26a

Diana Evans

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Ham

Before they were born, Georgia and Bessi experienced a moment of indecision. They had been travelling through the undergrowth on a crescent-moon night with no fixed destination and no notion of where they were, whether it was a field in Buckinghamshire, the Yorkshire Dales or somewhere along the M1 from Staples Corner to Watford. Night birds were singing. The earth smelt of old rain. Through scratchy bramble they scurried, through holes that became warm tunnels and softly lit underground caves. Their paws pressed sweet berries in the long grass and they sniffed each other's scent to stay together.

Soon they began to sense that they were coming to a road. One of those huge open spaces of catastrophe where so many had perished. Squirrels smashed into the tarmac. Rabbits, badgers, walking birds – murdered and left for the flies. Bessi thought they should risk it and cross, there was nothing coming for miles. But Georgia wasn't sure, because you could never be sure, and look at what the consequences might be (a little way up the road a bird lay glistening in its blood, feathers from its wing pointing stiffly up to the sky).

They crept to the roadside to get a closer look. Nothing coming at all. No engine thunder, no lights. It took a long time for Georgia to come round. OK then. Let's be quick, quicker than quick. Run, leap, fly. Be boundless, all speed. They stepped on to the road and shot forward, almost touching, and then the engine came, and for reasons beyond their reach, they stopped.

That was the memory that stayed with them: two furry creatures with petrified eyes staring into the oncoming headlights, into the doubled icy sun, into possibility. It helped explain things. It reminded them of who they were.

A slowness followed the killing. While their blood seeped into the road they experienced warmth, softness, wet. But mostly it was brutal. There were screams and a feeling of being strangled. Then a violent push and they

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landed freezing cold in surgical electric white, hysterical, blubbering, trying to shake the shock from their hearts. It was a lot to handle. Georgia, who was born first, forty-five minutes first, refused to breathe for seven minutes. And two and a half years later, still resentful, she was rushed back to St Luke's Hospital with dishcloth, carpet dust, half her afro and tassels off the bottom of the sofa clinging to her intestines. She'd eaten them, between and sometimes instead of her rice pudding and ravioli. The ordeal of it. Ida running around the house shouting Georgia's dying, my Georgia's dying! and the ambulance whisking her off and Bessi feeling that strange sinking back towards the road (which, when they were old enough to explore the wilderness of Neasden, they decided could well have been the North Circular that raged across the bottom of their street).

There is a photograph of them seated at a table in front of their third birthday cake, about to blow, three candle flames preparing to disappear. Georgia's arms are raised in protest of something forgotten and across her stomach, hidden, is the scar left over from where they'd slit her open and lifted out the hair and the living room carpet like bleeding worms and then sewed her back together. The scar grew up with her. It widened like a pale smile and split her in two. As for Bessi, she spent her first human month in an incubator, with wires in her chest, limbs straggling and pleading like a beetle on its back. The incubator had a lot to answer for.

So Georgia and Bessi understood exactly that look in the eye of the hamster downstairs in the sunlounge. He was ginger-furred with streaks of white, trapped in a cage next to the dishwasher. What is it? the eyes said. Where am I? The view from the cage was a hamsterblur of washing machine, stacked buckets, breathless curtains and plastic bags full of plastic bags hanging from the ceiling like the ghosts of slaughter. People, giants, walked through from other parts of the house, slamming the door and setting off wind-chime bells. A sourfaced man with a morning tremble. A woman of whispers in a hair net, carrying bread and frozen bags of black-eyed beans.

What is it?

Feebly he poked at the plastic wheel in the corner, looking for motion, hoping for escape or clarity. And the explanation never came. It was deeper than needing to know what the wheel was for, where the cage had come from and how he'd got there, or in the twins' case, the meaning of 'expialidocious' or why their father liked Val Doonican. It was more of a What is Val Doonican? And therefore, What am I? The question that preceded all others.

The hamster was alone, which made it worse. Alone with a wheel on a wasteland of wood shavings and newspaper. Georgia and Bessi did everything they could; stuffed him with grapes and cleaned his mess, gave him a name. 'Ham,' Georgia said, her eyes level with Ham's because she was only seven, 'be happy some days or you might not wake up in the morning, isn't it. Here's a present.' She'd pulled a rose off the rose bush in the garden that was Her Responsibility (Aubrey had said so, and Ida had agreed – so Kemy could shut up) and laid it, the ruby petals flat on one side, a single leaf asleep in the sun, on a saucer. She opened the cage and put the saucer next to Ham. He sniffed it and then was still again, but with a thoughtful look on

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his face that wasn't there before. Georgia thought that sometimes flowers were better for people's health than food. She often spent entire afternoons in the garden with a cloth, a spade and a watering can, wiping dirt off leaves, spraying the lawn with vigour, and pulling away the harmful weeds.

The twins lived two floors above Ham, in the loft. It was their house. They lived at 26a Waifer Avenue and the other Hunters were 26, down the stairs where the house was darker, particularly in the cupboard under the stairs where Aubrey made them sit and 'think about what you've done' when they misbehaved (which could involve breaking his stapler, using all the hot water, finishing the ginger nuts or scratching the car with the edge of a bicycle pedal). Other dark corners for thinking about what you've done were located at the rear of the dining room next to Aubrey's desk and outside in the garage with the dirty rags and white spirit.

On the outside of their front door Georgia and Bessi had written in chalk '26a', and on the inside 'G + B', at eye level, just above the handle. This was the extra dimension. The one after sight, sound, smell, touch and taste where the world multiplied and exploded because it was the sum of two people. Bright was twice as bright. All the colours were extra. Girls with umbrellas skipped across the wallpaper and Georgia and Bessi could hear them laughing.

The loft had a separate flight of stairs leading up from the first-floor landing and an en suite bathroom with a spaghetti-Western saloon door. Because of its intimacy with the roof, it was the only room in the house that had triangles and slanting walls. The ceiling sloped down over Bessi's bed and made her feel lucky. There was no other bed in the whole house that the ceiling, that God, was so close to, not even Bel's, who had the biggest room because she had breasts. That meant that Bessi's bed was the best. She wrote it down in yellow chalk: BESSI BEST BED, on the wall where her eyes landed in the mornings, just by the attic cupboard where things could be hidden, whole people could be hidden and no one would know to look there because you couldn't stand up in it and it was full of old books and buckets and spades for the holidays.

At the end of Georgia's bed next to the window – a whole upper wall of window that gave them church bells and sunsets and an evergreen tree in the far distance – was another triangle, an alcove, for thinking. Two beanbags whose bubbles smelt of strawberry were tucked into the corners and that was where they sat. Not many people were allowed to sit there too, just Kemy and Ham. But absolutely no one was allowed to sit there with them when they were thinking, especially when they were making a decision.

Late in the summer of 1980, Kemy knocked on the door (that was a rule) when the twins were trying to decide whether Ida and Aubrey should get a divorce or not. Georgia had put a jar of roses on the windowsill so that she could picture them while she was deciding, and sliced a nectarine for them to share afterwards – the nectarine was their favourite fruit, because its flesh was the colour of sunset. Bessi had wrapped her special duvet around her because she couldn't think when she was cold. Sky-blue slippers on their feet, they sat down in the strawberry corners and shut their eyes. They

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thought long and hard about it, drifting through possibles. Five minutes passed and ten minutes. Then, into the silence, Georgia said, 'Mummy can't drive.' Bessi had not thought of this. It was definitely important because they needed a car for shopping and getting Ham to the vet next week to see to his cold. A cold could kill a hamster.

That was a No.

What Bessi had been thinking about was the apple trees that were Her Responsibility. Ida liked to make pies, and Aubrey liked to eat them, so Bessi had to watch the apple trees all year round until the apples started thumping to the ground in September. Then she'd make the announcement, projecting her voice: 'APPLE PIE TIME!' And everyone had to follow her with their baskets and stepladders and Safeway bags, even Bel with her hips. Bessi didn't know whether she could give up this position because she felt, in some way, it was important training for the future. And it was almost September. So now she murmured, 'It's almost apple.'

That was another No.

But if they did get a divorce, thought Georgia, they'd all get more sleep, wherever they were, and surely that was a Yes.

But not if they ended up sleeping in Gladstone Park. And that wasn't definitely impossible.

Then Kemy knocked on the door, which was irritating because they hadn't got very far.

'What?' they moaned.

'Can I come in?'

'No,' said Bessi, 'we're deciding.'

'What about?' Kemy was disappointed. 'I want to too.'

'No. Go away,' said Georgia. ''Simportant.'

Kemy was five and didn't know what simportant meant so she started crying. 'I'm telling Daddy you're deciding,' she shouted, and stamped downstairs.

Georgia and Bessi adjourned the divorce decision, agreeing that it would be best to wait until after the vet and after this year's apples. And anyway, 'It's not up to us,' Bessi pointed out, taking a piece of nectarine. 'No,' said Georgia, 'it's up to Bel.'

In the mornings they went first into the sunlounge to check on Ham and then out into the garden for the apples and the roses. They put their anoraks on – Georgia's red and blue, Bessi's yellow and green – over their pyjamas when it was cold. It was usually cold because heating was

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expensive in the sunlounge (thin walls, a plastic corrugated roof) and there was no heating outside unless it was summer. They understood that. It would be a waste of money to put heaters along the fence outside. Imagine how much it would cost to heat all the outsides in the world. Probably more than three hundred pounds.

Georgia climbed the stepladder and unhooked the hose from the wall. Ham watched. He'd been awake for hours watching the hazy dawn pull in the morning. Today, a Wednesday, he was especially not happy. Wednesdays were hard and the twins understood this too. It was the being in the middle of the beginning and the end when things tumbled, things tossed. The day was reluctant and didn't know what to wear. It dreamed and reached out for dusk but people carried on as if it was Tuesday, or Friday, as if time's moods didn't matter. This was confusing for Ham and the twins but they did the best they could to join in.

With the hose over her arm Georgia peered into Ham's cage. It smelt of dry wood and droppings. He blinked very slowly and looked at her chin. 'Chocolate drop for brekky treat?' she rustled in the food tray under the table. 'Cheer you up today.' There was no noticeable response, not even a quicker breath or a quiet sneeze.

Georgia stepped out into the crispy sun and studied Bessi through the bushes that separated the front back garden from the back back garden. The back back garden was wild. Aubrey only mowed the lawn up there once a year because no one ever showed an interest in shaking out a mat and lying down. It had shadows. A hulk of old grass turning to straw by the back wall. A shack next to it full of incredible spiders. Bessi shone through the leaves like stained glass. Very still. She was waiting for thumps with her eyes closed but none had happened yet. She felt that if she concentrated hard enough something would, right in front of her.

The apple trees, who were very pregnant now, creaked and swayed into another long Wednesday. They were twins too. So far this year they'd released three unblushing apples between them. Not nearly enough for Bessi to say Apple Pie Time. There had to be at least four each, with rosy cheeks. And then the things could happen. The ceremonial march into the wild, the picking, peeling, boiling and baking, apple pies and apple sauce with inside sugar and all of it up to her. Dear God, she thought, please help them drop the apples so that we can pick them up. Thank you Amen.

Georgia went and stood next to Bessi and their knuckles brushed together. There was a shiver on the wind. Bessi opened her eyes.

'I think Ham's d'stressed,' Georgia said, staring through the grass. There was a pause. Sometimes, when Ida hadn't got enough sleep, she closed the bathroom door and locked it. She had a bath for five hours, during which time they would put their ears up against the door and hear her talking to someone in Edo (usually Nne-Nne, her mother, whom she missed). When the bathroom door finally shuddered open, Ida would wander out into the hall as if it were a dirt-track into a whole new country and she'd arrived at the airport with nothing but her magic dressing gown and a toilet bag. Georgia

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asked Bel what it meant because being clean didn't usually take that much time. Usually it took twenty minutes, or an hour if they had bubble bath. Bel had lowered her voice and told her that Ida might have d'stression. When Georgia had asked her what that meant she'd said it was to do with being sad, that being sad could be like having a cold if there was enough of it.

And Ham had a cold.

'Is he in the bathroom?' asked Bessi.

'No. He's in his room.'

Bessi frowned. 'But if he's not in the bath, how can he be d'stressed?'

'You don't have to have a bath. You just have to have a cold.'

'Oh.'

They stared at the base of a thumpless apple tree. A sparrow who nested in its branches peeked down at them and waited.

'What shall we do?' said Bessi.

'Gave him a chocolate but he doesn't want it.'

'What about Vicks? On his nose.'

'Have to ask Mummy.'

'OK.'

Georgia went quiet. She fell into deep thought and put her hand on her stomach over her scar. She said, 'What if he dies, Bess?'

'Don't know. We might have to put him in a box and have a funeral.'

Neasden was like the high heel at the bottom of Italy. It was what the city stepped on to be sexy. London needed its Neasdens to make the Piccadilly lights, the dazzling Strand, the pigeons at Trafalgar Square and the Queen waving from her Buckingham balcony seem exciting, all that way away, over acres of rail track and miles and miles of traffic. The children of the city suburbs watched it all on TV. It was only very occasionally that the Hunters ventured past Kilburn because most of the things they needed could be bought from Brent Cross, which had all the shops. And when they did go into town the Little Ones (Kemy and the twins) bumped into things and someone always got lost (Kemy in the bedding department of the Oxford Street branch of Debenhams, Georgia at the Leicester Square funfair one winter, underneath an orange polka-dot horse with wings).

Neasden was easier. A little hilly place next to a river and a motorway with nodding trees and one stubby row of shops. One bank, one library, one optician, one chemist, one chip shop, one Chinese takeaway, pub,

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hairdresser, off-licence, cash 'n' carry, greengrocer and two newsagents, a full stop at each end of Neasden Lane. There was also a chocolate-smelling chocolate-biscuit factory said by the older locals to have driven people to madness. Schoolchildren were given unforgettable guided tours through it, the chocolate warm, melting, over freshly baked biscuits on conveyor belts. Georgia and Bessi had been there, and afterwards they'd laughed a lot.

The place had clean air and history. Its hills were the result of Victorian golfers who'd whacked their golf balls towards far-off holes that now were tiny memories underneath houses, alleyways, wonky car parks and Brent Council bus stops. It was a place where cyclists' legs started to hurt, where they stopped and swigged water in the summer, leaning on their bikes halfway up Parkview and breathing in the chocolate air (which deepened in the heat). The roads snaked and dipped and wound themselves around the hollows and windswept peaks in dedication to the open countryside, now lost to concrete. Except for Gladstone Park with its ghosts, and the Welsh Harp marsh, where the river rushed on.

Gladstone's house was still standing at the top entrance to the park. It hadn't been his house exactly, Georgia knew, he'd just stayed there sometimes with his friends the Aberdeens when Parliament got too much. But as far as she was concerned, it was Gladstone's house. The duck pond and the lines of oaks, the reams of gleaming green grass had all been his back garden. Bodiced ladies in ruffles and high hats used to sip wine there under their parasols, and children hid in the shade of trees. Gladstone liked parties, but he also liked peace and quiet, a dip in the pond, and lying in his hammock between two trees. Georgia had seen a picture of him. Serious eyes in a fleshy face, a clever mouth, long white sideburns and white wispy hair around his balding crown. He looked nothing like her father.

Last Christmas, when Gladstone's garden was thick with snow, Aubrey had taken his daughters to the park with sleighs. They'd dragged the sleighs to the top of the hill where the ducks were shivering, and whooshed back down again and again. Aubrey had decided to join in, even though Bel warned him not to because of his bad back which he often suffered from in winter, or when he felt particularly agitated. In his long navy trench coat, the thick glasses slipped into an inside pocket, he'd sat down on a sleigh and pushed himself out into the soft slide down. Bel said in a foreboding voice, 'He's going to hurt himself.' They all watched and thought about what would happen if Aubrey hurt himself, and at first it was a good thought. But then Aubrey began to scream and despite everything Kemy said, 'Don't hurt himself, Daddy!' and the four of them began to run. He screamed a deep, toneless man's scream all the way down and they ran after him calling, frantic, afraid for his back and even his heart. He looked strange, a grown man on a sleigh with his short legs out in the air. When they reached the bottom, touching his arm, pulling him up, Kemy in tears, he said he was fine, his back was fine and stop fussing godammit. He had stayed in bed for a week afterwards drinking Ida's milky tea and not speaking much. This had been a very good week for the rest of the family, who spent it catching up on sleep, not standing in corners, and watching forbidden television.

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It might not be that bad, Georgia was thinking now, if they ended up sleeping there, in the park, after divorce. They were driving round the edge of it on the way to the vet in the royal-blue estate with three rows of seats. Ham was next to her with the What is it? still in his eyes. Aubrey was at the wheel.

Georgia imagined it like this: she and Bessi would knock on the door of the house and one of Gladstone's great grandchildren might open it, or better still, Gladstone himself looking sweetly ancient in a waistcoat. He'd ask them what he could do for them and it would be at this crucial point that Georgia would tell him that she and Bessi were in his class at school, green for Gladstone, and she'd show him her badge. He couldn't refuse. He'd say, Well, I was just serving tea to the haymakers, but do come in and make yourselves comfortable. And he'd let Ham in too. They'd all wake up the next day to the silver kitchen sounds of an oncoming party and wait for the ladies to arrive for their wine.

So that was a Yes. That was an Oh Yes. She nodded.

Aubrey, at this moment, was not in the best of moods. Last night he'd stayed up shouting about the boiler being broken and how his family were a bunch of ungrateful sods, especially Bel because she'd started to wear lipstick. No one had slept much; they all, regardless of age, had bags under their eyes. And to make things worse there was a traffic jam on Dollis Hill Lane, and there were never traffic jams on Dollis Hill Lane. It was 'preposterous', 'damnable' and 'a flaming nuisance'. That's what he said. Kemy, sitting on the other side of Ham, asked what pre-pos-ters meant, thinking it was possibly something to do with Michael Jackson, but Aubrey ignored her. Georgia stepped in, for she had been pondering this too, arriving at the conclusion that it was something to do with extra. Extra posters. Extra normal. Extra or-di-na-ry, which was the same as normal, she knew this, she was 'a very clever girl' (her teacher Miss Reed had said only last week). So she said, 'Extra posters and more ordinary.' And Kemy looked at her for a while with her shiny brown eyes that throbbed for being so big.

The traffic had advanced and the car in front was failing to keep up. Aubrey beeped and raised his voice, 'Come on woman! What are you waiting for!' Bessi was stuck fast to the passenger seat by her seat belt, feeling sorry for herself after a fight with Kemy about not sitting in the front. She studied the outline of the head in front that Aubrey was come-on-ing. It definitely looked like a man to her, lots of grizzly hair and massive shoulders. 'I think it's a man, Daddy,' she said. Aubrey dug the end of his Benson furiously into the ashtray, blowing out smoke from the very back of his throat. When the smoke was fresh, when it drifted, it resembled the eventual colour and texture of his hair, which was also fading away.

They stopped on a hill and Aubrey had to use the handbrake. He jerked it up with such force it shook the car and made a loud ugly squeak that made Kemy laugh. 'Ha ha! do that again, Daddy!' Her skinny legs flippered and she kicked the back of Aubrey's seat. 'Do it again!' He threw a glare over his shoulder. 'Will you settle down, bloody hell, just settle down!'

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Ham sneezed softly in his cage and closed his face.

There'd been an accident at the lights. The police were clearing the road and as they drove past they saw a red, ruined car smashed up against a lamppost. The bonnet was crumpled. The lamppost was leaning away from the windscreen, away from the death, who was a woman, who was dying in the ambulance flashing towards the hospital. Georgia caught a wisp of her left in the front seat, a cloudy peach scarf touching the steering wheel, and a faint smell of regret.

For twenty years Mr Shaha had been the only vet in Neasden. He'd come to London from Bangladesh after the bombs of World War II. 'They destroyed Willesden completely,' he told people (his grandchildren, his wife's friends, his patients – the dogs, hamsters, budgies, cats, gerbils, and the occasional snake), 'terrible, terrible things. But life must always go on, that is the way of the Shaha.' There were two framed documents on the wall of his waiting room, which radiated the permanent stench of animal hair and animal bowels: his creased veterinary certificate, and a misty black and white photograph of his mother, with a folded letter written in Bengali, hiding her neck.

Ham scowled and chattered his teeth as they waited amidst the meows and grunts. He shuffled around in his cage picking at dried rose petals, while opposite him a panting Labrador winced and scratched its balls. When Mr Shaha called them in, Kemy had fallen asleep and Aubrey had to carry her. Mr Shaha, old and fat, atrocious eyebrows, with his crooked spine only suggested beneath his overall, slowly took Ham out of his cage and looked him straight in the eye. 'Now what's the matter with you?' he said. 'Hmm?'

'It's Ham. His name's Ham,' said Georgia. 'He's d'stressed.'

'He's got a cold,' Bessi added.

'And he doesn't want chocolate.'

Ham was airborne, on a warm free hand. Mr Shaha's breath smelt of kippers from his lunch. He put Ham down on the examining table and Ham kept bolt still.

'Is he going to die?' Georgia asked.

Mr Shaha gave her a serious look. 'Little one, we are all going to die one day, and I suppose it is better if you are prepared.'

There wasn't much he could do for Ham. He checked his mouth and his eyes, one of which was closing, and recommended warmth and lots of sunlight. 'Try to keep him active,' he said. Aubrey bought a chequered tie-on body blanket from Mr Shaha's accessories cabinet (which had proved to be quite lucrative over the years), and on the way home Georgia secured it under his throat and belly. 'There,' she said. 'Isn't it better now. You won't die any more.'

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But Bel had another one of her dreams, and Bel's dreams were never taken lightly. She had once been told by a fortune-teller at the annual Roundwood Circus that she possessed 'the powers of premonition', which had made her shudder, as she was only ten at the time. Ida, who had been harbouring suspicions about Bel's psychic status on account of a certain piercing mystery in her eyes that reminded her of her paternal grandmother, Cecelia Remi Ogeri Tokhokho, who had also been prone to clairvoyance, had held Bel's hand and looked at her very intensely. 'Don worry,' she'd said, 'it means you are a wise one and you will know many secret things.' As she got older, Bel's dreams became more and more reliable, to the extent that sometimes Ida would consult her on matters such as forthcoming natural disasters in Nigeria or whether Kemy would catch chicken pox from the twins (which she had – they had scars on their backs).

The night after the visit to the vet, Bel dreamt of a wedding held in a muddy field. She tossed and turned. There was no bride and groom. There were no guests. There were only a few waiters wandering around with stacks of empty plates and the only sound was a dog barking frantically outside the tent. Bel woke up and rubbed her temples with her fingertips. She knew what was coming. Over the next two weeks Ham moved less and less. The apples began to thump and Bessi was joyous. She banged a frying pan with a wooden spoon and led her army of harvesters up into the wild. Under Ida's supervision they peeled and chopped and mixed, frilled in aprons, getting sweaty. And while Bessi was standing at the cooker, busy with the apple sauce and the future, Georgia walked silently out into the sunlounge every hour to check on Ham. She felt, in those last days, that she and he were travelling together to the end of What is it? and there was only so far she could go.

Ham sat through the days with his nose glistening. He was making a decision, and when the decision was made, he simply stopped moving. And closed the other eye.

Then it was possible, Georgia noticed, to choose the time, to leave when you were ready. The heart sends a message of surrender to the brain and the brain carries out the formalities, the slowing-down of blood and the growing cold, the gathering of stillness and the inside lights retreating. Ham's fading vision caught the angry man walking about in the middle of the night and shouting something. There were tender strokes along his back from the little girls, and roses, new roses. He could hear the faint echo of bells. But it all was history. He had decided and it had happened and now he was ending towards what was next. Towards another shock, another scale. It had been very small, this life.

The last thing he saw: the two of them enclosed in a yellow hulahoop, edging out into the garden.

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