in the rose, desperately, hoping to enhance this vision. Rachael Sloe, Artist, turns to me and says . . .

. . . and says . . .

I can't remember her voice.

The memory falters, flickers, fades.

My eyes fly open. The garden is desolately gray, and it's all

too much: her absence. The uncertainty. The monochrome. And how have I already forgotten her voice? It's only been one summer.

I go slumping into the kitchen, where I find the Professor perched politely in his usual spot at the table, opposite Emmy-Kate. Silence and the Sunday newspapers are spread between them. Seeing me, Em makes a *grrr* of annoyance and zips from the room, hurling her damp towel onto the floor by the washing machine as she leaves. The Professor stands up—I know from experience he won't sit down again until I do. He's a nightmare at neighborhood parties.

"Hi," I mumble, attempting to skirt around him. He dithers, blocking my path.

"Well, now, er—Minnie," he harrumphs—but kindly.

Mum appears clearly again, now at the table, wheezing with hysteria.

What's wrong with me? I haven't so much as dreamed about her in eleven weeks, and now I'm visualizing her twice in one day. In full color, too. But perhaps the Professor sees her as well, since his face is broadcasting distress signals. Sloe-sister theory: He's madly in unrequited love with Mum. And has been for the past twenty years.

"How are you?" he asks, formal as a tuxedo.

"Fine." I tuck my thumbs into my cardigan sleeves, squirming. Ordinarily I don't mind the Professor, despite his aura of tweediness—he's a familiar mainstay, like a comfortable old

sofa—but since I’ve become more or less tongue-tied, every conversation between us is stilted.

“Er, ah, er—Minnie,” he huffs. “As I was explaining to er—Emmy-Kate, I have some good news. The university has granted me a sabbatical this year. I plan to write another book.” He clasps his hands, like a bell ringer. “Which leaves me very much at your disposal for the, er. Until, um. For the *forthcoming*,” he finishes.

Translation: The Professor is going to be working from home, right next door, for a whole year. Which means he’ll be “popping in” practically every day. All summer long he’s been checking up on us, bringing with him hours of awkward silences and inedible pakoras. Even though the social workers grudgingly approved Niko as our guardian—they side-eyed her Greenpeace T-shirts and general dungareed demeanor—the Professor has appointed himself our responsible adult. What with the lack of godparents, distant relatives, or even deadbeat dads.

All we know of our absent fathers is that there are three. Every time we ask for more details, Mum changes the story: They’re cowboys, astronauts, rock stars, explorers, renegades; lifelong love affairs or holiday romances or one-night stands. She spins tales like clay on the wheel.

She keeps secrets.

Me too. There’s one in her studio.

If I unlocked the door, I could trace my hands over her last

movements: the swivel stool adjusted to her height, her finger marks fossilized in the bags of clay, a coffee cup with a lipstick tattoo on the rim. And four kilns, squatting in the corner like a family of Daleks. The largest is locked, on a cooling cycle from a glaze firing. I'm the only one who knows this: that inside the kiln is Rachael Sloe's last-ever piece of art.

The doorbell pulls me from my thoughts, the chime accompanied by flashing lights for Niko's benefit. When I escape the Professor and throw open the front door, Ash is standing on the doorstep, a guitar strapped to his back. With his skinny jeans, calligraphy swoop of dark hair, and mouth permanently curled into a half smile, he looks for all the world like Indian Elvis.

"Hey, Miniature," he says, opening his arms.

Surprise roots me to the spot, as though he's a total stranger and not my boyfriend of almost a year. (Not to mention, the Professor's nephew.) Ash goes to university in London but spends the summer holidays at home in Manchester, aka a million miles away. We've spoken on the phone, but this is the first time we've seen each other in person since . . . since everything.

"Hi," I say, focusing on the bull's-eye dimple at the center of his chin, strangely shy. "You're back."

"Came straight over," he says, his northern accent warm and worried. When I look up, he offers me a dialed-down version of his usual phosphorescent smile. My lip wobbles. Seeing my boyfriend in black and white—it's too weird.

“Ah, Min,” he says, misreading my face. “It’s all going to be okay.”

He probably believes it. Ash is an optimist. He’s happy-go-lucky and silver linings, a boy for whom toast always lands butter side up. My sisters and I all met him at the same time, one rain-drenched autumn afternoon two years ago.

We were dodging the weather at the National Gallery, sprawled with our sketchbooks in front of the blue-saturated *Bathers* by Cézanne, as if we were having the same picnic as the people in the painting. Emmy-Kate was making an abstract mess with oil pastels, Niko drew neatly with graphite pencils, and I was using every shade of blue felt-tip—cobalt, navy, azure, sapphire—to try out a new pointillism technique.

We’d been there an hour when a drop of water splashed on my sketch pad. Emmy-Kate nudged Niko, who poked my arm with her sharp pencil, and I sent a scribble of teal across the damp page. I looked to my right: This impossibly cute boy in a ridiculous puffer coat was shaking off the rain and sitting on the floor next to us. Headphones clamped over a flop of black hair, huge sneakers tapping to the invisible beat, he tilted his head at the painting.

Oh, effing wow, I thought, then looked back at my sisters.

“Holy Michelangelo!” Emmy-Kate signed. My tomato-cheeked sister had turned thirteen two weeks before and promptly been blessed with boobs and an unprecedented interest in boys.

“I know,” I replied silently, noticing with alarm that Niko was blushing too. We were a triptych of pink.

Here was something we’d never encountered before, in all our years of inseparable hive mind and slavish devotion to the same favorite artists: a boy we all liked.

I peeped back at the boy to see if he was drawing *Bathers* too. He wasn’t. He was looking at me. Well, at my sketch pad. Although sometimes, especially lately, that felt like it might amount to the same thing.

“Shit,” he said as he pushed his headphones down and pointed to the rain-besplashed page. “That was me, wasn’t it? Soaking your drawing? Sorry.”

“Oh,” I said, out loud. The three of us had been signing without speaking all morning—the grammar of British Sign Language was totally different to spoken English, and it was easier that way—and the word emerged from my unused mouth with a rasp. I rubbed at the splotches with my thumb, smudging the blues, wishing I could splash them across my beetroot face to cool it down. Emmy-Kate simultaneously interpreted for Niko as I said, “Yeah. But it’s okay—I mean, now it’s a watercolor.”

I wasn’t trying to be funny, but the boy laughed, a looping giggle that landed in iridescent pieces all over me. He kept grinning, amused, and I found myself smiling right back at him.

“Let me guess,” he said, pointing to each of us in turn. “Minnie. Niko. Emmy-Kate.”

This sunbeam boy turned out not to be psychic but,

somewhat unbelievably, the Professor's nephew. He was new to the city for his first year of university and Mum had sent him to find us, along with lurid and lyrical descriptions of who was whom. Another instance of her transforming the ordinary into the amazing: If the Professor himself had introduced us to Ash, perhaps we wouldn't have all fallen in love with him the way we did.

I'm so deep in this rainy-day memory of him it seems almost impossible that I'm actually standing on the porch, staring up at real-life Ash.

"C'mere, you," he says, pulling me into his arms. I sink against his soft T-shirt, his chest a place as familiar to me as the Tube map. My lungs fill with his warm, lemony scent, calming the unease I've been feeling all morning.

"Missed you, Miniature," he murmurs into my giant ginger cloud of hair.

Guilt tugs at me: Though I'm glad he's here now, for all the texts we exchanged this summer, I wouldn't exactly characterize myself as missing him. I don't get a chance to examine this thought, because—

"Ash!" We spring apart as Emmy-Kate comes bouncing down the stairs, barreling toward us.

She's ditched her swimming clothes for tiny shorts and a cutoff T-shirt; in places, the inches of bare skin are zebra-striped with paint. Em's always finger painted, but this looks like she's been rolling around the canvas naked. I wouldn't put it past her. She's the sister who inherited Mum's *joie de vivre*. For

years, she's been vacillating between personalities—swimming nerd versus passionate painter—finally metamorphosing days after the disappearance into this junior femme fatale.

She pushes me aside and goes running into Ash's arms.

"Oof." He staggers, unbalanced by his guitar, and hugs her hello. Then they launch into their standard playground handclap/dance/greeting. For all his dreamy Disney-prince eyes, Ash is a goofball, and momentarily he transforms Emmy-Kate back into my little sister. Laughing, he takes in her paint-covered appearance and says, "Check you out, Junior Picasso. Happy belated birthday."

"Since you're here, we can have pancakes again," Emmy-Kate convinces herself, skipping into the kitchen.

I move to follow her, but Ash puts his hand on my arm, tugging me back. "How are you all doing, Min, really?" he asks, his voice low. "Em seems good. But are you all right?"

I love his Manchester twang, the way he slurs *all right* into one word: *aight*. But it's not a question I can answer. Am I all right? Okay, answers on a postcard, please . . .

I can't see color
and it makes me want to scream
or set fire to something
become a statue
delete my dreams
smash up whole planets with my fists
. . . all of the above?

I scribble out all of these ludicrous options and go for: “School starts tomorrow.”

Ash tugs on his earlobe. “Yeah. One more year, then SCAD.”

I make a face like broken glass, and he raises his eyebrows, surprised.

“Never mind,” I say, and lead him into the kitchen, where the Professor has made himself at home by pouring tea. Ash tackles him with a hug, saying, “Uncle Raj, you’re in the wrong house, mate!” Then he ruffles Salvador Dalí’s fur and falls into a chair with his guitar, glancing at me for permission. When I nod, he bends over the instrument, spine curved. Ash has less than zero interest in art; he’s all about the music.

Niko marches briskly in and taps Emmy-Kate on the arm, signing an order: “Put a cardigan on.” As ever, she’s dressed as a hippie-feminist-vegetarian: headscarf, dungarees, clogs, slogan T-shirt with this week’s cause on it. Whales, trees, tigers—my sister’s heart bleeds for everything.

The whole room sucks in a breath, watching her take charge. She huffs at Emmy-Kate’s wet towel on the floor and removes the pancake mix from her hand; sweeps the newspapers from the table; hacks a loaf of bread into slices and shoves them into the toaster with a clang. Niko’s always been the sensible Sloe sister, but lately she’s gone into efficiency overdrive.

After all this, she greets the Professor, far more enthusiastically than I would. He signs-says his reply in the same ponderous fashion he speaks. Niko nods semi-patiently, then turns

to Ash, who's still bent over his guitar. For a moment, she watches him strum, her own hands mimicking his as he shapes the chords. He looks up and smiles at her, saying a carefully clear *hello*, and slowing his playing. She smiles back. For a moment, it's as if the mechanics of the music are sign language.

When she spots me spying on them, she snaps out of it and asks me without speaking, "Is Ash staying for breakfast?"

I shrug, switching into silent Sloe-sister signing mode. "Probably, why?"

"Because then we'll have to invite the Professor too . . ." She doesn't look displeased at this idea, but peers around the kitchen. "He didn't bring food, did he?"

We're signing too quickly for the Professor to follow. I confirm we're safe and Niko clatters down cereal, bowls, jam, and a rack of charred toast, then knocks on the table for our attention. When she has it, everyone obeys her command to sit. Except Ash, who hovers by our mother's empty chair.

"Aren't we waiting for Rachae—ahh." He breaks off, eyes widening in mortification. Emmy-Kate is interpreting for Niko and her hands freeze in mid-air. "Sorry," Ash mutters, sliding into Mum's seat. Under his breath: "Shit."

I crunch Coco Pops, my heart stuttering. I've had eleven weeks to absorb Mum's absence, fill the gap, get accustomed. But with Ash here, acting as if the hole she left is brand-new, it reopens the wound. Conversation falters.

After breakfast, Ash and I retreat to the back garden,

flopping down on the grass. It's a gorgeous morning: toffee-scented sunshine, September spreading itself out like a quilt.

I yank up a daisy, start tearing out its petals one by one. This could be the exact same plant with which Mum taught me the trick when I was little. Picking off the petals with her slim, quick fingers and reciting, "Loves me, loves me not."

I remember her handing me a daisy to try it, and laughing when my chubby toddler fists tore it in two. "Okay, not daisies," she said. She dug around on the lawn and handed me a spherical cloud on a stem. A dandelion puff. "Try this. Close your eyes and make a wish. Then take in a big breath and blow all the seeds off."

Before she became an artist again, the garden was her element. Somewhere in this jungle there are raspberry canes from a jam-making era, the hole where we made a hippo mud bath for baby Emmy-Kate, pint-glass slug traps dug into the soil. The last daisy petal is *not*, and I drop the bent stem by my side, wishing myself into the flower bed.

"I have to tell you something," I say, staring up at the flat gray sky. "About Mum."

"Course." Ash slides his warm fingers into my hand, shuffling toward me through the grass.

"She left us a letter," I explain. This is something I couldn't bear to tell him by text. "Before she . . ."

Before she left sounds as though she went on holiday or to one of the artist residencies she's been going to in the past

couple of years, leaving Niko in charge for two or three months at a time. But *before she died* isn't truthful, either. Without a body, there's no end to this.

She left her credit cards. She took her passport and her studio key, as if she planned to come back. She left herself as a question, unanswered.

I can't use the words *suicide note*: those syllables aren't discordant enough for what they mean. Anyway, it's open to interpretation. Her letter was too uncertain for the police to call it definitively: rambling, unhappy, incomprehensible, but not specific. And there's still the kiln. Her last work, waiting for her.

"She left a letter, anyway," I say, trying again as clouds begin to move faster overhead, the Earth spinning inexorably onward. "A goodbye letter. I'm the one who found it."

Ash sucks in a breath, squeezing my fingers. "Shit," he says. "I know, Min. I mean, Uncle Raj let me know about the letter. But I didn't know that *you* . . ." His voice cracks. "That you were the one."

I drag my hand from Ash's and make fists, coiling my body, shaking my head, a disbelieving ball. I'm about to be dragged under. Like Virginia Woolf, a writer who filled her pockets with rocks and walked into the river to drown. I've got whole mountains in my pockets. I've got an entire effing continent.

"Don't say anything to Emmy-Kate, okay?" I manage. "Niko knows, but Em doesn't."

"'Course. Hey, you. C'mere." I'm still balled up, but Ash circles his arms around me, bundling me to his chest. And

gradually, in this comforting place, I relax. Rest my head on his shoulder, trail my fingers over his chest.

As we lie here, limbs tangled, the sun warms my skin. I let myself melt into it. Let Ash's sure and steady presence slowly envelop me. Breathe him in. His smell is more than lemons—it's warmth and clover and coconut oil in his hair. He smells like kindness. Memories of last year's kisses begin to echo through my heart. Ash has come home. Having him here feels like slipping on a favorite old T-shirt, thin and soft from years of wear.

I sigh contentedly. Then jolt awake, stiffen in his arms. This is not okay. It's not okay to let my guard down while she's—
dead gone missing a body

I scramble from his embrace and stand up, loathing myself for allowing this small moment of joy. Ash follows suit, lumbering upright. He doesn't bat an eye at my sudden movement, but brushes the grass from his jeans, then pokes at my toe with his ginormous sneaker—he wears blinged-out ones the size of canoes.

"Hey, Miniature," he says. "All right? I've got to go, but chin up."

I peek at him. He's giving me an over-the-top Looney Tunes smile, designed to make me laugh. All I can give him in return is a watery one. Ash reaches out his hand to my cheek, softly tilting my face up. He leans in, possibly to press a kiss on me, but I'm turning my head and we crash into each other, an awkward hug. A brief flurry of lemon-scented confusion, then he's gone.

Bright Yellow

(An Ongoing List of Every
Color I Have Lost)

*Daffodils. The Post-it notes Mum left
scattered everywhere, scribbled with ideas for
new sculptures, research, love notes to us,
art we HAVE TO SEE! Ash's kiss.*

Cherry Red

(An Ongoing List of Every
Color I Have Lost)

*Flashing red lights on the police car. A lipstick
called Flirt Alert that Emmy-Kate took to wearing
the autumn we met Ash. The pattern of veins
when the optician shines a light into my eyes at my
contact lens checkup. I had one the week after the
disappearance, passing with flying colors (ha),
even though I couldn't discern red from green
on the chart.*

*That's how I know it's not an eyesight problem,
but a Minnie one.*

CHAPTER 4

The Color of Paper Cutouts

The moment I step inside the wide-windowed art space of Poets Corner High on Monday, the back-to-school clamor in the room fades. Even in this behemoth London school, silence and stares have followed me all day: Everyone knows.

I shift uneasily in the doorway, feeling the weight of my classmates' whispers. For the first time in my humdrum life, I'm hot gossip. Half the room gives me sympathetic smiles; the other half won't meet my eye. Including a new boy, huddled in a corner seat, beanie-clad head bent over his sketch pad. He alone is immune to the hubbub that greets my arrival.

I'm starting to sweat from the stares and mutterings when finally Ritika Okoneda takes pity. She breaks free from a clump of friends and jogs across the room, looking like she's going to

scoop me into a hug. At the last minute, she skitters to a halt, bops me awkwardly in the shoulder.

“Hey, Minnie. Good summer?” she asks. Then promptly slaps her forehead, shaking her box braids. “Damn. Not, obviously. Sorry about . . .” Ritika twists her earring, fidgeting. “You know. Your mum.”

I nod and she smiles, already retreating, as though what’s happened to me is contagious. And I go back to lurking alone. Here’s where a best friend would come in handy. I’m friendly with everyone but don’t have a group to belong to—I’ve always preferred the company of Sloe sisters. At lunch and breaks, Emmy-Kate would hold court with her swimming friends, while Niko would shake off the communication support worker who accompanied her to lessons and hang out with her BSL-speaking, save-the-world girl gang. And I drifted between the two groups.

I can’t sit with Emmy-Kate this year, not when I know the truth about Mum and she doesn’t. I’m making a mental note to hide behind the bike sheds at lunchtime, when a piercing taxi whistle rings out. Ms. Goldenblatt—the closest a teacher can get to Wonder Woman—strides into the classroom, cowboy boots clicking. Everyone scurries to sit.

Ms. Goldenblatt takes attendance, then jangles her bracelets, gazing round the room. Her eyes linger on me for a full minute before moving on. “Welcome back, people,” she bellows. “One year left. Shall we make it count? We’ll start the curriculum next lesson—zhoozHING portfolios, prepping for

exams. Today, I want to go back to basics. Your tool kit.” This is how she starts every term. With the tooooooooooo kit. “I want a *perfectly* toned color wheel from everyone.”

As per tradition, there are boos at this basic assignment—and a paper airplane from Ritika. Ms. Goldenblatt bats it away as it whizzes past her dark waves, adding, “Think about it. A musician practices scales. You need the building blocks. Oh, and we have a newbie among us. Everybody! Please welcome Felix Waters. Now get to it.”

The room erupts as chairs are scraped back and people jostle for paintbrushes and palettes, jars of water, and rags. With the spotlight finally off me, I can breathe again. I inhale the whole room: paint and fresh turpentine, familiarity.

“Minnie.” Ms. Goldenblatt clunks over, dropping into a squat next to my stool. “Got a minute?”

She flicks her enormous earrings out of the way and clasps her hands underneath her chin, looking up with the same wide-eyed pity as the social workers and the police family liaison and the Missing People charity worker and the journalists who tracked down our address and rang the doorbell for days. This is what happens when someone you love disappears: They’re replaced by hundreds of strangers.

“Oh, Minnie,” says Ms. Goldenblatt in her throaty way. “I was so hugely sorry to hear about your mother. You poor girls.”

My eyeballs swim. This is how it’s been all morning, in homeroom and every class. Teachers determined to have their

sympathy moment. I know Ms. Goldenblatt means it, though, so I give her a meek “Thank you.”

We’re following the script for a bereavement, but it’s not right. Missing is a new planet. One where the trees are hollow and there are no oceans, a place without a sky. Suicide is in another effing galaxy.

Ms. Goldenblatt’s hands, fingers laden with plastic rings, move from her chin to her chest, where she presses them against her heart. “Let me know if there’s anything at all you need?”

I nod and she stands up, half sitting against the table, as if we’re at the bus stop. “And on another topic entirely—let’s talk portfolios . . .” She beams encouragingly. Ms. Goldenblatt has cheeseball tendencies. She attends all the school plays, standing up and dancing during musical numbers. “Let me guess, all pottery, all the time? I couldn’t tear you away from clay last year.”

Oh, yeah. Soon after Mum returned to professional art, she invited me—and only me—to come to her studio. The first time she taught me how to throw, she stood at my shoulder at the wheel, her hands over mine, her hair tickling my neck. Afterward we stood side by side at the sink, washing the dried-up clay from our fingers.

“Want to know a secret?” she asked, bumping me with her hip. “Dry your hands and hold them out.”

I looked up, meeting her eye in the mirror. She winked, squeezing a tiny dab of something from a tube into my palm. I lifted my hand to my face, and took a deep breath. Glycerin.

“Um . . . So what’s the secret?”

“Neutrogena Concentrated Norwegian Formula,” she replied.

“You sound like a commercial.” I sniffed again, then rubbed the cream between my palms. “Mum, I’m not sure a hand cream you can buy everywhere counts as a secret.”

“No, the secret is that ceramicists have the best skin. See?” She vogued her hands around her face in the mirror, posing, her nails painted a lurid neon yellow. When I went to bed that night, I was wrapped in a haze of her smell, only now I knew the secret ingredient, and my sisters didn’t. I hugged the knowledge to myself.

“Earth to Minnie.” Ms. Goldenblatt clicks her fingers in front of my face. “Clay, yes?”

I know exactly what my teacher is talking about. Where Mum threw her clay into enormous bubbles with fat, round curves, I got into the idea of clean lines. In fact, I got obsessed. Last year I made tiles, hundreds of them. The plan was to spend this summer glazing them, then splice them into a kind of ceramic patchwork quilt. Not that I’ve ever completed a finished piece of art—it’s the ideas I’m into, the potential. And I haven’t touched clay—or paint, paper, pens, ink, anything—since the last day of junior year. Since visiting Mum’s studio after school and finding the letter. There’s no way I can finish the project.

“Actually,” I improvise wildly, “I thought I’d try a few other things out. Experiment.”

Ms. Goldenblatt’s eyebrows fly up so fast I think they’re

going to shoot right through her hair. “Amazing,” she enthuses, though I think she feels so sorry for me, she’d pretend anything I suggested was brilliant. “Whatever you finish,” she adds, stressing the word lightly, “SCAD is going to love it, I’m sure.”

She clasps my shoulder, apparently the go-to sympathy spot, and moves on to hassle Ritika, bellowing as she strides across the room: “Paper airplanes, huh?”

I blob a set of paints onto my palette, then pull out my sketch pad. The vast blankness of the white paper pulsates in front of me, seasickness-style. For three months, Emmy-Kate has done little else but paint, and Niko spends all her time with SCAD friends, or sequestered in her room. The house is filling up with abstract paintings and trails of tiny paper scraps. How can I possibly keep up, when I can’t see in color?

I grab a Sharpie and write down:

I CAN'T BEAR THIS

Minutes inch by. Ms. Goldenblatt circles the room, handing out fact sheets for the art-school application process. It’s different from university: the aforementioned portfolio. You don’t need to write a novel to study English, but you’re not allowed to learn art until you’ve already made it. The Wonder Woman bracelets jangle again as she calls out, “Forty minutes, artistes.”

Eff. I shove the fact sheet aside and stare at the blobs of gray paint on my palette. Art is going to be impossible. Everything

comes down to color. I pick up the Sharpie again and start making a list:

1. *Tickled pink*
2. *Green with envy*
3. *Paint the town red*
4. *Out of the blue . . .*

OED. Definition of *out of the blue* in English:

out of the blue (also **out of a clear blue sky**)

PHRASE

informal Without warning; unexpectedly.

I'd say my mother walking off the top of a cliff meets the definition. Except it doesn't. Not my spontaneous, seesawing mother. It sounds exactly like something she'd do. That's sort of the problem. I believe it, and I don't want to.

My heart is starting to speed up; my palms are sweating. I close my eyes and take a couple of deep breaths. It doesn't help, because out of nowhere I can smell Neutrogena Concentrated Norwegian Formula. Glycerin. It's so distinct, Mum could be here in the room with me. The spasm of misery catches me so quickly, I fold in half. I'm origami Minnie.

I tear the top sheet from my sketch pad and crumple it in my fist, then stand up, knocking over my stool with a bang that draws every eye in the room.

“Minnie?” Ms. Goldenblatt asks, her voice coming at me from a distance.

But I’m already stumbling from the door, rushing down the stairs, bursting out into the open air and trying to quench my empty lungs. And as I run, my list of questions grows:

What about time heals?

What about this too shall pass?

What about all the things people say that are turning out not to be true?

How can you even start to heal when your mother chose to leave you?

Clay

(An Ongoing List of Every
Color I Have Lost)

*Halfway between brown and gray, it fades and
fades and fades to biscuit beige as the water
evaporates. It can take hours to throw a piece.
Weeks for it to dry. Days to heat the kiln and fire
it once, days to cool it before glazing and firing
it again. You have to be patient. You have to
wait for her to come home.*

CHAPTER 5

Not Fade Away

*I spend the rest of the day hiding out with the Rainbow Series I, ignoring the parade of sad-eyed art pilgrims who periodically turn up with flowers and take photographs, as if this is another London tourist destination alongside Big Ben and St. Paul's Cathedral. And once school lets out, I ignore Niko's annoyed *where-are-you?* texts, only going home when it starts to rain. Even then, I linger in the back garden with Salvador Dalí, trying to subdue my pinwheel heart.*

When I finally slip inside, the kitchen is empty and smells fusty, like an abandoned building. Which it technically is. Upstairs, both my sisters' doors are closed. From behind Emmy-Kate's comes thumping music, a squeal of her laughter—then a boy's low chuckle. She's bringing boys home now? For some

reason this seems like the loneliest thing on the planet. Not to mention, she's fifteen!

I skitter around, not wanting to be the one to fix this, give her the birds-and-the-bees conversation. Where's Niko? She should be playing chaperone. I examine her door, biting my lip. Bedrooms are sacrosanct. It's a lifelong pact between us—one of many, actually. Not that there's ever anything to see in Niko's room. She's neat as a pin: books shelved, bed made, art materials organized in plastic storage boxes. It couldn't be more different from the explosion of stuff that populates the rest of the house.

I shrug off the pact, peep through her keyhole.

My older sister is at her desk. But she's not cutting up paper: She's writing frantically in a notebook—with her eyes closed. Kind of like she's in a trance. Surrounding her are hundreds of huge lit candles. The tall pillar kind you find on the altar in cathedrals. The flames flicker, sending occult shadows across her face.

Whoa. Oh . . . kay. I back away from the door. Emmy-Kate is sequestering herself with boys, and Niko is holding a séance. We're all losing it. And it's Mum's fault. At this, a fireball of rage swells in my chest. Instantaneous, red-hot. I want to take London apart with my bare hands until we find her. I want to hurl myself down the stairs.

Instead I text Ash to come over, lurking by the front door until he arrives and, hand in hand, we go upstairs to my attic bedroom. Aka the Chaos Cave.

The floor is layered with eight million floral frocks, dog-eared art books, rolled-up magazines, makeup, discarded shoes, empty chocolate wrappers, unfinished art projects, tufts of rabbit fur, old sketch pads, and boxes and boxes of broken pastels and half-used squares of watercolor.

My desk is as messy as the rest of the room, my portfolio right where I left it last summer. Next to it is a shoebox filled with dozens of unglazed tiles, yet to be fired. I swallow hard, and look away.

“As usual, I love what you’ve done with the place, Min,” says Ash, turning toward me with a smile. Like yesterday, it’s a subdued, toned-down version of his usual off-the-charts grin. “Busy summer, was it?”

We both freeze in place, realizing what he said. His eyes widen, and the half-smile wipes out.

“Crap. Sorry.” Ash knocks on his forehead, sending his damp flop of hair wayward. He’s brought the smell of the rain inside with him. “I’m an idiot. I meant . . . It was a joke, about the mess. No time to tidy, and all that. I . . .”

I take a deep breath and interrupt his stuttering: “It’s fine. I know.”

The three of us sit on the bed: me, Ash, and his guitar. Sometimes it feels as though I’m in a love triangle with my boyfriend and music. Today, I’m happy to let the music win out. It’s not like I’m a barrel of conversation. While Ash plays, I gaze at the Chaos Cave: It’s a cocoon, rain-dark, the view of the garden blanked out by the murky weather.

I point to the misty nothingness of the garden and say, “I feel like I’m in a plane.”

“Yeah?” Ash beats on his guitar and starts playing a sixties song called “Leaving on a Jet Plane.”

I lie back on the duvet and stare at the cobwebs on the ceiling, listening as he goes through his human jukebox routine, song snippet after song snippet. Eventually he runs out of plane songs, moves on to flying. Then birds.

“What’s this one?” I ask as he sings something about broken wings and learning to fly.

“This?” Ash repeats the refrain. “‘Blackbird,’ by the Beatles. Wait, fuck. Sorry. Again. I’ll play something else . . .”

I put my hand on his arm, say, “No, it’s okay. I like it.”

The Beatles are Mum’s favorite band. Her only band. She listens to them all the time, won’t allow any other music in the house, even though she was a teenager in the nineties, not the sixties. She says they’re the ultimate boy band.

I’m thinking of her in the present tense. Is, not was. But what’s wrong with that? People don’t stop being themselves when they die or disappear. Death and disappearance don’t undo heart-shaped pancakes for birthdays or the way she wore sequin party dresses to Emmy-Kate’s swimming competitions.

Her perfume *is* Noix de Tubéreuse by Miller Harris; she *is* addicted to black coffee and hard peppermints and Italian cigarettes. I think of her breaking off halfway through conversations, clicking her fingers, before sprinting to the studio to succumb to some random notion.

She suffers from sinkholes.

That's what we call the days and weeks when her electricity blinks out. When she turns into a broken clock instead of a mother. The times her white-blond hair grows dirty with grease, she lies in bed all day, eats nothing—or nothing but toast, whole loaves of bread at a time, even though she looks like she's made of bones. But there hasn't been a sinkhole in five years.

Except . . . suicide is the ultimate sinkhole.

I'm desperate to stop thinking about this, so I say to Ash, my voice coming out in a too-loud clang: "Remind me which album this song is from?"

"*The White Album*." He changes songs yet again, starts crooning along to "Hey Jude." Only, as usual, he sings "Hey Minnie" instead.

The words *The White Album* are snagging on my brain for some reason, ringing a distant bell, the world's faintest déjà vu. Didn't Mum have a piece called *The White Album*? It sounds vaguely familiar—not that I know her work off by heart. She was prolific. The stuff she made when we were little was mostly sold to private collectors; the *Rainbow Series I* is the only piece on permanent public display. I've probably only ever seen about half of her output.

Ash's song comes to an end and he places the guitar on the floor, then lies down next to me. We're face-to-face, body-to-body, ankles intertwined. "Hey Minnie," he sings again softly, cupping my cheek with his hand. Tentatively, he pushes back

my mountains of hair and strokes his thumb along my earlobe. He kisses my forehead. I close my eyes and he kisses my eyelids, then my jawline, then my cheek. We're like a dance. Calm washes over me, the way it did yesterday in the garden.

This time, though, I try to ease into it, instead of jumping like a scalded cat. This is a good thing. Despite being apart for a summer, and my whole life turning upside down, he and I are slotting right back into how we were before. Picking up right where we left off. Which was . . . well, there was a lot of kissing. No sex, yet. But the way things had been going between us, it seemed inevitable, sooner or later. It was a hair beyond our fingertips, on the horizon.

Ash is smiling, eyes half-closed as his hand slides inside my cardigan, resting on the same spot on my rib cage it always does. The room turns quiet. Even the rain is silenced. All I can hear is our breathing, in sync, and the slow, uneasy panic of my heart.

Ash moves his mouth toward mine. "You okay?" he asks. I'm not, quite, but I give a tiny nod. Because perhaps this is how I can turn the clock backward. Restore things to how they were.

But as our lips meet for the first time in forever, this line from the goodbye letter runs through my head: *disappear into the sky.*

Dark Green

(An Ongoing List of Every
Color I Have Lost)

*Meadow Park in the rain. The bitter looks
Emmy-Kate and Niko gave me whenever I showed
off about going to Mum's studio—I was the only
Sloe sister to whom she'd given a key.*