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Written by L. V. Hay

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The Other Twin

LUCY V. HAY



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One

'I'm not doing this anymore,' he says. 'She won't say anything.'

'We all know that's not true.'

He flinches from the silence that follows. Her expression gives nothing away. But that's her all over: she can mask the anger deep inside her. It's what makes her dangerous. *She Who Must Be Obeyed.*

'And what do you propose we do, instead?' she says at last, folding her thin arms.

He grasps for an alternative, but it's futile: he can come up with nothing. His body sags in defeat, his eyes cast downwards at the stone floor.

'I thought so.' A shark-like smile crosses her face.

Resentment blooms in his gut. Heat travels up his gullet and cloyes in his throat. He can't breathe. He doesn't trust himself to speak. He clenches his fists, keeping them by his sides, digging his fingernails into his palms.

'We've been through all this.' She puts one of her cool, papery palms to his face. From afar anyone would think it an affectionate gesture. It's not.

'I don't care,' he whispers.

'You know you do,' she chastises. 'Think of the others. We all agreed. Remember?'

White-hot anger blazes through him now. He'd never agreed, not really. Her gaze flickers to the clock on the wall. Already she is planning her next move, so sure of her victory over him. He proves her right; still he says nothing. *Such a coward.*

'Just play the game.'

Those words: a mantra, a verbal talisman. Designed to get them

all to fall into line. She'd drilled them until the words would come unbidden to their own lips. She'd told him he was the protector, the big man. He had to look out for everyone, present their best side to the world. No one must know the truth.

It could spoil everything.

He breathes in the sickly vanilla scent of her perfume. He speaks through gritted teeth. 'Maybe I don't want to play the game anymore?'

She blinks, momentary surprise in her eyes. He hasn't talked back to her in years. But then she recovers her nerve and stands her ground, all swagger and bravado. 'You're being ridiculous.'

Despite her rictus grin, he sees her realising she no longer has the upper hand. He meets her shining eyes and enjoys sensing her apprehension; she thinks he might hit her. He knows he won't, but her anxiety pleases him. He is nearly a foot taller, broader across the chest and shoulder, all muscle. He could grab her by her slim neck with just one of his hands and strangle her, dangling her above the floor ... *If* he wanted to. And she knows it.

But his boldness does not last. Like a soap bubble, his defiance bursts, leaving nothing concrete between them. She knows how much he fears her wrath; how he will attempt to scabble to safety. But his grip is always too weak: he will fall backwards, hopeless, into her suffocating embrace.

'You're supposed to look after them,' she enunciates each word, so each one drops like a rock. 'Remember?'

He feels his courage slide back down into his boots, into the floor beneath them. His head dips in shame. He swallows as the gloating steel edge returns to her voice. The familiar ball of pain in his throat stops him from speaking. The icy fingers of anxiety tear inside his ribcage, like a tiny creature clawing its way out of his chest.

He nods, acquiescing at last.

'You've done the right thing.'

He can feel the triumph radiating from her. Her bony hand pats his shoulder, her long nails like a bird's talons.

She turns, her high heels clacking on the red kitchen tiles, her

long skirt sashaying around her ankles. The kitchen door swings behind her as she leaves.

A sudden howl escapes him. He sweeps one arm across the kitchen worktop. Saucepans, ladles, plates and Pyrex dishes go crashing to the floor, smashing. Pieces skitter across the tiles and disappear under the stainless-steel cabinets.

It's not enough. He grabs more items from the sideboards and sends them flying. Cutlery and tins crash against ceramic; squash bottles bounce onto the kitchen floor; drums of coffee and sugar spill their contents. Granules pour onto the hob and countertops. Their subtle aromas fill the air.

He digs in the back pocket of his jeans and pulls out his phone. Desperation clamours through him as he scrolls through his contacts. He could call her, warn her. He should warn her.

But his thumb hovers above the call button. What would he say? Would she even believe him? He's not even sure he believes the threat himself.

As the swell of emotion recedes, he feels lost. He tells himself he's being ridiculous. He must pull himself together. Tamp down his rage, as always.

He puts his phone back in his pocket.

Two

Jenny, Jenny, Jenny...

...I like it. Your shining name rolls around my mouth, smooth like chocolate melting on my tongue. Vanilla and cocoa, sweet and soft, just like you. It makes sense.

But the truth is hard and ugly, like a fifty-pence piece forced in between my teeth. I bite hard, try to force it down my throat. It catches in my gullet. Their lies are too big to swallow.

It was never meant to be like this. You should soar, but instead you are a bird in a gilded cage. They celebrate the false shell, denying the real you inside. They say it is for your own good! But their language of care is one of control.

Well, no more. We see them for what they really are. We trudge onwards, holding onto each other, supporting the other when one of us threatens to fall. We can do this. You are and will always be my twin soul. Real girls.

Soon you will be free. As I am, now.

I love you.

India xxx



POSTED BY @1INDIAsummer, 22 December 2016

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Three

I awake, ravenous, in the early evening. Winter darkness forms at the window. Head banging, I sit up. I'm in a tangle of sheets on the floor; I've rolled off my grubby futon. As I reach for my phone, a sharp pain shoots down my neck and through my shoulders. *Getting too old for this shit.*

I wear just a vest and knickers. I'm lying on a selection of condom wrappers, crisps packets, empty pizza boxes and junk-food cartons. My hair is in a gluey mass at the back of my head. I don't even want to think about what caused that.

Predictably, my mobile is dead, the battery long since drained. I stagger to my feet and feel blindly for a charger. I find one already plugged into the wall next to the toaster, amid a shower of crumbs and globules of jam. I plug it in. I grab a glass, filling it at the sink and gulping the water down gratefully, as if I've walked across the Sahara the previous evening.

What the hell happened last night?

On the countertop, a hastily scribbled note with a phone number: 'CHEERS, D XX'. A flash of an image comes to me: just a body, no face. Pressed jeans, best shirt, a mop of curly hair with boy-band white teeth. *Where did I find him?* I can't recall. I become aware of this stranger's hands and lips on me: a red mark on my breast; sensitivity between my legs. I am unconcerned.

I put the rest of my dirty laundry in the basket, pulling off my clothes as I do so. Naked, I pad through to the bathroom, my nostrils flaring at the rank smell. I clamber into the shower anyway and let the water trickle over my head. I'd hoped for a power shower, but in this area the water system is ancient, the pressure nil. I wet my hands and lather myself with liberal amounts of shower gel, washing

his touch, his taste away. I watch water swirl down the plughole and imagine D, or whatever his name is, falling into its dark depths, forever trapped in the pipes.

Never. Again.

I turn the shower off and dry my body and hair roughly, before letting the towel fall onto the bathroom floor. Still nude, I walk through to the living space and open a drawer. Virtually all my clothes are dirty. I dress hurriedly in mismatched items – the only ones I have left. So, that's my Saturday night sorted: I'm off to the all-night launderette near the station. *Yay.*

I remember my phone, still plugged in by the toaster. I see its red light flashing from across the room. As I pick it up, I note the SILENT icon; I forgot to change it back after work yesterday. Expecting a few texts, maybe a couple of missed calls and my usual email spam, I swipe a finger across the screen.

29 MISSED CALLS.

17 TEXTS.

3 VOICEMAILS.

All from the same number, listed as MUM.

Raw fear courses through me before I open any of them. My mother is the laconic type; she's not the kind of parent who goes chasing. I read the texts:

—'PHONE ME NOW'

—'POPPY FOR GOD'S SAKE ANSWER'

—'CALL ME'

—'CALL ME'

—'CALL ME'

The same, plaintive message, over and over.

I hesitate. There's a part of me that doesn't want to know what could have happened at home, while I was pissed out my skull.

It has to be Tim.

A litany of causes of death crashes through my mind. Heart attack, one of the biggest killers of middle-aged men. Or perhaps a stroke, or a brain embolism. Tim has high blood pressure. He's been

overweight since I met him twenty-five years ago, when I was just five. He'd pick me up as a little girl and crush me to his barrel chest. He called the spare tyre around his middle his 'love handles' and for the past quarter of a century has resisted all attempts to make him slim down for the good of his health. He'd sing The Beatles' 'When I'm Sixty-Four' every time Mum so much as tried to broach the subject.

He's sixty-three now, could he not have made it to that celebrated age?

You hear of it all the time. But you always think it will happen to someone else; someone else's family. Death is just a concept, not real. Could my stepfather really be lying dead and cold on a slab, while I was doing something as banal as cleaning my flat and sorting my washing?

I don't hit the RECALL button; I don't need to. Mum's name flashes again silently on screen, her smiling face appearing on my smartphone a curious contrast to the dread piercing my chest. I let it ring twice, then press the green button and place the phone to my ear.

I brace myself for impact. 'Mum...?'

Mum does not launch into accusations or reproaches for being off the grid. She attempts to say my name, but instead just emits this pained, low moan, like a trapped animal. It sets my teeth on edge and threatens to open the primeval floodgates in me, too.

Insight hits me. My life is split in two: *Before* and *After*. My brain bucks against the weight of what's coming and strains to make sense of the fear deluging through my veins. In years to come, every time I hear tears in someone's voice, I will see the wall of this studio flat, the crack that leads from the television on its bracket towards the dented fridge.

But still I don't want to believe something terrible has happened. I don't ask the question – 'Is it Tim?' – because I don't want to hear the answer. I try to speak, attempt to say something stupid like 'Happy Christmas!' and make it all go away. I know it can't, but I'm desperate to hold onto my *Before* life, the one that had seemed so shit when I woke up, surrounded by the detritus of my reckless existence.

Anything other than this.

Then Mum speaks, her words clear, almost deadpan. It's not Tim, after all.

'It's your sister.'

Four

I blink. I find myself on a train, heading towards Liverpool Street station. I'm vaguely aware of cheery, anticipatory faces around me. It's Saturday night, so people in their twenties are everywhere, hands thrust in pockets, leaning against one another, the carriage a hive of excited activity.

The doors of the train swish open.

'She's dead. India's dead.' Mum's voice on the end of the phone seemed alien. It still feels like a bad joke.

'H-how? What? Why?' I stammered.

Bewilderment cascaded through me, followed by an ice-like certainty: Mum wouldn't have said something like this for no reason. Then, even stranger, another thought occurred: *But it's Christmas. As if Death takes time off during the holiday season.*

'Come home,' Mum whispered.

I could discern it was taking every bit of strength she had to form the words. She was threatening to unravel.

'See you in a few hours.' I sounded more in control than I was.

I drift through the middle of all of the crowds, making my way through the labyrinthine tunnels of the Tube. I walk up steps, on autopilot. I am untouchable: shoals of people divide and reconnect around me. I wander through bright-white hallways. The floor starts to move, travellers and elevators beneath my boots.

A blast of outside air makes its way down into another station – Victoria this time. I shiver; I have no coat. I have no luggage. Just the clothes I stand up in, my handbag. As I queue for yet another ticket, I catch sight of my reflection in the plate-glass window of a late-night burger joint. I look a sight. I'm wearing thin leggings, a pyjama t-shirt. I button up my cardigan, absent-minded. All my

dirty laundry languishes back at the apartment, with the rest of my *Before* life. My hair, still wet, hangs in ratty knots around my shoulders.

At last I make it to the head of the queue. Behind the glass, a woman taps at a computer. She has neon-coloured threads woven into her cornrows, contrasting with her dull, grey uniform. Weary irritation forces her limbs into squared-off angles, the sign of the perennial night-shift worker. She says nothing, waiting instead for my instruction, one manicured hand poised over the keyboard.

‘Single to Brighton,’ I say.

My ticket issued, I make my way towards the boards. I’ve got twenty-five minutes until the next train. That’s the difficult part of travelling, isn’t it? The waiting. In side rooms, on benches, in hallways. Waiting in the vehicles you’re travelling in, connecting you from A to B. The destination is all that matters.

Everywhere I look, there are newspapers. Carried under arms, lying on seats, fallen into stairwells. I grab one up, hungry for information, yet unable to shake the bizarre sensation that none of this is real.

I discover my younger sister is not front-page news. India is relegated to a side column, her humanity stripped away:

YOUNG WOMAN, 24, FALLS ONTO RAILWAY TRACKS

Trains were halted for several hours between Brighton and London on Friday night after a young woman fell from a bridge onto rail tracks. India Rutledge, 24, was sighted running away from Brighton Station between 18:00 and 19:00. It is thought, about an hour later, she made her way to the notorious bridge located further down the track.

People on board the 20:12 to London Victoria report hearing ‘a loud bang’, though no one saw the young woman fall. The train driver is being treated for shock. British Transport Police are appealing for witnesses.

I read and re-read the report, my brain refusing to take the details in at first. I look at my watch and note the date again: 23rd December.

India's birthday.

Earlier this week – in my *Before* life – I'd posted a card. I'd chosen it without care, grabbing it from a newsagent's near the school where I was working. I'd not wanted to give India any more ammunition. I wanted to show her – and my parents – I can be the 'good' sister. *For once.*

It's India's birthday, yet she's dead.

I'm six, nearly seven. The Christmas holidays are forgotten this year, because my sister is born two weeks early. There is no Christmas tree, no presents under it. My mother has been completely caught out by the new arrival.

The baby comes home from the hospital trussed up in a car seat. My sister is wearing a pink knitted bonnet and a baby-gro with embroidered strawberries on. I am dressed nicely too: my hair is plaited, my puppy fat forced into a dress a little on the small side. It pinches under the arms.

I am sidelined as relatives, friends and random associates take turns to look at my replacement. Still in that car seat, my new sister is placed on the polished coffee table. The best china, cups and saucers and shining silver teaspoons, are placed next to her. Adults coo, exclaiming how good, how tiny or how cute this baby is, bringing cards and presents with them.

None are for me. I grow bored waiting for the adults to say how nice I look, or ask how I am getting on at big school.

So I drift closer to them. But their attention is still solely on the new kid, the one who only yesterday was still in *my* mum's belly. Just twenty-four hours ago I heard only bad things about this baby: how she gave Mum indigestion, or heartburn or an aching back. *My* mum had put her bloated ankles up on the pouf in the living room. She'd eaten chocolate spread straight out of the jar. She'd complained about being pregnant and how it lasted forever. But

today, all is different: the baby is here and all is forgiven. India is only good.

I join two women on the floor. They sit on their heels next to the coffee table. One is the tall, thin woman across the road who's always in a rush and pushing a pram, her face set in a grim line. But not today; she is all smiles.

The other is the classroom assistant at my school: Miss Macey. She has big hands and a big gap between her two front teeth. She reads storybooks in silly voices, but not today.

Both are enchanted by my sister. I want them to look up, smile at me.

I lean on the coffee table. My weight makes it rear up. Two of its stubby legs leave the floor. There's a clash of china as cups and saucers slide. The car seat rocks perilously backwards. Multiple female cries of alarm fill the air, as if sound alone can cushion the baby's fall.

But the baby does not fall.

Miss Macey grabs the car seat handle with her big hands. A collective sigh resounds from the adults, like the hiss of air brakes on a double-decker bus. My mother stares at me with shiny eyes, as if she hates me.

'What have you done!'

I stand there, my six-year-old brain unable to process my mum's anger. Delayed embarrassment lands its black butterfly wings on my face, bringing with it red cheeks. I take in the adults' wide eyes, frozen where they stand or sit between my mother and me.

The moment melts just as rapidly. I'm able to move. I flee to the stairwell, too-jolly adult voices behind me, covering up their own anxiety.

An hour or so later, I see the grown-ups leave at last, shuffling through the hall. All of them pretend not to see me, morose on the bottom step.

Most people go without fuss, without bother. But not India. She goes out with a bang. Literally. And this time, I'm not there.

Sister. What have you done?